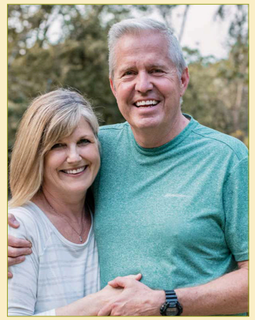
Through the New Testament

with Pastor Steve McGuyre

ValleyLife Church



Happy New Year!

I look forward to reading the New Testament with you this year. I encourage you to put your focus on Holy Scripture and read my thoughts with a secondary mindset. You will get the most benefit from the Word of God.

Feel free to reply to me with any questions you may have and, yes, I would like you to read the opening genealogy. Try to identify names you may know from your previous reading of the Bible. Just realize that Matthew is establishing Jesus' link to Abraham and then to David to establish His legal right to the throne of David predicted and promised in 2 Samuel 7.

I hope this year is full of rich blessings.

God's word is a goldmine of precious spiritual jewels,

Pastor Steve

Matthew

Day 1

"...through the Holy Spirit"

January 1 - Matthew 1: 1-25

Hello and Welcome to the World of the New Testament,

I have found that getting acquainted with God is both an adventure and a privilege. As we turn the pages of the New Testament we will be confronted with the words and works of God. There we are exposed to writing unlike any other in world history. On every page we are face to face with our Creator. What we do with that information will determine the kind of impact it has on our day to day lives. Those of you who already believe that God is working in your life know about the unusual experience of coming into contact with God. His Word is His vehicle to bring to you true spiritual experience. I hope you enjoy the ride.

From the time I was quite young I had wished that God could be known. I ignored the thought most of the time, thinking it was kind of a silly idea. I did have a Bible, but had no idea where to begin. Most begin in the beginning and make it a few chapters and then quit. Somehow I knew the Bible was a special book but honestly didn't know how to use it myself. In the mid-'70s I attended a church where the Bible was taught and, at that time, God turned the light on for me.

There are keys to understanding the Bible and I hope I can adequately communicate them to you. God's Word is like a lamp or a light and will bring you illumination like you would never believe could happen. Just the fact that God gave us His Word as a special letter to us is an eye opener and will deepen your appreciation for the blood, sweat and tears that went into its production.

Essentially, the Bible is God's self-portrait. God reveals Himself in the leaves of His holy book. In it we are introduced to God's history, and we also find that God showed up on the planet in order to reveal Himself in flesh and blood. That's why the events in the opening chapter of Matthew's gospel entail such out of the ordinary circumstances. Here we have a virgin with child, angels, and the entrance of the Holy Spirit. In a book about God we should expect to meet language and characters that transcend our world. Jesus would later say that God is a Spirit and that those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:24). It is the Holy Spirit who leads us down the pathway of spiritual life.

Right out of the gate we meet the three Persons who are revealed to us as the one true God. Take a look at verse 22 and allow me to comment within the verse as we read it: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord (here a reference to God the Father; whenever the generic name Lord or God is used apart from a definite connection with Jesus or the Holy Spirit, then we are talking about the Father) had said through the prophet, 'The virgin (Mary, the espoused wife of Joseph) will be with child and will give birth (through the Holy Spirit, verse 18) to a son (The Son, Jesus), and they will call him Immanuel' -- which means, 'God with us.'" Luke said: "And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.'" (1:35)

How could God do that? He's God, that's how. We

should expect God to be doing things that amaze us and surprise us. He wouldn't be God otherwise. We also ought to remember that an absolute knowledge of God is not a reasonable expectation. There is a sense in which God is incomprehensible.

He is way beyond us in every way -- in intellect, in power, in love, in scope, and so on. I ought to be thankful for what God has helped me to know about Him, but shouldn't presume that I will somehow have enough knowledge to fully understand the ways of One who has existed through all eternity. I hope that makes sense.

The exciting news is that the same Spirit who orchestrated the virgin birth is the same Lord who desires to inhabit our lives. We depend on the Spirit to make the life and words of Jesus clear to us. He is like a matchmaker who desires to draw us close to Jesus. He is like an intercom so that we can hear the words of Jesus. And He is like a spotlight that puts the emphasis on Jesus. Hebrews 1 says: "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the world" (1:1,2).

Right away Jesus is the subject of our reading. He will be from here on out.

God's blessings come in the power of the Holy Spirit,

Pastor Steve

Day 2

"A Voice Is Heard In Ramah"

January 2 - Matthew 2: 1-18

I've never been a news junky like some people are. I know someone who flips back and forth between one news channel and another constantly. He loves to hear about the ins and outs of the day's news. Me? I can get along with the highlights. Whether it's the day's events or the sports, I am content with just snapshots of the day.

Much of the time, the Bible is written in snapshot form. We get the highlights of what was a very busy time in the life of God and the world. Think about the way the creation days are recorded: Day 1 -- light; Day 2 -- expanse; Day 3 -- land, etc. But think for a moment about all the variety and diversity in creation. Think about God's crowning achievement -- us. There was much more going on from God's perspective than meets the eye.

Some read the Bible and get the idea that the Christian life should be one miracle after another. That is not the way it is. We have many miracles recorded because they were the highlights of what was otherwise an ordinary life for those who walked in the Bible days. We need to keep in mind as we read that the events were recorded so that we can know God, understand what He has done historically, and what He may, in the same character do today. The Apostle John said, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" (21:25). What we do have is sufficient for many purposes, but it is not an exhaustive record of all that God is or does.

Similarly, we need to be careful that we do not minimize the snapshots of the recorded events. As a matter of fact, we need to use other parts of the Bible that parallel what we are studying so that we can get as full a picture as possible. Some people like to say, flippantly, that the Bible is chock-full of errors and inaccuracies, but the truth is that the Bible is a wonderful tapestry of unified truth which leads to a unique relationship with the living and true God.

When we come to small passages it will be necessary for us to explore their meaning and application so that we can see them in the light of the whole Bible. This year as we explore the New Testament we need to keep in mind that the New Testament rests on the back of the first 39 books. Jesus Himself said that not one Old Testament verse would be left unfulfilled, and that you could trust the canon of Scripture without hesitation. It is up to us to follow Jesus and rest our faith on the truth of Scripture rather than the whimsies of men.

After Jesus was born, some came to worship Him and others sought to destroy Him. These attitudes would characterize the life and ministry of Jesus -- up to and including our present day. Even this past Christmas season there was much said about including or excluding Jesus from the festivities. Jesus continues to be the dividing line.

With the entire hubbub around the birth of the Savior, King Herod began to envy the Christ child. He decided to take care of the matter in his own barbaric way – by slaughtering all of the youngsters 2 years old and younger. God intervened and He sent the young couple and their infant to Egypt. God had predicted that this would happen way back in Old Testament days (see Jeremiah 31:15 for the cross Bible reference).

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel (Israel's wife) weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they were no more." Matthew 2:18

The loss of a child is always the hardest tragedy to handle. In this case many, many children were taken. Little did the parents know that they were the victims of a man bent on finding and killing the gift of God, the Lord Jesus. This event is described in Revelation graphically: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars; and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon...and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations..." (12: 1-5).

This small snapshot at the beginning of the gospel tells us so much: God is orchestrating the events all around the birth of His greatest gift to mankind.

Hundreds of years before the tragedy in Bethlehem area, God foretold that there would be an event like this.

The victims are called "Rachel's children" and are obviously Jews living in the days of Herod in the region of Bethlehem, the location of Rachel's death at the birth of her youngest son, Benjamin.

This event highlights the dangerous times in which Jesus was brought into the world. The same kind of violence that you might find on the streets of L.A. or Portland today existed back then, too.

The contrast between the Peace Child and the Wicked King puts us face to face with the same kind of world we live in today.

Do you hear a voice? Do you hear the weeping? Can you hear the marching of the soldiers as they search for the small children? Jesus was on His way to Egypt. God had a plan for Him. In the meantime, there was no comfort for the mourners in Judah. Already, a Savior was needed. Come, Lord Jesus.

God's blessings often come out of tough times,

Pastor Steve

Day 3

"Holy Spirit and Fire"

January 3 - Matthew 2:19-3:17

Baptism has always had quite an impact on people. I know that I will always treasure the memory of my baptism. I was scared to death. Then I got in the baptism tank and it was really a very peaceful and spiritual experience. I think that those who haven't been baptized wonder what baptism is all about.

Have you been baptized? What was it like for you? Who was there that day? What type of impact did it have on your spiritual development? Afterwards, were you closer to God? Did you have an experience like Jesus and find yourself in temptation shortly after you were baptized? If so, why do you think that happened?

Baptism is first introduced in the New Testament by John the Baptist. He was quite a character. Jesus describes him further for us in Matthew 11: "What went you out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went you out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king's houses. But what went you out for to see? A prophet? Yes, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, which shall prepare your way before you" (verses 7-10). Matthew goes on to say that John is the greatest man alive, but he is not as great as he will be one day when he reaches the kingdom of God. He says that John is considered a holy man by most and he is, truly, the coming of the prophet Elijah (a man in the Old Testament who never died but was raised from earth to heaven in a fiery chariot. The prophet Malachi predicted that Elijah would come before the great day of the Lord).

The Baptist, like any other spiritual man or woman, was humbled to even be around Jesus. He said about Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He only baptized Jesus at His urging. He acknowledged that Jesus was more powerful than he was, and that he wasn't even worthy to carry Jesus' sandals. To John, Jesus was the ultimate authority and he was thankful to have the privilege to be around Him. Think about how significant this is in the light of what an austere man Matthew portrays John to be. He was a rugged man who feared nothing and was not afraid to tell it like it was. Yet, when he was around Jesus he was reduced to a little child, mesmerized by the Man.

Are you a self-made man or woman? Are you a big shot in some arena? Do you have authority over others and think pretty highly of your station in life? Can you wield your wallet like a sword? If so, what difference has it made for you to come in contact with the Man from Galilee? Knowing Him is very humbling. Why would He have anything to do with me? This is the way John the Baptist felt. Jesus had a life-changing impact on his life. In this we can clearly see a barometer for evaluating how spiritual we really are. Are we humble? Do we think of others before ourselves? Do we seek to serve rather than be served? Do we often give up our rights so that others can be promoted ahead of us? If so, then we are becoming more spiritual.

Is there someone in your life who is hard for you to serve? Is there a family member or friend whom you'd like to teach a lesson? Are you avoiding someone because it seems too difficult to confront your own responsibility in a situation that has resulted in some tension? Remember, He must increase and I must decrease. Would Jesus be honored if you approached the person whom you consider a problem right now? A few chapters from now Jesus will say that it is good to try and seek reconciliation before a matter gets out of hand. I encourage you to go and seek a friendly solution to a tough problem by first humbling yourself in Jesus' presence. Oh, my gosh, I'll write later; I just remembered that I needed to go and talk to someone I've been avoiding lately.

Timeout .....

John the Baptist says that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire." Because God is good and He loves us, He doesn't leave us helpless in our spiritual progress. Even regarding salvation Paul said, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Then, after saving us, God continues to give us help by means of His Spirit in our lives. Again Paul says, "And hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us" (Romans 5:5).

To have baptism in the Spirit means that the Spirit is in residence in our lives and He continues to live in us and work in us to do what will make us more like the Lord Jesus. I believe that this is where the fire comes in. God will often bring us through fire or difficulties in order to make us like Jesus. "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestine to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). And so like Jesus we learn obedience through the tough times in our lives, in the times when the heat is on.

Is the heat up in your life right now? This is God's discipleship process and it is there for a purpose. God is making you like His beloved Son. You are the object of His affection and He knows what's best for you and what will help you to mature.

Sometimes it is hard to understand why things happen in our lives, but God understands. He knows what He's doing by creating in us what we couldn't do on our own. There will be many times in our lives when we will have to trust that God knows what He is doing when we cannot see the forest for the trees. Think about these applications:

What can I do today to show humility and love for others? How did my baptism impact my life? Let's tell someone how our baptism had an impact on our lives. Identify the temperature in your life right now. If it's fire-hot, think about ways you see God changing you in His refining fire.

God's blessings attend the humble,
Pastor Steve

Day 4

"Did God Mean That?"

January 4 - Matthew 4: 1-22

What was the devil's aim in the temptations of Jesus?

Was it to try to move Jesus away from God's purpose for Him?

Was it to try and use the Bible, from which he quoted, to possibly trick Jesus into doing his bidding?

Was it just plain old temptation to cause Him to do something wrong and prove who had the upper hand -- the devil or Jesus?

The answer is probably a combination of all three. The devil is a liar and the father of lies. He's bad to the bone. He wants what he wants and doesn't care what is good for others (take a look at John 8 and 10 for more thoughts on this issue). Surprisingly, he will even use Scripture for his own goals.

Scripture is misused all of the time. Even in our day it is twisted and turned to prove a point or create another religious sect. So how do I know that I'm interpreting the Bible correctly and am not also being led astray somehow?

Good question. Let me give you several answers to this question so that you can begin to gain confi-

dence in your understanding of the Bible.

First, all Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, points to Jesus Christ. John 5:39 says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." A bit later we will read Luke 24 where Jesus makes it clear that the whole Bible is about Him.

Second, and so important: Scripture builds upon itself from Genesis to Revelation, culminating in the Kingdom Age when Christ will reign over all. Hebrews 1:1,2 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Therefore, we must interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. And the events of the Gospels must be understood in the light of the letters that follow them. Paul and Peter and John and Jude and James are the interpreters of Christ. Their interpretation can be trusted and should become the rule for our own understanding of what Jesus did and said.

Third, Scripture interprets Scripture. That's what I have already been speaking about, but here I'd like to point out that Jesus was able to give the correct Scripture for the occasion because He was well aware of what the entire Bible taught. He could see through the devil's self-centered approach and instead moved the conversation to a God-centered approach. In other words, Jesus was more interested in honoring God than he was in establishing an alliance with the devil or promoting Himself. This is a good reason for us to stay committed in our reading of the whole Bible. That way we will be less apt to misquote the Bible or take verses out of context.

This subject will be picked up again and again in our journey through the New Testament. Let's make a couple of applications before we end.

The devil worked from the angle of tempting Jesus to do His own will rather than God's will. He appealed to His physical needs ("stones to bread"), His spiritual needs ("cast yourself down;" if you are really spiritual you'll be able to do this supernatural feat) and His ego needs ("I will give you all of these;" you'll be in charge of it all if you worship me, the devil says, so go ahead and sell out to me and I'll reward you). What angle does the devil most often use in your life?

Jesus responded to each temptation with a Bible verse in order to thwart the devil's attack. What Bible verses help you when the chips are down and you are being tempted to do something you know is not God's will? You could label the temptations as: Pleasure, Power, and Possessions. Which of these has the greatest pull for you? What can you do today to steer clear of the grip that one or all of them might have on you?

God's blessings are realized when we see the whole of Scripture,

Pastor Steve

P.S. The devil will always challenge the validity of God's Word in your life. He did with the first man and woman and he continues to do so. Let's have ears to hear the Word and the courage to resist the lies of the evil one. Remember, Jesus prayed that we would be kept from him in John 17. If that chapter is new to you, why not take a few minutes to read it today sometime.

Day 5

"What Christ Finished"

January 5 - Matthew 4:23 - 5:20

Be Open To The Lord Today!

What parts of the Bible apply to us today, what parts were for them back then, and what parts are future?

Jesus gives us some help with this question in Matthew 5:17.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

For example, the sacrificial system in the Old Testament was fulfilled when Christ offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice. Should we offer sacrifices like they did in the Old Testament, even though they are mentioned in God's Word? No. They are fulfilled in Christ.

What about all of the dietary rules? These were the rules God laid down while the Israelites were in the desert of Sinai. God told them what kinds of animals they could eat, such as beef and fish with scales, and not eat, like pork. These were rules God instituted because of the conditions they lived in while they were trekking through the desert. God was protecting these Moses' followers by steering them away from food that would be more apt to carry disease and cause problems for the whole group. Jesus later would say that it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart. So are we under the dietary regulations? No.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were God's chosen people and they were supposed to bring His light to the world. All of their national agenda is fulfilled now in the church of Christ. In Galatians, Paul identifies God's church as the Israel of God. In Romans, Paul will introduce the church as the Spiritual Israel. Therefore, God's temple is now us and not a building in Jerusalem. We are all one church in Christ, not members of a tribe of people like the Jews were from their beginning. Jews and Gentiles are now one in Christ and the wall that separated them crumbled when Jesus gave His life for all.

Paul makes this clear when he writes in Ephesians, "Wherefore remember, that you being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called uncircumcision by that which is called the circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world;

But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of two one new man, so making peace" (2:11-15).

So does Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament make it irrelevant for us today? No. It helps us to appreciate all the more what Christ came to do. He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. So keep on reading and appreciating all that God has done by bringing His Son into the world.

Also, the Old Testament reveals the holy character of God, all the way through. Therefore, it reminds us of the nature of God and the holy and righteous ways of the Lord. For example, in the first Psalm the writer extols the virtue of abiding in the law of the Lord and delighting in it. Or if you take a look at Psalm 119 you'll see that the Old Testament encourages us to meditate on the Scripture so that we can be built up in our faith in God. So even though we are making our way through the New Testament this year, I would like to encourage you to take a look at the Old Testament readings when you can. They will apply to you and encourage you in your walk in Jesus.

Another example would be the Ten Commandments. They are there to lead us to Christ. We need Christ's forgiveness for all of the ones we have broken. But they are also a good measuring tool of the will of the Lord. Jesus summed them up by saying that love is the fulfillment of the law. And if we have love, we will love God and put Him first, and love our neighbor and put him before ourselves. Therefore, the Old Testament very much applies to us today, minus the areas already fulfilled in Jesus.

God's blessings come through the entire Bible,
Pastor Steve

P.S. Note that in contrast to the devil's lure towards pleasure, power, and possessions, the Sermon on the Mount shows a much different road to happiness. God's ladder is down rather than up. God's plan is for self-denial and not self-aggrandizement. The happy ones are the humble, the truly sorry, the gentle, the spiritually hungry, and the persecuted. The happy ones are too busy living for God to place pleasure, power and possessions as the focus of their lives.

P.S.S. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul makes it clear that all Scripture is profitable. So let's seek to appreciate all of the Scripture and not ignore those parts that are difficult or offensive to us. The Bible covers all areas of life and can be very blunt at times. I hope that these sections will encourage you and help you with matters that have been difficult for you to express in the past.

"'I Say To You' - The Harder Sayings Of Jesus"

January 6 - Matthew 5: 21-42

God Is For You Today!

Let's think together about some of the more difficult sayings of Jesus. When we got into following Jesus we knew it was going to be different than anything we had ever experienced in our lives. This is especially true for those of you who came to Christ at a later age, maybe as a teen or older. But at the same time, I am still amazed at some of the things God's Word says. They just seem to run so counter to what I learned at home, in school and in society growing up.

For example: Hatred of another person = murder. The idea underlying all of these teachings is that sin and righteousness originate in a person's heart. The heart is the control center of our lives. Proverbs says, "Keep your heart with all diligence because out of it are the issues of life" (4:23). Jesus equates hatred of another person with murder. If someone says, "Well, at least I have never murdered anyone," it really isn't true, is it? Rather than harbor hatred, Jesus wants us to go out of our way to reconcile with people we have been struggling with. 1 John says much more on this subject. Check it out.

Lust = adultery. Treating people as objects or toys is not healthy. We dehumanize them and ourselves. God wants us to see others as people made in His image and not as sexual objects. Have you ever seen a good result from lust? The outcomes usually involve a whole truckload of pain and suffering, both emotional and physical.

Divorce = adultery. Jesus takes the hard line on divorce. Except for the reason of marital unfaithfulness, a person is not supposed to break the bonds of marriage. If they do, and marry another, they pull that person into adultery. Paul goes into this in some detail in I Corinthians 7.

Love your enemies. Don't seek revenge. Look for ways to express God's love to those who mistreat you. Be careful when applying these verses. Jesus is not saying, "Don't protect your family" or "stop working for social justice" or "let evil people do all the harm they want." He is saying that within our social sphere, we ought work with those who are difficult, the ones who are mean or who are trying to take advantage of us. Stand up to them but do not stoop to their level by returning evil for evil. Take a look at what Romans says about this at the end of chapter 12 into chapter 13.

I welcome your comments on these verses. I have been working with them for many years and they are still tough; tough but good.

God's blessings are attached to His ways,
Pastor Steve

"Where Your Treasure Is"

January 7 - Matthew 5:43 - 6: 24

What do you treasure in your life?

What is the most special thing to you? What goes through your mind at the thought of losing or having that special thing stolen? Is it unbearable? Would you go out of your mind?

Things break and people let us down. What then?

Is it wrong to have goals to acquire things?

Is it wrong to build relationships with people who may disappoint us?

I believe the answer to each of these last two questions is an emphatic "No!"

Then what does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... you cannot serve God and Money?"

I think Jesus is talking about security and investment.

Where does our true security lie?

What can we invest our time, talents, and treasure in that will bring a lasting result?

Remember the story of the three fellows who had each received a certain number of talents (money, in those days) to spend wisely. God had given abilities to each of them and they were to use their noodle and their energy to be productive. The first two fellows did well, but the third guy sat on his hands. He did not even seek to know what his purpose in life was, so he ended up doing nothing.

Investing what God has given us by way of talents and money can make life an exciting adventure. To spend our resources on selfish pursuits that amount to self-promotion will have no lasting value and will not be satisfying in the long run.

Secondly, too often money becomes the means of a person's mental well-being. "The more I have the more secure I feel." This, of course, is a false security. No matter how much we have, we will always be a dollar short of having enough.

On the other hand, if we purposely put our confidence in the Lord and invest thoughtfully in the things He endorses, our lives will be rich indeed. He promises people with this attitude that He will meet all of their needs (Matthew 6:33).

Where does your confidence lie today?

Can you name a few avenues that you are investing in for heaven's sake?

Don't get me wrong, we ought to be concerned with sound financial investment and planning for the future here on earth. At the same time, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the most important place for investment is in heaven and in the

God-things that will last forever. That's why I do this through the Bible work, because "heaven and earth will pass away" Jesus said, "but My word will never pass away."

Here are a few suggestions:

Go to your primary checking account and take a look at the entries there. What adjustments would you recommend? The money area has always been a tough one for me. I grew up in the school of materialism, and I sometimes find it hard to be a giver. If you have the same problem, then start slowly, but begin to give rather than hoard. This will set you free, especially if you tend to equate money with security. If the money area is like an albatross around your neck, go to Amazon and find a series on money management from God's viewpoint. Believe me, you will be glad you did.

God's Blessings change our hearts,
Pastor Steve

"The Frustration of the Sermon on the Mount"

January 8 - Matthew 6:25 - 7:23

Today Is God's Day,

How's your New Year going so far? The experts say it takes 21 days to learn a new habit. You are one-third of the way there. Keep up the good work.

If you miss a day, don't fret. Go ahead and do the day you are on and mark the missed day somehow so that you can come back to it at a later time. The key is not to lay a guilt trip on yourself for missing a day or two. Habit is the important thing. Good habits are worth working on and bad habits are worth giving up.

Okay, let's discuss the topic of frustration caused by the Sermon on the Mount. What do I mean by that? Jesus says several things in this short sermon that are disconcerting. He says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). And He wraps up the first part of the sermon by saying, "Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (5:48).

How do I respond to these verses? Those Scribes and Pharisees were pretty religious folk, weren't they? And what does He mean regarding perfection? I thought no one was perfect in this life. How can He expect so much? I quit, I give up...I'll never make it.

Before you despair, let's talk. Jesus' primary purpose is to move people to put their faith in Him. He invites men and women to believe in Him, trust Him, receive Him, follow Him, put their faith in Him, abide in Him, and walk with Him. Why? Because people are changed internally when they sincerely turn to the Lord.

What we need to understand is that in and through Christ, a person is more righteous than the religious Scribes and Pharisees. God declares that person perfect in Christ. It is our identification with Him that gives us a Christ-centered righteousness. Faith in Christ is the mechanism that triggers a new kind of life, a life where Christ is on the throne of your heart.

Just a note on the word "perfect." Some people read this verse and then seek to be error-free, perfect, and self-righteous. They may work and work and work, trying over and over to be without sin. They lose. In I John, it says that the person who says he is without sin is a liar and the truth is not in him.

In Greek, the word for perfect can also be translated as "complete," or "mature." It doesn't necessarily mean finished without any imperfection. No human but Jesus can fit that bill. Thankfully, He does it for us.

That's why we boast in our Leader, Jesus, who is our righteousness (see I Corinthians 1).

God's blessings declare us perfect in Christ,
Pastor Steve

"What would God be like?"

January 9 - Matthew 7: 24 - 8:22

God Is Good,

Think with me for a minute about what you'd expect God to be like if He came down to earth. Wouldn't you expect him to act, well, like God?

Really Smart: Smarter than everybody else, in as much as the manufacturer of a thing is smarter than the thing He creates.

Very Creative: Since we can already look around and see the complexity and diversity of living things around us.

Extremely Powerful: Since He could make things out of non-existent material, you would suspect that He could do anything He desired.

Unaffected by popular opinion: He would know what was true because He Himself would have created all that is true. He would not need to be instructed by anyone since He is the source of all things.

Highly Industrious: Just look at what He has already done. Look at all of the colors and designs and shapes of what he has already made.

Exceedingly generous: Why would God create such a perfect environment for people who are, by and large, unappreciative of it? He gives and gives.

Unusual: More interesting than kings or queens, more provocative than comedians or rock stars, more fascinating than magicians.

How about you? What can you add to my short list? Now let's look for these qualities in the person and life of Jesus. Here are a few examples:

1. Smart: When Jesus was questioning Peter about his love for Him, Peter responded, "Lord, you know everything..." (John 21:17).

2. Creative: John said, "All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3) And in Hebrews, the writer says, "For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses -- as much more glory as the builder of the house has more honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God" (3: 3, 4).

3. Powerful: The Bible says about Jesus, "Then He rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey Him?'" (Matthew 8:26).

4. Unaffected by popular opinion: "In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.'" (John 2:14f.)

5. Industrious: Jesus prayed, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17: 4).

6. Generous: After Jesus had cast many demons out of a man He said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

7. Unusual: "And when Jesus finished these

sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28, 29).

When we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

In our reading today, Jesus touches and heals a leper-- a man who was the pariah of his day. God is loving. He touches us in our imperfection, He reaches us at our lowest point and speaks with dignity into our lives.

This is our God. Let's worship Him.

Let's talk to God today in appreciation for who He is and what He has done. The more we understand Him, the greater the respect we will have for who He is. God is known in Jesus. Jesus came to make the Father known. In John 1:18 it says that Jesus came to "explain" the Father. Let's enter into His classroom today and hear a lesson that we will never forget.

God's blessings are real in Jesus,

Pastor Steve

"It Is Not The Healthy Who Need A Doctor"

January 10 - Matthew 8:23 - 9:13

Have you ever had a doctor with a good bedside manner? I had a doctor years ago whom I enjoyed going to see. I knew that he would get right to the heart of the issue and take care of whatever was ailing me. He had been practicing medicine for decades and was able to reassure me that the procedure needed was the right one. Fortunately, I have been pretty healthy most of my life, but there have been times when I needed to hear Dr. Hall's diagnosis. Funny, it wasn't just the diagnosis, but the way he said it that made the most difference.

When my wife and I were first married, I'll never forget one weekend when she was suffering from a sinus infection. It began on a Friday evening and progressively became worse. We probably should have taken her into the emergency department by Sunday, but she wanted to wait until Monday to see Dr. Hall. By the time we got in to see him, you could tell he was very concerned by the look on his face. Normally he is very calm, but we sensed an air of anxiety. He told my wife that she would need to go on some strong antibiotics right away in order to fight the infection. He told us that it had gotten pretty bad, and that the worst case scenario was that if the infection broke through the nasal lining, only brain surgery would save her. You know what? When we left his office we were stunned, but at the same time his reassurances that the antibiotics could kick in and help right away took the edge off what could have been a very alarming situation. She ended up fine.

It must be difficult for doctors when people look to them as gods. Their words of comfort or impending doom end up having a tremendous emotional impact on the patient. In some cases there is nothing they can do, and they have to do their best to comfort people in their loss. At other times, they do all they can and yet the results are up in the air until a solution or conclusion is reached. You probably view the medical community either positively or negatively depending on what kind of results you have had in the past. Some of you are like me and would only go to the doctor if you were on your last leg. Either way, we are all looking for the same thing -- wholeness and relief from pain.

As we said yesterday, Jesus is the most remarkable man. He is like no other. To be with Him meant that you would experience the out of the ordinary. When I first came to Him I was enveloped by His love. In Revelation it describes His eyes as a "flame of fire." I picture

that as a penetrating love that is so pure it burns. It is a love that cannot be matched by even the love of a man and wife deeply in love. I knew I had met someone who would love me like no other.

Jesus' love motivated Him to reach out to the spiritually sick. Truly, we are all spiritually sick. Paul makes this crystal clear in the first three chapters of the book of Romans. But there are those who are sick and know it and will admit it, and there are those who are sick and have devised a bandage for their sickness. They simply deny that they need to go to the doctor.

Jesus is responding to the Pharisees, a Jewish religious class who thought they were righteous based on their obedience to the law. They were put off with the way Jesus hung out with "sinners," who were "lawbreakers" in their minds. Later, in John's gospel, Jesus would say, "For judgment I am come into the world, that they which see not might see; and they which see might be made blind. And some of the Pharisees which were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, Are we blind also? Jesus said to them, If you were blind, you should have no sin: but now you say, We see; therefore your sin remains" (9:39-41).

People will not come to Christ if they do not believe they need Him. You can talk their ears off and give them every good reason to be saved and they will go their own way and say something like, "I'm really glad for you, but I don't need that religious stuff." They usually identify Jesus with some divisive, hurtful or powerless experience they had some time ago.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount as it applies to this. The "blessed" ones would be those who humbly accept the fact that they are spiritually sick and need a forgiver who can make them well. They mourn because they realize that they are unable to save themselves or heal themselves or forgive themselves. Interestingly, in pop psychology there is some emphasis placed on the need to "forgive yourself." The problem with that is the guilt factor. You can say you forgive yourself all day long and still wake up with the guilt pangs caused by your sin.

It was the people who were not trying to justify their sins who really warmed up to Jesus. Jesus was there like a doctor with an awesome bedside manner. He healed the demon possessed men, two lost souls who had been in bondage to the devil for who knows how long; and he healed a paralyzed man by first healing his sin problem and then giving him the ability to walk. The Pharisees were upset with that too, because they knew that only God could forgive sins. Maybe they should have taken a look at the credentials after Doctor Jesus' Name -- Dr. Jesus Christ, G.I.H.F. (God in human flesh).

When you talk to Jesus today, remember to whom you are talking, and remind Him of how much you think you need Him. You are walking with an unrivaled man and He is listening to your every prayer. Your prayers are like sweet incense to Him. Lift them up!

God's blessings come when we are in need,

Pastor Steve

"Really Read"

January 11 - Matthew 9: 14-38

Let's Engage Our Minds Today,

Do you like to read?

Reading came naturally for some of you and was a struggle for others. I have always been a slow reader. I always envied those who could gobble down a book in half the time as I could.

I believe reading is to the mind as

Good nutrition is to your body.

I believe reading is to the mind as
Fuel is to a car.
I believe reading is to the mind as
Water and light is to the growth of a tree.

You get my drift. Reading is so important. But I think it is the quality of our reading that really matters. Just as it's the quality of food or the kind of fuel or the right kind of water that makes our lives work.

Years ago I read a book called How to Read Slowly, by James Sire. It emphasized the importance of really understanding what you were reading by going over a paragraph or chapter again and again until it was living in your mind.

Try it on the reading for today. Picture Jesus teaching, when a man comes who is expecting Him to raise his daughter from the dead. Can you see the intensity in the man's face? Can you hear the inflection of his voice? Have you ever been with someone when they were desperate about an impossible solution? Then you can feel with this man.

Jesus gets up to go and help him. Wonder for a moment what the people in the crowd were saying. What would you have been doing if you were a face in that crowd? How might the healing of the woman along the way have encouraged this grieving father? He already believed in Jesus, no doubt, but can you imagine the anticipation as they got nearer to the house of mourning?

Listen to the mockers and doubters in the crowd. "No one can raise the dead!" Jesus enters in and raises her. The Bible then records that the news of this event spread. But think about the jubilation on the part of the parents. I wonder what happened subsequently with the relationships in this family with Jesus. Did they become disciples? You would imagine so, but the Bible says nothing about it. What happened to the doubters in the crowd when they saw the child alive? Did they believe or did they think it was all a big practical joke? Later, some would accuse Jesus of healing by the power of the devil. Were there some with this opinion already?

Imagine the conversations the family must have had later on. I would have loved to talk to the girl about the afterlife. "What was it like to be dead?" We don't know though, do we?

Think about the smells in the house. What did it smell like? Had neighbors brought broth over to comfort the saddened family? Were there candles or oil lamps burning? Were the tears on their faces still wet when Jesus raised her?

Work on improving your reading skill by being more and more imaginative when you read. Let the words of Christ dwell in you richly. Treasure them.

God's blessings need to be savored,
Pastor Steve

"Following Jesus; Fear this…not this!"

January 12 - Matthew 10:1-31

How about taking a second look with me in Matthew 10.

"If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of the household! So do not be afraid of them....do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Not everybody is going to like your decision to give your life to Jesus Christ. Have you ever had someone down play your commitment to Him?

"That's a phase I went through as a child. You'll get over it."

"A little bit of religion never hurt anyone."

"The church is full of hypocrites and money-grabbers."

I heard some of these comments when I was in the decision phase of receiving Jesus Christ. But you know what? Nothing compared with the surpassing value of knowing and walking with the Lord. Nothing.

I grew up with a high regard for my dad. When he spoke I usually listened. I trusted him fully. He was my hero. I remember taking a trip once to Prescott, Arizona. Down came a monsoon. It was like having buckets of water poured on you. At the time, we were on a windy mountainside. From the back seat I couldn't see out the front window, but I knew that somehow my dad could; I trusted that he would be able to get us where we were going. And sure enough, he made it!

Fearing God the Father is kind of like that. We see His word as more important than all competing voices in the world no matter how loud they may be. Our fear of Him is rooted in love. We need not fear what man can do to us, because God cares for us. His will is being played out in our lives. When a bird falls to the ground, God is there; when men ridicule us for our faith, God is there; when we feel like our circumstances areoverwhelming, God is there.

"The Lord is my Light and my salvation- whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life- of whom shall I be afraid?" Ps. 27:1

I trust that as you remain in God's Word, your love and respect for God will grow. He will never let you down, even when others do. He remains consistent, loving, encouraging and fathering.

God's blessings can be trusted,
Pastor Steve

P.S. Another really good cross reference for this subject is the end of the eighth chapter of Romans. If you need more assurance of God's love and care for you, go there and read it a few times. Make sure to underline some of the phrases that stand out. For example -- "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Take a look and enjoy the Word.

"Comparisons Are Sometimes Good"

January 13 - Matthew 10:32 - 11:15

It's Good To Be Alive,

Some verses in the New Testament are unique. Some don't fit the mold of the neat and tidy Jesus who is sometimes portrayed to us by some people.

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law -- a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34).

Is Jesus against peace? I thought he said that He would leave us His peace when He left. I thought God wants us to live at peace with all men if possible. What gives with the above verse?

As usual, the key to understanding these verses is to read on and focus on the lesson Jesus teaches in this context. The lesson is that of comparison. In comparison with our love and commitment to Him it

should look as if we hate others.

Let me give a similar parallel here. Earlier Jesus said that if our right hand offends, cut it off; if your eye offends you, pluck it out. Did Jesus mean that we should literally cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes? Of course not. However, He wants us to act as if we have made such a commitment to purity that it would be as if we had cut off a body part.

Jesus is the Master Teacher. He uses a variety of styles to make His point. That means that there will be times when people will not get His point because they will only hear part of His teaching. Later on when we are introduced to the Apostle Paul, we'll see the importance of teaching the "whole counsel of God." This is essential because you could go off on quite a tangent by taking some corner of the truth and not examining it in the light of the whole. Jesus will begin to teach in parables in chapter 13 of Matthew. He comes right out and says that He is speaking in parables in order for the ones with spiritual eyes to be taught and those who are in darkness to be confounded.

In the lesson here, our commitment to Christ will appear to others to be division with our own family members. Now, can this be literally true as well? Absolutely! Many of you know firsthand what it means to be turned away by your family because of your commitments to Christ. I can still remember my beloved grandma telling me how disappointed she was that I had chosen to serve Jesus in the ministry. That was tough for me. But it didn't push me away from Christ. I'm sure you have a story too. These are tough times, but also defining times. It is part of the baptism with fire we learned about earlier. Such times feel uncomfortable at the moment but end up driving you closer to the Lord.

Comparison is usually a bad thing. But when we compare our love for the Lord with our need for people's approval, we will understand who we are as believers. That is a good thing because it reminds us of the key place Christ plays in our life.

Are you a pleaser type? If so, there will come many points in your spiritual journey when this mentality will be challenged. There is no way for you to please everyone on the face of the planet. You can try and try, but it will lead only to frustration. Remember that a pleaser mentality is usually a self-centered approach because we do it so that others (all others) will think well of us. God would rather that we loved and had empathy for others for God's glory. Then when we are not accepted or we are even rejected, we can draw near to God. There we will always be received with open arms.

God's blessings cause division,
Pastor Steve

"Soul Care"

January 14 - Matthew 11: 16-30

The control center of our lives is the soul. Within every man, woman and child is a living soul. This soul is so tied to who we are that you could say the soul is the person. The Apostle Paul calls the soul "the inner man" and the "spirit of a man." In other places it is called the heart. Proverbs says, "Keep your heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life" (4:23). That non-material part of your being is the real you, the center of all your emotions and the chalkboard for all of your thoughts.

The soul is that part of us that most resembles the image of God in which it was created. It is also the part that has been most affected by sin. The Psalms say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within

me bless His holy name" (103: 1). The believer cries out to God from deep within because he wants to make his God happy with his praise and service.

Before coming to Christ, the soul is twisted inward and wants only to promote selfish interests. The godless soul seeks to be enthroned on the seat of its own pride. It is a restless soul because it must watch out for itself and protect itself from anyone who would seek to dethrone it. Self-interests rather than God-interests are its banner.

The restless soul searches for something to quench its thirst. It constantly has to justify itself and promote itself. On the other hand, if it doesn't receive the kind of ego massage it needs it may attempt to self-destruct. At that point it finds life to be utterly meaningless. A person may turn to a number of reality-altering methods to deal with the emptiness of life, like alcohol and drugs and illicit sex. A psychologist friend of mine calls it "medicating the emotional pain." The soul wanders, seeking refuge from the purposelessness of reality until it returns to the source of its origin and discovers the meaning for which it was made.

I will never forget a student of mine years ago at a Christian school where I taught a freshman Bible class. We were talking one day about the meaning of life; I asked the class to write down why they thought life was worthwhile. One boy, a tall and lanky young man with short greasy hair and acne, simply said, "Life is worthwhile because we can collect things." I have thought about that statement from time to time over the years. I think he was into baseball cards, if my memory serves me correctly. That was before the Internet. Can you imagine how much collecting this guy must be doing today? The collection of stuff is what made his life worth getting up in the morning. Why do you think that was true for him? Maybe it's because we have a thirst for discovery and the hope for what we don't possess yet. My wife loves to go to Goodwill and garage sales because of the thrill of what "treasure" she might find. Maybe this boy saw collecting that way. Maybe collecting gives a certain amount of security. It is a diversion from some of the harsh realities of life. Maybe it absorbed his mind away from the futility of other pursuits. Or, possibly it put him just one pack of cards away from finding the one golden card that would complete his collection.

In the midst of a soul's unrest, Jesus invites a person to find rest in Him. He invites us to come to Him. In John 7, Jesus says that if a person believes in Him, that out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water. Here in Matthew 11 He invites us to find relief from our burdens by connecting with Him. Remember the woman who touched Jesus' robe and was instantly healed? Here, Jesus says that we will find soul rest if we connect with Him. Unlike the legalistic rules of the Pharisees, the disgusting excesses of the libertines (those who promote hedonism as a means to happiness), and the austerity of the stoics (those who promote the minimization of emotion and the acceptance of fate) Jesus offers fulfillment and rest in His arms. He says learning of Him would mean losing our excess burdens and heaviness of heart. He would be the source of freedom for the worn and weary soul.

For us today the message is the same. When we come to Jesus and receive His peace and strength we too will be unfettered from the tyranny of the restless soul. We will find a Friend who will gently teach us a different way to live. He will loose us from the restrictions of people who lay heavy burdens on men's shoulders when they are unwilling to bear those burdens themselves. Jesus, on the other hand, will bear your burdens.

What is weighing you down today? Is it someone's opinion? Is it a past failure? Is it the perceived need to be perfect so that you will find relief from the soul's wandering? "Come to me," Jesus says, "and I will give you rest for your soul." -- Lord, we come to you today!

God's blessings give true rest for the soul,
Pastor Steve

Day 15

"Interpreting Prophecy"

January 15 - Matthew 12: 1-21

You Are On God's Heart Today,

So much has been written and taught about prophecy (prediction of future events). This is the area that I have found to be the fuzziest in the world of Biblical interpretation. Why do I say this? Because there has been such a great diversity of opinion when it comes to understanding prophecy.

I am mainly talking about End Time prophecy. The over 300 prophecies that speak of the first coming of Jesus are pretty clearly laid out. But how things will wrap up before the second coming is not as clear.

We will say much about this in the year ahead, but now let's look at a passage of Scripture in our reading:

"Many followed him, and he healed all their sick... This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their trust" (12:16-21).

How is Jesus' healing ministry a fulfillment of this prophecy?

Healing reflects God's love. It is love for the most disadvantaged, the smoldering wicks and the bruised reeds. According to this prophecy Jesus is:

1) Loved by God the Father

2) Just or fair

3) Unobtrusive: His actions will speak louder than words

4) Trustworthy

He is a healer. What did that do for those who were healed? Do you think they could put their trust in Him? What about people from "all nations?"

Prophecy sometimes points to the future, but when Matthew says "this" fulfills "this" then let's take it straight and try to interpret it as it is. In Jesus, God's kingdom had come to earth and the result was that crowds of people were healed of their afflictions. Matthew says that this graciousness by the Lord was a fulfillment of what Isaiah predicted would happen.

Our great hope is that Christ will return to take His church to live with Him forever. In the meantime, let's pattern our lives after Jesus who quietly demonstrated the love of the Father to those who were hurting. I like the fact that Jesus was not a show-off. He could have been. Rather, He acted out of love for others and was quick to divert attention from Himself. Such is the humility of Christ.

God's blessings make our future secure,

Pastor Steve

Day 16

"What is the Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?"

January 16 - Matthew 12: 22-45

From time to time I will attempt to address subjects that might be controversial or difficult. The question of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is one of those subjects.

The Bible is very clear about what it is and what it isn't.

It is not using the Lord's name in vain. But that is a bad sin.

It is not murder, or adultery or lying, or greed. But those aren't good either.

It is not something you have done if you now love the Lord and want His forgiveness. He is quick to forgive those who sincerely ask for it.

It is not something a believer in Jesus could do. Simply impossible.

Both here in Matthew 12 and in Mark 3, the Bible says you have committed blasphemy when you obstinately attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. The Pharisees here say, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons, that this fellow drives out demons." In Mark it says, "He said this because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'"

In the context of Jesus' day, Jesus points to the religious Pharisees as the ones who denied that Jesus was who He said He was. They were obstinate in their refusal to accept Jesus as God's Son and God the Son. Jesus battles with this religious sect over and over (if you're interested, read Matthew 23 and John 8).

The apostle John goes into this directly. Let's read: "But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him...Therefore, they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.'"

Do you know anyone who mocks the works of the Holy Spirit, speaks ill of the church, and minimizes anyone who puts God first in their life? This could be a person who is on their way to blasphemy, with no hope of salvation. In Hebrews 6 and 10 it is the person who minimizes the work of Christ on the cross. Jesus, I believe, alludes to this in Matthew 5 when he says, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." Mockers run the risk of being hardened and losing any opportunity for eternal life.

I hope this helps!

God's blessings keep us trusting in Jesus,

Pastor Steve

Day 17

"Parables"

January 17 - Matthew 12:46 - 13:17

Jesus spoke many PARABLES. In a parable Jesus describes a daily real-life occurrence and sets it alongside a spiritual truth. He's saying essentially: "Look at this -- a common thing, and see this – a spiritual thing." That's why Jesus makes such a big deal about being able to understand them. Those with spiritual eyes can see what they mean and those without light are still unable to make heads or tails of how a parable applies to them. Make sense?

It is no wonder that the first of the parables is one dealing with the Word of God. Spiritual truth is defined by the Word, as we have already emphasized. Parables are a good reminder to us that we need to approach the Bible with prayer, because it is a spiritual book. We will get so much more out of it if we talk to God before opening it and diving in.

In regard to the Parable of the Soils, Jesus said in Mark 4:13 - "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" Therefore, for some reason(s), this first parable in the Bible is an important one because it has a bearing on all the others.

The Parable of the Soils sets the pace for the rest of the parables. How so? Before I take a stab at it, go back and re-read it and come up with a few ideas of your own. How would this parable be the starting point for the rest? Ask yourself what the parable means. Fortunately in tomorrow's reading the meaning is explained. Go ahead and check that out.

Now, do you understand?

Let's talk about it for a moment. Doesn't this parable express the goal of all parables, which would be to encourage spiritual growth? The sincere follower of Jesus craves the good soil and does what it takes to have the kind of soil that will welcome the seeds, God's Words. Peter said later, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God" (I Peter 1:23).

On the other hand, the believer in Jesus will be upset when he sees some of the influences of the other soils (hard, shallow, thorny) in his life. He will get back to the pure milk of the Word so that he can grow. Once he's growing and bearing fruit, his fruit will multiply, as Jesus said.

Thank God that He has given us knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God. Enjoy them. Believe them. Think about them. They are truth. They are real life. They are like diamonds, jewels, and the most precious antiques. They will enter our hearts and change us forever. If you cherish His Word, you will never regret it.

God's Blessings come in tasty fruit,
Pastor Steve

Day 18

"The Soils"

January 18 - Matthew 13: 18-35

Listen to these miscellaneous verses on the subject of the Word of God:

"Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed in Him, 'If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 31,32).

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7).

"Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world, Amen" (Matthew 28: 19, 20).

The focus on continuing in God's Word is a clear key to true spiritual life. Those who forsake God's Word, for whatever reasons, do so to their own peril. Also, the way we personally handle the Word of God will determine how much spiritual fruit we can expect in our lifetime. If your heart is crying out to be used by God and to know God and to love God, then pay extra-careful attention to His Words. They will guide you no matter what the weather of life is like.

Life is like a voyage at sea. There is always the hope of smooth sailing, but the reality is that storms are constantly on the horizon. A dear friend of mine took me out on his deep sea fishing boat one sunny, summer day. I had been up at 2 a.m. to get ready and make the trip to the coast. I didn't eat much, had a couple of cups of coffee and was thinking that I'd fare well because I had done so in the past. So I didn't take any Dramamine, and off we chugged, about 16 miles from the coast. When he stopped the engine the vessel was being tossed in washing machine fashion, up and down and back and forth. I wasn't feeling so good. By the time we had the rigging ready I was reeling. My friend could see I was a mess and tried to distract me with the fishing, but I could see my own turmoil reflected in his empathetic eyes. We caught a few salmon -- the wrong type to keep -- and he suggested that we head for dry land. I didn't argue. Once I stepped on the dock, I was fine. We went to lunch and then parted each other's company. I realized that because I hadn't made myself ready for the trip, I spoiled the day for both of us. My friend was gracious, but I know that his expectations were disappointed. I wasn't adequately prepared for the voyage.

Are you adequately prepared for the voyage of life? One of the key elements of that preparation is a working knowledge of God's Word. Let's look for a moment at Jesus' interpretation of His own parable. Thankfully, He takes the guesswork out of understanding it. He makes it clear what each surface was about.

Some surfaces are hard. The seed makes no penetration and bears no fruit. The devil comes along and steals any hint of the truth.

Some are shallow. The seed is received with selfish intent. It can't take solid root and withers when the sun beats against its futile attempt to sprout. Shallow hearers of the word are really not interested in making Jesus the Lord of their life. To them the church is no more than a club to find social connections and meet personal needs.

Some are weedy. The seed is planted but the plant is choked by enemies of the soul, like worry and wealth and cares. No true spiritual growth can happen because the weedy person is planted too deeply in the world's ways to bear any spiritual fruit.

Some are proportionately fruitful. The seed is planted in good soil and bears a crop. Depending on the richness of the soil, the crop is greater or lesser. This person delights in God's Word and is eager to be a doer of it. He continues in the Word and attempts to see its application on a daily basis.

Some might be saying, "I am hearing the word but feel like I'm not bearing much fruit in my Christian life, what should I do?" Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper" (verses 1-3). Any questions?

God's Blessings make us fruitful,
Pastor Steve

"Don't Pull Them Weeds"

January 19 - Matthew 13: 36-58

Grace to You,

Do you like pulling weeds? Most of us loathe the job. They can be thorny and entangling. I have a hedge that is a big mess. It is a conglomeration of every kind of bush that you can imagine. It's a pain to keep trimmed, and when I do trim it I inevitably end up scratched.

In the parable of the weeds, Jesus tells His disciples not to pull the weeds out. That would be a kid's dream. "See those weeds over there? Go ahead and leave them alone; I'll get them later." In this case the weeds are supposed to stay.

Sometimes it's hard to tell a believer from a nonbeliever in God's church. Eventually, I think the differences are made pretty clear. But this parable is a warning to us to not be so quick to exclude someone from the church. On the other hand, it is a reminder that not all people who go to church or say they are believers truly are.

John says in one of his small letters at the end of the New Testament that those who leave the church will often do so because they are not believers in the first place. He says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (I John 2:19). They get tired of playing the game when their heart is not in it because going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger. I personally couldn't imagine being involved in a church as a non-believer. It's hard to hang around with people you have very little in common with. But there are people who do this, for one reason or another.

Until Jesus comes again there will always be impostors in the church. In the meantime there are some rules in the New Testament to deal with those who say they are believers but refuse to give up sins that mark them as unreal.

For example, in I Corinthians the Bible says, "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortionist -- not even to eat with such a person" (5:11).

The purpose of the exclusion is to provoke him to do the right thing and turn to the Lord and find salvation. The idea is not to express a "holier than thou" attitude which reaches no one.

On the other hand, if a believer falls into sin we are to treat him as a brother and warn him about his behavior. So Paul writes to the Thessalonians to continue to work hard and not be lazy because the day of the Lord is near. He concludes the second letter by saying, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3: 13-15).

I know of people who have been horribly disappointed with some people who say they are Christians but act with the kind of morals and ethics that belie their confessions.

Let's strive to be honest about who we are and turn to the Lord so that we can be lights in this dark world.

Peter encourages us to examine ourselves to verify that we are in the faith. Before we point out the sins and failings of others we need to take a long look in our own mirror. Am I a believer? Do I love the Lord? Do I want to do what God wants me to do? When was the last time I had a good talk with God? Or, do I know that I haven't really committed my life to Christ but want to hang out around the church for other reasons. Am I a true seeker or am I in the church to use it for my own purposes?

A Note to the Tenderhearted: Are you the type of person who always doubts, struggles with a sensitive conscience and tends to always question whether God could love you? Don't be too hard on yourself. For you, self-examination can end up being an exercise in futility because you are overly self-critical. I encourage you to talk to God about the way you feel and ask Him to give you confidence in Him and His Word.

God's blessings make smooth hands; leave the thorny weeds right there,

Pastor Steve

"Motivation Is Key"

January 20 - Matthew 14: 1-21

Over and over again a parent will do tasks for her child that the little one is oblivious to. This is especially true from birth to about 4 years old. The little ones are totally dependent on the love and good will of their parents for all of their needs.

The most essential ingredient in the nurturing of any child is the affectionate love of his parents. Sometimes that role is filled by grandparents. You'll have parents consumed by their responsibilities and unable to spend the time with them required to communicate love, and so the grandparents step in and give the children the nurturing they crave. Either way, usually kids get loved by someone and learn that true love is one of the key ingredients of life.

My grandma from Oklahoma, Grandma Rena, doted on me from the time I was born. Anytime we were together was special. She transferred love to me in so many ways. She would tell me stories and read to me from the Bible. I loved her scary tales. One, about the "Big Toe" was especially among my favorites. I'm not going to tell you the whole story here but let me just say that "Big Toe" scared the dickens out of me. I used the same story to put junior high school students to sleep when we were at camp. I remember one night telling it, and when I was done you couldn't hear a peep. The story represented so much more than just a thrilling tale to me, though. It was another way Grandma paid undivided attention to me. She loved me from the heart. Grandma's gone now, probably yodeling in heaven, driving all them angels crazy. She is something else!

Being loved by a person like Grandma Rena can provide a powerful motivation for a person. Motivation is a subject that has always fascinated me. I want

to know why people do the things that they do. What makes us tick? What I have learned is that love is a gift from God and that when a person experiences unadulterated love he is changed in a number of positive ways.

I believe we were made to love and be loved. When we give and receive love we closely reflect the nature of God, because God is love, according to the Apostle John. You can have a multitude of motivations in your life to do a multitude of things, but no motivation or goal will ever outweigh the significance of love.

One of the fundamental questions people ask is "Does anyone love me?" Some search for love their whole lives, and not finding it, substitute a number of love counterfeits. Sex is the biggest culprit. People indulge the flesh and think their appetite will be satisfied. What they end up with is a thirst for more and an attitude of consumption rather than love. Power is another deceiver. People think they can demand love. What they are doing is forcing others to kiss their feet. They feel the submissiveness of others and mistake their loyalty for love. Also (the Beatles were right) money cannot buy love. It may feel that way because people are drawn to the rich man for his riches, but in the end money takes wings and flies away.

"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick," (Matthew 14:14). By the way, Jesus was in a boat; they didn't have planes in those days.

It is so easy to mistake pleasing others for true spirituality. Some "pleasers" are busy doing a lot of stuff for everyone because they live to please. They translate their good works into leverage against God and others. "I do for everyone else so I deserve something in return." Pleasers usually will not express this demand, but they are thinking it. Why? Because they please others not for the other's sake but for their own sake. Real it. Why? Because they please others not for the other's sake but for their own sake. Real love and true spirituality serve others from compassion. True love puts itself in the shoes of others and reaches out to meet them where they are.

Many years ago I got as sick as I had ever been. Even when I had scarlet fever as a kid I had healed faster than I did from whatever I got my first year in Oregon. At some points I thought it was all over.

Most of the time for about three months I didn't feel like I had an ounce of energy. One day, during the second week, I lay in shambles on the couch when there was a knock on the door. It was a man with a hatchet. He introduced himself and asked if there was any wood that he could cut for us. What an angel! I didn't have the energy to pick up a toothpick, let alone an ax. He had compassion on me. He reached out to my family when we were in need. He was a God-send.

You and I can be a "God-send" today. "God, use us today and give us compassion for others. Lord, maybe you better give us compassion first and then we will be prepared to lend a hand to someone in need. In Jesus' name, Amen."

God's blessings flow from a compassionate heart,
Pastor Steve

"Short Prayers From The Heart"

January 21 - Matthew 14:22 - 15:9

Jesus taught that the optimum place for prayer is in a secluded place where only you and God can talk. He said this to contrast the habit of the Pharisees, which was to make a public display of their praying. I think most people are afraid to pray in public. It took me a long time to feel comfortable doing that. The Pharisees, though, were more interested in people recognizing their "spirituality" than they were in really talking to God.

I assume that you are not in the shoes of a Pharisee and that you would rather keep your spiritual practice more private. So tell me where you go to spend time alone with God? Where is that special place where you retreat to refresh your soul by honest dialogue with the Lord? Do you have a place like that? If not, let me encourage you to look for one.

Carl was a young man studying to be a pastor when I first met him. In a round-about way he was like a brother to my girlfriend when we were seniors in high school. It was right at the end of my senior year when Jesus came into my life. Kitty (yeah, that was really her name) and I took a weekend and drove up to San Francisco to spend some time with Carl and his wife Ronda. In the course of our visit, Kitty and Ronda weren't getting along. One morning the tension reached a peak. Where was Carl? He was nowhere to be found. There I was in the middle of a cat-fight and my new friend was AWOL. Ronda told me that when tensions were high, it was Carl's practice to go to a place at the park and spend time praying. That was his special place where he talked to the Lord about the situation at hand. At that time in my life I was a bit taken aback by this behavior, but I also thought that somehow it was the best course of action. And interestingly enough, the girls did resolve their conflict. Ironically, on the way home Kitty and I broke up. Such is life!

One of the key verses describing Jesus' life is found in Mark 1:35. It says, "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." Jesus always set the pace by doing what He asked others to do. Jesus even said, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it," (John 14:12-14).

Even though the ideal is to spend concentrated time in prayer in a secluded place, God accepts prayers on the run, or on the water, as the Apostle Peter found out. His prayer, "Lord, save me" is one of the shortest recorded in the Bible. Jesus answered his prayer. Peter's intentions were great and he had even taken a step in the right direction, but then he was overwhelmed by the sight of the waves. All of the sudden, his faith wavered and he began to sink. Jesus responded not with sarcasm or a scolding, but with help.

Prayers are most effective when they are sincerely prayed from the heart. That's why the best prayers are prayed when the need is great. The prayer doesn't have to be long and drawn out, it simply needs to be sincere. Sometimes, just pray short meaningful prayers like:

"Lord, give me courage to face this..."
"God, give me love for _____."
"God, I'm stepping out in faith; strengthen me."
"God, use me."
"Jesus, help me to act like you right now."
"Lord, would you heal _____?"
"God, I need you right now, please God."
"Lord, guide my steps."
"Lord, open my eyes so I can see your word clearly."

The Pharisees could pray lengthy and fancy prayers, but Jesus said their hearts were far from Him. People may have been impressed, but not the Lord. Because God knows our heart already, He is more inclined to hear us reflect back to Him where we truly are and not some made-up version that might sound grand, but is really only lip service. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight," (Luke 16:15).

"Pray in the Spirit" Paul told us in Ephesians. Let's join him.

God's blessings make prayer a joy,
Pastor Steve

"Out Of The Heart"

January 22 - Matthew 15: 10-39

Praise The Lord,

It's funny about our hearts. We seem to be most in touch with them when we're hurting. Those who have been through a good deal of suffering will sometimes have a deep capacity to feel for others. They can empathize with others. I think that maybe this is because their hearts are softened. They are less proud. They are more vulnerable. They are more reliant on Divine Grace.

Jeremiah said a long time ago, "The heart is deceitful above all else, who can know it?" Sin has had a big impact on mankind. I have heard over and over for years the comment, "I'm a good person," or "He's such a good person." "Good" is a relative word when it comes to describing the heart. Compared to God, no one measures up; both Jesus and the apostle Paul say that there are none good, not even one. So if we say someone is good, we need to qualify what we mean.

It seems to me that each time neighbors or associates of a person who is convicted for some horrible crime are asked to talk about him, they usually say what a nice person he was and how they just can't comprehend his actions. Remember the Columbine murderers in Colorado? One of the kid's neighbors said that he was quiet, but seemingly harmless. This person simply did not know him.

I believe we are so quick to think people are good because we hope that it is true. The truth is, that by nature none are good. So, acts of goodness should be attributed to the general grace of God who enables sinful people to do some kind things. Left to our own inward inclinations, we all would be guilty of heinous crimes. That's why Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that all men are guilty of the most horrible sins because the heart is corrupt.

Jesus said, "For out of the heart come:

1. Evil thoughts
2. Murder
3. Adultery
4. Sexual immorality
5. Theft
6. False testimony
7. Slander"

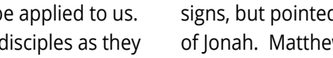
Jesus makes it clear that religious traditions like hand washing or, in the Pharisee's case, a whole lot of rules they made up to establish their own righteousness, will not prevent them from falling into a spiritual ditch. They are spiritually blind, even though they think they are okay because they keep their own man-made rules.

For these reasons Jesus would tell the Pharisee Nicodemus that a person would have to be born anew in order to enter the kingdom of God (see this in John 3). There needs to be an internal work of the Spirit in a person's heart in order for him to stake any claim to heaven or to think that he can comprehend spiritual things.

It is too easy to take for granted the miracle of new birth a Christian has experienced. Jesus says it's like the wind, in that it is mysterious as to its origin but has a dramatic impact on those it touches. Until then a person could clean up his act all he wanted and still not change the sin in his heart. Only Christ can make a clean heart.

Has Jesus changed your heart? If so, you will experience ongoing cleansing through the Word. John 15:3 says, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." There's another good reason to continue reading, studying and thinking about the Word of God.

God's blessings change our heart,
Pastor Steve



"Jonah, Yeast, and a Spiritual Answer"

January 23 - Matthew 16: 1-20

There are at least three very important lessons in this chapter. Let's spell them out and then try to apply them to our lives. The fact that Jesus was seemingly in a constant tussle with the Pharisees and Sadducees should give us some encouragement if we too are rubbing people the wrong way with our Jesus talk. Like we've already pointed out, Jesus is the dividing line and it just may be that you find yourself in tension right now with someone who'd like you to "keep your religion to yourself."

To date, what has been the number one spiritual lesson that you have learned since coming to Jesus? A lesson must first be heard and digested before it can be put into practice. Many times we will hear the words of Jesus and find them difficult to swallow. At the end of John chapter six Jesus told his listeners that they would have to eat His flesh and drink His blood if they wanted any part with Him. The Bible there records that many heard this and left Him. Sometimes we have to see the lessons lived out in others before we can understand how they might be applied to us. This was, of course, true for the first disciples as they walked with Jesus.

When I was just a baby Christian I met Rodney. He had long hair, a beard and a smile that could light up a room. He was also an ex-Hell's Angel. To me he was one of the coolest brothers in Christ I had run into. I met up with him one Saturday evening at church, the night before Easter that year. He asked if I wanted to hang out and then go him to a sunrise service at a local football stadium. Absolutely, I did! We ate at Denny's, drove around for awhile, and ended up outside the stadium, sometimes talking and then nodding off, but enjoying each other's company all the time. Probably about 5 a.m. a drunk staggered past us, bottle in hand, looking like he wasn't sure which way he was headed. I remember saying, "Look at that, it's Easter morning and that guy's as drunk as a skunk -- can you believe that?" I looked to Rodney for recognition. He bowed his head and prayed for the man. After he finished praying he didn't say anything about it; he didn't have to. That was 40 years ago; it seems like it happened yesterday. It was a powerful lesson to me.

Jesus taught many lessons and performed many signs, but pointed to one as the ultimate -- the sign of Jonah. Matthew doesn't explain what that meant here because Jesus had already brought it up back in chapter 12. It is about His burial for three days which implies his resurrection. That is the sign of all signs:

that He would rise.

The second lesson is the warning not to be taken in by the teaching of the religious brass of the day. So many people simply took for granted what the religiously esteemed person said. It would have been counter to the nature of some of the disciples to question their words. That was true except for the fact that Jesus spoke with so much more authority. That authority was recognized by the disciples as well as the crowd.

Thirdly, Jesus' identity as the Messiah and the Son of the living God is given to Peter not because he was extraordinarily smart but as a gift from the Father in heaven. God was speaking through Peter unbeknownst to him.

Who doesn't want to see a sign from heaven or be able to receive spiritual insights? In our day and age so many claim that they are spiritual people in some sense or another. They claim to hear God speaking or they profess to have deep spiritual insight and so they write books about how you can be like them. The "spiritual" new age movement in our time has adherents all over the country. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the spiritual leaders of their day. I believe Jesus is telling the Pharisees and Sadducees that as easy as it is for them to predict that a storm is coming, it should be as simple for them to realize who He is by His works and words. But they don't; they reject Him from start to finish. They do not believe He is their Messiah. And even though He is standing right among them, they cannot see Him, so to speak. They are blind.

Jesus did not want his disciples to be taken in by these blind guides. He uses the illustration of yeast to make it clear that their teaching spreads and negatively permeates the whole person. We, today, need to take this to heart and be careful who we listen to and follow. Let's respect good Christian teachers and listen to their thoughts on Scripture, but at the same time we ought not to become their disciples. They are merely servants guiding us closer to the Lord. We will get the most out of Scripture and learn the greatest lessons by anticipating that God will teach us out of His Word.

God's blessings teach us many new lessons,
Pastor Steve

"I Forfeit"

January 24 - Matthew 16:21 - 17:13

From the very beginning of time it has been man's temptation to try and live in an independent, self-satisfied, and materialistic way. From time eternal these have been the goals to shoot for if a person wanted "the good life." It's the banner I grew up under and it's the temptation that knocks on my door quite often.

The crazy thing is that the more I have, the less satisfied I seem to be. On the other hand, the more I am able to give to others the richer I feel. Jesus taught in another place that "life does not consist in the abundance of the things that a man possesses." The more we take a possessive attitude, the more we get possessed by our possessions. And if they don't suffocate us Visa and MasterCard will sure try.

Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" Rhetorical question. Of course the answer he expects is "No good at all. This is a question that applies in our day more than ever. When we give ourselves to the materialism monster, he eats a bit of our soul. The more we buy, the more we accumulate, the more false security and distraction we experience. Jesus knew that materialism would rob the joy from the soul.

That kind of gain, the accumulation of possessions, is actually loss.

This gain Jesus refers to probably also applies to position or status as well. So many people spend so much of their lives trying to please or impress others. Do you tend to live for the praise of others? Can the least bit of criticism bowl you over? Do you think a lot about others' opinions? Are you concerned that others might be talking about you? Is it hard for you to watch a football game because you are concerned the quarterback is talking about you in the huddle? Just kidding.

Gaining wealth or status is often the result of selfish ambition. When I put the focus on me and my well being I tend to not be satisfied unless things in "my" world go well. Unless I have money or status or power then I'm not happy. But the truth is that God did not put me on this planet to please me. He has a plan for me -- a game plan so to speak -- which will end in a guaranteed victory. Those who follow God's game plan will never have to forfeit. They are winners already because Jesus won the spiritual victory for them by dying on the cross and defeating every spiritual foe against us. Those who pursue material gain and self-promotion risk the possibility of forfeiting their lives.

If you have ever been on a team that had to forfeit for one reason or another you know the frustration that it caused. You didn't even get into the game. You went home early. You may have practiced hard and have psyched yourself up for the contest, but in the end there was no contest, only a long, sad, ride home. Sometimes when a game has been forfeited, the other team will lend you a player or two so you can have a practice game. It would be a meaningless game because you have already lost because of the forfeit, but at least you'd get in a little workout. What would it be like to work hard your whole life and find out in the end that you were never in the game because you had forfeited it all?

What would it be like to get to the end of your life with great wealth, popularity and a retirement that others envied, but learn on judgment day that you had lost your soul?

What would a man give in exchange for his soul?

What would it profit to miss Jesus and pour your life into every other pursuit that will one day end in a forfeit? There is no advantage in that whatsoever.

After Jesus comes into your life, in reality, you have everything that you will ever need.

David made it clear: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1).

I could live without a cell phone and still be in the game of life.

I could live without a 60-inch TV and still be in the game of life.

I could live without a new car and still be in the game of life.

I could live without the praise of others and still be in the game of life.

I could live without luxuries and still be in the game of life.

I could live without Jesus and forfeit everything.

God's blessings are realized in a life surrendered to Jesus,
Pastor Steve

Day 25

"Frustration, Failure and Fear"

January 25 - Matthew 17:14 - 18:9

It's tough to be human. Sometimes it's tough to be God, no doubt. Much of life is about the way we respond to our own humanity. We are limited in so many ways and are bound by our limitations. Even the actor who played Superman died recently although he had been hopeful that he would walk again despite his severe spinal cord injury from a horse riding accident in the mid-'90s. We are frail. Remember the "Iron Man," Lou Gehrig? Now the debilitating disease that took his life, ALS, is named after him. In his final speech at Yankee Stadium in New York, Gehrig said that he was the luckiest man on the face of the earth. He may have been made of iron, but he died a young man.

If you have been feeling the restrictions of your humanity lately, that is a perfectly normal thing. Don't feel sorry for yourself; instead, join the rest of us who are struggling alongside of you. My wife's grandpa used to tell perfect strangers on the street, "Today's a good day for a race!" They'd look at him cross-eyed and then he'd finish, "The human race." Then they got it. "This guy must be some kind of a nut," I could see them thinking. But he was right, wasn't he? Why sit around and mope and complain when there is a race to be run and a fellow runner who needs encouragement?

I think my Dam Theory will help us here.

Dams regulate the flow of water in a lake. Before the rainy season the engineer opens the dam's spillways to let out some of the pressure the high water level causes. Regulating the amount of water protects the safety of those who live downriver and prepares the lake to take on the upcoming rainy season. Make sense so far? What does this have to do with anything? Be patient.

Just as the dam determines the amount of water pressure against its wall, our minds and hearts will determine the amount of pressure in our lives. Let me illustrate. Picture three rivers running into a lake. Can you visualize them? Okay, now picture a good-sized dam at the other end standing firmly against the awesome amount of pressure all of that water brings. The amount of pressure is determined by the amount of flow from the rivers that are feeding the lake. What would happen if the amount of water coming in overtook the amount of outflow from the dam? Well, either the dam would crack or the water would overflow the dam, or both.

Now think about this from a different perspective. Let's say that the rivers represent the emotions: fear, hurt and frustration. The dam represents our minds and hearts. The homes downriver represent all of the people in our lives. Depending on our ability to open our dam, we will be able to regulate the amount of pressure we are having to contend with from day to day. Our inability to open the dam will determine how much increasing pressure will build up against us. If there is no mechanism to open the dam, sooner or later there will be a break. Now you're with me, aren't you?

Every single human being has pressure in his life. Without exception this is true. Jesus had pressure and so do we. Why is it that some people are better able to cope with the pressure in their lives? Are they superhuman? Are they the lucky ones? Do they have it easier than others so that they do not even feel the kinds of pressures that most of us feel? Really, pressure doesn't discriminate from one class to another. The rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the ones who look like they have it all together and the ones who don't, have all had their dams broken. Pressure is a universal reality. You have it, and I have it, and our kids have it.

A reasonable amount of pressure is motivational. The goal is not to release all pressure from our lives. People who have that goal are being too idealistic.

And those who retire with the hope of having a carefree life usually end up disappointed. Have you ever seen a lake with no water in it? It's not too pretty, is it? This pressure and the stress that it causes are in some ways an indication that we are alive. It forces us to use our minds and hearts to deal with the daily cares we are confronted with.

There is a multitude of ways to open your dam and let the pressure of the water in your lake flow. There are probably as many ways as there are people. No two people are exactly alike and so each person has to find the mechanisms to open those big outlets and relieve the pressure. At the same

time, I believe there are a few universal switches that can be instrumental in opening the dam. I'd like to share a few that have helped me the most.

1. It helps me to identify the particular emotion that is dumping the most water into my lake. Once I have identified the source of the problem I can begin to work on the problem and can usually -- not always -- find a way to deal with the rush of watery emotion that is flowing from that river. I am the king of frustration. Because of my perfectionist tendencies I will quickly cut my own head off to spite my face with unmet unrealistic expectations.

2. Next, it helps to pray about the particular event that is the source of the flow. "God is our refuge and strength..." (Psalm 46:1). Also, in prayer we can cast our care upon the Lord because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

3. I have found that it is extremely helpful to have a quiver of well-used Bible verses or Bible chapters to quote or read when under pressure. I love Psalm 27. Take a look at this jewel-filled chapter. Also Psalm 37 has a lot of help.

4. Music. Music is the balm of the soul and can open the dam very quickly when you can identify with the lyrics of the songwriter. Put on your favorite music and watch the fear, hurt and frustration flow down stream.

5. Talk to a friend. Get it off your shoulders. We all need a confidante to spill our guts to. "Bear one another's burdens and fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6).

And the list goes on. Maybe you can take some time today to personalize a list for yourself. Remember, these will be the actions we take when the emotions of fear, frustration and hurt are pressing against our lives and causing such undue stress that we feel like we are going to explode.

Let's apply this to our reading today.

Jesus is frustrated with the disciples and his generation because they lacked simple faith. Jesus deals with this frustration by stating it clearly with the expectation that He wants His disciples to have faith. He makes it clear that they will need it because He will not always be with them physically. When the disciples hear Jesus talk about His death, grief fills their hearts. They are hurt. How could this be that their Lord, whom they love, is going to die? They are saddened by the news. More than likely they didn't hear about the resurrection part. How could they have understood that at the time? They are also probably dealing with the emotion of fear as well. What would they do when Jesus died? He had become the center of their lives and now He was leaving; that didn't seem fair. Could they also have been dealing with the fear of failure since they couldn't cast out the demon?

Emotion is a big part of our lives. Let's learn to deal with it in wise ways and ask God for patience when He allows a great amount of stress to push against us. It will develop all kinds of good fruit in our lives.

God's blessings open the dam,
Pastor Steve

Day 26

"Forgiveness Is Not Optional"

January 26 - Matthew 18: 10-35

Let's face it, we tend to love those who love us. When I feel like someone cares about little old me, I tend to want to live in harmony with the source of that love. Isn't it interesting how all of those gigantic football players speak so sentimentally about their mothers? Recently there has been a TV commercial highlighting the Philadelphia quarterback's mom. In the commercial she is the Team Mom who feeds the players hearty soup so they can play well. Where are all the dads? I think the reason there is such an emphasis on mom is because of all of the nurturing she did through the years. It may not seem macho, but the truth is that mom gets most of the credit from down on the field. Who do the players say "hi" to when the camera is on them? Those who love us, like our moms, can make all kinds of mistakes and we would still be inclined to forgive them. On the other hand, it's much more difficult to deal with those we are not nurtured by, let alone forgive them.

Jesus' parable of the ungrateful servant speaks volumes about the central place of forgiveness in His teachings. The teaching concludes with the sobering words: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart."

Let's summarize the parable: a man owes an exorbitant debt to his master. When called to account he begs for mercy and receives it from the gracious master. He too has a debtor, whom he strong-arms to pay the debt. When that person begs for mercy he receives none, but is cast into debtors' prison. The servants of the big boss see this and report the matter to him. The big boss takes the ingrate and gives him a taste of his own medicine.

There a few key observations here:

1. The first man owed a debt that was so huge that he needed forgiveness to be able to deal with it. He couldn't pay his debt.

2. The big boss expected the indebted servant to learn a lesson about forgiveness from His kindness.

3. The basis for the forgiveness we offer others will depend on how personally we take our own forgiveness. The question is "What impact has the master's graciousness had on our own lives?"

4. When we squander the privileges we have received, we then forfeit the grace that could have been ours. Or, we demonstrate by our lack of appreciation for what has been done for us that we really haven't personalized the love of the Master.

Jesus said in another place, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed," (Matthew 21:43,44).

True spirituality is marked by true forgiveness. After a person is transformed by the salvation of Christ, he is then made fit for the kingdom of God by the change of his heart. When there is no heart change, the person may try to conform to the standards and expectations of spirituality, but in the final analysis he will not be able to do the words of Jesus.

It sounds harsh, doesn't it? That the Master would be so angry with the first servant in the story. But think again about the disparity between what he had received and the way he didn't appropriate it. Jesus says that the Master would say, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" There was a disconnect between the great gift the Master had given him and what he ought to do with that gift.

What impact has the gift of God had in your life?

When you read about or think about the cross, how does that affect your relationships with some of the harder-to-get-along-with people in your life?

Has forgiveness been difficult for you when it comes to some people? Have their offenses been

eating at you to the point where you are distracted by them?

If you chose to forgive them today how would that affect your relationship with them? If you are not sure, why not give it a try, for Jesus' sake, and see what happens? You just might free yourself from the burden of carrying the offense.

Back to the analogy about mothers; most of us will always feel a certain amount of love and security from our moms. Moms tend to love us no matter what. They have nurtured us and given us the sense that we could talk to them about almost anything. We trust them. We believe that they believe in us. It is easy to love our moms, because they love us; it is another story when it comes to those who owe us something and are asking us to forgive them. How can we treat them so harshly when we have had so much love and mercy in our own lives?

God's blessings empower us to truly forgive,

Pastor Steve

Day 27

"Little Kids"

January 27 - Matthew 19: 1-15

Pray Today,

We could talk about divorce; it's in our reading today. But all those grown ups talking about grown up stuff like divorce can sometimes be unnerving. Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus and Jesus told them the way it was from the beginning, when God initiated the union of husband and wife. Grown ups are always talking about controversial subjects, it seems. Even the disciples were protective of the Lord's time and tried to shoo the little kids from interfering with the important work He was doing.

Do you remember how you felt as a child? I hope that you had a ton of carefree moments and days growing up. If you didn't, for one reason or another, I am sorry. I wish you could have known some of the lazy summer days I remember when the cares of adult affairs were as far from me as the moon. One of my favorite memories is riding my bike down to the park to play "over the line" with my friends. Over the line was a simple game of baseball that only required four players. We'd set up two bases where second and third are on a normal baseball field. There was a shortstop and outfielder, a batter and an underhand pitcher. The point was to try to drive the ball past one of the players in the field. If you hit it past the shortstop, that was a single; if the ball landed in front of the outfielder, but got past him on the ground, that was a double; over the outfielder's head was a home run. Outs were made by catching a grounder at short or on the fly by either of the players in the field. We would play for hours. I might sneak back home for a PB&J, but then it was right back to the park.

Another pastime that my friends and I enjoyed was having Monopoly tournaments, especially on rainy days. We'd drink Dr. Pepper, eat candy and buy up as many properties as we could. When we were playing, we weren't worrying. Well, maybe we thought about what we might do that night or we would get on each other's case about who was better, the Dodgers or Giants. But we were not worried about adult stuff whatsoever. Man, that was a good time in my life. Can you relate to this in any way? I hope so.

I am concerned that via the Internet or cable TV or even regular old TV, kids are getting caught up in adult issues way too young. The things young children talk about at the grade school level these days were the things that made my friends and I blush in high school. Times have changed. But the purpose of

this email is not to discourage you, but help you to live with a more child-like attitude.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God was for kids. Don't you love that? At a time in the world when schedules and goals and deadlines and meetings are the norm, isn't it refreshing to know that the kingdom of God is for kids? Let's think today about ways we might emulate kids.

The other day a friend's son came up at a sporting event and out of the blue gave me a hug. Wow, did that feel special. Kids do that quite a bit, don't they? They do stuff out of the blue. When was the last time you did something that way? Why do adults become so predictable? I challenge you to do something out of the ordinary today in an "out of the blue" way.

Kids trust. They will quickly put their faith in someone whether that person is trustworthy or not. In other words, they are not as skeptical as adults. They are especially not cynical. Let's practice this in our prayers today. Let's come to God as little children and let Him know how much we love and trust Him and believe that He is doing good things in our lives. Trust in the Lord. Also, show someone you trust them by giving them your attention and displaying to them through your body language that they are worth listening to.

There are so many other examples, but let's finish with playfulness. Kids have such great imaginations. Give a kid a ball or stick and let him go to town. For years my family lived in the woods. My kids would play for hours, doing so many creative and innovative things. They would get some old pieces of lumber and build a treehouse. It became a project that they couldn't wait to get to.

How playful are you? Are you in a rut? Would it help you to do something today in a playful way?

Be a kid. The kingdom belongs to such as these. If you are a child of God, enjoy acting like one. God loves to see His children at play and He loves to talk with them in all the adventures of life.

God's blessings, child,
Pastor Steve

Day 28

"With God All Things are Possible"

January 28 - Matthew 19: 16-30

Lift Your Head High,

Let's step back today and look at the account of the rich young man.

Once on a segment of ABC's 20/20 there was a report titled, "Lies, Myths and Downright Stupidity." One of the myths exposed was: Money brings happiness.

They reported from the perspective of a rap artist who made millions producing records, that money doesn't really give you the kind of satisfaction that is at the heart of living life well. The rapper, the lead guy from the group, Run DMC, said that one day he woke up to the reality that even though he had it all, it really felt more like a game than real life. Real life was found in serving God and by reaching out to others and enjoying their happiness. He said that happiness is merely a byproduct of another's happiness.

The story of the Rich Man is a glimpse into the nature of all men. We want to know what we can do to have eternal life. I want my cake and I want to eat it too. I want it all. I want me to be happy. And so I become adept at justifying my own life to fit the way I perceive God's standard. When you read the account, you realize that the focus of the man was on himself. Nowhere in the story do you pick up that he is willing to follow Jesus. He wants to do a good work and earn eternal life.

How do you think the man would have responded if Jesus had said, "It's going to cost you a million dollars." He probably would have paid it if he was worth ten million. But what would he have done if he was worth nine hundred thousand? In the latter scenario he would have had to rely on the Lord for what he didn't have. He would have had to humble himself.

Jesus puts the man in his place. He exposes him for who he really is. Jesus is saying that salvation -- eternal life -- cannot be bought or earned unless you are perfect. The disciples pick up on this and ask how then anyone could be saved. The Lord replies, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

In I Corinthians 1, the apostle makes the point that there are few big-wigs in the kingdom of God. He says, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...He chose the lowly things of this world... to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1:26f.).

Are you still trying to earn eternal life? Jesus says it's impossible. Are you enjoying eternal life? Then you have learned the secret that with God all things are possible. Eternal life is in Jesus and if you have received Him, then you have eternal life. John says, "He who has the Son has life..."

God's blessings are realized in the Son,
Pastor Steve

Day 29

"God Does What He Wants"

January 29 - Matthew 20: 1-19

Happy are the People whose God is the Lord,

Remember being a kid and thinking how grown-ups knew everything? We thought that our parents must be like gods or something because the breadth of their knowledge was so far beyond ours. Then we grew up and realized that all of us have limitations to our knowledge. In so many ways--maybe in every way--we, as humans, are limited, mortal creatures.

Do you sometimes feel the weight of your own limitations? Or are you one of those who thinks that you are immortal and that life will always be the way it is now? Some religious faiths teach that man will one day become a god. He will shed his mortal flesh and take on the name of a god. Or, others hold to some belief in reincarnation, the idea that once you die you come back and get other chances to evolve into the god that you could become. Of course man's attempt at godhood is as old as the Garden of Eden. There, it was the devil who introduced the idea that man ought to aspire to be a god.

Rather than being an acceptable thought, this very idea became the downfall of all men.

We'd like to believe that we could think like God thinks. Ponder that for a moment.

What happens when we aspire to be gods or, even more bizarrely, try to bring God down to our level and give Him an identity in our own likeness? When that happens, we severely distort the truth about who God is. God is God and there is no one like Him. His thoughts, Isaiah taught, and His ways, are not like ours. They are so much higher that it is futile to try and figure them out. We may look at what God reveals and make conclusions from the things we read, but to think that we can know the mind of God to such an extent that we could figure Him out -- well, sorry, it just won't happen.

The same wonder I had as a kid about my parents' wisdom I felt again when I first came to Christ. So much about Him was a mystery to me. I was

not pre-judging what He could or couldn't do. I was awestruck by the possibilities of His work in my life, but I did not force Him into a little box and dictate the way things would be. I didn't know better because I had so little knowledge about Him. All I knew was that He loved me and that He was alive. That was good enough. If He were to surprise me tomorrow in some new way, that was A-okay with me. I was more than willing to submit to the wisdom and power and will of the Father. My thoughts ran along these lines: "God, bring it on; you be God and I'll be just me in need of you, waiting for you to do whatever you want in my life. I will just sit back and let you work in ways that will blow my mind." Then I met people who knew all about God...

Once we think that God can be wired and fully comprehended, then we will be in for a very rude awakening. I don't think God is interested in being confined to our formulas and ideas. Now, I do not mean that there is not clear teaching about who He is and His ways. The Bible is clear about the nature and works of God. It's when we think we are as smart as He is and begin to portray that we know as much, then we are in trouble.

Jesus' parable of the hired workers reminds us who is in charge. At one point the master says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" How could anyone argue with that? Of course He has that right no matter what anyone thinks about it. He's the one in charge and the one with the authority to hire. This is a very healthy way to view God. It helps us to keep the right perspective about who He is and who we are.

Sometimes we get too big for our britches. Have you ever looked around at the way God has blessed others and began to feel put out because they seem to be getting much more than you? You work so hard and do so much and along comes so-and-so and it seems like they do very little and, wham, their life is full of blessings. This "works mentality" has been the downfall of many. It was for the religious Jews of Jesus' day. When Jesus begins to talk about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God, their religious feathers are ruffled. Here they have the spiritual background and the heritage that the teachings and life of Christ are fulfilling and these Johnny-come-lately Gentiles are going to be let in. That was a thought that truly rubbed them the wrong way.

What does God owe you? Truly, God owes me not one single thing. Rather, I owe him my all in all. If God decides to give someone else more than He gives me I can't complain because all that I have is from Him in the first place. Even if I worked all day in the sun to receive my pay, it is still by grace that I have the mercy to do that. The Bible says, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom

and knowledge of God!

How unreachable his judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been His counselor?
Who has ever given to God
that God should repay him?
For from Him and through Him and
to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever! Amen." Romans 11: 33-36

God's blessings are unconditional. Enjoy yours,
Pastor Steve

Day 30

"How Great You Are!"

January 30 - Matthew 20: 20-34

I Hope You Find Yourself Blessed Today,

How are you doing on the ladder of success? In America it looks something like this, starting from the bottom up: high school diploma, a bachelor of arts degree, a good job, a master of arts degree, advancement at your good job, an eye-catching car, a house of your own, a strong retirement plan, retirement, relocating to a warm spot, living the good life. Is that pretty close?

Success is usually measured by how much you have and how much influence you wield. These benchmarks are easily distinguished by the kind of car you drive or the level of intimidation aroused among your peers. Accomplishment can also be measured by the degrees on your wall or the plaques which announce the honors others have conferred upon you. One way or another, your worth is typically determined by the status you have achieved in society.

Bear with me for just a moment while I detour from what I want to say today so that I can bang a drum of mine on the subject of education. The truth of the matter is that you may have a child who is not wired, no way no how, to go to college. That's just the way it is. What happens in that child's mind when he is told from a young age that you will not amount to anything if you do not go to college? By the way, many of our up-and-coming smarty-pants kids end up in a liberal university where they buy into Darwinism and the liberal mantras of the day and come out of the dorms with an education and a belly and mind full of garbage. That is not a good definition of success in my estimation. Ecclesiastes says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all of your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (9:10).

Okay, I feel better, now let's get back on track.

In response to a mother's plea for her two boys to have honor in Jesus' kingdom, the Lord sits his disciples down and tells them the way it is in His economy. First of all, He makes it crystal clear that His way would not match the way of the world. He so much as says, "Stop reading books on leadership by secular authors. They will not establish the same principles that I have been teaching you when it comes to living in the realm of God's kingdom. As a matter of fact, if you go their way you will be working against the kingdom." Jesus, the Master Teacher, oftentimes throughout His ministry had to rebuke the attitudes of His disciples. In so doing He was making it clear to them that they were to be different. Instead of lords with all authority, they were to be servant leaders.

Peter has much to say about this in his first epistle. Let's quote him: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away," (5: 1-4). Peter was there the day Jesus taught what Matthew recorded in our reading today and obviously he learned the lesson. Here he passes the torch to other leaders with clear expectations that they would lead by serving and not being served.

Jesus puts His money where His mouth is. Pardon the pun, but in a way that's true, isn't it? He took all of His resources and used them to serve others, even to the point of death so that others could participate in His kingdom. He made the way by sacrificing His own body so that we might have eternal life. "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all; how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things" (Romans 8: 32). If that isn't reason to serve

Jesus then I don't have one.

In what way will you serve others today?

Let's be like Jesus and follow Him in reaching out to others in His Name!

God's blessings happen with the servant's towel,

Pastor Steve

Day 31

"The Last Days"

January 31 - Matthew 21: 1-17

Jonathan Edwards, the renowned Puritan preacher, resolved not to waste a minute of his time on things that he knew would not honor the Lord. He made reference to using his time during his life the same way he would use it if his death were imminent. A number of us live as if we will never die and die as if we never lived. In the end we tend to add up what our time has amounted to and begrudge the brevity of our lives. Life is short -- shorter than we think -- and it would be a good thing for all of us to take Edwards's motto to heart and begin to live as if this day was our last.

In the New Testament we now begin Christ's final week before resurrection. He is met at first with praise by a riled up crowd. Let's call this time "Messianic acknowledgment." The people thought Jesus could be the promised Messiah. Most, if not all, of them thought this meant the beginning of a new earthly kingdom that would overpower the Roman government.

For so long Rome had dominated the world, including the little Middle-Eastern strip of land called Palestine. It was a significant location because of its centrality between different nations, but it was not considered by Rome a difficult area to control and manage. Many of the Jews were outraged that the "heathen" were dominating like they were. They thirsted for a deliverer who could subdue the power of this mighty despot. Jesus reminds them that he is not a political ruler. He does this by healing the sick and restoring the blind and by cleansing the temple of those who were exploiting God's things for profit.

Earlier, John the Baptist had sent messengers to ask Jesus if He was the "One" or if they (the Jews) should be looking for another. John too was apparently anxious to see his people escape the domination of Rome. Jesus sent word back to John clarifying that His ministry was one of healing and love and not of military conquest. He came to save, not to judge. He came to offer the kingdom and deliverance from sin and freedom for the soul.

This would be the beginning of some difficult days for Jesus. He knew that by the end of the week all of his close friends would forsake Him. He knew that he would be carrying the heavy cross. The praise in today's reading from the streets of Jerusalem should be a reminder to us that the adulation of men is short lived. If we are dependent on the praise of men, then chances are we'll be let down.

Could it be that many of the very people who yelled "Hosanna," screamed out a few days later, "Crucify Him!" Crowds are so easily swayed that I am sure there were some, if not many. Let's head into the month of February with eyes open, while we read the account of the last days of Jesus on earth.

This is the gospel at its heart of hearts. Let's swallow it whole.

Gospel means "Good News." We need good news today, don't we? We need to know that there is hope for our family and friends and for the world. There is just way too much bad news pouring out of every media crevice. Wherever you turn, someone else has

something difficult to say about the way things are. The world can be a very dark place. But there is good news! There is a light that shines in the darkness and dispels the darkness. There is hope in Jesus. The roughest week of Jesus' earthly life would become the catalyst for more hope than the world has ever known.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."

As you read the last week of Jesus, don't be hasty. Take it in like a glass of cold lemonade on a hot summer day. Let it roll over your mind like hot wax dripping down a candlestick. Allow it to penetrate the inner regions of your heart and let your heart rejoice in God your Savior. He desires to be the Master of your heart. Set Him apart as Lord there today, will you?

God's blessings make life worth living,

Pastor Steve

Day 32

"A Heart To Respond And Obey"

February 1 - Matthew 21: 18-32

May God Strengthen You,

Jesus directed much of His teaching at the cold-heartedness of the Scribes and Pharisees. You need to think of these religious professionals as a class of people. Their reputation and their position was based on their status as the religious elite. Paul was a Pharisee and he would write in Galatians, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (1: 10). In a Pharisee's mind there was a ladder to be climbed and status to be gained. No wonder those who heard that Paul had been saved by the grace of Jesus were cautious at first to believe that he was truly a disciple.

Jesus' teachings were diametrically opposed to the idea that spirituality made you somehow superior to those around you. He taught that the most spiritual person was the one who served God from the heart. A truly spiritual person loves God and wants to be a son or daughter who obeys the voice of the Master. The grand teaching in the Bible, "to obey is better than sacrifice," is a reminder that listening to and obeying God's voice, hearing His Word as we go about our business from day to day, is much more important, monumentally more important, than going through any sacrificial routine. It is the heart of worship that matters and not the exterior acts that God is after. That's why Paul would later regret all of the traditionalism he had so tenaciously held on to for so long, and trade it in for knowing Jesus.

The obedient heart is not always perfect. But God knows the heart and is pleased with its disposition. The disobedient heart may cover its disobedience with the appearance of a willing attitude, as in the story of the two sons that Jesus shares in our reading today. The obedient heart will come around and do what the Master desires. Which of the two sons do you relate to the most? Do you say you will, then don't? Or, do you sometimes say you won't, but then follow your heart and do what the Master desires?

Forgiveness is a good application here. We know that forgiveness is not an option for the believer, it is a requirement. If we are injured in some way, it is our obedience to Christ that leads us to offer forgiveness. Many times, I have talked to an obedient Christian who said at first, "I don't think I could ever forgive them for what they did." But later they do. Why? Because they have the heart of the Master "who came

not to be served but to serve."

May God keep all of us from cold-heartedness and may we walk in the footsteps of Jesus who humbled Himself to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

God's blessings make forgiveness possible,
Pastor Steve

"Many Invited, Few Chosen"

February 2 - Matthew 21:33 - 22: 14

Rejoice In The Lord Always,

Weddings are grand occasions. So much planning goes into a wedding because everyone wants it to be perfect, especially the bride. They never are flawless, of course, but that doesn't stop the need to try and perfect every detail. I was in a wedding where the bride and groom were just finishing the unity candle; they took their individual candles and lit the center candle and then they blew out the single candles to signify their oneness. The problem was that the bride blew her veil right into the flame and caught it on fire.

Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. It's a lavish affair. Everything is prepared and ready, but the original guests proved themselves unworthy of the occasion. So the call goes out into the streets to bring in all those willing to come. Guests begin to arrive and enjoy all of the benefits of the big event. The music is playing, the guests are engaged in lively conversation, maybe some are dancing and carrying on with spirits soaring, while still others are gorging themselves on the delicious trimmings at the table. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend, he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

If this fellow stood out like a sore thumb, then why didn't any of the other guests seem to be distracted by him? Jesus gives us no background on the man, only that he was not suited for the occasion. Obviously then, the others were dressed appropriately. They had the wedding clothes on. But this one man was conspicuous because of what he lacked.

Maybe he was one of those who was originally invited but had made an excuse for not coming. Maybe he changed his mind but it was too late because he was one of the undeserving. That's only a guess; Jesus didn't say that. What we do know is that he didn't fit in. For some reason he was in the wrong place.

Have you ever seen that show called "American Idol?" The call goes out for many to come and sing. They get every imaginable kind of singer. Some of them are so bad, they are fun to watch. One guy was so ridiculous that even though he was rejected, he went on to be pretty famous. Everyone wanted to see the guy who was rejected by the "American Idol" panel. But some of the would-be stars are chosen. They are chosen on the basis of their ability to sing well. Then they have the opportunity to go on and make a name for themselves.

In the parable we are not given the basis for the king's choice. We are only told that some had wedding garments on and this one guy did not. Later on in the Bible we are given a crystal clear picture of what the wedding garment would look like. For example: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature," (Romans 13:14) and "Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience..." (Colossians 3:12). Faith in Jesus is the basis for being made fit for the kingdom of God and for admission into the Great Wedding Banquet.

Jesus' own countrymen had rejected Him as king. They "paid no attention and went off." They were invited, but wound up turning away the rightful ruler. What was loss for them became an open door for the Gentiles (non-Jews), so that we without Jewish heritage can enter in and enjoy the bounty of the feast. The ones chosen will be those with faith in Jesus. Where does that faith come from?

I have often wondered why God has included me. His choice of me is based on my faith in Jesus, but why do I have faith in Jesus? Of all people I feel so unworthy of the faith that I possess. I feel like the guy without the wedding clothes more often than not. The clothes I have I did not purchase, I did not work for or sing for or bargain for, nor did I really seek to even try them on. God knows I hate to try clothes on. Why me? Why not the other guy, the guy next door or the guy who works at the coffee company or...where are his clothes? At this point let me leave these thoughts a mystery, a mystery of grace. For grace is unmerited favor; we cannot earn it or deserve it or inherit it from our families. Grace gives for its own reasons and in its own time. You were invited, and if you were chosen then you know the grace of God in Christ.

Let's stop today and ponder the mystery of Grace.

In what ways have you experienced the grace of God?

When you first heard the message of grace, where were you and how readily did you try on your new clothes?

By the way, there ain't no blue suede shoes in that outfit, only the sandals of a servant.

God's blessings are full of grace,
Pastor Steve

"You Are In Error"

February 3 - Matthew 22: 15-46

It's Good To Be Alive,

Do you tend to be too wordy? Do your friends ask you to get to the point more than you'd like? Do you stumble for words and sometimes even begin to talk when you really don't know what direction you are going? I think most of us probably say too much and listen too little. Proverbs says somewhere that in the multitude of words sin is unavoidable.

The religious brass in first century Palestine were constantly trying to get one up on Jesus. That's kind of like a first year science major thinking he could get one up on Albert Einstein. The breadth of the knowledge of God was known and lived by Jesus and so He always had an apt response when the enemies of truth came after Him. Also, quite characteristically, He didn't have to go into a lengthy explanation. He would simply utter a couple of direct lines, maybe a paragraph or two, and the job was done.

Another feature of Jesus' style was His directness towards those who were confronting Him. He told people when they were off base. He didn't accept the error and say, "Well, you have your opinion and I have mine and you can believe whatever you want. To each his own, whatever you believe is up to you." Not Jesus. If something wasn't true, he said so. He was the truth. He embodied truth. That's what John said in the fourteenth chapter of his gospel. Therefore, when He was challenged, He directly confronted the

error. One of my favorite confrontations is in John chapter 8. There He is accused of being of the devil. Jesus simply tells them that He is not of the devil but is from heaven – error dispelled, error carriers rebuked, record set straight.

Let's join Jesus and speak truth to those we rub elbows with. I believe it is always preferable to speak truth than to make up another story or not say anything at all or say that you'll talk about it later. This is true whether we are talking about Biblical truth or the truth about some situation you are in with others or about the way you feel about something. People will benefit more from hearing the truth than they will from being sheltered from it.

In our Western culture, for example, we think we are doing everyone a favor by "protecting" kids and sometimes even adults from the subject of death. Instead of teaching the truth that death is a part of life and is the destiny of us all, we tend to avoid the subject, not prepare for the inevitable and "politely" ignore the subject when little ears are nearby. Now, I'm not for being morbidly forthcoming, but I do believe we need to include death in our vocabulary so that when it does happen (and it will happen) we will be able to talk about it in a knowing way. Otherwise, we intentionally put ourselves at a disadvantage by not broaching the subject and talking about its impact on our lives.

The Sadducees did not believe in the supernatural. Therefore, they put together a scenario to upstage Jesus regarding the idea of the afterlife. What if a family of seven brothers died consecutively and passed down the woman the first brother married (that was the law, by the way)? Who would have her in the afterlife? Think about how unlikely this scenario would be! But even if it were possible, Jesus says that it misses the point altogether.

He accuses these "holy men" of not knowing the Scripture or the power of God. Then He corrects their inaccuracies. He simply says that there will be no marriage to others we knew on earth. Why is that? This is the case because we will be united to Christ in marriage at that time. Also, He makes it clear that there will be a future resurrection. He makes his case on the basis of a verse in Exodus chapter 3. In that verse God says that He is, not was, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This latter argument also gives us a window into Jesus' view of the Bible. He essentially says that the interpretation of that text of Scripture hinges on the tense of the verb, and in this case it was present and not past.

Even though the patriarchs had died, they were alive in God's presence. That proves resurrection. The fact that Jesus used such a small aspect of the verses in Exodus, shows the depth of the Word of God and Jesus' respect for its truth.

Don't you just love the reaction of the crowd? "They were astonished." Then the Pharisees chime in, trying to put Jesus on the spot, but to no avail. Jesus then gives them a Bible question that stops them in their tracks when they realize that Jesus is saying that He is Lord. Here too, Jesus gives us another glimpse into His esteem for the Word of God. He says that the Spirit was inspiring David when he said these things about Him. Our commitment to the Word of God should not be any less than Jesus'. Why would we water down our devotion to something that Jesus was 100 percent into? Let's not be caught like the Sadducees, who did not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Is there really any excuse?

God's blessings are found in Scripture,
Pastor Steve

Day 35

"Jesus Speaks Woes"

February 4 - Matthew 23: 1-39

God Help Us To Be True To Him,

I have always had trouble with the idea of a person, whether they be a parent or a boss or a work associate or anyone else, pronouncing shame on another person. I have been in situations when someone has said, "Shame on you for this or that." It strikes me the wrong way.

I am not sure why this is true. Maybe it is because, to some degree, we all deserve to be shamed, and I feel that the person pronouncing the shame doesn't have the right to speak like that. All of us have sinned and fall short of God's perfection and holiness, haven't we? Therefore, it would seem odd for me to be the one to say "Shame on you!"

Have you ever felt shamed by another person? I'm not asking whether you have ever felt ashamed. There is no doubt that all of us have at one time or another felt ashamed by our behavior. It's a different story when someone takes the shameful behavior that you would like to forget and rubs your nose in it. When I have felt ashamed I know that I have immediately wanted forgiveness or restitution or help. I did not need anyone to drag me through my own mud puddle.

Having said that, it is a whole different story when God pronounces shame on someone or some group of people. Jesus had already pronounced woes on some local cities for their stubbornness. He told them that if Sodom had the light they were privileged to have, they would have repented long ago. The result of this is that at the judgment these contemporaries of Jesus would be judged more harshly. Jesus had the authority to pronounce shame because He was without sin. At another time Jesus said about those who rejected Him that if He had not come they would not be held accountable, but because He had come and had spoken the Word of God, they had no excuse for their sin.

Jesus is always hardest on those who lead others astray. Those who are responsible for bringing others down or causing them to stumble away from the Lord will be the ones who receive a greater judgment.

All my life I have been a leader. When I was in high school I introduced my friends to behaviors that were far from upright. It wasn't good. My intentions were simply for them to have fun too, but the result was that I led many astray. If you can believe this, our school journalism class was invited to go to a conference at a local Marriott for an overnight affair. You can imagine how crazy it got. We weren't there to write stories, we were there to create stories. The next week one of my friends told me that I had inspired him. He said that before the weekend he had stopped doing any kind of drugs, but when he saw how happy I was, he picked it up again. At the time I thought to myself how cool it was that I had been such a catalyst in his life.

Just months after that debacle, I encountered Jesus and was all of a sudden on a different track. One of the first things I felt compelled to do was call all of my friends and tell them that I had found something that was so much better than anyone or anything else. Several of them came to Christ. But that one guy, whom I had inspired at the hotel earlier, I did not have the opportunity to talk to. For years I regretted that I had never been able to tell him about Jesus Christ. Well, 20 years later, after a class reunion that I did not attend, a friend of mine who did go met up with this guy and learned that he was now a believer. Whew! What a relief. That was some of the greatest news I had ever heard.

Maybe the reason the Apostle Paul spent so much energy trying to lead others to Jesus was that he had done so much damage to the cause before he became a follower. He considered himself the greatest sinner and in need of so much grace that he let it motivate

him to reach others. In Romans he laments the fact that his kinsmen, the Jews, would be lost apart from Christ. He wanted them to experience the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as he had.

Here in Matthew 23 Jesus lets the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and the legal experts have it with both barrels. Let's summarize the judgments. Try to make an application to meditate on under each bullet.

They order people around but are not willing to do as they teach.

Application: Be a doer of the Word, not just a hearer.

They love the praise of men.

Application: Live for God's approval, not man's.

They do not preach the true way of salvation.

Application: Point people to Jesus for salvation.

They play fast and loose with oaths to serve their own selfish desires.

Application: If you make a vow, keep it.

They neglect important matters by over inflating small issues.

Application: Know what matters most and dwell on those things.

They are more concerned about appearance than heart change.

Application: Be pure in heart, cleansed inside. Then the outside will clean up too.

God's blessings bring no woe,

Pastor Steve

"Signs Of The Times"

February 5 - Matthew 24: 1-31

Because God is God He knows the end from the beginning. Someone once said, "Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God?" God is all-knowing. In theological-ese it's called omniscience. In layman's terms it means that God is really smart. Albert Einstein had nothing on God. God, being the original designer of all things, got all things running without the help of anyone.

Since God is this way He can also accurately predict, without any sweat, what will happen down the road. Thus, the book of Revelation and other teachings like the one today in Matthew exemplify God's brilliance. Peter wasn't joking when he said to Jesus, "Lord, you know all things." And so prophecy, as far as we can fathom it, with our limited abilities, is made alive to us by the Holy Spirit who can use the words of Jesus to give us encouragement when it seems like the world is coming apart at the seams.

Let's look for clues in the chapter to understand the scope of the prophecy.

The disciples' inquiry in verse three is in response to Jesus saying that Jerusalem would be destroyed. This actually occurred about 40 years after Jesus said this would happen; the Roman general Titus besieged the city and leveled it in the year A.D. 70.

False prophets would flourish, persecution against Jesus' followers would be intense, God's temple would be desecrated, and there would be natural wonders like earthquakes, falling stars and lights out, meaning the sun and moon would be dimmed.

It's clear, I think, that the end of the chapter points into the distant future to the second coming of Jesus. Some Bible scholars see the allusions to Christ coming as "coming in judgment." They would link the cosmic disturbances to a figurative interpretation. They are then used to amplify what is said earlier

about a judgment, with the victims' bodies cleaned up by the birds -- yuck! So in this view they say Jesus is talking about the coming judgment on Jerusalem, and not about the coming He refers to when He talks about coming again so that He can be reunited with His disciples.

Because this discourse by Jesus is the answer to a question about Jerusalem, I tend to agree with the above interpretation. But I have always tended to see the cosmic references as a literal happening. If they are, then some of chapter 24 would have been fulfilled in the first century and some would remain for a later date. If you look carefully at a prophecy quoted by Peter from the book of Joel in Acts 2 you will see this same sort of thing. Peter says that Joel's prophecy is being fulfilled that day in Jerusalem and then he goes on to quote the whole prophecy which includes references to cosmic events like the moon losing its light.

As Jesus was led through the streets of Jerusalem to His death, some of the women were crying out because of the gruesomeness of the sight. Jesus said something very unusual. He said not to weep for Him but for themselves because of the coming judgment on the city and people that had rejected Him.

I hope these thoughts get you to thinking about Jesus' words. His words are spiritual and they are life.

Let His Words lead you and guide your life today. His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

As Job said, I considered His word as more necessary than my daily food. Let's do a spiritual Atkins diet and feed on the protein of the Word.

God's blessings are futuristic too,

Pastor Steve

"Ready or Not, Here I Come"

February 6 - Matthew 24:32 - 25:13

How long has it been since you played Hide and Seek? I loved that game. My friends and I would play it for hours; the challenge of trying to find new hiding spots was a blast. If you didn't use your head and crawl into some hidden place the chances are you'd be "it" next. My friend Tim had a house like a labyrinth with a ton of great nooks and crannies. That made it hard for the "It" guy, but it also added to the challenge of the game.

Life is not a game, is it? We can hide from God, but He will find us. So many people live their life as if it is all about them. They think life is like a game. They live as if all things will continue as they have been all of their life. But the older they get, the harder it is to find creative places to hide. Wouldn't it be easier to come out of hiding, raise our hands to God and say to Him that we would welcome His coming into our lives? Why do so many continue to reject Him when they need Him so badly? Maybe God is calling: "Come out, come out wherever you are!"

Jesus says that His coming will take many by surprise. Some will not be prepared when He arrives. They will be going along through the motions of life, doing their daily chores and thinking that life will just keep on going the way it always has and then, as if in an instant like the shock of a natural disaster, the Lord will return. Matthew likens this coming to God's judgment at the flood where all but eight people were swept away in the deluge.

What will you be doing when Jesus returns? I can hear someone say, "If I only knew when He will be back then I could prepare." Since we do not know when the Lord will return it can be tempting to fall into old sinful habits that bring us down. The truth is that we are not in control of the timing when it comes to Jesus' second coming. The Lord said that He would

return and that we are to stay occupied until that time. We ought to be about His business while He is away. The way Jesus simply put it was "Watch." Like a sentry on guard, we are to watch ourselves and keep the trust given to each of us until He comes.

Jesus calls the man who watches "faithful" and "wise." He is the person who continues to serve the Lord throughout his life even when things get difficult. On the other hand, the man who makes excuses for himself because he feels like the Lord delays His coming, will receive judgment in the place where hypocrites go where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It would be nice to know when the Lord will return. God hasn't given us that luxury. As a matter of fact, even Jesus was not given that knowledge. There have been those throughout the history of the church who have predicted the coming of Christ in their generation. They can really work people up into a frenzy with their wild and unsubstantiated predictions. People want to believe them because there truly is a possibility of it happening in our lifetime. The problem is that we do not know the time and to say that you have special knowledge is the height of presumption.

I once heard an end time prognosticator say that he wouldn't be surprised if the Lord didn't return before he was done speaking that evening. That was New Year's of 1995 or 1996. Either way, he was wrong. And at the very least I guess he got his surprise after all. He really had the ammo to whip the crowd into an excited frenzy. He claimed to have just returned from Israel where special plans were being made by the Israeli government that would provoke the battle of Armageddon. And on and on and on. Unfortunately, in my estimation, oftentimes the focus turns from simple devotion to Christ to an obsession on what they call "the signs of the times."

Jesus took the emphasis off of the signs and put it on our preparedness. As a scout is always prepared, a believer in Jesus should always be ready to meet his or her Lord. The parable of the ten virgins is meant to emphasize, again, the importance of watching. The foolish virgins were unknown to the bridegroom. "The virgins who were ready, went in."

Are you ready? What ought I do in order to prepare for the Lord's coming? Let's list several important areas that will be the oil for our lamps:

1. Verse 35: Have a firm grip on the Word of God and you will not go wrong. Be careful if you are trying to link the Bible with the current events – you may be wrong.

2. Jesus linked watching with praying. Be ready by being in constant touch with the Lord. Jesus said to watch and pray so that we would not enter into temptation. Prayer is a key ingredient in being prepared.

3. Keep working and doing well what you have been gifted to do. Don't stop the good work you are doing. Some would stop being productive because they think the Lord is coming back soon, but the Lord wants us to put our hand to the plow and keep doing a good work.

4. Jesus said in Luke's gospel: "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and care of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap," (21:34). In other words, don't sink your roots down too deep in this world; don't become so worldly that you will not be fit for heaven.

5. Treat this world like you are passing through. This place is a stop over on the way to your final destination. You are like an "alien" and "pilgrim" on this planet; these are Peter's words. This point parallels point four above. But don't be just concerned about staying away from bad influences, make it more extreme than that. Don't treat this world as if it is your home. Consider that heaven is your true home and you are merely passing through.

6. Check out the armor of God in Ephesians 6. There you will see the equipment God prescribes for our walk and the victory till the end.

Let's all finish well. It's one thing to get off to a great start and be all revved up for God and another to finish the race well. Paul said that he had fought a good fight, run a good race, and he had kept the faith. Let's be ready when the final trumpet sounds and we are united to the Lord in the air to remain with Him forever.

God's blessings prepare us during the end times,
Pastor Steve

Day 38

"Don't Waste Your Life"

February 7 - Matthew 25:14-46

Rise Up and Serve God Today,

God is not going to hold me accountable for the way I have sung. God did not give me the ability to sing and so I do not expect to be asked about that. My dad was an architect. He could draw. My mom could paint. I cannot do either. I don't expect to be asked about that. There are more things that I am not than things that I am. Yet I am some things and it is those gifts, those talents, that I will have to give an account for -- someday.

Are you willing to be used by God in some way or another? If so, I don't think God disguises His will. If we are open to His hand gently guiding and directing us, then I think we will have that guidance. Just as a loving parent leads his child into a pursuit that he can accomplish, so the Lord leads us into the things that we will be able to excel in.

We have been given natural talents like athletic ability, singing ability, writing ability, designing, and others, and we have been given spiritual gifts like the gift of teaching or prophecy or discerning of spirits or helps or administration. It is no use spending our time bemoaning what we do not have or envying someone else who has the gifts we desire, because God wants us to be prudent about using what we do have. In the parable of the talents each one is given an allotment "according to his ability."

Sometimes we can get into a rut when we do not explore untapped areas of giftedness in our lives. I hear so many excuses for why people cannot try something new but they usually all boil down to fear. I am out of my comfort zone, so I stay put and do nothing new because I wouldn't want to get stretched and grow and experience all of the excitement that comes from seeing God work in some new way in my life. You won't know unless you try. Maybe this week you could make a short list of possible new pursuits or areas of interest that you have not yet explored.

A great example of a man who used his God-given gifts was Charles Schultz. His Peanuts comic strip is known and read worldwide. Who doesn't know Charlie Brown and Snoopy and all of the other beloved comic characters? Schultz used the strip on many occasions to highlight Bible themes and lead others into a greater understanding of truth. He is an example of a man who used his great talent and love for God to do something for others that would encourage an appreciation for God.

It's interesting that the man who is rebuked by the Lord for not putting his money to work said that it was fear that motivated him to not act and use the gift that God had given him. Fear is a horrible taskmaster. Fear is a horrible motivator. Fear keeps us from doing the very things that our minds and hearts are prodding us to do. If you are afraid today about some area that you believe would be a good pursuit for you, would you talk to someone about it? Then you can put it behind you and begin to experience the freedom of doing the thing that God has given you the ability to do.

I think the judgment of the sheep and goats fits in here. When the sheep (the righteous) hear that they have helped so-and-so and done this and that, they are surprised. "When did we do that?" was their reply. Jesus said that they served Him when they were serving others. The truth I see is that when we are doing the thing that God wants us to do, we will automatically be serving others and thus doing God's will. We won't be conscious of it necessarily. We will be busy doing what we delight to do, like Schultz, and will find pleasure in doing God's pleasure.

I can hear someone say that they go to work and do their job but don't find much satisfaction in it; it only feels like a place to collect a paycheck. In my opinion, it's time to change your attitude or change your profession. The Bible is clear that whatever we

do, we must do it for God as if He were our boss. Picture yourself being called into your manager's office, but when you get there it is empty but for a Bible on the desk. In it is a ribbon marking our passage of Scripture in today's reading. How does this passage about the talents apply to the kind of job you are doing? If you think there is a need for an attitude adjustment, think of a couple of ways you can change your tone today in order to be more like the first two fellows in the parable.

The fate of the third guy is dire because of his utter neglect of God's will for his life. He disregarded God's way because of a misconception about the nature of God. Had he realized that God was the giver of his gift and that God had given him the ability to walk down that path maybe he would have reconsidered his course of action. But he didn't because he only knew God as a harsh taskmaster and not as a loving Father who provides all we need to do His will. The safe road is not always the right road. It takes some risk to commit your life to God and open your heart to doing His will. In the end, though, the one who has done this will receive more and the one who hasn't will be stripped of all he has. And the loss will be great!

Let's get to work; God has a job for us today.
God's blessings give us talents to use,
Pastor Steve

"Not Me, Lord"

February 8 - Matthew 26: 1-30

I love that the characters in the Bible were characters. We don't know everything about them, but what we do know helps us to relate to them. They were average men and women with strengths and weaknesses just like us. They had faith and they had doubts. They had victories and they had defeats. They were upright and they were downright bad at times. But any way you stack it, they were our fellow brothers and sisters. They were not in a class all by themselves. They had real flesh and blood and experienced the same kind of ups and downs that have marked every generation in history.

Do you find yourself discouraged by your own inadequacies? Do you sometimes try to cover up your flaws so that others will not look down on you? Do you hear yourself making excuses for some of the errors you have contributed to society? Do you feel like some of the time you have to fake your way through life and hold on to idealistic images in your own mind of the way you wished things were? If so, then join the club. It is difficult to admit who we truly are in the face of possible rejection. Rejection is the one thing that most people find unbearable.

Can you imagine how the disciples must have felt about being around Jesus? Here was a perfect man whose holiness must have shed a high-beam of light on their imperfections as they traveled from day to day. Yet, remarkably, they seemed to be able to be themselves and "say it like it was" and let their true selves hang out. Could that be because of the love of Christ which perfectly complemented His holiness? I'm sure it was.

When Jesus announced at the Last Supper that one of them would betray Him, the reaction was very telling. You would think that some of the disciples may have been on to Judas, wouldn't you? I'm sure from time to time the old boy probably showed his true colors. Maybe a bit of a rebellious attitude

or a word here and there about his dissatisfaction with the program Jesus was running could have

been picked up by at least John and Peter. But no, that wasn't the case, it seems. After Jesus makes this heavy accusation, all of the apostles begin to do a self-exam and they are immediately sad that it could be, not the other guy, but them.

I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had said something about picking one of them to be closest to Him in the kingdom. That may have sparked their pride. "Surely it's me," I can hear one of them saying, "Jesus knows how much I have sacrificed for the cause." I can also hear them in small groups debating their own case for why it should be them and not the others. But the subject on the table was not exaltation, but betrayal. One of them was about to betray the Master.

Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for the ones who loved Jesus with all of their hearts to even think that they might betray Him? That would have been an unbearable thought, especially for someone like John who had developed such a close relationship with the Lord. What a relief, mixed with sadness, when Judas dipped in the bowl with Jesus and identified his true self. Jesus had treated him like all the rest. When Judas finally leads the soldiers into the garden to bring Jesus to the authorities, Jesus addresses him as "friend." What an awesome example of the way to treat an enemy! Jesus made no personal remarks to Judas; He simply submitted to the will of His Father, which included rejection by a long-time associate.

The disciples' reaction to Jesus' revelation correlates with the Lord's teaching that "there is none good but God," and Paul's later interpretation of Jesus' teachings when he writes in Romans 3 about the depravity of all men, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). At the point of Jesus' remark about betrayal, all of the men knew they were capable of falling away. They knew what they were made of. They knew it could be them. Maybe they thought that it seemed impossible for anyone to betray this loving Man and if it were possible for someone to carry this out then they were as likely as anyone else.

Later, of course, Peter would say that he would never deny the Lord, and then he did. Pride always goes before a fall. Let's not become so spiritually arrogant that we forget we are made of clay. We are vulnerable. We need the grace of the Lord to remain true to Him. It will help us to remember just how fragile we really are. It will keep us humble.

I am totally dependent on divine grace. How about you?

I am in need of God's spiritual power to do anything of value for God. How about you?

I am a man who sins and needs the constant washing that comes from the fountain of the cross. How about you?

I am susceptible to loosening my grip and falling. How about you?

Let's humble ourselves together.
God's blessings lead our loyalty to Jesus,
Pastor Steve

Day 40

"Do This and That"

February 9 - Matthew 26: 31-46

God is Good All of the Time,

Life can reach some pretty intense pressure points. I'll never forget an earthquake in California in the early '90s that felt like a freight train coming through our bedroom door. We were awakened early in the morning to a loud sound that seemed to be approaching us from hundreds of miles away. I leaped out of bed, called my kids to the hallway and together we swayed back and forth as stuff fell from the shelves downstairs in the living room.

I'm sure that at some time or other you have experienced some very intense moments -- we all do eventually. Those who have gotten the news from a spouse that they were leaving him/her for someone else know the shock and pain of losing someone they thought they would be with all their life. Then it's over and they are left with the pieces of a life that they aren't sure what to do with. The stress can be overwhelming. The jilted person's world is reeling and they lose their appetite and they talk about their pain and they cry, but it doesn't feel like anything is helping. Life as they knew it would never be the same.

Jesus was quickly at the apex of a time of suffering that would include a series of events that, though predicted long ago by the prophets, would entail the greatest cruelty on the most innocent man in human history. It began in the Garden of Gethsemane and ended on a Roman cross on a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem. The garden was where it all began. I'm sure that Jesus had known for a long time, if not all of His life, that He would die on a cross, but now the reality of it is in front of Him. It's one thing to anticipate going to the dentist and quite another to hear the whizzing of the drill and feel the sting of the needle and smell the smoke of the tooth being drilled. Jesus had been warning His disciples of the inevitable, but now the dominoes were falling and there was no stopping them.

He prays honestly and with final submission. He draws on His Father for strength through prayer. His soul is being poured out with wrenching pain. In another gospel it says that He sweated great drops of blood, it was so rough. And in the middle of this crisis, the disciples, maybe from the wine at dinner or maybe just because they had had a long day or possibly because they were in denial and didn't want to face the realities of Jesus' words -- they took a nap. Each time Jesus comes to them they are asleep.

When the pressure is on are you tempted to withdraw? The disciples were sleeping at this time when Jesus needed support. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" Jesus says to them. It's human nature, isn't it, to move away from the pressure when the intensity is being elevated? Here Jesus needs help, wanting a bit of support, and the Lord asks for His servants to hold Him up. Here is Jesus in all of His humanity; truly, He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as Isaiah saw Him. Jesus is alone in His suffering. He is forsaken by all, takes the sins of all on Himself by earning salvation all by Himself. He went it alone.

In the midst of His agony Jesus looks to the disciples-- to the three, Peter, James and John, but they aren't available. In a state of drowsiness He awakens them and gives them food for thought. He does this so that, even though they were not diligent now, they would remember His words and apply them to their future ministries. He tells them to "watch" and "pray."

To watch means to be on guard. It means to be on a heightened sense of alert. It means to be ready to step in when you are needed and lend a hand when someone needs you. It means to be wary of the devil's schemes so that you are not taken off guard and end up in a ditch of sin, entangled and caught in a trap. It can also mean that you are aware of the lessons and direction God may be leading you when you yourself are in a garden experience. Jesus throws Himself on the will of the Father even though it would be easier to take another road. So we too are also watching to do the will of God and not our own, if the way of Jesus we would follow.

To pray means to petition God for the things that originate in the will of God. When we pray for the things that correlate with the will of God we can have confidence that they will happen. When we pray and ask for things in a self-centered way we will never find joy in prayer. Whether we get the selfish thing we want or not, true happiness comes from knowing that we are doing the will of God. Things do not bring happiness. So praying for things that are in the will of God is our only guarantee that we will receive the things we pray for.

We are to watch and pray, Jesus says, because temptation is knocking at our door and it is too easy to take the easy road. We may want to do God's will, but the flesh, the body, is weak and it will demand things that contradict the will of our Father in heaven.

Take some time today to talk to God about His will for your life.

Ask Him to show you a few areas in your life where He could work even more powerfully to do His will if you'd watch and pray.

Try Jesus' prayer on for size: "Not my will, but yours be done."

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

Pastor Steve

Day 41

"You Have Heard The Blasphemy"

February 10 - Matthew 26: 47-68

Expectation and anticipation are two very powerful components in our lives. When we are counting on something happening, our wills really kick into gear and we long for the desired result. Think of a young couple who is deeply in love and is planning for their big day. The expectations of what will happen during their wedding ceremony and in the days afterwards can create a great deal of anxiety. It's probably positive anxiety, but it is anxiety nonetheless.

From past experience I can say that there were times in my life when the anticipation leading up to an event was more daunting than the event itself. I remember in high school on the days I had golf matches, I was unable to concentrate on anything but what I'd be doing on the course that afternoon. I was obsessed with the desire to do well. I would mentally visualize each hole I'd be playing (if I had played the course already) and go through the locations I'd like to position the ball. I could see myself swinging and making contact and ripping the ball right down the middle of the fairway. And on the greens I'd picture myself making every putt from every different angle. I can remember how I felt on the first tee of most tournaments. I was numb. I went through the motions to launch the ball, but it wasn't until I was out on the course that I was able to settle down and concentrate on scoring. You see, my expectations were high. And because of that I anticipated being able to see my expectations fulfilled.

The Jews expected their coming Messiah to fulfill the apocalyptic role written long ago in Daniel the seventh chapter. He would come with triumphal glory to set up a Jewish Kingdom ruled under His sovereignty. Of course, the Pharisees and Sadducees believed that they would reign with their conquering hero and, to the relief of all, Roman rule would finally be abolished. Daniel wrote: "I saw in the night visions, and behold,

with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his kingdom is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (7: 13-14). It's no wonder that the kind of Messiah Jesus was did not fit their bill. How could a meek and lowly at heart man be the conquering God-figure of Daniel's visions? They didn't see that Jesus could be the one when He was held up to the light of the Old Testament prophecies they had in mind.

Therefore, when Jesus agreed to the high priest's question asking if He was the Son of God and the Christ, and then also adds that He is the one Daniel spoke of, the response was vehement. This was the same as Jesus claiming to be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Caiaphas tore his robe in disgust and accused Jesus of speaking blasphemy. To Caiaphas, Jesus was claiming a position that only belonged to God and so he railed at Him for making this claim.

Under Jewish law the punishment for blasphemy is death. At this point it's very early in the morning, possibly not long after midnight; it is not a lawful time for a Jewish court to be in session, especially near a special Sabbath day, the one marking Passover.

Back in the Old Testament, in the days before the Israelites were released from Egyptian bondage, God had ordered His people to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. The night the death angel swooped over the land of Egypt to kill all of the first-born, whether of man or animal, those who had the blood mark on their home were spared. It was at that time that God led them out of Egypt. Since that time the Jews had been required to celebrate the Passover every year as a reminder of God's deliverance from bondage.

Jesus was brought to the cross on this day because He would become God's ultimate and final Passover Lamb. Remember what John the Baptist said when he first met Jesus? "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus would be murdered on Passover not by mistake or coincidence but because of a pre-determined plan of God that would bring forgiveness to all who put their trust in Him.

The high priest and his kangaroo court, early that morning, condemned Jesus to death, "then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, 'Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you.'" These were men who were looking for a way to condemn Jesus because envy had driven them to find anything by which they might sentence Him. Jesus was treated unfairly so that by His forgiveness of our sins we might be treated with mercy when we stand before a holy God. Behold, the Lamb of God!

The next several hours would be unthinkably brutal. Hold on to your seat...

God's blessings come through the unjustly treated Christ,

Pastor Steve

Day 42

"Then The Rooster Crowed"

February 11 - Matthew 26: 69- 27:10

Friends,

There are times in everyone's life when a reminder cuts us to the heart. A smell can take us back to another time and place and may even bring tears to our eyes if sentimental emotions are stirred by the aroma. We may meet someone who reminds us of a significant person in our past. Depending on the nature of the relationship we may feel some pretty strong emotions; maybe guilt, or fear, or hurt, or you name it.

Some objects can bring back happy memories and others sad ones. I usually love James Taylor songs. Most of his early songs, like "You've Got a Friend" and "Walking Man" are among my favorites. His music really loosens me up. On the other hand some of his stuff from the early '80s unnerves me because of the circumstances in my life at that time. I associate those songs with the events in my life that were upsetting. For some, Christmas is the best time of the year and for others it is dreaded. Just the sound of a Christmas carol can bring tears to a person's eyes -- for some tears of joy and for others tears of sorrow.

Let me list a few stimulants and you try to remember how they affect you even now: the flashing lights on a police car; the smell of alcohol, from a beer or wine; the smell of pine; a sunburn; cotton candy; seeing a car like the first one you drove; sand between your toes; a couple walking hand in hand; hearing the song "Let It Be" by the Beatles; a cross on the side of the road with someone's name written on it; kids laughing; the smell of chlorine; piano music; salt water; a campfire; Oreo cookies; thinking you may have felt God's presence; John 3:16.

Just a few days before the time we read about in today's passage, Peter boasted that he would never fall away from the Lord. The prophet Zechariah prophesied that the Shepherd would be struck and all the sheep would be scattered. Jesus applied this Scripture to His impending death and the flight of the disciples. Remember, after the crucifixion, the 11 remaining disciples are found hidden away in a secret place where they were wondering what to do next. If Jesus was led away to the slaughter, how would they escape the same fate? I think they were pretty nervous at that point. Peter had gone from big talker to denier. He was over-confident, but ended up jelly-legged. Jesus had told him what would happen, but did he believe it? I don't think so.

Then Peter heard the rooster. That sound, that bird, that moment of the cold morning, would be etched into Peter's conscience forever. "Cock- a-doodle-doo." That screech would mean so much more than a wake-up call. It was like an earthquake to Peter, rocking his world and challenging all that he had trusted for the past few years. How could all that was so special with Jesus be ending in such a mess? He was probably in shock in many ways, the least of which was probably amazement at his weakness. Now he knew what Jesus meant by "watch and pray." He was caught up in the moment and in the moment he denied his best friend, his Lord. Peter was humbled and heartbroken.

Peter wept bitterly. Picture him, would you? Take a moment to put yourself in his shoes. Some of us don't have to imagine very hard because we have been in his shoes. But think how he must have felt at the sound of the bird. He must have felt helpless. In his mind at that point, he had failed and Jesus had failed. He had nowhere to turn. I wonder if thoughts of the miracles of the Lord may have flashed through his mind's eye. If you've ever been in a quandary then you know where Peter was that morning. Nothing made sense. Peter, Jesus had told you this was going to happen the other day. Why not trust Him despite the circumstances?

Humility is a good thing. It doesn't always feel that way, but the results of humility will be good medicine for our souls. Over and over in Scripture we read about humbling ourselves under God. Let the sound of the rooster remind you that we are all made of the same clay, like Peter. Let it be a reminder that boasting can lead to a fall. Paul would say later, "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall."

There is another sound from that day that we will soon be hearing. It is the sound of the nails piercing the hands of the Lord Jesus. That sound is also humbling because it should forever remind us of the love of God. Can you hear the bang on the head of the metal spike and see the grimace on the face of Jesus? It is that grimace that expressed the pain emanating from the body that would bear every sin we have ever committed.

God's blessings are associated with key events in our lives,

Pastor Steve

"Bad Dreams"

February 12 - Matthew 27:11-44

Dear Friends,

Are you a dreamer? Some have the most vivid dreams and others cannot, for the life of them, remember if they dream anything at all. Sometimes our dreams will correlate with our current thoughts. It seems like if we are preoccupied with something we will wind up dreaming about it. This can cause restless sleep if we feel like we are reliving our day while we are asleep.

I wonder why so much of our dreaming comes under the category of bizarre. Many of my dreams I cannot make heads or tails of no matter how hard I try. They seem to have no significance at all. I know that there are some psychologists who think dreams tell a lot about a person, but how in the world do they come to any conclusions about the random, nonsensical, and wacky nature of most dreams? I think they make up conclusions to make a buck. I could be wrong, but that's my suspicion.

The Bible records many dreams as from God. A couple of the more famous ones recorded in the Bible are Jacob's dream of a ladder that extended to heaven (Gen. 28:10ff.), Joseph's dreams about his rise to power (Gen. 37), and the Babylonian king's dreams about the future of the world powers (Daniel). Then in the New Testament we have already seen how Jesus' stepdad Joseph had dreams that would warn him about protecting the Christ child (Matt. 1). This is only a small sampling of the numerous accounts of the way God used dreams to lead His people.

You can imagine how befuddled Pilate must have been after hearing Jesus. He was amazed that the Lord did not answer. It was as if Jesus was conceding to the wishes of the crowd and thereby sealing His own fate. Matthew records that Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and that the Pharisees had only turned Him over out of envy. By the time the governor gave Jesus over to the executioners he wanted nothing to do with the responsibility of His death. In those days it was important for a Roman governor to maintain peace in his jurisdiction so that he would receive a favorable job evaluation in Rome. Who would Pilate need to appease in this situation? The Jewish ruling council (called the Sanhedrin)? The crowd? His own conscience?

There is a little verse tucked into this long narrative that says so much. It talks about a most unlikely source and also shows that God was working in the details of the matter in order for the truth to be told later. The verse simply says, "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him'" (27:19). Mrs. Pilate (of course that wasn't her name) is bothered to such a degree that she has to warn her husband against condemning Jesus. Pilate had been on the judgment seat countless times. Why this time, why Jesus? She had a dream that alarmed her. Don't you wish Matthew had explained the contents of the dream? Possibly he didn't know what they were. But it was nightmarish enough to warrant disturbing the proceeding, momentarily. What if she had been up that night, maybe disturbed by all of the events. Could she have gotten up in the wee hours of the morning and seen the torches and the small crowd coming down off of the Mount of Olives, some of the crowd feverishly yelling? Then maybe she went back to bed and there in her mind's arena, she witnessed the greatest travesty of justice ever. However and whenever this all occurred was enough to rock her world and compel her to stand up for the Man.

God was making it clear that Jesus was an innocent man. He had done nothing worthy of death, except that under Jewish law He could be stoned for claiming deity. The elders of the Jews and the chief priests wanted more. They wanted Him to be publicly condemned and hung on a cross so that all men would see and know that this Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah was actually a false prophet. In their minds, crucifixion would be the disgrace necessary to make the point.

Pilate's wife knew the truth. Whether she personally acted on it later is unknown, but what we do know is that she couldn't keep her dream to herself. Pilate must have been whirling when he heard her report. The dream was one of many evidences that pushed Pilate towards offering Jesus to be released rather than the condemned criminal, Barabbas. But the crowd already had their minds made up for them and cried for Jesus to be condemned and the criminal to be freed. And so today the irony of that scene is the salvation of all those who put their faith in Jesus. The innocent man was condemned so that the condemned man could be released. Today, we all are guilty and worthy of condemnation, but Jesus took that condemnation so that we might receive life; in this case we are talking about true spiritual life.

Next time you have a dream, go ahead and pay attention to it. God may be speaking to you in some way. But remember to always check what you hear with Scripture. God will always stay true to His word.

God's blessings are worked out in the details of Jesus' condemnation,

Pastor Steve

"After Jesus Died"

February 13 - Matthew 27:45-66

Have you ever heard strange stories about the aftermath of a person's death? I have heard people say that they heard music when the spirit departed. Others have said that they could feel the person's soul go upward. I have heard others say that their loved one sat up or opened their eyes for the last time as if they were seeing something out of this world. Someone recently told me that they felt a rush of wind when their loved one died.

Since Jesus was who He was, it should be no surprise to us that outstanding things happened after

his death. As if to signal that something monumental had just happened, a string of out of the ordinary occurrences took place. At His birth the angels heralded his arrival and a star appeared over the city of Bethlehem; why should it surprise us that at His death there would be some very unusual wonders? Isn't it true that a person goes out in much the same fashion as he lived? A person's impact is felt when they leave much the same as it is when they live.

I love the story of Elisha's bones in the book of II Kings. At the time of Elisha's death his people were at war. The people were in the process of burying a man when a group of raiders (not the Oakland Raiders, by the way) were spotted. They hastily took the man's body and heaved it into the tomb of Elisha. When the body touched the bones of Elisha, the man came to life and stood to his feet. Now those are powerful bones! But that's my point. Elisha was a powerful man while he lived and in his death he was powerful too. Quite a story.

Let's just list the things Matthew records that happened after the death of the Lord: The curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom (why did Matthew put it that way? To highlight that it would be a God thing and could not be attributed to man); there was an earthquake; dead guys came to life and showed up down at the pool hall (I don't know if there really was a pool hall in those days. Is it curious to you that they were raised when Christ died and showed up three days later when the Lord arose?); the Roman guards were impressed with the death of Jesus to the point that they thought He must have been divine; a rich disciple comes forward to bury the body in a new tomb and he has a big rock rolled over the entrance of the tomb.

There were some ladies watching the events that day from a distance. The immediate disciples had fled. I can imagine that everyone connected with Jesus must have been mortified. How could He have allowed such a horrible thing to happen? Wasn't He the Lord? Didn't He have power to calm the seas and still the winds? Then why didn't He set up His kingdom?

Instead: emptiness, despair, sickness, distress, disappointment, discouragement, fright, maybe a homesick feeling -- a complete letdown.

What did they think of the darkness? Was it a sign or just a coincidence? It wasn't only dark outside though, it was dark in Peter's soul and in John's and in James's and in Thomas's and in Bartholomew's and in Judas's (not Iscariot) and in Simon's too (he was a zealot but not on that dark day. That day he cowered with the rest out of harm's way). In Andrew's soul there was an ache (was he thinking of his brother's denial of the Master? Was he thinking of his own flight from the pressure in the garden?); Philip's soul was bleak also; the other James was bummed as well; and then of course the author of this gospel-- he too was hunkered down in seclusion, maybe a bit shaky because of the day's events. Darkness of the soul is tough to deal with.

Do you feel some of this same sort of pain in your life right now? Has someone you trusted apparently let you down? Do your circumstances defy the way you wish things really were? Is it hard to make heads or tails out of your current situation? Is fear governing your day to day life? Remember, it's Friday, but Sunday is coming. It may be a season of pain and suffering, but Sunday is coming. As a matter of fact, in our reading tomorrow we will witness the greatest event in human history. It dwarfs any other experience known to mankind. It is more monumental than the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Until then, hope in God's blessings,

Pastor Steve

"The Greatest Reason"

February 14 - Matthew 28: 1-20

I Hope You Are Having A Good Day,

We all need a reason to live. I think that most of us would like to have God in our lives. Some fill that need by immersing themselves in good religious activity. They live by the rule of proximity. The thinking kind of goes like this: if I'm near to the things of God, within arms' reach, then I will be near to God. Really, that is not horrible thinking because you are more apt to find the Truth by being near to a source (maybe like a fountain) of Truth. But you will have to drink from that outlet yourself before you can say that you are in the Truth. I wonder how many people will be close to God things and yet miss the great gift of God's grace.

To me, that God could be known and admired and appreciated and loved is the greatest possibility of all. Some would recoil at this suggestion and think that you were as loony as a man in an institution who thinks he is Napoleon Bonaparte to hold to such an idea. By and large, most people are so naturalistic in their thinking that any supernatural talk would set the "rational" and "logical" thinker against you before you were able to explain what you meant.

What does it mean to you to know God? How would you explain to someone that you have personally come to know God? What would you talk about? What do you think that unbeliever would think if you told him that God has been speaking to you lately? You've heard the story of the guy in the asylum who thought he was Napoleon, haven't you? He announces to the group in the lunchroom, "I am Napoleon Bonaparte, the famous ruler!" Then he puts his right hand into the fold of his jacket just above his belly in true Napoleon fashion. The orderly says to him, "How do you know that, man?" He shoots back, "Because God told me." A voice comes from the other side of the room, "I did not!" Just because someone says they know God doesn't mean that they know what they are talking about. If God can be known then it seems to me He would have to make Himself known empirically. I use that word in the sense of "verifiable by experience or experiment." This parallels that Old Testament invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

Jesus never pussy-footed around about who He was or what His intentions were. He said who He was and backed it up with actions. He said what would happen next and it did. He did not ever waver or change His point of view or admit to wrongdoing. No wonder He says after the crucifixion, as He stood before his unbelieving disciples, that he had all authority. This is a quality or attribute of someone who is Lord of all. You cannot have all authority if you are not Lord of the entire house. By the way, this is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews -- Jesus is superior to all in the same way that the builder of a house is greater than the house he builds.

So what is it here in Matthew about resurrection that we ought to emphasize? I think that first of all we need to get into our heads that Jesus' aliveness is an indication that we today can have a connection with Him that will bring us close to God. He presents Himself alive to His own and then commissions them to go and tell everyone about Him. Why? So that they can know God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so they can experience His presence with them as they carry the message abroad. When they first looked on Him they did what you'd expect -- they worshiped. Some doubted. That would have been me. I'd have been looking for mirrors. How could this be the same man who was on the cross a few days ago? This kind of thing just doesn't happen.

We'll get back to the resurrection three more times through the gospels, but let's stop here this time and try to apply what Matthew says to us.

Think about what that scene of worship must

have looked like. Try to reconstruct it in your mind and then include yourself in the group. How would you have worshiped Jesus under those circumstances?

Take a time out today to spend time worshiping Jesus. Address Him directly and let Him have it. Let Him know from your heart that you believe He has all authority and begin to worship Him with your lips.

And do you want to take a risk today? Worship Jesus by bringing up His name and His authority with someone who obviously doesn't have any connection to Him.

Jesus wants us to teach about Him and tell others what He said. What teachings from the gospel of Matthew could you relay to your family this evening? Take some time today to review what we have been learning so that you can pull a thought or two from the gospel to give to others. Teach Jesus and others will be amazed at Him. He is amazing in so many ways.

Jesus is alive! Expect Him to work in little old you today in some way or another. Expect it and then be aware of how He is directing your life. Don't doubt when you see His imprint on your life in some way today.

Rejoice in Jesus always.
God's blessings raise us up with Jesus,
Pastor Steve

Mark

Day 46

"Let's Move – Intro to Mark's Gospel"

February 15 - Intro to Mark's Gospel

There is no doubt that the reasons for doing something are as varied as the people doing it. I have always thought that guilt was the very worst motivator. When folks are spurred on by guilt they tend to work with a great deal of frustration. Another very weak motivator is acceptance. If you're trying to win the approval of another, you can work yourself to the bone but end up hurt that you were unable to receive the applause of your audience. Some are driven by money. If they have enough money, they reason, then they will find the freedom and independence they crave. This is the battle cry of every Get Rich Quick scheme.

If Matthew's gospel was the presentation of the King, then Mark's Gospel emphasizes the servant nature of the Son of Man. In Matthew, Jesus is the Hope of Israel and of all men. He is highlighted as the One who has majesty and authority over all. Even in His trial He accepts the title of King. But here in Mark we see Jesus serving. He is a King with a servant's heart. We ought to all hail King Jesus and simultaneously behold Him as the suffering servant. That is not to say that Matthew did not have this same element, because you can find it there — Matthew 20:28 for example.

Mark is a fast-moving gospel. You will see the word "immediately" on a regular basis. Jesus is going here and going there teaching and preaching and healing. He is doing for the kingdom. He is getting His word out so that everyone can hear and pass on the word. Jesus was a busy man, but you don't get the feeling that He is hurried or worried or harried. He moves with purpose. This is a practice that contrasts Him with most men today who are busy. Show me a man with a purpose and I'll show you a focused individual who is getting it done. Jesus was like that. He knew who He was and He knew what He wanted to accomplish.

Love for God is the greatest motivation to serve God. The more a person gets to know God and appreciate His Person, the more energy he'll have to go out and make a difference for God. If my life is focused on God I will naturally want to do what God wants me to do. If my life is focused on myself then I will be self-conscious about serving God because I will always be concerned about what is in it for me. If I'm concerned about what others will think of me if I talk about Jesus or the Bible then I will quickly lose the energy for doing what God wants me to do. There is a verse in Daniel that reads in the old King James: "...but the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits" (11:32). Strength comes when we know God in Truth and do not minimize the Person and works of the Lord.

How many times have you felt inadequate to stand up for the Lord and say or do the right thing? I feel that way more times than not. If we let that feeling of inadequacy paralyze us, how much will we get done? Not much. It is better to step out and do what you can in the strength you have than to sit on your hands and wait for a better time. The gospel of Mark is a reminder that serving God can be difficult, but it is worth it and we need to take that motivation and go with it. Let's step out and be like Jesus—tools in the Master's hand to be used in any way He so choos-

es. Jesus said, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatsoever you shall ask in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16).

There you have it; our relationship with Jesus is meant for production of good fruit and answers to prayer. So in Mark Chapter 1 we see Jesus going out early in the morning for prayer. He needed and wanted to spend time with His Father because that time would provide the impetus for fruitfulness. That daily experience would be the catalyst for a life well lived and a life full of good works. Prayer is a great motivator. Do you lack energy and oomph right now? Spend some time in prayer and talk to God about it. You will be renewed and refreshed so that you can go out and do what God has called you to do.

When Caleb—you know, the Caleb who conquered the land of Canaan with Joshua—was 80 years old he still felt like a kid because he was wholly devoted to the Lord. God had strengthened him all of those years because his heart was right with the Lord. He was motivated to action by his love and respect for God. He wasn't a man-pleaser. He wasn't interested in seeing his picture in the Jerusalem Gazette. He was jazzed about serving the living God, because of this God strengthened him all the way into his old age.

As we begin the gospel of Mark, let it motivate you to service. Allow it to get into your head and compel you to do some things that you normally would be a bit afraid to do. Step out. Move forward. Don't hold back. Take a leap. With God behind you there is no limit to the kinds of works you could do for Him. And as we meditate on Mark, let the actions and words of Christ be a great motivator for you. You can be like Jesus; if you believe in Him, then He is in you. Now watch Him work through you—He will!!

God's blessings spur us on,
Pastor Steve

"He Did What?!"

February 16 - Mark 1:29 - 2:17

I went to school with a guy named Mike Scott. I'll bet that name makes no difference to you whatsoever. Mike was a senior when I was a "wise fool" (sophomore). He walked at a snail's pace around campus, his wavy blonde hair bouncing up and down. He was the star basketball player, I was a star golfer. Guess who got the headlines? I did — I was also the assistant editor of the school newspaper. I really didn't think much of Mike except for the fact that his girlfriend was beautiful and I had a major crush on her.

Years later, long after high school, I was reading an autobiography by Nolan Ryan — do you know that name? He is major league baseball's all time strikeout leader. In this book Ryan starts to talk about his relationship with none other than with Mike Scott, my high school classmate. He is highlighting the fact that Mike Scott was an out of shape, lazy glutton, while Ryan was known for his exercise regimen; he'd pitch nine innings and then ride an exercise bike afterwards to warm down for an hour. Ryan described how Scott was just the opposite. He talked about his poor eating habits and sleeping habits and so on and so on. I thought to myself that this guy never changed. He was that way in high school and he was that way when he played in big league baseball.

Now the irony in all of this is that Mike made it to the majors. When I turned the channel and saw this guy pitching I was blown away. "Hey, that's the same guy I hung around with in high school," I thought. What had happened is he ran into a pitching coach in college who taught him to throw a special pitch (for you baseball aficionados it was a split-fingered fastball). This pitch looks like it is coming over the plate about belt high, then right at the last second it drops in the dirt. It is practically impossible to hit when thrown properly. Mike had learned to throw it well and he ended up leading the Houston Astros to the playoffs one year.

I think some of the people in Jesus' day thought about Him the way I viewed Mike Scott. He was just a local boy—we sure didn't expect Him to be doing the things that he did. We were a bit unbelieving when we first saw him on the mound or doing an interview with someone on TV. Could you imagine people who had grown up with Jesus around Nazareth? Here the Lord is in Capernaum and He's doing things and making claims that just seem too out there to be real. And from the standpoint of the religious know-it-alls, Jesus was making claims that were just downright impossible to swallow. But there he was before my eyes. I couldn't deny it and I couldn't contradict what he was saying because he backed it up with action.

And so we come to one of the most important chapters in the New Testament. The setting is in a house on the seacoast of Capernaum. This is the place where Peter's family is from. The crowds are pushing in to hear Jesus. Imagine the stir. Think about the buzz in the air. While Jesus is teaching, pieces of plaster or dirt begin to fall from the ceiling where He is seated. Then a hole, then a gap, then a space large enough to lower a paralyzed man through. That's what the men are doing; they are lowering this disabled man before Jesus. The interruption is apparently welcomed by Jesus who immediately sees the faith of the friends whose arms are straining as they guide the cot to the ground. Jesus doesn't seem irritated or upset but sees the situation as an opportunity to teach a bit more about Himself. Every lesson in the New Testament points to Jesus. Chapter 1 of the first book is about Him and the last chapter of the last book is about Him. He is all in all.

Jesus immediately forgives the man's sins. "Now wait a minute, who is this guy to think that He is in God's place and can forgive sins?" the religious leaders in attendance point out. They rightly state that only God can forgive sins. It would be one thing to forgive a sin that the man had committed against Jesus, but that is not what Jesus does; He forgives the man's sins in general, sins that he has committed against others as well. To the Pharisees this was blasphemy. Can you imagine what the long-time friends of Jesus must have been thinking when they heard Him talk like this? They must have thought that Jesus had a screw loose. They may have bought the idea that He was a prophet doing things in the name of God, but to take the position of God and forgive sins was unthinkable.

The "what is easier to say" question that Jesus poses is striking. Of course it's easier to say that your sins are forgiven—anyone can say that—but to back up your deity by healing the man would be a different story. Jesus backs up His claim to deity by letting the crowd know that He was about to prove His identity.

Do you remember the show "To Tell The Truth?" There were three panelists: two were impostors and one was telling the truth. The contestant could ask the panelists questions to try and determine who was telling the truth. Could you imagine if God was one of the panelists? "Panelists number one: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins!" "Panelist number two: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins!" "Panelist number three: Are you God?" "Yes, I can forgive your sins and to prove it I'm going to heal that broken arm of yours." If the man's arm is verifiably healed, who do you think will receive the nod? Some things are self-evident. In the case of Jesus, the very identity of God begs the question.

What could they say when the man got up and walked out? Surely a miracle had happened right before their eyes. It's the nature of a miracle is to take us off guard. Something has just happened that defies everything we have known in our lives. That's why we are so amazed at magicians—they can do things that make our senses react in non-traditional ways. When he pulls the blanket off the lady we expect to see the lady, and when she's gone our senses say, "No way, how'd he do that?" "That's not normal." For me, when I hear of a reported miracle, I doubt. Sorry, but that's my nature. I can understand why people saw many miracles, let's say during the time of the Exodus in the Old Testament, and still did not believe. People are

skeptics. Why? Because of pride. It's tough for a proud person to admit that he is not a god himself. So in the face of miracles, miracles that the skeptic cannot replicate himself, he dismisses the miracle for personal reasons.

Remember the magicians of Egypt? When they were up against the God of Moses, they too could produce some wonders like turning the water to blood or making the frogs come up on the land or turning a staff into a serpent, but eventually they were frustrated when Aaron, Moses' brother, struck the ground with the rod and the dust became lice throughout the land. 'Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God' (Ex. 8:18). You reach a point where you either have to deny the miracle or admit that God is God and He is bigger and stronger than you. In Jesus' case the evidence was before the crowd at the house. Obviously, if you followed Jesus you'd be in for the ride of your life.

Don't forget that Jesus has forgiven your sins — all of them.

Don't forget that Jesus works miracles — you can hold on to Him even if you can't walk.

Don't forget that Jesus proved who He was over and over — your faith will grow if you ponder this.

God's blessings are with the forgiven ones,

Pastor Steve

"Dead Or Dead"

February 17 - Mark 2:18 - 3:30

Welcome To The Jungle:
Wanted Dead or Dead
Jesus of Nazareth
for:

Acting in opposition to the Jewish traditions of fasting.

Breaking the Sabbath by:

* Picking wheat with His followers
* Claiming to be the master of the Sabbath
* Doing the work of healing a man

Bringing disgrace to His family by His actions.

Being possessed by the devil.

Jesus should be considered dangerous because He is out to dismantle our traditions and replace them with ideas that are opposed by the Elders. The fact that He heals the sick and casts out demons is only by the power of the devil working in Him. Stay away from this Man and keep yourself from the devil.

By the way, Jesus answers every one of these charges directly:

1. Now is a time for celebration; fasting will come later, when I'm gone.

2. On the Sabbath we should show love; I'm in charge of the Sabbath.

3. My family are those who do the will of God.

4. Would Satan cast out Satan? No, dumb argument! You blaspheme!

A note on tradition: When people believe that they are right, they will defend their point of view to the death. At that point they are not open to opposing points of view. They surround themselves with others who hold their positions, and this strengthens their conviction that their way of thinking is the right way of thinking. They see someone with a different opinion as a potential candidate for their camp; they do not even begin to think that they could be wrong or in need of correction. If they grew up believing a certain way it is very unlikely that they will change their mind later. You've heard the expression: "They are set in their ways." When people are set in their ways, their one goal is to convince others that their way is the right way.

The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat because He did not fit their mold in many ways. Remember though, back in Matthew 23, Jesus said basically that we ought to do what they teach on some things but, at the same time, not use them as our examples. Jesus taught that true spirituality was about service, while the Pharisees saw true spirituality as a way to acquire religious prestige. No wonder the Pharisees envied Him; He backed up what He said with actions. This was something very foreign in their culture. And no wonder that James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote to the believers later that they should be doers of the Word and not merely hearers.

The best question to ask yourself is what would be on your wanted poster?

How do people see you celebrating your faith?

Do you do good works for others on most days and even on Sunday?

Do you continue to follow Jesus even when your family thinks you are nuts?

Do you take a stand against demonic things in your culture and pray for those who are in the enemy's grasp?

If so, to whatever degree, may you not try to fit Jesus into traditional molds. Take the new wine and drink it. Do not put it back into the old wineskin; rather, put it in the new skin of Jesus' teachings and ways.

God's blessings are wrapped up in a controversial Man,

Pastor Steve

"You're Family"

February 18 - Mark 3:31- 4:29

It's A Great Day For A Race—The Human Race,

Are you a hypocrite? I apologize for even asking such a question, but I'm curious about what you think. I guess if you narrowed the question down it would be more palatable. Do you sometimes act like a hypocrite? Do you sometimes say you believe and value some behavior or creed and then turn around and do the opposite? To this question I'd say, "Who doesn't?" When we get a bit further into the Word we'll see that even the Bible says that the nature of man is to act in a hypocritical way. On the other hand, the person who can be called a hypocrite, the person who puts on a mask when he gets up every morning, including Sunday morning, is the person who lives a double life and knows it and does nothing about it. Most likely, Judas Iscariot would fit into this category.

Probably the number one criticism of the church is that it is full of hypocrites. Have you ever heard someone level that criticism about your church? It is a smoke screen! The reason people brings this accusation is that they do not want to face the real people they are. They are too good for "those church people."

Josh McDowell, the Christian writer and apologist, once said that the three reasons a person will not come to Christ are in this order: pride, a moral problem, or an intellectual problem. I may use the argument that I will not go to a church because there are hypocrites there, but the reality is that I am too proud to admit my need for God even though I myself have been hypocritical.

I have heard people say that they have some non-Christian friends who have better moral behavior than some who call themselves Christian. My question to them is always: how do you know? Do you know

their secret life? Maybe they wear a mask in public and in private they are deviant. Next time you hear on the news of a person being brought to justice, listen carefully to the ones interviewed who "knew" the person. More often than not their opinion of the person contradicts the crime they have been charged with. Beware! There are more hypocrites out there than first meets the eye.

In my lifetime, I have found the most genuine, the most loving, the most authentic, the most caring, the most generous, the most personable, the most considerate, the most fun to be with, the most welcoming, the most influential, the most enjoyable to be around folks, in church. That doesn't mean that I think the ones outside of church aren't some of those things, but I really don't like to venture too far outside of the church because the world is full of hypocrites (just kidding, sort of). If someone uses the hypocrite argument, if he were honest, he'd have to go out of the world to find a hypocrite-free zone.

Another place I've found love in my life was with my family

I loved my family growing up. We lived within a few miles of my mom's folks and about 10 miles from my dad's mom and aunt and uncle. We had a lot of family gatherings and dinners that would make you cheer. One of my favorite memories is the after Thanksgiving dinner scene. After we had gorged ourselves on all of the delightful food, you could witness bodies strewn all over the house, on every bed, couch and open space. It looked kind of like a morgue. It must have been that chemical in the turkey, but the look of it was always a comical scene to me. My immediate family, my dad and mom and sister, had a multitude of wonderful memories. We went on a family vacation every year, and my folks tried to get to most of my games, and we usually always ate dinner together. One of my dad's mottos was that family should stick by each other. I grew up with that idea and I believe it still. Families need to be as strong as they possibly can be.

We don't know a great deal about Jesus' family. Joseph is not mentioned after the birth accounts of the Lord. Mary is there all along and is still active in the church; she is there on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus also had half-brothers: James (the writer of the Bible book by his name); Joseph (after dear old dad); Simon; and Judas (called Jude and writer of the Bible book by that name). It's interesting that the half brothers did not believe in Jesus' identity until later, probably after the resurrection. In John Chapter 7 the Bible says specifically: "For not even his brothers believed in Him." In Acts 2 it says that "His brothers" were among the ones waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whether that means all of His brothers or some of them isn't quite clear, but a least some of them were believing.

When Jesus' family members came to see Him and couldn't make it close because of the crowd, the Lord put them off and emphasized that all of those who believed in Him were his brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. There was a new spiritual family that superseded His earthly family. When you come to Jesus and He becomes the Leader of your life, then you too become part of the family of God. That's why you can meet a fellow believer in Jesus and feel so close to him right away. You are family!

Church is a family. We are not an organization. We do not exist to build buildings or raise money for ourselves. We exist as a family to honor and praise the head of the family, the Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, in Hebrews it says that Jesus even calls us "brothers." I don't know about you, but I do not feel worthy of that. What I do know is that when I'm close to my brothers and sisters in Christ, I feel close to Christ.

In what ways has the church made a difference in your life?

Do you relate to God as His child and a brother of the Lord Jesus? Do you feel like you are accepted as a family member in the Body of Christ?

What can you do this week to build up the family of God?

Would you reach out to a weaker brother or sister this week and let them know that they are a special part of the church? Take a look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 about honoring the weaker members of the church.

God's blessings are on His family,

Steve

Day 50

"A Mean Spirit"

February 19 - Mark 5: 1-20

I went to my share of parties when I was in high school. One particular party stands out above the rest. My friend Rusty's parents weren't going to be home that weekend so his house was a good as any to invite a few friends over and celebrate. It didn't matter what we were celebrating, we just celebrated. What I remember most about Rusty is that he had a foul mouth. I'm not saying that I was much better, but Rusty could really cuss. He said the "F" word about every other sentence. It didn't bug me then but I'm sure that when we were having a conversation it must have sounded pretty juvenile.

Anyway, back to the night mentioned above. We were having a good time and others were showing up. Some of them we did not know, but if they were cool we were cool about them being there. You know how it goes—we really believed in diversity and inclusion in those days. No we didn't; we believed in self-gratification and narcissism. Back to that night. There was this guy there who was acting really weird. None of us knew him, so Rusty was keeping a blurry eye on him. Pretty soon, he punches a hole in Rusty's folks' screen door. When Rusty confronts him he goes postal. I mean, he was out of control. Interestingly enough, he was kind of a little guy. Rusty immediately called on the football player types to help him subdue the fellow. By the time I got involved there were six or seven bigger guys on top of this guy and still they were having trouble maintaining him. He was writhing back and forth and spitting and it looked to me like his eyes were going to bug out. I jumped into the fray. We had him pinned in the back of a pickup and off we went to drop him off somewhere. We found a grandparent's home and kept him surrounded all the way up to the door. Thinking that he was secure behind the door, we scrambled to the truck to make a quick getaway. As we are driving off we could hear the shattering of glass. The boy had dived through the front plate glass window onto the front yard. I have no clue what happened next.

That is about as close to a demon possession as I have ever gotten. He was probably on angel dust, a drug that releases adrenaline. I don't know for sure. I can remember, though, that it seemed so unusual that this little guy possessed such great strength compared to all of the muscle on top of him.

The man in the account at Gerasene was like that. He was wild. He had a reputation. He was feared. I'm sure people were telling their family and friends to stay away from the region lest you were confronted by the devil-man. He was out of control. He was unpredictable for sure. You couldn't have a normal relationship with him. Could you imagine someone befriending him and taking him out to eat?

Jesus confronted him by doing battle with the devils in him. There was a whole boatload of demons living in that one guy. We are not told how they got there or why. Maybe he played Dungeons and Dragons as a kid. Why he was so vulnerable or targeted by the devils is a mystery, but the reality was that his life was not his own—there were others renting space in him. And they were not friendly tenants.

I am struck—aren't you?—that immediately the devils were submissive to Jesus. They knew His authority and were afraid of Him. Compare this with the Pharisees and you have an odd comparison. The Pharisees did not know Jesus and the demons did. The Pharisees were so proud and stuck on themselves that they could not recognize the authority of the Lord. They even blamed His good deeds on demons. Whereas, the demons were so intimidated by Him that they would do anything He said.

Jesus sends them into a herd of pigs, two thousand of them, and over the cliff they go into the sea. The demon-possessed man is free and the pig farmers are furious. Later the townspeople want Jesus out

because of what this might mean to their business. It is a thought that if this was a Jewish business then it was a group of Jews who were disobeying the law by dealing in pork; pork was a forbidden animal in Israel. So Jesus kills two birds with one stone —the demons are gone and the man is free, and the pigs are gone and the land is cleansed of an unclean animal.

The Bible is clear that before a person comes to Jesus he is under the influence of the devil. He is led along by him to do his will. Why this is more obvious for some than others I am not really sure. However, if a person dabbles in the occult then he can expect to be taken captive by it in one way or another. A person does not sell his soul to the devil and come out of the bargain unscathed.

How does Christ's authority touch your life? How aware are you of His protection from spiritual enemies?

Paul would later say: "If God is for you, who can be against you?" Let's enjoy and be excited about Jesus' authority over all that is evil. He is able to keep you from the evil one. Today let's appreciate His authority and apply it to our own lives and homes and jobs. Jesus is Master of all.

God's blessings include authority over demonic powers,

Pastor Steve

Day 51

"Recollections"

February 20 - Mark 5: 21-43

"I'd like to explain to you what God did in my life long ago; your grandmother has had experiences in her childhood that you need to know about," the matronly woman said as the three young kids sat under her wings.

"I was a little older than you, Esther, when something very remarkable happened to me. I got so sick and was burning up with such a hot fever that Papa was panicked that I might die. I couldn't even get out of bed; I was so paralyzed with sickness.

"I had asked Mama where Papa was going but her words were dim to me because I was going in and out of consciousness. Finally I think I blacked out or something because I didn't remember any more until I heard the Voice.

"The word had spread that I was gravely ill and might die. Friends were already gathering at the house to help your great-grandparents deal with the situation. Finally the word came to them that I had died, yes, I had really died. That set off a chain reaction of weeping and wailing. As others heard the noise they gathered around to see what was happening.

"The Voice was gentle but firm. I had been roused from sleep many mornings by Papa's deep-sounding vocal alarm, more effective than old Willie the rooster. But the Voice I heard that day was sweeter and kinder than any I had ever imagined. Words and rumors about the carpenter from Galilee had been spreading everywhere, but my life at that time was full of play and chores and learning the ways of our people. I had had no contact with Jesus. Papa had spoken mysteriously about Him many nights at supper; he had said that He could touch the unfortunate ones and make them well.

"Now it was my turn. The Voice simply called me to get up. 'Arise, little girl,' He said. And like the first cries of a newborn baby I was alive again—fully alive—no longer sick; full of hope, full of wonder. As I came to my senses, I saw Mama and a handful of men standing around me. Gratitude flowed in the dimly-lit

little room, believe me, as if we were all swimming in a pool of refreshing water.

"Papa hugged Mama and they hugged me, and they cried. Those were tears of joy that day. What was going to be the saddest day of their lives became a day of celebration. I must have looked quite skinny and in need of some nutrition because the Lord, my Lord Jesus, asked to bring out some food and drink. A neighbor had already dropped by some rolls and a fish soup in anticipation of the mourning time. We all ate. I ate across the table from Jesus. He was...what can I say?

"When Jesus hugged me I felt so loved. He had brought me back from the grave and then He shared His love with me. His hug wasn't much different than Papa's; it was like I had two dads now. I was well taken care of and I knew it. From that day on we all began to live with that love. Not just the memory of it, no, it also somehow lived with us and has lived in us each day since. I guess it was so rich and so deep that its impact on us was life changing.

"Peter, James and John were there too. They acted like the big brothers I never had. Papa especially liked Peter. They seemed to really hit it off. I knew they had all been fisherman before leaving their nets to follow Jesus full time; that was something we had heard before we ever met them. They didn't act like fishermen, though. They were gracious, like Jesus, and kind, and they kept asking if there was anything they could do. James and John at one point went out to quiet the crowd, who were still carrying on as if I were dead. They weren't being rude or anything; when a child died there was always an outpouring of sympathy and support. The brothers went out to let them know that things were all right. Can you imagine how they must have felt about the Teacher after having been so close to so many miracles?

"Esther, Hannah, Sarah, I love you all so much. Times are difficult. It feels like we are disliked by so many. The Romans want us to give all of our devotion to Caesar and the Jewish leaders want us to renounce Jesus. But can you see why I must always stay true to the Voice. Jesus raised me and gave me the gift of life. Then He was taken and crucified, but that wasn't the end. He raised Himself from the grave too. Listen! I saw Him again. It was a crowded assembly of followers of the Way who had gathered to meet with a few of the Apostles who said Jesus had been seen alive. While we were gathered, suddenly, there He was with us. He knew me. My heart pounded out of my chest. He had made me alive and by that same power He too was raised. I believed. I believed with all of my heart.

"And so today we follow Him. He is the Lord. He will give us strength to go through whatever may come our way."

Esther, the oldest, said, "Granny, we love Jesus too and will follow Him. Great Papa has told me of the same day when he used to bounce me on his knee. He said that he would always be thankful for what Lord Jesus did that day. He'd say, 'Esther, my darling, I can still hear the crowd and your great granny moaning and can feel the sense of panic that moved us to find Jesus. He came and things were well. Esther, that is why you are here and you also can follow Him.' I will Granny, I love Jesus so much!"

So often I wonder how things turned out with those who had been touched so personally by Jesus. Has Jesus touched your life? If so, your story will play out in much the same way. I'm sure your story will have an impact on generations to come. Your story is the legacy that will enable future generations to love Jesus and follow Him too.

God's blessings are worth retelling,

Pastor Steve

Day 52

"John's Demise"

February 21 - Mark 6: 6b-29

Today Is A Good Day To Be Alive,

This is especially true when the subject is the death of the Baptist.

Jesus was exceptionally close to John. Remember, John had reluctantly baptized the Lord because he realized that the Lord deserved utmost respect. John treated Jesus like God. By the way, that's a good thing for all of us to consider. Anyway, their relationship was a close one even though it appears that after Jesus left the Jordan for the more northern parts of Israel, they didn't have as much physical contact. Also, John had been thrown in prison for speaking the moral truth about Herod's adulterous relationship with a woman in his own family.

I have had a few friends over the years whom I could rely on to be there for me even when we hadn't talked in quite some time. Do you have a friend like that, whom you could call, not having talked for several months, and still feel like you could pick up right where you left off? There is never any of the awkward guilt where you feel like the person is put out with you because you hadn't called in a while. It was right into: "How are you doing?" and "What's new?" and "Is there anything I can be praying for you about?"

Life can take some pretty peculiar twists. The truth is, sometimes things turn out contrary to the way we would like them to be. My friend Carl, whom I have already written about, was only 28 when he succumbed to cancer. He battled and battled for three years. Just when he had reached remission, another disease took advantage of his weakness and he died. He was so young. I can remember turning 30 and thinking about living longer than Carl. It didn't seem fair that God had given me more years than him. I had felt he was always more God-honoring than I had ever been.

Job, that infamous Old Testament personality, has a lot to say about the unfairness of suffering. If you haven't read Job in a while, or never at at all, I really don't blame you. Most of us do not want to be reminded that Job could be us. And so the book of Job sits at the pinnacle of human avoidance. No one wants what Job got. This is probably because they have not read the end of the story. Most likely they got bogged down in the argument and debate between Job and his "miserable counselors." But the end is better than the beginning in Job's case, because in the end he got a spirit full of the knowledge of the Lord. And in so doing Job once again rejoiced in God and humbled himself before God. He received more than he ever had before, not the least of which was a new found appreciation for the sovereignty of God.

What does the sovereignty of God have to do with suffering? Well, that's a deep question for a shallow mind like mine, but since you brought it up let me just say this: God tells Job, after he had lost his 10 kids, and his health, and much of his wealth, that He was still in control and that His will was over all, including the devil's will or any man's will. The boundaries of Job's suffering were ordered by God. The devil was asking for the opportunity to do him in and God gave permission up to a point, but forbade him from taking Job's life. So when we see Job in a state of grief, picking at the sores which raked his body, we are moved to pity or—as Job found out from his three counselors—to condemnation depending on the way you viewed God. Job's so-called friends were quick to judge his faith in God when things started to go array.

God was motivated by love and by the development of Job's spiritual maturity. In the end God shows Job, through a variety of illustrations, that He is in perfect control of His creation and is therefore able to work in the same kind of detailed way in the lives of His own. As God controls the boundaries of the seas and the constellations in the sky and the ways of the animal kingdom, he controls the events in our lives that otherwise seem out of control. Nothing is out of the scope of His rule and wisdom.

John the Baptist was the greatest man born, according to Jesus. Jesus spoke only glowingly of him. It was more than the fact that he was a relative. It was more than the fact that the old prophets, Isaiah and Malachi, had predicted that John would be Christ's forerunner. I think Jesus liked John and believed in him. If you have ever known someone who really believed in you, then you have touched the heart of love. Love believes all things, according to Paul's list of love qualities. Jesus loved and believed in John.

Maybe Jesus appreciated that John spoke the truth in the face of rejection. John was more interested in pleasing God than man.

Well, John's truth-telling got him murdered. He had offended the king by telling him that the woman he was with was not kosher. It was adultery and John called a spade a spade. Herod had him thrown in prison. He hadn't killed him already because of John's esteem among the people. Jesus too was killed because of His truth-telling. The difference between the two was that John got in trouble for telling the truth about someone else, while Jesus was crucified for declaring who He was.

John's death was brutal. I find the description at the end of the account pathetic. John's disciples came and took his body and buried him. The end of an era was over. John was dead. Another gospel records that when Jesus heard about His friend's death, He went away for awhile with His disciples. It was a sad time for the Lord. Jesus loved John. It's hard to say goodbye to someone you love. "Goodbye John, you were the greatest among men; now you are in a place of honor in my kingdom."

God is sovereign over life and death. Revelation says that he holds the keys of both. John's death was no surprise to God and it happened within the scope of his rule. Though John lost his head, he gained his soul. In death, he was alive in God. The world was not worthy.

I wonder how many people he pointed to Jesus. One of his mottos was "He must increase, but I must decrease." John was just a voice, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Maybe his voice was hoarse. Maybe he had finished his job and he was ready to go. Actually, I think that's certain. John served the Lord in life and in death. They served his head on a platter. Some felt like they had shut him up, but his message lived on and the person he worshipped was on His way to His own death, even the death of the cross.

God's blessings come to those who recognize God's sovereignty,

Pastor Steve

Day 53

"He Taught Them Many Things"

February 22 - Mark 6: 30 - 56

Bonjour,

That's about as much French as I remember from three intense years of it in high school. I had my mind on other things in those days.

Okay, you all know that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. But if the horse is thirsty, it probably won't be hard to get his snout in the water. Aren't people the same? If we have experienced something amazing in our life, isn't it a greater joy to bring others to the same well so that they too can drink? The interesting thing is that novices may not understand at first what they need in order to experience the same pleasures as the person who has been at it for some time. Most of us live day to

day, content to fulfill our bodily needs without much thought about living life to the fullest for the Lord.

Jesus saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd. They were aimless followers, sometimes lost, sometimes caught in a thicket, sometimes on their back and unable to get up. They were easy game for a pack of hungry wolves. Sheep, to my knowledge, are pretty dimwitted. They go with the crowd for the most part, but can also stray out on their own and find themselves all alone, lost in no man's land. Helpless is a good way to describe them. Without a strong shepherd they will have very little protection from an enemy or from themselves. Isaiah the prophet declared, "All we like sheep have gone astray..."

The world is like a great big hillside. The masses, billions of people, are like sheep out there wandering, looking, eating whatever sprouts of grass they can find. Some are sick, some are making others sick; there are a great number of dead sheep. There seem to be more wolves than sheep. Some are lucky and have made it thus far, but there is always the fear they may hear the snarl today. Some are so lost they don't realize that they will probably be consumed by the elements.

When Jesus saw the crowd in this helpless condition he didn't leave them alone in their dilemma. He sat down in a convenient spot and began to teach them many things. I'm sure that some of these things are recorded in the gospels, but which things they were at that time Mark does not tell us. We do know that Christ's teaching is the antidote for a wandering heart. When the truth about God is made clear, great things happen. How can you not be taken aback by the love that flows from the heart of Jesus? I can remember when I first really heard the words of Jesus and how spellbound I was that these words were for me. I was loved and God was at work in my life. It was an amazing thing to me. In some New Testaments the words of Christ are in red ink. Even so, we may not be at a place in our lives where we are listening to those words. Life tends to pull us away from those red letters and we are tempted to trust the words of others over against the words of the Lord.

Have you been soaking in the Words of Jesus lately?

All sheep need to be fed under the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd. When we get to John 10, we'll see in a more detailed way what it is that Jesus does for us as a shepherd.

The more teaching you take in from His Word, the healthier and stronger you will become in your discipleship. Reminding ourselves of spiritual things is one of the most important things we can do in our daily lives. All of us need spiritual alarm clocks built in to our lives so that we can run on God's good teaching rather than the teaching of the culture. Our society is self-centered and egotistical, whereas God's teaching is Christ-centered and spiritually fruitful.

Sit at the feet of Jesus while you read the Bible today and let Him instruct you in the way you should go. Psalms says that the Lord will instruct you with His eye upon you. Put your trust in that. I can hear a howl in the distance, can you? The bones of ransacked sheep are strewn across the landscape. We need His rod and staff to protect us. Without Him we are just too vulnerable.

God's blessings make us spiritually healthy,
Pastor Steve

Day 54

"Get A Grip"

February 23 - Mark 7: 1-30

Odds are if you've been at your present place of employment for more than a year then you probably have a pretty good handle on the rules and regulations of the company. If you are a hockey fan, (and I can only hope you are!) you are probably acquainted with a poke check, icing, and slashing. If you are a bargain hunter then you have certain stores on your list of good stops. If you are patriotic then I imagine you can stand with your hand over your heart and belt out the Star Spangled Banner at an American sporting event.

Depending on our interest in something we value we will have a pretty firm grip on that thing. Those of us who are married men ought to have a firm grip on our spouse. We should know her inside and out. We should read her like a book, a well-worn and well-read book that is dog eared, missing some pages and held together with duct tape. Once we begin to ignore our spouse we will also lose our grip on the kind of relationship that we dreamed of before we married. Sometimes a husband will exchange his grip on his marriage to grip someone else. With this exchange he loses his grip on some very important items: morality, commitment, manhood, responsibility, and a vow before God.

Sometimes people get a grip on something that is really good for them, but for one reason or another they lose their grip. It is not always easy to maintain our grip, even when the thing we are holding on to is profitable. Exercise is a good example, isn't it? I cannot tell you how many people I have heard over the years who have been excited about one piece of exercise equipment or another, who were all jazzed about their new found ritual. They stay with it for awhile, lose those unwanted pounds, and remind you when you chat about what a good time they are having with it.

Most of those people, when you meet up with them years later, have put on the old weight and are no longer excited about their exercise hobby. They had lost a grip on the very thing that they were once so charged about. Why is that? If this is your story, would you answer that question? Why is it that I was so hot on my jogging routine and now I would not even consider doing it? It seems unrealistic to me now, whereas before it was my sole focus. Then I was hands-on, but now I am hands-off.

I think part of an honest answer is that it isn't convenient for me anymore. I have other priorities now and exercise just doesn't fit into my routine. It is more convenient to let myself go, do what is easiest and not worry about my health or energy level. Let's be honest—most of our decisions are based on our current circumstances and the convenience of doing whatever will be of most pleasure to us. We may have believed at one point that we ought to maintain an exercise regimen, but now we are distracted by more immediate needs.

Jesus said that this is what happens in some people's lives when it comes to truth. People worship God at their own convenience. Worship centers are more like convenience stores than places to meet God for spiritual edification from the heart. Jesus told the Pharisees that their lips were moving but their heart was far from God. They were into the routine and keeping the rules to justify themselves, but a heart-felt relationship with God was not in their M.O. (method of operation).

Man is constantly making up his own rules in order to justify himself. Even those who do not believe in God have certain standards that they try to live by. Those with obsessive and compulsive tendencies would tell you that they just have to do this or that. They cannot help it; they are driven to meet whatever standard they have set for themselves.

The human being is in need of acceptance and

affirmation. This is a universal need. So if a man does not feel like someone else's rules fit him, he will create his own in order to have some measure of acceptability. Most people would say of themselves: I am a good person. Then they would draw the line of acceptability right behind themselves.

The religious leaders had done this very thing in Jesus' day. They had created their own rules which had been edging out the Word of God. They had even found a loophole in order not to have to love their parents. If they dedicated their money to God then they wouldn't have to use it to support their loved ones. Funny, isn't it? Their loved ones became the unloved ones. Then they attached a spiritual meaning to their actions.

Jesus said that this kind of behavior would not cut the mustard because God knew their hearts. God knows whether my heart is His or not. He knows if I am willing to do what He wants of me or not. He knows. So in our praying let's be frank with the Lord and talk to him about our motives, or at least talk with Him about the confusion we feel in our motives. Sometimes we are so confused we don't know what our own motives really are.

Jesus bluntly said, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." Your grip has slipped. You have opened your fingers and have let go of the truth. Remember when the truth was important to you? Don't turn a deaf ear to the Word of the Lord. Instead, open your heart and receive the pure milk of the Word. Let it feed your soul and motivate you to love in God's name.

Try doing anything constructive without your fingers wrapped around it and see what happens. Could a carpenter swing a hammer without his fingers wrapped around the handle of the hammer? Could a baseball player swing a bat without his fingers? Could you cook that way? How about driving? How would you read a book without being able to turn the pages? We need a firm grip on the truth in order for the truth to take hold of us.

As you make your way through the New Testament make sure to develop a firm grip on the Word. Take hold of different verses by underlining them or highlighting them with a marker. Think of them through the day and talk to God about them. They will become the catalyst for spiritual fruitfulness. "Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you."

God's blessings come to those who hold tightly to His Word,

Pastor Steve

"Jesus' Itinerary"

February 24 - Mark 7:31 - 8:13

Do you live your life on a schedule? Some people love schedules and others can't stand them. I wonder what kind of a schedule Jesus kept. Have you ever thought about that before? I have heard people debate what kind of car Jesus would drive if he was walking in our day and age. A VW, of course. But would Jesus carry a PDA or have a wireless laptop? Would His car have OnStar? Who knows?

Let's create a possible itinerary for Jesus, keeping in mind the times in which he lived. Jesus even said at one point that there were twelve hours in the day. Why was that? No electricity. So from approximately six in the morning until six in the evening you'd have light. That was the time to work.

5 a.m.: Jesus rises, rolls up his bed and goes to a quiet place to pray.

6 a.m.: Most of the apostles are up; Peter's mother-in-law cooks breakfast (fish and eggs with fresh-baked bread).

7 a.m.: Andrew and Philip are late for breakfast so they hold up the rest. Jesus walks ahead along the Sea of Galilee.

8 a.m.: Jesus meets with the Twelve, talking to them about the kingdom of God.

9 a.m.: A 12-mile walk and hike to the south shore.

10:30 a.m.: The crowds press in on Jesus as He makes His way through a small seaside town. He is pushed off shore in a small boat and addresses the crowd. The on shore waves cause Him to weave back and forth as He relates to the crowd in parables.

11:30 a.m.: Many have brought their sick and lame for Jesus to touch and heal. The crowd buzzes with amazement. Others run to round up friends to see what's happening. It's hot and muggy today. The disciples are getting hungry. A feeling of Messianic invincibility is growing. The disciples begin to speculate about what this new kingdom will look like when Jesus reigns in Jerusalem.

12:30 p.m.: The disciples attempt to pull Jesus away from the crowds so they can go out to eat. John mentioned that he'd like to eat at the deli. Judas makes some off-handed comment about the lack of funds in the bag. The women who normally accompanied the group stayed back in Capernaum to help with clean up there and to assist Peter's wife with the kids.

1 p.m.: They finally agree on a roadside vendor and wait as their bread and fish lunch is served. Judas pays the bill with a smirk. The money is running low. Jesus says not to worry about it, that God would take care of all of their needs.

2 p.m.: Head out to reach Nazareth by dark. Jesus stops along the way to reach out to individuals. He also uses the scenery of the landscape to teach, telling stories about mountains, trees, birds, farmers and fields. Many lives were changed today when Jesus touched lepers, healed sick people and taught strangers the importance of following His teachings. He offered hurting people hope by saying they could be free through his instruction. It's a long difficult walk. There are many ridges and rocky, tough terrain.

5 p.m.: Arrive in Nazareth. Relationships seemed a bit strained. Jesus' brothers are skeptical about his new-found fame. Mary is quieter, and receives the group with open arms. She would love to have a question and answer time with her Son but is willing to accept God's will in the matter.

5:30 p.m.: Darkness will soon fall. A few of the disciples make a fire and prepare for the evening meal. Philip and Thomas are cranky and getting one another's nerves. Thomas decides to go into town and catch up on any news he hasn't yet gathered. Mary and the boys have chicken, bread and some good wine they have been saving in old wineskins from the miracle wedding feast the first time Jesus surprised them with his power.

6:30 p.m.: The men roll out their mats on the veranda. Mary and Jesus are having a private conversation inside the modest home he had grown up in. James and Simon (zealous Simon) tell stories and entertain the others as they prepare to sleep before another demanding day. Some wonder when it will be their turn to do the work. They are getting tired of only assisting Jesus.

7 p.m.: The one small lamp is snuffed and before you know it Peter is snoring. The others make comments about putting Peter out in the barn but they too soon drift off to sleep. Jesus is still awake. There are just so many memories here. It's good to come home even though He was not as welcomed as He had wished.

What does your itinerary look like for the day? Let's all add a bit of love for others and God to the mix.

God's blessings are on schedule,

Pastor Steve

Day 56

"Don't Tell Anyone"

February 25 - Mark 8: 14 – 9:1

Good Day Friends,

Timing is everything. More than likely the best jokes you have ever heard were not read out of a joke book. You likely were somewhere when something funny happened on the spur of the moment that was absolutely hilarious. Timing makes all the difference in the world. That's why different people have varying reactions to events. One person could take it one way and another person could take it in just the opposite way. What may tickle your funny bone will not always reach the guy next to you.

Timing is everything. Sometimes the timing of things really catches us unaware. Can you imagine how my grandma felt when right after I was born her mom died? It was a bittersweet time in her life. It was a world of mixed emotions. She had gained and lost all at the same time. I hope that my presence was a comfort to her. I lived the first several months of my life in her home with my mom because my dad was in the army serving in Korea. Maybe having me there was a reminder that life sometimes ends and begins at the same time.

Timing is everything. A few decades ago my life seemed to be in the pits. It was hard for me to even tie my shoes in the morning. I felt like the last man on earth. During that time when I was in the throes of despair, my friend Joe would show up. He was a life-saver. When my thoughts were taking me to places I shouldn't go, there would be a knock on the door and Joe's pleasant demeanor would enter the room and cheer me up. His timing was always amazing. He was there for me when I needed a friend to help me up.

Timing is everything. When did Jesus Christ come into your life? Were you a child? Did you recognize from an early age that Jesus loved you and had a plan for your life, and so you committed your life to Him? Was it in your teen years at a youth rally of some sort? Were you already experiencing the futility of what the world had to offer for happiness and finding it empty? Did a friend invite you to hear the good news when you responded to the invitation and gave your life to Christ? Or were you an adult who finally yielded after years of living life your own way? Whenever it was, I'm sure you'd say now that Christ came into your life at the right time. He saved you from your sin at the point in your life when you knew you needed Him. God's timing is always perfect.

Timing is everything. Ecclesiastes says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away; a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace" (3:1-8). What period of time are you in in your life right now? Is it a good time or a time of trouble? Does it feel like a constructive time or a time when you are being torn down? Whatever time it is, remember that there is a time for every matter under heaven.

Timing is everything. Jesus knew His own timing. What I mean is that He was well aware and in control of the events that eventually would lead to His crucifixion and resurrection. In the year or so of His growing popularity Jesus avoided the chance of a crowd taking Him and making Him a king. That was not His mission as he walked the streets of Jerusalem. He was a king, that's for sure, but His kingdom was not of this world. That is why He avoided the notoriety that His miracles produced. The people around Him might want to take Him and make Him a king before His time. In our reading today Jesus heals a blind man. At first the man could only see the shapes of people, but when Jesus laid His hands on him again his sight was perfectly restored. Jesus then tells the man not to go into the village. This is another reference to Jesus desiring to be incognito so that He would not draw too much attention to Himself.

When you read and study the lives of the people in the Bible you realize that God's timing is perfect. When a child of God had the promises of God he or she could count on those promises no matter what the circumstances. Often promises from God were met with challenges and temptations and detours which were all meant to test and inspire the person those promises were given to. If you grew up with a dad who made promises and kept them, then you also remember that the promises were not always fulfilled in the exact way you imagined they would be. The important thing was that dad came through in the end and you saw the completion of what was promised to you.

God's timing is perfect in our lives, so don't worry. You can count on the promises of God for all of your life. You do not have to worry whether God will come through for you or not. He will. Our job is to cling to His promises and the hope that is attached to them. God will come through, though it may not happen quite the way that you planned. You never expected someone to die, or a divorce to happen, or a car to break down, or a job to be lost, or a friend to betray you. Still, God's promise to be with you and complete the work He began in you long ago will not be in vain.

Remember Daniel in the lions' den? I can imagine at first that Daniel was a bit edgy about the beasts. Soon enough he must have realized what was true all along—that God was with him and could shut the mouths of the lions. God had more to do with Daniel. It was not his time to die. If it had been that would not have been a bad thing because Daniel would have had peace in death. Either way, he won and God's will was carried out in his life.

Timing may be everything, but God's timing always supersedes our own timing. It just so happened that Jesus could control His timing because of who He is. Don't you think that as He sits on the throne of our lives, that we too will experience the joy of divine guidance and divine appointments according to God's day timer? Look today for God's timing in the events you experience. You may begin to see the risen Jesus in events that are much more than coincidence.

God's blessings parallel God's timing,
Pastor Steve

Day 57

"A Voice"

February 26 - Mark 9: 2-32

Isn't it frustrating when someone calls and they start talking away like you should know them, but for the life of you, you're not registering who they are? I finally have to break down, stop pretending that I know them, and ask who's on the other end. Then when I find out who it is, I'm usually shocked that I hadn't been able to identify the caller.

Think for a moment of all the voices that are in our lives. I liked the news anchor, Peter Jennings's, voice. It was soft but clear, steady and friendly in some way. He had a way of pulling you in and making it easy to listen to him. Growing up, there were a couple of sports announcers in my area whom I just loved. Chick Hearn, the voice of the L.A. Lakers for

decades, brought a lot of fun and excitement into my room as I did homework and listened to him call the games. Then there was Vin Scully, the voice of the L.A. Dodgers. To this day when I hear his voice I feel like a comforting presence has entered the room. To listen to him was much more than baseball; he could create all sorts of images as he painted pictures with his voice.

Isn't it amazing that no two voices are the same? We hear so many different voices during the day that we probably couldn't think of them all. Some are pleasant and some are annoying. Usually though, a voice will elicit a response of some kind. Some voices make us angry, others sad, others glad. Is your voice rough or smooth, loud or soft, comical or serious, repelling or appealing? Take out a tape recorder and talk into it for awhile and see what your voice sounds like. Some voices are special to us: a parent's, a spouse's, or a child's. Others really make no difference to us: the gal behind the register at the market, the guy pumping our gas, or the guy reading the news on the radio. Unless it was Paul Harvey — now there was a distinct voice!

I'm sure the disciples were being constantly guided by Jesus' voice. One of the things about His words that I am looking forward to hearing someday is the inflection in His voice. How did He sound? I can imagine that because of the great amount of love in Christ that his voice is very caring and reassuring. I'm sure it draws you in and wraps its vocal arms around you and fulfills you. What would the voice of God sound like?

Peter heard it. So did James and John. They heard the voice of God. They were up on a high mountain and they had an encounter with God that they would never forget. That is true of encounters with God generally. When you have had one, it becomes memorable and for some people, it will define their lives from there on out. Most find this experience in the Word of God. God uses His Word to speak directly to people's situations. When they recognize it as such, they become thankful that God would have anything to do with them, let alone speak to them through His Word.

Peter was particularly impacted by his experience on the mountain. He would later write: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am will pleased.' We Ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain" (2 Peter 1: 16-18).

The expansion in Mark of "listen to Him" gives us the application of the experience. The Father loves the Son and both the Father and the Son delight in those who listen to Him. John would later write: "... everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world" (1 John 5: 1-4). Mark's gospel, by the way, is primarily the mind and work of Peter. We know this from church history. Peter leaves the admonition out in his little epistle because it is not the point he is making there. But here in the gospel he includes the word about listening so that the apostles (and us) would correlate the Words of Jesus along the same line as the words of Moses and Elijah. In Moses we have the law of God, in Elijah we have the prophets and in Jesus grace and truth. Again in John's gospel we read: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

Are you listening to the Word today?

What is God speaking to you from His Word?

Let's open our hearts to His Word and take in the messages God speaks to us from the Bible.

Let's, like the apostles, acknowledge the superiority of Christ and take His words with the utmost respect.

God's blessings come to those who listen to Him,

Pastor Steve

"What Did Jesus Say About Hell, And What Should We?"

February 27 - Mark 9: 33 – 10:12

Good Day To You,

I actually don't mind talking about hell because sooner or later the discussion will turn to the cross, that wicked and glorious place where death and sin and hell were conquered. It is a bit easier to swallow a difficult subject if you can also talk about the solution to the problem. If you end up focusing on the problem and dwell on the realities of it then you will be much more apt to despair.

Let's face it, many people would see the subject of hell as outdated and irrelevant. These skeptics might say that it was invented to scare people into church so that you would stick with religion out of fear. Others have trivialized the subject by making it cartoon-like. Some would say it isn't a real place but is a teaching tool to emphasize that if you are bad then bad things will happen to you. Still others believe that hell is a temporary place where you will pay for your sins for a period of time, but then you will become extinct.

What has your impression of hell been? I can remember as a kid having periodic dreams of what looked like a hellish place where people were suffering the torment of fire and brimstone. I can remember in those dreams seeing the tormented faces of the sufferers. I'm pretty sure my vision of hell was pretty distorted, but one thing probably was true. The people I saw were horribly isolated. People were all alone, with no connection to anyone else. I thought how lonely and hellish that would be. Of course, most picture hell as a party place for those who party with Satan. To them it will be a place to continue to "raise hell." This is far from Jesus' picture of the place.

When Jesus discusses hell it is in the context of judgment. The connection is pretty obvious. For example, in our reading today those who stumble or mistreat kids will be judged. Jesus says it would be better for them if they were buried at sea than engage in behavior where kids were brought down or taught to sin. This is why generational sins are emphasized in the Bible. So often the sins of the fathers are passed down to the kids. The aftermath of the hippie movement in the sixties, in a multitude of cases, resulted in an amoral attitude in the later generations. This led to a morality that brought a deluge of physical, emotional, and mental problems for families and for society in general.

So what about judgment; will anyone escape the scrutinizing judgment of God? The answer to this question is both simple and complex. It's simple because the quick and easy answer is that no one will escape the judgment of God. The issue becomes more complex when we see ourselves as "good" or "better than others" or "very religious." People who do this often believe that they will be exempt from the judgment of God. The problem is that the Bible says there is none righteous enough to stand before God's glorious presence. Our sins have separated us from God. So we have Bible verses like: "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3: 23) and "now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Romans 3: 19). The all-seeing, all-knowing, all-encompassing God of the universe will bring every detail of a person's life into judgment. If there is a person out there who can stand under that judgment then he would be a perfect man who had never once broken the law of God, for the Bible also says, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2: 10).

Jesus says that if your hands or feet or eyes cause you to sin then remove them. He says it is better to be maimed than to be caught in sins that lead to hell. Do you think Jesus is talking literally about removing body parts? If he was then we'd be the church of the

stumps. All of us sin. All of us have misused our feet and hands and eyes. So what is Jesus saying? First, I think He is using a simple teaching tool to capture the disciples' attention. I'm sure it worked. Can you imagine if one or two of them were daydreaming and heard this? Now He has my attention. Secondly, now that Jesus has my attention, I need to think seriously about what He is talking about. This is no laughing matter. Jesus paints judgment in the most sober terms. The point is to take sin seriously. Your eternal destiny hinges on this issue. If you walk haphazardly though life and downplay whatever sin issues you have picked up from your parents or grandparents, then you will be disappointed in the end when the judgment comes.

Someone once said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Maybe one man wasn't as great a sinner as another, but he never dealt with his own sin. He took it lightly. He hoped that things would work out or that his "good works" would outweigh the bad. He never dealt with the heart of the matter and found God's way of deliverance from sin and hell. Maybe he intended to do differently. Maybe he once thought that he should read the Bible or look into being baptized or go to church, but he never did. It didn't seem that important. That's why Jesus puts it the way He did. He says that this is so important that it's like the removal of a body part. It's much more than taking a Tylenol, it's like major surgery. Don't let your sin fool you—it is much more serious than you think.

Some have tried to suggest that Jesus' picture of hell somehow represents an unreal place. How they can come to that conclusion beats me. It doesn't follow that just because He speaks in exaggerated terms about dealing with sin (in order to get us to think seriously about sin) that in some way He is saying that hell is not real. Do you see the illogical thinking there? Actually, the opposite is the case. He gets our attention about sin in an exaggerated way in order to save us from a horrible eternity. The images of eternal flames and worms and being salted with fire, maybe like a fire storm image, are not meant to make us think hell does not exist. If that was His objective, then His images are meaningless. No, the images are meant to warn us of the horrible reality of separation from God for eternity. In other gospels weeping and the gnashing of teeth is used to describe the torment of the lost.

How severe is hell? Let me answer a good question with another good question: How severe were the sufferings of Christ?

The solution has to match the problem. The punishment has to fit the crime. If it took the blood of the spotless Jesus suffering at the hands of men and the cross where He died, then just how immense was the sin problem? Hebrews says somewhere that Christ is the source of eternal salvation and eternal redemption, and in the same book it talks about eternal judgment. Therefore, if Christ's death is the solution to the problem then that problem is obviously an eternal one, not a temporary one. No wonder Jesus used such strong language to get their attention that day. Wouldn't it be better to be maimed in life than to be in hell? Absolutely!

What would the point be if Jesus was warning them to beware of an imaginary place? There would be no point. Jesus was getting their attention so that they would consider their need for His forgiveness and prepare them for the gift of eternal life.

So then, what should my attitude be about hell and how should I convey these ideas to friends who haven't heard about the Lord and probably think hell is a mythical place? First, I need to pray that God would remove the blinders from their eyes so that they too would take the threat of judgment seriously. Secondly, I need to look for opportunities to talk about the cross of Jesus and His resurrection so that they can have the opportunity to accept Jesus as I have. Thirdly, I need to be careful not to downplay hell. It is the devil's method to get us to think lightly about hell.

God's blessings of eternal life come to those who accept the free gift of God in Christ. Thank you Jesus for saving us from eternal torment.

Pastor Steve

Day 59

"A Look Into Jesus' Emotional Makeup"

February 28 - Mark 10: 13 - 31

How do you gauge your emotions? How do you know if you are emotionally healthy or if you are bit off balance? Our emotions respond to so much varied stimulation from day to day that it is oftentimes hard to lay hold of our emotional equilibrium. On the other hand, don't you think that, by design, some people are more emotional than others? We will say that so-and-so really wears her feelings on her sleeve to describe someone who may cry a lot or go from 0-60 on the emotional scale in a short period of time. I believe God made some of us more or less emotional than others. Wouldn't it be beneficial then to dial it down somewhat if you are constantly on the high side, and rev it up if you are on the low side too much?

Many people let their emotions gauge them. They live by their feelings. They are constantly on a mission to up their emotional energy. These folks can be adrenaline junkies. They are forever looking for stimulation to make them feel high. They don't like to slow down and relax; they must constantly be on the go and they feel unproductive when they stop. They are the ones who are very impatient behind a few cars at a stop sign. If they slow down, they believe, they might wither up and die.

Then there are the emotional zombies. For them to crack a smile is a monumental feat. They just don't seem to feel much. Others will misinterpret their lack of expression to conclude that they don't care because their reactions are so flat. Sometimes these people have quite a bit going on in the control center of their mind and heart, they just don't know how to express what is going on inside. This person is not as excitable about doing something risky and on the edge. He has been misunderstood often enough that he would rather avoid places where the expectation for emotional energy is high.

What is your emotional makeup? Do you feel like you experience a balance of emotions? When there is a major event in your life, such as the death of a family member, mistreatment by a fellow worker, or a car accident, do you give yourself time to feel sad, angry, or grieved? Do you process those emotions by not internalizing them, but rather respond through more constructive means? In any given day without major emotional waves, do you experience life as it comes and roll with the ups and downs, or do you panic when you feel a bit depressed or overly excited or flat or disappointed?

Jesus experienced all of the human emotions, as we all do. The difference with Him was that His emotional tank was not affected by sin. So when we look at Jesus' emotional identity we will get a glimpse into the way God originally intended us to experience feelings before the fall brought us all down. Jesus felt sadness, grief, anger, joy, exuberance, and a host of other real human emotions that we can all relate to. Jesus is God but He also became a one-hundred-percent-real man so that He could identify with us.

As Jesus talks to the rich young man, He is straight with him. Yet also, in some knowing way, He loves the man. Mark says that as the Lord looked at him He loved him. Think about that for a moment. I know some are thinking love is more than an emotion; what was it in His eyes that conveyed love? I get the feeling that the disciples recognized that the Lord really had a heart for the man. When our emotions are driven by love of others, it helps us to plow through the world with a compassion that will, I think, balance us emotionally. We often get into trouble emotionally when our focus is on ourselves: how we feel and where we are at. This leads us to exclude others. Jesus was full of love.

Another telling thing in this passage of Scripture is that Jesus calls His disciples "children." If the Lord was older than they were, it wasn't by much. Chances

are that some of the disciples were older than He was. And yet He calls them "children." Again He is focused on them and not on His own emotional needs. Today the tenor of psychology and humanism in general is to put the emphasis on self-fulfillment. When a person does this, then the gauge of his well-being is himself rather than the care of others. Jesus called His disciples children because He was into taking care of them like a good father takes care of his kids.

Two more points on this subject: He uses the hyperbole of a camel going through the eye of the needle, I believe, to lighten the mood while at the same time teaching a lesson. I can imagine a wry smile or two by the disciples when they heard this comparison between something ridiculous, the camel squeezing through the eye of a needle, and the difficulty of giving up riches for the kingdom of God's sake. Humor is a good indication of emotional well-being. Proverbs says that a merry heart does good like medicine. Laughter is sometimes the best medicine.

Lastly, faith is absolutely vital for emotional health. Otherwise, where will we turn when the heat gets turned up? Jesus told them that all things are possible with God. We need to hear that, don't we? We need to believe it too! When we are going through the sometimes confusing rain of emotions, we need to know that God is for us and that He has a plan for us and that we are His children. Jesus demonstrates this for us in His own relationship with the Father. He trusts the Father. He knows the Father will never leave Him. He knows He can express all of His emotions to the Father and the Father will listen and take care of Him.

Let's do likewise.

Let's not let our emotions get the best of us.

God's blessings come to those who put others first,

Pastor Steve

"What Do You Need?"

March 1 - Mark 10: 32-52

Are you a doctor? What I really wanted to ask was whether you play doctor, but I didn't think that would be an appropriate way to begin. What I mean is, do you tend to give a self-diagnosis when something is ailing you? Most of us tend to be self-proclaimed experts on ourselves when we have a problem. In other words, we think we know what we need.

Have you ever been at a point though when you were stumped? For the life of you, nothing over the counter was working to appease your ailment. So you broke down and went to the doctor, and he poked and prodded and listened with that cold medal gadget and gave several "ums," until he stopped and put his finger to his chin and told you what he thought you'd need to get better. Lo and behold, it was something that you hadn't even suspected. So you did what the doc proscribed and in no time at all you were better. Sometimes we honestly do not know what we need.

What is the greatest need in your life right now? Have you prayed about it sufficiently yet? Have you sought counsel about it? What is your opinion about what your part is in acquiring what you need? Is it a material thing like a new car or something for the house, or is it something relational, like better communication or the ability to forgive another? Our greatest need is that thing in our life that is on our minds every day and drives us to try and find an answer. You may try to avoid it, but typically it is screaming to be heard, isn't it?

Bartimaeus must have heard about the Man from Nazareth. Word had been spreading that Jesus could heal the afflictions people lived with. "What if Jesus could heal me?" he must have been thinking. When you've been dreaming for a long time about being able to see, it would be worth a shot to ask Jesus to meet the need.

And so he was determined to meet up with the miracle Man. He knew that Jesus was in the vicinity; the buzz of the crowd and the excited exclamations of the people around him made it clear that Jesus was somewhere close. So he began to yell out for Jesus. He was calling on the Lord. He needed Jesus. If the crowd was too loud maybe the Master wouldn't hear him and he'd be left in his current condition, so he hollered. There were people near him who thought he was being rude and tried to get him to quiet down. They didn't understand his need. They had not lived in his shoes. Maybe he was interrupting Jesus, but that didn't matter now, now in the hour of his desire to be made well.

In his cry, Bartimaeus was acknowledging his belief in Jesus. He calls Him "the son of David." This was a clear acknowledgment of Jesus' Messiah identity. The coming Messiah would be considered the son of David because he would rule as king in the lineage of King David, the first great king of Israel. Saul was the first king of Israel, but it was David who brought the kingdom into its greatness. Bartimaeus was recognizing Jesus for who He truly was, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Secondly, he cries out for mercy. This is a recognition of his own unworthiness to be considered by Jesus for healing. He knew that if he was going to receive his healing that it would not be because he deserved it but by the goodness of the Lord. His faith was planted firmly in the reputation of Jesus and not on his own righteousness. It wasn't about him, it was all about Jesus and whether He would extend mercy to him. Can you hear him calling out? It may have been the heart of the day but this man's world was dark. Jesus would be his only hope to come into the light. The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the light (John 8:10). He was about to see, probably in more ways than one.

I find it a bit funny that Jesus even asks him what his need is. Isn't it obvious what it is? Maybe the Lord wanted the man to state what his need was. Jesus credits the faith of Bartimaeus for the healing. So what was his greatest need?

Was it that he was blind? Or, was it that he needed Jesus? If it was his faith that opened his eyes, then why did he need Jesus at all? This will help us to get a grip on what faith is. If it was "his faith" that did the job, why did it take Jesus coming through town before he was healed? Because it was that his faith was simply in Jesus. Jesus was the source of that faith. Then the man was healed.

Our greatest need is to always come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we have anxiety…come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we aren't sure how the rent will be paid this month…come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we are concerned for one of our kids…come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we feel nervous about a test in school…come to Jesus.

We may not be blind, but we _____…come to Jesus.

God's blessings come to those who come to Jesus,

Pastor Steve

Day 61

"Prayer and Commercialism"

March 2 - Mark 11: 1 - 25

Don't we all long for richness? We want our lives to be full and rich. We love to enjoy the "good things" in life. When I was a kid we used to eat steak quite often. I think my folks would buy a side of beef and stock the freezer. Every now and then we'd do fondue. Have you heard of that? In the middle of the table was a flame-heated, bowl-shaped skillet full of some kind of oil. The steak was skewered by long metal prongs and we'd dip it in the hot oil. You'd eat that freshly-cooked steak and feel like you'd died and gone to heaven. At least I remember it that way. Maybe I was easily pleased.

What are the things that make life feel rich to you? Are they mainly material things or non-material things? I will never forget the day I got my driver's license. Let freedom ring, man. I was on cloud nine. I drove down the street by myself in my used Ford Maverick with Neil Diamond playing on my new 8-track player. Life couldn't be any better!

I think for me life has been made rich, not by stuff, but by the people I have known and know now. Rich people make life rich. However, the ones who are only rich in dollars make life very poor. I love to be around truly rich people. I'll never forget the peanut salesman at Dodger Stadium. Now that was a rich man! He had so much fun selling peanuts and the fans got such a kick out of him. He had a tennis ball with a slit in it, and he'd throw the peanuts across the aisles, then toss the ball to retrieve the money for the nuts. Some fans got more out of the peanut guy then they did from the game. If a peanut man can be rich, so can you and I.

People who pray are rich. Prayer is helplessness. Prayer is dependence. Prayer is the acknowledgment that God must be our source. Not money or investments or IRAs or "location, location, location" or stocks and bonds, but reliance on God. Prayer is faith in God. It says that I need God. It means that I cannot navigate life apart from God's guidance and wisdom and help.

Prayer acknowledges that God is like my Shepherd. I am a dumb sheep. I tend to stray. I want to do things my own way and not read the instruction manual, and so I go my own way and find myself, again, in a mess. Then I pray and look to God for help. The positive side of this is that when the Lord is my Shepherd I will have everything I need, guaranteed. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Why? The Shepherd meets all of my needs.

The next time you go shopping for stuff, just looking around for something else to make your life rich, try this attitude on for size: "I don't need any of this stuff because the Lord is my Shepherd. Because that is the case I have everything I need already." Try that idea on for size and see how it feels. It really is true. When you have Jesus you have it all. Nothing, and I truly mean nothing will add one ounce of happiness to the "sheep" who has the Good Shepherd looking after his every need. Anyway, so much of our buying is to keep up with the proverbial Jones's or to try and create a safe feeling, kind of like a security blanket. The rich man says to himself that he has it all, and so he sets out to build bigger and better buildings to satisfy his commercial longings. He doesn't know how foolish he really is because, sooner or later, his soul will be brought into judgment. Then he will be caught with his pants down and nothing to show for his spiritual and moral poverty. We brought nothing into this world and we will go out the same way.

In our reading today Jesus cleanses the temple again. The temple workers were making merchandise of the animals being sold for offerings. The temple had become like a tourist trap. People were forced to buy at exorbitant prices so that they could make their sacrifices. Jesus said that this was robbing the true purpose of God's house, which was prayer. Rather than use their religion for advantage, they were to use it for worship. Jesus, meek and mild Jesus, didn't take too kindly to this abuse and took action to rectify the situation. "He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts." Jesus took a stand.

Is worship happening? Is church a place of worship? Do we go there to worship God? What other reason would there be to enter? To find business contacts? To put on a good face for others? To look respectable? I hope not.

Jesus teaches the disciples the power of prayer by cursing the fig tree. He says to believe that your prayers will be answered and they will. Don't doubt, but believe that God is able to do anything; let me add, within the scope of His will. Jesus also says that we need to be careful when we pray not to be harboring bitterness towards another. We ought to forgive them first so that our own sins may be forgiven. Maybe He had in mind that we shouldn't compare ourselves with the temple merchandisers, thinking we would be heard because we were better than them, but rather we ought to be humble in prayer reflecting back to God our dependence on Him.

Will you have a special time in prayer today?

I encourage you to talk to God like He is your Shepherd. You know that new car that you are desiring that you think will bring you happiness? Put it on hold for today and talk to God about the happiness that He has brought into your life.

Pray sincerely.

Pray with faith in God.

Pray always.

God's blessings come in prayer,

Pastor Steve

Day 62

"Who Are You Talking About?"

March 3 - Mark 11: 27 - 12:12

Greetings in Jesus Christ,

What is the best, most surprising news you have ever received? When you heard it, at first, you could not believe that they were talking about you. For a moment you felt like you were in shock or in a daze. You had to do a double-take in order to fathom the intensity of what you were hearing.

"Are you sitting down?" the voice on the other end of the phone said. "You have won third prize in a state-wide drawing which means you will be able to draw as much money as you can from an ATM machine in five minutes and you also have a week for two at a dude ranch in Arizona." I'd practice beforehand, withdrawing money from my ATM, making sure I could do it quick and nimbly. When it was over I had won more than anyone in the state, $2,600 (you could only withdraw the money in $200 increments). (Did that really happen to you? Wow.)

On the other hand, have you ever gotten called into the office when you didn't know exactly why? Sure, you were in a scuffle with someone at recess, but you were just sticking up for someone or something you believed in. But the messenger has dispatched you to visit with the man in the suit...pretty intimidating! I was just minding my business one lazy afternoon when I heard the fateful summons. I knew I was innocent so I went feeling more curious than anything else. I was in the seventh grade and sometime that day I had called a bothersome girl a "horror" (note the spelling). To me a "horror" was a monster along the lines of Dracula or Frankenstein or the Mummy. The homophone of this word was not a concept I had come across at that young age. The teacher and the principal didn't know that and so I went

through the prosecution. By the way, even though I had a pretty clean record, they didn't believe my story. I'm sure my little story was the topic of conversation in the teachers' lounge that afternoon.

Jesus' parable of the tenants was about the Pharisees, no doubt about it. They knew it and it outraged them. So they continued to pursue a way to have Him eliminated. Jesus even quoted from their own Scriptures to show that He would be rejected but one day rise to prominence. All of these thoughts were rubbing the religious brass the wrong way. They were in no position to receive Christ's words. They were against Him. They knew what He was saying was not in their favor but they also were unable to hear the positive message Jesus came to deliver. One of their number, Nicodemus, approached Jesus at night (probably so that he wouldn't be seen) and questioned Him about His teaching. When Jesus declared to him that he needed a complete life change, he was unable to make heads or tails out of what the Lord was saying. Even when Jesus eluded to the Old Testament Scriptures he couldn't see how they applied to Jesus' words.

The same reality holds true today. People have an idea of what Jesus is saying but have no clue how it relates to them. They do not get the message of Jesus. They may even feel like a Pharisee, even if they have no religious background, in the sense that they think Jesus is condemning them and making it hard for them to be accepted with God. In that way Jesus is confusing to them. That's why so many people will say things about Jesus or His teachings that are so off base. I have heard people say things like, "Jesus is a great role model of how we should love others," or, "Jesus is a good example to me and I am trying to follow His example so that I am good enough to make it to heaven someday." Have you ever heard something like this?

The Bible says that we are born spiritually blind. Because of this we cannot truly hear the Words of God. I don't mean that we cannot read them, certainly we could do that, but we cannot understand them and how they would matter to us. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 Paul talks about the need for spiritual understanding in order for spiritual things like the Bible to be made alive to us. In other words, we need to be made spiritually alive before the Bible will become alive to us. Let me be perfectly clear what this means. The last thing I want to do is muddy the waters when it comes to understanding spiritual things.

Jesus said that to be born anew we need to be "born of the Spirit." When people realize their need for Jesus and understand that they cannot adequately pay for their own sins, they are prompted by the Spirit to trust the work at the cross by Jesus as the payment for spiritual rescue. As soon as a person sincerely asks God to forgive his sin and be the Master of his ship (so to speak) he is born of the Spirit. The Spirit enters the person and begins the life-long process of making him like Jesus. With the Spirit inside, like a lamp, he is then able to read the Bible with Spiritual illumination.

Jesus is speaking to you today. Take a moment to listen. Take the time to read His Word. Like a good Father God is loving you and working in your life. When I first "heard" God talking to me, it was not with words of condemnation, it was with words of love and encouragement.

"If God be for us who can be against us..."

God's sincere blessings and good news to you,

Pastor Steve

Day 63

"Got Ya"

March 4 - Mark 12: 13-27

It's a Good Day to Give Thanks,

In Jesus' day teachers of the law, who were called "Rabbi," spent a great deal of time communicating God's Word and the writings of other rabbis to the people. People would have questions about different parts of the Bible and how they should be applied, and so they would bring their inquiries to these learned teachers. The rabbis loved to sit in the place of God and disseminate the truth. As we read recently though, they were quite regularly exchanging the words of God for the traditions or teachings of men and thereby were diluting the Word of God.

I have a great deal of respect for teachers. First of all, they are usually smart and have reached a high degree of intellectual achievement. That doesn't mean that they are perfect. I have seen teachers make some of the most boneheaded errors you can imagine. But also, teachers are giving. They have to spend a great deal of time with a group of people, be they young or old, who usually do not appreciate all of the time and energy they invest in teaching. How would you like to be an English teacher who has to stay up very often to grade 60-90 essays at a time? Some grade school teachers have a tremendous amount of homework themselves. They have to teach a variety of subjects, and grade papers in each of those subjects. It's quite a job. Add on to all of that lesson planning and classroom decoration and grading at the end of the term and you can see that the job of a teacher is probably misunderstood by most.

On the other hand, there is an occupational hazard that can really bring a teacher down. Teachers are very susceptible to pride. When you are smarter than your students and you have the answers to their questions, they will lean on you, sometimes so hard, that you begin to believe that you just might rule the world. This is especially true in the younger grades. Most little kids worship their teacher. They really do put their teacher in the God role. What their teacher says is gospel, no question, that's the way it is. As students get older and start to question the things their teachers are saying, then it is harder for a teacher to feel invincible. If you misspell a word on the board in front of the class and a student points it out in front of God and everybody, you will quickly fall from your pedestal. I have known some teachers who are so conscientious about their lessons that they will go over and over them, double-checking every little thing so that they will never be embarrassed in front of their class. Sooner or later they will slip. Everyone does.

Once a teacher thinks he is invincible then he begins to protect his territory, his status, and will expect that not only his students but the faculty and parents as well treat him as a fountain of wisdom and truth. He covers up weaknesses and blemishes and begins to try and live as if he isn't human. That's why it's pretty hard for some teachers to get along. You'd think that teachers would enjoy sharing with one another and learning from one another, but all too often they do not want their colleagues to know that they don't know something or haven't read some book or that they got a poor grade in a certain subject in college. No one teacher knows it all. Some would like to think they do, but they do not.

In the rabbinical system there was a great deal of one-upsmanship. As we have said before, the teachers of the law were on a ladder of success. The more you knew and the more you were respected, the more status and authority you carried. Can you imagine how the Pharisees must have felt about Jesus' authority to teach the law? He hadn't had any formal training, for one thing. And He was claiming Messianic authority by asserting that He was the unique Son of God. He was also talking about God in personal terms, a privilege the Pharisees did not enjoy. And on top of all

that, the people were flocking to Him to hear Him. His reviews were stellar. To the run-of-the-mill Pharisee this meant competition. "By what authority do you do these things, Jesus?"

Mark says that Jesus knew their hypocrisy. What hypocrisy do you see in the section? Could it be the flattery before the "tricky" question? They were feeding Jesus a bill of goods to try and soften Him up for the blow when they would give Him a question that would embarrass Him in front of the audience. All the flattery about being full of integrity and speaking God's Word in truth and not being swayed by men, though all true statements, was only spoken so that they might trick Jesus into a fall.

Flattery is one of the worse forms of hypocrisy, because it is meant to harm. Behind Jesus' back they were planning on killing Him. They knew they couldn't carry the crime out until they had the people on their side; many people, who were possibly not even disciples yet, believed that Jesus was at least a prophet. So it meant a great deal for the Pharisees to make Jesus look bad.

Why the question about taxes? They were more than likely trying to make Jesus appear a Roman sympathizer, which would not go over well with much of the Jewish population. Even those who paid taxes saw allegiance to Rome as a crime. Some did not pay out of principle. They believed paying would be a concession that Caesar deserved allegiance at God's level. If they could get Jesus to take a position, then the anti-Rome crowd might help them in their goal to have Jesus killed.

Envy and flattery and murder are ingredients for a confrontation. Even today when these elements are seen in relationships the outcomes are usually very volatile. The Pharisees saw their own importance and authority as more god-like than Jesus'. To them, He was a threat; a threat that needed to be removed. Not long from now in Mark's gospel we will get to the passion of the Christ once more.

That the Pharisees could catch Jesus in His words would be like me being able to play chess with Bobby Fischer. When Jesus asked His questions, first about the coin and then an acknowledgment of whose inscription was on it, the only thing those around could do was marvel. Checkmate, game over.

Let's make a few applications.

If you are a teacher please examine yourself in the light of God's knowledge. James says that you need to take teaching very seriously because teachers will incur the stricter judgment.

Let's pray for wisdom to be able to answer those who challenge us. Try Jesus' approach on for size and answer a question with a question. For example: "How do you know there is a God?" Answer: "How do you know there isn't a God?" "If there was a God, there wouldn't be as much suffering in the world?" Answer: "How do you know that God has caused the suffering?

God's blessings teach us, Pastor Steve

"Not Far Out"

March 5 - Mark 12: 28-44

Has Truth mattered to you for most of your life? Were you regularly raising your hand in class to ask for an explanation on some topic? Did you seek out things on your own, not willing to take what you were hearing as the "for sure" truth? Or, have you been a "go with the crowd" kind of person? Maybe you didn't care much about what was true, but just skated through life waiting for the next experience to capture your attention. Maybe it didn't matter much to you what the teacher was saying as long as you could reiterate the information on an exam.

Most of my life I have been the latter case. I have lived for the next encounter, the next thrill, the next opportunity, the next invitation. Where I grew up that was kind of the prevailing attitude. Being lackadaisical, kicked back and chilled out was the banner of the time. I grew up in a town not far from the beach, so my friends and I spent a lot of spare time hanging out at the ocean. The pound of the surf, the constant traffic on the strand of joggers and bicyclists, the smell of suntan oil, calloused feet from walking on hot pavement and sand, sunburns, riptides, and being stung by jellyfish were all essential aspects of the culture I grew up in.

All of us are affected by the culture of our times, aren't we? Most of us can say that to a greater or lesser degree we have been shaped by our culture. It was the comfortable thing for us. We adapted to the changing times by associating with the people we felt the most affinity with and spent the most time with. These people were our friends. The memories we made with them probably impact our lives today.

In what positive ways did your friends affect you?

In what detrimental ways did your friends affect you?

In Jesus' day, if you were a teacher of the law, the odds were that you had been surrounded with Scripture talk for most of your life. From the time a Jewish boy is very young he is absorbed in the study of the Torah, the books of Moses. The word Torah can also be used to refer to all the Old Testament books as well as Jewish tradition. It was a top priority for Jewish fathers to have sons who were literate in the Scriptures. Oftentimes, the sons of the teachers were candidates to become teachers of the law themselves. Therefore, they were around and in and surrounded by discussion of the Scriptures. More than likely the teacher of the law who addresses Jesus in our reading today was a person who had a long-standing background in the Bible of the Jews, our Old Testament.

Even though we are trekking through the New Testament this year, my goal is for you to try the Old on for size; maybe next year. If you want you can give it a go even now. At least the Psalms or Proverbs at the end of the reading would be a good dessert to the main reading for the day. The Old Testament is rich in spiritual background for the New Testament. Jesus' footprints are on each and every chapter in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, Jesus tells the disciples after His resurrection that the Old Testament Scriptures are pointing to Him. Jesus is the subject of the Bible from beginning to end.

It seems like the man in the account is respectful of Jesus. His question is not meant to undo the Lord but is a sincere inquiry. The greatest commandment, the granddaddy of them all, the one that defines all of the others, the pinnacle of Biblical knowledge, the thing that matters most to Jesus is that we love the one true God and love others. To Jesus this truth sums up all of Scripture.

Most of culture is about self-promotion. In our Darwinian-dominated culture the philosophy is centered around the survival of the fittest. How can love be the main thing when self-preservation and survival is the name of the game? It isn't. In our self-gratifying and narcissistic culture there is really no room for love. Love gives, humanism consumes. I apologize for all of the varied terminology, but I wanted to drive home the point that it is hard to love in a culture that says, "Look out for Number One."

When the teacher reflected back to Jesus the truth He had just spoken, indicating that he had been listening, Jesus said that he is not far from the kingdom of God. There is no shame in that. This guy was open to hearing the Word of Jesus. The Bible doesn't say how the others responded to this dialogue. It simply says that no one else was courageous enough to ask another question. They were silenced. How awesome it would have been to have been in the crowd that day.

The teacher wasn't far from the kingdom of God. He wasn't there yet, but he didn't have far to go. He was a lover of truth, no doubt, and was interested in listening to the Words of the Man of Truth. Jesus would say, as John recorded, that He was the way, the truth, and the life. The man would now have to acknowledge that Jesus was the truth in order to enter the narrow gate and enter into life, eternal life. Jesus would quite often tell people to believe in Him if they wanted eternal life. I wonder if maybe this fellow became one of the early believers who were saved on

the day of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2. That day 3,000 were baptized into Christ. If he was one of the crowd that day can you imagine how he must have felt when he remembered his interaction with Jesus.

How can we become more interested in Truth? I think the more you hear about the truth and think about it for yourself the more likely you are to be captured by it. Maybe you are at a point where, like the teacher of the law, you are near the kingdom but have not entered through the gate yet. Jesus says that He is the gate in John Chapter 10. If you enter through Him you can find the kind of pasture that a well-fed sheep needs to not only survive but thrive. Jesus came not to help us in the survival of the fittest but to give us an abundant life, a life of service for Him.

On a scale of one to ten, ten being extremely motivated, how charged have you been lately about walking in the truth?

If you are a seeker like the man in our reading, are you ready to cross the line of faith and enter through Him into eternal life? You can pray with me right now and receive the gift of eternal life which was purchased on the cross where Jesus died. "My Leader, Jesus, I pray you would forgive my sins and come into my life. Thank you Jesus for dying on the cross for me and rising from the dead so I can know you. I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen." If you prayed that prayer sincerely then you have just entered in at the narrow gate and enjoy the benefits of eternal life. Welcome into the kingdom!

God's blessings come to those in the kingdom of God,

Pastor Steve

"Pass Away"

March 6 - Mark 13: 1-31

A while ago a friend came to me and with despairing eyes told me that his dad had passed away. My heart really went out to him. I couldn't help thinking about my own dad who had also died some time ago. My friend was experiencing the loss and he was heartbroken. I prayed for him, but when we parted I still felt the emptiness that loss creates.

As a kid I could spin my mind by thinking very theoretically. I would reason: what if there were nothing? No people, no earth, no universe, no infinity, no nothing. What would be? Nothing? Well, the fact that we can reason like that tells us that there would have to be something. In those days I could also think about my parents passing away and would work myself into a pretty good depression. Loss is tough.

Interestingly enough, loss for a follower of Jesus is actually gain. What we give up for the sake of Christ and His Word will come back as gain sooner or later. At some point in the disciples' travels with Jesus, Peter points out that they (the disciples) had left their comforts of home to walk with the Master. Jesus' response to him is that the sacrifice they were making would come back to them in a multitude of divine blessings both in the world and in the after-world. The apostle Paul saw his life in much the same way. He counted all "things" loss for the sake of knowing Christ. The "things" he refers to are all of the things that made him such a big shot in his pre-Christ years. He was more than willing to give them up because for him it meant intimacy with the Lord. Paul's attitude to those things: Good riddance!

One of the many meaningless pursuits of life on this planet is the pursuit of immortality. We live much longer than we ever have. I know a few, just a small percentage, of people who are living into their 90s, but I have never had a meaningful conversation with someone in their 100s. Life for every single one of us will eventually pass away. Yet, so much of our time is spent pursuing the fountain of youth. We diet and exercise and take vitamins and read the latest research on maintaining our youthfulness, but the problem is the principle of entropy. It applies in the second law of thermodynamics and it applies to you and me—everything is winding down. Another way to look at it is everything is losing energy. Things are not evolving into higher and higher forms; actually, we are moving the other way.

Technology creates the illusion that we are progressing. But are we? It seems to me that the more technological we become the more harried we become. I have noticed this when it comes to cell phones. What do you do when you are having a face-to-face conversation with someone and your cell phone goes off? Let's say you are at lunch with a friend when the tones of interruption sound. How do you think your friend feels when you begin to carry on a conversation with someone who has just interrupted your meal together? I admit that I, like Pavlov's dog, have been guilty of this. Why I'm so tied to my phone I don't know. All I know is that I am not giving my friend the proper attention he deserves when I interrupt him to talk to someone about what are usually mundane matters.

Jesus says that the only thing remaining in the end will be His Words. Huh? Now that's an arrogant assertion. Do you mean that all of the wisdom of humanity from Plato to Dr. Phil will one day be superseded by the Words of Jesus? The heavens, and I take that to mean all that is in them: the planets and stars and our atmosphere and comets and asteroids and black holes and everything else will one day be no more. The earth, and all that is associated with it: mankind, animal-kind, the wisdom of men, the "wonders" of man's ability to create architecture and technology, sexual relations and our mobile society; all will disappear. Along with all of that, there will be no more war or dominance or hatred; it will all be swallowed up when God clears the stage at the final act.

Peter talks about the final act in his last little epistle. He says that everything will be burned up. There will be a total annihilation of the current heavens and earth. In the light of this upcoming cataclysm Peter poses a moral question to the church: He says since all these things are going to come we need to think about what kind of persons we ought to be—spiritual and careful to be doing the will of God.

In John's gospel Jesus is called "the Word." Who He is gives us the full picture of who God is. His words are the Words of God. In the end all that will remain is the Word of God. Obviously too, those who do God's Word will remain as well and John says this in his first epistle: "...and the world passes away but he who does the will of God remains forever." So do you see how God's Word is such an important focal point for our lives? We need to see ourselves as in God's Word. Let's let the words of Christ dwell deeply in us. Let's treasure His words more than our daily bread. His Word and its contents will remain; all else will be blown away.

Three cheers for God's Word!!!

God's blessings in His Word will be eternal,

Pastor Steve

Day 66

"Radical Worship"

March 7 - Mark 13:32 – 14:16

You can easily gauge how much you love something or somebody by the amount of time, treasure and energy you give. If you love golf, for example, you'll probably spend quite a bit of money on clubs, memberships and/or green fees, other equipment like a good bag, club covers, waterproof shoes, rain gear, tees, and a host of other necessities. Golf also takes a great deal of time and energy. On a busy day on the course you could spend up to five hours to finish a round. If you walk the course, which is the best way to get some good exercise, you will be pretty beat by the end of the day. It would also be a good idea to get lessons from a professional, which will also cost you time, money and energy. You'll have to hit countless numbers of range balls (practice balls) before you will see some steady improvement in your game. I think you get the picture.

I'm sure you have met up with someone who was gung-ho about some new hobby he had discovered. By the time you were done talking with him you'd have thought he believed his new adventure was the greatest thing since sliced bread. It's all he can talk about. Someone was telling me recently about how goo-goo, ga-ga her daughter was about a new boyfriend. She giggled and acted undone when she described how taken she was with her new man. Any other subject was really meaningless. All she wanted to discuss was how nice he was and how handsome and how, well, you name it, it didn't matter, this new dude ruled the world as far as she was concerned. She was obsessed.

I grew up in the era of discovery. We were encouraged to try new things and get involved in many pursuits. Some things were good, like scouts and sports and chess; and some things were detrimental like drinking and smoking and other stuff. It was "in" to explore. Constantly, and I mean constantly, someone was coming up with some new thing to tantalize the rest of us until we joined in and discovered it too. It usually lasted for a short while and off we went into the next pursuit. We were on a constant watch for the best thing or coolest way or most fulfilling experience. And once we found "it," "it" was all we talked about until the next thing came along. Truly, the heart of man is restless and is turned one way and then another like the waves of the sea. The only problem is that it is difficult to live that way when the things you give yourself to are shallow and ultimately unfulfilling.

When Jesus found me I couldn't believe what I was getting into. My parents said that it was only a phase. My cousin, who was from a religious background, said she was once excited about it too but then she grew up. My sister and some friends said it sounded cool but it wasn't for them. I really didn't care and wasn't swayed by the nay-sayers. I was into Jesus and He came into my life the night I surrendered to Him. You've probably gathered from reading my thoughts on the Bible that I love Jesus more than ever. I do. He is even more real to me now then He was back when I first was introduced to Him. Jesus died for me. How can I not raise my voice and say THANK YOU? There is no one like Jesus and no hobby, career, pursuit, goal, or any achievement that could even come close to the love of Jesus Christ. Did you know that the Bible says that God's thoughts toward us, his meditations about each one of us, are more numerable than the sand on the seashore. God is awesome!!

When you love someone that much you'd do anything for Him. I think that is what motivated the woman at Simon's house to pour a very expensive container of perfume on the Lord's head. Picture it. The disciples are soaking up the accommodations and enjoying the hospitality of Simon, a leper whom Jesus had healed, when this woman breaks open the fragrant perfume. How could you not be taken aback by the act? Wouldn't you be thinking, "What are you doing?" But she is so caught up in worship that it doesn't even occur to her that there would be any better use of the valuable substance. She was expressing just how much she valued Jesus.

Others' reactions missed the point. You know how groups go, though. Someone—could it have been Judas?—probably led the rallying cry that the woman was a "waster." That sounded like a logical explanation for what was happening. They forget who the Lord is for the moment and focus their rebuke on the woman. I wonder what the expression on her face looked like? Did she wince? Was she oblivious? Did she suddenly feel like she had made a mistake? Really, think about it, did it matter at that point? The deed was already done. She had already "wasted" the precious ointment and had filled the room with its odor.

Jesus immediately comes to her defense. He tells them to leave the woman alone. He accepts the act as worship and says that it is an anointing for His burial. His impending death was right around the corner, literally. Bethany was just a few miles from the Mount of Olives and the descent and hike back up to Jerusalem. Jesus' sad words about His impending doom fell on deaf ears. The disciples didn't recall these things until after the resurrection, and even then there were doubters.

The love of the woman would be memorialized from then on so that wherever the Word of the gospel was preached, what she had done would be mentioned. Think about what a privilege it must have been for her to be thought of in this way. Just a moment earlier she was possibly feeling shot down, and now she is sky high. Jesus will make you feel that way. Jesus believes in you and receives your worship when you do what you can. This same lesson is highlighted when the disciples and Jesus are watching people pay their temple offering. Many were giving from their wealth, but the poor widow put in her two cents and that was all she had. Jesus said that she put in more than them all. She gave out of love until it hurt.

What do you love most? Rank the following options in order from one to ten of the things you love the most.

____ your car

____ your education

____ your home

____ your relationship with Christ

____ your friends

____ your ministry for Christ

____ your spouse

____ your favorite hobby

____ your kids

____ your _____

Does the way you marked the survey reflect your true priorities? Does it reflect where you put your time, money and energy?

I've got to go, I'm late for a tee time.

God's blessings come to those whose priorities are for real,

Pastor Steve

Day 67

"What Does God Care?"

March 8 - Mark 14: 17-42

There have been times in my life when I didn't think anyone cared. Have you ever been at that point? Are you feeling that way today? This can be especially pointed when we have recently been rejected by someone. Maybe we thought that something was developing between us and we found out that they really weren't interested. "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I guess I'll eat some worms." I'm not sure where that saying came from but it feels true every now and then.

How do you think Jesus felt after the Garden of Gethsemane experience when He saw the mob coming to arrest him, Judas in the forefront? Jesus arouses the disciples from their slumber to tell them that "His betrayer was at hand." He was about to feel the sting of betrayal. Not long before this He tells the disciples that they would all fall away as the prophet predicted. This would be a time of intense aloneness for the Lord.

Who hasn't felt the searing ache and pain of betrayal? I had a girlfriend in high school. "Bonnie" (that was her name) was someone I had longed to be in a relationship with even though I was aware that her mom was a psycho. When she broke up with her older, out of school, boyfriend I swooped down opportunistically. Bonnie said all the right things and I said all the right things and before you knew it we were holding hands down the hallways of Hawthorne High School. I was diggin' it. She seemed happy and all was right with the world.

Then it happened. The betrayal. I was down at the beach, Manhattan Beach, soaking in the rays and walking along the strand with a friend. We thought we'd go to Zippy's Pizza for a slice and a Coke. There she was, arm in arm, with him — the old guy! The adrenaline starting pumping and I threw over three tables of pizza and plates to get to him. I pulverized him as she squealed and carried on. Not really. Actually, when I saw her, I forgot about pizza and only wanted to get out of there ASAP. I ran to my car, put it in overdrive (did VW bugs have overdrive?) and was listening to the Stones and driving like a madman to her home to collect my stuff. You know, my records and stuff. That was the last time I ever interacted with Bonnie. I think she married the bum and lived happily ever after.

Insert your story here.

We all have them, don't we? Some, like Bonnie, are more benign than others. Some have faced the pain of betrayal with a couple of little kids in the mix. It isn't far off to describe the feeling as shattered glass. There's that feeling that nothing will repair what's happening in my life. It is broken and to fix it would be like putting shattered glass back together.

The prophet portrays the Christ as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He knows firsthand how you feel. Not only that, in Hebrews the Bible says that He empathizes with our hurts. In other words, He enters into them with us and holds our hand and can truly "be there" because He has truly been there. He is not a God far off but a God who is near. That is why prayer is so significant. When you pray He is face to face with you spiritually. You can count on Him being with you in the fray.

As Jesus watched the band of captors coming early that morning He knew that what had begun in the garden was only the beginning of the end...and a new beginning. You see, what kept Him going was you and me. We were in His mind when He faced His trial, His passion. He would be betrayed, forsaken, tried, beaten, mocked, crowned with thorns, and spit on; He would be scourged and crucified by His own will. Jesus said that He was laying His life down for His sheep.

On the other hand, Jesus will never betray you or forsake you. You can count on Him through thick and thin. If you feel like you don't deserve it then you are in a better position than if you think you deserve it. "... while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

He loves you more than you can fathom.

God cares, after all.

Which "god" in any other religious belief system has done what Christ has done?

Jesus has no rivals. God's blessings came at great expense,

Pastor Steve

Day 68

"The Passion"

March 9 - Mark 14:43-72

Enter In To God's Promises Today,

"They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, 'Prophesy!' And the guards took Him and beat Him" (Mark 14:64).

John's gospel says, "He came to His own and His own did not receive Him, but as many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become sons of God" (1:12).

The very people Jesus came to help rejected Him. They didn't think they needed a spiritual physician. They didn't think they needed help to understand the Scripture or to experience the power of God. So Jesus made it clear to them that because they said that they could see, instead they were truly blind. Their spiritual blindness was the reason they could not see Jesus for who He was. And so they condemned Him.

It's important to understand that the priests had their own temple police. These law enforcement officers were responsible for maintaining the peace in matters related to Jewish affairs. Jesus was on their case list because of the claims He was making about Himself. For a man to declare Himself the eternal God was no less than blasphemy in the mind of a Jewish teacher. Therefore, when Jesus claimed to be the Messianic figure in Daniel 7, that was the last straw.

There was a unanimous vote to put Jesus to death. To them He was an impostor and a deceiver and worthy of death. I wonder what Nicodemus was thinking. He had come to Jesus one evening to question Him about spiritual things. He showed that he thought Jesus must be a prophet because of the things He was doing. Besides, he reasoned, only God could do these good miracles. This was in contrast to the arguments of the others who tried to attribute Jesus' miracles to devil power.

Now that He was condemned, this opened the floodgate to humiliate Him. And so they spat on Him and beat Him. I have never been spat upon, have you? I couldn't imagine anything more debasing. Here before them is the King of kings, the Creator of heaven and earth, and they spit in His face. Awful! How horrible can you get? They beat Him like he was a rag doll being tossed around by a pit bull. As a matter of fact, Psalm 22 describes this time: "Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion."

These are only the beginning of His sufferings. Do you suffer in some way(s)? Christ understands suffering. Do you know someone who is currently in the throes of suffering? It may be helpful for them to focus on Jesus and remember His suffering. Peter applied the sufferings of Jesus to the life of the church. He said, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God" (1

Peter 4: 1,2). What "way of thinking" is Peter referring to here? Could it be an identification with the sufferings of Jesus so that we do not see suffering as a bad thing but actually as a bridge to spiritual growth?

Over the years I have seen people go down two roads in times of suffering and difficulty. Some people are bitter and some are better. Some shake their fist at God and others bow a knee. Sometimes it softens a heart and in other cases it hardens the heart. It really matters if the person turns to Jesus or not. Once you see your own sufferings in the light of His sufferings it helps you to appreciate what He went through. Like Peter says, it removes us further and further from sins that actually weigh us down.

Peter's language is interesting. He uses the military term "arm" to make sure that we get the point. If we drift with the crowd the chances are that we will probably wallow in the mire of bitterness and regret. But, being armed with the knowledge of Christ's sufferings, we will be able to endure the hurts of this life and find that the sufferings of this life aren't even worthy to be compared to the glories in the afterlife with Christ (See Romans 8: 18).

God's blessings come unexpectedly through identifying with Christ's Passion,

Pastor Steve

Day 69

"They Crucified Him"

March 10 - Mark 15: 1-32

God's Ways Are Not Our Ways,

I'd like to include in our discussion of the crucifixion a bit of what the Old Testament says about the priest of the Lord who served in the temple of God. These priests were required to be separate from the rest of the people. They had specific duties in regard to the animal sacrifices that were required in those days. As a matter of fact, sacrifices were still being offered in Jesus' day. The New Testament makes it crystal clear that Jesus is both our Great High Priest and our Sacrifice. He offered Himself. Let's consider what He offered.

Throughout the Old Scriptures there is an emphasis on the holiness of God. That means God is separate from all that is sinful. He is different from the base nature of sin. He is above sin. Because of this He stressed that his priests be careful to treat the holy things as holy and not become slack in the way that they did what the Lord required them to do. One of my favorite verses in the New Testament is Hebrews 7:26, "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." And so when Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins, He was both a holy priest and a holy offering. In other words, He was pure. He was the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus was crucified as a criminal. He was condemned. Many around the open and public cross were mouthing abusive statements his way. He was hanging between heaven and earth and between two thieves. It was a humiliating and disgusting scene. The sight and smell and trauma of the scene was sickening. The physical nature of the sufferings of the Lord is a whisper of the suffering He experienced emotionally and mentally and spiritually, when He received the weight of the sins of the world on His frame. If you've ever seen someone wincing in pain then you can probably imagine that the look on Jesus' face at that point was brutally pathetic. The force of the sin and guilt He bore would have been beyond description.

Imagine the reaction of the audience at the cross.

The Roman soldiers were probably accustomed to seeing this kind of thing and didn't pay much attention; as a matter of fact, they were gambling near the cross for Jesus' tunic. The other gospels say that Mary, John and Mary Magdalene were there and they were certainly visibly shaken and weepy. There were priests and Bible experts who mocked Jesus. I can imagine there were curious onlookers who had seen Jesus do miracles and probably shook their heads at Him. The fact is that the crucifixion was a public spectacle. Jesus' death was testified to by friend, family and foe alike. No one would step up later that first century and say that there really was no Jesus of Nazareth who died on a hill outside the city of Jerusalem. How could they? It was all done in open view.

Listen to the irony of this statement by a religious zealot or two at the cross: "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!" What would have been the result if Jesus had saved Himself? Then we couldn't be saved. Jesus could have saved Himself, certainly, but He chose not to in order for the likes of us to be saved. Actually, in not saving Himself, He saved others. He was the Lamb of God.

"Thank you Jesus for going to the cross to save us from our sins. We are forever grateful that you gave your life for us. When 'they crucified' you, we received forgiveness of our sins and real spiritual life. Help us to live like forgiven and thankful people. We want to make the cross a part of our daily vocabulary both in our prayers of thankfulness and when we talk about you with others. We boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

God's blessings are at the cross,

Pastor Steve

Day 70

"They Buried Him"

March 11 - Mark 15: 33-47

Are you the kind of person who needs to see the evidence for a thing before you will accept it and believe it? Maybe you have been equipped with a skeptical attitude from birth. Were you always a "show me" kind of person?

If this is true of you, then you need to know that the burial of Jesus is the exclamation mark on the crucifixion. It is the bright highlighting over the famous last words, "it is finished." The burial is the neon light shining on the finality of the crimson cross. It eliminates the "shadow of a doubt." It is the capstone on the whole project of salvation.

Don't forget that most criminals, once flogged, died right there. The brutal Roman whip would open the life right out of a person. The fact that Jesus made it alive to the cross was a wonder in and of itself. The spear to the side opened the floodgate of the last remaining trickle of life in the body that was offered as a spotless sacrifice for the sins of the world.

In our reading we have the Roman centurion reporting that, indeed, Jesus was dead. The report surprised Pilate. Why? Probably because he saw a strength in Jesus that was far superior to any other man that he had crucified. Maybe he expected Jesus to somehow pull through. Possibly it was wishful thinking that maybe in defiance of his own conscience and common sense Jesus would endure the cross and survive the ordeal. He must have known that the chances of survival for even a short period of time were doubtful. It was true that the Romans were masters of torture. It was the way they dominated and controlled the people. They could injure a man within a foot of his life and then allow him to suffer in suspension between heaven and earth for hours and sometimes days.

On the other hand, the Romans would not allow

a prisoner to come down before death had been verified. The order was death and the order would be carried out. That he was buried was confirmation that the job had been done. Jesus was dead. There were no ifs, ands or buts about it.

When the gospel was spelled out in its most simplified essence Paul made sure that we would always remember that our salvation was solely dependent on the work of Christ. He said that Christ died in accordance with the Scripture, that He was buried and that He was raised according to the Scriptures on the third day from His cross. It doesn't appear that the burial was "according to the Scriptures." In other words, there wasn't a specific verse about the burial in the Old Scriptures like there was for the death and resurrection, but without a burial we cannot be sure about the two other events. The burial gives the death and resurrection validity and clout.

The burial is like a bridge. It spans the three day gap between death and life. Jesus' resting place was a new tomb, donated by a rich member of the Jewish council, cut in rock surrounded by gardens and probably not too far from Mount Calvary. It was sealed with a large stone, sealed with a Roman seal and guarded by proven soldiers. There was no miracle that first day, nor the second, but on the third day Jesus would raise Himself from the dead. He had said He would. The only obstacle was a cold dark tomb and a large stone sealing the entrance.

Our burial will be more like a door. When death comes we will knock on that door and enter into spiritual life or spiritual death depending on where we placed our faith. If you believe in the poles opposite the tomb, that is, the death and resurrection, you will enter into life. If your faith is in self or things or others or anything other than the work of Christ on either side of that tomb, you will be lost. When we die the soul departs and the "body" slumbers until the final resurrection; but by that time our fate will already be sealed. That resurrection will only be a gateway to judgment for rewards and punishments.

When a Christian is baptized he goes under water to signify burial with Christ and he comes up out of the water to demonstrate the resurrection of Christ. The old cruddy man is buried with Christ and he is raised to newness of life. "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation."

As long as Jesus is buried all He has stood for is invalidated. He said quite a bit about His death and He mentioned that He'd be coming back to life. As long as you could point to His burial spot there would be no reason to trust His words. If some tried to start any kind of "Jesus movement" all you'd have to do is bring your friends to the tomb. "There is the body of the carpenter from Nazareth. He was killed at the hands of the religious leaders and the Romans. He is dead. It's over. He was good while He lasted but now He lies all alone within the confines of this tomb."

It will only be a few days and then the tomb will have a vacant sign.

God's blessings come to those buried with Christ,
Pastor Steve

"He Was Raised"

March 12 - Mark 16: 1-20

He Is Risen!!

"Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph over His foes;

He arose the victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with

His saints to reign. He arose, He arose, hallelujah,

Christ arose."

I used to sing that chorus in church with my family on Easter Sunday. My sister and I would have sworn those people were saying "...with a mighty triumph in His toes." We could never figure out how that was connected to the Easter story. It didn't matter anyway because for us Easter was about the Easter bunny and candy and hidden eggs and family dinners. We didn't know the man from Galilee who could do miracles.

Before we get to Luke's and John's resurrection accounts, I'd like to stop here and begin to explore the Old Testament basis for the resurrection of the Messiah. Mark's account is interesting, but brief, so I'd like to suspend discussion from here and go back several centuries to when the Holy Spirit was inspiring the writers of old so that we'd have an inkling of what would happen in the future. In another place Jesus says that David spoke by the Spirit when he penned the words we have recorded in the Psalms. So let's go back to those words and find the origination of resurrection thinking.

Crucifixion language is crystal clear in the Old Testament. You can turn to Psalm 22 or Isaiah 52 and 53 or Zechariah 13 and see vivid accounts of the cross of Christ. His passion is detailed there. Some ask how the Jews do not see this as a reference to their Messiah. The answer is that they view these verses as referring not to the individual Messiah but to their nation instead. They can still not fathom how the Messiah could be so weak as to allow crucifixion. Yet, they do not offer animal sacrifices to atone for their sins today. So how can they experience forgiveness of sins?

Resurrection language is not as forthright as the crucifixion. We need help from New Testament writers to give us the place to look. And Luke does in the book of Acts. He records some of the early sermons by the apostles. In these sermons, when there was a Jewish audience, the apostle would characteristically quote from the only known Scriptures at that time in order to prove his point about Jesus. The place where they'd go was Psalm 16.

"I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol (hell), or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (verses 7-11). There it is, tucked away right in the middle of a song of worship.

Let's make several observations. Christ was not abandoned by the Father. Even though He had borne the weight of the sins of the world and felt forsaken by God, He was not alone after death—the Father was with Him. Secondly, the "holy one" here, the "special, set apart one" is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts one of the apostles calls Him "the holy child." Don't you love that! Thirdly, this special child would not see corruption. The body lying in the tomb would be invigorated with a spiritual blast, rise, and appear to many. Jesus always made it clear that He would rise in His body. It was not the spirit of Jesus or some kind of ghost that would appear. The Bible says, "So the Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from he dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:18-22).

Fourthly, I am struck by the phrase "at the right hand." This, of course, means close in proximity and in purpose. If someone is at my right hand it means that they are one with me on whatever purposes we are attempting to achieve. You've heard people say that so-and-so was their "right hand man." This meant a close partner in whatever they wanted to achieve. The apostles use the verses in Psalm 16 to show that God was keeping the body of the Messiah free from corruption even though He was buried and had been brutally maimed. Remember that after the resurrection Jesus ascends to the Father in heaven and sits at His right hand until a future time when His enemies would be brought to submission under His footstool.

Fortunately for us, as Christ was raised so we also will one day be raised. The sea and the ground

and every urn bearing the remains of believers will be opened and they all shall hear the last trumpet sound and they shall be raised incorruptible and reign with Christ forever.

Sometimes people will ask if we will recognize one another in heaven. Were the disciples able to recognize Jesus after His resurrection? We will be able to identify one another in God's kingdom. At what age we will be known is irrelevant. We will be known as we are known (1 Corinthians 13).

God's blessings come to those resurrected in Jesus,

Pastor Steve

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

Day 73

"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 "Emmanuel," 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

Day 75

"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

Day 76

"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.

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 your 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

Day 77

"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 doldrums.

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 spellbound? 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

Day 80

"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

Day 81

"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

Day 82

"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

"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 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

"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

"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.

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

"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

Day 88

"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

Day 89

"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-pooper 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 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 apartments 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

"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

Day 91

"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 dependent 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 significantly. 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

Day 92

"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

Day 94

"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

Day 95

"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 then 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 heartwarming 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

"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,

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 an 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

Day 98

"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

Day 99

"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.

Day 100

"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

Day 101

"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

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

Day 102

"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

Day 103

"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 estranged. 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

Day 104

"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

Day 107

"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 challenges 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

Day 108

"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

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

Day 109

"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

Day 110

"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

Day 111

"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

"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.

Day 118

"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

JOHN

"The Word"

April 29 - John 1:1 - 28

Our God Reigns,

What is a "word"? A word conveys the mind of the person who speaks. The word of a person defines that person. Some people do speak other's words and so they are not truly their own but another's. The person who is called "The Word" is unique and original and set apart from all other words.

In the beginning (literally in the Greek, "In beginning" to emphasize not an actual time period but an indefinite beginning) was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). God is called "the Word". The Greek for "Word" is "Logos." It can also mean, "Reason," "logic", "mind," and similar ideas. The emphasis is not on a particular word but on an idea or concept. For example, it conveys the idea that the Word is all that God is. "The Word was God." Even the word "was" in the Greek indicates indefinite past. John is trying to convey through his known language an idea of eternal understanding. So essentially he says that the Word always existed and that the Word is God.

The Word is the creator of all things as well. This idea is in harmony with "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John says that all things were made by him and just to emphasize this he says that without Him nothing was made that has been made. Think about how this coincides with Genesis chapter one as well. God spoke and it was made. He just made everything out of nothing. But again it was through His Word that the world and all that's in it came into existence. For example, "God said, 'Let there be light and there was light.'" Where did light come from? God. The Word.

We have said before that God is incomprehensible. On the other hand, God has made himself known in some ways so that we can get to know Him as best we can. God has made Himself known through Words. It is His words that make Him known to us more than anything else. Through the use of words He has revealed The Word. And so from the beginning God has spoken clearly so that we can come close to Him and know Him and love Him and listen to Him. If I close my eyes I can hear my dad's voice very distinctly. Do you know what I mean? His words are encouraging and comforting to me and so I will never forget a great deal of the words he has spoken to me. The same is true of God's words. He has revealed his words to us so that we can be close to Him. And so John emphasized this so that the good news of Jesus will be real to us as we read the gospel.

John contrasts Moses and Jesus. He says that Moses gave the law but grace (God's unconditional love and favor) and truth were given through the Son, Jesus. Moses had given God's Word indirectly but through Jesus the Word came directly and so John says the "Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

In the book of Revelation it says that Jesus is the "Word of God." That is His name. Why? Because everything that God is has been revealed to us in the Son. So now in the gospel the good news of God's love is made clear because the Word has come into the world.

What voices rang clear in your mind? Whose voice has made the greatest difference to you? Is it a parent or a friend or a teacher? I appreciate so much the different words (voices in my life) because they have made a difference to me. They have helped to shape me into the person I am. But it is God's voice that has made the most difference. His gentle voice has reassured me of His parental love over and over again. In Hebrews it says several times that if today you hear his voice, then act on that and do not close your heart.

You can hear His voice.

Keep reading His word.

Keep opening your heart to Him.

Allow His Spirit to speak to you in the quietness of your soul.

Lord, speak to us today. Open our hearts and minds to you.

God's blessings come through God's special Word,

Pastor Steve

"A Lamb"

April 30 - John 1: 29 - 51

God Is Found In Jesus,

It seems like John the Baptist came out of nowhere. Someone asked me the other day if there was any precedent in the Old Testament for baptism. Baptism was not a part of the Old Covenant. In the Old Testament circumcision was the sign of the covenant. Of course it was limited to males and was also combined with animal sacrifice. The circumcision signified the removal of something - the foreskin = the sin that separated a person from God.

There was a few Jewish communities that were known to be "super spiritual". In those small groups they did practice baptism as a form of cleansing from sin and purification in general. These practices were not prescribed by the law to my knowledge. It may be that John was a part of one of these strict religious sects.

The Old Testament prophets predicted that he would be the forerunner of the Christ and that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. He is described as a thundering and rugged man who knew his mission. But when he meets up with the Messiah, he is a humbled man. The presence of greatness will do that to you. John didn't even feel worthy to untie his sandals. Before John met up with Jesus he had been anticipating his arrival. Jesus was then the culmination of his entire ministry.

When John sees Jesus coming he simply says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Up to this point a great number of people were following John and many of them had already been baptized in the Jordan River. When John views the Messiah in the distance, his first reaction is to point his followers to Jesus. He tells them to look at Him. Take your eyes off of me and look to Jesus. That would be quite a change. John was loud and brash, Jesus was quiet and meek; John was austere, Jesus was humble. As a matter of fact, He was like a lamb. The meekness and humility and naïve nature of a lamb is well known. They are animals completely at the mercy of others.

John could have called Him a mighty warrior, or a lion, or a valiant conqueror, or a King. He didn't; he called Him a lamb. A lamb would probably have been the furthest thing from the people's minds. How could the Messiah be so humble? How would He be able to relieve the Jews from Roman tyranny with such a submissive attitude. They could have swallowed the

description "Man of God," but to be called a harmless woolly beast was hard to accept.

John's ministry was a spiritual ministry. From the time he was in Elizabeth's womb, he was called by God to do what God had planned for him. Mary had received prophecies about Jesus that she probably shared with her cousin Elizabeth. Even though we have very little information about John's early years, it is reasonable to think that he was aware of some of the aspects of the Messiah that God had revealed to him. Obviously he knew that Jesus would be a sin bearer. It's also possible that John spoke the words in 1:29 prophetically and he didn't necessarily know the full impact of his own words.

No matter what John knew about the long term affect of Jesus' ministry, he still is clear about his identity. Maybe the fact that John balks at baptizing Jesus is connected to John's statement about Him bearing the sins of the world. John thought Jesus should be baptizing him and not the reverse.

Jesus' mission was to die for the sins of the world. Essentially, it would be the sins of those in every part of the world. His saving work would have a worldwide impact. The Lamb would be dying for His sheep living on every continent on the planet. His death would have a global impact. The fact that He saved you is an indication that he died for all. You are part of that select group. When the angel appeared to Joseph and gave him the name of his son, he said, "And you shall call him Jesus because He shall save His people from their sins." If you believe in His death and resurrection then you are one of "His people."

Will you take the invitation of John to "behold Him"? Today would be a good day to do that. Instead of looking at the problems of the day, let's behold Him. Let's think about Him and His love and His death and His victory over the enemy for us. He is our deliverer. He can be our deliverer today wherever we are. Look to him. Stare at Him. Let His image imprint the main theatre of your mind. Meditate on Him. Think about Him as a lamb who came to save us from our sins.

Look to Jesus and...
Rejoice in Jesus always,
God's blessings are found in the Lamb of God,
Pastor Steve

Day 121

"Save The Best For Last"

May 1 - John 2: 1-25

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

A great number of people live their life like a piccolo Pete. They make a lot of noise for a short amount of time and then sputter out in the end. Jesus said that some people receive His word with joy but when troubles arise because of the word, they fall away; He says that they shrivel up.

A "retirement mentality" kind of goes this way in modern day America. The progression goes: work - retirement - death. For many the distance of that last hyphen is not a great amount of time. How many people have you known who retired and then got sick and died? Too often that is the case. I tend to wonder if the let down from a life of meaningful employment doesn't disillusion some and cause them to go into a depression that leads to other illnesses. Retirement can be very sad when a person loses all purpose for their life.

Also, of course, as we get older there a lot more aches and pains to deal with. I was once at a pastor's meeting where the preliminary conversation was all about the various surgeries and ailments that the men had experienced. I looked around and realized that these men were all about ten years older than me. I changed the subject.

Our lives are filled with limitless possibilities when:

We see life as a daily adventure of trusting the living God.

We consider ourselves servants of the God who is near.

We see that God uses men and women of all ages in the Bible.

We make love of God and others our aim.

We save the best for last.

Someone said that "your attitude determines your altitude." If we live for a day when our work will cease, it seems like it is all too easy to stop the momentum of serving God in our lifetime. I love the story of Rick Warren, who said that his dad's last words were "win one more for Jesus." There was a man with a lifetime mission. He knew why he was here and didn't live for his own comfort.

Jesus took six empty water jugs and had them filled with water. Earlier in the evening when it looked like they were not going to be able to accommodate all of the guests Mary comes to Jesus for a solution. This tells me that the party was probably for someone close to the family. Jesus lets her know that He is working on His own time table. But when the wine had run out Jesus went to work. All of the good wine had already been consumed and now that the guests were in a carefree mood; it really didn't matter the quality of the wine. Some of the guests probably couldn't even taste the difference. But when the head waiter tasted from the pots, lo and behold, the best wine was ready at the last.

Jesus desires to work in our lives from start to finish. "He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). I think Jesus has some new wine for us today. Do you believe that Jesus can make some of the hum drum in our life disappear? Or, if we feel like we lack something, like energy or motivation or hope or encouragement or focus or whatever else that makes us feel anemic spiritually, He can put new life into us where we lack.

Do you feel a bit powerless today? Do you feel like the joy has been stripped from you? Is it tough to see the road ahead because there is too much of a focus on what you lack? Then listen to the head waiter. He knew that there was no wine left. He knew that there was not another source for more. And he knew that somewhere somehow, miraculously, there was a supply of new good wine. Listen to the servants too. They knew the source. They had just witnessed a miracle first hand. The best wine would be served last. This was better wine then what they had to begin with.

Let's put our faith in Jesus today to provide. He has resources that we know nothing about. Excuse me, I'm going to go check my Sparkletts cooler.

God's blessings come in unexpected ways,
Pastor Steve

Day 122

"Agape"

May 2 - John 3: 1-21

I remember hearing someone say that love makes the world go round. I would say that is true from the standpoint of God having the whole world in His hands. Everything in the world and in our lives rubs against the love of God. From creation to the cross to our final state in heaven, God's love is the

hallmark of it all.

Why God is love is such a mystery to me. Why was it that in the beginning before any of the created order was made, God was there and He was love? Think about it, God was self-existent and self-sufficient and without beginning and without end; and God is love and not a hater or cruel or mean or nasty or conniving. He was none of those things that make their way into our day to day world. I also tend to believe that no matter how much I think about this subject and no matter how knowledgeable I become, God is still somehow infinitely more loving than I could even imagine. Why though?

I don't know.

Paul said that "God demonstrated His love toward us, in that, while we were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Love is an action word. Love acts on behalf of others. Love focuses on the welfare of those outside ourselves. "God demonstrated" the kind of loving God He is by making an amazing sacrifice so that His people could be rescued from a horrible fate.

John chapter three, as you know, is the museum of God's love. The objects in the museum include a bronze serpent, a cross, and water. Over the door are the words "You Must Be Born Again." The serpent represented the plague of serpents that slithered into the Mosaic camp because the people were complaining. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole and whoever looked at the serpent was healed of their snake bite. The cross on which the Lord was raised became the source of salvation for those who looked to Him. Faith in Christ's death was the bridge for forgiveness and access into the holy presence of God. The water, mentioned in Jesus' words to Nicodemus as the means of cleansing for those "born of the water and the Spirit." Then we see Jesus baptizing simultaneously with John the Baptist, even though Jesus was not doing the dunking but His disciples.

Are you up for a Greek lesson? The New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek, the common language of first century Palestine as well as the entire world. In the Greek of John 3:16 the word "loved" is in the aorist indicative. This emphasizes a point of time when God loved the world. Go back to verse fifteen and you see that the subject is the cross of Jesus. At the time of the crucifixion God was displaying the ultimate in love. He was sacrificing His life for others - for you and for me. After the word "loved" you have "He gave his only begotten Son." This is a reference to the cross as well. He loved when Christ was hanging on the cross and He loved as He gave His unique, one-of-a-kind Son.

How can we experience the love of God? Isn't that the question we all would like answered? I wonder if that wasn't on Nicodemus's mind when he went to speak to Jesus that night. He was impressed with what Jesus was doing but isn't it the love of Christ that draws us to Him mostly? Nicodemus appears to be frustrated and I say this because of his literal interpretation of what Jesus was saying. He responds to Jesus' comment about being born again with a cynical response about how unpractical it would be to enter again into your mother's womb and be born again. Jesus expects him to know that Ezekiel had talked about a new heart, a new spiritual life that would be the gift of God. Nicodemus, it seems, trudges away confused.

To experience the love of Jesus we need to start with Jesus and not focus on ourselves. We need to admit that we need Him. We need to acknowledge that our deeds are evil and that we have loved darkness rather than light, but now we are turning to Him and want to have Him in our lives and we want His love to be our love and His Spirit to be in our spirit. Secondly, we only need to accept the love of Jesus by faith in the same way a child responds to the loving care of his grandfather. The grandfather pats the boy's head and leads the boy to the fishing hole and spends time talking to the boy as if the boy were the only person in the world. Accept the love of Jesus. The cross makes His love accessible to you anytime. Now would be a good time. Thirdly, keep yourself in the love of God by praying in the Holy Spirit with an expectation for the second coming of Jesus in the clouds (Jude and 1 Thessalonians 4).

Lastly, hang out with Jesus people. Spend time with others who love the Lord and want to serve Him. They are out there and they would love to spend time encouraging your love in the Lord.

God's blessings are established in Jesus,
Pastor Steve

Day 123

"John The Baptist On Jesus"

May 3 - John 3: 22-36

When I was a kid I thought the Dodger first baseman Wes Parker could walk on water. I wanted to emulate him in every way. At that time I knew all of his stats and collected every one of his bubble gum cards and listened on the radio to his every at bat. If the opposing team hit the ball anywhere near first base, Parker would scoop up the ball like a vacuum and put the guy out.

When I began to play baseball in junior high I played...you guessed it, first base. I walked like Parker and talked like Parker and tried to carry myself on the field like him too. If his name came up in a conversation I could enter right in and give my two cents because I was a student of the man. When he was awarded the Gold Glove, which happened many years, I was right there cheering him on. And when the Dodgers were in the World Series everything else stopped so that me and my family, with mom and sister abstaining, could watch the big games.

John the Baptist was big on Jesus. He knew from an early age that his mission was going to be that of a voice for the Messiah. I'm certain that John's parents and cousin Mary were also influential in forming John's early views of Jesus. But remember too that John was full of the Holy Spirit even while in his mother's womb and would have had deep spiritual insight into the identity of God's Messiah.

The Holy Spirit acts like an intercom to give God's people a clear message about God so that the person and work of God can be accurately understood. John the Baptist experienced this interaction with the Spirit and we today need to keep in mind that the Spirit still desires to guide us into the truth so that we too might comprehend the things of God. Too often I take the Spirit for granted, but it is the Spirit who makes the things of God plain to us so that we can walk with the Lord each day. So what message was it about Jesus that John understood at this time in his ministry?

The emphasis is on the authority and greatness of Jesus who, though born of a woman, actually descended from heaven. It is this heavenly origin that John points to as the basis for the authority by which He ministered to others. This also put Him in a whole other category than the Baptist. John saw himself, rightfully so, much inferior to the Lord Jesus. He says somewhere else that he is merely a "voice," and here he says that he is like a friend of the bridegroom who simply enjoys hearing the bridegroom's voice. This is a true spiritual perspective of the person of Christ. Any other perspective that lessens the authority or origin of Jesus is unacceptable and unspiritual. Jesus is exalted and deserves exaltation. We would do well to listen to the Spirit and like John be lifted to new heights by merely being able to hear the voice of the Son.

John's emphasis on Christ increasing and he simultaneously decreasing is the right attitude for all of God's children. The closer we are to Him and the more we get into Him the less we will think about ourselves. We will be more concerned that He increases in our life. What did John mean by Christ increasing? In the context John is answering some of his own followers who are concerned that some are leaving the Baptist and are beginning to follow Jesus. They see it as a competition. To John it's perfectly fine that this is happening because the spotlight is meant for Jesus and not him or anyone else. Paul also takes up this theme in many of his letters and tells us that when we think of others as more of a priority than ourselves then we will be acting with the mind of Christ.

Do you want to be refreshed spiritually? Do you want to grow in the Lord and find a peace that makes life worth living? Do you desire to rise above a lot of the pettiness around you? Think about Jesus. Find ways to put Him in the driver's seat. Take a back seat and stop striving to make life work for you. Instead,

pray about ways to make Jesus real to others. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 2). John the Baptist knew this and we would do well to follow suit.

God's blessings are showered on those who bless Jesus,

Pastor Steve

"Worship God In Kind"

May 4 - John 4: 1-26

I grew up in a non-integrated town. Two towns over that was not the case. When I was young, that other town was predominately white. By the time I was in high school it was mainly black. To me that was no big deal except for the fact that I had a couple of bad experiences where a group of black teens tried to beat up on me and my friends. That kind of thing leaves a bad taste in your mouth, especially when you are not looking for trouble, but trouble comes to you.

When I was in high school the husband of my journalism teacher, who was a teacher from that other town, introduced me to one of the student body leaders from that school. He was a likeable soft spoken person without a prejudiced bone in his body. His name was Louie. Louie would come over to my campus and I'd go over and visit him at his. After high school was over we still got together from time to time to see how things were going.

I can still remember how uncomfortable I felt on his campus when I got the "what is the white boy doing here" stare. It didn't have to be that way, I honestly wasn't interested in creating any feelings of hostility. I would have to admit though that some of my more negative experiences did add a bit of bitterness to the way I viewed race relations. Louie would always bring me down to earth though; he had such a non-assuming manner. It's always good to have people in your life who help you out of the pit of cynicism. Louie did that for me.

In Jesus' day, like ours, there were many religious divides. One of the biggest chasms was the hostility between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans because they were a half-breed race made up of a union between Jews and Gentiles. Many of the Samaritans wanted to keep the Jewish traditions, but had to do so privately because they were considered unclean by their half-brothers. Often when Jews were traveling they had to avoid Samaritan areas because of the threat of violence. They were two opposing groups and were not able to see eye to eye by any means.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman in our reading today we get another glimpse into the compassion of the Lord. Not only was she Samaritan, she was immoral and she was a woman. Usually men did not have conversations with women in the open like this. Remember that it was Jesus who requested her help at first. He struck up the conversation. "Will you give me something to drink?" He said. The dialogue soon turns into a spiritual theme with Jesus offering her the kind of water He has, living water that continuously quinces the thirst. In response to Jesus' knowledge about her personal life she, probably nervously, brings up the proper place for worship. She is used to worshipping there whereas the Jews, Jesus' people, worship in Jerusalem.

Jesus then moves the discussion to the true nature of God and worship. He is saying that worship is an inside experience. You are to worship in your spirit. You can do that wherever you are. It doesn't matter if you are in Samaria or Jerusalem or Portland, Oregon; worship of God is an inside job. Interestingly, Jesus says that true worship is experienced when we realize the nature of God. God is spirit. I think He is saying that God is everywhere present. God is not localized. He can be with you here and in India at the same time. He is also saying that we shouldn't see God as a glorified man. God became a man, yes, but God in His full essence or being is spirit, non-material, invisible, physically untouchable.

In Psalm 139 we read that you cannot escape the presence of God. He is everywhere present at the same time. He can be this because He is not bound by time and space like we are. Even Jesus in His resurrection body, though it was a body, was not hindered by space and time. He could simply appear to the disciples in a locked room. He could ascend to heaven without being affected by the laws of gravity. Now that's a unique body! Someday those who believe in Jesus will receive a body like that.

Worship of God is a matter of our spirit responding to the work of God's Spirit in us. The inner man, that new man who loves God always and desires to please and honor God at all times is refreshed and strengthened when we express to God from our hearts the adoration and praise we have for Him. You can be in a church service and you can mouth the words to the "worship songs" and still be a million miles away from God in mind and heart. On the other hand, you could be rummaging through the dump looking for something and be moved to pray and worship from your heart of hearts. The place is irrelevant, but the movement of the heart plays a melody of worship to "Our Father who is in heaven."

Let's worship God in kind. He is spirit and we have the opportunity to worship in our spirit.

Let's worship the true and living God. When you worship Him for who He is and do not try and reconstruct Him in your own way, you will be lifted beyond the pettiness of race differences or religious differences and begin to view God for who He truly is - the all knowing, all powerful, everywhere present God who created all things by the Word of His mouth.

Are you in tune with your spirit? Here are a few helpful suggestions that will help you to worship from your spirit:

be still

let prayers flow from the heart to the screen of your mind, then speak the prayers

pray internally without speaking

think regularly about the greatness of the Lord

practice spiritual breathing; inhale the Spirit, exhale sins

be honest with where you think your heart is.

express your heart's cry in a variety of ways: write, sing, read, stand, lift hands, kneel, walk, shout, memorize, lift someone else, be patient.

God's blessings are in spirit and truth,

Pastor Steve

"Grade "A" Food"

May 5 - John 4: 27-42

Years ago some friends invited my wife and me over for a rare treat. They were making some special Indian cuisine that we would eat together while sitting on the floor- no eating utensils, just our fingers. We had a blast and the food was absolutely scrumptious. It was weird, but delectable. That was a once in a lifetime experience, I guess, because we haven't had anything close to that since and, quite

honestly, I haven't been real motivated to go to an Indian restaurant and copy that one time experience. Really, most of what was good about it was bound up in the fellowship we had with that couple.

Are you a picky eater? I've never been too picky. I do not like Spam. The thought of it turns my stomach. Otherwise, I enjoy most foods. I can even stomach chicken when it's cooked with spices or something on it. You can keep plain old chicken; I'd rather eat cardboard. Mostly everyone has an opinion about food. We have an individual taste for certain foods and have our own likes and dislikes. Any way you cut it though, there is nothing much more enjoyable than sharing a great meal with a friend or two. The quality of the food heightens the enjoyment of the camaraderie.

When Jesus' disciples return and find Jesus talking with a woman, they are surprised that the Lord would be doing this, after all it was a socially unacceptable thing in those days. But Jesus was about people, all people, and He had a mission to fulfill that was directed from heaven and would be accomplished despite any social pressures to the contrary. Jesus likened his mission with a certain kind of fulfillment that was better than even the best meal you could imagine.

From time to time I get glimpses of what this might mean. Anytime I am able to help someone move closer to God and find their fulfillment in Him I too feel the satisfaction of spiritual food that pleases the soul's taste buds. When you are involved in any ministry that furthers the things of the kingdom of God there is a sense of accomplishment that satisfies. In a world where very few people are truly happy and fulfilled this is a big deal. I'll never forget the quote from Chariots of Fire, the movie made to portray the life of missionary and Olympian Eric Liddle, when he says to his sister, "When I run I feel God's pleasure." At that time he felt like his mission was to run for God. Later Liddle would go to China and die at a young age while serving the Lord there.

Have you ever experienced something like this? Have you ever thought to yourself that the thing you were doing was so in the will of God that it gave you goosebumps to be a part of it? Are you still searching for your place in the church, the Body of Christ? If so, the Holy Spirit will help you if you only have a desire to find your place. The Bible says that He distributes to each as He sees fit. Once you find where you "fit" then you will, like Jesus, be able to talk about a food source that will not be understood by everyone.

A good place to start on this pursuit is with the Word of God. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). According to Jesus, real living happens when we partake of the Word and let it assimilate through our lives. It is God's Word that nourishes us and sustains us and makes us spiritually healthy. In our day and age when so many are thirsting for spiritual value and truth, there is still too much of an emphasis on spiritual self-discovery. If people would discover the riches of the Word they would then find it easier to find the will of the Lord for them.

You might take an excursion today in Psalm 19 where the virtues of the Word are laid out. Because the Word is perfect food, able to do much greater things to our spiritual body than even the burritos and spaghetti and steak and burgers and chicken and all the other stuff we spend so much time craving, we ought to be renewing our commitment to the Word so that we can be assured of the will of God. Jesus saw this as a first priority and we would do well to move in the same direction.

I was recently telling someone how God used a particular Bible verse that I had remembered thirty years ago to give me balance when the trials of life bombarded me through the years. Without that particular insight I would probably have been susceptible to all kinds of strange thinking. When I quoted the verse to him I could tell that it was like a filet mignon, medium, with just the right flavoring.

What is your place in the church?

Whatever it is, do it with all your might.

Don't hold back because others sometimes pull you down.

Paul would say, "Your labor is not in vain in the Lord." I concur.

God's blessings are like steak and lobster,

Pastor Steve

Day 126

"Take Jesus At His Word"

May 6 - John 4:43 -5:15

I Hope It's An Awesome Day For You,

Who hasn't been disappointed by someone who promised to deliver and didn't? Do you remember putting your faith in someone only to be let down later? This happens in marriage partnerships every day. The neat and spiffy bride and groom were adamant about their promises until they began to believe that they really didn't love their partner any longer. Or, maybe they have found someone better, someone who would be more lovable and give them what they wanted.

It's quite amazing what or who we will put our trust in. I once sat with a stock broker who convinced me that it would be the road to a windfall to invest in a certain car company. He had heard or read or maybe he had dreamed about this certain company making future profits that would be through the roof. I naively listened and went along for the ride. Well, in the end he took me for a ride. I think I ended up selling those shares for about twenty cents on the dollar. You live and learn!

People fall to any charismatic crack pot that comes down the lane. From Jim Jones to David Koresh to the more mystical like the Bagwan Rajneesh, these men had devoted followers pay big bucks, give up their careers and follow them to the ends of the earth. These gurus made grandiose claims and gave simple people reason to hope in their promises. Eventually though many of their claims proved to be bogus. Many of their devotees died and the ones who remained were left with scars to deal with for years to come. How is it that people can so easily give themselves to someone or something that seems so "out there"?

The whole human race is on a quest for meaning and purpose. When a person finds something to believe in, then they are apt to jump in with both feet. This is also the way marketing works. If the advertisers can get us to believe that we cannot live without their product then they have us hooked. It may only be a fad thing, but that doesn't matter to them because they are in it for the burst of money. Very few products make it for the long haul. A good example is cigarette advertising on TV. I can remember when the Marlboro Man would ride into the valley, looking rugged and manly, and puff away on his cig in order to give the viewer the feeling that he would be happier if he too smoked that brand. Those ads won a generation of nicotine addicts. They were hooked because they wanted to be manly too and they also enjoyed the fix of nicotine.

Fads come and go, self-proclaimed prophets rise and fall, fountain of youth ideas tickle our fancy for awhile and most of us spend the majority of our lives looking for the right size peg to fill the hole in our hearts. Jesus is the only one who can fill that space. He is the only source of lasting peace and happiness. He is the only one who can be trusted absolutely. If you have Jesus you have all you need. You do not need Jesus and anything else; He is sufficient. In the end, when the kingdom of God is realized, there will be no need for Procter and Gamble or Ford or cable or a fancy suit or any mind numbing hobby or pill. At that time everything we are saying here about Jesus will come to completion and we will see that Jesus is what it is all about. "He who has the Son has life," John the Apostle said. He knew first hand how important that was. He lived in a very hostile environment to Christianity and had to trust the Lord every day.

The father who comes to Jesus on behalf of his sick son hears the words from Jesus' lips that he longed to hear, "Your son will live." That's all it took for him. To him that was better than the word of a doctor or anyone else; Jesus had claimed that the boy would be better and he believed the word of Jesus and went on his way. Don't you love how John puts it,

"The man took Jesus at his word and departed."

Jesus people are the most secure people in the world. They are like well fed sheep lying down in green pastures. They do not fear the low growl of the wolves because they know that their Shepherd is always there for them. They have peace. They have encouragement. They have Jesus' Word.

How about you, do you take Jesus at His Word?

Do you simply believe that what He says He does?

Paul said, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have entrusted to him until that day." Paul was secure.

Jesus is trustworthy. He will not lead you down a wrong-headed pathway. He will lead you where there will be plenty of good food and water.

Let's follow.

God's blessings are poured on those who take Jesus at His Word,

Pastor Steve

"Christ's Deity Is as Clear as a Bell"

May 7 - John 5: 16-30

We live in a day when the trend is to think that truth is relative. What I mean is that truth is no longer seen as absolute and binding. I saw a Leave It To Beaver episode recently where Beaver is being instructed by his mom because she suspects that he has been stealing. Actually another boy was stealing stuff and giving it to the Beav to win his friendship. Nevertheless, his mom tells him that he can't do anything without being watched. He responded by acknowledging that his parents and teacher and the usher at the theatre all saw him. When his mom said that she meant all of the time, Beaver said, "Do you mean God?" Beaver said that he knew that and he didn't want to make God sad. He figured that God had a long list of things to do and didn't need to be too concerned about him doing wrong. Could you imagine this as a topic for a current sitcom? Just mentioning the word God, outside of an off the cuff curse, would be taboo.

No longer is a spade a spade. People reserve the right to contradict a statement like " 'a' cannot equal 'non-a.'" It used to be the two were mutually exclusive and that you could be certain of the truth of that maxim. For example, a right angle cannot be 90 degrees and not 90 degrees. If someone comes along and says they believe a right angle is 35 degrees, can they be right as well as the person who believes it is 90 degrees? Honest to goodness, someone once told me that it wouldn't matter if I taught their children that 2 + 3 = 6. Huh? That's right, truth was so relative to them that as long as I qualified them into the school I was principal of, to them, it didn't matter what I taught their child. This is, of course, a pretty extreme case. Let's try an example related to the truth about Jesus. If Jesus claimed to be the unique Son of God, equal to the Father; if He said that He was the Messiah like the Son of Man depicted by Daniel in chapter seven of his prophecy; and if Jesus was essentially saying that He Himself was God, not to be confused with the Father and Spirit, but eternally equal to and in concurrence with them from all eternity, what would we say to the person who came along and gave Jesus another interpretation?

We have heard of people thinking they were God. Insane asylums are full of megalomaniacs. The difference between these quacks and the Lord Jesus is that Jesus always backed up His claims with action. If you can raise the dead, walk on water and feed a multitude with a Happy Meal then you are in a different class of God-claimers. Someone could claim or promise great things but if they do not deliver the goods then they ought to be rejected. Jesus said that after He left many would come on the scene and claim to be the Christ. He said do not believe them, rather look for me to come in the clouds with an unmistakable visual presence.

I lay all of this down so that we can talk about Jesus' undeniable claim to deity. As a matter of fact, almost every signpost in the New Testament points to Jesus' unmistakable identity as God in human flesh. John 1:1,14 says it outright - "...the Word was God... and the Word became flesh..." And here in chapter five we see the connection of Jesus' relationship with the Father as a certainty that He is equal to the Father. He also talks about the perfect harmony between the Father and Son. Jesus says that He and the Father are in perfect unity, so much so that whatever He sees the Father doing He does and whatever the Father wills He wills. There are no secrets in the relationship. Interestingly enough, Jesus later says of the Spirit that He would take the Words of Jesus and reveal it to the apostles. All three persons of the Godhead are in perfect sync. Lastly, also in this same chapter Jesus says that the Father has committed all judgment to Him. The Bible is clear that only God can make a final judgment on a person and at the same time only God can forgive sins. These two roles are played out in the life of the Lord Jesus.

Any religion or pseudo religious group who undermines the truth of the deity of Jesus is on thin ice. They are preaching another Jesus, not the Jesus of the Bible. He is and always was "God among us." Paul said that in Him the fullness of deity dwelt in bodily form. In Jesus you have God, not a part of God or the qualities of God or a God-likeness, no, but God. In Hebrews the Father addresses the Son, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." Any questions?

The application is striking. God became a man that He might take on Himself the gross sins of humanity so that we might have the opportunity to have the gift of eternal life. He died for our sins so that we do not have to. O, what a gift! God really cares. He didn't stay aloof, even though He had every right to do that. He came. He suffered. He died for us. He rose. He is coming again. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

God's blessings are incarnate in the Son,

Pastor Steve

"Everything Points That Way"

May 8 - John 5: 31-47

When you become a Christian something much more is happening to you then you even realize at first. God is working in your life and doing things that are unfamiliar to you. It's somewhat like the metamorphosis that takes place for the person who becomes a master guitar player. They pick up the guitar at first and feel at home with the instrument, but do not have any idea where their interest will take them. Then they learn their first note and then chord and then progression of chords, etc. and they are hooked on the melodies that come out of their work.

The Christian life is more like God playing us as his instrument. We have already alluded to the verse in Ephesians where the Apostle says that we are "God's workmanship" (or "poem"). At first, when God begins to strum our lives with His presence and

purposes for us we may be a bit unaware of the tune that is being played. Up to that point we had been used to sounds in our lives that were not the same as the new songs God began to play. But the more we submitted to the Master's touch and skill, the more we knew that this new melody was the reason we were made in the first place. Some of us may have felt like our instrument was being used for the wrong reasons. Maybe like using a guitar to hammer a nail. But when the Lord began to play our lives we knew that now we were in tune.

The Apostle John records that Jesus is the Master. With all of the detours in the world, both physical and spiritual, it is too easy to take your eyes off of Jesus and look to other things for a sense of well-being or connection. Each and every one of us, no matter what our personal likes and dislikes, and no matter what we think is the most important and pressing issue of the day, cannot afford to neglect the one person who is central to faith and life. Jesus is the Master.

It's amazing how someone can be so close and yet so far away. Jesus told the Bible students listening to Him that they were good pupils of the Word and had a desire to know the life-giving message of the Bible, but they were blind because they did not see how the Scripture was being fulfilled in Him. They were versed in truth but were unwilling to come to the embodiment of truth. They did not want to bow before Jesus and submit to Him because in their minds the cost would be too great. They might be persecuted or looked down upon by their peers. They were not willing to learn from Jesus because they already thought their way was the right way. Jesus said that they were men-pleasers who did not have the love of God in them.

The Jews are very proud of their heritage from Abraham. They wear that distinction like a badge of honor even to this day. Jesus puts Himself in relationship to Moses by saying that Moses wrote about Him. By doing this He automatically puts Himself in a greater position than Moses. There was already a great deal of hostility brewing in the hearts of the Pharisees and the allusion to Moses would have to strike them the wrong way. The next couple of chapters bare this out. The fact that Moses wrote about Jesus does two very important things for us. First, it confirms again Jesus' high regard for our Bible. Moses was responsible for the first five books of the Bible and Jesus essentially puts His stamp of approval on them. Secondly, Jesus bids us to interpret verses of prophetic import as fulfilled in Him. For example, in Deuteronomy 18 Moses wrote that someday God would raise up a prophet like him who would speak God's Word directly.

Do you believe that God is at work in your life? This is an essential part of walking the Jesus walk. Paul applies this by describing it as a believer having a treasure in a common clay pot. The pot is not the essential thing because it merely holds the thing that gives life. This life is the Spirit of Jesus in us who works in us to make us like the Master Himself.

Let's also allow this teaching in John to encourage us to see Jesus in the Old Testament. Someone once said that "Christ is in the Old Testament concealed and in the New Testament revealed." Fortunately for us most of the Old Testament ideas are clearly made known in the New Testament. For example, the Baptist's declaration that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Thus, the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system is made perfectly evident in Christ.

God's blessings encourage those who see Jesus in all of Scripture,

Pastor Steve

Day 129

"Pop Quiz"

May 9 - John 6: 1-24

"Class, this morning we are going to have a pop quiz. Take out a blank piece of paper and a pencil and put your books under your desk. This quiz will test not just your knowledge but your will and use of wisdom as well. You will be asked to explain what you would do if..." "If what?" you ask.

1. "Your friend Ben has been in a car accident. You don't know how severe the accident was until you arrive at the waiting room in the hospital. There you encounter many grieving people, family and friends of Ben. One of Ben's cousins knows that you are a Christian and nervously asks you why God has allowed Ben to be injured. How would you respond to this individual?"

2. "You have been preparing to compete in the high jump of the state track and field meet. You have worked and worked and worked, putting in hours upon hours of practice. Your coach is excited about your potential and thinks that you could possible get an athletic scholarship if you do well at state. Two days before the big meet you spring your ankle while approaching the bar during a practice session." How do you handle such a disappointment?

3. "Sally, a member of your small home group, has not been around for some reason. You are pretty sure that she is doing well but you are the kind of person who does not like to butt in on someone else's business. Weeks go by and Sally is on your mind quite a bit. Something inside of you is telling you that you ought to contact her and see how things are going. It's so much against your nature that you are still struggling with it. What should you do now?"

4. "You are taking a leisurely walk downtown. You glance to your right down an alley and see a man beating up a helpless woman. Your adrenaline begins to pump through your body and the anger over what you see rushes into your head. You have the wits to step back momentarily and ask yourself what you ought to do. What ought you to do?"

5. "Lately you have been overwhelmed. It seems like everyone is asking you for the world. No one knows the financial pressures you are under. The mounting stress seems unbearable and you find yourself acting unlike yourself. You think to yourself that if one more person asks you for a favor you'll go crazy. When you are in a tough spot like this, what should you do?"

These are difficult questions but not far from reality. Possibly one of them hit home for you. The tougher things in our lives are sometimes met with questions about where God is in the mix. I hear this in the desperate cries of those who feel like things would not turn out like they do if God were directing the universe. Why we think God somehow owes us is beyond me. On the other hand, you can be assured that God loves you in the middle of the mud and mess of life. I can't help but think that God will bring things into our lives to check our view of this world. If we get too cozy here we will tend to lose our purpose of bringing others to Christ and helping them to grow in Him. We also forget that God has something better in store for those who love Him and await His coming.

Jesus turns to Philip and poses a difficult question, not unlike one of the scenarios above. The crowds around the Lord are in the thousands. Jesus asks him, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip is a realist and states that it would take way more than they had to buy enough grub. Andrew is the practical one; he sees a boy with a small amount of bread and fish and thinks maybe we can start there, but he also expresses his doubts. What would you think if you were there? I'd probably tell the Lord that if they are going to come out in the desert then they need to be responsible for their own meals.

What was the test here? Wasn't it to see if they

had faith that Jesus could take care of the problem? They had an unsolvable dilemma. Do you ever have "unsolvable dilemmas"? I do. And usually my mind starts to spin with possible solutions. I will pick one and frantically try to solve the problem. Sometimes I forget to pray about it. Sometimes I forget to bring my requests to the Lord and throw my burden on Him. After all, He made the worlds, I think He can take care of my little problem or my big problem.

After the feeding of the crowd the disciples picked up 12 baskets of leftovers. With Jesus there is always more than enough. He provides more than we could ask or conceive. Do you have a dilemma going today? Where are you going to get the money to take care of it? Perplexed? Jesus will provide - let the problem sit down on the grass and the Good Shepherd will feed His sheep.

God's blessings are in abundance,
Pastor Steve

Day 130

"Real Nourishment"

May 10 - John 6: 25-59

There is nothing like a real good meal. You know what I mean, one that really satisfies. On the other hand, it is tough to feel healthy and nourished by eating stale or moldy bread. Today my wife came home from the market and realized that two items she had bought were expired, one by more than two months - yuck!!

I am amazed that we can eat crud and expect to feel good later. Or maybe we have overeaten and then wonder why we feel so cruddy the next day. Maybe we ate no fruits and no veggies but we expect to feel like we have the food pyramid mastered. It won't work that way. Sometimes when I see that so and so is losing weight, I ask them what they did. Most of the time I learn that they began to eat right. They began to focus on healthy eating habits and practicing moderation with their food intake. Surprise, surprise, in no time they were down to their ideal body weight and began to feel much better.

Spiritually, these principles are true too. If we rely on the "gospel" of "what's happening now" we will get out of it short-lived satisfaction. It may be something to eat for now but later we feel bloated and out of shape. We simply need to partake of Christ on a daily basis. Let's mark what Jesus Himself said about this:

"I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." I love when Jesus says, "Come to me." I can do that. I can bow before Him and pray and come to Him and experience Him in my heart and life. Simply come to Him. Reach out to Him. Hold on to Him. Spend time with Him. Let Him be near to you and hold you (spiritually speaking), and you will find rest for your soul. You will be able to rest and enjoy life because He will fulfill your deepest hunger.

This world does not have what it takes to meet your needs. Sometimes the things of this world taste like frosting on a cake. You can eat and eat and eat and still you are not nourished, you are only left with that uncomfortable bloating feeling that doesn't soon go away. You may say to yourself that you won't eat like that again and then, out of desperation, there you are again eating spoonful after spoonful of frosting. Same result.

The second thing besides coming to Jesus is to believe in Him Take Him at His word. Cherish His words. Let them soak into your heart and impact you on the inside. Become more and more convinced

of them so that they can form the basis of what you believe. Believe in Jesus. This also involves trusting Him. Can you do that? Say to Him, "Jesus, I trust you and believe in you, I believe you love me and are working in my life. Thank you for always being there for me; believe me, I want to trust you and believe in you more and more." The promise for doing this is satisfaction.

Are you satisfied in life?

Do you want to know a peace that passes understanding?

Do you want your inward thirst to be quenched?

Come today to Jesus and believe in Him.

He is there.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings nourish,

Pastor Steve

Day 131

"To Whom Shall We Go?"

May 11 - John 6: 60 - 7: 13

When we were babies we involuntarily went to our moms. While in school some of us went to a favorite teacher. I had a couple of teachers who made a real difference in my life and I would go back and visit them years later. Last year when I was down visiting my old stomping grounds, I stopped by my old elementary school to look up my sixth grade teacher. He really had a positive influence on my life. I don't think I would say he changed my life but there is no doubt that he made a difference.

As we get older some of us form friendships that we depend on and others still lean on their parents. Others go to chemical dependency to find what they need. My sister, who died in 2001, went to Jack Daniels for comfort. You can imagine how angry I become when the commercial comes on for that hard booze and glamorizes the experience. Drink responsibly they say; yeah, right!

Jesus often said things that weren't conventional. Because of this John records "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." I have always found it interesting that the Bible doesn't then describe Jesus going after these wanderers saying things like, "Hey guys, don't take it so literally, I didn't mean to offend you; come on back and we can work this out." No, He turns to the 12 and asks if they are on the way out too. Jesus divides. He divides because He is Lord (Master, Boss, The One in Charge) and it is His way or the highway. On the other hand, Jesus unites. He unites those whose hearts are truly His. For those people he is their all in all and they love to talk about Him and adore Him and honor Him. Jesus! Yes, Jesus! We love to talk about Him!

Peter's response is classic. He basically says what he has already realized, that Jesus is it. There is no one else who compares. This, in Peter's mind is true whether he understood Jesus or not because he had already determined to follow the Lord to the death. To Peter, Jesus has eternal words. This is another confirmation of the respect the apostles had for the words of Jesus. They believed they were God's words. So the issue is, do I follow God's words or the men who were offended by the teaching of Jesus? Peter felt it best to trek with the Master.

Who do you go to?

Does he/she have eternal words? Does he speak words that will have lasting value?

If not, turn to Jesus even if His words are a bit bizarre and hard at times to follow. Follow Him.

As a disciple, you are a follower of Jesus. He is the

teacher and you are the student. He is the leader and you are the follower. He is the Master and you are the "slave."

Lord, Where you lead I will follow. Lead on. In Jesus Name, Amen.

God's blessings divide the wheat from the chaff,
Pastor Steve

"Mere Appearances"

May 12 - John 7: 14-44

Take a Look Around at What God Has Done Today,

"You can't tell a book by its cover." Have you ever heard that expression? Or have you ever had an unfavorable first impression of someone only to find out that they were not like how you perceived them at all. Maybe they even became a friend after awhile. Here, I may have judged him very harshly because I didn't like something on the surface about them and all along there was something deeper about his life that became very appealing to me.

Sometimes we Christians can do this to other believers in other churches. We mistakenly form prejudices against a person because he does things different than us. This can lead to an attitude of superiority, where I believe that the way I experience spiritual things is the only way to do it. And so I begin to look down on people who are linked to such and such church or who use such and such version of the Bible or who worship in a different manner.

We need to be careful not to be so quick to judge others. Could this be what the Lord had in mind when He said, "Judge not, that you be not judged"? In other words, don't have a judgmental attitude, rather, be an encourager and someone who builds others up. In Acts there was a man named Apollos who was "mighty in the Scriptures." Yet when he met some of Paul's friends, named Aquilla and Priscella, they noticed that he did not have the whole truth of the gospel in his message. They didn't publicly criticize him or speak harshly to him, no, they took him aside and explained the Way more thoroughly to him. They were encouragers. If they would have jumped the gun and judged too harshly at first there could have been a rift in the work of the gospel.

Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath. The enemies of Jesus used this as an opportunity to scrutinize Jesus by saying that He was breaking the Sabbath rules on rest. Evidently this was considered work and the Jewish regulations about Sabbath rest were interpreted by them very strictly to mean "no work" whatsoever. I was in Israel on a Sabbath day. We were on a tour and kept on going even though it felt like the whole country was shut down. We had trouble finding a bathroom rest stop. To this day the Sabbath is practiced with strict regulations by the Jews. The truth of the matter is that those first century Jews were looking for a way to discredit Jesus. Imagine what a thinking person must have been thinking. Jesus makes a man well and the Pharisees are saying that Jesus is not from God because He did this "work" on the Sabbath. Huh?

Jesus' rule was that love always supercedes any rules. Was it the good and loving thing to heal someone who had been infirm for a long time? Of course! People often ask what God's will is for their life. They are concerned that they will not miss out on all that God has for them. If we would simply do as Jesus did and love others the best we can with God's help then we will be on target when it comes to doing the will of God. Men want a set of rules to fulfill so that they can go back and measure themselves by those rules and feel good about themselves. The problem with that approach is that we also tend to reinterpret those rules to fit our own likes and dislikes. Then we will justify ourselves by feeling a sense of superiority to those who do not keep the rules like we do. The Pharisees had fallen into this way of thinking and they could not see the goodness in the Lord Jesus. To them He was a threat to their rules and their way of life.

Appearances can also be very deceiving. What we see is not always what we get. This works two ways. Sometimes we think we see more than is really there and other times we see little and get more later. So Jesus encourages us to judge with a right judgment. When the prophet Samuel was directed by God to anoint the second king of Israel he had six boys, sons of a man named Jesse to pick from. As each boy filed by the aged sage, each was rejected. Samuel knew that there must be another boy because God had not chosen any of the others. There was one more boy, but he was such a runt and not old enough to fight, but Samuel called for him and, lo and behold, David was introduced into Israel's history; he would become "the man." In the context of this presentation the truth was revealed that "man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart." David became a man with a true heart for God.

Do you have a heart for God? Do you want to do God's way for you? Are you more concerned about God's reputation than your own? Are you concerned for others who do not know the grace of Jesus? If you can answer yes to these questions then you are in a good place. You are in a good place for God to work in your life and use you for His purposes. You will not quickly judge those you see but will give them the benefit of the doubt until there is good reason to believe that they do not have a good heart. You will know by their fruits. Good ones out of the good treasure of their heart will produce good fruit and those contrary will produce rotten fruit. But you will not be quick to judge their point of view until you know them truly.

Remember, God looks at the heart and it is much more difficult for us to see the heart. So let's reserve judgment until we are sure that we are sure. Is the person we are judging actually acting out of love and we are unaware of their motivation? Years ago I had a neighbor who wanted to do me a favor and so he sprayed around my lawn sprinklers with Round Up. That was the way he liked his sprinkler wells. I didn't, but he didn't know that. On the surface, once my grass began to die, I thought that maybe my neighbor was a real mean person, a bad egg. But his motivation was love and I tried to accept it as such. "Judge not according to appearance but with a righteous judgment."

God's blessings bless those who see beneath the surface,
Pastor Steve

"Join The Mob"

May 13 - John 7: 45-8:11

Don't you just hate being stereotyped? I remember when a well known preacher was standing before the world in tears confessing to a lifestyle of adultery and how it made me feel knowing that he was giving many an excuse to lump all believers in the hypocrite category. There is something in all of us that wants to simply be ourselves. We do not want to be the brunt of a prejudiced viewpoint hurled

at us by some ignorant commentator.

The problem is that when the church gets a black eye we all suffer. This type of thing goes all the way back to the time of king David, the man after God's heart who committed adultery and murder and was forgiven but gave his enemies a reason to blaspheme God. In the church at Corinth Paul has to address an issue of morality that he says is something that even the non-believers feel is gross and out of bounds. Nevertheless, each of us individually must give an account of our own life before God. Each of us can follow the Lord and enjoy the Lord and walk with the Lord and not worry what others say. It's good to just let God take care of the way the chips fall. God can work it out.

At this point in our reading in John the Pharisees are starting to boil against Jesus. The Lord has been drawing attention and followers and the Pharisees were not interested in competition. They wanted the people to follow them and they were insecure about the number of people who were attending to Jesus. In verse 44 it says, "Some wanted to seize Him. But no one laid a hand on Him." Hostility was in the air. The temple police who reported to the Pharisees were not inclined to arrest Him at this point because He seemed to be a man who spoke with such...um... um...grace maybe. It's hard to say how they took Him. Imagine listening to the gracious words that fell from His lips. It would be easier to arrest your grandfather for feeding the pigeons too much than to arrest the Son of God. Nevertheless, the guards came back to their superiors empty handed.

This lack of obedience outrages the Pharisees. And so they argue that Jesus couldn't be anything special because they hadn't given themselves to Him. Then they do what most do when they are trying to persuade from a position of weakness- they discredit the people who are following Him. They call the believers a group of mobsters who are cursed by God.

I can't help but see the parallels with today's criticism against Christians for holding to more conservative values. When Christians stand up against abortion or porn or euthanasia or homosexuality they are maligned as narrow-minded and bigoted. On the other hand, as the commentators try to discredit us and paint us as unkind or unloving or unthinking, they merely show their own inability to be open-minded and accepting of the Christian point of view. The fact that the Christian viewpoint is exclusive because we are following the Master does not give anyone the right to discount Jesus because of it. Jesus will stand on His own merit. It just so happens that Jesus stands head and shoulders above every other belief system ever disseminated. Jesus makes this clear in chapter eight as He hones in on His credentials to make the statements that He makes, statements primarily about His own deity.

Are you part of the "mob"? Do others misunderstand you? Are there some people in your life who discredit you simply because you are associated with the mob who is following Jesus? Interesting, in the end when Jesus is being arrested, this "mob" is instructed by Him to stand back and not fight. Peter would later write: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3: 15, 16). Some mob. Turns out it's a bunch of people trying to do good.

God's blessings are misunderstood by some,
Pastor Steve

"The Nitty Gritty"

May 14 - John 8: 12-30

One of my favorite songs in high school began:

"Sometimes late when things are real and people
share the gift of gab between themselves;
some are quick to take the bait."

The song is Oz Never Did Give Nothing To The Tin Man by the group America. Remember them? Most of the song is a mystery to me but I was always drawn to this first line about being real, you know, the kind of real that happens when you stay up late with a friend or friends and you begin to talk about the things that are in your heart.

Connecting with others and sharing some of our deeper experiences together is a special thing. Lonely people haven't had too many of these times. These are the times when you have the kind of give and take in a conversation where you go away feeling more whole because you have touched the soul of another person. By the way, I think it more often than not happens late because we tend to let our guard down when we are tired or feeling rummy.

Paul said in Ephesians 4 that we ought to "speak the truth in love." He promised that if we'd do this we would grow spiritually. He says that we would become like Jesus. Jesus did this, He spoke the truth in love. He told it like it was so that those who listened to Him might benefit. He even spoke that way when the Pharisees were around. He wasn't intimidated by anyone nor was He swayed by the opinions of others. He spoke what was good for others to hear. Remember the guards in yesterday's reading? They were so impressed by His words that they just couldn't arrest Him.

Chapter eight looks like a verbal heavyweight fight. "In this corner, weighing in on the authority of the Law, and living on the traditions of the elders, fighting in the purple trunks with white tassels, from the capital of Israel, the Jews among Jews - THE PHARISEES! And in the other corner weighing in on His own word, a healer and miracle worker, teaching out of the red corner, from the small peasant town of Nazareth - JESUS CHRIST." The problem for the Pharisees was that Jesus always had a right hook that couldn't be stopped. He was always right. They tried and tried to discredit Him but the best they could do was work up a false accusation based on a misinterpretation of what He had said. Interesting, isn't it, that every cult today does exactly the same thing. Not that they want to directly discredit Jesus, no, they do it indirectly by misinterpreting who He is. Well, the Pharisees had no clue who they were dealing with or sparring with for that matter.

Does Jesus lay it on the line? Listen up:

"You have no idea where I come from or where I am going."

"You judge by human standards."

"You do not know me or the Father."

"You will die in your sin."

"Where I go you cannot come."

"You are from below; I am from above."

"You are from this world; I am not of this world."

"I always do what pleases Him (the Father)."

I was always told to avoid conflict it is a good idea not to use the word "you." I guess Jesus feels that in this situation it is the necessary thing to have a conflict so that the truth can be told.

"1...2...3...4...5...6...7...the Pharisees stagger up from the mat, dripping with sweat, bruised and battered, but they are not done. The bell rings; round one is over."

You and I sometimes, make that most of the time...well, consistently need to hear the truth about ourselves and we need to speak the truth to others. If we love those we rub shoulders with we will tell them what is true. Let's keep in mind that Jesus could say "you" because he knew what was in men's hearts.

We need to be more careful before we exclaim some general rebuke to someone or to a group. If we act in love we will not be off target. The crowd that Jesus was dealing with that day were those who were not going where He was going. They were not His sheep; Jesus knew those who were His. We do not always have the luxury of that information.

In the meantime, let love be the rule and truth the standard.

God's blessings fall from those who love truth and speak it,

Pastor Steve

Day 135

"Daddy Devil"

May 15 - John 8: 31-59

Godspeed,

John's gospel is about the deity of Jesus. AKA - Jesus is God in human flesh. From the first chapter this point is clearly laid out. You can imagine how opposed to Jesus the Jewish leaders were when it came to His claim to deity. They were against Him and made that clear both privately and publicly.

I can understand why the Pharisees and Sadducees were opposed to Jesus' claims to deity; that claim would fly in the face of their teaching on monotheism (one God). In their mind there was no way any man could be God. Only their God (YHWH, or Yahweh) was considered to be God. In John 5 we read that Jesus was calling God His Father making himself equal with God. The result was that the people were after Jesus to kill him because they considered Him to be a blasphemer.

In John 8 the confrontational rpm's are spinning like crazy. Accusations are flying and the fight is on. Jesus is under scrutiny and attack, the Pharisees coming after him like a pit bull latching on to its victim. They accuse him of being born in fornication, an allusion to Mary's pre-marriage situation. Jesus doesn't walk away or sidestep the issues. He confronts them head on. He takes them on and answers their accusations with alacrity.

The Pharisees did not accept Him because they recognized that His words were self-serving. In other words, Jesus pointed to Himself as the object of a person's faith. This kind of self God-talk was getting under the skin of these religious leaders. They wanted Him dead.

Jesus said, "Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8: 43,44).

Jesus battled against lies by telling the truth.

He told the truth about who he was.

He told the truth about His Father in Heaven.

He told the truth about where He came from.

He was a truth teller.

Do you tell the truth?

Are you used to telling it like it is?

Do you go to Scripture to verify whether something is right or wrong?

When someone says something that is off base do you correct them in a polite way?

Listen to what Paul told Timothy:

"And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" 2 Timothy 2: 24,25.

And Paul says somewhere else that we should speak the truth in love.

Let's be a truth telling people.

Let's share the truth with others.

Let's counteract lies and give people the light of God's truth.

God's blessings come through the truth,

Pastor Steve

Day 136

"If I Could Only See"

May 16 - John 9: 1-34

This Is God's Day,

Are you a credit card junky? Is it hard for you to deny an offer for a new card with some fancy scene on the front? Do you collect plastic like bubble gum cards? Have you ever used one credit card to pay another one?

I have to admit, at one time I sort of collected sports Visa and MasterCard. I couldn't help it. When I was rooting for the Green Bay Packers I made sure my card signified that. When I visited a professional stadium like SafeCo in Seattle or the Shark Tank in San Jose or the home of the Minnesota Wild, I'd fill out a credit card application. You know why I did it primarily? I wanted the free stuff they offered for filling out the application. I have hats and a towel and beanies and probably stuff I've forgotten about. Actually I've done pretty well by not putting merchandise on the cards, but the credit is there waiting to consume me like a fire breathing dragon.

Most of us owe, don't we? We know what it means to be in debt to someone. We know how it feels to write that check and feel the weight of having an outstanding promise to pay. Some of you also know what it feels like to have others owe you. You know how it feels to collect payment with interest for a loan you have made to someone. And even if someone doesn't owe money, many people feel that people or government owe them things like their time or their expertise or their advice. Many of us live as if others owe us and if they do not give what we expect then we cry the blues because we think we are getting a bum rap. Children sometimes expect their parents to take care of them all of their life. Employees sometimes think it's their employers responsibility to give them benefits that are not provided. Husbands and wives sometimes expect their partner to give to them as payment for their giving. "You owe me" is not an uncommon thought or feeling, either spoken or unspoken, that creeps into our mind and plays with our wills.

In the same way many cry out that God owes them a happy life. They figure that if God is as good as the prophets say then He would naturally be more than willing to bend over backwards for them. Often the attitude comes across when people compare their blessings with others and wonder why they have come up so short. "Hey wait a minute God," they reason, "I've been as good as so and so and look at how much easier their life is than mine." "Hey, look at that guy over there; he's uglier than a mud fence, I bet he really made God mad to end up looking like that!"

I read an article lately about a man that really blew my mind. He is graduating from the University of Madison, Wisconsin with a M.D. degree. He's going to be a doctor. He passed all of the tests and performed all of the procedures flawlessly to the delight

of his supervisors. He finished with rave reviews and was liked by his professors and his fellow students as well. This man, Tim Cordes, is blind. Unbelievable! How could a blind man perform all of the delicate procedures that would be required for graduation? He made a way because he was determined and the university was willing to help him along. One of the things I enjoyed about Cordes was the fact that during residency he was more aware of the ins and outs of the hospital than the other students and he would often be stopped in the hallway to give someone else directions. Also, many of his patients did not even realize that he was blind. One boy asked his father why the doctor had his dog along. Cordes is a man who says he is using the skill and talent he has. He is not complaining, making excuses or wallowing in an attitude of self-pity. He lives purposely with what his lot in life is - period.

When the disciples and Jesus see a blind man along the way the disciples wonder who is responsible for his blindness. Were his parents to blame or should they pin the responsibility on the sins of the man himself. Jesus says neither. Jesus instead says that he is blind so that God can show His work in him. In other words, God can be glorified through the blindness. The blindness is not necessarily a sign of punishment but an indication of opportunity. Back in the Old Testament when Moses is bemoaning his speech impediment and complaining that he doesn't want to go to Egypt and represent the Lord, the Lord says to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4: 11). In other words, God wanted Moses to know that He had created him just as he is for a reason and He could use him despite his weaknesses. As a matter of fact, our weaknesses are usually the very point at which God displays his grandeur.

The rest of the story is academic. The man is healed. The Pharisees don't believe Jesus is the healer until they hear the man's testimony, but then they discount Jesus because He did it on the Sabbath. Same old story. I love the part where it seems like the healed man is being a bit cynical with the Pharisees and challenges them in the light of the healing power of the Lord. When Jesus changes your life you just know it and when others make lame excuses for it you know inside that they are just trying to discount what is so real to you.

Are you worried that God cannot use you because of some malady? Do you too quickly make excuses and turn from the road of faith because you do not see how God could work in your life compared to others? Well, remember the man in this story and realize that you too were created just the way you are so that Jesus can work in you what is pleasing to Him. And remember the doctor from the university when you feel like life or God has handed you a difficult path. God has given you just what you need in order to be all that He wants you to be in this world. Put your faith in that truth.

God's blessings are sometimes in the difficult path,

Pastor Steve

Day 137

"If You Hear His Voice"

May 17 - John 9:35 - 10:21

You are unique. Listen how Rick Warren puts it in The Purpose Driven Life: "You are not an accident. Your birth was no mistake or mishap and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. In fact, He expected it. Long before you were conceived by your parents, you were conceived in the mind of God. He thought of you first. It is not fate, nor chance, nor luck, nor coincidence that you are breathing at this very moment. You are alive because God wanted to create you! The Bible says, 'The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.' God prescribed every single detail of your body. He deliberately chose your race, the color of your skin, your hair, and every other feature. He custom-made your body just the way He wanted it. He also determined the natural talents you would possess and the uniqueness of your personality" (p.22,23). On top of all that God desires to speak to you and guide you through life. He wants us to know His will; He will not hide His will from any willing person who honestly comes to Him. Jesus said a bit earlier in John, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (7: 17).

In John 10 Jesus uses the word picture of the shepherd and his sheep to convey the kind of relationship that He desires to have with us. He comes right out and says that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. And if someone else comes along, apparently claiming authority to be followed, the sheep stay clear because they do not recognize that voice. In this teaching you are either in or out of the sheepfold depending on the way you desire to enter. If you do not go through the door, Jesus, then you will not make it in. To go through Him means that you will not only be able to enter the protection of the sheep pen but you will be free to meander out into the pasture in order to feed on the lush grass. The good shepherd knows His sheep and is known by them. But if this is true, then why does it seem like God's voice is drowned out by every other kind of noise in our ears?

The truth is that sin affects us all of our lives. What happens is we get blinded by our own sin to the point where we think we don't need to deal with it and move on, but we sometimes even deny that it is a problem. On the other hand, some people wallow in their feelings of guilt and make that the excuse for not being able to get past it and listen to God's voice. Sin has a way of deceiving us and causing us to trust ourselves and the voices in our own head. So if we lean on our own thinking too much we get conflicting thoughts about God's direction for our lives. In Hebrews it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (12: 1-2). Who is the "cloud of witnesses"? Some may say it is the saints in heaven looking down on us now, but I think it is more natural to see this group as the ones mentioned in chapter eleven who have shown us the way of faith in God. It is through their example that we can follow in and experience the voice of the Lord too. In other words, imitate their faith and you will be on your way to experiencing the same kind of spiritual direction they experienced.

God speaks to us most clearly through His Son in His Word. Keep that in mind when you are thinking about your need to hear God's voice on some matter you are facing.

God also speaks through Christian counsel. God will use a friend, pastor, or counselor to point out a

place in the Bible to turn for help.

God speaks as well through His Spirit inside of you. Remember to test everything that you hear by the truth of the Bible before you go public with some new revelation. God has given us all things that relate to life and being spiritual through His precious promises so don't act too quickly on a thought you hear in your head. But, also do not hesitate too long when God is prodding you to go and do this or that. If it is a good and loving thing to do and you feel strongly that God is speaking to you to do it, then go.

God's blessings are heard in God's voice,
Pastor Steve

"Believe The Miracles"

May 18 - John 10: 22-42

Sometimes life can become overwhelming. Things don't always go our way. The accumulated stress of our day to day lives can bean us when we least expect it. Sudden disappointments will trigger the other hot spots we have been lugging around and all of a sudden we lose faith in family, or friends or even in the Lord. I hope I'm not speaking to you today but chances are that these thoughts will apply to you too.

A great number of people are dealing with stress with a little pill, a little helper. I don't have a problem with that approach as long as it is viewed as a short-term fix, but to see it as a permanent solution is not healthy. Stresses, according to God's Word are to be welcomed as God's friends that will aid us in our spiritual progress. How will I learn patience when I run to an instant solution when I feel the least bit of anxiety? My impatience will only produce more impatience.

What can we hold on to when the roof is caving in and the car is broken down and the kids are out of sorts and things feel hopeless? Where do we turn then? One of my favorite verses is in a pretty obscure Old Testament book titled Habakkuk. It says, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the field and there be no herd in the stalls, yet, I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's, He makes me tread on my high places" (3: 17-19). Then he ends, "To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments." This statement of faith was sung from the heart in times when it appeared that all was lost. It was to be sung when the mind and the will and the body were tired and didn't feel like going on. Paul echoes this same spirit when he says to the church at Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice."

Jesus wants his listeners to know that He and the Father are one. They are equal in every way. Jesus does the very things the Father does or thinks of doing. Jesus is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1: 3). If the people reject Jesus they will be rejecting God, the very God they claim to serve. Jesus says to them to believe the miracles. Who can do that sort of thing, that is, to love people by healing their maladies. It is God! The Jews did not believe though and Jesus says their unbelief is an indication that they are not His sheep.

Those who do believe, on the other hand, are secure in Jesus. He holds His own. He keeps His own. Jesus is the Great Shepherd who attends to the needs of His own. They cannot be snatched from either

His or His Father's hand. They "...by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). They are the ones who believe in the miracles of Jesus. They think that Jesus is big enough to take care of their business and mold them into the image God has made them to be conformed to.

Some people, even scientists and politicians, do not believe in the miracles of Jesus.

Some people, even scientists and politicians, do believe in the miracles of Jesus.

Some people, even professors and musicians do not believe in the miracles of Jesus.

Some people, even professors and musicians do believe in the miracles of Jesus.

The miracles are what they are - miracles. By definition they cannot be explained unless you believe the man who raised the dead and healed the blind and walked on water and fed thousands was God made flesh. If you do then you too will be able to believe the miracles. And believing you can overcome the muddled thinking of our age that is bogged down in the muck and mire of humanism with all of its limits and failures. Man cannot save himself. We've been trying for centuries, but the best we can do is pacify the dying and try to prolong the inevitable. Man's days are few and painful and then he is gone. Jesus, contrariwise, is someone to believe in, if not for anything else, for the miracles.

God's blessings are miraculous,
Pastor Steve

"Delay"

May 19 - John 11: 1-44

Grace To You,

Have you ever been waiting for a package to come in the mail and you just couldn't stand it that it hadn't come yet? Each day you hightailed it to the box to see if it had come and you were either disappointed if it hadn't or ecstatic if it had. Hope is a very powerful motivator. When we think something good is coming we can put up with almost anything else in the meantime.

When our hopes are dashed though, we can reach new lows. I have known people to go off the deep end because of some apparently trivial occurrence, but later I realized that the last thing was merely the straw that broke the camel's back. There were a whole boatload of other stresses in his life that were under the surface. For example, if you have been burned in a significant relationship in the past you may have trouble trusting a future mate. Even if that person has not given you any reason to mistrust them you can still transfer prior feelings their way.

Disappointment with God is a very real place for some. They think God has let them down because He allowed a certain thing into their life or didn't give them something that they longed for. They may have prayed earnestly for divine help and at the same time tried to do everything right so that, they felt, God would hear their plea. Yet, it all seemed to fall on deaf ears. They didn't get what they wanted or maybe they got what they couldn't have imagined would happen to them.

That was somewhat how the sisters, Mary and Martha, felt when their brother Lazarus got sick. I'm sure they tried every remedy they knew at the time, but nothing was helping his condition. Then they did what we would do, they sent for Jesus. They were sure if they could get word to Him of their problem

then the Lord would quickly come and heal their ailing brother. But the situation reached a desperation level as he worsened. All they could do was sit and watch their brother die before their very eyes. Where was Jesus, certainly by now the Lord must have received word, how could He delay?

Well the Lord had delayed, purposely delayed. He knew the grief it was causing and the disappointment it would bring. He knew the girls would be upset and that their deep loss would be the source of much heartache. But He allowed it anyway. Could Jesus really be expecting them to trust Him even when the circumstances were as dire as they were? Jesus delayed.

I met a lady several years ago who really made an impression on me. She was the most cheerful and uplifting soul you'd ever want to meet. She laughed and joked and kidded and was just a delight to be around. A few years ago she became deathly ill. She was so sick that the hospital staff told the family to come and see her for the last time. And so the family members here in Oregon called the ones from out of state and they came to her hospital room to say goodbye. My wife was one of her nurses at the time. One of the pastors from the church went over to pray with them and so they all gathered around and prayed. The next morning she was sitting up, cheerful as before and well. I'm not kidding, she was good to go - to go home. Her name is Joyce Maxwell so I began to call her resurrection Maxwell. The family made their way back to their respective out of state homes and Joyce went on living. Two years later it appeared that she was again at the end of the line. She had become frail, bedridden and unable to communicate. At one point she stopped breathing and her daughter performed CPR on her and the medics took her to the hospital and she lived, barely. She came back home and was on hospice care when one day she sat up in bed and began to eat again and could walk to the table and watch the birds outside her window. Resurrection Maxwell was at it again. A few months after this she succumbed to a weak heart. At her service I thought about her smile and laugh and the fact that God wasn't done with her a few years ago. God's timing is not always our timing. God sometimes delays.

Do you have an unanswered prayer that has been delayed?

Do you have a hope that has gone unfulfilled for many years?

Do you have heartache because it feels like the Lord hasn't heard your plea?

Jesus invites us to trust Him even when things look hopeless. He didn't love Mary and Martha any less nor was He punishing them in any way. He wanted them to put their trust in the "resurrection and the life." He wanted them to believe in the face of death.

God's Blessings come to those who trust in the face of the circumstances,

Pastor Steve

Day 140

"They Plotted"

May 20 - John 11: 45-12:11

Proverbs, that old sage book filled with jewel after jewel of wisdom and helpful advice says, "The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord," and "the heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (16: 1, 9). Nothing in life can wiggle outside the scope of God's rule. Nothing? Yes, God has the whole pie in His possession. And this is never more evident than in the life of Jesus.

Psalm two says, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.' Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him." Why does He laugh? What is it that amuses Him?

The happy Mexican golfer Lee Trevino always said that he wouldn't hire a coach who couldn't beat him on the course. Why would he need instruction from someone who wasn't as good as he is? That didn't make sense to Trevino. God looks at those who try to thwart His plans and smiles as He sees the futility of their attempt to outsmart the Sovereign Lord. Isaiah said that God "...brings princes to nothing, and makes the ruler of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when He blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble" (40: 23, 24). God doesn't need anyone to instruct Him because He knows exactly what He is doing. God is not accountable to man, just the opposite, man is accountable to God.

The rulers of the Jews are getting nervous. They say, "If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (11: 48). They are worried that the Jesus movement will cause a rift between them and Rome. Their prosperity depended on the peace that was maintained in their jurisdiction. If the Romans saw that tensions were high they may come in and remove some of the benefits the Jews had in governing their own nation. Therefore they determined that it would be necessary to remove Jesus. And so they plotted to take His life.

God had different plans. God's plans were already laid down in Holy Scripture, like Psalm 2. The people could plot all they wished but God's plan would prevail. God exercises His plans sometimes directly by initiating the events at hand as when He miraculously guided the star over Bethlehem to announce the arrival of the Savior. Sometimes God initiates His plans indirectly by allowing the will of man to appear in control and then He supersedes that will to accomplish His own will as we will see in the arrest and trial and execution of Jesus. Sometimes He works directly in people when they don't even know it, like in Caiaphas, the high priest who spoke of a substitutionary death when he was oblivious to the ramifications of that declaration. God's plans prevail. Proverbs very boldly says, "The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble" (16: 4).

God's plan included the suffering of His Son. His suffering resulted in our salvation. Our suffering results in Christ-like behavior and personality. When Jesus was standing before the Roman governor not a single soul realized that God was working His plan all along. No one stood up and said, "This is God's plan, He is working His will!" From all outward appearances it looked like God was failing. Isn't that the way people talk when things go bad for them? "Where was God when it hurt?" "I cannot believe God would allow me to go through this!" "If God were good then stuff like this wouldn't happen!" But God's plan often involves suffering and that's the way it is. If we are going to walk as He walked then we too will feel the sting of agonies. The good news is that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death the Lord is still with us, He doesn't leave us high and dry. He walks with us all of the way. This was Jesus' confidence too. All along He said that He was not alone because the Father was with Him.

Do you feel like things are out of control - God doesn't.

Are you having trouble getting a grip on your current circumstances - God has a grip on you.

Does it look hopeless in some way or another - God will give hope.

God's blessings are under God's control,
Pastor Steve

Day 141

"Falling Up"

May 21 - John 12: 12-36

Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me" John 12:26. Are you a servant or one who is served?

God's economy and the world's economy are opposites. In God's system service is the way to greatness, in the world's order self-assertion is the way to greatness. It is the difference between being self-centered and Christ-centered.

We are all driven by what is at the core of our beings. If self reigns then you will only be as strong as self. If Christ reigns then you will find strength from Him. That is why Daniel said that those who know their God will be strong and do exploits (11: 32). Knowing God changes your focus from self to Christ.

I spent a lot of years serving self. The purpose of my existence was to please me and make me happy. When I didn't get my way or felt like things weren't going as I wanted then I worked even harder to try to make that happen. An ego life is really a frustrating life because the universe does not spin around one individual. God didn't design it for that, so there is an immediate frustration when we try to assert our own sovereignty.

How do I move away from ego to Jesus?

Spend some time on your knees, literally bowing before God's sovereignty.

Begin to treat others as more important than yourself (Philippians 2).

After you read your Bible, put into practice what you are reading (I John 2:17).

Do the opposite of what you used to do, instead of pampering self, deny self, put up with the inconvenience and follow Jesus (Mark 8).

Share the love of Jesus with someone. It is amazing how we grow when we see others come to Christ and grow too (Matthew 28).

The last part of the verse above is an awesome promise. The Father will honor you if you serve Jesus. Jesus is saying, first of all, that He is worthy to be followed. He is the Lord and following Him is what the Christian life is all about. If you will put yourself in the place of a server then Jesus promises that you will be honored. What a motivation that is to serve Jesus. The Father will honor you for your simple service. Find ways to be a servant for Jesus.

Have you ever heard someone boast about their boss because of how good they had it at work? He might go on and on telling you of all the benefits he has and what it's like at the office and what the future there looks like. He is proud of his boss and wants to tell others about him. Jesus wants us to talk about Him like that too. His benefits are out of this world.

God's blessings are experienced in service,
Pastor Steve

Day 142

"Spiritual Insight"

May 22 - John 12: 37 - 13:17

Make a Rainy Day a Bright Day,

There a number of points in our reading today that will help to give us spiritual insights into following Jesus. Whether you have been following Him for years or months there is always room for improvement. It seems to me that it is dangerous to have an attitude that says "I've already arrived and do not need to make further progress." Spiritual snobs are not fun to be around and the truth is that they are not really growing the way they think they are.

Over the years I have run into more people who thought they had arrived and were God's gift to mankind. Unfortunately for them their know-it-all attitude only ended up bringing them down. The best laid plans of mice and men usually turns sour. The pride of man is so fleeting that it isn't worth highlighting. Those who love the praise of men will end up disappointed or disappointing. Their foundation is built on shifting sand and when the floods come and the rains descend there will be nothing but the sound of brokenness.

---- God shares His glory with no man.

Those who chose not to believe in Jesus in the light of His miracles were blinded according to the Word of the prophet Isaiah. Their eyes saw the works of the Lord but their spiritual eyes were blinded to the source of those miracles. Even Isaiah, some five hundred years before, saw the glory of Jesus as He wrote into the future about the time when God would show His glory before all nations. Pathetically, the unbelievers reached a point of no return where they were unable to believe no matter what because at that point they were spiritually blinded. The lesson for us is to believe in and trust the miracles of Jesus and to take Him at His word rather than doubt and give in to skepticism.

---- Who are you trying to impress?

Some of the people believed in Jesus but were unable to make any progress because they were intimidated by others who did not believe in Him. They were afraid that they might be socially maligned and this created a feeling of insecurity that drove them to silence. Faith in Jesus is never a silent faith. Anyone who has ever truly been united to Christ cannot keep silent about it. Baptism explains this too. When a person comes to be baptized he is publicly telling everyone present that he believes in the death and resurrection. Before Jesus was crucified and raised, baptism meant turning from a life of sin to a life of following Him. Either way, it made a public statement about your allegiance to Jesus.

Feet washing was an indication of servitude. That

Jesus would wash His disciples feet was quite a shock to most of them and especially Peter. I once went to a church that practiced feet washing as part of their regular routine. There would be a time of singing worship songs and then the men would go into one room and the women went into another room. You'd choose a partner and then one of you would sit near a pale of water and your buddy would wash your feet. It was a matter of putting a foot in the water and then briefly rubbing the foot; then you'd take that foot out of the pale and dry it off. Then you'd switch and have the other person wash your feet. It was a pretty meaningful practice.

Whether we take Jesus' command to do as He did to His disciples either literally or figuratively the end result will still be the same. If we love others we will serve them. We will do the menial things with a good attitude because we have a chance to serve the Lord by serving others. Jesus asked them if they understood what He had done. He wanted them to have this lesson sink in and take root in their own lives so that their future ministries could be marked by love.

What we do in love will be blessed by God. Paul said the greatest is love. It supersedes faith and even hope. If you have love then you are in a position to grow in the Lord. If, on the other hand, your life is marked by turmoil and sarcasm and bitterness, then you will be in for a long lonely ride. It is only in serving others that we emulate the Lord Jesus and grow spiritually. He served, how could we do less and expect to be like Him? He humbled Himself, He served, He gave; He wasn't thinking about Himself, He was thinking about what it meant for Him to serve. Let's go and do the same.

Is someone bothering you, maybe a spouse or one of your kids? Serve them.

Is life hard right now and does it feel like you have no one on your side? Serve instead of complain.

Find yourself saying, "How can I help you," rather than groveling about what others are not doing for you. You are a servant. Pass a towel, would you?

God's blessings will happen if you do what He says,

Pastor Steve

"As I"

May 23 - John 13: 18-38

Teachers who teach for a living are truly remarkable people. I will never forget entering my cousin's third grade classroom for the first time and being mesmerized by the wide array of colors and activities. Her room was like a miniature world waiting for those little minds to explore. I recall that she was big on teaching character qualities like honesty and goodness and faithfulness, etc. She would highlight one of these qualities and teach the kids ways to practice being good.

Teachers are much more than dispensers of knowledge. That is why I am skeptical about some college classrooms where there may be up to five hundred students. In that setting there won't be much happening but the dissemination of facts. Most learning is caught, not taught. Over the years the greatest compliment I have received was when a former student said that I inspired her to be a lifetime learner. When you develop a thirst for knowledge and want to understand how truth reflects the nature of God then you can say that you are on your way to becoming a good student.

I am sure that one teacher or another has had a very valuable impact on your life. And I am also certain that you developed a love for those teachers that motivated you to learn what they were trying to teach. They probably modeled a love for learning in front of you. So much so that you wanted what they had. You wanted to drink from the same well that they had been used to for a long time. When I was in city college I had an English teacher who taught a class titled Short Novels. When I enrolled in the class I thought we'd be learning to write novels. I was wrong. It was a class where we read them. That ended up being an ok switch. But what I remember about this particular teacher was that his copies of the novels we were studying were so studied that the books themselves looked like they had been through the wash a few times. Passages were underlined and there was writing in almost every margin and there were dog ears and the pages were multi-colored by different highlighters. He was into his craft. That always impressed me. I wished that I could be into something the way he was.

We have the opportunity to be Christ's students. Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit was given to the church upon His departure that He would be our Teacher. He would live in us and teach us the ways of Jesus. He would be the mouth and the hands and the feet and the embrace of the Lord Jesus. He would give us the kind of instruction where we could see our circumstances and apply the teaching of Jesus to them. He would guide us into the truth so that we could walk in truth and be conformed into the image of Jesus. Romans 8 is chocked full of verses about the Spirit's work in our lives. He brings us close to the Father and confirms in us who we are as children of God and he loosens us from the yoke of the law so that we can have true life through Him. It is the Spirit in us who makes following Jesus a daily adventure. It is learning at the highest level in the school of daily living.

Sometimes I forget that God is at work in my life. I guess I just lazily forget that He is interested in making something out of me. He wants to take a lump of coal and make a diamond out of it. I will be taught by God through the work of the Spirit in the school of Jesus' ways. The goal of the instruction will be love. That will be what God is looking to produce in me. And to get me there He will bring many unusual people into my life, as well as circumstances, that will force me to trust. I will be challenged. I will not stay in spiritual kindergarten. I will need to move on and learn greater lessons that make me more of a servant. I will never be at the head of the class; I will need to rest content in the headship of the Master and be willing to follow Him even if it means I will go where I am uncomfortable.

In our reading today Jesus tells His disciples, and us, to do as He does. He serves; He washes feet. He simply asks us to follow His attitude. He wants us to take Paul's words to heart: "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2). Humble yourself. Be ok with being second fiddle. Don't need to be first. Let someone else go first. Feel good about someone else being promoted. Be happy when another person is promoted ahead of you. Take up the towel of a servant and serve.

We never stop learning. We can continue to be taught by God. Think today about this verse from the book of Hebrews: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (8: 10-12). We are all taught by God.

Time for class.

Be alert.

Be ready to do what the Master teaches.

Do "as I," Jesus says.

God's blessings are caught from the Master,

Pastor Steve

Day 144

"The Trove: Open Er Up"

May 24- John 14: 1-31

If you've ever received a gift unexpectedly then you know the excitement that it can create. Eighteen days before my daughter's eighteenth birthday my wife and I gave her one gift each day until her birthday ended. We didn't get her big things but each day there was an anticipation on her part about what she'd get. Giving and getting gifts is one of the nicest pleasures in life. I think this is true because we were made in God's image and God is a giving God. Remember, "For God so loved the world that he gave..."

I sometimes wonder how many gifts God has given to us that we leave unwrapped. We know there is something there in the Bible for us but the distractions of life keep us so preoccupied with the tyranny of the urgent that we do not take the time to unwrap the gifts that God has for us. Wouldn't it be fun to open up one gift each day from now until when the Lord returns? Wouldn't it be a healthy thing to hear ourselves saying "Thank you, God" each and every day for some piece of treasure that we have brought up from His Word? Well, the section of Scripture we are mining today is a treasure trove of spiritual riches. As a matter of fact, all of these middle chapters in John are such pure gold that if we were to meditate on their value for days on end we would not be able to fully appreciate their value.

So what kinds of questions does John 14 answer?

How can I face death?

How can I know that Jesus really cares about me?

If there is an after life can I know something about it?

What is the essential activity in the after life?

How can I know that God is personal?

How can I know I'll end up in a good place after death?

Do all roads lead to heaven? If not, how can I know the right way for sure?

Who was it that Jesus came to reveal to us?

What should I be praying for and how can I know that God will hear and answer my prayer?

What does this section of the Bible say about the work of the Holy Spirit?

If we love the Lord what should our attitude toward God be like?

Does Jesus offer me peace? How is His peace different than the peace the world gives?

There is so much here and it would do us well to spend some time camped on this chapter and the ones to follow. Open this trove and you will be in better shape than Bill Gates.

God's blessings are there,

Pastor Steve

P.S. Jesus makes the statement "the Father is greater than I." What did He mean, I thought Jesus was equal to the Father? By nature Jesus is equal but since the Trinity chose to limit Himself when Christ became a man the ramifications from that decision will forever affect the position of the Son. He humbled Himself and took on human flesh and thereby purposely limited Himself to a body. That body is now glorified in heaven with the Father but also indicates that He is in subjection to the Father eternally. This will always be a constant reminder to us of the price that was paid for our salvation. He is the Lamb that was slain. And He will be that person forever. For us, by the way. Let's quote a fairly lengthy section of Scripture to help us here: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order. Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For God has put all things in subjection under His feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that He is excepted who put all things in subjection under Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under Him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15: 22-28). Christ's position does not make Him less than the Father but simply obedient to the Father for our sake.

Day 145

"Abide In Christ"

May 25 - John 15:1 - 16:4

I Hope You Are Having a Great Day,

I have vivid memories of doing things with my dad as I grew up. My dad was in Korea when I was born, but from the time I was a toddler he was always there for me. I never doubted that I was his son and he was my dad. That was a given. Over the years we have always been connected. That doesn't mean there weren't times when our relationship was strained. That is true of all human relationships. But even during those times I knew I needed my dad's support to cope with the pressures of life.

As we grow up we tend to take on the characteristics of our parents. And I believe boys especially tend to resemble their fathers. We may or may not look like them distinctly but there is always some family resemblance. We also can pick up their habits and values. Think for a minute about some of the ways you are like your father. I know for some that this is a painful exercise because their father may not have been the greatest example, but I'm sure there are some ways in which you see yourself in him. Are you built the same? Do you sound alike? Some people think my son and I sound much alike. Do you think similarly? Do you like many of the same things? Do you have goals that are like your dad's? What is it about your dad that you really aspire to and haven't obtained yet?

The Bible says that we become God's children through faith in Jesus Christ. We will talk much more about this when we get to Romans and then Galatians. But for now I'd like you to think of your relationship with God and ask yourself how you view it. Do you see yourself as God's child? Do you talk to God the way a happy child would talk to a good father? Do you feel comfortable talking to God about anything and everything? Do you have a good sense of trust that God has your best interest in mind even when He allows some difficult things to come into your life? I hope so because that is God's desire for you. He wants you to feel uniquely connected to Him in a loving and caring relationship. He wants you to be able to say that you feel very close to Him and that you look forward to times when He is talking to you through His Word and you are talking to Him in prayer.

Throughout these very important chapters in John, Jesus makes it very clear that His relationship with the Father is the prototype of the relationship He wants us to have with His Father as well. He talks much about His own oneness with the Father and then, almost in the same breath, He talks about our oneness with Him and the Father too. So look carefully at how Jesus talks about the Father and you will see what He wants for you. Therefore, it is no wonder that Jesus' illustration, His metaphor, of the vine and branches is meant to teach about the oneness and connectedness God desires to have with each and every one of us.

As the branch extends from the vine and draws all of its support and nourishment from the vine, Jesus wants us to draw our spiritual strength and life from Him. Apart from Him we will not have any vitality

whatsoever. He is the source of all life and to try and live apart from Him would only bring death sooner or later. That's why Jesus taught elsewhere that men without Him are actually dead men walking. They are physically alive but spiritually dead and separated from the vine, from God.

Knowing that Jesus wants us to be this close to Him we need only to remain in Him. We do not need to ever look elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction. We need only to stay in Jesus. Even if you were to feel like your spiritual life was waning it would be counterproductive to go somewhere else for help. Jesus is the vine, the Father is the vine dresser. Sometimes believers like you and me will be in the pruning process and it hurts and we will feel like finding an easier way, but there is no other road to satisfaction. To stay in Jesus is the only path for spiritual growth. Think about how difficult it was for Jesus. He loved His Father and it is written of their relationship in Isaiah 53 that "it pleased the Father to bruise Him." There are times when difficulties and sufferings will stretch us beyond our limits. It is at these times when we need Jesus the most. It is at these times when it is best to simply abide in Jesus.

In the middle of this great teaching is a verse that really hits home with me. It talks about prayer and the Word. It talks about remaining in Jesus as we have been saying, but there is a promise to those who allow the Words of Jesus to remain in them. They will be able to ask God for whatever they want and it will be granted. Now that's a promise! Now an interesting thing happens to the person who remains, abides, stays in God's Word. All of a sudden he is not as interested in the things that promote self as he once was. He may start out thinking he is going to abide in the Word so that God will answer his prayer for a nice shiny Cadillac. But his time in the Word tempers that ego drive and need to achieve material prosperity and he finds himself desiring spiritual prosperity first. Then as he prays about the things that make for spiritual prosperity he also discovers that it delights the Father to give him these things.

God is your Father. God is the one who cultivates you in the garden of the vine. Celebrate your relationship with God today, would you? Take some time to let the Father know how much you appreciate your relationship with Him. Fathers like that sort of thing. What they also like is good honest conversation where they can hear you express your heart. Come to the Father. When we do we will create memories that will not be forgotten.

God's blessings are in the vineyard,
Pastor Steve

"About Prayer"

May 26 - John 16:5 - 17:5

Top of the Day to You,

Someone called the other day to ask for prayer. I, like usual, went into my counseling mode. He didn't want counseling, he wanted prayer. I said, well, you could do this or do that and if it didn't work why don't you try something else. He just wanted prayer.

I was struck by the heading over John 17 in our Bibles - "Jesus prays for Himself." That couldn't be right, John 17, the "High Priestly Prayer" of our Lord, about Himself? There must be some mistake. What would the benefit be of praying for ourselves? Isn't that selfish? And we know that Jesus wasn't that way. What gives?

So what did Jesus ask? He wanted to glorify the Father. Now that's a good prayer. God will answer a prayer like that. He talks to the Father about eternal life, the very purpose for which He showed up on the planet. And He mentions the presence of God and his desire to once again experience that presence the way He had it before the world came into existence. Weighty prayers.

1) Glorify God
2) Fulfill my purpose
3) Desire God's presence

The interesting thing about those prayers is that Jesus' fulfillment is wrapped up in His relationship with the Father. Later He will pray for us so that we too will experience oneness with the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Oneness. Think about that. If you have ever experienced oneness with someone you were drawn to them in a very close way. You felt joined to them. You felt committed to them. You felt a love for them that goes way beyond the norm.

This was the kind of oneness that David and Jonathan experienced, even though they were from very different backgrounds. Their oneness was wrapped up in their relationships with God. And so God brought them close together. Oneness with God is God's will for our lives. The closer we are to God and the more of His "eternal life" that we enjoy, the greater the amount of oneness we will experience.

Let's pray for ourselves today like Jesus prayed. Let's ask God to use our lives so that we could glorify Him. Not ourselves, Him.

"God, work in me today, using me like a jar of clay filled with the glory of God so that you would be glorified by others because of my life. Make me like Jesus, doing things for your glory with your power so that all men may see that and glorify You."

Let's also think about Eternal Life. It was for Eternal Life that Jesus came and gave His life on the cross. Let's dwell on the cross and thank God for what he has done for us.

"God, we are so thankful for what you have done for us by sending Your only Son to die in our place. Thank you for securing eternal life for us. Lord, we could never have done it in our own righteousness because we needed you. When we were weak and helpless, Christ died for us. Thank you so much!"

Let's desire the Presence of God so that we can know God and have the oneness that he desires for us.

"God, with all of our hearts we seek your presence today. It is in your presence that we will have fullness of joy. God, you give us joy and we are so thankful. You are the joy of my life, O God. Fill me now Lord with your presence. I will praise your because of your presence in my life. May your presence in me be a light to those around me."

God's blessings are experienced in prayer,
Pastor Steve

Day 147

"Fuel For Life"

May 27- John 17: 6-26

What kind of fuel does your car run on? Dumb question, you say, well maybe not. There was a day when you had a choice of leaded or unleaded when you went to the pump. Now, of course, it's only unleaded. But, you have a choice of regular, plus, or supreme. Does it really matter what kind you use?

My wife and I have gone round and round for years over this issue. Isn't it odd what married couples duel over? I have always believed that it was better for your car to have plus gasoline because it would reduce the wear and tear on your engine. My wife says it's cheaper to buy regular, so regular is better. I say you get what you pay for. I had a car that had well over three hundred thousand miles and was going strong on, yes, plus gasoline all along. I suppose one car won't end the argument, but I still hold to my conviction regardless.

God has made us to run on supreme. That is, His supreme rule in our lives. If we try to run on anything else we will find the same result that Solomon discovered centuries ago; we will only discover emptiness and striving against the wind. It will be like trying to run our cars on water. There will be no spark, no life, no mileage and no way we will make our destination. I cannot count the number of times I have talked and counseled with people who were trying to run their lives on an inferior quality of fuel. As much as they try to jump start the engine they fail because the problem is not the engine but the substance that is being used for fuel that actually lacks the kind of substance that will matter.

Jesus prayed that we would be set apart for God's purposes. His prayer reminds us that we are His. We belong to Him. He has chosen us and considers us a personal gift from the Father. Why He has taken us is a mystery. I never think that God got a deal in me. I am a desperate sinner who needs the mercy of God to accept the forgiveness in Christ. Jesus also states that it is the Word of God that acts as the Wrangler who corrals us and brings us closer and closer to God.

"Sanctify" is from a Greek word from which we get the words "holy," "holiness," "set apart," and "isolate for a special purpose." God uses His Word to bring us to a new place. It's a place where we become more like Jesus and reflect His love and oneness with the Father. God working in you will set you apart from the world's system and transform you into the image of the Son. That is sanctification.

Jesus also said that God's Word is truth. God's Word is the standard, the rule, the final word, the way; "my words are spirit and they are life," Jesus once said; His Word stands. We cannot experience spirituality or spiritual growth or God apart from His Word. His Word is Truth. He Himself is Truth. That correlation is a powerful reality for us to grasp. One Word from the mouth of God can give strength to deal with whatever the devil would throw our way.

What kind of fuel have you been running on lately? Are your valves corroded? Are your spark plugs failing because of deficient fuel? Have you been barely making it from point A to point B? Correcting these problems is only a matter of changing the place where you fuel. Pull into God's station and come under His supreme rule in your life and you will begin to run much more efficiently.

If you've ever gotten bad gas then you know the frustration of trying to run on mixed fuel. It's impossible. It eventually ruins your engine. It needs to be drained and your system needs to be cleaned out and then you can add the real thing.

Jeremiah bemoaned his people's behavior by identifying that they had forsaken the fountain of living water to pursue the muddied water of a broken cistern. They had exchanged the pure for the polluted, the clear for the mucky. Let's not go there.

God's blessings come through God's truth,

Pastor Steve

Day 148

"Listen Up!!"

May 28 - John 18: 1-24

Hi Friends,

Yesterday we stressed Jesus' words about His words. We talked about the importance of being set apart by the truth. We saw that true spirituality comes when a person submits to the Word of God. It is His Words that feed the deepest needs in our hearts.

We are quickly approaching the half-way mark in our Through the New Testament reading. I'd like for you to take inventory of your attitude towards the Word at this point. I want more than anything for the Word to grab hold of your heart and life and encourage your love for God and others. I hope that the Word has already had an impact on the way you see God.

We have almost made it all the way through the four gospels. We now have an appreciation of Jesus that should surpass where we have been before. It is important to keep thinking about the words and works, and death and resurrection of the Lord, so that we can journey through the book of Acts and then into the letters. Everything else rests on the solid ground of the gospel. You will especially see this when we reach the book of Romans. There we are told the gospel in an interpretive way. We will see again the death of Jesus and His resurrection, but also we will see just how separated man was from God before Jesus came to bridge that gap. We will be told how the work of Jesus has changed our position with God and how we can rejoice in the Lord even in the face of troubles. And then we will be taken down the road of Christian life issues, like how we treat one another and how we fit into our society.

Living in the world's system is like swimming in polluted waters. The moment you open your eyes under the surface you realize that you are in trouble and that this way will not be productive or fun in the long run. I have done much swimming in the Pacific Ocean. Most days were enjoyable, but from time to time the waters would be polluted with stinky yuck. It smelled. We still swam though. We were diehards when it came to being in the water, and so we tolerated the stink in order to have "fun." That's what happens to us in the world's system. We acclimate to our environment and make the best of it even though it may be hazardous to us. For example, I can remember days in Southern California when we had to come in early from the playground because the smog alert level was at a dangerous point. We'd come in coughing and sweaty and disappointed that we had to cut our favorite time in the day short. They made us come in because it wasn't good for us to be out there. The air we were breathing was unsafe. Do you think we would have come in if we had not been commanded? Of course not. We would have made the best of it.

The only way for us to move out of the world's system and grow closer to God is to stay connected to Jesus' words.

I invite you to join me today in a renewal of commitment to our daily reading. Let's all resolve to be readers and doers of the Word. Let's move into the second half of the year with a pledge to daily be in the Word.

Will you join me?

Let's charge forward!

Let's take up God's Word like a sword and do daily spiritual battle!!

Let's unite under God's Word to be of one mind in Christ!!!

God's blessings encompass those who hold on to His Word,

Pastor Steve

Day 149

"What Is Truth?"

May 29 - John 18: 25-40

Dear Friends,

It is so difficult to live a life driven by guilt or fear or non-acceptance. People who get up in the morning and jump on the treadmill of life feel exhausted by the end of the day because these negative motivators only sap their energy. They do not act as good reasons to get on with it. Instead, they rob you of the vitality that God wants you to enjoy as you grasp the Word and apply it to your life.

I once knew a man, a miserable man, who thirsted for his father's approval. He worked and worked and worked to try and prove to his dad that he was something special. He wound up being very successful at his job; I recall that he was an insurance salesman. He had a beautiful house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. From all outward appearances it seemed like he had it made. Yet, his life was driven by the bitterness he had toward his dad because he could never seem to do enough to please him. This man died of AIDS, sad, and disillusioned with life.

If you can relate to him in any way I hope that contrary to his experience you will be able to grasp the truth that God accepts you in Christ (if you are a believer), and that you have His approval because of the cross. What a gift God has given us in the cross! Not only are we forgiven but we have an acceptance by God that will extend into eternal life. Therefore, an appreciation of the cross is essential to grasping truth. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, had no interest in truth. If truth were a snake it could have bitten him, but he turned away and pressed on, driven by fear and anxiety.

There was a great amount of hostility in the political sphere in the days of Jesus. Rome ruled with an iron fist. Tiberius was the ruler at the time. The Jews were always aware of the oppression of their overlords. Some of the Jews gladly cooperated with Rome and others sought to rebel. Chances were that Barabbas was in prison for leading some sort of rebellion against them. Throughout most of the Roman period the Jews were allowed to govern their own affairs from their own distinct religious point of view as long as they paid taxes and obeyed the laws of the land. That's why there was a Jewish council that decided matters related to issues involving their own people. Jesus was handed over to Pilate because the council wanted Him crucified so that He might be publicly humiliated. Pilate was most concerned about maintaining the peace and was therefore nervous about the hullabaloo over Jesus.

Pilate's conversation with Jesus was brief and to the point. Pilate wanted to know what kind of king Jesus was claiming to be. I have to wonder if Pilate might have thought he had a religious nut on his hands when Jesus stated that His kingdom was not of this world. Pilate interpreted Jesus' statements in a way that convinced him that He was harmless. And Pilate knew that the Jews had turned Him over out of envy. Another gospel states that. As soon as Jesus brings up truth and says that those who are of truth listen to truth, Pilate has heard enough and carelessly says, "What is truth?" He wasn't interested in a reply. He, at that moment, wasn't interested in a philosophical discussion on the subject. So he turned away.

Some people are not at a point in their lives where they want to think about the deeper issues in life like truth. They see themselves as more practical. They are busy achieving or doing their jobs or having fun. For them to stop and contemplate what is true would be a bore. They would rather that the intellectuals debated those subjects, they are too busy enjoying the here and now to worry about the impact of truth on their lives. And so they turn away and seek to cover over the discomfort that truth can sometimes bring to them. Pilate just wanted things to smooth out. He just wanted to get on with life as usual. He didn't want nor did he need this disruption. He was a practical ruler.

What does the truth mean to you? I have always been drawn to this verse in Ephesians. It says, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! - assuming that you have heard about Him and were taught in Him, as the truth is in Jesus" (4: 17-21).

God's blessings are found in the truth,

Pastor Steve

Day 150

"I Have Power"

May 30 - John 19: 1-27

It's kind of funny how our view of the world changes as we get older. I have heard people identify life as a digression from infancy to adulthood and back to infancy before death. That is really true for those who suffer from dementia. They eventually lose the ability to reason and take care of themselves, and they are then forced to be cared for like they were as babies. It really is a difficult thing to go through.

I hadn't seen my grandpa for a few months. I had only been married for about four or five months when I decided it was time to take a trip down south to see my grandparents. I greeted my grandma at the front door and went immediately into the kitchen to sit down for a meal of meat and potatoes. Grandpa was sitting at the opposite end of the table but, surprisingly, he didn't greet me when I came in. I got a chilling feeling and felt like I had moved into a fog. What was happening? My grandpa was there but he wasn't there at the same time. I remember, he got up, walked right past me and into the garage, picked up a hammer and began to bang on the workbench. Grandma followed him out there and guided him back inside.

It wasn't long before grandma acquiesced to the idea that he needed to be in a care facility. It just killed her to do it, even though it was literally killing her to be up with him at all hours of the night when he would do senseless things around the house. Needless to say, this was a very difficult thing in our family. Here was a man, a former Chief of Police, a self-made man, a well-respected man, and he couldn't even tie his shoes. He was once a very powerful man, but now he was dependent on others to make his every decision for him. He wasn't at all what he once was. That experience really challenged my view of the world. Also, it made me think about some of the things I thought about as a kid growing up. Allow me to list a few.

Things I thought when I was a kid:

1. Most of the people in the world were good.
2. My dad could do anything.
3. Life would go on forever.
4. If I did better it would make up for what I did wrong.
5. If my sister didn't bug me the world would be a perfect place.
6. It was important to know powerful people because they could give you favors.
7. Money was the end goal of all achievement.
8. You should stick up for family even when there is a rotten apple in the bunch.

9. Medicine had a cure for every problem.

10. When you died, if you had been good you'd go to a good place and if you had been bad you'd go to a bad place.

Of course, some of that thinking is completely bogus and some of it is sort of true and all of it is wishful thinking. But that is the way a kid thinks, isn't it? Doesn't a kid see life like that? Isn't the world a much bigger place and a safer place for most kids? Then we grow up and realize that we, and others, are not as in control as we once thought.

Finally, Jesus would no longer answer Pilate. Pilate is in a pickle and wants to find a way out so that he can deal with the fear he is experiencing. If Jesus would defend Himself then he'd have reason to release Him. Now the governor is at the point of utter frustration. Then, in my estimation, the most remarkable dialogue in the Bible takes place.

Pilate reminds Jesus that he is the one who has the power to free Him or have Him crucified. But Jesus responds, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." Now that's a very telling statement. Was Pilate really in control? NO!!! Jesus was in control of what was happening that day. He was voluntarily laying down His life for His sheep. He was making His way to the cross, not by accident, but by design. It was actually the predetermined plan of God to bring Jesus to the cross for the benefit of those who would believe in Him. Pilate thought much more highly of himself than was the case.

There is a story in Daniel of a king who gloried in his own wisdom and power until God took everything away from him. Then, the Bible says, he ate grass for seven years until he finally acknowledged that God was the ruler of the universe and did what He wanted with His own creation. Ultimately, God is in control, not man. Man may rise for a season and appear very powerful and influential but his time is coming. Science has not been able to save us from the certainty of death. Death is as certain a part of life as being born. Man's days are few upon the earth.

Let's acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

Let's thank Jesus for purposely going to the cross.

Let's look for God's hand in our day to day life.

God's blessings are under God's control,

Pastor Steve

"These Things Happened"

May 31 - John 19:29 - 20:9

How vast is the mind of God? Isaiah says that His ways are inscrutable. They are past finding out. Think about this: God created all things; He made all of the varieties in creation. There are some scientists, I think they are called entomologists, and they spend their entire career studying the habits of bugs. There are people out there with Ph.D's who spend the lion's share of their lives observing insects. Now if a person can spend that much time and still not sound the depth of the bug world, then how can a man think that he will be able to fathom the mind of God in his lifetime?

Think about this: God knows the end from the beginning. It's kind of like life as we know it is a re-run to God. He is not taken by surprise by anything. Someone might say then, how can God take pleasure in anything if He already knows the end? Well, He is God and how that works in God is probably beyond us. I can remember years ago that my friends, and actually my dad's friends, and I would stay up late on Saturday night to watch a replay of the UCLA basketball game that had already been played that evening.

The big game of the year was always the match with the USC Trojans. One year, I don't know how it leaked out, but somehow I had heard before the replay that the Bruins had defeated SC. That information was a let down because even though I was happy with the result, I thought it would take the fun out of watching the big game. That's not how it ended up for me though. I thoroughly enjoyed the game. At the end of the game I thought that possibly I had received bad information. The Bruins were down by one point with seconds left and the ball would have to be taken out at the other end of the court. They threw in a mid-court pass to a guy named Lynn Shackelford, and right at the buzzer he threw up a long arching shot - swish!! UCLA had won. If I could enjoy a game I knew the outcome of ahead of time why couldn't God enjoy the affairs of man that He is directly involved in even though He knows the end from the beginning?

There are more than three hundred prophecies in the Old Testament Scriptures that predict the events of the life of Jesus. From His birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:7) to His death (Isaiah 53; Psalm 22), God gave His people a preview of coming attractions. Of course, God could easily do this because He saw and ordained the death of Jesus before the world was made. As a matter of fact, He says this in the book of Revelation: "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast- all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (13:8). God knew that we would fall away from Him so He made a plan to save us before the world was even complete.

When Peter is involved in the healing of a lame man at the temple he sees that a crowd is gathering and says to them, "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power of piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And His name-by faith in His name- has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He thus fulfilled. Repent, therefore, and turn again that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3: 11-21).

The early leaders of the church, including Peter, believed the words of the prophets were a guarantee. They put their faith in the truthfulness and accuracy of their predictions. Peter alludes to them as the final authority for the verification of the works and words of the Lord Jesus. Do you put your faith in God's Word like Peter did? Why don't we take God at His Word and begin to talk about the greatness of God and His Word. Don't forget John 17:17.

In our reading today we have the death of Jesus on the cross. If you compare this reading to the Old Testament verses that predicted that dark day, you will see that His death was a direct fulfillment of the Word of the Lord given long before by the prophets. To get a list of these predictive verses put "Old Testament references to the death of Jesus" into your search engine of your computer and you will find some very good links to go to.

Because it was Passover time at the death of the Lamb of God it was necessary to have Him taken down from the cross before nightfall. Because Jesus had, of His own doing, given up His spirit to God, and had died they did not have to break His legs to hurry death. He had already died. And at that time there were many spectators near the execution. Some were friendly and some were hostile. Nevertheless, these "incidental" events were all part of God's predetermined plan which He had given hundreds of years before in the words of the prophets. John writes, "These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled..." (19: 36).

God's Word is miraculous.

God's Word is the best source of hope for anyone who will come to it and read.

God's Word fulfills God's promises.

Take His Word in hand today with a good sort of pride, pride that boasts in the goodness of God for giving us a clear record of Himself.

God's blessings flow throughout Scripture,
Pastor Steve

Day 152

"Blessed"

June 1 - John 20: 10-31

Greetings,

Let's Think About the Joy of Others Today, I'm not sure if the word "blessed" is common enough today to be readily understood by everyone. What do you think? Most modern translations of the Bible use the word "happy" in place of "blessed". I don't think "happy" does the word for "blessed" justice, so let me explain the term and try to make it as practical as possible.

When people say "I am so blessed", what do they usually mean? Haven't they just experienced some unexpected benefit that arouses in them a deep appreciation for the giver? Lovers will often speak of how "blessed" they are since they met Mr. or Mrs. Right. This person is the source of such unexpected happiness that they need a way to describe their fortuitous situation. Some people equate "blessings" with benefits. Psalm 103:2 says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." Here "bless" is synonymous with "praise," and looking to God as the giver of so many benefits.

In our reading today we have, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Blessing here is equated with faith. Jesus is saying that if you trust Him, even if you haven't experienced the physical evidence, like the disciples in the secret room, you will have a satisfaction, a joy, a peace that outdistances that of the first disciples. It is a reference to you and me. Simple faith in Christ is accompanied by blessing from God. Do you believe in Jesus? Then you are one of the people He was talking about.

I believe "blessing" and "grace" go hand in hand. Blessing is not earned, but bestowed by the giver at no cost. You are not blessed when you get what you deserve. You may be compensated or rewarded for hard work, but essentially you weren't blessed with the reward. Now, when someone gives you something out of the blue and you did not work for it in some way, that is a "blessing."

In Romans chapter four, Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who was blessed even though he did nothing to earn God's favor. Paul said, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (verses 4,5).

So who is the person who is blessed? It's the person who simply receives God's work for him and enjoys the benefits of it. He realizes that God has done all of the work for his salvation and for the energy he will need in his Christian life to do what God wants him to do. So this explains why most people miss out on God's blessing. They approach it the wrong way. They think that they can earn God's blessings by doing good. That would not be blessing then but debt, and the Bible is clear that God is no man's debtor.

Now one more thing about this. If you consider all that you have as a gift from God then you will have no trouble seeing all things in your life as a blessing from God. For example, you may be very successful at your job, and the work there may be something that you credit God for giving you the energy and talent to do. So not only is the job a blessing, but the skill with which you do the job is reflected back to the loving gifts of God. Make sense?

What do you have to be thankful for today? What blessings do you have to count? Will you take some time right now to count out at least twenty-five blessings? As you do, reflect on God's gifts to you that are directly related to you obtaining that blessing.

God's blessings bless,
Pastor Steve

Day 153

"Mind Your Own Beeswax"

June 2 - John 21 (the last chapter)

We love a juicy story. Life seems more exciting when there is something out of the ordinary going on. We want to know what so and so did or how they did it or why they did it or how we can do it too. Isn't that true? Inquiring minds want to know.

We are also pretty adept at comparing ourselves with others. How do we match up with our best friend or our worst enemy? Will things work out for us the way they have worked out for him/her? How would my life be better if I could get what he has? Or, I can feel a sense of inadequacy and defeat when I think how far behind this person I really am. Then I begin to use self-defeating terminology to describe comparisons with him. If you've tried to rekindle a sport that you were once very good at, but haven't practiced or played for twenty years, then you know the feeling of frustration associated with that effort.

Think with me about Peter's last conversation with Jesus before the Lord ascended to heaven. Jesus affirms Peter's ministry to the sheep in the church. Peter would be instrumental in teaching them the ways of the Lord. But then Jesus says that Peter would be taken against his will and be led away to crucifixion. An interesting tidbit in this same context is John's statement: "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God."

Birth and death are two experiences that we do not have any control over. We didn't chose the day of our birth and we will not chose the day of our death. Even those who have used suicide as a way of escape were not always successful. I once knew a man who was unsuccessful at it and lived to be grateful that it didn't work. But regardless, our lives from start to finish are in the hands of the Almighty. As certainly as we were born, it is just as certain that we will die. The question is how we will glorify God between the those events, and even how our death might be for God's glory. Paul said, "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14: 7,8).

Upon hearing of his destiny, Peter immediately sizes himself up against John. He wants the Lord to tell him what will happen to John. Certainly if Peter would be martyred then John would too. That would be the fair thing. Maybe Peter was seeking some solace in the fact that both of the veteran apostles would be in for the same end. Misery loves company. It is comforting to know that I am not the only person on the planet that has had a hard time. Instead of facing my own situation I, like Peter, am tempted to focus on others. Sometimes I can be so concerned

about God's will for others that I forget to pray about God's will for me. Does that make sense? But Jesus put Peter in his place once again. He told him to mind his own business and follow. Don't worry about what the Lord is doing in the lives of others. You follow and God will work out the details.

We cannot live our lives through others.

We cannot live other's lives.

We cannot change the outcome of another's choices.

We cannot follow God for someone else.

Jesus said to Peter, "You follow me."

We can live our lives.

We can use the examples of others to inspire us to live well.

We can make better choices, ones that would glorify God.

We can follow too.

Let's get our walking shoes on and walk in Jesus' footsteps.

God's blessings can be counted individually,

Pastor Steve

ACTS

Day 154

"What Next"

June 3 - Acts 1: 1-22

Can you imagine how excited the early followers of Jesus must have been when they saw Him alive after his death!? Luke records that He appeared to them over a forty-day period, which proved that He was, indeed, alive. Likewise, I can remember when Jesus came into my life and my friends' lives, how excited we were that Jesus was alive and making Himself known to us. We couldn't help but spread the news about what God was doing in our lives. To some degree we shared the same experience as those early disciples. It was the same Holy Spirit, which Jesus said would be given to the church, Who has worked in the church ever since.

Good news is worth sharing. If some scientist found the cure for cancer, that news would be on every news wire worldwide. When a person discovers the love of God in Christ, he cannot help but spread the word. The book of Acts is all about that enthusiasm. The early church was born out of a group of 120 disciples. From them, the message of the gospel has spread worldwide and continues to our day to have an impact on its hearers.

Can you imagine how empowered the first disciples must have felt as they walked with Jesus and witnessed the variety of miraculous events that He created? I'm sure they had an "I'm with Him" attitude. At one point Jesus sends out 70 followers to go and spread the news in nearby cities, and to heal the sick and cast out demons. When this group returns they are sky-high. They begin to recount how wonderful it was to have the same power that Jesus had been operating in all along. The funny thing is that Jesus downplayed their success and told them that rather than focus on the miracles, they ought to rejoice that their names were written in the Book of Life. Why this focus? Because that was Jesus' primary mission—He came to bring salvation from sin and death and the devil, and He wanted His followers to have a firm foundation in that salvation before they got too caught up in the miracles.

Acts is all about spreading that message of salvation. It chronicles the impact of the message on people's lives, and how they in turn took it to others. It recounts for us the spread of the Word to the Gentiles. Up to that point, only Jews had embraced the message. It was during a Jewish feast, the Day of Pentecost, that the Spirit filled 120 believers with a power that radiated throughout the streets of Jerusalem. They were so excited and spoke in such an unusual way that some of the spectators thought they had been drinking in the morning.

Luke, the writer of Acts, makes it clear that the power in the early church was a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised that they would be able to do greater works than even He accomplished. This was beginning to take place by means of the all-encompassing ministry of the Spirit.

Acts, though not a book of teaching per se, is a very motivational book. I don't know if you are motivated by family history. Maybe there is some famous person or some event in the life of your family that really makes you stand up and take notice, and also propels you into action. Acts is kind of like that. It gives us the "What's next?" after the gospels' information. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Great Commission Jesus gave, ordering His followers to take the message to the ends of the earth, so that all may know that God sent His Son.

Does history repeat itself? You bet. Over the centuries since these events the Spirit has been actively motivating and empowering men and women to take a stand for the gospel. You will read about the most unlikely heroes, like the Apostle Paul, who was an adamant hater of Christianity before he met Jesus while on a trip to persecute them. You will also see ordinary human beings, like you and me, whom God used because they submitted to Him and He filled them with the Holy Spirit.

I hope you enjoy the book of Acts, and I trust that you will be charged with new spiritual enthusiasm to take the message to the highways and byways around us and beyond.

May God give you power today, an energy for spiritual truth and practice that you have not felt or exercised for quite some time. He will use us if we only submit to Him. Like the early church, let us be in prayer and anticipation for the filling of the Spirit so that we too might boldly proclaim Christ in our generation.

God's blessings are demonstrated in Acts,
Pastor Steve

Day 155

"Power"

June 4 - Acts 1:23 - 2:21

Grace To You,

People will sometimes say that they sure wished they had supernatural powers like Jesus. If they had power like that then life would be so much easier. But is that really the way it was for Jesus? Hardly. Hebrews says that Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered. He was God, but chose to lay aside, temporarily, the attributes of deity in order to fully identify with us earthlings.

Jesus had to pray and study Scripture and share the good news and love his disciples just like we do. He experienced all of the inconveniences of life just like we do. He was not isolated from the world while He was here—just the opposite—He had a reputation for being right in the fray.

Jesus had supernatural power because His life was in tune with the will of the Father. God gives power when our wills are aligned with His. Jesus said, "Truly, truly , I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father," (John 14: 12).

God gives us power to do his will. The problem usually is that people want power to accomplish their own selfish interests. Let's face it, too often we are just looking out for number one. Jesus isn't always number one and so our interests are divided.

On the Day of Pentecost God gave the gift of Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. He gave personal power to members of the church. This was not power to glorify themselves, but to glorify God and to do things for God that they would not be able to do on their own. Essentially, the power was given so that they could become instruments to help change the lives of others through the gospel. For example, Peter, once cowardly and ashamed, was now out in the open square proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead and that his listeners had to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. That was quite a change from just a few short months before when

he had denied the Lord.

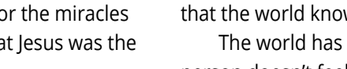
I love the conclusion of the prayer of the church in Acts 4: "... and now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant your servants to speak your word with all boldness..." (verse 29).

Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? If you invited Jesus into your life to forgive your sins and lead you, then the Spirit was given. But maybe you have not realized what He is doing in you. Open your heart to God and ask him to continuously fill you with His Spirit. The result will be the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and the power of the Spirit as you talk to others about your faith in God.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings are powerful,

Pastor Steve



"Save Yourselves"

June 5 - Acts 2: 22-47

If there is one clear message from the apostles in the book of Acts, it is that salvation is in Jesus Christ, Who died and rose again. The message is simple but profound; straightforward, yet not understood by those who refuse to come to Jesus.

In our modern era there are so many roads advocated by so many people, it's no wonder that many people are confused about what the truth might be. So many today do not even think there is a "truth," but merely think that whatever a person feels is true, is true. They think we create our own truth, and that there is no disputing it even if it cannot be corroborated.

The apostles stood up and told a whole generation that they needed to turn from whatever their former way of life was, then believe in and follow the risen Jesus. They made it clear that Christ's death was no accident but the predetermined plan of God for our salvation. And they followed that thought by saying that Jesus was alive. As a matter of fact, they didn't take any personal credit for the miracles happening in their midst, but said that Jesus was the source.

Peter replied to the spiritually hungry crowd: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," (2:38). It was through Jesus that a person could be relieved from the burden of sin and guilt. Once Jesus came into an individual's life, they began living a new spiritual life, led by the Spirit and free from the weight of the penalty of sin. So Peter went on and said, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." In other words, come to Jesus and you will experience liberation from the bondage of a corrupt society. Just imagine how lighthearted Peter must have been proclaiming this message of hope when just a few months before he was watching his Lord and his Friend being tortured.

The generation of the 2010s is no different than the one Peter talked to in the first century. They needed to be rescued from their generation and so do the lost people of our own generation. Maybe there are more distractions today than there used to be; I don't know. But the message is the same: Jesus can give you new spiritual life, a life of love and freedom that the world knows nothing about.

The world has a tendency to eat us alive. If a person doesn't feel like he is on top, then he is on the treadmill of trying-to-please, attempting to get there. I recently had someone ask me what I scored.

He was referring to my golf scores. Well, the truth is that I rarely get out on the course any more, even though at one time I practically lived out there. I sort of hemmed and hawed and gave him a pretty inflated score. He looked at me with a somewhat condescending manner and I could tell he was pleased that he was above me. I didn't tell him that I get out only about two or three times a year. Maybe that would have lessened his glee. Regardless, this is a microcosm of the way the world looks at us. It wants to find a way to spit us out, to make us feel like a nobody, or in Beatle terminology, a "Mr. No Where Man."

Has the world been pulling you away from Jesus recently?

Do you feel the weight of sin, which once was lifted, putting pressure on your life?

Are you sometimes confused because of all of the conflicting voices out there "competing" to be the supreme truth?

Then come back to the simple message of the gospel, the same one the disciples preached so many years ago. Come to Jesus Himself. Open up your heart today to the crucified One, who gave His life on the cross for you. Welcome Him into all of the areas of your life and pray to Him with open arms.

Keep seeking, keep asking, keep knocking and then...

God's blessings are in the simple gospel,

Pastor Steve

"Not A Dime"

June 6 - Acts 3: 1-26

Good Day—Good God,

It seems like we spend a good portion of our lives accumulating things. We earn and we save and we buy things that make us happy. The fatter our wallets, the bigger the grins on our faces. At the same time, the sorer our rear end is from sitting on it. Doesn't it also seem like the more we have, the more complicated things become? We have so many different varieties of things. There are varieties of credit cards. There are varieties of makes and models of things like house products or car parts or food products. If you want to buy some piece of exercise equipment, your choices seem never-ending.

One of the most fulfilling times in my marriage was when Mindy and I were living on almost nothing. I remember that we would have meetings and talk about budget matters, and we'd have to get creative as to how we were going to make ends meet. Those were simpler times for us. We felt an anticipation that God might be involved in meeting our needs. Boy, did He, and on a regular basis. Our needs have been supplied on a consistent basis over the years. There is a greater awareness of the need for God's provision when our own resources are scanty. All men are dependent on God, but the rich live with rose-colored glasses, and they believe too often that they will always have whatever they need to make things work. That is an illusion.

Spiritual purpose and spiritual focus put ambition in perspective. Have you ever been so excited about something meaningful that you lost all track of the mundane things of life? Maybe you were smitten with someone in high school. Just being able to work with her in science lab made your whole day. You didn't care whether the project was done just right, as long as you were able to sit next to "her" while you were doing the lab. Your love for her, whether real or imagined, drove you to a singular purpose. Your mind and

your heart and your body—your whole being, including your will, were singularly moving in one direction.

If you compare that kind of drive with a time in your life when nothing made sense, then you will realize how powerful it is for a person to find an overarching purpose in life that drives the whole. What if you could latch on to one motivator that would begin to fuel every area of your life? What if there was one source, one inspiration, one guide, one truth that could energize all of the others? Wouldn't life then become unified and whole? Wouldn't it be easier to see why things are as they are? Sure it would. You would be a man or woman with a direction and a reason to live.

Well, that's exactly what a follower of Jesus feels the moment the Lord comes into his life. He goes from spiritual blindness to spiritual light. Like Rip Van Winkle, he wakes up from the longest sleep, rubs his eyes and begins to marvel at the wonders around him. He cannot believe that he has waited all of these years to finally come to life; he is greatly motivated out of appreciation for all that God has done for him.

In Peter's case there is a transformation beyond reason. He went from a denying, cowardly, retreat-minded man, to a man who was boldly telling people about the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the man who had been horribly beaten and mocked and whipped and crucified and buried and guarded by a Roman guard, was now alive according to Peter. And on top of that, Jesus was in some odd way in Peter, making Himself known to anyone within earshot of the Apostle.

Jesus turns men. He turns them from a life of futility and vain pursuits to a life of meaning and purpose.

Peter didn't have silver or gold that day he came to the temple, but he did have Jesus. At that moment his faith was all he needed. Peter felt like a million bucks. What would you give to feel like a million bucks? Is your wallet full but your faith bankrupt? Is your credit line open but your heart closed to God's purposes for your life? Peter went from spiritual bankruptcy to heights of joy after Jesus' resurrection. He now had something much more lasting than money to give and he was willing to stick his neck out to give it.

The lame man, having received the gift of healing in Jesus' name, got up and began a jubilant dance. He could walk! He was free from the restraint of having to be carried everywhere. He was no longer a burden. Jesus had healed him through Peter.

There is something magical about giving to others when you have very little of what the world has to offer. You do not have to have an abundance to give the gift of faith. Simply look for ways to bring the love of Jesus into the lives of others. Recently I was talking with a couple who was in a desperate situation. Neither they nor I had the resources to meet their need. We talked and talked and talked about ways to solve the dilemma. But when all was said and done, it was still apparent that what we had would fall short. Then I related to them a few of the lessons that we have recently learned in the gospel about Jesus' provision in our lives. You know what? I saw a hint of hope. Just a hint, but enough for them to believe that Jesus could do the impossible.

Don't let your own limited resources stop you from reaching out to others in Jesus' name. Jesus will use you to bring healing and hope into their lives. What you have, give away. Take a chance and let it go; be amazed at the grace of God when He uses you right where you are.

God works through those without silver and gold. What counts is a genuine excitement about the resurrection. Because Jesus is alive, anything is possible.

God's blessings bring healing,

Pastor Steve

Day 158

"Filled With The Spirit…We Can't Help It"

June 7 - Acts 4: 1-22

Birds fly, lions roar; birds do not roar and lions do not fly.

Earthquakes rumble, lightning flashes; earthquakes do not flash and lightning does not rumble.

Water cleanses, honey sticks; water does not stick and honey does not cleanse.

Alligators make for good boots, bears make for good rugs; alligators do not make for good rugs and bears do not make for good boots.

Mosquitoes suck blood, fish breathe water; mosquitoes do not breathe water and fish do not suck blood.

Chickens peck, cows moo; chickens do not moo and cows do not peck.

Christians have the Holy Spirit, Non-Christians have the spirit of the world. Christians do not have the spirit of the world and Non-Christians do not have the Holy Spirit.

You are what you are. That's why it is so important for people to find their identity. Some people grow up being maligned by their parents or siblings to such a degree that they will form a pseudo-identity. In other words, they really believe they are one thing when in fact they are another. They need someone to come along and help them recognize who they really are. If you have been told all of your life that honey should be used for washing, it will be a real eye-opener for you when you discover that water works much better.

The miracle of new birth as a Christian is that you can be re-made into something different than you were before. Ezekiel says that God gives a person a new heart: a pliable, God-centered, Christ-honoring heart. This heart is the beginning of a whole new life, a life with God in it. Likewise, you also have a new identity. You are no longer the person you once were. Now God has hold of you and you have all the abilities that come with being His child. Another way to look at it is that you now share in the benefits of all that a child of God enjoys. Remember Romans 8:32: "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

A bird was made to fly. God designed it specifically to take flight. The horse and the lion and the cow were not. A Christian was designed to worship God and serve Him. Those pursuits were not interesting to you when you were broken down—when you had no wings, so to speak. But now that you are in Christ and have your wings, it's time to fly. Now you can soar because of what God has provided for you.

Much of the Christian life is realizing what God has already done for you. Too often we get discouraged because we do not realize all of the wonderful things God has provided for His children. Once we are aware of who we truly are in Christ, we realize that we have ready access to the equipment God has given us to do spiritual battle. This equips us to handle the attacks of the enemy. In Ephesians 6, Paul gives us a description of the armor of God. He tells us to put it on, and be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. It is a matter of seeing yourself in the power of the Lord.

Peter had experienced the things that we are talking about here. After he is called to account for healing the lame man, he stands very boldly, described by Luke as "full of the Holy Spirit," and proclaims Jesus has risen from the dead. Peter had a new lease on life. He was no longer the cowardly apostle, but a strong and determined follower. As a matter of fact, Peter says a bit later in his dialogue with the Jewish brass that he couldn't stop talking about what he had heard and seen. It was too good to hold in; everybody had to know the good news.

Peter was now a new man. He was who he was. He was filled with God and this invasion of the Spirit had a direct connection to his mouth. He wanted to confess Jesus and give others the opportunity to know Him too.

Are your actions consistent with who you are? Sometimes we Christians try to fit the square peg through the round hole by making friends with worldly ways. It never works and it never satisfies. Why? Because we are who we are. We can try to jump to the moon, but we were not made with that capability. We can try to run as fast as a car, but God didn't make us like that. We were made for God and it is in Him that we will find we can fly and jump and run. There is no greater satisfaction in life than to be doing what we were made for. Peter said he couldn't help it, because it flowed out of a heart that had been transformed by the Spirit and was full of the Spirit.

God's blessings make you who you are,
Pastor Steve

"Prayer Meeting"

June 8 - Acts 4: 23- 5:11

God Is In Control,

Jesus said that where two or more were gathered together in His Name, there He was in their midst. Think for a minute about the significance of that promise. I think all of us long to experience God. We want to know that He is with us and that we have access to Him through prayer. The gospel implies this in two big ways: first, that Jesus died for us and has made a way for us to come to the Father. Before the cross, there was no instant access into the presence of the holy God. Second, Jesus is alive; and, being alive, he can be with us wherever we are. He is not detained somewhere in some meeting so that He cannot give us His full attention. God is near.

I have been in some pretty interesting prayer meetings over the years. Some have been pretty straightforward. The leader wrote several prayer requests on a chalkboard and the members systematically prayed through the list. And then I have been at other meetings where there was a lot of shouting and stammering. I have been in meetings where there was much singing, in others where there was prophesying, and in others where people spoke in tongues and interpreted tongues. The meetings I have enjoyed the most were the ones where I knew the others involved, and each individual could be real with God and pour out his heart. I have also loved the singing times when the melodies lifted your heart to heaven and you could sense that God was near.

When we get to 1 Corinthians we will talk more about the purpose of a worship service, but let's keep in mind that God is a God of order, and He is less known when there is chaos in meetings. Just because someone is loud or prays in old English or can even speak in a stammering tongue doesn't mean that he is spiritual. You can sound very spiritual and still be very carnal. All that we do—both to glorify God and to build up other believers—should be done in love, with sensitivity to the people around us.

Another very meaningful time for a prayer gathering is when there is an issue or a fresh experience that makes the intensity of your prayers very real. "A friend in need is a friend indeed," is an old expression that can apply to God. When we need Him most, He is there. And when we need Him most, our prayers are usually straight from the heart. When the elders of our church go to someone's home to pray for a serious malady, the prayers are very heartfelt and meaningful. So often during those times I can feel the Spirit at work in one way or another.

After Peter and John's experience with the lame man, their defense before the Jewish leaders, and the leaders' demand that they not speak any longer in Jesus' name, the enthused men come back to the church with a heart full of praise and the need to pray. The focus of their prayer was not on selfish needs, but for boldness to speak the word of the Lord with even more intensity.

Peter quotes verses that talk about God being in control, even though it looks like His enemies are getting the upper hand. Peter quotes the same verses that we referred to when we talked about the trial of Jesus, discussing how Pilate really wasn't in control even though he felt he was. Man thinks he can stand in the way of God's purposes, but the attempt is futile. God is working through his servants and spreading His word through them.

Have you been involved in a prayer meeting lately? If so, how significant have the prayers been? Are the prayers riding on the wings of needs that are felt? Do you have a purpose for meeting?

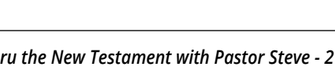
Prayer is powerful when it is focused.

Prayer is powerful when God is praised as Sovereign.

Prayer is powerful when you are united to be bold for Jesus.

Prayer is powerful when the group is of one mind.

God's blessings attend the prayer meeting,
Pastor Steve



"Worthy Of Suffering"

June 9 - Acts 5: 12-42

It was one day back in 1964 that I rode my gold Schwinn Stingray downtown to the dime store to buy the latest craze, a record called "Meet The Beatles." If I remember correctly, I think I paid $1.65 for the piece of plastic that was going to change my life. I was probably eight. I, along with most of America, had been watching the Ed Sullivan show the evening the Fab Four were introduced on this continent. The rest is history.

In many ways the Beatles' music did have an impact on our culture. We bought their albums, watched their movies and followed their careers as if we were part of their story. Their search for truth and happiness was our search as well. We'd sing their songs and imitate their styles and try to identify with them. Years ago my wife and I got to see an imitation Beatles group, called Rain, who could really bring you back to the Beatles' glory days. I enjoyed them so much. I actually did see George Harrison in concert back in the '70s. Those were his Hari Krishna days and it was a bit weird, but it was still a treat to see him perform live.

I think the song "Nowhere Man" captures the mindset of a huge segment of our world. Man looks for answers in all of the wrong places. Modern man strives for peace and security and happiness in all of the wrong places. He runs and runs and runs and still feels empty in the end. He is a man without a purpose; he has no point of view because he blows in the cultural wind and adapts to the ways of the current trends. Let's take a look at the lyrics of this classic Beatles' song:

He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody

Doesn't have a point of view
knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere man please listen
You don't know what you're missing
Nowhere man, The world is at your command

He's as blind as he can be
Just sees what he wants to see
Nowhere man, can you see me at all
Nowhere man don't worry
Take your time, don't hurry
Leave it all till somebody else
Lends you a hand
Ah, la, la, la, la

Doesn't have a point of view
knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere man please listen
You don't know what you're missing
Nowhere man, The world is at your command
Ah, la, la, la, la

He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody

Some find their meaning by attaching themselves to clubs and social groups that occupy their time and give them interaction with others. My daughter once received a student of the month award from one of our local clubs and we were invited to a dinner and a short award ceremony. The dinner was fantastic and the ceremony was...well...weird. I thought I had entered the Twilight Zone. It seemed like a place where grown men gathered to hide their alcoholic tendencies and legitimize their need for importance. The most hilarious person was the Grand Poopa (not the real title) who presided over the affair. We all want to feel like what we do is meaningful.

Those who were members of the first century Jewish ruling council felt far more than a club-like connection to what they were doing. They thought they were doing God's business. They were the elite ones, who made the decisions that preserved the traditions of the elders. Ironically, there were factions in the council based on their particular theological views. One thing they were united on was their distaste for the Jesus sect, who went around publicly proclaiming that Jesus was alive. Luke records that they were "filled with jealousy." Why hadn't it been enough to kill Jesus? Now His followers were in the temple courts, praising Him and testifying about the recent events that were changing the lives of those who put their faith in Jesus.

What a time to be a Jesus person! The apostles are thrown in jail only to be let out by an angel. Once they are rounded up and presented to the council, their excitement level had reached a new high. They were experiencing the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. God used a Pharisee named Gamaliel to persuade the council to lay off a bit. The rulers still had the apostles beaten. They thought maybe intimidation and physical leverage would silence them. When people do not understand Jesus, they feel threatened, both by Him and by his followers. When people do not understand the truth in Jesus, claims that are made about him seem threatening too. Some people become violent in response. During the time we are reading about in Acts, there was such a man (whether he ever was a member of the council is unclear), a man who treated those of the Way with much contempt and persecution. His name was Saul. He figures in Acts a few chapters ahead.

The beating we read about in today's passage only gave the apostles resolve to continue following the Master and proclaiming His Word. They actually were happy to be associated in their sufferings with the suffering Savior. Their identity with Jesus was something they all wore with great satisfaction. They knew that they would be treated as Jesus had been treated and they welcomed the opportunity to suffer reproach for the Name. The tough times only made them more determined to do as He did.

Let's take some kind of stand for Jesus today.
Let's not fear the rejection of men.
Let's make Jesus clear so that others can understand His love.

Let's walk as He walked.
God's blessings are confirmed in suffering,
Pastor Steve

"Problems, Problems, Problems"

June 10 - Acts 6: 1 - 7:19

God is Good,

The world is broken down. The wheels fell off in the garden of Eden. We have inherited trouble. Solomon said, after considering that the same destiny meets the fool as well as the wise, "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun is grievous to me, for all is vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2: 17). No matter how "perfect" we think we can be or how good we can make things, the truth of the matter is that we are in a world of hurt.

If you are a "bury your head in the sand" kind of person, then you will not be able to cope well with the realities of life. You can hide from troubles and problems, but that will not make them go away. From a philosophical perspective, especially if you disregard the Biblical reasons for the predicament we are in, there is very little to be said for why we are in this pickle. We can deny our problems or avoid them or transfer them to others, but they will always come back to bite us. Probably the stickiest problem is death. Try explaining that one without the help of Scripture, and you will be left like Solomon, to bemoan the realities of life under the sun.

I remember one such brush with hard reality. We sat in a family meeting. My wife and I and two elementary-age kids, along with one preschooler. We had important business to discuss. Our cat, Willy, had somehow gotten one of his eyes poked out. He seemed to be in a lot of discomfort. Do we take him to the vet and pay through the nose (or actually eye)? Or do we say goodbye to him? After all, he had been a good cat, and all good things must sometime come to an end, right? We sat and stared at one another. I laid out the realities. What should we do? I asked the children what they thought. I wanted them to be in on important matters. My youngest didn't seem to have an opinion either way and my daughter was speechless. When I got to my middle child—he burst into tears. Discussion over. We were going to help Willy the cat. Fortunately, we had the number of a friend who could give some pre-big-bucks advice. We got the goop needed and my nurse wife applied it, and in a while Willy was on the road to recovery.

Problems, problems, problems.

Some people have the idea that the early church was problem-free. You know, they had the Holy Spirit in a great measure and didn't have the ordinary day-to-day inconveniences that we have to deal with. That is as far from the truth as someone thinking that you never have troubles. Is that true? Do you live a problem-free life? No way! We are all in the same boat.

Right off the bat the early church faced a situation that would test their ability to solve relational problems. The Jewish widows with a more Greek background were feeling left out in the food distribution. They were probably feeling discriminated against, because some Jews considered them to be compromisers. Maybe their portion wasn't equal on account of their Greek ways, they reasoned.

The apostles pulled everyone together and made

it clear that they were going to delegate this issue to others, so that they could focus on the spread of the gospel and prayer. They picked men who were full of the Spirit and wisdom. These would be proven people, who could take the ball and run with it. The result was a spirit of cooperation in the congregation, as they confirmed the decision of the leadership. We are not told how the issue finally resolved itself, but we are given a couple of very important tools for solving dilemmas.

First of all, we must enlist the help of others when we are dealing with a problem. Sometimes we attempt to do too much and take on more than we can handle. Finding someone else who has expertise in an area will give us a sense of good management, and will give the person helping the joy of feeling needed.

Second, we need to be careful whom we pick to help with a problem. Sometimes we settle too quickly on a certain professional person even if we have a gut feeling that this may not be the best match. It is always wise to look into a matter more deeply before committing to one solution. I have a friend who had prostate cancer, had surgery, and then was left with a number of questions about his after-surgery treatment. He researched the matter for himself, discovered his options, knocked on some pretty big doors (in the big city) and found a physician who was an expert with years of experience. I'm not sure if he was "full of the Spirit," but he was wise.

Third, we need to always keep our primary focus in mind. It is all too easy to be wrapped up in the tyranny of the urgent. We must stay focused on our most important track. If you are not quite sure yet what your focus should be, then get some counseling on the matter. It would help to narrow your focus so that your energy is not dissipated in too many directions.

Problems are real. Embrace them; don't run from them. Let them be your friends. They will be the catalyst for great spiritual growth in your life.

By the way, the early church, as we will see when we get to the smaller letters, had many, many problems. Most of these letters are written because a problem or two needed to be dealt with.

What problem is on your plate today? Delegate; choose well; focus.

God's blessings embrace problems,

Pastor Steve

Day 162-163

"Stephen's Speech"

June 11 - Acts 7

Hi Friends,

Have you ever heard Billy Graham preach live? I first heard him in the late seventies in San Diego. I was amazed at the simplicity of the message. He spoke directly and challenged the ways of the world. He said that those ways would leave a man empty and that the search was only satisfied by faith in Christ. He talked about Jesus bearing the sins of the world on Himself. He talked about the resurrection. He told the people that they needed to repent, to turn to God if they wanted to find peace and happiness. I saw Graham again in 1984 and you know what, it was the same message. He hadn't changed at all.

Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. He was one of the fellows chosen to resolve the conflict we talked about yesterday. Well, he was doing many good things among the people and was busy spreading the Word of Jesus. Some Jews were in opposition to him and, using a deceptive tact, brought him before the Jewish council. Once there, Stephen saw an opportunity to teach about Jesus. In response to their accusations Stephen responded by recounting the history of the Jews which, of course, they were very familiar with.

The history Stephen recounts is God's history, it is His story. He reminds them of the calling of Abraham and how his great grandchild Joseph was shown favor by Pharaoh and eventually ended up rescuing his family from the peril of famine. After Joseph died, the new Pharaoh did not know the previous favor bestowed on the Israelites and began to enslave them and put them to forced labor. They were in this predicament for four hundred years until God raised up Moses who would be a prototype of Jesus.

Moses was initially rejected by his people, but forty years later he was sent back to Egypt to lead his people from captivity. He subsequently becomes the central figure in Jewish history. He is the great deliverer. The parallel with Jesus is striking. Jesus came to His own and His own rejected Him, but as many as put their trust in Him were delivered from the greatest bondage of all - the captivity to sin and the devil and death. Ironically, just as the generation Moses led out of the "iron-smelting furnace" (Deuteronomy 4:20) was without faith and only a few ended up believing in the Lord, so Jesus died for the sins of the world, but proportionally very few actually have faith in Him.

Stephen then goes for the juggler when he brings up the fact that their ancestors did not believe the prophets, and he says they were instrumental in their deaths. In other words, they had a history of not listening to the Word of the Lord. He parallels this to their rejection of the Lord Jesus. They had rejected the very one who came to save them. And now they were resisting the ministry of the Holy Spirit who was working through the church. The strength of his argument was overwhelming, but important, because this was the council responsible for the direction of a nation and they held the power to sway their people toward Jesus or away from Him.

More than likely, Stephen's reference to God not dwelling in a man made house reminded them of Christ's statement about destroying "this temple" and raising it in three days. They believed Jesus and the apostles and Stephen were out to destroy their religion. To them there was no greater place of holiness than the temple of the Lord. They could not accept any change in emphasis even if Stephen had a good Bible verse to show that God is not contained by human ingenuity.

When we put Jesus at the center of our lives, every other structure in our lives takes on a whole new meaning. Everything is subservient to Him. Life is no longer about me, but about how He can be first in all things. How can we glorify Jesus? I think that was the attitude of Stephen. He wanted only to honor the Savior whom he believed was the great deliverer prophesied by Moses himself. That's why it is futile to try and add Jesus to your life in a peripheral way. Jesus does not belong on the outskirts of our lives but at the control tower, right in the middle of everything. He invades every aspect of our lives. He is concerned about our thought life and our social life and our recreational life and our family life and our sex life and our physical life and everything else. Remember that Peter said "set apart Christ as Lord..." Why? Because Peter knew that life only made sense when Jesus was number one.

Many want just a bit of God. They don't want to go all out or commit themselves to serving. They want whatever they can get to make them comfortable and happy. And if having some of God could do that then they are all for it. Years ago I ran across this poem that typifies this attitude:

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,

But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk, or a snooze in the sunshine.

I don't want enough of Him to make me love a black man, or pick beets with a migrant worker.

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth.

I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.

I would like to buy three pounds of God, please.

--Wilbur Reese

Why is this? I think it is because we do not want to give the control of our lives over to anyone else, including God. I'll take God as long as He doesn't demand of me anything I want to keep for myself. The problem is that God has always made it clear that He wants our whole heart and He wants us to love Him with our mind, heart, soul and strength. He wants the whole enchilada. If you give it all, you'll find your life. If you hold back you will lose in the end. That's God's Word on the matter.

Stephen's words weren't received well. The truth will sometimes have that effect. They rushed him, stoned him and this propelled a general persecution against the church so that believers had to flee Jerusalem for safety. Taking a stand for Jesus can be dangerous. In some cultures today you can lose your head for proclaiming Jesus on the streets. People don't take kindly to a message that says Jesus is the only way of salvation. Regardless, the church still preaches Jesus and the results are up to God. Some believe, some persecute and some are indifferent. The church still moves forward and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

Like Jesus, Stephen prays for his persecutors that their sin would not be held against them. Stephen is ready to fly away; he sees Jesus standing in heaven at the right hand of the Father. This is the only place in Scripture where Jesus is not pictured seated at the Father's right hand. Stephen is welcomed into heaven by the one who loved him and gave Himself for him (Galatians 2: 20).

Let's stand.

Let's resist taking only three pounds of God.

"Lord, I give you my whole heart today."

God's blessings sometimes get us stoned,

Pastor Steve

Day 164

"Do You Understand?"

June 13 - Acts 8: 4-40

Have a Fine Day,

The early days of the church were truly remarkable. There were many fantastic signs and wonders that were verifying the works of the apostles. People were being saved daily and then added by the Lord to the Church. There was a great enthusiasm for reaching new folks with the gospel. There was some persecution because of the emphasis on Jesus, which was unthinkable for strict religious Jews who considered Jesus an imposter, and for Romans who could only hale Caesar and would not be comfortable transferring their allegiance to Jesus.

For some reason the early days of a new believer's life in Jesus is usually pretty remarkable as well. Maybe this is true because God is making Himself so real to him and he is daily experiencing the work of God in his life. Maybe it is the liberation he feels from the shackles of his old life. Maybe it is the new, good friends he is making in the church, friends who are more real than the ones in his former life. All in all, it is the new life that is so liberating. Truly, all things are new in Christ, including the person who embraces Jesus and makes Him the daily leader of his life.

Whether you are new in the Lord or have been a believer for many years, there is always the hope of a new beginning today. God's power in our lives is not limited and He knows what we need. Are you at the beginning stages of a walk with God? If so, enjoy the ride and be thankful for the works God is doing in you. If you need a new beginning today just ask God for this. Ask Him to refresh you and renew you today. Open your heart to the work of the Holy Spirit and the filling of your heart with the Spirit. This could be the beginning of something really good for you. More of God is always good.

The Lord directed the preacher Philip to go to the desert and meet up with a man who was ready to receive the good news of Jesus. Of all things, the man was reading from the Scriptures in the book of Isaiah, right in a section of prophecy about Jesus. Philip asked a really good question, he said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Think about that for a minute. That's a good question for all of us to answer. "Do you understand the book of Genesis or Samuel or Ezekiel now that you have read it? Are you getting something out of the book of Acts? Do you get what you are reading?

Philip could begin with the very passage of Scripture and start talking about Jesus. Remember, all of Scripture points to Jesus. Remember what we said about Luke 24 and how Jesus showed the apostles that all of the Old Testament pointed to Him. Well, that was Philip's approach too. What if the man was reading from some other part of the Old Testament? Philip would have begun there if possible and then started to tell him about the work of Jesus and how he could give his life to Jesus and find a new life in Him.

Another interesting note in this account is that the man was immediately baptized after believing in Jesus. He didn't have to go through a class or wait until he proved something, he went immediately into the water and was baptized into Jesus. Have you been baptized? If not, what are you waiting for; if you believe you can be baptized?

Why not try to reach someone this week with the good news? Do you have some 4 Spiritual Laws or a Gospel of John. Give the Word away to someone and then later ask them if they understand what they are reading. Maybe they will have been prepared like the man from Ethiopia and you will end up leading them to Jesus. Try it on for size and see what happens. Who knows, maybe you'll find yourself riding in a chariot.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings make us new,

Pastor Steve

Day 165

"Least Likely"

June 14 - Acts 9: 1-31

Remember the categories in high school about who would be the most or least likely to be something or do something? Did you make it into one of those categories? For some reason it drives me crazy to be categorized. Fortunately, I didn't make it into any of those recognitions. I can tell you one thing I would have never been pegged as: Most likely to become a pastor. No way, no how. How many of us became something or do something that would never have been predicted? Life takes us down some pretty peculiar avenues.

It is always weird to hear about some radical thing going on with one of the people I knew in high school. One of the guys became a pitcher for the Houston Astros, and another guy started his own toy company and made a gazillion bucks. One of my old friends who grew up a couple of blocks from me died of a drug overdose, and another one of my childhood friends died recently of skin cancer. You cannot easily predict what is going to happen in a person's life. I think that is why it is important to not let others dictate to you who or what you are going to be. Be yourself. Strive to do your best. Let the other guy worry about the other guy, you take care of yourself. I like

what Paul says in relation to this in Galatians 6: "For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load" (ver. 3).

Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, one of the most renown rabbis in Israel, would have been least likely to become a Jesus follower and, believe me, that would have been the consensus of every single human being who knew him or knew about him. He was adamantly committed to the proposition that followers of Jesus were deceived and were dangerous to the sanctity of Jewish faith. The fact that thousands were being baptized and added to the church must have created a great deal of consternation on Saul's part, but he was ready to oppose anyone who got in the way of Jewish tradition.

Even today, the most difficult person to bring to Christ is the person who is entrenched in their anti-Christian belief system. Some of these people may even have a view about Jesus, but they have not submitted to the Jesus of the Bible. This can be the case for those who have been involved in a church that is filled with ritual and tradition, but does not see the Bible as the sole source for determining what is true and what isn't. Like these folks, Saul was convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was right and that Jesus people were wrong.

Surprise, surprise!! Saul was about to meet the risen Jesus while he was on a mission to destroy the work of the church. Saul was accosted by Jesus. He was snatched by Jesus. I am sure that he was the most surprised of all. How could a man so set against something one minute be so wholeheartedly for it the next? Saul had an encounter with the risen Lord. It is not uncommon today to hear of people coming to Christ and then to hear some remark that they would have never guessed that so and so would give their life to Jesus. This should give us hope for those we have been tempted to cross off our prayer list.

I know of no other Jesus encounter as dramatic as Paul's. He is confronted by a blinding light (and he is literally blinded), falls (maybe a sign of humility), hears the voice of Jesus (His sheep hear His voice, John 10), and is instructed what to do next (Jesus has a definite purpose for saving him). These steps to one degree or another are not unfamiliar to anyone who has encountered Jesus through the gospel. We all need spiritual light, and we must repent (trade in our old life for a new one in Jesus) and we will hear His voice and be given a set of marching orders. Maybe your experience wasn't identical to Paul's, I'm sure very few have had a like experience, but yours contains elements like his. Think about it and see if there aren't some similarities.

Skeptical? You bet, many in the church thought it was a rouse that Saul was in the faith. Maybe this was some sort of trick. Maybe he wanted on the inside so that he could implode the church from there. Barnabas, who was known as an encourager, had witnessed Saul's testimony in Damascus about Jesus and was convinced that he was for real. And so he comes to his defense before those who doubted. Can you imagine that some of the church members had been personally affected by his persecution, some had possibly lost a loved one to Saul's cruelty.

I recently had a conversation with an alcoholic who had been arrested and convicted of DUI. I listened for a while to the same old broken record about how important drinking was to him and how he did it because others brought pressures to bear on him. Then I reminded him that the night he was driving drunk he could have killed my daughter on the highway if she would have been in the wrong place and the wrong time. He agreed. That thought did not endear me to him. But what if that scenario had actually played out in real life? And what if, hypothetically speaking, I later heard that he had been rehabilitated and was teaching drivers training at the local school where my other kids were attending? That would be a tough pill to swallow.

This may have been the way some members of the church felt. Here was a man bent on destroying the church and now he is in the synagogue and market place proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah. Even Ananias is skeptical when the Lord tells him to welcome Paul because he too had heard of his brutality against the body of Jesus. Ananias was obedient though and initiated Saul into Christ. He prayed for him and he regained his eyesight and then he baptized him. Also, just before this, the Lord had revealed to Ananias that Saul would be an ambassador for Christ and carry the message before kings as well as suffer persecution for Jesus' Name.

Is there a Saul in your life?

Do you know someone who is dead set against the Lord and the church?

Keep praying for him and don't give up, he just might be brought to his knees.

God's blessings are very deliberate,

Pastor Steve

"Good News for All"

June 15 - Acts 9:32 - 10:23

Time will only tell of the impact that Jesus Christ has had on our world. He is the subject of "for God so loved the world." God's marks of love are all over the place. This is true in creation and in the people of God who bare His image, both the original smeared image and the new image in Jesus.

Think about the enormity of what He has done compared with the obscurity in which He lived. He lived most of His life in a little town despised by others as a place known for the least desirables. Do you live in a town like that? I do. I can't tell you the number of times I have heard cutting remarks about my tiny town. Someone once said, "Can anything good come out of His town." On top of that, Jesus was a lowly carpenter. He wasn't from fine breeding. His dad was a carpenter too, and the family probably lived from paycheck to paycheck. We have no record of Jesus' early years until the age of twelve when we see Him on a family trip to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts.

He has changed more lives than any other man and he does it in the most unconventional ways. The people He has changed talk about His death as the highpoint of their connection with Him, and they talk about Him as if He were alive still. Think about how remarkable that is. His name causes more controversy than any other name. Men either love Him or hate Him, but there is very little ambivalence about His person. He is a person who demands our attention and commands our respect.

Now we say all of this to highlight the way God chose to spread His word in the world. As you have already gathered from reading in the book of Acts, there was an explosion of evangelistic enthusiasm in the initial days and thousands were saved. Have you also noticed that all of the original members of the church were Jewish? That's an amazing thing. Jesus also originally brought His message to His own people. But then when they rejected Him, He began to reach out to some non-Jewish folks. In Acts, chapter 10 is the turning point of the good news going out to the non-Jews (Gentiles). And of all people to get this message out, the apostle Peter was the most unlikely; he was Jewish through and through.

God had to do some pretty miraculous things to show everyone that the message of Christ was for Jew and non-Jew alike. Paul, the very Jewish apostle to the Gentiles said, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to those who believe, to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles" (Romans 1:16). And so God sent an angel to a Roman centurion. God told him to send for a man named Peter who was in Joppa and he would explain the way of truth. In the meantime, Peter is waiting for lunch up on the roof of a house and, bam, he sees a vision. There's a big sheet and it is being lowered from the sky and it bears all sorts of animals, many of which were unclean to a committed Jewish boy like Peter.

Then God told him to kill and eat. What???????? No, way Lord, I don't eat that, you know that. "Kill, and eat Peter!" Then the messengers, those unclean people, showed up, and off Peter went to share good news with the "unclean."

Let's make some observations and applications:

I'm glad for this because I'm a Gentile and I appreciate the opportunity to know the Lord.

God makes His will clear so that we won't botch things up. God wanted His word and Spirit to reach all men.

We can count on God to make His will clear to us. He wants us to know and do His will and He will not make it a mystery.

God was making a big point here about Gentile inclusion in the church and so we need to get that first before we try to glean other more trivial points.

God will use angels to accomplish some of His purposes.

Thinking about Peter, we too sometimes need to learn our lessons directly by God making things crystal clear to us, especially if it is a very important lesson.

What do you get out of this chapter? It is important. Peter will go to the other apostles and report what God had done through this incident in his life. And so this story goes through chapters 10 and 11. Let's get all out of it that we can.

Take a moment to go over the account again and we'll pick up our comments on it again tomorrow.

God's blessings are for gentiles too,

Pastor Steve

"Revolution"

June 16 - Acts 10: 23 - 11:18

This month forty-four years ago is when I accepted Jesus. It seems like I should be much more spiritually mature. But look what God had to work with. Sometimes the materials do the craftsman a disservice.

Yesterday we talked about the message of the gospel going out to all peoples. We said that it was initially just the Jews who were recipients of it. God had to work miracles to make it plain that His word was for Jew and Gentile alike. So at the end of the experience, the Jewish believers commented that the "Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" Acts 10:45.

The Book of Acts is a history book. It is the account of the beginning stages of Christ's church. It is not to be taken as a book of teachings and used to communicate doctrine. The events recorded were not necessarily normative for us. God had a specific purpose for the miraculous events which were recorded in the book like the ones in Peter's life that we are currently reading. Those who take the book of Acts and weave a normative doctrinal statement from it, I believe, lead people astray. That is not to say that we can't draw applications from what we read or find encouragement from them. But to think that God will do miracles just like the ones in the first century is assuming that we are in the shoes of the apostles. But not to discourage you, I think we need to pray and expect God to do great things in our lives for His glory and honor. But miracles for the sake of miracles is not the point of the ones we read about in the New Testament or in the whole Bible for that matter.

Another important aspect of this is that when we read Biblical accounts of miraculous events it appears that they were happening all the time. This certainly isn't true. The events recorded are the highlights of

what God has done and not the normal day to day stuff that characterized the life of a Biblical character. For example, there were times when Jesus was healing everyone in sight and other times where He was nowhere to be found because He was isolated for one reason or another. So it can be dangerous to give people the idea that miracles in the Christian life are the standard operating procedure.

The greatest miracles I have seen over the past forty-four years have been the changes in the hearts of people. I have seen people who you would never expect to change have such drastic changes that you would say, "It must be a miracle." I have also seen people experience forgiveness and forgive others in situations where you would never think it possible. To me, these events are miraculous. I have also seen the Lord touch people physically and heal them, usually alongside a doctor or two. Remember, the gospel writer Luke, a traveling companion of the apostle Paul, was a doctor. God works through any and every means to do His will.

Back to Peter. Peter finally reaches Caesarea and is greeted by the Gentile Centurion Cornelius who is hanging onto Peter's feet in awe. I love Peter's response: "Stand up, I am just a man." Peter's focus was not on himself but Jesus. That's where our focus should be. Peter simply considered himself the messenger of good news, even though at first it doesn't seem like Peter knows for sure why he was there. Maybe he was just wanting to hear from the horse's mouth the things he had heard from the messengers.

I love the way he describes the gospel. He talks about the cross and emphasizes the fact that he and his buddies were eyewitnesses of the events that happened after that day. He says that God "caused Him to be seen." And he talks about how God had chosen witnesses beforehand for Him to appear to. He points out that they were able to eat and drink with Him. In other words, He was Himself. They were doing things they had always done; it was Jesus and they couldn't be more happy.

While Peter was speaking, his Jewish companions were amazed at the results because before Peter even finished his sermon "the Holy Spirit was poured out" on them and the crowd began to speak in tongues like the group on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Then they were baptized. Something big had happened. The gospel had come to the Gentiles. Of course, word got around very quickly of these events and the brothers in Jerusalem were anxious to see what Peter had to say. The apostle recounted the events just as they had happened and especially how God had taught the lesson of how he needed to accept those whom he once considered to be outside the scope of God's plan.

This was all revolutionary to the church. Now the message would need to be taken to the ends of the Gentile world. That's where Paul comes in, but before we go there let's make a couple of applications from chapters 10 and 11.

First, expect God to change the way you view the world. A new world view is part and parcel to growth in faith. We will need to shed our "I know it all" attitude and accept the way of Christ.

Secondly, we need to develop a heart for the people of the world who need Christ. Are you open to being involved in world mission? Let's pray that God will open up doors for us to take part in getting the gospel out to all men.

Lastly, be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Even though these events in Acts are directly connected to the spread of the gospel, and are a special work of the Holy Spirit, there is a gift of tongues given to some in the church for the purpose of praising God. See 1 Corinthians 14 for more information on this gift. You may have the gift and not even know it. Get alone with God and praise Him and begin to speak to Him from the depths of your heart and see if he gives you this gift. If not, enjoy the time with the Lord as you talk to Him and praise Him.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings are for all nations,

Pastor Steve

Day 168

"It Must Be His Angel"

June 17 - Acts 11:19 - 12: 19

Life is about people. Think for a moment about all of the various people you are connected to in some way. There are people you are deeply tied to and there are those who just meet your acquaintance. There are people you feel drawn to and there are others that repel you. People though are what make the world go round in a manner of speaking.

I think the secret to success is being able to get along with or at least deal with all different types of people. The closer we get to another person the harder it is to get along with them. This is proven over and over again in marriages. Marriage partners get hitched with the greatest of intentions and then, ka-boom, the anti-relationship missile hits and then they look like too mean cats in a barrel.

The book of Proverbs was written so that we could have insight as to how to treat others and get along with them. Granted, there are times when you have to separate yourself from a fool or a hot-tempered man because of their bad influence, but the bulk of the Proverbs are about how to get along.

One of the many secrets for better relationships is to let people be human. Remember, it is human to err. We make mistakes. We are fallible. We strike out, fumble the ball, hit it out of bounds, throw up an air ball, whiff the puck, and double fault, to put it in sports terms. Too often I criticize others way too soon. I do not give them the benefit of the doubt, but step up and throw them out of the game way too prematurely.

I don't know why some people think that believers in the Bible stories are any different than us. They are, you know? They are made out of the same stuff as us. I think maybe we too often shoot ourselves in the foot by thinking we will never measure up to people in the Word, and therefore we get ourselves discouraged about being doers of the Word. We take on a "I'll never have a walk with God like so and so" attitude. We'd like to think that Peter and Paul and John and James and Rhoda and John Mark and the rest were somehow over our heads, but the truth is that they weren't, they were human just like we are and they made mistakes just like we do. Let's allow them to give us encouragement when it comes to our own desire to walk with the Lord.

In our reading today, Peter has been cast into Prison, waiting the same fate of his longtime companion, James the brother of John. James had just been executed by Herod as a favor to the Jews. When the king saw how this pleased the Jesus haters he had Peter arrested and was about to try him when, poof, he came up missing. Actually an angel of the Lord had visited him at night in order to help him out. By the time Peter realized what was happening and before he could even thank the angelic guest, the cherub vanished.

The ironic thing, and the thing that I can most closely identify with, is that the church was busy praying for Peter's release, but when the starry-eyed apostle showed up at the house of prayer, no one believed that it was really him. "Na, that couldn't happen," they reasoned. "Sure, we've been praying for his safety and release, but it couldn't have happened so quickly and effectively, there would be no way of that." But there was Peter in the flesh.

There he was, an answer to their prayer and they didn't believe it. How often have I felt the same way?

God listens to and answers our prayers, but how often do we not even believe the very prayers that we are praying? We pray with such eloquence and fervor, we impress others around us with our ability to come to God boldly, but God knows whether we are really believing that He could do what we were asking for. I think maybe the church was praying nervously about Peter's release. James had already been killed and I'm sure there was a bit of discouragement. But they still gathered for prayer. They knew it was important for them to lift their hearts to God, but could it have been that discouragement had set in to such a degree that they just couldn't believe Peter was off the hook? I think so.I think they were under so much stress it was all they could do to pray. Their leaders were being executed and they were feeling the hurt and weight of that.

On the other hand, I identify with them because so often I have prayed and really didn't expect God to do anything. As I prayed I was more concerned about myself and my problems, much like them that night, that I really couldn't muster the faith to believe that my prayers could really amount to much. I am like them. We are all human. Psalm 103 says that God knows what we are made of; He understands; He knows that we were formed from dust. He bends down and takes care of us even when our prayers are not really amounting to much. He helps us to pray when we do not have the energy to pray.

If you've ever prayed in a grief state then you know what it means to be real with God. No pie in the sky, super-spiritual hallelujah prayers then, no, just hard line straight forward prayers that are heard and answered, even when you are just pouring out your heart to God.

It is good to be human.

It will be even better to be out of this body and into our heavenly body some day.

In the meantime, be human and pray human prayers.

Someone's knocking at the door.

Could it be the answer to your prayers?

God's blessings are showered through prayer,

Pastor Steve

Day 169

"The Joy of Glorifying God"

June 18 - Acts 12:19 - 13:12

When I was a young boy I loved Space. I'd stay awake at night thinking about the stars and the moon and going out there. I loved to read about astronauts and rockets and spaceships. To me it was fascinating. I would imagine how fun it would be to blast into the unknown and see things that no human being has ever seen. It lifted me to new heights when I would think like this.

Spaceships and rockets were created by engineers and scientists and managers and other important people to accomplish a specific goal. If they were manned, then they were designed to go into Space, perform a certain number of experiments and then return to earth safely. If the spaceship's creators did their job correctly then it would be mission accomplished. If they missed something it could mean disaster. One of my favorite astronauts died in a cockpit fire some time in the sixties. I was heartbroken and, with a little kids reasoning, couldn't believe that something like that could happen. What went wrong? How could they have let that happen? He was such a good astronaut.

We were designed to do and be what our Creator made us to be. No more, no less. We have His stamp of authenticity on us and the warranty will run out at His choosing. When we do what we were created to do then we reflect back on our Creator the honor due to His genius. Likewise, when a spaceship does what it is supposed to do it reflects back on its creators. If you took a spaceship and used it as a missile to destroy your enemy you would not get the desired effect because it was not created for that purpose.

Man was made to glorify God. Man was made to accomplish great things for God and to reflect back to God the credit due His name. Because of the fall of man our natural bent is to try and glorify self. Instead of worshipping God and making Him the center of our lives, we are tempted to put self at the center and work hard to make sure he gets all the praise he can get. But because we were not made for this, we will self-destruct eventually. It's like trying to run a gasoline car on diesel. Soon enough the engine will be ruined. And so today we have millions of ruined lives because people are not running on God, but self. Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Deny self, don't glorify self.

In Acts 12 we have a remarkable story of the folly of self-importance and promotion. "On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread" (Acts 12: 21-24).

God does not share His glory. He alone has the right to it and it is this glory that man was designed to reflect back to God and not take credit for it himself. So Herod had a gift of oratory, so what. It was a gift from God and was to be acknowledged as such. When Herod took center stage and glorified himself he had a little visit from the angel of the Lord. Maybe this was the same angel who let the charge in the book of Exodus. I don't know that for sure.

"God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" I Corinthians 1: 28-30.

Who do you like to talk about?

I admit, the answer to that question is too often "me."

Let's talk about Jesus more and do what we do well for Him.

He is the source of all things and it's for His glory that we were created.

To Him Be the Glory Forever and Ever,
Pastor Steve

Day 170

"Gospel Anatomy"

June 19 - Acts 13: 13-41

Have you ever seen inside the human body? Years ago I was doing some study for an upcoming job and had stowed away in the recesses of the university library. I loved the old building with its musty book smell and old wood shelves. The new library at this particular school does not have near as much personality as the old one, but is full of the modern conveniences that mark this new millennium. Anyway, while taking a break one day I happened upon some books with full color cross-sections of the human body. Interesting stuff. I was amazed and surprised how things really looked inside us; I really had had no idea of the way it really was.

This experience was not long after a Dodger pitcher had rotator cuff surgery. When I saw all of the muscle and ligament and other stuff around the shoulder I was taken back by just how complicated it would be to operate on this section of the body. No wonder there would be a good amount of pain and suffering after surgery. The doctor would be cutting through so much just to get to the place that needed repair. I had a whole new appreciation of the way we have been made.

The anatomy of someone, even though veiled by skin is really the stuff that makes the body function. Take away the brain or the lungs or the heart or the stomach or the reproductive organs or the stuff that makes up the legs and feet and what would you have? Not much. The anatomy needs to be healthy for the person to be healthy. The anatomy needs to have all of its functioning parts to make the body adaptable to its environment. It's all essential in order to understand the movement of the body. The body moves because the insides are telling it to do this or that.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the anatomy of the gospel. In our reading today Paul is busy sharing the good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The head houses the brain which is parallel to the Truths about what Jesus said and did. The gospel has truth statements. Jesus died for our sins and He was buried and He rose all according to the Scriptures. Without these powerful truths there would be no gospel just like a body without a brain. People who say the Christian faith is about humanitarianism or a collection of good moral lessons or a way to live are those who make the faith brainless. If the scarecrow only had a brain he could understand that without Christ's work there would be no good news.

The strength of the shoulders is in the muscles and tendons that make them move and bare great amounts of weight. The shoulders could represent Christ's work for us and the weight of sin that He bore in His body. There are no other shoulders like His. No other shoulders could bear under the weight of sin that Christ bore. Any man who tries to carry his own weight of sin will be crushed by it. Only Christ has the strength and moral purity to carry the sins of the world. "He bore our sins on His body on the cross."

My wife is an R.N. and has had to help people with breathing problems. This is especially true if someone has smoked their entire life. If you smoke for decades you are building up a covering of tar on your lungs that will eventually do you in. The Bible says that spiritually we were all born with black lungs and so we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2). What the Holy Spirit does is come into us and make us to breathe spiritually by giving us new lungs to use for God. The renewal of the Holy Spirit is what enables us to breathe in God's life. Then, having received this new set of lungs, we can continue to experience clean and refreshing air and breathe with a renewed life. Anyone who believes in Jesus and receives Him into his life is given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The heart is the pump house of life for the body. Every day our hearts beat in our chests, receiving and sending life-producing blood throughout our bodies. The motive of the gospel is God's love. Peter was sharing the message of the gospel because of God's love - Peter loved God and the people who were listening to him preach. Without the love of God we would not experience the good news. No one can come to Christ without hearing about His love for the world at the cross (John 3).

Someone has said, "What you eat is what you are." Your stomach will digest what you eat and distribute it throughout your body. The more spiritual food from the Word of God that you take in the healthier you will be in your spiritual life. Several times in the book of Acts it says that the Word of the Lord was growing and expanding. It was moving forward in people's lives, both individually and in whole communities. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Without the reproductive organs there would be no you. God has chosen a wonderful way for the human race to produce after their kind. This is true of the gospel as well. As we have already studied, the gospel is for everyone and when it is explained it has a way of producing fruit. One person is born again and they share with someone else and they are born again and so on and so on. How did you become a believer? Someone told you what the message was and it had an impact on you and you were moved to give your life to Christ, and when you did your life was new and different and changed for the better.

The strength of your legs and feet is governed by muscle and blood flow and a number of other factors. Strong legs are built over time as they are exercised

to bear the weight of the jobs you are asking them to do. Your legs take you where you tell them to go and the message of the gospel, because it is for the world, wants to spread out to all regions of the globe.

I trust that God's good news is in your heart and mind. If so, it will continue to work itself out in your life. My prayer is that the anatomy of the gospel will get into your anatomy and have an impact on your world.

God's blessings make the gospel real to us,
Pastor Steve

Day 171

"On Track (Windows In Our Lives)"

June 20 - Acts 13:42 - 14:7

Only one life ever lived was full of light from first to last. John said of Him, "In Him was life and the life was the light of the world." The rest of us have a history of darkness, shadows, pitch black, rays of light, baths in light, and walking in the light with memories of the clouds from the previous day. Even the Apostle Paul would later, at the end of his life, lament the years he had walked in darkness.

Remember 1 John 1: "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus (continually) cleanses us from all sin." And John seems to equate "walking in the light" with confession of sin. Our constant need for forgiveness and for remembering where our sins were nailed continues on our journey throughout our Christian lives. It is not a life of "no sin" but a life of walking in the forgiveness that Christ has given to us when He died on the cross. "All hail the cross of Jesus, from there we see the light!"

Paul had seen the light literally. He saw the glorified Jesus. Indeed, it temporarily blinded him, but he could say later to the Thessalonians, "But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5: 4,5). He goes on in that same chapter to talk about the moral changes that have marked those who believe in Jesus. The true believer will not enjoy the habits of darkness any longer. He must turn from them. Flee them. He must put on the "armor of light" that Paul describes.

All too often the unsuspecting believer gets sideswiped by the enemy because he is caught napping. He is not in the Word like he has been and is beginning to doubt his own salvation and wonder if the Bible truly is the Word of God. He is a soldier without a weapon and becomes a sitting duck for the enemy to manipulate. I have always been impressed by the description of the "shield of faith" mentioned in Ephesians 6. According to my reading, I understand that this particular shield would be held by a group of soldiers. It would act as a barricade so that the enemy could not penetrate. Picture a group of brave warriors holding up this large shield and warding off the foe. That is the kind of Christian unanimity that God wants from us in the work that we do for the Lord.

Paul's life had taken a one hundred and eighty degree turn. Now He was on mission for Jesus Christ. The very one he once berated is the one he heralds. He and Barnabas had been commissioned by the Holy Spirit through the church (Acts 13: 1f.). Paul's approach was to go into the local synagogue (meeting place for worship among the Jews) and look for an opportunity to talk about Jesus' Messiahship. Paul was boldly talking about how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promises of a suffering savior. And, of course, he was big on the resurrection as well. As he preached Jesus from place to place some believed and others were agitated. The agitators usually found ways to run Paul and his companions out of town. Paul didn't let them deter him though, he simply went right on proclaiming Christ from town to town.

If Paul was saved in the mid-30's A.D and martyred in the mid-60's A.D., then he would have only a three decade window to make his life count. And, boy, did he! His efforts alone have had a sweeping impact on every people group on the planet, barring those who have not yet been reached with the gospel. Paul is read every week in churches around the earth, so far reaching is his influence. Paul could say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul was Jesus' servant and it didn't matter to him where he went or how much it cost or even if it would endanger his life. Paul was a man on mission.

Paul's story is a great argument for the truth of Christianity. If the truth was not Jesus, then why did Paul turn from a tradition that had been ingrained into him from childhood? If not Jesus, then why was Paul willing to suffer persecution because of his belief in the cross (Galatians 6,7) when he could have easily gone along with the crowd? If not Jesus, then why in the world would this man talk about a risen Jesus when just the other day he was dead set against the message of the apostles? If not Jesus, then why was Paul out talking with Jews and Greeks about Him? Jesus had come into Paul's life and was living, by the Spirit, in his heart. What other good explanation would anyone have? We'll see in the letters to the Corinthians that there were some men who came along and tried to upset the faith of some by blasting Paul's motives. Do you know how Paul answered these accusations? He told them that he bore in his body the scars of Christ, that is, the marks he received because he was willing to be persecuted for the name of Jesus and his belief that the cross saves.

How many decades do you have left?

How are you making them count for the cause of Jesus?

God blesses the spread of His Word, Pastor Steve

Day 172

"Paul Stoned"

June 21 - Acts 14: 8-28

Sometimes it doesn't hurt to make an educated guess. Common sense is better than no sense at all. As a matter of fact, sometimes the common sense guy can act more wisely than the know-it-all college educated fellow. Besides, harmless speculation won't hurt us and it might send us off into thoughts that can really build us up. I know someone is saying right now, "What in the world are you talking about?" Let me continue. I'd like to try and tie a couple of Bible passages together that may or may not be related.

Ideas about the after-life fascinate me, how about you? When the spirit leaves, what then? Some people have documented that they saw a great light and felt euphoria. Some research doctors say that that experience is the outcome of the brain shutting down because some endorphin is released at that time. But, regardless, what can we expect when the curtain is pulled on the last act of this life? Don't you want to know?

There is a somewhat cryptic passage of Scripture found in 2 Corinthians 12 that talks about a man, presumably Paul, who made his way to heaven and then lived to tell about it. Let's quote it here in length:

"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it. I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses" (12: 1-5). He goes on to say that since he had the privilege of receiving revelations from the Lord, the Lord gave him a humbling thorn in his flesh so that his head would not get too big.

What in the world is he talking about here? Where is heaven one and two, if he was up in the third? Why couldn't he talk about it; in Revelation heaven is described in some detail? Questions, questions, questions; it seems like heaven elicits more questions than answers. Let's give it a try.

Yes, in Revelation we do have some descriptions of heaven; for example, gates of pearls and streets of gold and a throne and no sun or moon and twelve trees for the healing of the nations and flashes and lights of various colors and living creatures and elders and lots and lots of praise, etc, but all of this is still not the whole story. Why? Because our mortal brains cannot fathom the depths of what heaven will be like.

The other day I was invited to talk to a group of high school students on sex. One of my favorite subjects! Anyway, I was trying to tie the subject in with the idea of close relationships. I told them that sex is a picture of the oneness that the Trinity enjoys. The closeness there is beyond our understanding except for the fact that God gives us a picture of it here when we are one with another person. And that oneness could be in a same sex relationship (without sexual relations), when two people get along in a way that makes them feel like they are joined in heart. This was true, as you might recall, in the Biblical relationship of David and Jonathan. I asked them if they thought heaven would be better than the best sexual experience on earth. Kind of a weird perspective, huh? Anyway, the answer is a resounding "yes!" because the oneness we will have in heaven with the Lord will far outdistance any memory of marital oneness on earth. Maybe that's why Jesus said that in heaven you neither marry or are given in marriage but are like the angels. Also, you will recall, back in John 17, how Jesus made quite an emphasis on the oneness that He enjoyed with the Father.

As far as "third heaven" is concerned isn't it most likely that the first heaven is our atmosphere, you know, the place where birds fly and clouds collect and rain originates and lightning flashes? Then the second heaven would be outer space, which would include the creation of heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars. Then the third heaven would be the place where God lives or dwells metaphorically speaking, of course, because God cannot be contained. But maybe heaven, the third heaven can contain God because it too is unlimited. Try that one on for size.

This man Paul talks about, again, probably himself for emphasis, could not describe what he had seen in that beautiful place. Think about this in contrast to the rich man Jesus described who was in hell and in torment. That man wanted to go and warn others about his fate. It was a miserable place. Paul though is in a spectacular place so unlike anything on earth that to try and use earthly objects or experiences to describe what he experienced would have been a crime. He leaves us hanging but excited. Could we someday go there too? Paul's response would be a hearty yes through Christ.

This is the point too, where we need to learn to be discerning about after death testimonies. In the Apostle John's lingo we need to "test the spirits." Any story that excludes the need for Jesus in order to have a happy after-life experience should be rejected as bogus or at best a deception. The person might believe they experienced something magical but in reality it was only the devil giving them false hope. Peter said that only through the name of Jesus could someone be saved from that horrible place Jesus' describes in Luke 16 (also see Acts 4:12). Paul said that his experience was an unveiling or revelation from the Lord. It would be a sentimental and hopeful idea that no matter what a person did or didn't do or no matter what they believed, they would be accepted in the after-life, but that is only deceptive and wishful thinking.

Now let me loosely tie this information from Corinthians with our current reading in Acts. Luke records, "They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city" (14: 19,20). Could it be that the experience he records in Corinthians happened here in Lystra? Look at the supernatural elements here. Paul appears to be dead. Can you imagine being one of the disciples? You'd be in shock and disbelief. You'd have an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. Your view would be traumatic. But if this is where Paul entered the third heaven, think about the contrast between his view and the other disciple's view. He was in paradise, they were in grief. He was in an indescribably beautiful spot, they were in a horrible spot. He was seeing things better than any earthly thing; they were seeing the depths of human cruelty.

Of course I do not know for sure if these two Bible passages coordinate as clearly as I have intertwined them, but it sure is possible. Regardless, both are quite supernatural.

Paul doesn't wake up and start talking about himself, about his great testimony; he is right away busy about proclaiming Jesus. We need to keep this in mind. The tendency in our day is to make too much out of our experiences and put the gospel in the background. The gospel is the main thing, the star of the show, the main bout; Paul knew that and went on his way making Jesus known.

Let's make Jesus known.

God's blessings are sometimes at a price,

Pastor Steve

Day 173-174

"Meetings, Meetings, Meetings"

June 22, 23 - Acts 15

Some of you spend half your life in meetings. How do you like it? Do you see the value of a good meeting? Are you sick of them? Are you finding it difficult to focus in your meetings because it's just more of the same old stuff? Some of our gatherings feel like meetings for the sake of meetings. Have you ever felt during a meeting like you could be getting so much more done if you weren't in this "boring" meeting?

Some meetings are monumental and life changing or even have an effect on the world. I am thinking of the meeting of JFK with his cabinet back during the Bay of Pigs episode in US history. It was Kennedy's restraint that eventually led to the disarmament by the Soviets from Cuba. Or what about Reagan's meetings with the leaders of the Russians. Now, those meetings had a dramatic impact on the world's landscape. So meetings can be very important. Leadership makes a huge difference in meetings. If you are looking to a leader to guide you down the road of improvement and progress, then you will be much more apt to pay attention during the conference.

The church has had important meetings too. Acts 15 is one of those meetings where positive change erupted from the gathering in Jerusalem. James chaired the meeting. All of the apostles were there. Peter was fresh off of his vision of the sheet experience and the meeting with the Roman Centurion and the guests in his home. There was tension in the air because some of the Jewish believers in Jesus were saying that the new Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to go to heaven. Ouch!

This was a turning point in church history. What would they decide? Was Christianity a Jewish sect? Besides belief in Jesus what was necessary for salvation?

There were strong feelings on both sides of the fence. Have you ever been in a heated meeting? Sometimes people are so fired up that they resort to name calling and character assignation to make their arguments. Fortunately, the church has God on its side to make things clear. And when it comes to salvation there was no room for haze.

What I like about the meeting in Acts 15 (from yesterday's and today's reading) is the clear-minded and sensitive thinking of the leadership. The answer to the problem was not to disregard the concern of the more strict Jewish believers nor was it to merely pacify. The truth of Jesus' death and resurrection was going to have an impact on the life of all believers and the message was always going to create controversy because of the unbelievable grace offered by God to fallen humanity.

Peter's recollection of the Cornelius episode and Paul and Barnabas recounting their work among the Gentiles was enough to silence the crowd. James then summed things up by saying that Scripture indicated that God had a plan for the Gentiles to come to Him. James said that they should not make it too hard for the Gentiles but only require them to do what would be good for them anyway. They were to stay away from idols which were operated by demons. They were to abstain from sexual immorality which would reflect God's purposes for holiness in their lives. And lastly, they were asked to not eat the meat of strangled animals or blood. This last requirement would be socially taboo for Jews and would be something that could divide the church if the Gentiles were not inclined to make this commitment. Otherwise, maybe it was for health reasons as well.

Peter had summed things up when he said, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we (Jews) are saved, just as they are (Gentiles)" Acts 15:11. The "requirements" themselves were not what saved, God's grace saves. These were things that would help to unite Christ's body into one. Like Paul said in Ephesians, "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs (with the Jews), members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). Changes are difficult and the apostles knew that it would take a while before the Jewish brethren were able to accept non-Jewish members into the Church.

From this meeting we get a good picture of God's love in motion in the Church. We also see how God was working behind the scenes to make His will clear to His people. Let's also apply the practice of being sensitive to others who are of a different tradition. It is too easy to lay judgments on groups before we really hear them out to see if they too are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Walk in grace,
God's blessings can happen at some meetings,
Pastor Steve

"The Lord Opened"

June 24 - Acts 16: 1-15

To My Friends In Christ,

What role did Jesus Christ play in your salvation? Now that's a loaded question, isn't it? We have already identified that salvation is in His name and in no other. The apostles were very exclusive with it came to the means of a person's eternal destiny, it was by and through Jesus Christ and not another. Peter just said in yesterday's reading that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's take a second and dissect His name.

Lord: Supreme ruler (or Exalted Ruler); the one in charge; the Leader. The unquestioned authority who is able to render decisions at His own discretion is the Lord of a place. Those who submit to Him are called servants and bondservants obviously because they are bound to Him. In Revelation Jesus is called the Lord of lords and the King of kings. And in Corinthians Paul says that there are lords many and gods many but to the church there was one Lord and God. "For although there may be 'so called gods in heaven or on earth - as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"-- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8: 5).

Jesus: the name means "God saves." It is the Greek for the Hebrew Joshua which means "the Lord is our salvation." At His birth the name was given specifically because it identified His mission. His name would be Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. His name is so significant because it is through faith in His name that a person receives eternal life.

Christ: means "God's anointed." The Christ would be God's deliverer as promised through the prophets. He is specifically mentioned in Psalm 2 and in Daniel 7. Paul had always thought that the Messiah would be a political deliverer. Once he met the Messiah on the road to Damascus he soon realized that the prophecies about the suffering servant of the Lord were verses about God's Messiah fulfilled in Jesus.

Paul's salvation experience had been very dramatic. Obviously it wasn't the norm. Yet, when Paul was out and about spreading the Word he sensed the Lord working in the hearts of his hearers. A few chapters earlier he recognized that a lame man had the faith to be healed. And when Paul and Barnabas were on the little island of Cyprus the governor believed after Paul had rebuked a sorcerer and caused him to be blinded. Paul saw the Lord working in the lives of those he was sent to share God's Word with.

God had clearly called the small band of missionaries to go to Macedonia, the continent where Philippi was located. Paul had seen a vision of a man pleading for him to come over and preach. When he got there the only group he could initially see was a small group of Jewish women who had met at the river for worship. Paul shared Jesus with them. He noticed that the Lord opened Lydia's heart so that she could respond to the message.

Interestingly, she was already a worshiper of God, but had not yet responded to the gospel of Jesus. As Paul preached to the women the Lord opened her heart and she put her faith in Jesus. Luke didn't record what happened to the others but only highlighted her, relating that she then invited them to her home for refreshment after her entire family had also believed and were baptized.

Do you recognize that your faith was a result of the Lord opening your heart? I know that when I first heard the good news I was strangely warmed by the message. I couldn't believe that God's love and grace were for me. Yet the Lord was making it clear to me that He loved me and had a plan for my life. My heart was opened like a lid on a jar had been twisted off and I could be poured out before God. Why hadn't I seen it before? Why hadn't I grasped the truth of God's Word in my earlier years? I think it is because of my unbelief and I needed the Lord's help to unscrew the lid. I needed the assurance that Jesus was real and that He had truly died for me. Once I was able to see that it was not a difficult decision to come to Christ.

Is it possible that there are "worshipers of God" today who have not yet come to Christ through the gospel? Absolutely! Paul had been a "worshiper," and he was as far from Jesus as possible. "Worshipers" may look very spiritual and appear to have their act together and still be separated from God. The gospels, and now Acts, makes it plain that a person must come to God through Jesus; he may not parade in on the merit of his own righteousness or religious affiliation or association with some "spiritual" person, he must come through the cross and believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

Hardness of heart is remedied by the gospel because once the Lord opens your heart you are ready to do all you can for the sake of the gospel. The gospel becomes the central focus in your life and you are no longer motivated by self-interests and disappointments and bitterness. Now you have a new heart, one that is pliable and tender to God and others.

God's blessings fill a soft heart,
Pastor Steve

Day 176

"You Bug Me!"

June 25 - Acts 16: 16-40

Be Open to God's Leading Today,

I once attended a sports awards banquet where a famous wrestling champion was the featured speaker. Actually he had excelled in wrestling at a national level but was more recently known for his exploits in the Ultimate Fighting cage. Have you ever caught one of those matches on cable? Two men are locked in a cage and fight with all parts of their bodies until one man is left standing or crawling or barely breathing. It is a brutal contest.

He had a couple of really good things to say that evening. He talked about having faith (he didn't say in what, but at least that isn't bad advice), then he said to believe in yourself (Ok), and then he talked about taking care of your body because you only had one and you'd have it all of your life (true indeed!). He said that we would all have to deal with difficult people, just the difference between us and him was that he was able to punch difficult people in the face. We all laughed. As a matter of fact, I'm still laughing but maybe I'd better think twice about it.

How often do I "punch" difficult people in the face by treating them as if they needed a good whooping? On the other hand, maybe sometimes a person does need a good "punch" in order to come to their senses. Maybe sometimes I am too nice to those who need a wake up call. How often do I put up with tough people hoping they will clam up and leave me and others alone when I really ought to let them have it in the chops.

I can hear someone saying that they don't think that attitude is very "Christian." Most of us equate being "Christian" with being nice. Well, being nice doesn't usually get you flogged like the apostles. Why was it that Paul was consistently healing from some new wound inflicted as a result of some authority's attempt to shut him up? What I'm not getting at is that believers ought to be bullies. That is clearly not a Christ-like way. At the same time though it is very Christ-like to be assertive and straightforward, especially when someone is resisting the work of the gospel. Later we will read in Thessalonians about Paul's frustration with certain Jews because they were like roadblocks in the way of others hearing the message of salvation. Paul there states that they will be judged by God for this posture.

When Paul and Barnabas are confronted by a fortune telling gal who brought much income for her brokers, the duo knew that they had a heckler on their hands. At first it might have appeared that she was for them because she was announcing that they were servants of God. Her theology may have been right but her technique was nothing but annoying. She went on like this for several days. At some point the apostolic party realized that she was demon possessed. It had been a spirit that was giving her the ability to predict the future. She may have seemed to be a friend but actually she was a distraction to the work of the gospel.

Do you have a difficult person in your life? Have you been putting up with them for too long? Does it appear that they have a different spirit? Is it time to take action?

Paul was at the end of his rope with this and turned and addressed, not the woman, but the spirit in her and essentially told it to get lost. The result was that the woman was relieved of the inward menace and Paul was relieved of the outward menace. Luke records these things with the interest of an artist who is painting his subjects. This was interesting stuff. This was the kind of thing that made for real life drama. I'm sure Luke must have been amazed at the power of the Lord.

Interestingly enough, Paul and Barnabas end up beaten and imprisoned for their efforts. They are not deterred though because they knew that the Lord would take care of them. Well, He did. Their jail time ended in the salvation of the jailer and his family. There we have one of the most famous dialogues in the Bible: "What must I do to be saved," the distraught Barney Fife says, and then Paul responds, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your household."

Have you prayed for that difficult person you are dealing with?

Have you addressed the "spirit" in them before you "punch" him/her?

Remember, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood," but against all kinds of wicked spirits who are real and who often control the difficult ones.

Make today an adventure - be open to sharing the good news with someone, who knows, maybe you'll end up down at the county jail. If you do, I'll come down and visit you.

God's blessings have a punch,

Pastor Steve

Day 177

"More Noble Character"

June 26 - Acts 17: 1-21

Most people are followers. Their attitude is "tell me what to believe and I'll believe it." "Peer pressure" for most simply means following a bad leader. Did you ever get in trouble because you were going with the wrong crowd? The friends we run with will and have had a big influence on our lives. Proverbs is full of verses that warn about having the right kind of friends. To be wise you need to find wise people and make friends with them.

Why is it that we usually want someone to just tell us what we ought to believe? Simply put, laziness. We don't want to do the hard work of thinking for ourselves and deciding what we think about our own well being. So we trust people and sometimes end up getting hurt or ripped off. A good salesman can make manure smell good. This is especially true in the world of religious scams. Just because someone sounds believable or looks believable doesn't mean he is peddling the real thing. Many false teachers have gone out into the world to prey on the unsuspecting. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" 2 Peter 2: 1.

Some people are inquisitive by nature. They want to know why? Others don't care why, they just want to know what works. If it makes life easier or more convenient or less obtrusive or more fun, then they are for it. This was the philosophy of the drug using generations. They'd say they weren't hurting anyone and were only wanting peace, but it was this same crowd that proliferated the sale of illegal narcotics and set an entire generation on the road of self-destruction because of the escalation of harder and harder drugs. The people who take the time to ask the tough questions are often the ones who avoid many of the pitfalls that others land in.

As Paul preached the message of Jesus, many believed. Some opposed. The ones who opposed usually incited a public outcry against the work of the apostles. When Paul got to Berea, he and Luke were impressed by their eagerness to check their Bibles to confirm the message of the apostles. They weren't going to just believe anyone. Even Paul, who had quite a strict background in Jewish affairs, theology included. They dug in and studied the passages Paul would quote and apply to the life

and teachings of Jesus.

I can remember lining up for class registration in college. The word would get out that if you wanted to skate through a certain course then you needed such and such teacher. So and so was the tough prof, so don't take him or you'd be working your tail off all term. But guess what, I always learned more in a tougher class. I once had a little 2 unit class where the teacher thought he was the only class I had. He piled the work on. I learned more from that class than many of my heavy 4 unit ones. The point is that hard work always pays off and will also keep you out of trouble. If you take the easy road, prepare yourself for a sloppy and less satisfying life.

I'll never forget something my uncle told my cousin after the first day she worked as a postal carrier. She was exasperated and wanted to give up after only one go around. She called her dad and laid the trouble she had had on him. She went on and on about just how impossible it was and how she couldn't find half of the places she was supposed to be and how dog tired she was and so on and so on. My uncle said to her, "That's why they call it work."

It is hard work to stay committed to someone or something. Marriage is hard work. School is hard work. Work is hard work. Reading your Bible and applying it to your life is hard work. The Bereans were of a more noble character because they worked hard to understand what the apostle was teaching. Did it pay off? If you dig into the Word it will always pay off. God's riches in His Word is the greatest treasure there is in life.

Let's work hard today and tomorrow. Why not? Let's take on the attitude that we are going to kick it hard for the next few days. Let's read our Bibles with more enthusiasm, let's take life on with greater trust in the promises of God. Let's believe the Scripture and live like our lives depended on it. What do you have to lose? Nothing! What do you have to gain? Everything! Let's be like the Bereans and dig deeper into the Word and mine out of it the kind of treasure that makes Wall Street look like a sidewalk lemonade stand. Go for it!!

God's blessings,

Pastor Steve

" Temples"

June 27 - Acts 17:22 - 18:8

I Hope You Are in Good Health Today,

From the beginning man has erected monuments and built magnificent structures for his gods. Why do we do this? I think there can be both positive and negative reasons. On the negative side would be things like: the need to contain our gods or corral them so that we could understand them; also, we may seek to appease them so that they will not squash us. Our buildings become sacrifices to maintain unity with them; another less desirable reason would be the desire to bring heaven to earth or, in other words, we may try to make the earthly into the heavenly. So we create our own little heaven on earth and are deceived into thinking that life will go on forever on this planet.

On the positive side might be: to simply show God that we appreciate Him and so we want to have a beautiful place that reflects His beauty and our desire to meet and praise Him there; or, the structures could reflect the gifts God gave to some in order to create masterpieces like those made for worship; or, a place is made to facilitate the gathering of God's people for worship and the focus is not on the place but on the Creator.

In the early eighties I was fortunate enough to go to the very place where Paul stood the day he addressed the Greek seekers and philosophers of his day which is recorded in our reading today. It was a thrilling feeling to be on that little hill, called Mars Hill and look up and see the famous Acropolis where the ancient Greeks paid homage to their gods. It was here that Paul pointed to the beautiful works of art and construction and talked about the Unknown God. As I stood on Mars Hill with the little tour group I had come with, one of our number got up and recited Paul's sermon by heart to us and others who gathered there. That was a memorable experience. God doesn't dwell in temples made by human ingenuity but He lives all around us and in those who have turned from their old way of life to the living God.

Later on that same trip I was able to visit the pyramids in Egypt and then we were on to Jerusalem which is highlighted by the eye-catching Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place that glows in its golden color as the sun shines down on it. In Paul's day there was also a temple in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord God. It was a temple that had been constructed after the Jews' return from captivity in the 400's B.C. and was renovated by King Herod in the first century B.C. There is a model of this temple to scale in the city today and from it you can gather a pretty good appreciation of its former splendor. For many, certain locations and temples and burial chambers are sacred places. When they visit them they feel close to their god or their forebears.

In every culture there is a belief of some sort that reflects that people's view of how we got here and what the "god (s)" expects of us. The basis of a great deal of these views is mythology or fantasy or tradition. Someone at some time came up with the idea and it stuck. In a number of cultures, especially African and Indian there is a belief that god, or the spirits of god, is everything and is in everything. The problem is that the "gods" are not always friendly and so the people live in fear and are constantly trying to make friends with these spirits. This belief is called animism.

Other cultures throughout history have bowed down to idols and have treated objects as their gods. This was a prevalent practice of the people in Canaan when Joshua led the troops in to conquer the land. Many Old Testament prophets spoke disparagingly of the practice of idolatry and pointed out the absurdity of making your own gods as if they could ever have any true power.

In our world today there is still a wide array of belief systems about deity.

Muslims: worship Allah, the god proclaimed by the "prophet" Mohammed. A Muslim hopes for eternal life and reward based on his commitment and obedience to the Koran.

Hindus: a system to appease the gods while journeying to godhood.

Buddhists: a plan for salvation (an 8-fold path) by the effort of man.

Jews: salvation through obedience to the traditions of their faith.

Mormons: a system built on non-Biblical "revelation" designed to create human perfection and eventually godhood.

Jehovah Witnesses: a system designed to invoke fear and obedience to its organizational leadership with the hope of good works rewarded with a future blissful life right here on planet earth.

Roman Catholics: a priestly system whereby a person can come to God as long as he is obedient to the system and maintains good works. (see my P.S. below)

To the Greeks in Athens and to the members of these organizations Paul would still say the same things: God is outside the limits of human ingenuity and purpose; God is not about the elaborate boxes we give Him to live in; God created all things, placed humans where He wanted them and He governs their lives because He wants men to know Him and worship Him as their Creator. Salvation is not the result of perfect religious form or having a system that seems to "work," it is a result of faith in the resurrected Jesus. A person must turn (repent) from his own futile thinking and lifestyle and embrace the living Jesus. Faith in Jesus saves.

Every religious system, whether it includes elements of Jesus or not, creates insecurity because the focus is not on Christ but on human effort or human

sincerity. A person is left to guess whether they are really good enough to make it into God's kingdom. Usually too, the system has to create a set of documents in order to corroborate their aberrant views.

The believer has not learned Jesus in this way. The believer is saved by grace through his faith in Jesus. He is guided by the sixty-six inspired books (39 of the Old Testament approved by the Lord Jesus and the 27 of the New approved by the Lord Jesus ahead of time; He said that the Spirit would oversee the establishment of His Words once He was gone and that the Spirit would bring back to mind the things about Him that would need to be recorded) of the Bible and is not swayed by the charisma of man or the words of any other "holy" writing. The believer is connected to Jesus as a branch is connected to a vine; he is one with his Lord and can be happy and joyful that the Lord has saved him.

Give thanks today if you are saved by grace!

Continue to leave the system of self-effort that you may have clung to in years past. Instead, look to the Lord for the security you need to follow the resurrected Jesus.

Note in Paul's sermon the simplicity of the gospel - no temples needed, no works trip necessary, no man-centered philosophy required; just Jesus and Him crucified and resurrected! All praise to His grace!!

God's blessings fall down outside buildings,

Pastor Steve

P.S. Let me try to make something as clear as I can. There can be and often are people who have attached themselves to various religious groups that are not Bible-centered who have sincerely at one time made a commitment to the Jesus of the Bible. In the meantime for whatever reason they may have been drawn away into a system that they are not fully aware of what is being taught by its leaders. For example, I believe Hindus and Muslims are much further off track than a Catholic, but I cannot help but identify non-biblical ideas and practices in the Catholic tradition. The fact that Catholics believe in the Trinity and Christ's deity gives me reason to hope in a common ground with them even though I struggle with their deification of Mary and their "saved by works" mentality. I am aware that this point may raise some eyebrows, but that's ok as long as it spurs us on to search the Scripture to see if these things are so.

" Apollos, Mighty in the Scriptures"

June 28 - Acts 18: 9 - 19:13

Recently I was talking with a couple who was having some serious marriage problems. If you are married then you know first-hand how tensions can run high in your relationship. This couple is facing relationship ending issues. One of the partners has addictions.

I could give advice.

I could help the couple to talk openly about their circumstances.

I could give them reassurance of one sort or another.

I could tell them what has worked for me when my marriage was struggling.

I could help them to get organized.

I did a portion of this list but all of these approaches fall short of the importance for them of getting into the Scriptures. It's one thing to tell someone what they should do and quite another to help them take up the "sword of the Spirit" and wield it against the enemies in their life. You've heard the lesson that it is much more productive to teach someone to fish rather than give them a fish. Psalm 119 boldly states, "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I may not sin against Thee." The Word has a powerful impact on the inward part of a person so that they can make changes on the outside.

And so I talked about getting into the Word and being filled with the Holy Spirit and the need for Christian fellowship. As I shared these simple truths, their interest level grew and grew. It gave them hope. I gave them something to lean on that was much bigger than me or my advice. It gave them the knowledge that God was bigger than their problem and that through Him they could find answers. We read from Romans 8 together.

Apollos was strong in the Word. He was a student of the Scriptures. He knew the Scriptures and where to take someone to show them the things about Jesus they needed to know. He was teachable because after Aquila and Priscilla heard him they pulled him aside and shared with him some of the essentials of the faith that he had not yet learned. Then Apollos is sent on his way to share the gospel and publicly tell people the things necessary to help them believe in Jesus.

Being a disciple (follower of Christ) means that we are students of Christ. We desire and are committed to following Him and imitating Him full-time. For many believers there is a specific time in their spiritual journey when they realize that being a Christian means not just Sunday and one evening during the week but 24/7. For me I was aware of this commitment from the time I first heard the gospel. The work of Christ on the cross and His love for me means to me complete commitment. How can we give Him only half of our hearts when He gave His all for us?

Apollos is a great role model for all of us. He should encourage us to study the Word like we never have before. What do we have to lose except our egotism that only weighs us down anyway. Apollos was mighty in the Scriptures. He knew what the Bible said. He was confident in his understanding of the Word. He could explain it to others as well and help them to come to know the Lord Jesus.

Let's go a little deeper this summer in the Word. Let's take more time to look up specific words that catch our attention and see how they are used in other chapters of the Bible. If you have access to a concordance then you can do this very easily. There is some good software or just a copy of Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible would do. By using the concordance you can expand your knowledge of the Bible by going deeper in this way. There are other tools for Bible study that can be helpful. I'll take some time in the future to expound on these things. In the meantime, take the time to dig deeper into the treasury of God's Word.

Be an Apollos.

Read, study and think about Bible truth. It will wash your soul and strengthen your heart.

Look for opportunities to share it with others. God's Word will help them more than we ever could.

God's blessings,

Pastor Steve

Day 180

" Who Are You?"

June 29 - Acts 19: 14-41

I love to see kids pretend and play in the land of make believe. Their little minds are circling away as they venture off into far away places in order to take on horrible creatures or explore new planets. What a gift the imagination is and what a sad thing it is when somewhere along the line we lose our ability to use our minds in a creative way. Some kids can play for hours with a stick and a ball. I remember that I used to imagine myself playing baseball for the Los Angeles Dodgers. I was out there at first base snagging line drives and grounders just like a pro.

One time I had a dream that I was playing shortstop for the Dodgers and we were at Candlestick Park in San Francisco playing the Giants. The dream was so real. Scary real. I can remember thinking that I hoped the ball wasn't hit to me. The crowd was shouting and the pitcher was winding up and the batter cracked one a mile high in the air somewhere above my head. I spun around a couple of times and fell to the ground before there was any hope of catching the ball. What a nightmare! I soon woke, relieved that I was only dreaming. It was cool to be on the team for an inning, though. That was the extent of my big league play.

I think kids need to really be encouraged to imagine. Pretending is a good thing and a creative thing growing up. I do think it unlocks something in our minds that helps us to think better. Sometimes we get too downright set in our thinking patterns and we need to be jarred out of the rut that we sink into. On the other hand, there are some very important areas where it is detrimental to pretend. When you pretend you are something you are not and try and convince others that you are that thing you can wind up in a world of hurt. Every week in every Christian church across the country there are pretenders. There are those who come to church and go through the motions; they might even look or act more spiritual than the real McCoys. A kid may pretend he is an astronaut and sit at the pretend controls of his spaceship and he might make rocket sounds and even spread his arms and zoom around the room, but no one really believes he is an astronaut. But if an adult pretends to be a Christian it can be very hard to spot his guise. He can learn all of the right lingo and he can get baptized and he can even teach a Sunday School class and at the same time be pretending all along. Sometimes the people in this position know they are pretending and sometimes they are so deceived they do not even know it.

The sons of an influential Jewish fellow named Sceva were impressed by Paul's ability to cast out devils. They thought they would practice the same thing in the way that Paul did it, using the name of Jesus as their trump card against the evil spirits. What they didn't realize was that the name of Jesus was not like a garlic necklace used to ward off Dracula. They also didn't realize that you had to be a follower of Jesus to use the authority that came with the name of Jesus. They could pretend as they did but they soon found out that they didn't have the authority they thought they could access by simply using the Name of Jesus.

They got beat up. They were shamed; the evil spirits even disrobed some of them. Picture the looks of terror on their faces as they flee the seen of their folly. They had pretended to be something they were not and the results for them were debilitating. Jesus said that in the end time some would call Him Lord and try to convince Him that they were true servants of His but He would respond to them that He never had made their acquaintance. Maybe they had even done some things in His name and had impressed others, but in the end it turns out they were only pretending. They were the great pretenders. They were in it for other reasons than the love of God. As a matter of fact, there are some aspects of Christianity that do draw the pretenders: the need to have a family - sometimes people come and tolerate the spiritual practice of the faith so that they can be accepted by a Christian church family; answers to prayer - they see spiritual things happening and want to think they are part of it but in reality they have not made a commitment to Jesus, to follow Him; they may enjoy certain aspects of a worship service like the music - they feel inspired to be a better person when they are around others who are worshipping God and they do enjoy the upbeat music but they still have not embraced Jesus; they may want to feel important - many people have made up grandiose stories of how God has done this or that in their life only to be applauded by others. Some have even admitted later that it was all a hoax and that they really did not have the experiences they once claimed; people want to be considered spiritual - they think it is important to have a spiritual M.O. so they put on a spiritual pretend front to feel "spiritual."

Who are you?

A child of God through faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross?

Have you crossed the line of faith by putting your hope in the work of Christ?

Let's not be like the person in this famous Platters song:

The Great Pretender

Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell
Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Adrift in a world of my own
I've played the game but to my real shame
You've left me to grieve all alone
Too real is this feeling of make-believe
Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal
Yes I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around
Too real is this feeling of make-believe
Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal
Yes I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around

Let's live our faith sincerely today.
God's blessings should not be misused,
Pastor Steve

Day 181

"We All Need It"

June 30 - Acts 20: 1-38

My son and I used to watch boxing. I know some of you think I have a screw loose somewhere but isn't it better that I just tell you about my problems rather than hide the truth. Sometimes we watched Classic ESPN where they showed old big time fights like with Mohammad Ali or George Foreman (you know, the guy who sells hamburger grills now) or Joe Frasier or Mike Tyson. It was a point of connection for my son and I - that justifies it, doesn't it?

Well, once we were watching a kickboxing match and this one guy was getting the tar beat out of him.

He'd get knocked down and then up he'd pop and then down he'd go and then up and finally the referee stopped the fight. I was glad to see it end because every time he got up he looked a bit more bruised and dazed. The poor guy was getting dominated and no matter what he did there was no relief. He was helpless against his foe.

I couldn't help but think that the poor bloodied man was a picture of so many people today. So many people that we know are getting bloodied and battered in life and they get knocked down and they get up, but when they arise something is taken out of them. The drive is gone, the will to fight is stunned. They have sort of a far away look in their eyes and you can feel with them that they feel doomed. Can you relate? So what do you do when you feel like you are on the ropes or you have a friend who is on the ropes and they appear to have already lost before the fight is over? Can they be saved by the bell? Can they take a time out and get their act together before the next round? Where do they turn when they ache all over?

Remember the Rocky saga? Remember when he is practically out of it and he's sitting in his corner with swollen eyes and he cannot see a thing and he says to Mick, his trainer, "Cut me, Mick!" He was at his lowest low so many times in that five film series that we were always rooting for a comeback even though we were pretty sure Rocky would come through. What I like most about those films was the training segments in them. Rocky was certainly the underdog most of the time, but he trained like there was no tomorrow. He really went for it. Remember when he ate the raw eggs and went for a run through the streets of Philly? That was determination. Rocky had the inspiration of his trainer, of Adrian his wife, his "kid," and others throughout the series. It was these people who gave him the inspiration to go on when he was low. All of us need ENCOURAGEMENT to fight the good fight.

A good part of Paul's ministry was about encouraging the church. He wanted those who had received Jesus to go on with Him and continue to grow with Him. He was consistently revisiting believers in various cities and encouraging them in their faith. He was also constantly contending against adversaries who would spread false reports about him in order to discourage the faith of new babes in Christ.

Paul's letters were meant to encourage also. So that is a major purpose of the Bible. It was written to encourage you in your faith in Jesus. If you get discouraged then you should be able to find encouragement from the pages of your Bible. One of my favorite verses about Scripture is found in Romans 15. It says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (verse 4). Do you need hope? Do you feel like you're headed for the canvas? Are you dazed by life's ups and downs? God invites us to find help in the Scriptures. We can go there and drink as if from a living well of spiritual nourishment and life-giving energy.

We all need encouragement. We all are bombarded by spiritual foes who seek to bring us down. We all need to be cleansed and refreshed daily by the forgiving grace and blood of Jesus. We all need to stay alert to the temptations that can stir us off course. Where do you go when you are down? Do you get up, ready to fight again, but in the back of your mind you know you're going down again? If so, regroup. Take a one time defeat in order to go back to the training room and train like you've never trained before.

Rocky and Adrian had just had their first baby, but in the process Adrian almost died and was barely hanging on to life. Rocky, against his own will and desire, had decided not to fight any longer in order to please her. He's leaning over her at her hospital bed and she whispers for him to bend closer so she can say something to him. "Win." Rocky, in his fumbling way says, "Huh?" "Win." Mick, standing by the bed says, "What are we waiting fer?"

Let me say to you today, "Win." "Go back into training and go to battle again with more determination and fight than you have ever had. Don't allow past defeats to discourage you."

"What are we waiting fer?"

God's blessings happen in the ring of life,

Pastor Steve

"Even If"

July 1 - Acts 21: 1-26

People with a singular focus are a pain in the neck. Why can't they talk about anything else but what they are into? Why can't they listen to what you are into for a change and lighten up a bit? Why is it that every time you are around them they have to be talking about...you know...what they are into? They don't care if "their thing" is difficult, dangerous or offensive to others. They are into it and that is that!

Even if a person like this bugs you, you have to admire their drive for what they believe in, don't you? They are not wishy-washy or unclear. Everyone around them knows what they are about. When I was in high school I had a golf club in my hand all of the time. Any one who knew me knew I was driven to be the best I could be at it. When I wasn't playing golf I was thinking about it, even though I would admit I thought about girls too. But golf was most important. I ate, slept and breathed golf.

Some of you might think that was an inferior goal. That is the usual response by those who do not see the importance of what you think you are doing. Everyone has a right to their own opinion. But it is still, to some degree, a good thing to be focused, directed and energized in a way that produces results. Even if golf was an inferior pursuit it still gave me something to shoot for and a purpose to get out of bed in the morning and pursue. I think this happens to quite a number of people. They dedicate themselves to something and then later in their life find a higher purpose but they already know what it means to be on a mission for something so they insert that same kind of enthusiasm into the thing that makes their motor run.

The Apostle Paul was like this. He says in his letters to the churches that there was really no one like him in his pursuit for the traditions of the Jewish elders. He was an ardent advocate for Judaism's road to salvation. He lived for it and stood up for it and persuaded others to do the same. So when Paul was found by the risen Lord he immediately applied his fervor to the service of Jesus.

Some liberals in our day think that the things recorded by the evangelists in the first century were made up later, maybe in the second or third century A.D., as a way to promote their ideas and religion. They would say that the experiences of Paul and others were made up as teaching tools to help us become good people. Those thoughts are a thousand miles south of bogus. Every credible eyewitness in the first century who knew Paul would be able to attest to the fact that this man was now obsessed with the crucifixion and resurrection of the Man from Galilee. If a first century person were to sit down with a modern critic and talk about these things the eyewitness would be looking at the modern scholar with a quizzical expression thinking, "Is this person nuts or something?" Who would know better: a first century associate of Paul like Luke or Barnabas or a modern "scholar" who is looking back after two-thousand years? You be the judge.

But putting all of that aside there are really bigger fish to fry in this section of Scripture we are reading today. The question is: Why would Paul journey to Jerusalem knowing that he would most likely be persecuted or killed for his testimony about Jesus? The answer is merely an echo of what we were saying above. Paul was on mission. He had a singular purpose and that was to bring the gospel to all men. It didn't matter to him regarding his own safety because he knew the Lord would be with him no matter what. And even if the church was, out of deep concern for him, trying to persuade him to not go he would go anyway because he felt he needed to talk in Jerusalem about the grace of God.

I think there is another reason as well. I think

Paul wanted to clarify for the Jews that he was not anti-Jew. How could he be, he was one, but he has been so misunderstood because of his stand for Jesus. He also knew that the church in Jerusalem, led by James the brother of the Lord, needed the affirmation that Paul, the well-known revolutionary for Jesus, was not trying to make a Jew into a Gentile. Paul's mission was to bring Jesus' Messiahship into the forefront of Jewish life and religious practice. This idea was met with opposition by the elders of the Jews.

Where are you going?

What do you stand for?

When people think about you who or what do they associate you with?

Is it time to make a greater resolve about your connection to Jesus?

If so, let's begin in prayer and let God know that we want Him to be the center of our lives. With Christ at the center, before you know it, He will work in your life from that place and make a way for you and I to make Him known to others. Not all of us will have the influence of a Paul, no doubt, but all of us can be inspired by his life. Let's be.

God's blessings push us to do the unthinkable,

Pastor Steve

Day 183

" Paul's Mission"

July 2 - Acts 21:27 - 22:21

I have always admired artists. I also marvel at the people who have been involved in creating great things like giant ships or large suspension bridges or tall buildings. The brain power and creativity behind these projects in pretty amazing. All of these feats are a picture of the God who made the men and women who make the things that dazzle us. I think we have to be careful too, because remember what happened when the Tower of Babel was built as a monument to man's greatness? It stood as an indication to the builders and those who watched it that man could be his own god and that he really didn't need his Creator.

Museums are made so that we can admire the more amazing things in life. There is a museum for almost any pursuit man has endeavored. They say that at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., you can spend days walking the hallways and gawk at all of the things on display from history. Museums can glorify God or they can glorify man. When we admire we are not far from worship, are we? We admire and we allow our will and our passions to move toward the object that we are looking at.

Religions, like museums, are halls of fame where the most "spiritual" among them is exalted. Religion promotes competition and rivalry. The reason for this is that the ladder for success is based on a person's standing and progress in that particular religious system. The more a person excels in the system the more esteem he receives from his fellows. Pretty soon after he has reached the top of the ladder he becomes the object of admiration and envy. He has arrived. He has demonstrated that he can achieve spiritual superiority over the rest and so he is worthy of museum-like status. He has become the Jack Nicklaus of his religion. So when he is dead the things associated with him are also memorialized along with his memory.

This is true because religious systems are based on performance. It's a gold star mentality. Depending on the amount of effort you put out you will be able to earn stars. Hopefully, but not assuredly, you might

make it through the pearly gates as long as you have enough stars in your "works bag." This was Paul's mentality too before he came to Jesus. He would have been in the Who's Who of religious zealots. If salvation were measured by works then Paul would have been first in line. Many times through the letters to the churches he has to appeal to his former life to make sure people know that his boasting was not in himself but in Christ. As a matter of fact, Paul thought all such boasting was vain.

In our reading today Paul's arrest and speech on the steps of the prison are recorded for our benefit. Paul was using this very volatile situation as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus to his Jewish brothers. What I'd like to focus on is the mission that the Lord entrusted to him at the time of his new found faith in Jesus. We can learn much from this speech about boldness and using opportunities for the Lord, but today let's zero in on the apostle's call.

Ananias was used by God to send Paul on his way. I find four elements in the commission of a man who would change the world. First of all God would show him what His will was. Later in the letters Paul would say that the mystery of the gospel was made known to him through revelation. God would clarify over and over to him the message and application of the gospel. God's will became a central theme and would dominate his life. This was also a theme in Paul's prayers. He wanted to know and do the will of God and wanted the church to do the same.

Secondly, Paul would "see the Righteous One." Think about that. A number of times throughout his ministry he would meet up with the risen Jesus. Whether through a vision or a personal encounter, he would have the privilege of having personal instruction by the Master. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says, "And last of all He was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." When Ananias met with him he had already had his experience on the road where he had seen Jesus, but now he was referring to future times when he'd see Jesus.

Next, Ananias said that he'd hear words from His mouth. He'd hear the voice of Jesus. Audibly? Probably. In his heart or spirit? For sure. Spiritually by the Holy Spirit? Certainly. Jesus spoke to Paul. Jesus led him from one place to another and gave him instructions so that he could admonish the church and give the church words that would later guide the church for centuries. Paul would refer to spiritual understanding when he prayed for the church. This, no doubt, would come as a result of hearing the Word of the Lord from the mouth of the Lord Jesus.

Lastly, Paul would be a witness of his experiences with Jesus. He'd have opportunities to share with others the good news of salvation through the Messiah Jesus. This was exactly what he was doing that day in Jerusalem when the crowd went crazy with hatred of him and wanted to kill him. We too can take the opportunity to tell others about what Jesus has done in our lives. Has the Lord given you hope? Has He given you security? Do you now know the peace of God that passes human understanding? Do you enjoy the gift of eternal life that Jesus earned on the cross for you? If so, you will not be a museum piece, you will be a living disciple of the Master who will reflect His glory to others and boast in the cross and not in your own righteousness.

God's blessings put us on mission,

Pastor Steve

Day 184

" The Lord Stood Near"

July 3 - Acts 22:22 - 23:11

My girlfriend was going to meet me in about a half hour at the bandstand in Disneyland so that we could spend the night celebrating our high school graduation. In the meantime I was goofing around with a few friends and was really enjoying the frivolity of it all. There was no better feeling than finally being finished with school and books and teacher's dirty looks. Well, this one girl who had been a friend of mine for some time ran up to me and landed in my lap. I was laughing and she was laughing and...you guessed it, my girlfriend came along. She bee-lined it straight ahead and away and I just assumed she'd cool down and come around. She didn't. I sat and waited for a while. My other friends were already away too, waiting in line for the rides, etc. Now you can really feel sorry for me. Yep, I spent the night circumventing the labyrinth called the "happiest place on earth."

I think rejection and loneliness are two of the cruelest devils one could come up against. It's kind of like being kicked when you are down. When someone puts you off, along comes the blues to rub it in. They are also pretty unrelenting kind of like the grip of a pit bull. You can try to do stuff to feel better but actually it will take some time to get over the intensity of the emotion of it all. Look at me; I'm still crying the blues after forty years. I was robbed of a good time at a time in my life when a good time was what it was all about. You'd think I would have met up with someone that night I knew, but no, I spent the entire night with me, myself and I. The park was so crowded with grads from schools all over that I didn't run into a single soul I knew. About two in the morning I think I began to hallucinate because I thought I saw my girl in other's faces but every time I zeroed in I was wrong. I spent the whole bus trip home glaring at her. I was ticked!

If you have ever met these beasts (I mean rejection and loneliness, not a girl) then you too understand the hopelessness they provoke. We were meant for fellowship with friends and family and it is cruel when we are isolated from human love and affection. We need others. We need to be connected to others. If not, I think eventually we will dry up in some way. How many people do you know who have isolated themselves from others and spend most of the time entertaining themselves and getting intoxicated? Loneliness is an ache that needs a healing ointment, it doesn't just go away on its own.

Most of us begin with our relationships with others before we even consider a relationship with God. All human relationships are just a small picture of the fount of all relationships which springs from the heart of God. That is why Jesus spoke of God in such personal terms. He was to be addressed as "Father." He was not some abstract out of the way deity, He was a "Daddy." He could be approached and related to in closer terms than we would look to our own fathers for, for our identity and security.

The Apostle Paul was a man who knew the difficulties of life. In his Corinthian letters he chronicles some of the hardships that he encountered. He went through it all and we'll save our thunder for when we reach those books. For now let's simply state that Paul was a man who had a rugged way. He also had a big heart for people as well. It just killed him when they resisted the gospel. His mission was to save them but so often they only ridiculed him and the message of the gospel.

Did Paul need encouragement? Who doesn't? We all need it and the apostle is not exception. After the tumult in Jerusalem "the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" Paul knew at that point that Jesus would deliver him from the hungry wolves who were making vows to do him in. The Lord stood by him and spoke to him just like Ananias had said He would do in the beginning when Paul received his initial orders from the Lord.

Friend, take courage in Jesus because He is standing next to you as well. Don't let the world or the devil or your wandering mind lead you off course. Jesus is standing by and He will encourage you. He will infuse you with courage. Don't you find it interesting that Luke records that the Lord was standing by Paul? Jesus lived in him but at this juncture Paul needed to know that He was standing by and would guide him on his way.

He will guide you as well. He is not finished with you. He has plans for you and will speak to you and show you the way to go.

Why not trust that the Lord will be your strength on the right and on the left? Why not stake your faith on the solid rock of God's love and grace in Jesus. Jesus had you in mind when He was being crucified and when He was raised He raised you with Him forever. Rejoice!!

God's blessings are standing right by you,
Pastor Steve

Day 185

"Hungry Yet??"

July 4 - Acts 23: 12-35

Have you ever hated someone so much you wished they were dead? Some must because people end up that way; dead, I mean. I don't think I have ever really hated someone that much but there was a girl; she left me for someone else. That was a devastating time in my life. It felt like the glass of my soul was shattered. I don't think she even realized how much damage she had caused. I cannot say I didn't have brutal thoughts about her demise. Then as time and forgiveness teachings passed by, I didn't want to see her harmed any longer.

The Apostle Paul was hated because of his stand for Jesus. Paul could not and would not keep his mouth shut when it came to talking about the risen Christ. In Jerusalem this became a more acute problem because of the anti-Christian sentiment among the Jews there. You have to wonder what the other apostles were enduring as well. There were various persecutions which drove many believers out of the "City of Peace." And actually in Paul's case, he was trying to be careful about not offending the Jewish brass. It didn't work because they were ready to kill him. They could not accept the teaching that Jesus was alive from the grave. It didn't set well with them because they realized the ramifications of making a commitment to Jesus. In some cases it would mean rejection by their families. As you may know from experience, Jews are a very tight knit people and very proud and very slow to make any major shifts in their belief system. Jesus didn't fit their thinking and that was that.

More than forty men had made a vow not to eat or drink until Paul was dead. And so they formed a conspiracy to kill him in ambush the day after he entered the prison barracks. Unbeknownst to them though Paul's nephew got wind of the plot and blew the whistle. The Roman commander then made plans to transport Paul safely up north to the Roman governor for a fair trial. What a surprise this must have been for the conspirators. I wonder how many died of starvation. You know, in their culture if you made a vow, you kept the vow.

It wasn't Paul's time to die. God has our times in His hands. He knows when we'll be born and

when we will die. No one can change the plans of the Lord when it comes to life and death; Jesus holds the keys to life and death. It was not Paul's time. During Jesus ministry, he said several times that His time was not yet. In other words, Jesus knew what God's timetable was and the plans of man would not interfere with the divine plan.

One of my favorite Psalms is the second one. It pictures man plotting against the Almighty. He makes his plans in secret to undo the will of God and the Lord God is in the heavens and he laughs because He knows the end of all men and He sees the arrogance of man and all his plans but knows that His plans will stand no matter how fearsome man may be. Listen to how the Message describes Psalm 2:

Why the big noise, nations?
Why the mean plots, peoples?
Earth-leaders push for position,
Demagogues and delegates meet for summit talks,
The God-deniers, the Messiah-defiers;
"Let's get free of God!
Cast loose from Messiah!"
Heaven-throned God breaks out laughing,
At first he's amused at their presumptions;
Then he gets good and angry.
Furiously, he shuts them up:
"Don't you know there's a King in Zion? A coronation banquet
Is spread for him on the holy summit."

Man plans his way and the Lord directs his steps. The group of 40+ were hot in pursuit of doing their own will and didn't realize that God had different ideas. God still had work for Paul to do and until God was done with him there would be no murder.

Do you trust in the daily sovereignty of God in your life? Do you realize that nothing can happen to you today without the Lord first going before you to guide your steps? For God, all of history is on delay mode. Once a friend of mine was at a baseball game at Anaheim Stadium in California. I was talking to him on the phone and watching the game at the same time on TV. It struck me weird that he was calling the action about 5 seconds before it was shown on TV. There was a delay. My friend wanted to bet me on what would happen next because, of course, he knew what would happen before I did. Well, God knows the end from the beginning. The difference is that He can work in the hearts and minds of the players and give the players certain abilities and affect the judgment of the umps. And God is more involved in the game of life than we really know. Remember how big and smart and mighty He really is.

We can trust in His sovereignty because He loves us in Jesus Christ.

God's blessings,
Pastor Steve

" A Clear Mind"

July 5 - Acts 24: 1- 27

I Hope Your Day is Bright,

Someone once said that "the mind was a horrible thing to waste," and I think I'm with them on that. Scientists say we only use a very small portion of it and I have found that the portion we do use can sometimes play tricks on us. The mind is one more indication that God is the Creator of all things. God thinks.

We were made in the image of God.

We think. Unfortunately, not at God's level.

Like a healthy body, a healthy mind doesn't just happen. It needs to be fed and exercised in order to function at maximum capacity. The mind is like the control center of the soul. I define the soul as the person. So the soul encompasses the mind and conscious and sub-conscience, spirit, and body. We call people "souls," don't we? We'll say things like, "that poor soul is really going through a tough time." When we say this we mean the person. Anyway, the mind is like control central for every other function of the person. When the mind is being used productively then the person will be successful. When the mind is being wasted then the person will waste his life.

How do you think? How's your brain? What's playing on the screen of your conscious mind? Are you happy with the way you think or do you get discouraged because your thoughts sometimes get out of control? What have you been feeding your mind lately? Let's take some time to think about the way we think. In our reading today the apostle Paul gives us a line about his own thinking that will help us to refresh our minds.

Some people have disturbing thoughts on a regular basis. If this is true of you I feel for you and would encourage you to seek out a qualified pastoral counselor who can help you work through this problem. Most of us have disturbing thoughts on an intermittent basis. If you've ever been driving along and had a thought like, "I could drive this car right into opposing traffic and cause a horrible accident," you are not the first to think this way. Now most people who have that thought will immediately get a grip on their senses and not allow their brain to connect with their arms and hands. Instead they will say something to themselves like, "that's a dumb thought, I'd never do something like that; where in the world did that thought come from?" Those who get these aberrant thoughts on a more regular basis can begin to consider following through and doing something tragic. But even if they don't there is still a struggle just because they had the thoughts. They think there must be something wrong with them.

One of the things that has helped me more than anything is to remember that you can only have one thought at a time. Admittedly, some get these singular ideas one after another in rapid-fire motion and find it hard to control them, but they are still only thinking one thought at a time. Why this is helpful is that if you can corral the thoughts one at a time and examine them then you can do something about them. A person struggles when his thoughts seem to be out of control.

And you can also redirect your thoughts down other more healthy avenues when you realize that you have detoured off into murky territory. It is amazing to me how that sometimes in the morning I will wake up and be so off in my thinking that my mind feels like it is on a roller coaster. If I do not have the capacity to say something like, "wait a minute, that's not the way I want to think, I'm going to change my way of thinking about this so that I am not going down a destructive path; I want to think God's thoughts from His Word and not thoughts that would be hurtful to me or others." If I could reason like that, then I'd be much better off.

It is also helpful to bounce your thoughts and ideas off of someone else who you can trust. They act like a sounding board so that you can clarify the way you are thinking. A trusted friend can save you a lot of heartache by helping you to crystallize the direction your mind is going. When we have mentally backed ourselves into a corner we often need a loving hand to guide us back on track. Do not be afraid to run things by someone you trust. That's why they are your friend, and they will save you from the misery of being a captive to your own bad thinking.

Another helpful mind matter is learning to roll thoughts over in your mind before you jump on a bandwagon and take a bumpy road. In other words, you do not have to accept every thought that knocks on the door. Step back and think about whether you want to entertain what you see through the eye hole. Don't panic. Don't go with the first idea in knee-jerk fashion. Rather mull over what presents itself. You be in control of your own control center. You are the king of your own castle. Now it is also very helpful to start your day off with prayers of commitment to Jesus. Then you can turn over to him the throne of the castle so that He can rule in your heart and mind and help you deal with the predatory thoughts that

are thieves and cruel.

In Paul's defense statement he says to the ruler, "So I strive always to keep my conscious clear before God and man." There is nothing more healthy than living with a clear and clean conscience. When your conscience is not bothering you there is so much more freedom and you will be able to think much more clearly because you do not have that pesky voice constantly reminding you of what a bum you are. Let me add a couple of other Bible verses into this discussion. The first is from Hebrews, which says, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9: 14). The death of Jesus frees us from the guilt that has weighted us down and gives us liberty from the accusations against us. The Bible is clear that those transgressions were nailed to the cross when the loving Savior died for our sins. The blood of Jesus brings us to God and concurrently washes us from all defilement of the conscience. Be free!

Secondly is a passage of Scripture in one of John's little letters at the end of the Bible, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him, for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask we receive from Him because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him" (1 John 3: 18-22). Your conscience may be upsetting you even when you have already asked for forgiveness. At that point you have to trust that God knows it all and that He has forgiven you and you can from that point go on and serve Him. The more you serve the more your heart will be assured that you are a forgiven person.

Paul desired to keep his conscience clear. He didn't want his mind to be a distraction in his work for God. Therefore, he kept things right with God through confession and forgiveness and he treated those who hurt him with the forgiveness that God had given to him. He would often commit a tough person to the Lord so that the Lord Himself could deal with them and then he went on to do his business.

Before we go here is a couple of other brain strengtheners:

Read.

Write out your thoughts. Keep a journal.

Memorize Philippians 4:8.

Bounce your thoughts off of the Word rather than your experience.

Know your mind. Then make allowances so you can exercise it on a regular basis.

Relieve your guilt to God and a trusted friend who will pray with you.

God's blessings help our mental state,

Pastor Steve

" At A Loss"

July 6 - Acts 25: 1-22

I waited my turn in line. I wouldn't admit that I was nervous but really I was. After all, I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of twenty-five junior high kids. We were on a week long field trip at the Catalina Island Marine Science Institute. What a place! We snorkeled, petted sharks, handled all kinds of sea life like sea anemones, star fish, and more; we discovered the hidden world of plankton, and wondered through

museums replete with shark and dolphin and whale skeletons. It was a wonderful learning experience.

Everyone was anticipating the nocturnal animal lesson and then the simulation of an experience that would take you into the world of a night creature. You know, the ones like bats and owls where they do their thing at night while the rest of us should be sleeping? We all lined up outside what looked like a little house or maybe more accurately described as a large shed. On the outside was two doors, one for entry and one for exit. To go in you had to bend down and crawl on your knees. The man in charge would open the door and let one student in at a time and then he'd shut the door until that student was a ways in then he'd let someone else in.

In line, the kids were asking me if I'd be entering and I gave them no indication that the butterflies were at work inside me. "Sure, no problem," I said, as I watched another student disappear into the dark world within. When you entered there was a sudden realization that you were in a tight and pitch dark place and there was no turning back unless you wanted the razzing of the crowd outside. Besides, they'd never let me live it down.

Bam, the door shut behind me. Now I was committed. My claustrophobia kicked in and I could feel the narrow walls moving in on me. I was feeling warm and nervous. Determined not to be humiliated I crawled onward and upward. Yes, there were ups and downs and slides and turns and other kids in there making weird sounds, but I kept on going sometimes having to push myself through very narrow places. All the time you couldn't see a thing, not even your hand if you were to hold it up to your face. Finally I made it to the end and maintained my hero status. I was not going to let the darkness and narrowness of that place humble me. But, O, what a feeling when I stepped out of darkness into the moonlit evening and breathed again the fresh air of this little island in the Pacific.

We start our journey in life in much the same way as I looked in that dark place. John says that men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (3: 18). I was crawling around in the darkness and that is not unlike the way most of us navigate ourselves through life. We crawl and we squeeze and we struggle and we seek and we feel like there is darkness all around us. So we get used to the darkness and even begin to appreciate it for what it is and then even start to love it. It is amazing how we can adapt to the only environment that we know.

In John's gospel the evangelist says that Jesus taught the necessity of a new birth by the Spirit of God before a man could come out of the darkness and have a new spiritual life. Until then he was destined to live in darkness, surrounded by all of the obstructions to finding light. Paul mentions to Timothy in one of the pastoral letters that men who oppose the gospel are being led along by the devil and are taken captive to do his will. It is a perilous condition. Man may think he is free but in reality he is a pawn in the devil's hand. Paul says that the only way to penetrate this darkness is to share the truth and pray that God would grant the person repentance so that he might come to the truth and escape the grip of the evil one.

After Festus took the ball from Felix he began to govern and found that he had inherited Paul's case from his predecessor. Paul's case was a mystery to him. In regard to Paul's claims about Jesus and the resurrection "he was at a loss how to investigate such matters" (Acts 25:20). These kinds of questions were foreign to him and he would much rather send his famous prisoner back to Jerusalem where they could more accurately deal with the issues he was raising. Paul knew that if he went back south the Jews would kill him and so he had appealed to Caesar in Rome. It was the right of a Roman citizen to do this and so Paul would be on his way there as soon as a sailing vessel was available.

Spiritual matters are only understood by those who are spiritual. Festus was not capable of even beginning deliberations when it came to the kinds of things that set Paul against his countrymen. Today this is just as true. Most men are oblivious to the truth of God's Word. When they hear of the resurrection of Jesus and the need to receive Him as their forgiver and leader, they are put in a quandary. But if the Holy Spirit moves on their hearts then they will be born again (born from above, or born anew) and will be able to understand the things of the Spirit.

Sometimes people will say that they don't believe in Jesus because they cannot see Him. If he'd appear to them and talk to them then they'd believe they say.

But the truth is that the vast majority did not believe in Jesus even after they saw Him do many miracles. How could this be? Why didn't so many more come to Him? I believe because they were lost in darkness and didn't want to come to Christ and have their evil deeds exposed. They loved darkness. The truth is that when the Spirit works in a child of God's heart he knows internally that God is real and is alive. He then submits to God and wants to follow after Him. Until then, he will wallow in his own unbelief and selfish ambition and pride and moral depravity.

If you have already come to Christ and are experiencing Him at work in your life then you have much reason to be grateful. You have come out of darkness and are now in light. You can understand truth and the message of the gospel and the Bible. You are a spiritual person. Paul has much to say about this in the book of Corinthians. We'll get there before you know it and will take up this discussion there. Until then, be grateful that the light has dawned in your life and you have been given light through God's Spirit. Jesus said, "No man can come to me unless the Father draws him" (John 6).

God's blessings are a powerful force in our lives,
Pastor Steve

Day 188

"Goads"

July 7 - Acts 25:23-26:23

When you look back over your life can you see signs that God was at work all along? For example, I can remember praying at a very early age, even before anyone had ever instructed me about prayer. Why would I do that? Does a person just up and pray out of wishful thinking in the hope that maybe there is someone out there or does he pray because God has built into him a need for God? I believe it is the latter. Our conscience is always at work trying to push us towards God and truth and right. That's why we would cringe when we did wrong or were under the disapproving eye of some adult as we grew up. I hated to be feeling guilty. I wanted to do the right thing even when I would deliberately choose the wrong thing. I, like the typical child at many points, was rebellious.

In Romans two, Paul alludes to the gift of the conscience. He talks about how we are all at the mercy of our own conscience because it does a good job accusing us when we are in the wrong. It can acquit us as well, but it is those times when it points its bony finger at our heart and warns us not to go "there" again. We then know that we have done wrong and are in the danger zone of life. Not a good place. Paul uses the conscience not to highlight that man is innocent before God; rather, he points out that even before we knew Jesus or understood why He came, we were guilty, all of us, of doing the very things we knew were wrong and contradicted the will of God that we knew instinctively because we were made by God.

Our conscience can act as a goad and punish us until we move in the right direction. The problem is that we often have already done enough damage already before we begin to turn the ship around. Paul says that Jesus told him he had been getting goaded for some time before that fateful day on the road to Damascus. Before we discuss this let's get a good description of what a goad was in Paul's day: "It is a strong pole about eight feet long and two inches in diameter. At one end is a sharp point for pricking the oxen when their movements became intolerably slow, and at the other end is a broad chisel like blade,

which is used to clear the plowshares of the roots and thorns which impede it, or of the stiff clay which adheres to it. The pointed end of the instrument is alluded to in Acts 9:5 and 26:14" (Manners and Customs of the Bible, Freeman). Have you ever felt poked by God? Paul did?

We do our best before finally coming to Jesus to ignore or minimize or complain about the goads. We have had prodding by the Holy Spirit throughout our lives; sometimes they came through observation and sometimes through conscience and sometimes through the Word and sometimes through the lives of others. In Psalm 19 David said that the voice of God has gone out in all the earth. In Romans 1 Paul says that man is without excuse because God can be known in His creation. Goads, goads, goads, there are goads everywhere. Just the fact that man has been designed by God ought to make him curious about his roots. How did my body become so complex? Why does it feel like I have a soul or an inner person who feels deeply and thinks purposely and desires longingly?

Maybe one of Paul's goads was the stoning of Stephen. Paul never says he was a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus; I would think that he would have mentioned that if he had been. But he was there as a young man when his leaders took up stones and began to bash the erudite preacher. Remember, Stephen prayed for his accusers, like Jesus, asking God to forgive them for what they were doing. Could it be that the kind of peace and tranquility Stephen was experiencing at the time could have been a goad in Paul's side? Did it get him thinking about how this man could act this way under the most extreme pressure? It probably impressed him greatly even though at that point the budding Pharisee would not have been able to admit his impression.

It's also possible that Paul had done some studying regarding the church's claims about the Old Testament's statement about the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. Once Paul is saved by the grace of Jesus he wastes no time opening up these scriptures to others who did not believe in Jesus. He seemed to know right where to turn almost immediately. Could he have been burning the midnight oil some days while pouring over the prophecies of Messiah and thinking how in the world he would contradict the Christian claim that Jesus was the fulfillment of them? It's possible.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. These are three powerful goads that are at work in the lives of your friends and family members who have not yet heeded the good news. It would be good to pray that they would turn to Jesus and stop resisting the prods that the Spirit has put in their life.

God will also use us to lovingly goad our loved ones who need the Lord. Through a variety of means God will remind them that they need Him. You can pray. Prayer is a powerful invisible force that goads a person without their knowing where the poke is coming from. You can give them the good news. The message of the good news is another powerful goad. Look for opportunities to talk about why Jesus died and how He is working in your life today. Creation goads. When people begin to consider their origins they will have to go back to their Creator sooner or later. Love goads. People need to experience what it feels like to be loved in an unconditional way.

Paul said in one of his letters that we, the church, were all able to "admonish" one another. Welcome to the fellowship of the goads. How about that for a church name: The Fellowship of the Living Goads. Now that would raise some eyebrows.

God's blessings will sometimes be preceded by a sting,
Pastor Steve

Day 189

" In A Corner"

July 8 - Acts 26:24 - 27:12

I can tell you quite a bit about my sixth grade teacher. After all, I spent a whole year with him and was enamored with him. I remember that it was fun to be in his classroom and I believe most, if not all, of his students felt the same way about him. If you were a fifth grader you waited nervously at the next year's classroom assignment schedule to see if you'd be in his classroom. If not, there was always a grimace of disappointment on the faces of those who would be in Mrs. So and So's class. All of the students knew who the number one teacher was and all of us wanted to walk through his door and do all we could do to please him.

Mr. Nagaoka was of Oriental descent. I think he was Japanese. He was about 5' 9" and was probably about thirty pounds overweight. This gave his face a jolly sort of look. He wore black thick rimmed glasses and when he became animated it looked like his eyes were going to bug out of his head. He was a great listener. Maybe that was the secret to his ability to connect with others, I don't know. When he listened, those big eyes were focused intently on you and you just knew that he wanted to hear where you were coming from. His hair was jet black and cut in flat top fashion; I think he had a kind of hit-or-miss stash. He spoke constantly in an excitable tone. It was as if his next words were already out before he finished the ones before. As I look back now I realize that he was a passionate man who loved what he was doing. I loved being his student.

We didn't have any pet names for our master. He was just Mr. Nagaoka. He wasn't "Nag" or "Eggnog" or "Okie" or any other name, he was who he was and we all respected that. He was always involved in our day, even outside of the classroom. He'd get right in there at P.E. and play with us. I can still picture him pitching the softball to us and yelling and cheering as we ran the bases. He was our advocate. He made you feel like you could accomplish your goals. I also remember that sixth grade was the year the president instituted the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. Mr. Nagaoka would be out there pushing us on to earn the right to get that patch. I never did. I accepted the fact that I could not do enough of this or that or run fast enough. He egged me on but never threw eggs when I didn't succeed.

I knew this man pretty well. I learned to love and admire him based on the interaction I had with him on a daily basis for one school year. I would have been able to defend him if someone came along and made a false claim about him. "That Nagaoka doesn't give a rip about his students, he teaches for the money!" If someone said that I would have probably knocked their block off, but in reality I could have simply told them that they didn't know what they were talking about. No one was going to make a false statement about this man in my presence and get away with it. But as well as I knew him I could have known him much better. I never visited him at home. I never rode in his car. We never went out for lunch off campus. I didn't know his wife or kids. I never did anything recreationally with him nor did we ever go on vacation together. Yet despite all of these things I would still say that I could be a pretty good witness of who he was.

The disciples, who became the tellers and writers of the life and times of Jesus, were far more intimately acquainted with their Master than I ever was with that beloved sixth grade teacher. That small band of Jesus followers became an excellent source of eye-witnesses to the life that would change the course of history.

Over the course of three years the twelve traveled hundreds of miles with Jesus. They ate together constantly. They served a common mission together under the direction of Jesus. They rubbed shoulders with one another sometimes having to squeeze through large crowds who were trying to reach the Lord. They touched Him and held Him and beheld Him on a daily basis for years, not days, or a year, but years. They saw the miracles first hand and they were often part of what was going on when Jesus would work his graceful work. They also knew the pain of rejection and opposition. Public controversy was not foreign to them because Jesus would often be the source of ridicule and false accusations.

When Paul is giving his defense before Festus and Agrippa he makes the comment that the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth were not done "in a corner." In other words, the events that were being spoken of by the apostles were not things that had been cooked up in secret. They had all been done out in the open for all to see. Paul alludes to this so that his accusers would have the opportunity to give their lives to Jesus. Paul wanted all who heard him to have what he had minus the chains he wore.

Jesus had been publicly taken and tried and beaten and scourged and crucified right there on the streets of Jerusalem. These were not stories that some "holy" person was making up in a cave somewhere. These were not rules for right living or steps to making things work or helpful tips in order to find health and happiness. These were nitty-gritty, down to earth, real life events involving a real man who made claims that would need to be verified or discredited because of the enormity of their consequences. Well, the apostles came along after the crucifixion and said that Jesus was now alive and able to save their souls from all sorts of bad stuff.

If you've ever wondered why the apostles bravely went to their deaths for the belief that Jesus was alive from the grave then consider how close they had been to Him and how much a resurrection would impact their resolve to stay the course even unto death. They gave their lives for the things that were done in front of all. They were not a secret society with beliefs that could not be corroborated. They would point to the events that were common knowledge much the same way an historian points to crucial events in history in order to make his points.

Peter said earlier in Acts that they could not help but talk about the things they had seen and heard. These are the things that meant the most to them and endeared them to Jesus, the Master, to whom they belonged and were willing to give it all.

God's blessings are not in a corner,
Pastor Steve

Day 190

"Adventure"

July 9 - Acts 27: 13-44

This is the Day the Lord has Made,

A man's character is always proven in adversity. Who we are on the inside really comes out when the heat is on. Someone once said, "If you can't stand the heat stay out of the kitchen." Sometimes, though, the world feels like a kitchen. We may try to escape the pressure, but no matter which way we turn there seems to be only more trouble.

I was at a friend's kid's birthday party, sitting out in the backyard, enjoying the fine weather and the company of my friends. For some reason the patio leading out from the house had two tiers. Well, out came Aunt Mable, smiling and waving to those she knew when, all of a sudden, she tripped at the ledge of the tiers and began a descent that I had never witnessed before. I saw that she was going to fall flat on her face, which would be devastating because she had wired rim glasses on. As she tumbled I felt as if things

were happening in slow motion. I was trying to get up from my seat when I realized what was happening, but it felt like I was glued there. The poor woman hit the cement with a tremendous thud. She had a deep gash in the area between her eyes. As this was going on I heard a lot of swearing and yelling from just behind the scene. It was her husband who was flipping out and cussing her out because she fell. He was blaming her and swearing at her and saying how clumsy she was and how she was going to ruin the party by doing this. As someone took him away to try to calm him down, my nurse wife applied first aid before another family member took her to the hospital.

She had to have thirty-two stitches, half of them inside and the other half outside. Her husband made a fool out of himself that day. I hope he finally came to his senses and realized that he was the one who needed to feel ashamed because of his behavior. But under pressure, instead of being helpful or empathetic, he acted like a nit wit. The pressure of the circumstances sent him over the edge and it ended up that he was no help at all.

Paul was a leader. Paul was a man with a mission. He wanted to make Jesus known to as many people as he possibly could before he died. He was on his way to Rome when a violent storm made it necessary to unload the ship of its cargo, probably so that it wouldn't sink, and try and find a place to dock before they all drowned. Paul had courage. He had been visited by the angel of the Lord who told him that all of the lives on the boat would be spared. He took charge, encouraged the crew to eat, and told them what the Lord had conveyed about their end. He was courageous and he encouraged others to be the same. He was an example. In Philippians he says that if the church would follow him as he follows Christ they would experience the peace of God. Paul knew where his strength came from and he knew the power of the message he had to share. Paul was a man's man. You just have to love the man.

Paul's life was an adventure. Life for him was dynamic. No re-runs of Gilligan's Island for him, no, he wanted to be out and about making the good news known far and wide no matter where it took him. He knew that eventually he would reach Rome because God had already told him about that, but in the meantime there would be difficulties that would only test his leadership resolve and give him the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. When the pressure was on Paul prayed and trusted God and His Word and spent his time reaching out to others. You do not hear him complain or bicker or rage against God. Paul had a conviction about the love of Jesus and the fact that the Lord was alive and working in his life. With that knowledge he could keep on going and doing what the Lord wanted him to do. You go, Paul!!

Do you play it safe too much? Do you take few risks because you are afraid of the consequences? Do you all too often isolate yourself from the adventure of life because of fear? Let me ask you this: what is stopping you from letting go and letting God take you on the ride of your life?

Life is an adventure, let's live it with all that is in us.

God's blessings can take us to out of the way places,

Pastor Steve

Day 191-192

" Snake bit and time in prison"

July 10 & 11 - Acts 28
(My disconnected thoughts at the end of Acts)

Let's Continue the Acts Story in our own Experience,

Are you superstitious? The closest I got was in junior high when I wore the same unwashed socks for probably six or seven weeks in a row because I had been winning games. Remember the silly ones when we were kids like "step on a crack and break your mother's back"? If we weren't getting along with mom we'd be stepping on every crack in the sidewalk on the way to school. It was all malarkey.

Oftentimes, religious folk are very superstitious. Maybe you know someone who uses a cross to ward off evil spirits. Or, they think that unless they pray a certain way or for so long they will somehow be out of God's favor and won't be putting a protective covering over someone. And in a number of cultures religious relics are said to have special powers and can guarantee special favors from above. I think when people claim to have seen the face of the virgin Mary in some object like a tortilla or a painting, that they are hoping for a special blessing from her if they will only be in the vicinity of the manifestation. More malarkey.

Paul ran into some superstitious people on the island they were shipwrecked on for when he had been bitten by a snake they all judged that he was probably a notorious sinner who was getting his just desserts. But then when Paul didn't fall over dead they all hailed him as some form of deity. Fickle, fickle, fickle. This is the kind of thing Paul describes in one of his letters when people appear to be spiritual but deny the true power of God. God wants us to know him in personal terms and not in superstitious ritual form. These kinds of things do not impress Him whatsoever.

Isn't Luke detailed in his description of the voyage and the circumstances of the final destination to Rome? He was there and could record accurately the things they were facing. I'm surprised that he didn't record some of his own emotions on that trip. I think he was so caught up in the purpose of it all that he didn't think his own comfort or lack of it was all that important. What a privilege that time in the life of the missionaries would have been.

Paul's prison time in Rome was not horribly confining. He was guarded but was allowed liberties like being able to have visitors. After calling together the Jewish leaders, he laid out the message of the gospel to them. After they reject the message, Paul quotes a familiar verse that Jesus once stood on when dealing with the same attitude, and then he declares that the message would be acceptable to the Gentiles.

Paul stayed there for two years preaching Jesus. Then...

the story goes on but the scripture that records it ends. According to church tradition Paul is eventually beheaded by Caesar Nero.

Now the story continues with us. The Spirit is now at work in ordinary folks like you and me to bring His Word to others.

Now we turn to the letters. Mostly they are Paul's. Don't forget as you read them where he came from. All of his writing reflects his background and highlight the wonderful experience of salvation in Jesus. The letters also reflect his love for the churches he either began or encouraged at one time or another. Romans and Colossians were exceptions since when he wrote those letters he had not yet visited the churches in those locations. The other letters address pertinent issues among the believers in the various locals.

If you love the gospel and you are excited about the work of the Spirit in the church then you will be delighted at the application of the gospel in Paul's letters. Sometimes people will say that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible and so you really can't trust any one interpretation. They

are mistaken because Paul is the interpreter of Jesus. He takes the gospel and tells us how to accept it and internalize it and use it in our daily lives.

God's blessings continue throughout the whole Bible,

Pastor Steve

ROMANS

"The Romans Road"

July 12 - Romans 1:1 - 17

Of all the books in the Bible, Romans has had a more dramatic impact on the history of mankind than any other. Romans is the mini-Bible, the Reader's Digest version of all 66 books. It is a crystal-clear explanation of the Gospel of Jesus and what it does for those who embrace it.

My views on God, as well as how He and I relate, have been greatly affected by what I have read and studied in Romans. I hope that this year you will experience the overwhelming grace of God in Christ Jesus and be liberated from the noose of the law and the guilt of sin. If you believe what you are about to read and apply it to your life, you will experience a fresh measure of the Spirit in your daily walk with Jesus. I want that for you with all of my heart. My hope is that I can explain some of the truths there and make them as clear as I can. I welcome feedback and questions. Please don't hesitate to bring anything to my attention. These things are more important than I can emphasize. Let's go!

Romans is the explanation of the good news, first proclaimed by Jesus Himself; completed when he said, "It is finished;" and then heralded by angels and men when the words came, "He is not here, he has risen." This is unparalleled news. A man once crucified is alive and working in the lives of men and women. No wonder Paul said he wasn't ashamed of this message. Jesus had changed his life and could change yours and his and hers and theirs...

And the basis of this change is faith and not works. It is simple, child-like, open-hearts-and-hands-faith that believes in and embraces the love of Christ for one's soul. This faith makes things right with God to such a degree that God even declares the guilty sinner "Righteous!" Then God's Spirit works in the believer's life on a daily basis so that he can become conformed to the image of Christ. Finally, God will finish His work in us and we shall share eternity with Him in paradise, a place so unlike anything we have seen on earth that human language fails to describe its glories.

Paul's introduction includes a glimpse of the love he felt for those who were already joined to Jesus but who had not gotten acquainted with him yet. Paul was an apostle who had seen the Lord after His resurrection many times. Paul's commitment to the message of the gospel was without comparison. His life had been changed by the good news and he was devoted to bringing the same message to the world. Strangely enough, God had called him to go to the non-Jews mainly. This is odd since all of Paul's background was under Jewish tutelage. But Paul continued to see that God was opening up doors to reach Gentiles, and so he went.

Rome was on his list of places to visit and he was all the more anxious since he had heard of the faith of the believers there.

I have grown to love Paul and his writings. He was tough and he was tender. He was a passionate man who could speak to the crowds, but he also spent time pouring his life into individuals. Anyone who would listen became his audience. He was devoted to proclaiming Christ so that he could reach as many as possible and encourage their growth in Christ-like-

ness. Paul had a deep love for Christ's church and he spent endless hours building her up. In all of his letters you see this same message and concern for church people. He wanted their unity and growth, and he would not tolerate bullying by anyone opposed to true faith in Christ.

The good news was for a lost world. Just how lost, you ask? Well, Paul will spend the next several chapters painting the dark backdrop of sin so that the brilliant work of Christ will be all the more illuminated. But from the outset of this book, Paul pegs his entire message on faith in Jesus Christ, both for salvation from sin and for a walk with Christ that is not measured by human effort but by daily faith in the living Lord.

God's blessings, by faith,
Pastor Steve

Day 194

"God's Wrath"

July 13 - Romans 1:18-32

Grace To You,

To put it lightly, God frowns on sin. One of the sins listed at the end of the chapter is "God-haters," which is an apt description of a person living under his own ego leadership. It describes the sinner as autonomous, self-sufficient and not in need of God. A great number of people muddle through life with an "I can do this" attitude and just eliminate God from the equation.

Paul is laying out an argument that will culminate in Chapter 3 with the conclusion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Not one soul is excluded. Then he breaks down different types of sinners. There are the Do-badders, the Do-gooders, and the Religious-doers. Paul makes the case that no matter what group you are in, you will still sin and there will still be consequences for it.

Paul is saying that man has no excuses for his behavior and the condition of his heart. Later, he will say that the law was given so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world might be shown guilty before God. In other words, no one will get away with anything. God sees it all and He knows the motives of the heart.

Paul even says that God's power and divine nature are clearly seen by what He has made. We have already commented on Psalm 19, where it says that the voice of the Lord goes out into all parts of the earth, sounding through the "handiwork" of God that man can see all around him. Man may choose to worship what God made rather than God (and he does) but that is a corruption of what God intended. God wants us to see Him in creation. Look at the solar system—all of the beauty and variety and complexity around you—and you will get a good look at who the Creator is. All of us have admired the work of a famous painter, or author, or architect, or ball player, or hockey player and have readily praised the author of the thing we are admiring.

Now think about it this way: if God didn't make all things, then the only thing that really gets praise is blind chance, accidental forces, or whatever else you want to call it. Have you ever something really remarkable and gone away from it convinced that what you witnessed was a result of an accident? Let's go to the museum of stuff that was created by blind chance. Is that possible? I haven't seen anything like that, have you?

Paul says that God's truth is evident, but man wrestles it to the ground. He doesn't want to submit to the truth, so he denies it and twists it until it looks like the thing he wants it to be. And so, Paul says, sexuality is perverted so that man will believe a lie and follow the desires of his flesh no matter where that may lead him.

Then Paul gives a list of sins that describe the extent of mankind's depravity. How far has man fallen away from God's righteousness? Read Paul's list again, and also his conclusion that not only do people do these things, but they are delighted when others do them too.

Let's make a few applications:

What is it about creation that you admire the most?

Make a scrapbook of the pictures of that thing.

Study it and admire it and give God the glory for making it.

(I love sea otters, for example).

Let's repent, turn away from, be repulsed by, and leave (not glorify or rejoice in), the sins on Paul's list. Neither let us laugh, pay money to watch, or join in when others glorify the things on that list.

Let's remember that it is faith in Jesus Christ that motivates us to go down the narrow road that leads to life. Many are proceeding down the broad road, but they will be led to the place of destruction. Let's not walk with that company. At the same time let us not look down our noses at those who do go down the wrong road because those who condemn them "do the same things." That is the subject of the next chapter.

God's blessings happen despite sin,
Pastor Steve

Day 195

"So You Think You're So Good"

July 14 - Romans 2: 1-16

Grace To You,

There are usually three ways people think they'll get to heaven on their own merits:

Most people would say that they are good enough. "I'm a good person," I've heard.

Second, people compare themselves to others and assume that God grades on a curve. They couldn't imagine God judging them when there have been so many infamous bad guys that put us on the good side of the curve.

Third, there are those who believe they have fulfilled their religious duty and should therefore be included. They think they have sufficiently kept the rules of their church.

Paul's point in this chapter is that human effort and merit are really no merit at all because no matter how good or better than others you might think you are, God knows every single thing you have done or not done, as well as, the reasons behind those things. As a matter of fact, he says at the end of this section, "God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ." There is a verse in Hebrews along these same lines: "And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account," (4:13). The fact that God knows the true me can either be very scary or very comforting, depending on how honest I have been with Him.

Remember, Paul is setting up a backdrop for the gospel that cures man's disease of depravity. So he has to be very candid as he speaks of the true nature of man. We would like to think that there are people in the world who are good enough to get to heaven

on their own merits. But the question is, do we really know them the way God knows them? Can we see into their hearts and understand their motives for doing what they do?

Well, of course not; we have our own issues. It might make us feel self-assured to point the finger at really sinful people and compare ourselves with them. The problem with that is that in my own way I do the same things. That's why the law is like a hammer; it will smash us where we are. We may point out where others have failed and highlight their weaknesses, but the truth is that we do the same things.

Remember what Jesus said about righteousness. He made it clear that you could fail internally even if you didn't follow through and do the crime. For example, hating your fellow man was tantamount to murder. The guy who sincerely hates his neighbor may point the finger at the bank robber who killed two people in the lobby as he was fleeing, but the neighbor-hater is in hot water too, because God will judge his secret motives one day.

No man will be able to stand on his own merits before God's righteous judgment tribunal. As a matter of fact, God says that when a man tries to justify himself on his own merits, it is a slap in His face in regard to all of the kindness He has shown in Jesus. God says, "If you are righteous enough to share my heaven without my help then, you would be equal to Me. You would know as I know. You would be like a god." Of course, this is the very thinking that got the devil in hot water, and is the cause of Eve and Adam's failure in the Garden of Eden.

When Paul says God will give to each person according to what he has done, stating that "those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life..." and to the others anger, we should not assume that puts me in the category of "I can do it by myself because I'm a good person." That is the very point Paul is trying to counteract. Just a chapter later he will quote Scriptures stating that ,"there is none good."

If I could make it into heaven by my own efforts or good deeds or righteousness, what does that say about the work of Christ and His statement on the cross, "It is finished"? It would invalidate the work of Christ. It would be like saying to God, "Thanks anyway, but I think I deserve to enter into your kingdom on my own merits."

People who think like that are very deceived or delusional or religious. Tomorrow we'll cover the religious man's point of view. Oftentimes, a man's religion gives him the hope that he will get into heaven by his own goodness. Oh boy! Paul addresses this false belief at the end of Chapter 2 and into Chapter 3.

So far we see that sinners are under the wrath of God because they deny truth, and today we see that the moral man is under God's wrath because he also rejects truth; the truth that no one is able to duck out of the reality of his sin.

Let the words of Romans sink deeply into your mind and heart. This book is the heart of the gospel. As you read it and reflect on its content you will gain an appreciation of the work of God and how much He did to bring you back to Himself. If you begin lost, you will be thankful that you were found. If you think you are not lost, it will not matter if you are found because you didn't think you were lost in the first place.

Jesus said, "I have come to seek and to save those who are lost."

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings are gospel-centered,

Pastor Steve

Day 196

"The Religious Man"

July 15 - Romans 2:17 - 3:8

Dear Friends,

I realize that many of you consider yourself to be religious. People sometimes refer to their experiences in church as a religious awakening or a religious experience. James said that true religion involved helping widows and orphans and bridling the tongue. For some reason I have always equated the word "religion" with a negative twist; to me, it referred to those who were counting on their religious works to gain them eternal life. This was certainly true of many Jews in Jesus' day and in Paul's too. I don't mean to offend anyone, and would like to say that the word can have a positive twist; it's just that I have not used it that way very often. I hope I can make this clearer while we go through the wonderful book of Romans.

As you know, the Jews are an extremely proud people. This is true in almost every area of their lives, but especially in their spiritual heritage. Paul says that they have every reason to be grateful, because God brought His Word to the world through them. Their lineage goes back to the Patriarch Abraham. God had told Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God spoke to Abraham and his sons; to Moses and David and the prophets and the priests. Theirs was a very blessed nation. God was using them to vouchsafe His Word for all mankind. This is a more important trust than words can convey.

Paul's message to the religious man, and in this case the Jew, is: "Don't brag; you break the very law you advocate." Think about what James says about the law in his little letter: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it," (2:10). Many of the religious Jews had set their minds and wills to keep the law of Moses without fail. They worked and worked and worked to do all that it said. They even went beyond the law and made it harder on themselves, so that they could assure they wouldn't break the least of the commands.

Jesus says of them: "They strain at a gnat and swallow a camel," (Matt. 23:24). In other words, in their effort to be precise in keeping the law, they did well on the minor things while they were violating the majors like love and justice. Why? Because we all break the law, don't we?

Paul goes so far as to say that Judaism is not about nationality or birthright, but whoever is made new on the inside and desires to please God from the heart is really a Jew. Paul says it is not about circumcision and obeying the whole law, because if it were then no one would make it. All men break the law. It is only those who have had a work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts who can claim a relationship with God. "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code," (2:29).

Jesus said something like this in the gospel of John: "But to all who did receive Him, who believed in his name, He gave the right to be called children of God, who were born, not of blood not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God," (1:12,13).

But if salvation is not by works, and if God gives forgiveness to undeserving sinners, then how can God judge the world when He forgives even the most vile and irreligious man? Someone might argue that his sins only glorify or highlight God's forgiveness. Why should he be condemned for something that God sees as a good thing?

Paul brings up these hypothetical questions because the good news of forgiveness could lead a person to these wrong conclusions, and some people were drawing them. In the Message in says, "Some people are actually trying to put such words in our mouths, claiming that we go around saying, 'The more evil we do, the more good God does, so let's just do it!' That's pure slander, as I'm sure you'll agree." This subject comes up again in Chapter 6. The bottom line is,

the free gift of God's forgiveness in Christ seems much too easy for the religious man to swallow. He says, "If it's that easy, people will be taking advantage of it; they'll disregard the law and commit all kinds of sins because they know they can be forgiven for them."

The religious law-abiding man appears to have it together. Others don't see much weakness in his character. He works hard at doing the religious activities that he feels will accumulate enough credit to his account in order to buy his way into heaven. He really doesn't need to lean on faith in the work of God, because he has his own portfolio of good works. He believes he does what he does for God and by God. But in his heart of hearts he trusts in his own religious works to shine in the heavens.

Paul thought this way before he encountered Jesus on that hot afternoon trip to Damascus. Listen to what Paul says about this in Philippians:

"Look out for the dogs (Jewish religious leaders), look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh (those who emphasize circumcision). For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews (a reference to standing out among his people), as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith," (3: 2-9).

I quote extensively because Paul's own story fits like a hand in glove with what he saying in Romans 2 and 3. Mark these verses in Philippians in your Bible and refer back to them. It will illuminate what we are studying in Romans.

God's blessings make you a truly religious person,

Pastor Steve

"Roll Back the Curtain"

July 16 - Romans 3: 9-31

Dear Friends,

When I was a kid we had a central movie theater where it seemed like the whole town always turned out for the newest flick. I remember seeing a movie there called "The Last Man on Earth" that scared the living daylights out of me. That theater had a curtain covering the screen that was thick velvet material, burgundy I think. I can recall how I felt just before the movie was about to begin, and they would slowly draw the curtain back and reveal the giant lion growling to represent the movie studio that produced the film. It kind of sent shivers up your arms. There was just something about the dark theater that was weird. It had an eerie feel that I still remember.

Well, Romans 1:1-3:20 is like that curtain, but pitch black. It is the blackest backdrop to the unveiling of the most luminescent light imaginable. I have never been to the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, but I'm told that at one point on the tour they turn out the lights and you can't see anything. You supposedly can't even see your hand if you held it right in front of your eyes. Now that's dark! The first few chapters of Romans are darker still.

An accurate way to view this is to picture a theater of moviegoers who are all blind. Someone can explain to them just how dark the place is and tell them about the curtain, and they may be able to conceptualize what the person is saying, but to them it's only theory. They cannot see anyway. Their world is always dark. The only way the intensity of the darkness would matter to them would be if they gained their sight.

Think about this verse in 2 Corinthians: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God," (4:3,4). But once that veil is removed, the light one sees is so spectacular that to go back to the darkness would be like a freed prisoner going back to his jail cell.

Paul has already made the case that God's wrath, his judgment, hangs over all ungodliness. He puts the "moral" man in his place by showing that no one is good enough because God knows the dirt on everyone. And he has made it clear that the religious man has himself broken the very law he wants everyone else to keep. Then the final blow from Paul's pen, directed by the Spirit, levels all men like the bomb from the Enola Gay leveled Hiroshima in WW2. Paul quotes scripture to affirm the point that is encapsulated in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The exclamation comes in several phrases; two, in my opinion, are very powerful:

"There is no one righteous," which makes sense all by itself. Then he makes it perfectly clear and concludes that thought with "not even one."

"There is no one who does good." Is that what I'm hearing you say, Paul? And as if he can hear me he repeats, "not even one."

God's Word is clear. All are guilty. Me and you and that sweet little old grandma who doesn't look like she could hurt a fly. "Not one" is Paul's final answer to the question, "Who is good enough to go to heaven?"

So the good news begins with bad news. The person who thinks he is good enough will have to look past the Bible to find a way. The Bible is clear on this point. This is a Black and White issue. There is no gray zone, no purgatory, no exceptions, no ifs, ands or buts. My sins have been put in the balance and I have been found wanting. Paul says that every mouth is silenced. The guilt of my sin speaks against me, and the law points out that guilt, and I find myself in a world of hurt. I am not good enough, God does not grade on a curve, and my religious good works fall far short of God's perfection. I am in trouble.

In the darkness of all of this, like a sunburst on a cloudy day, God's love and grace pour through the skies, giving me hope. At this point I realize that God has done something for me that I was powerless to do for myself. God provided a way. God gave me something that I didn't deserve.

God gave me righteousness, the gift of righteousness, wrapped up in the scars and welts and blood and pain and agony of Jesus Christ. "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood," (3:22-25). Wow! Awe! Unbelievable!

GOOD NEWS!

Shout it from the rooftops!

The end of this chapter is so very significant. If you have an ounce of your own righteousness to add to your salvation, then you would also be able to boast about that little part. But because Jesus paid the price and rescued us from the slave market of sin, we can only boast in Him. Paul said in Galatians 6, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," (verse 14).

Lay down all self-righteousness today.

Don't even go there.

Accept the gift of salvation that Jesus extends with nail-pierced hands.

Oh, the wonder of it all, the wonder of it all, just to think that God loves me.

God's blessings are radiant in Christ,

Pastor Steve

Day 198

"Too Good To Be True"

July 17 - Romans 4: 1-15

Friends,

My boss called me over and asked me to sit down because she had some news for me. Boy, did that get my attention. Usually when the boss called me over it wasn't good. I was in the habit of clowning around with the staff and the public, and immediately thought I was going to get a swift reprimand. She proceeded to tell me that I had a very important phone call to take at her desk. What could this be? Was someone in my family in trouble?

Instead, the lady on the other end congratulated me and informed me that I had won third place in a statewide drawing of all employees. I had won a trip for two to a dude ranch in Arizona and all the money I could withdraw out of an ATM machine in five minutes. That sounds better than it was, but it still took my breath away. I could only withdraw $200 at one time, over and over until the five minutes were up.

Every day until the day when I would go to collect my prize, I went to my ATM and withdrew $20 at a time, over and over, so that I could get used to the way the machine worked. Let's face it: the pressure was on. All that practice paid off; I ended up winning the most money in the state--$1,800 in five minutes. That stack of twenties looked sweet to me. It was more money than I had seen in a long time and it came at a time when I needed a new car and some other things. Really, it was a gift that I couldn't believe. Why me? Out of 100,000 entries I was pulled from the drum number three. I just cashed in the dude ranch trip and ended up with a cool $2,600 in my pocket. Thankful? You bet!

In our last reading we learned about a free gift that was purchased with the life of a perfectly innocent man, the Lord Jesus Christ. How could it be that easy? Can't I bring something to the table? It doesn't seem fair that Jesus would do all of the work and I just receive the benefits of what He has accomplished. What we find in Romans is that this gift, this good news, is the only rescue from a life of self-serving sin. The result of Christ's work is that He alone will get the honor for doing what He has done. People cannot stand up and take credit for their own part. Only Jesus will get the credit for dying for us and saving our souls.

In Romans 4, Paul illustrates what he has said in Chapter 3 by going to the Old Scriptures and showing that this is how God has always operated. He uses Abraham and David to show that God will only forgive when a sinner reaches out in faith and receives the promises that God has made.

Let's quote Paul: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness," (4:4,5).

How clear can the Scripture be? "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourself, it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast," (Ephesians 2: 8, 9). "Not by works of righteousness which we have done but by his mercy He saved us..." (Titus 3:5).

But what about what James says: that faith without works is dead and that a man is not justified by faith alone but by works? James is talking about the result of salvation, which is a life of works caused by the new life a person has experienced in Christ. Paul here is talking about not the result, but the means of salvation, which is the finished work of Christ, grasped by faith in Him.

Then Paul goes on to David. He says David wrote about this very thing that we see in Abraham. God declares a person righteous, for Christ's sake, apart from any effort on the part of the sinner. Unbelievable!

Happy is the man whose sin the Lord will not count against him.

And again to highlight this remarkable gift from God, Paul makes it clear that Abraham was declared righteous before God even before He initiated the rite of circumcision. It isn't circumcision that qualifies you, or any other physical act. It is faith and faith alone. Abraham is called the father of all those who believe in Jesus because he is the father of those who believe by grace and receive the grace that accompanies that belief.

The totally depraved of Chapter 1 and the deceived moral man of Chapter 2 may not care what Abraham and David had to say on this topic, but the religious person sure would have. These two guys are the pillars of the Jewish faith. Interestingly enough, in Judaism today there is no free forgiveness. A person only tries to put himself in good standing by doing good works and following the traditions of their elders. Muslims also trace their heritage back to Abraham, but they do not have provision for the absolution of a person's sins beyond personal piety either.

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift," (2 Corinthians 9: 15).

God's blessings, Oh, their depth, in Christ,

Pastor Steve

Day 199

"Jewels In The Gospel Crown"

July 18 - Romans 4:16 - 5:11

God's Word is so rich. You and I are so rich because we have God's Word. I cannot think of a greater treasure than to possess the very Words of the Creator of the universe. His words give us hope because they are His promises to us. They describe the wonderful work He did on our behalf when we were nowhere to be found.

In this passage Paul is like a jeweler, polishing the beautiful truth that Abraham was saved by faith. Abraham simply believed in God's promises. God had promised him a son in his old age. When Abraham believed this, God then credited righteousness to his account. His relationship with God was based on trust and faith, not performance and evaluation. Abraham was a sinner like all of us; but he, like many of us, believed in the declarations of God.

Do you believe in the declarations of God? When you hear Scripture, do you receive it not as the words of men but as it truly is, the words of God? If so, like Abraham you are justified in the sight of God for Jesus' sake.

Don't you love this verse? "Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised," (4:19,20). Do your circumstances sometimes weaken your faith because you don't see any way that God can fulfill His promises? Remember, God will keep His Word. What He promises, He fulfills. That is something you can bank on.

Paul paints the grace of the Lord with golden strokes in Chapter 5. He uses some terminology that may be a bit difficult at first, but after an explanation these ideas will come alive with very practical results. The first concept is justification by faith. Justification means to be declared righteous. When you are justified, you receive something that you do not deserve. In this case, the righteousness, the perfection of Christ.

In another letter Paul would write, "and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head

over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross," (Colossians 2: 10-14).

Here Paul spiritualizes the act of circumcision and makes it a picture of the removal of sins. Notice it is something Christ does for us. As a matter of fact, note in these verses all of the things Christ has done for us.

Paul goes on in Romans 5 to emphasize the many benefits of being in Christ. He says that for the believer there is a purpose for suffering. Indirectly he is identifying the believer with Jesus, the ultimate sufferer. Hebrews says that Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered. Paul says that suffering serves the same purpose for us as well—it builds character. The greater the character you are, the more hope you have.

On top of that, the believer has the Holy Spirit, Who is actively supplying us with God's love. The work of the Spirit is described throughout Romans. Remember the small nugget in Chapter 2 where Paul talks about true Jews and what true circumcision is? He says that it is all "by the Spirit, not by the written code."

Once again, to reaffirm the fact that it was God who worked out our salvation, Paul emphasizes our condition when Christ died for our sins. We were "sinners," separated from God and enemies of the cross. Paul says that Christ died for the "ungodly." Not for those who had their act together and had a heart for God. No, it was people who were, in essence, raising their fists at God and saying that they would live life the way they wanted to live it.

Notice the jewels that Paul says are ours in Christ:

We are justified by His blood (by means of the cross we are declared righteous before God) (5:9).

We are saved from God's wrath, that wrath that is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (1:18; 5:9).

We were saved by His death and we are kept by His life (5:10).

We have received reconciliation, we are now one with God as Jesus is; we were once enemies but now we are friends (5:10,11).

We have ample reason to rejoice in Jesus always.

God's blessings are true blessings, indeed,
Pastor Steve

"Through One Man"

July 19 - Romans 5: 12-21

By now I believe many of you, who are sincerely listening to God's Word, have been broken by the great love of God. You are probably in awe of the wonder of God's grace. How could God demonstrate His love in a more sacrificial way? He couldn't. He loved us to the Nth degree and showed it on the cross. All praise and glory and honor be to His name forever. Wouldn't you, with me, exchange any personal glory so that the name of Jesus may be fully glorified in our life and in the world, and one day in the heavenly kingdom? If I were to boast about my own works it would only be like throwing dirt on the brilliant work of Christ. God forbid that I would ever do that.

This section under consideration today only emphasizes what has already been said so far. Paul clearly states again that all are sinners and experience the result of sin, which is death. The question is "What are the results of sin?" The answer is "Death and sickness and disease and pain and all forms of turmoil." Death came through one man, Adam (note interestingly enough that Eve is not mentioned). Adam passively disobeyed God and took the fruit from the hand of his wife. She was deceived, but it seems that Adam went into the transgression with his eyes wide open.

So that we won't blame Adam for our own sins, Paul adds at the end of verse 12: "...because all sinned." We were all in Adam when he sinned. I think of it like a cheering section. The whole human race was in the grandstands that day rooting him on. "Go ahead and take it Adam," we all shouted. "Assert your independence! Stand up for what is rightfully yours! Make your opinion heard!"

Someone might say, "That's not fair, I wasn't there, maybe I would have said differently. God can't hold me accountable for what Adam did. I protest!"

And God replies, "You prove every day by your own sins that you are a son or daughter of Adam. You are no different. You are like the man in Chapter 2 who points his finger at others but doesn't consider that he does the same thing in his heart and in his actions."

In Chapter 5 we are also reminded of more benefits because of what Christ has accomplished for us. Now we reign through Christ. What Adam did is no comparison with what Christ did. Adam unraveled the ball of yarn and Christ not only put it back together, He wove a beautiful tapestry out of it. There is so much more in Christ then we even can imagine. For example, "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ," (verse 17).

Let's review:

Chapter 1: God's wrath is revealed against ungodliness

Chapter 2: The "moral man" and "religious man" are under sin

Chapter 3: All have sinned; men are justified freely through the cross

Chapter 4: Abraham and David corroborate justification by faith

Chapter 5: There are many benefits for a forgiven person

Practical review:

Chapter 1: God is aware of all of my sins

Chapter 2: I have no excuses; I must be responsible for my own sins

Chapter 3: I cling to the cross for forgiveness of my personal sins

Chapter 4: I can rely on the Scriptures for spiritual assurance

Chapter 5: I take God's promises and stock them in my daily life

God's blessings cannot be added to,
Pastor Steve

Day 201

"I Am Dead"

July 20 - Romans 6: 1-14

I am not who I once was. If you met Jesus as a child, you are not what you might have become. You and I are different. Our identity now is Jesus Christ. God's book says so. There are some mysteries in the Bible that I don't understand; because of my ignorance I am confounded and sometimes confused and frustrated. Some mysteries, however, like the ones at the beginning of this chapter, confound me but leave me in awe and give me joy.

Christianity in its essence is identification with Christ. He died, I died; He lives, I live. Before we dive into this a bit deeper, allow me to make one important point about the first line in this chapter.

Remember that it comes on the heels of the truth that we sinners are freely forgiven in Christ and have been declared righteous by Him. We have learned that this is a gift that comes to the worst of sinners on the basis of grace, a grace broad enough to cover all sins no matter what the background of the sinner. Now someone might argue because of this that it would be God-honoring to go ahead and sin away, since God is so gracious to forgive sins. The more sins, the more God can extend His grace. Paul says, "No way, no how!" He argues that this is faulty thinking because of the change forgiveness works in a person's life. Remember that Paul dealt with this issue once already, at the beginning of Chapter 3. Obviously, he thought it was important enough to revisit.

Why would Paul even bring up this topic if it wasn't a common response to the good news of God's grace? For the gospel is a gospel of grace. Do some people take advantage of the message of free forgiveness and grace? You better believe it. But if they read Paul's thoughts in Chapter 6 they will be silenced.

I have never once thought that Christ's blood was something I could take for granted. Could you imagine, after being rescued from some dire condition by a kind soul, you purposely go back to that same position and put your rescuer in the same position to save you again? That would be stupid, wouldn't it? I think you would be so thankful for your rescue that you would be very sensitive about putting yourself in harm's way again. Some people do this anyway, but any clear-thinking person would say they are rude and despicable. We ought to do what is right out of a heart of gratitude. Wouldn't you say? Typically, people will do anything for someone whom they believe loves them. And when it comes to Jesus, no one loves us like He does. But Paul takes it further than that. Let's explore.

Paul says that we are united to Christ in His death and resurrection. The old us is crucified with Christ, and the new us rose from the grave when Christ came back to life. That's what baptism is about too. When you go under the water you leave your sins there; they are buried as Christ was buried. Then when you explode up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. And when you do, the Bible says, you are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come, (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Let me talk very practically for a minute. What you believe about the death and resurrection of Jesus will have a bearing on your life. It will. Do you believe you died when Jesus died? Then why are you self-focused so much of the time; guilt-ridden and talking about your failures as if the more you moan, the greater the chance you will feel better about things? The Bible says simply, "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus," (Romans 6:11). And "sin shall not be your master because you are not under the law, but under grace," (6:14). Now give your body to God. Your eyes, ears, mouth, hands, legs, feet, your whole heart and mind; give it all to God. Do not hold back. You have every reason to give yourself to the one who gave you free-forgiveness through His sacrifice.

What Paul is saying here is that our union with Christ motivates us to be true to Him. Isn't this the same in marriage? It is our union to our partner that motivates us to be true to our partner. When a couple gives their vows, they make promises about their body parts. They are saying: my body is no one else's, it is only yours; I give myself to you and you alone. So Paul is saying that because you are now united to Christ, you must be devoted to Christ. Don't go back and live like you once did, because that would be adultery; a spiritual mockery.

I hope you are enjoying Romans. There is something in Romans for all of us all of the time. Keep reading and studying this awesome book.

God's blessings unite us to Christ,
Pastor Steve

Day 202

"The New Way Of The Spirit"

July 21 - Romans 6:15 - 7:6

Some people see joining the church as similar to joining a service club in town. That's where you pay your dues, do your service, attend the meetings and make the acquaintance of others. You follow the rules of the club and off you go. Well, that is not the way it is with the church. The church is not a club or even an organization for that matter. The church is a body; it is the body of Christ. We are now grafted into Him and experience Him working in our lives. This has many ramifications, some of which Paul alludes to in our reading today.

In our last reading, we discovered that we are no longer slaves of sin because we died to it. Here we read that we are not under law. Law does not govern our life or our conscience any longer. Man usually depends on rules to govern his life. He can then measure how he is doing. If he's keeping the rules, he feels well, and if he's breaking the rules he will have a guilty conscience. The problem is that no one knows which rules are "the" rules. One man's standard is another man's joke. Then there is the problem of adapting the rules to fit my own likes and dislikes. Man becomes a rule unto himself and there becomes as many standards as there are people. So who makes the rules?

Even moral and religious people struggle with this because they are constantly trying to reach an unreachable standard. Either they live in guilt, or they set their standard at a level they're capable of living up to. It becomes a never-ending effort to keep a set of rules. Those on this treadmill will often be very judgmental and hard on others because they have to continually promote their standard to others, in order to convince them that they know what the standard is. That's why Jesus blew the Scribes and Pharisees out of the water when he raised the bar of righteousness way out of their reach. See the Sermon on the Mount and you'll see what I mean.

So those in Christ are not under law. As a matter of fact, Paul states in Galatians that the law was like a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, who is the end of the law as far as righteousness is concerned. The law merely showed me where I had blemishes; there was no way it could, in and of itself, make me righteous, because there was no way for me to keep it perfectly. Those who try to live by law only frustrate themselves because of their lack of power to fulfill it.

We who are in Christ are now under an entirely different law. It is the law of the Spirit, and He leads us and empowers us and fulfills the law in us. He is at work in our lives, transforming us into the image of Christ. Look at it this way: in Adam the image of God was smudged, but in Christ that image was renewed.

We have a new life in Christ. I can remember living by rule. It is wearisome and chaotic. I have even tried this with the Christian life, but it doesn't work because it contradicts a life led by the Spirit.

Paul also points out that we have become slaves of God. I love the way he puts it: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life." Think about that truth for a minute. After you were set free from the bondage of sin, you became God's slave. Bad thing or good thing? Good thing! Being God's slaves frees us from the tyranny of sin and law and the traps of this world. We need, now, to see ourselves as God's. Remember that Jesus said, "He who loses his life for me and the gospel, will save it," (Mark 8:35). Slavery to God is absolute freedom. Not freedom to do my thing, but freedom to be all that my Creator made me to be. That is reason to throw a party. Now I am truly free. I am free at last.

In Chapter 7, Paul comes back to his original point by using the illustration of the freedom of a widow to remarry. If her husband is dead she is free. In the same way we died to the law and are therefore truly free because the law has no more hold on us. Now we are dead to law and remarried to Christ, and the result is that we bear fruit to God. This reminds me of John 15, where Jesus said that abiding in Him would result in a fruitful life. Again the idea is that something special happens when we are joined to Christ. It is something the rules of law could never provide. It is alive and active in us, compared to law, which was all external. The law may have guided us but it could not make us righteous. We needed the Spirit for that. Now we have a new way to live: the way of the Spirit.

And so Paul introduces us again to the work of the Holy Spirit, Who changes the believer internally, making a huge difference in our lives. We'll be taking about His ministry more as we go along, but in the meantime we need to stress that the Christian life is about being wrapped up into Jesus, walking with Jesus, and getting to know Jesus more and more. It is not about how good you are at keeping rules.

How about you? Is your righteousness dependent on rule-keeping?

Do you spend more time worrying about following rules then you do following the Lord?

Are you pretty judgmental of others, tending to measure them by your own set of standards?

Do you often suffer from guilty feelings after you have let yourself down by breaking some of the rules?

If so, then pray about it and see about the new way of the Spirit. He is waiting to lead you down this road of freedom and life. The Romans Road is a wonderful road. Enjoy the ride and you will be set free from the tyranny of rule-keeping.

God's blessings set sin's captives free,
Pastor Steve

"How Spiritual Am I?"

July 22 - Romans 7: 7-25

Romans 7 is all about me and you. Some claim that they have graduated out of chapter 7 into chapter 8, and in the process have left chapter 7 behind. Bunk! I believe we, as Christians, live in chapter 7 every day. Paul says here that the law is not to blame for our problems. The law is simply the catalyst for bringing out the utter depravity of my flesh. Also, there is an emphasis on the new me vs. the old me; or, another way to put it, the real me and what looks like me but really isn't. I'll try to explain this momentarily, so hang on.

Remember Chapters 1-3? Well how about putting it this way: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my sinful nature...but in the sinful nature (I am) a slave to the law of sin" (7: 18, 25). Paul says that this law is at work in the members of his body, so he has to fight to do the right thing. In Galatians, he says that the flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, so that we cannot do what we would like to do (5:17). As long as we are in these bodies, the gravity of sin will weigh us down. We will have the "want to" but not the "can do." I can not tell you how often over the years I have tried to deal with the sinful nature in ways that have been unsuccessful. Many times I have convinced myself that I had finally conquered the flesh. Then the next day...

In my early Christian days I had a friend named Donny who shared with me that he felt he had gotten victory over lust. The next time I saw him, he despaired that he'd never know freedom from the tyranny of lustful eyes. You see, that week he had run into a poster of a famous "hot chick" and...that's all she wrote. His mind went bonkers. He couldn't think of anything else and it was downhill from there. Why? Because there was a war in his body which was stronger than the desire to resist the temptation.

We all battle. There is no one who bats a thousand. We are all in a struggle. In Ephesians 6, the famous chapter on spiritual warfare, it says we are in a wrestling match, a contest, a battle; the only ones who win are those who are strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. All others eventually fail. The victors are those closely associated with Jesus, who find in Him the strength for a fight that will end in His victory through His cross.

There is a very intriguing verse in this section of Scripture. It reads: "And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me," (verses 16,17). What is Paul saying?

First of all, he is trying to show us that the purpose of the law is to point out where I have gone wrong. How would I know where I have blown it, if there was no code to tell me? The law fits that bill. The law is holy, just and good. The law points its bony finger at me and declares, "Guilty!" I shut my mouth at that point, because if I'm honest I would agree that the law is good and I am sinful.

Second, he is saying that God knows our true intentions. God knew that my friend Donny wanted to do the right thing, and yet he did the very thing he didn't want to do. Donny was merely proving that, indeed, he had nothing to offer in his flesh or sinful nature. But God knows the heart, and if your heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit, the true you, the born-again you, is innocent and holy and righteous. The "inner man" cannot sin. John says this in his little epistle at the end of the New Testament. He cannot sin because he has been born of God. But he does sin, because he is still in a sinful body with members aching to do the very thing the law says not to do. So even though I love the Lord and want to do what He wants me to do, I still sin. To others it looks like I am a sinner. But the truth is that the real me, the inner me, is okay because he has the righteousness of God.

Think about David. David looks like a horrible sinner from the accounts we read about him. And if David had those incidents to do again, he might have handled them differently. But from God's vantage point, He says that David is a man after His heart. How do you explain that unless the real true David is the one who wants to do the right thing despite his struggles and struggles and struggles. Can you relate?

Finally Paul cries out for someone to deliver him from this dilemma. Then who does he say comes to his rescue? He thanks God that the victory is in Christ Jesus: his Lord, his Leader, his boss, his ruler. Jesus is the key to the victory.

If you go to the law you will see, as in a mirror, all of your smudges.

If you go to Jesus you will experience His righteousness and find peace.

It's possible that you're reading this and thinking, "Well then, if it's like this, I'll go ahead and sin all the more because God sees my heart." But if that's your attitude, beware. That is presuming on the grace of God. God knows your motives. He knows if you really want to serve Him and be His disciple, or if you are "kidding." But in the final analysis no one kids God; all things are open before Him.

Do you love Him?

Then it is no longer you who is sinning. The real you is perfect in Christ.

Do you believe that? It's gospel.

But remember, sin still lives in your members and there will be consequences for your sins. My wife and I were talking today about people who land in the hospital because of poor health choices. What percentage of people do you think are in the hospital despite good health choices? Really a very small percentage. Most are there because they've failed to do the things they knew they ought to be doing. We still reap what we sow.

The good news is that in Christ there is victory, in this life and ultimately in the life to come. Hallelujah!

God's blessings help us to overcome sin,

Pastor Steve

"Is Romans Eight The Greatest?"

July 23 - Romans 8: 1 - 17

Grace To You,

Some might say it is the Sermon on the Mount, but that section is three chapters.

Others may say it is Luke 15, where you find the story of the Prodigal Son.

I Corinthians 15 has a ton of good stuff, especially teaching on the resurrection of Jesus.

The romantics would probably cling to I Corinthians 13.

Many would say Psalm 23 or John 3 because they know those chapters.

I personally think Luke 24 is the number one chapter in the Bible, but that's just my opinion and I've explained the reasons why before.

But when all is said and done, it is probably Romans 8 that gets quoted the most. Romans 8 is a safe haven from the world and the theological battles that happen in some churches. Romans 8 is a place to find assurance and hope, and it is put in such easy-to-understand language that all believers can come here and drink from its refreshing, cool, spiritual waters. Have you drunk there lately? I hope today it becomes a spring of water for you during these dry summer months.

I said earlier that Paul would begin to unveil the workings of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers. Here is where we begin to see how our relationship to the Holy Spirit benefits us. Paul says that if you have the Holy Spirit, Who Himself is the gift of God, (see Acts 2:38,39), then you know you belong to God and you can partake of all of the graces that flow from that relationship. On the other hand, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ," (8: 9). In other words, the believer who truly loves God will have the activity of the Spirit in his life.

Chapters 1-3 put all of us in a place of condemnation—deserved condemnation. You know, the verse right after that famous verse about God's love, John 3:16, says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him." Once you are "in Christ," God finds no grounds to condemn you because His Son took your condemnation. Paul boldly stated in another place: "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him," (2 Corinthians 5:21). When Jesus died on the cross He bore your sins and the guilt associated with them. He took your penalty on His own body. Peter says, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

Being free from guilt is a load off. It helps me to live with less burdens and more energy, because my conscience is not on my case constantly. And when it gets on me I go right away to God and talk to Him about the sacrifice of my Forgiver, Jesus Christ. His blood cleanses me from all sins once for all. When we get to the book of Hebrews, this point will be made over and over again. The blood of Christ cleanses our conscience from all of the muck and mire that has weighed us down, and gives us freedom to love God and others.

Paul says we are under a new law, the law of the Spirit of life. Under this law I am not bound to the old law of sin and death any longer. The Spirit is busy putting the spotlight on Jesus. He reminds us of what He did for us and what that means for our lives. The Spirit moves us away from the strife of self-righteousness, and moves us to focus on the righteousness of Christ. He fills our minds with thoughts of Christ and in so doing gives us peace and spiritual life.

At this point we have welcomed Jesus into our lives, we have been forgiven of sin, we desire to please the One who gave His life for us, and we begin to despise the works of the flesh when they put their tentacles around us and squeeze. We don't want that life any more; instead, we desire the life of the Spirit.

We are now under a new jurisdiction. The Spirit controls us now, and our new set-free nature loves to submit to His direction

Paul also says a few more things about the Spirit here. He says that we need the Spirit's help to put to death those strong pulls of the flesh that we talked about in chapter 7. The Spirit will help us to deal with the lusts of the flesh that pull us in the wrong direction. The Spirit will also remind us that we are the children of God. Receiving Him moves us to cry out to God as our "Daddy."

Wow, Paul also says that you are an heir of God, a co-heir with Christ. Your inheritance is God Himself. This also means that you will have to put up with the difficulties associated with being a Christian. Others may mock you and put you down. Some may wonder why you don't go out and have "fun" any more. But you are under new management. And the Manager is busy re-constructing you into His Image by His Spirit in you.

How To:

How do I get more in step with the Spirit? Stay in the Word that He inspired. Peter said, "For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God," (2 Peter 1:21).

Ask God to help you to pray with the Spirit's help. He will help. Remember, "those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."

Ask God to fill you with the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:18)

Pray by asking the Spirit to guide you.

Walk in the Spirit today.

God's blessings are from the Spirit

Pastor Steve

Day 205

"More Than Conquerors"

July 24 - Romans 8: 18-39

The extent of sin's effect even reaches to the creation. It groans, it aches, it reels; it is experiencing the decay that sin brought into the world. It longs for the day when God will sum up all things. That day will affect everything, all of creation. We will experience the final deliverance, the renewal of a body that was destined to death and decay, and transformation into a glorious body like that of the Lord Jesus. What a day that will be! What rejoicing! What triumph!

And so, we who have the fruits of the Holy Spirit in us because of our association and identification with Jesus, have hope of a better future day when the full effects of sin will be dismantled and God will make all things right.

In the meantime, the Holy Spirit helps us. He is active in our prayers when we go to God in Jesus' name. The Spirit knows what the will of the Father is and He can help us to pray on target, so to speak. We don't always know what we should be praying. We pray one way and then another, and a lot of the time we are just shooting in the dark. But when we rely on the Spirit to help us in prayer, He does. There have been many times at many different prayer meetings when I knew the Spirit was leading us along because of the content of our prayers. I think it may even be better to just go to prayer and let the Spirit lead. Sometimes when we try to figure out our prayers I think we can get in the way. Simply bow and pray and begin to talk to God; you will find a welcome assistance that will sail you along as you pray. "The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will," (8:27).

Now God invites us into His counsel and gives us a glimpse of the heavenly movement. God did this before, in the book of Job. Remember? We were invited into a conversation between God and the devil and then we were told how things work out for good old Job. Sometimes God will allow us a peek into the somewhat hidden things so that we can appreciate His sovereign rule over all things. Things may seem out of control to us, with our limited perspective, but God has all things in the scope of His council.

He is working in our lives. That truth boggles my mind. The God of all creation is at work in our little lives today? Why? Because He loves us and has a plan for our lives. Paul says that He is working in His children's lives for the good. There are good ends for each and every circumstance in our lives. How He can do that and also work with my will is a mystery, but He does. God is not limited by the will of man. Some may teach that He is, but I personally do not believe it. I think Paul is confident that God is in control of all things. Otherwise, how could he say that all things are working together for good, unless God works in all things? God can take the crummiest of circumstances and work out His good plan in them.

I experience Romans 7, but I also experience Romans 8. Eight does not negate 7. We still will struggle with the old flesh. It will continue to pull us down. But the truths in Romans 8 should give us hope. God is at work in our lives and He is working through all of our circumstances to complete His. How do I know this? Well, look at what follows Romans 8:28. God's foreknowledge, or the placement of His love on our lives, led Him to predestine us to conform to the image of Jesus. Then Paul gives a chain of events that describes the life of a believer:

Those He Predestined, He also called. John 10 says that Jesus knows His sheep and calls them by name.

Those He Called, He justified. Remember that it was the blood of Jesus that is the basis for God to justify us or declare us righteous.

Those He Justified, He glorified. He will bring us safely into His heavenly presence. He started the process and He will finish it. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

So how do you respond to these great truths?

Obviously, God is for you. And God is gracious. And man cannot thwart the will of God because it is God who has worked and is working in your life. There is no condemnation your way. As a matter of fact, nothing can separate you from Jesus. Nothing, no way, no how. You are a conqueror in Christ. Let me say that again: You are a conqueror in Christ. That is who you are. Man may say differently, but God is true and His Word is true. Our response will determine how we live today.

I invite you to join me in living victoriously in Jesus today as a conqueror. John says that the victory that overcomes the world is our faith (I John 5:4). Put your faith in these truths today and you will grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Enjoy!

God's blessings make us conquerors,

Pastor Steve

Day 206

"God's Choice...Of Us"

July 25 - Romans 9: 1-21

I hope your reading in Romans has been profitable for your spiritual journey so far. We are almost home, but the last trek of the Romans Road will bring us through some winding parts where our conventional thinking about God and His purposes will be challenged.

I think most of us have a mental view of God that we have constructed over the years based on our own circumstances. I like to think of God as a good Father who has my best interest in mind, even as I do for my kids. He tells me He loves me and reminds me over and over that I am His. This is actually what we read in Romans 8, isn't it? Now we can call God our "Daddy" because of what He has done for us through the Son of God, Jesus.

The call for salvation goes out into all the earth. Men see God's work in the created order and the message of salvation goes out from the church everywhere. Later God will judge all men on the basis of what they did in response to the Son. Someone once said that, theoretically, on the door of heaven it says "Whoever wills may come," and once you are on the inside you see that the inside of the door says "Chosen before the foundation of the world." The fact that God has chosen "His people" is indisputable. Somehow God works in the hearts of people, drawing them into the kingdom of God. If God didn't do this what would happen? Romans 3 says that man would go on in his own way, lost and blind and stumbling to find his way in life. Only by embracing the work of Christ on the Cross can a person find help.

Paul expresses his desire to see his own countrymen saved, but makes it clear that their unbelief does not negate what God is doing in the world. As a matter of fact, it was through Israel that the Christ descended. He came through Abraham's son Isaac and not through Ishmael. Why? Because salvation would come through grace, and through a promise in which men would trust and be saved. Isaac was the son of promise, and so the blessings of God's promise to Abraham would come to those who believe in the promised one, Jesus Christ. It didn't matter if you were Jew or not, salvation would be for those who place their faith in Jesus.

Isaac's wife Rebecca had two boys, twins, but God had already decided that the promise would be fulfilled through Jacob and not Esau. It would be easy to figure out why if we could base God's choice on His

foreknowledge that Esau would be a bad egg and Jacob a good bird. But Paul makes it clear that that isn't the issue at all. "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bead—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by Him who calls—" and also, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." If it's not based on works, then it appears unfair that God would choose one over the other. Why couldn't He have chosen both?

Paul anticipates this objection and answers it. "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" Paul answers his own question: "Not at all!" Then as he delves into this he says later, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" If God chooses one and leaves the other in his sins, how can that be fair? This would have been the perfect place for Paul to talk about free will and how it depends on the choice of men, but he doesn't, does he? His answers point back to God's choice. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...But who are you, O man, to talk back to God...does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay, some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"

I would encourage you to go back and re-read Romans 8 and 9 and let the Bible speak for itself. Paul may be speaking to you when he anticipates your objection: "Who are you?" That is the lesson in Job as well. "Who are you, Job?" "Do you understand the mysteries of God? Do you know the ways of the Almighty?" In the end, Job's response was remorse that he had judged God's good judgment.

Do you love God? Do you enjoy His words? Is your heart willing to be obedient to Him? Do you work for the unity of the church and use your spiritual gift(s) in the church? Then you are chosen by God. You can thank God for His choice of you, and you can urge others to come to Christ so that they too can enjoy the benefits of being a child of God.

"By grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourself, it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast," (Ephesians 2:8,9)

God's blessings are according to God's choice,
Pastor Steve

"Even Us"

July 26 - Romans 9:22 - 10: 4

Yesterday we learned that God decided to choose us on the basis of His mercy and not on anything that impressed Him in us. When he looked into our hearts all He saw was egotism. We were set on doing our own will until God came along and had a tremendous amount of grace upon us. Remember that in Romans 8 we saw God's progression in dealing with us: Predestined - Called - Justified - Glorified. We, who are the objects of His mercy, were called to Christ so that we might show the riches of His mercy for His own glory.

What would be God's motivation to send His one and only Son to give His life for sinners? Paul gives us a direct answer to this in Ephesians 1: "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him, In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intentions of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved," (verses 4-6). Sounds a lot like Romans, doesn't it? Paul taught with continuity. He exalted the grace of God in

all of his writings. The Holy Spirit was guiding him as he penned the words of Scripture.

Who are those who get mercy? The deserving? No, mercy means not getting what you deserve. You deserve judgment, as Paul has been explaining all along the Romans Road, but God is willing to give mercy to sinners. "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," (5:8). Jesus died for us when we were on the other side. We were in darkness, separated from God, and spiritually dead. Then, because God loves us, we read in Ephesians again: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (2: 4,5).

Then Paul goes on to give the words of the prophets who had declared that God would have a people consisting of Jews and Gentiles. He also points out that unless God had stepped in and shown mercy, the human race would have looked like Sodom and Gomorrah, where no one was saved except for just a few fortunate ones.

The Romans Road is a highway of faith in Jesus Christ. He is a stumbling block to those who would like to come to God in any other way. If you exclude Him, you will be excluded. Jesus is the end of the law to those who put their trust in Him, because God's way of righteousness is through Jesus and not through human effort. Consider the arrogance of anyone who would think they could add to the perfect work of Christ.

Those who have the Spirit, those in Christ, have had the blood of the Son applied to them. They are now recipients of the righteousness of Christ. This righteousness is from God, for us, and clears us from all wrongdoing that has isolated us from God in the past.

Look at it this way: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord,'" (I Corinthians 1:30,31).

Also, you have reason to celebrate. If you have faith in Jesus, you can rejoice that He has done all of what we are talking about for you. He took a sinful person and exchanged His own righteousness so that you could freely come to a holy God. Rejoice!

Third, no matter how often you think on the mercy and grace and love and blood of Jesus, you will always be able to go deeper than you have before. The depth of His grace is unfathomable. Just when you think you have it down, it will surprise you all over again. Jesus loves you in an incomprehensible way.

God's blessings are ordained by God,
Pastor Steve

"Jesus Is Lord"

July 27 - Romans 10: 5 - 11: 10

A few days ago we skipped over a very important verse that is reiterated here in this section. "Theirs (the Jews) are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen," (9:5). Who is the Christ? He is none other than God. In Hebrews it says, "But of the Son He says, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, And the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom," (1:8). Is there any doubt as to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ?

It is faith in Him that saves, and Paul lays this out here in Romans 10. True faith originates in the heart.

You have to believe from the heart that Jesus Christ is alive, and confess (or speak with your mouth) that He is Lord. I'll never forget how, the night I accepted the Lord, my girlfriend bought a "Jesus is Lord" bumper sticker and slapped it right on the back of my little VW Beetle. For some reason that small act helped to change my identity. I was no longer the lord of my life; there was a new boss. I was now under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Look at what Paul lists as the benefits of coming to Christ. He says that you will not be ashamed or disappointed. I have found that to be true. Second, he says that Jesus richly blesses all who call on Him. I have found that to be the case as well. The connection I have with my spiritual family far outweighs any other relationship I have experienced. There is a bond that goes way beyond the natural relationships that form between people with whom you have things in common. To know people who love you simply because you are friends and you have the Lord in common is a very pleasurable experience. We have the same Lord. He is a good Lord, a benevolent King, a friend who sticks closer than a brother. In what ways has Jesus blessed your life?

For the rest of this chapter and into chapter 11 Paul wants to make it clear that anyone can call on the Name of the Lord and be rescued from sin. God's people are Jews and Gentiles alike, and they come from every continent on the globe. They are a remnant, a people chosen by grace. Grace is defined as undeserved favor. That's why Paul makes such a big deal about God's choice not being in correlation with a person's works. If God gave grace based on a man's works, then no one would be saved.

"So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did, the others were hardened..." (verses 5-7).

Grace is God's "loving kindness," a word used frequently in the Old Testament, which is the New Testament equivalent of grace. God Foreknows - Predestines - Chooses - Justifies - Glorifies. His elect are the beneficiaries of His inheritance, and what the "graced ones" find out is that God has placed His love on them and given them grace, grace to be saved by faith (Ephesians 2: 8,9).

Let's look at a couple of other verses that will parallel what we have been saying. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice..." (I Peter 1: 3-6); and "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things (the qualities he had just talked about like faith and moral excellence and knowledge, etc.), you will never stumble," (2 Peter 1:10).

A growing Christian is always reminding himself about the importance of Christ. He stays in the Word and is reminded of the grace and mercy of God. Because of this, he has few doubts about his own place in God's kingdom. He hears the Spirit telling him that he is a child of God and loved dearly by God.

Is Jesus the Leader of your life today?

Have you committed the day to Him?

Let's pray: "Lord, be the leader of our lives today. Make your ways clear to us so that we can go your way. We do not want to call our own shots. We have tried that, Jesus, and have only found it to be a detour from your good purposes for our lives. Show me today, Lord Jesus, what it would mean for me to be under your control absolutely. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

God's blessings teach the grace of God,

Pastor Steve

"Mercy Upon All"

July 28 - Romans 11:11-32

"He came to His own but His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to be called the sons of God, even to those who believed in His name," (John 1: 12).

God's chosen people, the Jews, started well but ended poorly. They began by faith, like Abraham, and ended with trying to justify themselves by works. I see this trend in the church and sometimes in my own life too. We are saved by grace, and yet from time to time we attempt to feel good about ourselves by our works.

This works in reverse as well. We can overly emphasize our failures and forget the blood of Jesus. Instead of coming to the Lord and confessing our sins, we try to make up for them by balancing the scales with a better day tomorrow. God's remedy is I John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

How about you? Are you trusting in the grace of God from day to day? Are you overly concerned about impressing others, justifying your actions, or comparing yourself with others? Remember, Paul said earlier that where the Jews fell short was in attempting to establish their own path for righteousness apart from Christ.

Despite all of the light that they had received over the years, they went about things not according to God's way but to their own.

The fall of the Jews meant that the message of the gospel would go to the Gentiles. Paul, as we have said before, was the apostle to the Gentiles even though he was a Jew. He reminds us all in this section that when it comes to our salvation and the fall of the Jews, our attitude should not be arrogant, but humble. It was through their heritage that our blessings have come. And now Paul's hope is that they will be moved to Christ through these blessings. He says that God is able to graft them back into the tree (a picture of the elect ones mentioned in chapters 8 and following).

The crux of the matter is belief and faith in God. Those who persist in unbelief, whether Jew or Greek, must come to Christ for salvation. He is the Deliverer who rescues His people. Eventually all Israel will be saved. Does this mean all Jews will one day be saved? Remember who the true Jews are. Paul made this clear in earlier chapters, saying that a true Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly, with a heart that has been heart circumcised. One day all Israel will be saved, because all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile, will be saved, and these believers are the "true Israel." Do you buy that? Think about it in the context of what Paul has already told us about true Judaism. All will come to God the same way—through faith in Jesus. There will be no national salvation because of your bloodline; we must all come by faith as Paul has taught throughout the book. Can you imagine him emphasizing faith all along, and then suddenly teaching that a particular nation will be saved? On what basis would that fit with the rest of his theology?

The main point here is that God shows mercy to Jew and Gentile alike. He has sent a Deliverer who earned salvation for any man who calls on His Name. "Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," (Romans 10:13). What a privilege to tell someone about the great love of God through Christ.

With whom would you like to share your faith in Christ? Take a moment to pray for that person, and for God to open up an opportunity for you to share your personal story of salvation through Christ.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings make the gospel powerful in our lives,

Pastor Steve

Day 210

"True Worship"

July 29 - Romans 11:33 - 12:21

Hello Friends,

We were made to worship God. All of Creation was made to worship God. Isaiah 55:11,12 says, "So shall My word be which goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

Worship is a universal desire. We were made to worship. But remember, as Paul pointed out in Chapter 1, that often man distorts worship; and instead of making God the object of his worship, he worships things and images.

In Romans we have been in some pretty deep water. We have seen the sovereignty of God in ways that maybe some have never considered before. We have been a bit confused by the statements of God's election and choice of His people. We, like Paul's hypothetical man, have said, "How can that be?" or, "that doesn't seem fair." We, like Paul's first century readers, have wondered how suffering fits into God's plan, because it doesn't seem to fit our ideas about a loving God. Paul does not pussyfoot around with any of the difficult issues. He lays them out and serves them up on a plate for us to eat and digest. So by this point in the book you may have a bit of indigestion. Rolaids, anyone? Paul's response is a doxology that magnifies the wisdom and autonomy of God.

He cries out: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unreachable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" In other words, good luck figuring God out; He is incomprehensible and we cannot understand the kind of mind He has or make the judgments that He makes.

Paul goes on, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?" Who has the final word? God. Who knows what's best for everyone? God. Who sees all and knows all? God. Who can understand what goes on in His mind? No one.

Then: "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" God is debtor to no man. He doesn't need a thing. He is self-sufficient. How do we know this? "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen."

Remember the story of the small child who asks his father for two bucks and then goes to the store to buy a present for his daddy? The child, with delight, buys a gift with "his money" and brings the present to his dad. The money was from him and through him and to him. The child was only able to use what his dad had given him, for a delightful reason. This is the way it is with everything we have. All that we have is from God without exception. Someone may protest, "Wait a minute, I earned it, I did the work!" Where did you get the health and the strength and the brainpower and the energy to earn it? "... from Him...are all things."

In view of all of this, what should I do? Give myself to God. If I do, He will have mercy. If I do, I worship. God wants me in worship. My gift back to God is me. God made me and He wants me and He will forgive me of my sins so that I can get to know Him.

In light of this, I see a theme in the previous chapter and this one. The idea is HUMILITY. In chapter 11 humility meant not judging the Jews or moving them out of the scope of God's forgiveness, because God was able to bring them back in. In chapter 12, it is humility in the way we treat one another and our enemies. Look at 12:3, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." And verse 16: "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Do you see what I mean?

Then the other subjects here in this chapter,

which is very practical indeed, come into focus so that we can see the Christian life through the lens of the great things God has done for us in Jesus.

For example: When you live humbly:

You will know the will of God and want to do it, 12:2.

You will find your place in the Body of Christ, 12:4-8.

You will care about and love others from the heart, 12: 9-13.

You will love your enemies by overcoming evil with good, 12: 14-21.

All of this goes out the window, though, when I live in a proud way. When I put myself in the God position, there are problems. The opposite of the good things Paul lists will happen. I become worried about my own will and not God'; I focus on myself and not the church; I make sure people are giving me strokes, but am not thinking how I can reach them and love them; and by no means would I consider loving my enemies.

My mind must be renewed. I must soak up and think about the things of God. His ways are beyond finding out, but when I accept His way as The Way, I am then ready to let Him lead my life and work in me.

God's blessings are realized through humility,

Pastor Steve

Day 211

"Love Does No Harm"

July 30 - Romans 13: 1-14

I feel sorriest for those who have inadvertently injured others. We're talking about a person who didn't mean to hurt someone, but it happened anyway. Maybe this person made a mistake and did something she will regret for the rest of her life. Years ago I visited a young man who had been shot at close range with a shotgun. He had 20 hours of surgery and months and months of rehab. The other boy, who shot him, didn't mean to. He was just showing him his father's gun. What started out so innocently changed the other boy's life.

Those who want to show kindness toward others just cringe at stories like this, because they realize that they too could accidentally injure someone.

One of the words we have already heard in the same breath with God is the word kindness. God is kind. He has demonstrated His kindness through Jesus by offering Him as a sacrifice for our sins.

Think about it. God wants to do things for us out of the goodness of His heart. Remember 8:32: "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things." God's kindness is so remarkable. He is kind to you and me; kinder than anyone we have ever known in our lives.

Kindness is just one of the practical qualities Paul commends to us in this chapter. Let's take a look at a few other ideas.

Submission to authority: Paul says that God is in control of government. He uses government to shape us into trusting people, he disciplines us through the authorities, and being a good citizen helps us learn responsibility. Think about how unbelievable this statement must have seemed in the light of the government of that time. Rome is considered by most historians to be the most ruthless of ancient governments. What Caesar said was binding. He was sole ruler and would often resort to barbaric practices to have his way. Nero lit his garden at night with the flaming bodies of church members. Caesar Hadri-

an had all Scripture burned. These rulers were no friends to the Christian cause, and yet Paul says that we are to submit. From the Biblical perspective, God is behind the scenes working through even the most anti-Christian rulers.

Paul tells us, very practically, to be responsible citizens. I believe that for us in America this includes voting. We are to give honor to those in government even when we do not agree with their views or actions. Why? Because God will work it out. God has a plan and in some way He will even use the most God-denying leader to accomplish His will.

Debt: Paul tells us to not be in debt because debt quenches love. If you are in debt, then you are a slave to the lender. He says not to do that because it will drain you of the kind of love believers need to show to all men.

Love: Paul winds up the chapter with a theme that pervades all of his writings. That theme is love. If you have love, you fulfill the law. You will not want to harm your neighbor if you are a loving person. A loving person could not even imagine hurting someone accidentally, let alone on purpose.

When you love others, you sum up all of the commands of the law. If you love God, you will not make idols of things or people to put before Him. You will not commit adultery because of the damage that would do to families. You would not murder because that is not a very loving thing to do. Love does not steal from or take advantage of his neighbor, but wishes the best for those he meets. The loving person does not covet, because he is thinking how to give rather than to get. It's hard to covet when you are focused on meeting the needs of others. Love fulfills the law.

So how do I love and give up bad habits at the same time? How do I let go of my wayward ways? Sex and vodka and hatred are hard to release if you have been into them for most of your life. Paul simply says, "...clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Put on Jesus. Pray to Him. Read His words. Tell Him that you will obey His word and then do it. Believe the declarations God has made in His Word. Thank God for what He has done in your life. Keep on praying.

Will you bow your head right now and connect with God?

God's blessings are kind,
Pastor Steve

"The Kingdom Of God"

July 31 - Romans 14: 1-18

Good Day/Good God,

The outright sinner, described by Paul in Chapter 1, could care less about pleasing God or loving others. The moral man, from Chapter 2, thinks he is the standard by which everyone else should be judged. Therefore, he is usually pretty critical of others. He wonders why people don't live life like him. The religious man, from the second half of Chapter 2 and part of 3, sees those who do not conform to his religious rules as simply wrong. To him, it is do as I do, or else! He masks his talk with a lot of religious jargon and heavenly language, making others feel condemned for their nonconformity.

These points of view are each humanistic. They are man-centered and focused on performance and evaluation. In my early days I would have identified most with our friends in Chapter 1. The more I could dive into self-absorbed behavior, the more I thought I was getting ahead in life. If it wasn't about me then it wasn't worth pursuing. I thought the moral and religious guys were weird. They seemed to me to be wasting life on their own scruples. How boring! Now when I see adults acting the way I did in high school, I tend to think that it's time for them to grow up. I don't mean to say that having fun is a bad thing, but when a person neglects responsibility to focus on partying, it just makes me shake my head...at myself.

The difference Jesus makes in any person's life, no matter which camp they started out in, is a stark one. The Jesus person has moved residences. He has moved out of Me-ville into Jesus. Remember back in Chapter 6, about how closely identified the apostle says we are joined with Jesus? And in chapter 12 we saw that we were part of His body. You can't get much more connected than that. We are members of Jesus. We are all necessary. No one can look at another member and say that he or she is not needed. We all are.

Jesus' example and teachings show us that life is about serving God and others. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many," (Matthew 20:28). Now our focus is to be like Jesus and not to be corrupt (Romans 1) or self-righteous (Romans 2) or religiously justified (Romans 2 and 3). We are in Jesus and to be like Him is our new passion. We are no longer on the ladder to the top. We are holding the ladder for others.

So here in chapter 14, Paul makes some applications for us on how to treat fellow believers who may be different from us. Are others in the church different than you? You've noticed that, haven't you? We are all so different, and sometimes that makes it hard for us to get along. But now that we are in Jesus, we have ample motivation to learn to love the way Jesus loves. Don't you want to love the way He loves? I think you'd say that was God's will for you. Any objections?

In Paul's day people had opinions about the food they ate and what days were more important than others. This was especially true for those from a Jewish background. Certain foods were off limits and certain days were more holy than others. Some of the folks who grew up following these rules became followers of Jesus. Remember that the entire early church was made up of Jews only, until God showed Peter that the message was for Gentiles too. So the church became a mixture of people from very different backgrounds.

I see this same problem in my own home. My wife grew up in the church. She had good values and a focus on the Bible. I grew up with the attitude "Live and let live, you do your thing and I'll do mine." Can you see how these backgrounds might affect our marriage and the way we raised our kids? It has. We have needed to learn to compromise on many things. Guess who the kids go to when they want their way? I have learned to say, "Have you asked your mom?"

Paul says, that for Christ's sake, you must be sensitive to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't flaunt your liberties before someone who would be tempted to violate his own conscience by doing what you do. He is convinced in his mind at the present time that it would be wrong for him to do what you do. So he sees you doing it, and his faith is weakened because he is toying with violating his own conscience. Look at what Paul says, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

For example, the issue of the best day to worship was one of the sticking points. The apostle says to not make a big deal out of it. Let the person who thinks one day is more important than another go ahead and make that day special. Don't look down on him. On the other hand, if you treat every day the same, don't make yourself out to be someone super spiritual. God has called us to peace.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men." In other words, live under and by the law of love and you won't go wrong. Think about others before you indulge your own liberties. If you do this, you will be helping the weaker brother who struggles in his conscience with many things. Maybe if he sees your love for him, that you respect where he is, then his faith will grow and he too will see that Christ is all in all and that issues like these are not all that important.

Is there someone in your life who is driving you crazy right now because he is just so different? Let's apply this lesson to him, and you too will experience righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Love in Christ,
God's blessings help us to accept others unlike us,
Pastor Steve

Day 213

"Accept One Another"

August 1 - Romans 14:19 - 15:13

(Please allow me to do something a bit different today. I thought I'd try to write to you after the same spirit Paul is writing this section. Let me give it a try.)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Sometimes it is so difficult to put up with the idiosyncrasies of our friends with whom we worship at church. We tend to look around and find the flaws of others in order to justify our own lack of spiritual vitality. When we are close to Christ it is so much easier to put up with the foibles of others. That's what I have been trying to say so far. I want you to have a close relationship with Jesus and then carry that over into your relationships with others.

Do you have some strong opinions about the way things ought to be in the church? That's great, but be careful how you share your thoughts, because you could bowl over others who do not understand your thinking. God wants us to live peacefully together so that we can reflect the love of the Savior. Remember that He suffered to the point of death, not so that he could correct our sometimes faulty or weak thinking, but so that He could give us the gift of forgiveness.

What I'd really like for you to do is get into the Word and find in it the strength to love as Christ loves you. If you do, you will find special grace to be able to put up with all kinds of incongruities among your friends. You will then have the energy to reach out to a friend you struggle with instead of criticizing him. What does criticism accomplish? Not much.

If you are still concerned about him, go to him and try to talk sensibly with him about the things you believe in. But be careful to do it in love. Remember, love is the fulfillment of God's law. Keep that in mind. Let God's word be your encouragement. Don't let the Scriptures gather dust on your shelf--read the Bible, think about it, follow it, and you will find that it is a life-map, giving you the direction you need to love as Christ loves.

Remember that Jesus was able to accept sinners and bring them along. He put up with a lot of junk so that He could show his love. Let's do the same. You know how it feels when someone accepts you unconditionally, don't you? How does that make you feel? Pretty good, huh? Well, accept others as you would like to be accepted. This includes those who are from a different religious or ethnic background. It may be difficult because you do not have a natural affinity for them, but because of Jesus you can love them now with a new kind of love, the love of Jesus. You can do it. Commit it to God and He will help you.

Don't forget that it is the Holy Spirit living in you that will enable you to do things you never dreamed you could do. Once you experience His joy and peace, you will be out there in the world full of hope and enthusiasm for doing the will of God. Enjoy!

I love you in Jesus.

God's blessings enable us to love as Jesus loves,

Pastor Paul (really Steve)

Day 214

"You Are Able"

August 2 - Romans 15: 14-33

What is your opinion of counselors and counseling? Your answer probably depends on whether or not you have been helped by a counselor. We live in a "hurry-up" world, a place with little time for deep conversation. And yet I think from time to time we need someone, like a counselor, to truly listen to us. If we do not regularly bring out the things in our minds and hearts they tend to sit in us, getting stale and rank, until they make us sick, emotionally. There is a proverb that says the heart of man is like a deep well and the wise man is able to bring out the deeper things.

Wouldn't you agree that we live in an impatient world? By that I mean that we tend to want what we want immediately. This way often results in frustration. Have you been around people who are more and more frustrated? Remember back in Romans 5, where we saw that our sufferings are meant to accomplish things in us? Things like patience, proven character, hope, and a new relationship with the Holy Spirit, which brings us into the love of God. How are you doing in the area of patience? I know that I struggle with wanting things to come together today. I get so disappointed with myself because I don't have my act together yet in the same old areas. I feel like Charlie Brown who could never get it together and was always being picked on by his nemesis, Lucy. "Good grief, Charlie Brown!"

One common problem in counseling is impatience. People come to counseling with unrealistic expectations or doubts about whether it will work or not. The real question is not whether counseling will work, but whether you will you work in counseling. Problems are not solved overnight, nor are they the product of a smart counselor. People must be willing to recognize that their problems did not come about yesterday and they will not be resolved by tomorrow. Most people are unwilling to face that music. When there are problems, a popular approach to dealing with them is to isolate oneself from them. And in doing so, the person usually isolates himself from God and his spouse and his friends, as well.

Paul's attitude toward counseling involves all of us. Come to think of it, this approach dovetails what we have already been reading in Romans. We are the Body of Christ. We are individual members of something that is alive and life-producing and spiritually invigorating. Therefore, Paul says, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (15:14). Paul says that the church is to counsel itself. What does this mean in practical terms?

Number one, I need to be an active part of the church's life. I cannot afford to isolate myself from my brothers and sisters in Christ. I need them and they need me. We are joined because of our identification with Jesus. If we are not functioning well in the Body, the Body will be disabled. Do you know local churches that are disabled? It happens all of the time. I wonder how it makes the Lord feel. Not very well, I reckon.

Second, I need to be a growing believer. To be "full of goodness and complete in knowledge" I must be vitally joined with the Holy Spirit, Who is good, and I must grow in my understanding of the Word of God so that I will be able to show someone from the Word what God's will is for them. Are you growing? Then according to Paul, God will use you in the church to counsel others. Christian fellowship creates this and gives it opportunity. It is in the context of developing relationships that we are able to admonish someone toward the Lord's will. When a close friend is wandering from God, I want to be right there encouraging them to get back on track. It is much harder with people you do not know, isn't it?

Third, we need to step out in faith and ask the

tough questions sometimes. Paul's word for "instruct" is a Greek word that means to "admonish, warn, correct." He is saying that each of us has the God-ordained task of encouraging our Christian friends who are straying from the truth to get back on the Romans Road. Maybe they have forgotten and need some reminding. Maybe they have succumbed to immorality. Whatever has happened, God wants to use all of us to pull them back.

Here's a small collage of verses along these same lines from other apostles. "My brethren, if any among you stray from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins," (James 5: 19,20). "And have mercy on some who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh," (Jude 22,23). "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men," (Paul in I Thessalonians 5:14).

God's blessings often follow admonishment,
Pastor Steve

"Good and Evil and Satan"

August 3 - Romans 16: 1-27

The kindness and love of God has drawn us to Jesus Christ. We now have a new life in Him. God's kindness changes the way we see others. The church becomes our family and the way we treat our family is with God's kindness. I think you can sum up Romans like this: God was kind to us/we are to be kind to one another. We need God and we need one another. God made us that way; no man is an island, so it's time to learn to get along.

Who are the people that encourage you in your faith in Jesus? We all need a group of people in our lives with whom we can laugh and cry and pray and... you name it. Paul ends this gospel book with a list of people who have had an impact on his life and the advancement of God's Word. They are not only men but a pretty good group of women. Paul acknowledges all of those who have been a help to him in the spread of the gospel. The message of God's kindness was Paul's passion, and the people who partnered with him were the ones he loved. Do you love the gospel? If so, you would have been one of Paul's favorites.

I love this verse: "Greet Apelles, tested and approved in the Lord," and "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me too."

This is our last day in Romans. It has been a good road. I am always revitalized in my faith after reading it again. The last chapter of a book is always important. It is meant to bring to a conclusion the many truths we have been reading. Let's look at it with the rest of the book in mind and bring to a conclusion the Romans Road.

The list of names is more than a list of names. It represents the life of the Holy Spirit through people. It is about the church meeting in homes, and about working hard for the Lord, and about simply being in the Lord, and about helping one another in the gospel work. It's the life of the church. It is the result of the gospel working in the lives of people. First, to change them, and then to send them out into the world to reach others.

The "brothers" are to greet one another warmly. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." I guess that would be with warm affection, innocently, not in lustful passion but in brotherly love.

How important is the message of the gospel? Paul says that you are to mark out those who cause divisions and teach another gospel. Those who oppose the gospel oppose Christ and are to be avoided. In Galatians Paul says that any who preach another gospel are to be accursed. Why is this? To distort the gospel is to throw mud in God's face. It misrepresents God. How would you feel if someone came up to you and said he knew your father, but when he began to describe him you were flabbergasted because his view was nothing close to the person you know. You would be angry. He would be dishonoring your father by representing him incorrectly.

Then Paul says some very important things. He commends the Roman believers and then says to them "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." What should we major on? What should we minor on? Major on the good and minor on the evil. I think the message for us is, "Don't get caught up in the loose morals of the times." Spend the majority of your time studying and knowing the real, the pure, the genuine, and then you will be able to call a spade a spade. Paul said in Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

The reason some cannot tell the true from the fake is that they do not spend enough time examining the genuine. There is a lot of fool's gold out there. Some people naively walk into traps by not evaluating what they are getting themselves into. Many well-intentioned folks have bought a bill of goods because they have not eaten from God's tree. Jesus said that as the branches remain in the vine, so you abide in Me (John 15). Jesus says that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

Another interesting quote from Paul here is the one about Jesus soon putting the devil under their feet. I'm not sure exactly what Paul meant here except for the fact that he was confident that through Jesus they would have whatever spiritual victory they needed. A common New Testament theme is that the devil has been defeated through the cross and that eventually God would wrap all things up in Jesus, which would mean a final dispelling of the evil one.

Let's finish Romans by reading Paul's benediction (Let's read it out loud):

"Now to Him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

My friends, I hope that Romans has made an impression on your heart and mind. This book is one to go back to over and over. Martin Luther believed that every Christian should memorize every line of it. Whatever your commitment level is to Romans, I hope you find yourself on the Romans Road for life.

God's blessings,
Pastor Steve

1 CORINTHIANS

Day 216

"Who Am I?"

August 4 - 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," (John 17:3). These lofty statements must be understood in the light of the way we, God's people, behave in the church and in the world. The mistake some make is to think they can separate their relationship with God from the way they do life from day to day. The two are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are intertwined.

One of the major signs that you are growing spiritually is that you can rejoice when things go well for others. When your focus is on others, you are walking in love. For example, if you take the qualities of love enumerated in I Corinthians 13, you will see that they all apply to the way you treat others.

"Love is patient." Usually, maybe not always, but for the most part, patience is practiced toward others.

"Kindness:" is an attitude you have toward others.

If you go down the list, you will see what I mean. They are all focused on others, not self. Plus, others will appreciate it when you think of them. I am always warmed when people sincerely ask me how I'm doing. They want to really know, and when I tell them I feel like something special has happened between us because of their sincerity.

The Corinthian church members thought of themselves as a very spiritual bunch. They were very active in practicing some of the outward manifestations of the Spirit. They were receiving "revelations" from the Lord. These were messages from God to His church. The problem was that they were stepping on each other's toes when they got together to worship. Their services were disorderly and self-serving some of the time, and they were neglecting the more important priority of loving one another. Their spiritual experiences were falling into a "me first" category. And so there was much confusion, especially among those who were brand new to the church and spiritual things in general.

Notice in the first chapter that Paul first commends them and then rebukes them. He says that they are actively using the gifts of the Holy Spirit and they are excited about the second coming of the Lord. After this praise, he slams them for having a party spirit. They were rallying behind various teachers rather than building up one another. They were, as a church, acting like kids instead of spiritually mature believers. They were not acting like Jesus showed them.

This is understandable because the culture in which most of them were raised was corrupt. They had lived with egotism for so long that their new faith became another expression of self. They were excited by the outpouring of spiritual manifestations they were receiving, and saw it as a way to inflate their own spiritual egos. Later, in his second letter to them, Paul writes: "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God," (7:1). Really, spiritual pride is just as bad if not worse than carnal pride. Paul would remind them that glory for all of the Christian life should be directed to God.

This brings me to an example in the Old Testament. A prayer of David is recorded in I Chronicles 17, in which he responds to the message of the prophet concerning God's workings in his family (Journaling your prayers is a good exercise, by the way). David's humility is exemplified by his response to the message of Nathan. Nathan has just told the king that he would not be the one to build a house for the Name of the Lord. Rather, it would be one of the sons who would have this commission. Of course, it was Solomon who would fulfill this prophecy. But think about it; this could have been devastating news for David. He had wanted so much the honor of building a place for worship of the God who had been with him from the pasturelands to the throne. But upon receiving this news, instead of complaining, he thanks God for what God has given him. In God's presence, he says, "Who am I?" No whining, no groveling, no pity party, no temper tantrum, no rundown of how he deserves this or that—only humility.

In Psalm 8, David says, "What is man that you are mindful of him or the son of man that you take thought of him?" David is saying that in the light of the bigness of God, man becomes insignificant. The upside of this is that once you find your life in God, you have significance beyond compare. God gives you purpose. God gives you worth. God is all and in all.

Who are you?

Have you spent too much time focusing on you? And do you need to spend a bit more time being thankful to God? David leads the way here, doesn't he? He had so many personal accomplishments that it would have been not unusual for us to see him boasting in himself and complaining that he was unable to build God's house. He didn't; he gave thanks.

Who can you share your thankfulness with today?

Take time today to show thankfulness in some way.

Be generous.

Be worshipful.

Be loving for Christ's sake.

Pray very sincerely and tell God about how much you are thankful for.....

God owes me _____.

I owe God _____.

You fill in the blanks. The word "everything" goes in one blank and "nothing" goes in the other. This is a pass or fail test.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

Pastor Steve

Good Questions to help us think about Scripture and live godly lives.

1. What does 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 say about hero worship?
   a. In 1:26-30, Paul minimizes people in order to show what truth?
2. How would you explain that the "message of the cross" is "foolishness" and "weak"?
   a. What does the cross mean to you? What aspect of Christ's suffering impacts you the most?

Day 217

"Nothing Except..."

August 5 - 1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:5

A focused person lives a meaningful life. I wonder what people thought about Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel.

Maybe, "Is this guy ever going to finish?" What did people think about Noah building the ark? It took him 120 years. Now that was quite a project!

Great things are not accomplished overnight. It's just that most people do not have the kind of purpose in their lives that motivates them to sacrifice for the long run or the big picture.

How are you doing in this regard? Are you focused or scattered? Are you consistently looking for meaning in what you do, or do you know why you do what you do? Are you organizing yourself to accomplish your purpose? Is your time geared to focus on the big issues in your life? What are you going to do tomorrow that fits into the big picture? What step will you take tomorrow that will lead toward your bigger goals?

Depending on how we answer these questions, I think it might be time for many of us to sharpen our focus. Where do we begin? Let's pray.

"Lord, I believe that you love me and have a plan for my life. God, I apologize for focusing so much on what I want. Please show me what you want for my life. Where do you want me to spend my time and energy and money? Guide me, direct me, show me the way you want me to go. I want you to be the guiding force of my life. Fill me with you so that I will be energized with your power. I love you and want to find my life in you. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

Paul lived a focused life. God's purpose for him was to proclaim Christ. Remember back in Romans, when Paul said that he didn't want to intrude in another's work but wanted to share Christ where He hadn't been preached before? Paul spent most of his time, energy and treasure on this task. He says that his main aim in Corinth was to preach about the crucifixion of Jesus. Paul believed that the message of the cross was the focal point of a person's life. If a person was called by God, that person would come to God through the cross. Interestingly enough, Paul says that he was not the most gifted speaker, but that wasn't the issue at all in his eyes. He wasn't always confident either, but was still excited about the message of the cross. Paul's purpose was much bigger than himself. He daily trusted in the power of God to be with him as he traveled.

Once your purpose is established it will be challenged. We live in a world that rewards and persecutes the focused person. Those who are scattered will often attempt to distract the person who is on task. Scattered people usually complain about how things are not working for them. They are always looking for the magic solution to their empty existence. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:33 that bad company corrupts good morals. People with little focus in life tend to pull down those who are going somewhere.

Paul knew what it was like to deal with distractions. I can imagine that Paul's presence in Corinth was not received by everyone with open arms. Corinth was a very corrupt city. Paganism and immorality were rampant. Paul was a bit intimidated by all that was going on around him. But that did not deter him from talking about Jesus and particularly the cross. The cross was Paul's focal point. He knew that the Jews were into miracles and the Greeks wisdom, but the cross was the message and Paul was going to stick with it.

What is the focus of your life? Once you are convinced of your focus, you will be able to weather many storms because your soul's anchor will see you through. In childbirth classes, the teachers instruct the couple to pick a focal point to use during the pre-birth process. The expectant mom is supposed to focus with an eagle eye on her focal point during contractions. This mental tool is meant to take the attention off of the pain and mentally release it to the object she is concentrating on. It really worked for my wife. When you have a focal point in your life it really works too. What is your focal point?

Does your job meet the expectations for a valid focal point?

Is it your family? Does your family occupy the majority of your thoughts?

Is it a hobby or recreational activity that you obsess about?

Is it retirement? Do you spend much of your time accumulating enough money to live "the good life"?

Is it a spiritual gift that you use to build up the Body of Christ?

It was for Paul.

If you are a believer, God has given you a spiritual gift to use in the church. Are you actively using the gift God has given you? Paul needed to tell his young protégé, Timothy, to fan into flame the gift God had given him. Could that be true for you too? I would encourage you to take a step in faith and get involved in the local church. First of all, pray for the church. Then see if there is an area of interest where you could get involved.

Encourage others in the church.

Give your time, talents, and treasure to the church.

You will feel God's pleasure when you serve Him.

God's blessings,

Pastor Steve

Good Questions (GQ's)

1. Read 2:5 carefully. What reason does Paul give for not wanting the Corinthians to be impressed by his wisdom and eloquence?
   a. What do you believe it means when Paul says that his preaching was "in demonstration of the Spirit and power?"
2. What was the main subject of Paul's preaching?
   a. Why is it important to focus our spiritual thinking on Jesus?

"Another Gift?"

August 6 - 1 Corinthians 2: 6-16

Good parents delight in giving good gifts to their children. That doesn't mean you will always get just what you want; good parents will give their child what is best for him. We have learned in Romans that God sometimes gives us the gift of suffering, which leads to Christian character (Romans 5).

I love to bless my kids. I love to do things for my kids. Not for their approval, but because I love them and want them to experience my love for them. The look in their eyes when they receive something special, especially something unexpected, is my pure delight. And if they say thanks, then the look in my eyes reflect the joy I have in my heart. Sometimes my kids will surprise me with a "thank you" that I did not expect and was not fishing for. Again, my heart is warmed.

Remember this verse in Luke: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (11:13). God is our Father and a generous Father at that. He has given us everything we need to be happy and fulfilled. Remember this verse in Romans: "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (8:32). Obviously, God is a giving God. He is certainly a Father you can be proud of, can't you?

Paul says some pretty remarkable things in this section of I Corinthians. He says that God has revealed by the Spirit the secret things we need to know. Paul says, "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us," (2:12). It takes the work of the Spirit for us to understand and fathom the depth of the love of God. It is so easy to not buy into the love of God. How could God love me that much? Why would He go to all that trouble for me? I have trouble believing that the God who created all things would reach down and take part in my life. But He does. He has given us so much grace that it is almost too good to be true.

The Spirit of God is actively working in the life of a believer. He points to Jesus, putting the spotlight on Him. He reminds us that we are sons and daughters of God, and He shows us the things that are freely given to us by God. Oh, the depth of the love of God. No wonder Paul says, "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" (2:16). No one

knows the depths of God's mind. Just think, God was before anything else came into being. Who made God?? No one, God always was. Now, you explain that to me.

And then Paul goes on to say, "But we have the mind of Christ." Wait a minute, the mind of Christ? What in the world does that mean? With the way I think, it would be a mockery to say I had Christ's mind. What is the apostle saying?

Before you came to Christ you were unable to think God's thoughts. God's thoughts came through your mind like a complicated calculus problem, and you let the thought exit as soon as it knocked at the threshold of your mind. I can remember talking to people about God, but really I was just making up stuff, making excuses by saying the church was full of hypocrites. I had no clue about God's thoughts. But when God came into my life and I embraced Jesus, the light went on. All of a sudden God's thoughts became real and enjoyable to me. They come in the form of Scripture, because Scripture is God's Word. God's Word is a spiritual book—actually, 66 separate spiritual books combined into one—and can only be understood by spiritual people. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned," (I Corinthians 2:14).

If you have the Spirit, you can understand Scripture. No doubt, God uses gifted teachers in the church to make His Word clear, but only those with the Spirit inside can really make heads or tails of it.

Yesterday we read, "It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption," (1:30). Another aspect of having the mind of Christ is having the wisdom of Christ. As a believer, you will think differently, because Christ is your wisdom and He gives you practical insight into living well.

Do you have faith in Jesus? Then listen to the Spirit when He says you also have the mind of Christ. We need the Spirit's confirmation of this wonderful gift or we will not think it is for us.

Holy Spirit, speak to us today and give us the openness to accept all of the things that God has freely given us in Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit, speak to me today. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Expect to understand the Scripture. Before you read it, thank God that He has given you the mind of Jesus. Also ask Him to empower you to be a doer of His Word. Jesus said that He would send another comforter who would guide you into the truth.

"Come, Holy Spirit, and guide us into your truth."

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings to God's Children,

Pastor Steve

GQ's

1. List two important truths that Paul reveals about the Holy Spirit in this section of Scripture.
   a. What do you think it means to "have the mind of Christ"?

"Hey, Name Dropper"

August 7 - 1 Corinthians 3: 1-23

Dear Ones,

Do you feel important because of your connection with someone else? Do you feel superior to others because you know so-and-so? Are you a bit more spiritual than the other guy because you go to "that church?"

It is so easy to get caught up in the name-dropping game. When I was at Talbot Seminary in La Mirada, California, we often had some pretty famous teachers drop by to do chapel. Chuck Swindoll came every year, and another pretty well-known guy named John MacArthur came to impart his wisdom too. We were blessed to have these exceptional teachers speak to us.

There is nothing wrong with having Chuck and John over, is there? The wrong thing would be for me to use their names to try and gain a feeling of superiority over you. "Hey Steve, I heard the greatest message today on the radio by Charles Swindoll," you might say. "Oh yeah? That's nothing. I heard Chuck in chapel today at school and he spoke directly to me and my class!"

How does that make you feel? Inferior? Maybe not as up to spiritual par as me? Like somehow I rank a bit higher than you because of my privileges? This is all pride and prejudice. It makes no significant spiritual statement except to highlight how self-centered a person can become when he feels like he is one of the privileged few.

This is what happened to the Corinthian church. They began to feel like a spiritual Hercules because of the way the spiritual gifts were operating and because of their connection to the "super teachers." They had become name-droppers. They felt like the spiritual elite, the invincible, the unreachable, the crème de le crème. Spiritual pride is a deceptive beast and can disguise itself as superior spirituality.

There is no doubt that even Jesus' earlier disciples were harboring thoughts of gaining a position in the kingdom of prominence. The gospels describe them jostling for position at many points. They even looked down on others for doing it, while they were thinking about it at the same time. Pride not only affects us from a worldly point of view but we can also succumb to its allure in the spiritual arena. Paul will say a bit later in this same letter, "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall." And in his second letter to this church he says that they need to be washed from spiritual pride (7:1).

Pride forms a barrier which keeps the unbeliever from surrendering to Jesus, and it creates a barrier that stunts spiritual growth in those who are already believers. Pride is a bad recipe and those that ingest its contents usually end up with a stomach ache. Pride comes before a fall, Paul will say in this same letter. This little emotion is the precipice from which many a well-intentioned person has crashed.

All of us want to feel important, don't we? We want to think that we matter. Some people root for teams because they want to feel what it's like to win at something. So you'll ask them who their favorite team is, and they will tell you some team like the New York Yankees. Have they grown up in New York? No! Do they have relatives from New York? No! Then why in the world are they cheering for the Yankees? They want to be associated with a winner. I have never heard someone proudly state that they are going to be rooting for the Kansas City Royals this year. Why? They are losers.

Paul clears the air at the end of Chapter 3 by telling them to stop boasting about men. He tells them that this is a worldly way. That behavior is for those who do not have confidence in the truth of the Word. He essentially says that you do not need to gain your approval from men because of all of

the benefits God has given you. You can boast in the Lord instead and make Him your common goal. The Apostle says that believers are to build their lives on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ. They must believe that the—that is their bodies—are the temple of the Lord. As if that wasn't enough, they also need to know that everything belongs to them (when he says everything, he means everything: the apostles and the world and all of life and death) because they belong to God.

People who value human recognition will always minimize the spiritual riches we have in Christ because they do not want to think that they are on an equal footing with others. They would rather believe that they are superior to others. But if the church shares the riches of Christ, then we ought not to haggle over who is the best or most spiritual. Rather, we must serve others, a theme Paul is big on; we must build up the church and try to glorify Christ by laying down our pride.

How can we apply this lesson to our lives?

Today, can you serve someone who would humble you?

Let's not seek to be wise by the standards of this world.

God's blessings are good enough,

Pastor Steve

GQ's

1. List the qualities of a "carnal" man.
   a. Paul uses the pictures of a building to represent the church as a structure built on Christ, and a temple to highlight the importance of the church as a place where God dwells.
   What kinds of things can we build on Christ in a way that will last?
2. What does it mean to "glory in men"?
   a. The Bible says that all things belong to us. Isn't that a strange idea? Look back at 2:12 to see the same idea.
   Could this be what Jesus meant when He said that we'd "inherit the earth"? Do you think that possibly we own all things because God does, and we are His?
   b. What does it mean to you that you belong to God?

"The Scum Of The Earth"

August 8 - 1 Corinthians 4: 1-21

What should we do when relational problems enter into our lives? We all have them, don't we? We cannot avoid them. They have been there in the past and they will be there in the future.

We usually try to avoid conflict. Some of us boil over and explode when we're rubbed the wrong way. And others, like Jesus, and Paul in our reading today, respond appropriately. Make no mistake; conflict is part of life. We might as well learn to deal with it as constructively as possible.

Unfortunately, we tend to deal with conflict the way our parents did. They were our models. If you had a passive father, the chances are you will be the same. If your parents swept disagreements under the carpet and didn't talk about them much, then chances are you also have a lumpy carpet, making it hard to walk through your home. The lumps don't go away. We just get used to tripping over them.

Paul is dealing with relational difficulties caused by the arrogance of some of the Corinthians. The Corinthian church had relational troubles in more ways than one. Remember, we have already commented

that the Corinthians considered themselves a very spiritual group. Because of this, a spiritual pride began to eat away at them. When you are in a group that is competitive for spiritual supremacy, conflicts are unavoidable. Some Corinthians were even browbeating the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Paul makes love the motive and aim of problem resolution. Don't get me wrong—he still calls a spade a spade—but he makes it clear that his intention is driven by love; love for God and love for them. Most marital and relational conflicts escalate because one or both parties do not make it clear that they truly love the other person and want the best for them no matter how the disagreement goes. Usually, the couple will come to a problem with both guns blazing, and before you know it both parties are full of holes. Selfishness is the culprit in most of these battles. We want it our way and that is that. Paul, and Jesus, make it clear that they are doing what they are doing because of the love of God. Love does not seek its own; that is a virtue when it comes to getting along with others. When we are walking in love we will do all that we can do for the benefit of others.

Sometimes that may mean being firm, because you do not want your friend or loved one to go down a road that would not be spiritually healthy for them. Needless to say, that kind of love is tested when others question your motives. That was going on in Corinth. Paul considered himself the Corinthians' spiritual father. He was protective of them. He saw that imposters had entered the fellowship and were leading them down a potentially dangerous road. So Paul's motive is not only to write of his love for them, but he also wants to exhort them to do all they do out of love. Thus, the famous I Corinthians 13, which is quoted more often than probably any Bible chapter.

Paul addresses the arrogance of the self-proclaimed "spiritual ones" in the church. Paul appeals to God's judgment and reminds these prideful folks that it isn't right for them to judge him. God would do a good job of that Himself. He emphasizes that we are all on a level playing field, because everything we have is a gift from God. No one could claim superiority because every gift, every talent was merely a gift from above.

Paul gets a bit sarcastic when he compares their inflated attitude to the real life hardships that he and the other apostles had to endure. The bottom line is that love is worked out in the muck and mire of day-to-day ministry to others. And it was this kind of work that won the Corinthians to Christ. He says, "Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world." I think Paul is not speaking enviously, but is pointing out that true ministry is grimy.

Timothy is on his way to Corinth to set things straight, and if the Lord wills, Paul will not be far behind. Paul again compares himself with the "arrogant," by letting the church know that he wants to be like Jesus and not come to them with a rod of discipline. He knows that you can change others by treating them with respect and love; that is the way all of us would like to be treated.

How about you? Do you need to spend a few minutes evaluating your motives toward others?

Do you struggle with selfishness? Do your conflicts usually involve demands for your rights? Do people feel like you are coming down hard on them, and that it is hard to talk to you? Do you bury your conflicts and let things continue as they are, out of fear of facing the conflict or dealing with your own shortcomings?

If you struggle here, ask God for agape love, His love, a ICorinthians 13 kind of love. See if He doesn't help you to be more selfless and more concerned about the welfare of others.

"Let all that you do be done in Love."

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings are experienced with friends,

Pastor Steve

GQs

1. Name two verses from this chapter in which it looks like Paul's relationship is strained with the Corinthians.
   a. How does Paul describe the life of an apostle?
2. What aspects of your life are tough? What advice do you think the apostle would give you about these issues?

Day 221

"To Judge Or Not To Judge"

August 9 - 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13

How's it going,

People misquote and misapply the Bible on a regular basis. I would say that I have been guilty of this from time to time myself.

Probably the most misquoted verse in the Bible is Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you," (Matthew 7: 1-2).

Is Jesus saying that we should suspend judgment on any matter at any time? Is He saying that if you even dare to challenge someone's thinking, then you are being "judgmental" and breaking the command? Should we never consider whether something or someone is right or wrong? After all, that would be judgment, wouldn't it?

Do you like judgmental people? Probably not. How about discerning people who show discretion? There is a big difference, isn't there? Let's look at a few important verses from Proverbs, which, of course, Jesus knew and lived by Himself. "My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck," (3: 21-22). "I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment," (7:7). Of wisdom it is said, "Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power," (8:14). In Proverbs 9 the adulteress is said to take advantage of the man who lacks judgment. "The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment," (10:21).

Obviously, Jesus was not saying that we should kick judgment out the door. So what was He saying?

Do you remember what follows Matthew 7: 1-2? Jesus says that in the course of day to day living, you should not be a big-mouth, I'm-better-than-you, you-better-get-your-act-together-or-else, I'm-glad-I'm-not-an-idiot-like-you kind of person. Maybe another way to say it is, "Don't act like a Judge Judy wannabe." Or, don't have a judgmental attitude. Don't look for people to put down and treat with contempt. Jesus says that in the same way you treat others, you yourself will be treated.

The antidote to this attitude is given next. Judge yourself first before you go after the next guy. Your brother may have a splinter in his eye, but you actually have a log in yours. Pull yours out first and then go humbly to your neighbor and pull on his. Jesus is talking to those, probably the Pharisees, who act holier-than-thou and put down others with their self-righteous behavior. This is sometimes demonstrated verbally, sometimes non-verbally, but the message is the same: "You need to get your act together because you are sinful. You need to be righteous like me."

Jesus and Paul lived under the same principal: let love be your guide. Don't criticize your brother, but believe in him and build him up. If there is a glaring problem, go to him gently and in the meekness of Christ. Don't rush in like a bull in a china shop and bowl the poor guy over. Handle the problem with kid gloves, not boxing gloves. Paul said in Galatians: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself," (6: 1-3).

I have brought all of this up because of Paul's problem in I Corinthians 5. He is dealing with a moral problem in the church that needed judgment. The Corinthians were sitting on their hands and letting the situation slide. That never works, does it? Paul concludes his thoughts after making a definite judgment about the matter, saying, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you,'" (5:12-13).

Recently someone came to my door with a small piece of paper in her hand. It was a note from her pastor stating that there would be a forum on the subject of gay marriage, but that the pastor wanted to let the congregation know that she was pro-gay marriage. The person sitting on my couch was in somewhat of a crisis. She didn't feel like she could support the direction of her church any longer because of this viewpoint. She wanted my input because she had been at the church for years and was feeling badly about making a move. I told her that she shouldn't be so judgmental. She needed to have an open mind and simply and naively trust the direction of the pastor. Don't apply Scripture, I said. That would be narrow-minded and judgmental. Remember, Jesus said, "Judge not."

If I really said all of that stuff, you can shoot me in the eye with a Red Rider BB gun. No one in his right mind would say that. The Bible doesn't. Remember, back in Romans 1, that God said directly through Paul that homosexuality was unnatural and a sin. So we take God's Word on the matter. We stand against what God is against and we stick up for what God is for. It's not rocket science. It's obedience.

For goodness sakes, there was a man in the Corinthian church who was shacking up with his own mother. It was probably his mother-in-law, but still, come on—that stinks. Paul even says that we are to mark out sexually immoral "believers" and not hang out with them as if there was nothing wrong. Judgmental? Yes. Why? So that the sinning person will repent and turn back to God and be restored. The motive is not to express a holier-than-thou attitude but, to bring the person back. Now that's Christ-like.

Is there someone in your life who is breaking your heart because of his blatant disregard for God's Word? Do you love him enough to intervene? Let your love for others guide you, and pray that God would open a door for you to talk with them. God will be with you because He wants these believers to turn around as well.

One of my favorite verses is in II Timothy. It says, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will," (2: 24-26).

God's blessings require that we be "judgmental,"

Pastor Steve

GQs

1. What impact does immorality have on the Church as a whole if it is tolerated? If the church disciplines a member who is sinning, isn't that the same as being judgmental, and didn't Jesus condemn judgmentalism?
2. Why do you think people get caught in explicit sexual sin?

What would help someone who wants to get out of a lifestyle of sin but is having difficulty stopping their behavior?

Day 222

"Body Language"

August 10 - 1 Corinthians 6: 1-20

We live in a sexually driven society. The depths of lust-producing media are beyond our reach. What used to be considered depraved, trashy, unreasonable, and dirty is now on prime time. And like the unwary frog in the pot, many of us are oblivious to the way the heat keeps getting turned up.

Do you have a healthy view of sexuality and your body? I know that is a very personal question, but that's Paul's subject in today's reading. I told you the Bible covers it all. Many people have grown up in the school of Hugh Hefner, creating a very warped view of the opposite sex and sex in general. As a result, we have an entire generation of people who are looking for love in all the wrong places. Many see love as a physical and emotional high that must be maintained for personal fulfillment.

This philosophy leads to the use of people for personal gratification. It is the road to egotism at its height. Love is quenched, and lust becomes the banner held high. Remember what James says, "...but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death," (1:14).

When I taught Bible at a Christian high school I used to take a couple of weeks to talk about sex at the end of the school year. I never had one absence from those classes. Kids want to talk about it; they want to understand a healthy view of sex. I asked them to write down anonymous questions beforehand so that I could address them. Believe me, there was no aspect of the subject that we didn't talk about. In the final analysis, it was God's blueprint on sex that gave the balanced perspective we all needed.

I would hold up a picture of a prune-faced old lady from an obituary and ask them what they thought this woman was like when she was younger. After they made guesses in the dark, I'd tell them that she was actually the first Miss America. "No way! That's weird. I don't believe it," they'd say. Then I'd read them the obituary. Sure enough, she was the first beauty queen, and now she looked like an ad for prunes. "All flesh is like grass," Jesus said. It appears so green and pretty for a while, and then overnight it dies and looks ugly. This is the truth for all men and women. By the way, even J-Lo and her friends will have the same dilemma. "All flesh..."

Paul says to use your body for the Lord and not for sexual immorality. He says your body is a temple where God's Spirit lives. He says that we are no longer our own property but God's. Therefore, we must strive to glorify God in our bodies and not give our bodies over to lustful passions.

It's also in this section of scripture that Paul describes sexual sins as more harmful than other sins because of their effect on all involved. Today we see sexually transmitted disease run amuck, as a result of people using their bodies to fulfill ego needs and not the deepest needs. He says, "All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body." In other words, you ruin the temple by letting in foreign influences that break it down and corrupt it. Remember when Hezekiah let the Babylonians look around the temple to see the treasures? It wasn't long after that the treasures were transported away to Babylon. When the enemy comes in, he steals away from us what is precious; things that we can never take back.

No matter where you've been or whom you've been with, it is never too late to begin to do the right thing. It takes a lot of resolve and partnership with the Holy Spirit to pick up the pieces and go on. But you can do it. Today is a good day to honor God with our bodies.

We will no longer use our bodies for selfish reasons but for the Lord. You are one with the Lord, so dedicate every member of your body today and don't let the flesh dominate your day.

How about a couple of practical helps:

Keep the Scripture nearby so that you can be reminded of these truths.

Consider writing an apology note to anyone you dishonored, or with whom you dishonored yourself, and let that person know that you are now dedicated to doing what God wants of you.

Turn the other way very intentionally from anything immoral or tempting today, and instead celebrate your new life in Christ.

Ask God for His wisdom. He will steer you in the right direction.

Write out the sins and situations that you have stumbled upon in the past, then, as a symbol of God's forgiveness, burn it in a fire in a can or shred it or somehow destroy it.

Remember what Paul said to the Corinthians after he lists the lifestyles that exclude a person from the kingdom of God. He said, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God," (6: 11).

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings support a healthy view of sex,

Pastor Steve

GQs

1. Read 6: 9-11. Why would you say that these are key verses in the New Testament?
   a. Look up the definitions of the sins that you do not know. What would you say to someone who was practicing one of these sins with no regret or repentance?
2. Read 6: 12-20. Compare the reasons why God made you, to the reasons he did not make you. What does this section of Scripture say about our bodies?
   a. Does 6:18 imply that sexual sin is more harmful than other sins? Why or why not?

Day 223

"Talk About Sex"

August 11 - 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

WARNING: This email is for the mature. Please be careful and thoughtful as you read my words. I hope they are helpful, but most importantly biblical.

Hi There,

I'm happy that the Bible is forthcoming about sex. I think that when sex is treated as taboo, all kinds of problems happen. When the Apostle Peter talks about God's precious promises applying to all of our lives, that also obviously includes good information about the boundaries of sexual relations. And in Bible days, like today, sex was a major issue.

Do you feel like you have a healthy view of your own sexuality?

Did you learn about sex from a source that gave you God's blueprint?

What obstacles will you have to overcome because of unhealthy sexual input at some time in your life?

Where do you turn to find answers about a subject that makes most of us blush?

I once asked some high school students to write any questions they might have about sex on a 3x5 card, and I promised to answer them when I came the next day. They asked me some very good questions. Let me list a couple of them:

When is it a right or wrong time to have sex when you are married?

By looking at porn and lusting will that ruin things that you would have been destined to have with your spouse or is there redemption?

Is masturbation wrong when you do it without perverted thoughts?

Is a woman supposed to have sex on her period?

What are some ways we can keep ourselves pure in our sex-driven culture?

What is the average length of time of one sexual intercourse period?

Obviously, we had some interesting discussions. Of all the questions—and there were more than I have listed above—I thought the last one was the most thought provoking. I think this because I believe the answer correlates with the design God had for sex from the beginning.

God made us for relationships. When our relationships are good, life is good. When our marital relationship is good, then life can be good. When a married couple has intercourse it should reflect the oneness in their relationship. It is an expression of their ability to draw very close to one another, to speak tenderly to one another and to meet one another's needs. So the answer to my student's questions is: "It depends."

It depends on whether you are focused on yourself or your partner.

It depends on how you have been getting along lately.

It depends on how you are feeling at the time.

It depends on whether or not you are mentally distracted by other things.

It depends on whether your bedroom is a safe place or not.

It depends on how well you can work together to ensure mutual fulfillment.

It depends on whether you are holding something against your partner.

It depends on whether you view sex as a physical act alone, or see it as a way to express oneness.

It depends on the time of the month, for some couples.

It depends on how physically rested you are.

It depends...

Depending on the factors listed above and probably about a hundred more that I haven't listed, the length of time a couple spends during a love making time will vary. I do think that length of time, (though I don't recommend looking at the clock), is an indicator of the kind of communication and relationship the couple has. Couples who make love on the fly live their lives that way. Couples who take their time and emphasize the romantic side of things usually are not the types who hurry through the day. Forgive me for generalizing, but I think we are on to something here.

Paul tells couples to take care of each other sexually. God doesn't want you to neglect this area, because it could lead to unwanted temptations. In other words, keep the home fires burning and you won't look elsewhere to keep warm. The only exception is when you take a break to seek the Lord through prayer. During those times the outcome should be a renewed commitment to your partner's sexual fulfillment.

The moral fabric in Corinth was threadbare. We live in a time not unlike those days. Today the sexual health of our society is inoperable. Sex is not related to relationship but to personal gratification. The result is that some people continue to thirst for sexual fulfillment by elevating their experiences, rather than building relationship with their spouses.

Sex is all about relationship. Bad relationship, bad sex. Maybe physically good, but emotionally and mentally and spiritually bankrupt. So the time you spend making love equals the time you spend enjoying each other. It will equal your drive to be with and enjoy the person to whom you said, " I forsake all others to be only with you." The more you enjoy each other, the more you will enjoy the marriage bed.

By the way, that's why sexually active but uncommitted couples usually are plagued by shallow relations. It leaves them feeling empty, because the relationship has not progressed to the point of complete commitment. One or both of the partners knows that this could be the last time, and then "adios" if the other person finds someone else more appealing. Marriage, on the other hand, when applied to the bedroom with a solid commitment, means everything. It means that you will love and cherish only this person. Your physical relationship is the icing on the cake, highlighting that commitment.

God's blessings bring physical satisfaction,

Pastor Steve

P.S. It is interesting that Paul departs from this subject to talk about singleness and its virtues. Those who are truly single, Paul will explain, are the ones who will enjoy healthy relationships whether they are friendly relationships or marital ones later. The emphasis is on good relationships. Good relationships make for good living. So if you are single, don't be discouraged. Better to be single and happy than married and miserable. If God has a mate out there for you, then He is even now in the process of equipping that person with the relational skills to love you completely and exclusively.

GQs

1. The Bible is forthcoming about sex. What does this section of Scripture say about the roles of the husband and wife?

Why is marriage helpful to the person who does not have the ability to remain single?

a. Did you grow up with a healthy view of sex? What is your opinion of the dominance of this subject in our society?

2. What is Paul's advice about divorce for believers? What does he say if a non-believing partner wants to leave a believer? Should a believer leave a non-believing partner if they want to? Why or why not?

Day 224

"It's Good To Be Single"

August 12 - 1 Corinthians 7: 17-35

I realize that we read about singleness yesterday, but I didn't want to zip past it because I think it is such an important subject these days. Let's look for a moment at the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes. Bear with me, and in a few moments we'll tie Solomon's thoughts together with the subject of singleness.

Solomon says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom," (9:10). Half-hearted work won't cut it. Half-hearted prayers won't do. Half-hearted love is no love at all. Half-hearted anything isn't anything. On the other hand, those who put their hand to the plow and work hard will reap the harvest for their efforts.

When I was growing up, my grandparents had an eight-acre walnut farm. I think there were only a little over 100 trees on the farm, but to me it seemed like a pretty big place. Whether we were irrigating, pruning, dragging the field, harvesting, or shelling nuts, life was busy on the farm; but if you worked hard a hot shower awaited you when you were done. I learned what a hard day's work meant working with grandpa and grandma.

It is easy to begin a task well, and quite another thing to finish it the same way. Some people see themselves as initiators, and others as finishers. Even if you think of yourself as the former, there is something to be said for seeing a task through to the end. Once you have accomplished your goal you can revel in your accomplishment and take pride in your work. What work have you done that you take pride in? Do you have to think back for awhile to remember something you enjoyed completing? Is it difficult for you to work with all of your might because your motivation has been waning recently? Take this Bible verse and apply it to your work. Put your hand to your tasks and

do it with all of your strength.

OK, let's take a look at singleness. Strength and singleness go together. Paul says that if you are single, you will have more strength to spend on doing the Lord's work. Compare that to the married person, who is distracted because he is devoted to the protection and welfare of his family. Paul even says that marriage will bring troubles.

At a wedding I recently attended the best man got up at the reception to encourage the bride and groom. He said that some people say you have to work on your relationship, but he thought that marriage was just fun. He said that he was an expert because he had been married a whole year. A friend and I, both of whom have been married for decades longer, laughed about that one all the way home.

I think singles get a bum rap today. Singleness is the gift of God, but our society makes the single person feel weird. From the time a kid reaches puberty they are made to feel out of place if they are not hooked up with someone. The "cool" kids are matched up with the other "cool" kids. If you are not matched up, then you are waiting to be. There is no encouragement to enjoy singleness and the benefits that go along with it.

The Bible says that singleness is a good thing. Paul says not to seek a wife if you are single. You are to let the Lord present your mate to you, if that is His will for you. So think about what Solomon just said about your strength, and match that with Paul's thoughts about singleness. While you are single, take the opportunity to use the time, treasure and talents you have for the Lord's work. Seek the Lord. Get to know Him and spend time in the Word of God. You will never regret giving your time to God. He is the one who loves you the most and has a plan for your life.

So many people try to find meaning in a relationship with the opposite sex, and later on they regret it. Remember, it was the foreign women who led Solomon's heart away from the Lord. I'm sure he had a number of good times, but what did that matter if he ended up miles away from his Creator? Life like that would be meaningless; striving for the wind; it would be vain.

If you believe the guy at my friend's wedding, you will be in for a world of hurt later on. I hope he's prepared for the trials to come in his marriage. They will come. They will pull him away from his Maker and he will wonder why he ever got married. Marriage can pull you away from the greatest source of strength you could find. "God is our refuge and strength..." (Psalm 46:1).

Are you single? Maybe never married, or widowed or divorced? Use the time you have profitably before you think about marriage. Some of God's greatest warriors have been single, like Paul for example; Corrie Ten Boom was single, and so was C.S. Lewis for most of his life.

To practice these Bible verses will require faith. Most people believe that they could not survive without a partner. Some have not been single since the 5th grade. They don't even know how to act as a single.

A single's prayer: "God, thank you for the gift of singleness. I trust that you have my future in your hand. Use me in your service and I will encourage others in the Body of Christ. Thank you for making me just the way I am and thanks for loving me too. I love knowing that you have my life in your hands."

God's Blessings are for singles as well as marrieds,

Pastor Steve

GQs

1. Paul indicates that he and his contemporaries were living in tough times, which would make it better not to take on a wife and have kids if they could be self-disciplined in that way. What would you guess was going on?

a. The Bible is straight about how difficult marriage can be.

Why do you think so many today get married and yet do not even consider that they will have problems later on?

"Smarty Pants"

August 13 - 1 Corinthians 7: 36 - 8:13

Let's All Walk in Love,

Have you grown up with misconceptions? I think all of us have to some degree. Here are a few common ones:

• God will love you more the more you are in church

• If you have a guilty conscience it means you are far from God

• You can balance the scales of your sin by doing good works

• If you are busy for God you are automatically right with God

• If you associate with godless people, God will look down on you

• If I can't get the victory over a certain sin it means I must not really be a Christian

How does a rookie become a veteran? How does an apprentice become a journeyman? How does a boy become a man? How does a person go from a position of weakness to a position of strength? Doesn't it take experience and training to grow? Should a veteran expect a new recruit to be able to perform at the same level as someone who has been around for a long time?

When a person becomes a child of God, he goes through a process of growth that will take a lifetime. During that journey he will face many ups and downs and he will go through a series of changes in his grasp on how to live the Christian life. Just when he thinks he has a handle on things, his grip will weaken and he will feel like he never knew what he thought was so certain. Sometimes he will believe he has the walk of faith mastered, until he faces another situation that tests his ability to apply what he knows from his devotion to Jesus.

Fortunately, as he continues in the Word and gets older in the Lord, his confidence will grow and he will not waver so much in his convictions about the right thing to do. He will grow to accept his own weaknesses and will give and receive forgiveness more freely. Nevertheless, as he grows a new temptation will test his patience. He will have trouble putting up with the foibles of newer believers.

Usually, the more a person learns about God from His Word, he gains more distance from the issues that used to weigh him down. He becomes lighter because he realizes all of the ways in which Christ has set him free. This knowledge, though, is not as clear to some and so they develop scruples which become important to their way of life. The problem is that these scruples become their measuring stick for determining how they are doing spiritually. So if they see other believers doing the things that they have determined are prohibited, they may try, against their conscience, to do these things as well. Then they end up with a guilty conscience.

Unfortunately, this has caused some division in the church. The reason for this is that those with more knowledge of Christian liberty have looked down on those with less knowledge about it. In the early church it was the issue of the meat you ate. Meat that was sold in the market may have come from an animal that had been offered to an idol. It also sounds like Paul is saying that some believers thought nothing of going to an idol's temple for a good steak. To others, this meat was forbidden food. To the first group, including Paul, it didn't really matter because meat was meat and the offering of it to an idol did not pollute it. But if another believer saw this differently, Paul taught that we ought to be sensitive to the scruples of the "weaker" brother whose conscience was bothered by the idolatry associated with the steak.

In the church today people are scrupulous about a variety of things: what kind of music should be listened to, what politician you should vote for, what

translation of the Bible you should read, how often you should attend church, which people you should or shouldn't hang out with, what you drink or what you smoke, or whether your drink or smoke at all. Look around and you'll see as many styles of Christian practice as there are groups of Christians.

Paul's point is that love is the guiding principle, no matter how much liberty you have as a more mature Christian. We ought to keep our brothers and sisters in mind and make sure that we do not give another child of God reason to defile his weak conscience. Love is the greatest rule, and is even greater than liberty. He says that knowledge makes you proud and boastful. He doesn't mean here book knowledge, but knowledge of Christian liberty. You may have a freer conscience but that does not give you the liberty to ram-rod someone else who struggles with an area that is no big deal to you.

Let me go out on a limb and talk about an issue that has come up among several brothers with whom I fellowship regularly. Within about a four-month span, four separate guys told me about their struggle with chewing tobacco. Each of them was attempting to break the habit.

What if I took their desire lightly and told them they were silly for worrying about it? What if I pulled out a can of Copenhagen and put a pinch between my cheek and gum? And what if then I began to enjoy the soothing taste and spat a couple of times on the ground to remind them of the pleasure of the whole experience? What if I offered them a snuff and held out the open can so that they were just arms' length from the very thing that they had felt bound by for so long? Well, simply put, I would not be walking in love.

Of course I'm not advocating the use of tobacco, nor would I encourage someone to spend their lunch hour at the bar. But if a person could do these things with a clear conscience, then he ought not to flaunt his liberty in front of someone who has a weaker conscience. This other person might stumble because he sees you doing the very thing that would stain his conscience if he were to do it. The rule is love. If you should give up one of your liberties for the sake of another, then your sacrifice will be well worth it.

It is too easy to get wrapped up in our Christian ethics, the way we live our Christian lives, and think only of how our actions affect ourselves. What we need to consider is how our behaviors affect those who are just beginning their service for Christ.

Someone might ask how new believers will grow if they continue to lean on their scruples rather than the Word of God. The answer is experience in the Word of God. The more people realize what the Bible says about who they are in Christ, the more they will escape the tyranny of man made rules and regulations. They will follow God's law of liberty and not get caught up in the legalistic patterns that others foist upon them.

When we get to Galatians we will deal with this issue head-on. In the meantime, we ought to be careful how we walk, making the most of the time we have, not being swayed back and forth by issues that we could easily give up for the sake of a weaker brother.

God's blessings come in measure throughout our lives,

Pastor Steve

Day 226

"Err On The Side Of People"

August 14 - 1 Corinthians 9: 1-18

A few years ago I buried a good friend of mine named Coolidge. With a name like that, you can probably tell that he was up there in age. He was in his 80s somewhere. Some people called him Cool, and he was cool. He was always a kick to be around, could make you grin from ear to ear, and looked at you with the kindest eyes. I really loved Coolidge.

After Coolidge died his family and I gathered at the mortuary to talk about the man. Some of his kids, grandkids and friends were there. The conversation really took off. First one person reflected on his life and then another. It was so easy to talk about him, even as he lay in his casket 40 feet from us, because he had had such a great impact on this circle of mourners.

One of the grandkids talked about the old doors of the house where their grandfather lived, a wood door and screen door, which led into the modest home on Ninth Avenue. He said that these doors represented so much to him; any time he needed to, he could walk right through those unlocked doors into the safety of grandma (who died a few years earlier) and grandpa's home. There he would find complete acceptance and a place to recoup from the pressures of life. There he found love and a listening ear. Coolidge's place was a very good place.

Then somebody said something that became the theme of my memorial message. He said that Coolidge always erred on the side of people. Like a brick between the eyes, that statement really hit me. He erred on the side of people. Things were not as important to Coolidge as people. He was the kind of guy who'd go into town and see four people he knew and make two new friends. It was just so easy for him to make a new acquaintance.

This is what Paul has been getting at in the Corinthian letter. He is telling them to err on the side of people. Make people more important than your spiritual gifts or your money or your foibles. Make people your number one priority. People are important to God and they should be important to us as well. People also require us to take the focus off of the person in the mirror and begin to reach the other guy right where he is.

Paul too erred on the side of people. He had brought the good news to Corinth and he felt responsible for the progress of the church. Well, this particular group of people had problems. They had spiritual problems (Chapters 1 and 2 make this clear), they had moral problems (in Chapter 5 Paul has to lower the boom on a particular moral dilemma) and they had ethical problems (Chapter 6 deals with a legal matter that the apostle needed to correct). Boy, and you think you have it tough at work. The work of an apostle was never done. Later, in the second letter to them, Paul talks about having or carrying a daily burden for the church. Paul loved the people.

All of Paul's writings are full of references to people who were important to him. He was a man who believed in people and needed people. And so his writings are for the people and are intended to encourage them. He wanted them to grow in the grace of Jesus more than anything. He wanted them to continue on in the work of spreading the good news to others.

Because of Paul's love for people and the gospel he did not want anyone to say that he was doing what he was doing out of some inferior motive. If someone came along and accused him of being in it for the money, they may have discredited his connection to the very people he loved. And as a matter of fact, this actually did happen. Some men came in and began to malign Paul's intent. Paul always had an answer though, because the truth was that he was in it for the Lord and for the people and not for personal gain.

Even when he could have asserted his apostolic authority and demanded money for his work in the Lord, he would just go about his business of making tents in order to provide for his daily necessities. He did not want the gospel to be rejected because of something he did that might be perceived as self-serving.

Let's face it, when most of us first heard the gospel we were asking what was in it for us. And there was a great deal in it for us, wasn't there? But as we grew we realized that it wasn't just for us but for others as well. This knowledge heightened our awareness of the needs of others. In a few chapters Paul will begin to teach about spiritual gifts. He points out that the gifts are to be used not for selfish purposes but for the building up of others. The individual gifts only highlight the truth that we are all part of one spiritual body in Christ, and that each role is important no matter who you are. Your place in the Body of Christ is for the good of others, and it may from time to time require sacrifice. Therefore, if one member suffers, we all hurt; if one member is happy, we are all happy.

Listen to people.
Put others ahead of your own interests.
Give to others of your time, talent and treasure.
Build someone up today.
Service for Christ is spelled O-T-H-E-R-S
God's blessings flow through you to others,
Pastor Steve

"Stand Up"

August 15 - 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13

Do you learn from the mistakes of others? For some reason it is so difficult to learn from someone else's failures. We usually have to feel the pain ourselves before we decide to give up what is bringing us down. Remember in Romans, how God warns us not to become conceited about the faith we have in Him? He knows our hearts, and our propensity to go our own way and fall. Here in I Corinthians Paul says, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

The reason the Romans used crucifixion was to teach others not to do what "that person" did. It's my understanding that even if the convicted people died at the stake from the beating, they would still nail them to a cross and display them before all. Why did the Jewish brass want the Romans to punish Jesus? They wanted him publicly humiliated. They wanted all men to know that He was a nothing and a religious imposter. The Jewish mode of capital punishment was stoning, a practice they wouldn't do at the time of Passover, which was the time of Jesus' execution. Sometimes people are punished unfairly.

We have already established that Christ's cross was no accident. Actually, it was His humiliation that paved the way for our eternal life. The cross is the bridge between sinful man and a perfect God who is holy in every way. Despite the fact that we have forgiveness for all our sins, it's still good to avoid going down the sinful road when we can. We can look back on history and learn from the evil that brought them down. God says, "Don't do it that way; look what it did to them and how it destroyed their lives." "Don't play with fire or you will be burned." "Don't play with immorality or you will pay the consequences." "Learn from those who have fallen and don't go down the same pathway or you will experience the same grief that followed their folly."

God loves us, and warns us against what will kill us. He is a good Father who says to His kids, "Don't play in the street or you will get hit by a car. Don't play with razor blades or you will be cut. Don't throw mud or you will injure your neighbor." He is a good Father. In Paul's words, "And God is faithful." He Fathers us, as a good daddy would. He is not a neglectful parent who lets his kids go any which way they want; rather, He steps in, corrects us, and helps us back on to the good way.

I Corinthians 10:13 is a wonderful verse, very helpful, and will come in handy as you need it from time to time. Let's take a look at it and try to apply it to our lives.

First of all, temptations are no respecter of persons. Some people fret about the kinds of weird temptations that pull on them. They think that they must be the only person on the planet who thinks like they do. But that isn't true at all. Temptations come in all shapes and sizes. They are arrows in the enemy's quiver to turn us away from the Lord and from living a Spirit-filled life.

Then, God promises us that there will be a way for us to face each and every temptation. Sometimes temptations seem insurmountable. Have you ever heard yourself say, "I just couldn't help myself?" I have heard people say things like, "My mind was set on doing it; there was nothing I could do." This is one of the enemy's greatest schemes. It is like a flaming missile that hits us unaware and derails us from standing in the Lord. God promises that there is a way out. He will provide it so that you can stand up under the pressure of the temptation.

I encourage you not to be hasty. The book of Proverbs is chalked full of verses that emphasize the importance of not running swiftly to do evil. Too often, we get into temptation's tangled web because we have run fast and hard into it. Then pray. Pray short sincere prayers, crying out to God and pouring out your soul to the One who has promised to help you when you are tempted. This verse we are looking at seems to imply that with God's help you will find the patience to deal with the upsetting circumstances of your temptation.

There is a way out. If you are dealing with a moral issue, make sure to not throw yourself into a situation where you will be like a sheep led to slaughter. If you are a former alcoholic, you cannot hang out down at the Watering Hole. If you are a former kleptomaniac, you cannot isolate yourself from a friend or small group that can keep you accountable. If you are drawn to Internet porn, you cannot afford to keep your Internet server—shut it down!

God is with us and He will help us to deal with tough situations where we don't immediately see a way out. God promises that there will be one, so hang in there and He will direct you in the "paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

God's blessings give us strength,
Pastor Steve

"Whatever You Do"

August 16 - 1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

Are you looking for a motto to live by? Would you like a rule of thumb, a paradigm, a litmus test for any and every situation you may be in? In our reading today we have a fine one. This nugget of wisdom is a good guide for life. It will carry you through some deep water and lead you to the celestial city.

I need easy-to-remember statements or ideas so that I can recall them when I need them. I forget much too easily. How about you? Are you thinking all of the

time, so that you consider things before you speak or act? Or, are you like me and so quickly forget the very jewel of truth that you were so proud of just the day before? Over the past 40 years, I've only heard a handful of sermons that I can still recall the content of. The truth is that we retain very little of what we hear. Usually what we read has a bigger impact on us than what we hear. What we write down seems to stick even better. But what we do is the thing that turns into a habit and then to a destiny.

We learn from doing. That's why James reminds us to be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding ourselves. What we do will eventually impact who we are and whom we will influence.

Remember that Paul is always mindful of the way we treat one another. He wants us to love one another because that is the will of God for us. That means that we will have to work through situations where there are disagreements.

Some people are surprised to find, after they have read the New Testament for a while, that there were such difficult times in Bible days. I have heard people say that they would like their church to be a first century type church. Oh, yeah? Well, many of the early churches dealt with some pretty serious disputes and divisions. This was true in Corinth where there was much pride and a history of paganism. Some people felt like they could eat meat that had been offered to idols; they would pray beforehand and then dig in. But there were others who just could not do this. Their conscience bugged them when they did. So if they followed their brothers and sisters with the stronger consciences, they were led into a situation where they felt like they had let the Lord down by eating that food. Paul says that it would be better to simply not eat the meat if you knew that you would be jeopardizing the feelings of a brother of sister.

So here's the maxim: "So whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (10:31).

I can simply ask myself: Is what I am doing for the honor of God, or am I being selfish again? Would I be proud to do this thing before God and for God, or am I uncertain whether it would be a good thing or not? If in doubt, wait. Make sure before you venture off into something that may harm someone else's conscience or even your own.

Let's live for the reasons God made us to live. One of those reasons is to glorify God. Compare this with the child who wants to honor his father by living in such a way that he knows his father would be pleased. There is such a respect there that he is moved to think about his decisions based on whether or not his actions would glorify the father.

Does this work for you?

Take it and run with it. How could you go wrong by making God's glory a priority in all of your decisions? I don't think you can.

And keep in mind that God's glory is for us to treat other believers with the kind of respect God has given to us through the sacrifice of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let God's glory lead you in the way you think about all things.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings are carried out in the Name of the Lord,

Pastor Steve

Day 229

"Submission"

August 17 - 1 Corinthians 11:2-34

Let's focus today on one of the more cryptic sections of Scripture.

I want to do this in order to shed some light on what could be a very confusing passage for some. Let's face it, in our day and age when haircuts are so diverse for boys and girls and we do not have the traditions that indicated some important things in the first century, it is hard to see how this discussion about hair and head coverings applies to us.

It applies because what we're really talking about here is authority. It's about knowing your role. I think we get into more trouble than is necessary because we either don't know our place or we have forgotten it.

There are people who have authority over me. When I act as if I am unaccountable to anyone, I put myself in a precarious position. Think about people who break the law every day, and when they are caught, they make excuses for their behavior rather than admitting the truth, in the hope that they might hear a warning and get out of the predicament. These people just can't admit that the law has authority over them and they are accountable if they've broken it.

The roles of husband and wife are also sometimes confused, and result is chaos. When the wife is leading the family and the dad is passive, the kids will often take advantage of the lack of authority in the home. The kids learn to play the parents against each other so that they can get their own way.

There is rebellion at every level of authority conceivable. There is rebellion against government, administrators, teachers, church leaders, job bosses, automobile drivers, police officers, guardians, etc. Challenging authority is acceptable today in many circles. I remember one bumper sticker that said "Question Authority." I guess that's OK, but it's the attitude behind it that really is the crux of the matter. If I take an autonomous, don't-tell-me-what-to-do attitude, then I am in rebellion against the authority God has placed in my life.

Why does authority exist? Paul told Timothy to pray for those in authority so that we could lead a peaceful life. Authority is God's protection mechanism against the tendency of man to seek anarchy, essentially to go his own way. This is so clear when there is a riot. I have lived in cities near a few riots in my lifetime. Each time, stores were smashed with rocks and bricks and make-shift bombs, and citizens then looted them. They thought that it was "OK" to steal because there was no authority in the store to get them into trouble. No authority translates to chaos.

Authority is Paul's point in chapter 11. He begins by giving a chain of authority: God - Christ - Man - Woman. He includes Christ because he wants to remind us that Jesus is our role model, Who submitted wholeheartedly to His Father's will. If the man is submitted to Christ he becomes a good leader for the woman, who was created from the man.

For a Christian wife In Paul's day, the practice of head covering was an indication of submission to God and your husband and the leadership of the church. I have heard some teach that it was the prostitutes who didn't wear a head covering. If that is true, it would give even more emphasis to Paul's teaching here. What Paul is saying is that all of us need to be in our God-ordained position of submission to the authority God has placed over us. Verse 11 is a key verse here: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God."

This is the main issue here—submission to God. For example, if I believe God sets up government then I will pay my taxes (see Romans 13 again). All author-

ity is from God. To rebel against authority is to rebel against God. Are there exceptions? Yes. If government is asking you to disobey God, whom do you choose to obey? God. A situation like this came up in the early days recorded in Acts. Peter and his companions were hauled before the authorities and were asked to stop speaking about Jesus. Peter said that it was more important to obey God than man. Then he went right on telling people about the Savior.

There is a verse in this section that I am not sure about. It's verse 10, where he mentions the angels along with the need for the woman to wear a head covering. Why the angels? I don't know, but it probably has something to do with _____; yes, you got it, authority.

2 Chronicles 7:14 talks about humbling ourselves before God so that He would heal our land. If you have been rebellious against God, your life will sooner or later self-destruct. Remember, we were made to run on God. In this famous verse, used by dignitaries and clergymen alike, God invites us to humble ourselves and turn to Him. If we do, He will hear us and heal us of our dislocated souls, weighted down by rebellious behavior. The verse is for the nation as a whole, but it certainly applies to us individually too.

I often think about the Lord's prayer, where Jesus told us to pray "give us this day our daily bread." In affluent America, how many Christians sincerely pray that prayer? Safeway or Roth's or Albertson's is right down the street. Why do I need to pray this prayer? But think about it. "Everything comes from God," and we need to acknowledge that every day.

It is an acknowledgement of God's authority when we acknowledge that all things come from Him. That means the 7-layer burrito I just bought at Taco Bell. God has blessed me with the money to buy that food.

How do you do with authority?

Do you have a rebellious spirit?

Do you tend to demand your way?

Do you find it hard to submit to those above you?

Do you talk about those over you when you are behind their backs?

Grab a head covering and be reminded that God has an order of authority that is for our good and will ultimately help us to submit to Him.

Rejoice in Jesus always,

God's blessings are under God's authority,

Pastor Steve

"Spiritual Gifts"

August 18 - 1 Corinthians 12: 1-36

There are a few basic principles about spiritual gifts that will help us to put into practice what God has designed for each one of us in Christ.

First of all, you have to believe that God has given you a spiritual gift. Some of us just can't believe that we would be gifted at all, let alone by God in some unique way. This is God's promise to us; He has given us a gift for His own purpose, and when we exercise our gift we will feel God's pleasure. Some don't believe they have a gift because theirs is in such an infant form; when they try to do it, they do not feel, right away, that they are really gifted.

Believe me, I know how this feels. I have never been a natural at anything. Anything I have excelled at, I have had to work at non-stop. I was slow in school and in sports. I had a good amount of drive but didn't feel like growth came quick. I admit it; I envied my friends who could pick something up and do well at it.

One example is golf. I worked my tail off to get good at it. I mean, I practiced seven days a week. By my senior year I was the No. 1 golfer on the team and was averaging a pretty low score. Then my friend came along. He had not ever picked up a club until his junior year, but he was a natural. He looked like he'd been playing golf for years. I could still beat him, but it took a Herculean effort to do it. I thought it was so unfair that I had to work so hard and he could make it look like a walk in the park.

I think that now I do not expect things to come my way so easily. If I don't see results right away, I don't tend to panic. When it comes to spiritual gifts, some give up too soon because they do not stick with an area of ministry long enough. Therefore, the first principle is: believe you have a gift and don't give up on your ministry too soon.

Second, know the purpose of all gifts. Paul says, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." Our gift is designed by God to build up the church. So I need to be involved with a group of people who believe in the gifts as well. We need, together, to allow one another to reach out and touch all of the members. Are you involved with other believers who appreciate the spiritual gifts God has given to the church? Are you allowed opportunities to exercise different gifts so that you can identify which one is your special gift?

Let's make a couple of comments about the gifts listed here in I Corinthians 12.

The message of wisdom. You are able to give timely advice in matters that are facing your brothers and sisters in Christ.

The message of knowledge. You are thirsty to know God's word and communicate with others who want to know what God's will is for them.

Faith. You are consistently stepping out to follow the Lord in ways that require a risk.

Healing. You have a desire to pray for the sick. You look forward to praying for them because you have seen God work through your prayers.

Miraculous powers. God is working through you to do extraordinary things, like helping to change people's lives or hold back the forces of evil.

Prophecy. You want to declare God's Word. You look for opportunities to share God's Word with people in your life.

Distinguishing between spirits. You can quickly smell a rotten egg when it comes to knowing whether someone is right or wrong. You just know that "something ain't right here."

Tongues. In believer's meetings you are able to speak in an unknown tongue to God in praise and thanksgiving.

Interpretation of tongues. The ability to know what the tongue speaker is saying to God. The interpretation delights everyone because of the joy of making God smile.

There are other gifts listed in Romans 12. It is important to note that the Corinthians, not unlike many fellowships in our day, were making too much of the more "flashy" gifts like tongues and their interpretation. Paul will correct them in chapter 14. When we get there I'll make a few comments. But remember, the gifts are not for personal gain; they are for the benefit of all. When a person highlights his gift to glorify himself, he is misusing what God intended for His own glory.

Paul goes on to emphasize that each and every member in the church is necessary. You and I are necessary. You are an important part of the Body of Christ. Jesus needs you to do your gift for the building up of His church. You will do your part and others will do their parts and the result is an orchestration of the Holy Spirit that glorifies Jesus. As a matter of fact, he says that those in the church who appear to be less necessary are actually the ones who need to be encouraged and spurred on. They are to be honored as an important part of the church.

My prayer is that you will take your gift seriously. Pray about it and then step out in faith and grow your gift. God will give you the grace to move forward in the area in which He has gifted you.

By the way, God will sometimes give more than one gift. Or, He'll use a combination of gifts to accomplish His will. But the place for you to begin is with

the area that interests you. Maybe it seems like God may be nudging you in a particular direction. Go for it! Get involved in the church and the ministry of small groups and a network of other believers. Or, maybe you will be able to use your gift at work. Wherever you are able to use your gift, don't hold back.

God's blessings bring gifts,
Pastor Steve

"Agape"

August 19 - 1 Corinthians 12:27 – 13:13

Warm Greetings,

"God is love." He is also the author of love. To know love in its truest form is to know God. The Apostle John writes much about this in his short letters tucked in at the end of the New Testament. John said, "He who loves is born of God and knows God." A few decades ago I was awestruck by the love of God. I thought I had experienced love, and then I was face to face with the love of God in Christ and learned what it truly meant.

Jesus even talked about this to his disciples when He said, "No greater love has a man then this, that he lays down his life for his friends," (John 15:13). True love is sacrificial. True love goes the distance and pays the ultimate price for its object. "For God so loved the world that He gave..." How did He give? He gave Jesus, who was raised up upon the cross. If you look closely at the context of John 3:16 you will see that God's love is connected to Christ's gruesome death.

Love was what the Corinthians needed desperately. They were breaking every rule of love. And so, like a lighthouse that towers above a cove to give light for the boats at sea, the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians shines out in this epistle of Paul. Its light gives direction and warning and help in all kinds of weather. It sheds light on the direction any church should go. Love, after all, is the main thing.

Paul makes it clear that you can be anybody; you can have great charisma and or have lots of stuff or even be a martyr, but if you don't have God's agape (the Greek word used here for love), then you are a nothing. That's a slap in the face for someone who is a big shot. That's a cup of cold water in the face of a self-made man. That's a bummer for the religious man who is boastful about his knowledge but gives little consideration to others.

1 Corinthians 13 shines its bright searchlight on all of us and asks us what really motivates us to do what we do. For Jesus, and for Paul, love was the motivation. Jesus loved me and... Paul loved the church and people and...

Why do you do what you do? That's a loaded question, isn't it?

Do you feel like answering it today? If not, I don't blame you.

That spotlight is bright. Why? It usually shows just how selfish we truly are.

I admit that way too often I am driven by self-absorption. Selfishness is all too often nearby, pushing me along. Only by God's grace am I able to practice the qualities of love described in chapter 13.

By the way, the gifts of the Spirit need to be practiced in the love of the Spirit. We need God's love when we are using our gift. When you are full of love, you will exercise your gift for the right motive. You will want to build up others and encourage them.

Love is patient. I can put up with the idiosyncrasies of others because I love them. This means loving even the unlovely.

Love is kind. I can be nice to others because they

are made in God's image and they need someone to encourage them.

Love envies not. I can let others succeed because I want their best. I do not need to be absorbed in my "wants."

Love boasts not. I can let those who love me say nice things about my accomplishments. I need not blow my own whistle.

Love's not proud. I can be full of Christ because I have enthroned Him in my heart. Self-promotion is valueless.

Love's not rude. I can consider the feelings of others and not draw unwarranted attention to myself. Others first.

Love's not self-seeking. I can be part of the church where we seek to promote Christ and build up one another. Christ, not self

Love's not easily angered. I can respond instead of react because I can believe that God is working somehow. Think, then act.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. I can forgive others because Christ forgave me. I am not a prosecutor looking to make others look bad.

Love delights not in evil. I can take a stand against those things that will hurt others. I will not join the crowd down sin's alley.

Love rejoices with the truth. I can make God's Word the object of my delight and not listen to contrary voices. I choose truth, I want love.

Love always protects. I can treat the feelings, opinions and circumstances of others with kid gloves.

Love always trusts. I can be a team player because Christ is the head of it all and trusting Him enables me to put trust in others.

Love always hopes. I can be flexible when the winds of change come into my life. My hope is in an unchanging God.

Love always perseveres. I can go to the finish because the love of Christ constrains me to keep on keeping on.

Love never fails. I can win in life because love will always prevail.

I can't go wrong if love is my driving force.
Love in Christ.
God's blessings flow from His agape love,
Pastor Steve

"I Speak In Tongues More Than All Of You"

August 20 - 1 Corinthians 14: 1-40

"Tongues: A Stickler Divine Gift"

August 21 - 1 Corinthians 14: 1-40

May You be Warmed Today with God's Love,

Let's summarize before we get started:

1. Main purpose of this chapter: Building up other believers and not confusing unbelievers is paramount (Build Up: verses 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 24, 25, 26, 31, 40; Reaching Unbelievers: 17, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28).

2. Spiritual gifts are under the control of the gifted person and should be used in a Spirit-led way.

3. Ministry in the church should be practiced in an understandable way, not with confusion, and when the tongues gift is used in the church assembly there must be a person handy with the spiritual gift of interpretation of tongues.

4. Tongues is a way to worship God. On the day of Pentecost the general public heard the disciples speaking in their own dialects and praising God. In the church, a person can give thanks in a mysterious language that can be understood only by a person with the gift of interpreting tongues.

5. It appears that Paul and others with the gift did benefit from its use in their private devotional lives. So there was a distinction between the use of the gift in public and its use in private.

Spiritual gifts in the church can certainly be misused. They were being exploited in the church at Corinth in Paul's day. They were being used for show, not to build up the body of Christ. It's quite possible that certain personalities in the church were highlighting their own ability to speak in another tongue, most likely an unintelligible one, which could only be understood by God unless made known through the spiritual gift of interpretation.

This same practice continues on in certain sectors of the church today. Some churches have even gone so far as to say that a person is not as spiritual if they do not speak in tongues. Of course, Jesus said that servanthood was the mark of the most spiritual, but these zealots blow their trumpet for the tongues gift as if it signified whether or not a person was close to God or not.

In my wife's grandfather's church they would not allow him to be a leader because he did not have the gift of tongues. He was probably the most spiritual man in the assembly, but because he did not utter words unknown to man he was excluded from this privilege.

It is no coincidence that 1 Corinthians 13 precedes this chapter on the ins and outs of the tongues gift. It had become such an issue in the church that the apostle needed to set the record straight about its proper use. He says that in all we do as believers, love is the greatest good. This love of God is also to be applied to the gifts in operation in the fellowships. If a gift is causing rivalry and egotism, it needs to be tempered so that the others in the church will be lifted up. The gifts are not intended for self-glorification. If God has given you the gift of tongues, He expects you to use it in a Christ-honoring way.

Paul's other concern is that the Corinthians would become a bad testimony to any unbelievers who were checking out the gospel. These seekers would think the church was full of crazy people if they made a bunch of noise that could not be understood. It would be better, Paul asserts, to speak a few words that could be understood than thousands of words that had no meaning to the hearers. This led to his point that all things needed to be done in an orderly way, so that visitors could hear the Word, be convicted of their sin, and turn to the Lord.

Also, on top of the tongues problem, it is apparent that some of the ladies were taking a leadership role and asserting their authority over the men. Paul says that is not the way to go about business in the church. The leaders—the men with a mature and growing faith—were to be the ones directing the use of the gifts in the church service.

Paul concludes with an emphasis on prophecy (or the declaration of the Word of God), but says that tongues should not be neglected as long as it is practiced in a Spirit-controlled way.

Remember, love, not self-glorification, is to be the rule of our lives; and order, not chaos, is to be the rule of the worship service.

God's blessings are experienced in an orderly way,

Pastor Steve

"Another Hallmark Chapter"

August 22 , 23 - 1 Corinthians 15: 1-49

Greetings in the Name of Jesus Christ,

Is what we believe important? You better believe it! You and I will be shaped by what we believe. If truth is our passion, then we will grow into the image of the one who is the Truth (John 14:6). If we sink into error, we must try and keep a belief system built on shifting sand from wobbling.

To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," (John 8: 31-32).

Truth matters. Truth is not some cold and hard set of facts one must learn to impress the Sunday School teacher; truth is alive and active and life-changing. It reaches to the core of who a person is, and changes them from the inside out. Truth is not a list of dos and don'ts, but a treasure to be grasped and explored and valued all of our lives.

Let's pray: "Lord, like the Psalmist's prayer, let your Word be a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I want to know gospel grace like Paul did, and I want it to have an impact on my life. Make me come alive today, O God, so that I might behold wonderful things from your law. Thank you for the peace I have when I am in your Word. Help me to understand it and grow in it as I read and think about it. Keep me from distractions that would derail me from my purpose to know You and Your Word. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the garden tomb in Jerusalem is the bedrock belief and claim of Christianity. Without the empty tomb there is no basis for faith in Jesus. You might believe Jesus was a good man, or even a prophet, or that He had God-like qualities, but if you do not believe in the resurrection then you have no basis for believing anything Jesus said. Why? Because Jesus, it is reported by those who walked with him, said that He would be raised from the dead three days after His gruesome death on the cross. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then all of His claims come under suspicion. Good men do not lie. True prophets are not incorrect in their predictions. It would not be God-like to say one thing and do the opposite.

Is it difficult for you to believe in a bodily resurrection? Obviously, for some in Corinth it was. But when Paul answers their doubts, I can't help but consider what a powerful argument for the resurrection he makes. Paul says that there were hundreds of eye-witnesses. Hundreds. Just ask them—they saw Jesus alive from the dead. Some heard Him or talked with Him. I'm sure others just stared with an awkward look on their faces. Then Paul says that he himself saw and talked with the risen Jesus. Can you believe Paul? Remember, he was an ardent Jesus-hater until he met the Savior on the road to Damascus that high noon day. What would compel Paul to embrace Jesus and face the wrath of his contemporaries unless Jesus was truly alive and working in his life?

Ever since I heard of the resurrection of Jesus I have been intrigued. Why was I so interested? Because I also believed God was working in my life. Someone took a real interest in me getting to know God. I appreciated that effort, but it was more than that; it was like God was wooing me, pulling me to Himself, and in endearing terms letting me know that I was special to Him.

And I found myself saying, "Me? Are you sure God? I'm the most self-absorbed person I know. Why are you doing this?"

And the answer came, "Grace."

"Well, I don't understand that, but I'm sure willing to learn," I responded.

So I believed in a resurrection, but was still in a state of shock because of the hugeness of it all. As a kid and young teen, I just assumed that if there was a

God He was a mystery and couldn't be known in any way. Boy, was I wrong!

The resurrection, to me, is one of two hallmark truths of the Christian faith. The cross establishes the fact that God loves us, and the resurrection that He is alive and at work in our lives.

Paul also says that the resurrection of Christ is our hope for resurrection. Simply put, if Christ isn't raised, then our hope for resurrection is spoiled. We might as well just party then, because this life and the hope for a life after death is meaningless. He reasons that if we only hope in Christ during this life, without the prospect of a future blissful life, then what is the use of putting up with all of the troubles here? Essentially, he's saying that all we do for Christ now is in the hope of a new resurrection body later on. Otherwise, we would really be no better off than anyone else.

Another issue that comes up here, for whatever reason, is that some Corinthians were baptizing for the dead. Paul had already discussed baptism at the onset of the book and downplayed it in proportion to the message of the gospel. So here, he is by no means advocating baptism for the dead. He just puts it to them so that they will see the futility of not believing in resurrection. It does surprise me that Paul does not come back to the subject of baptism for the dead, but then again why should he? He downplays baptism anyway, and would not give a practice like this the value of his ink on parchment. He had more important fish to fry. His ambivalence to the subject and prior clear teachings on baptism refute any idea of legitimate baptism for dead people. (see the addendum below)

Our reading concludes with strong words about hanging out with people who do not speak the truth. They are the kind who like to dominate the thinking of others by teaching whatever comes to their minds, and with their corrupt words they lead others astray. Paul says it is a sin to hold to false teachings. Ignorance is no excuse for crummy thinking. If bogus thinking is allowed to circulate, then sooner or later many will be deceived. They, or we, cannot afford to be deceived in the things that are of first importance. These are the things that we need to get right, if we are to stay right with the Lord.

Elsewhere Paul says that we need to let the word of Christ dwell deeply in us. The more we think about God's Word, the more we will be kept from thinking with errant judgment. Remember, you have the mind of Christ.

Let's get excited about resurrection. "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." Today, consider the truth that Jesus is alive and working in your life. "We are his workmanship," Paul says in Ephesians 2. The more you think about these things, the more clearly you will be able to recognize them when they happen in your life. Keep looking for the risen Christ in your life.

The hope we have in resurrection also includes a glorious new body that will not be weak and perishable but "heavenly." When you plant an old, dry bulb in the ground in the winter, there is no indication at that point of a future life for the flower. But spring comes and the beautiful flower comes forth and brightens our lives. So is the resurrection of our old dilapidated bodies; they are put in the ground or blown to the wind, but at the resurrection they will be transformed into a glorious heavenly body that will not even compare in magnificence with the body that was buried. What a hope!

Come Lord Jesus,

God's blessings apply the resurrection to our daily lives,

Pastor Steve

Addendum:

`What did Paul mean when he said, "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?" First, let's put this verse in the context in which it is found. Paul is talking about the hope of resurrection; first, he wants us to know that Christ was truly raised, and then he emphasizes that those who are in Christ will also be raised. He is emphasizing again and again that if there is no resurrection then all that is Christianity becomes vain.

As we have already pointed out, the Corinthians had all kinds of practical and theological problems in their practice of the faith. Some in the church were even teaching that there was no resurrection of the dead (verse 12). Therefore, this letter is meant, for the most part, to correct the faulty thinking of some of the

church members, including the leadership. There is no doubt that Paul had already had some very deep discussions with them when he was in Corinth. After he left, some began to sow seeds of doubt about certain issues, including the all-important issue of resurrection.

There is also no doubt that the issue of baptism was already on the table before Paul left the city. The Corinthians were using baptism as a sign of superiority, depending on who baptized you. They were using baptism not to honor the death and resurrection of Jesus but to prove their own spiritual superiority. So Paul says in the opening chapter: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power," (1:17). Obviously, in Corinth, baptism was being misconstrued. Rather than set down rules and regulations about the practice of baptism, Paul downplays it. He would rather highlight the gospel than let baptism become the main issue.

We do know that Paul never teaches that a person should be baptized for someone else, and especially for someone who is dead. You will not be able to find one verse in either the Old or New Testaments that sanctions baptism for the dead. On top of that, if a person is baptized in proxy, what power would it work for the deceased? Does the Bible teach that my faith can save someone else? Nowhere, no how! The New Testament does not talk about after-life conversions. The Bible makes it clear that after death a person is then accountable immediately for sins committed while living on earth (Hebrews 9: 27). So why were some baptizing for the dead in Corinth?

Who knows? Why were the Corinthians doing the majority of the weird stuff they were doing? Well, their background was wild. They were uncultured, morally unbridled, and ethically suspect. Is it any doubt that they would fall into all kinds of self-serving practices? Every chapter in this first letter addresses a problem. The Corinthians were a dysfunctional family. They were fickle, emotionally driven, and given to self-aggrandizement. In the confusion of all their problems Paul is carefully picking the areas he needs to address in order to get their attention. So as he talks about resurrection he thinks about this quirky baptism practice there.

We also know what these two brief questions are not saying. They are not advocating a practice in the church of baptism for the dead. If they were, then Paul would have made it clear that this was God's will in one of his other correspondences related to baptism, for example, in Romans or Colossians or Ephesians. He does not address it, because he has already made clear that baptism is only for believers. He never teaches that a dead person can be saved by baptizing a live person. That is so goofy it's hard to even fathom. So why did Paul even mention it in chapter 15?

This is just what I think, so take it with a grain of salt. I think Paul had already addressed this in person and had put it to rest while he was in Corinth. It was an old issue, one that they were probably embarrassed by once they understood that only a living person could be saved. It was probably a topic that everyone was aware of, since Paul didn't feel the need to introduce it with any qualifications. He just uses it as another stupid thing to do if there is no resurrection. Because he mentions it doesn't mean that he is endorsing it. Rather, he is rubbing their noses in their false beliefs and practices. I guess you could say he is killing two birds with one stone.

If they didn't believe in resurrection then why baptize for the dead? I think he was saying something like, "You guys are not thinking properly; the very thing you deny—namely, the resurrection—you belie with your actions. You acknowledged life after death when you were hoping to help dead people into heaven by baptizing them even after they had died." Remember, in chapter 14 he told them to be mature in their understanding. This group was so gut-driven and emotionally unstable they would jump into anything that looked spiritual, then start to tell others that they too needed to get on the bandwagon.

So you can forget about getting wet on Uncle Charlie's behalf. Uncle Charlie will have to stand before God based on his own life. You can cancel your appointment with the Mormons to join them in baptism for the dead. They have an elaborate genealogical system, so that you can be baptized for long-lost relatives who were not baptized Mormon. The fact that they base this system on these obscure verses says much about their inability to interpret

Scripture accurately. Right-thinking believers never go to a cloudy and obscure passage and then use it to contradict the crystal-clear revelation of the rest of the Bible. Yet, they do, and it is not right.

"O, Lucky Day"

August 24 - 1 Corinthians 15:50 - 16:4

Have you been tired lately? Are you on an anti-depressant, or do you feel like you may need to be? Do you struggle with your weight, or are you frustrated with your weight loss goals? Are you fed up with the ongoing tension you feel with some of the people you associate with at work or in your community? Are you tired of things breaking down; does it seem like as soon as you fix one thing, another breaks? Have you become a bit cynical after watching the news regularly? Do you miss a loved one who has not talked to you in a while, or has died?

This world is rigged for frustration. Joni Eareckson Tada said that in her talk on pain and suffering. She made the point that this world is not meant to be a cozy place for us; we are merely pilgrims passing through on our way to an eternal place. Those who spend their time trying to make earth into heaven, are the ones who will be the most frustrated.

Life can be tough. Do you feel that way? When you sit and consider your life and others around you, do you feel weighed down by the way things are? My heart goes out to those who seem to go through more than the rest. But really, all of us at one time or another can say that life for us just isn't working right now. It's at times like those when the hearts of men are tested. Can I maintain when the going gets tough? Sometimes I wonder, don't you? If this life is all there is, then the common denominator for all men is futility. Sounds like Ecclesiastes, doesn't it?

The Bible offers a hope that should make us sit up and take notice. The Bible says that our real home will be occupied later, and that once we get there we will be different—we will be fit for that time and place. A trumpet will initiate the change, and in an instant, the blink of an eye, we will be delivered, set free, changed, liberated. We will no longer be tied down by the things that have made this life a very frustrating journey.

At the time of change, the things I thought were so miserable on earth will be like a faded memory. They will seem such a light and momentary thing compared to the beauty of the new place. Have you ever felt the adrenaline high of a long run? You may be struggling along after five miles of running, and then somewhere in the sixth mile you feel this euphoric sensation as if you could run a hundred miles. It makes it all worth it and you think, "If I felt this every time I ran, I would sure be motivated to get out and run more." All of a sudden, the pain and sweat and discipline of it all is worth it.

Paul says that we will be changed. The mortal and the perishable will put on a new set of clothes. Have you ever put on a new outfit and felt like a new person? That is a poor illustration of what it will be like on that day. We will no longer have our earthly clothes on, and yet we will not be found naked. We will have our new spiritual clothes on, and they will then define us forever and ever. Oh, what a day that will be. No more colds, flu, broken bones, divorce, war, accidents, hunger, worries, and any other disappointments you could think of. We will be fit for heaven. God will be there, and He will light the place up with His very own presence. Death will be no more. There will be no fear of death, or talk of death, or reality of death. Death will be dead.

Only life.
Only peace.
Only joy.
Only God glorified.

Is your spiritual blood flowing now? Oh, lucky day; oh, lucky day! I don't mean that the lucky will be the ones to enjoy it. It will be the abode of the chosen and redeemed and loved by God in Christ. I just look forward to it and I can't wait and I want to proclaim, Oh, lucky day!

God's blessings bring healing,
Pastor Steve

"Words Matter"

August 25 - 1 Corinthians 16: 5-24

As we finish up the book of I Corinthians, I would like to spend some time dwelling on the importance of communication and the words needed to accomplish it. The words we speak to one another make a huge difference in the outcome of our personal lives and our society. Harsh words stir up contention and kind words produce a much different result.

I just love words. For example, I love the Greek word "splanknizomai" because it embodies the love or compassion of Christ for the common man. Isn't the word "compassion" a cool word? Doesn't it do something inside of you when you consider acting toward others from a compassionate heart?

Words wound and words heal. Words have a big impact on the way we walk through our day. For those who have been attacked verbally, words haunt them and discourage them, causing a well-spring of emotion to rise up in them, which can be very overwhelming. If you have ever been told that you would not amount to anything then you have quite a hurdle to overcome. Kids today are often so put down by the time they get into high school that it is no wonder that they are doing alcohol and drugs to escape the echoes in their minds.

What was it like to communicate in the first century? How did everyday citizens convey to one another the important messages of their time? They didn't have phones, faxes, pagers, email, newspapers, TV, magazines, or any of the other modern modes of communication. Were they worse off? I don't think so.

Let me explain. In the first century people were used to receiving and giving messages orally. Oral communication was so important that people were much more in-tune with one another. Most of us have played the game where we say a secret message to the first person and then they say the same message to the next person and so on. Usually, by the time the message reaches the last person, the true meaning is lost altogether. I don't think that would have happened in the days of fewer media. People were used to giving and receiving messages orally. They depended on spoken communication to make sure they had the true message.

Fortunately for us, the Words of Scripture were written by people who were sharp. Luke, for example, a doctor, was very careful to compile the facts about the things Jesus said and did. Luke was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. Luke would have had access to many valuable witnesses, including all of the apostles and the women who had traveled with Jesus. Especially helpful was Jesus' mother Mary. Can you imagine those interviews with Mary? Luke would have been riveted on every word as she described the pre-incarnation events, and then went on to share many other insights into His life. The other writers of

the New Testament were eye-witnesses themselves or associates of eye-witnesses. How important is this? Huge! For example, think about one event in your life that impacted you, and then ask yourself who is most qualified to recount the circumstances of that event? You are.

The big difference with what the apostles wrote about is that the things they heard and saw happened over years and were not limited to one day. Years. People wonder why there are some variations in the teachings of Jesus. Is that because the apostles made mistakes and contradicted one another? Not at all. Jesus probably told the same stories in different settings to make the points he wanted to drive home. So when the apostles re-told them in their gospels, they would have had a slightly different take on the same story. You can see this in Matthew and Luke's accounting of the Sermon on the Mount. Same material, put into different words at some points. No change in meaning, though the authors wrote with a different style. The authority of the Bible hinges on the truthfulness and reliability of the vessels—the human agents in God's plan to bring Words to the human race so that He could continue to clearly communicate with us.

Ink and parchment were not cheap in the first century, nor were they always readily available. Also, Paul had an eye problem and it wasn't easy for him to get the words on paper. But where there's a will, there's a way. The Holy Spirit was moving Paul along, watching over and inspiring and directing the very words of Scripture. It was His Word and God is jealous for His Words. Paul said, "All Scripture is God-breathed..." Peter said that some of Paul's words were hard to understand, and that some of his readers twisted them, like they did other Scripture. Peter thought Paul's written words were Scripture. That's good corroboration.

By the way, you may have noticed at the end of Romans that a man named Tertius actually wrote the book. Huh? Tertius was the man with ink and pen who took Paul's words and wrote them down. Paul needed help and leaned on this man to enable him to write the all-important letter of Romans. Other than Romans, we are not sure if Paul had anyone else write for him. In Galatians he made a reference to writing such big letters, as if he needed to write big so that he could see what he was writing.

Your words are important. When you speak, you make a difference.

Today, mark your words more closely. Think about what you are saying.

Are your words constructive?

Are your words compassionate?

Are you thinking about God's Words to you?

Personalize God's Words. Put your name in the text and make it more personal. "For God so loved Steve, that He gave his one and only Son, that if Steve believes in Him (and he does), Steve will not perish but have eternal life."

God's Words are meant for us, a love letter meant to draw us close to Him.

God's blessings are often transmitted through our words,

Pastor Steve

2 CORINTHIANS

Day 238

"Prayer Alert"

August 26 - 2 Corinthians 1: 1-11

Paul writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God," (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4).

My kids joke about the tours I have given them of the city I grew up in. They were pretty patient because they really just wanted to head to the beach, but they listened to my ramblings as we toured around.

"This is where I went to elementary school," I would say.

"And this is my intermediate school...and this is my high school; remember all of the cool stuff I told you I did back in those days? Well, this is where I did it. Interesting, huh?"

"I'm getting hungry, dad," was all I heard in return.

"We're almost done, one more stop," I said excitedly.

Even though the town had changed a lot, I could still get around very well because I had spent about two decades there. As we drove around there were plenty of stories, some I could tell and others that I chose to keep to myself. As we'd pass a significant house, a flood of memories would wash into my mind, but my kids were clueless. They had not lived where I had lived. They had not been through the same experiences I had.

There is a great deal of truth to the statement that "only those who have suffered can understand the path of suffering." Of course, there are many roads of suffering and some are more difficult than others, but it is the one who's been down that road who can clearly speak to another sufferer. Compassion does not come cheaply. It is usually forged in the fires of affliction. Those who have experienced an unwanted divorce, for example, can empathize with a person who just heard that his partner has another partner. The aloneness and misery of that experience can only be understood by the person who has been down that road. Just as there is no uncommon temptation, there really is no uncommon path of suffering. Suffering happens in our world, in our families, in our community on a daily basis.

Paul says that suffering has purpose. It makes us like God, the great sufferer. It makes us into more compassionate people. God became a man and experienced the most dramatic forms of suffering—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Isaiah said about Jesus, "He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

Jesus knew firsthand what it meant to be misunderstood, rejected and run out of town. On more than one occasion the crowd picked up stones to do Him in. They believed He was committing blasphemy against God because of the elevated statements He made about Himself. Peter said, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin," (I Peter 4:1). I'm not totally sure what "arm yourselves" means, but I'm sure it doesn't mean that we shy away from the subject of suffering and don't consider its spiritual significance in our lives.

Paul believed that difficulties were God's class-

room chalk talk to teach us to serve others. Paul says, "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer," (1:6). If you put on this attitude, you might find yourself thinking things like: "I'm suffering so that I can better serve others," or "God will use this awful experience to one day enable me to reach out to others."

Paul was others-minded and is a good example for us as we seek to follow Jesus, who was a servant as well. What a privilege it is to be a servant of Christ. Believe me, He can use servants. He can take your desire to serve Him and do such great things with it. But before He can do that, we must learn the lesson that we are merely His servants.

The Apostle goes on to explain to the Corinthians the troubles he and his companions were having as they went about preaching the Word. At one point Paul thought it was all over. He felt like there was no way out and that surely he'd be dead soon. He was in a desperate place, a bind, a pickle, between a rock and a hard place, "but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (1:9). When the chips are down, to whom do we turn? Where do we go when there is no possible human way out? When we have given up on the inside and are despairing even of our lives, to whom do we turn? It is human nature to try to figure out our own solution. We want to somehow be the hero and save the day, but there are some circumstances when there is no possible way out. Years ago in Florida, Hurricane Charlie swept through and devastated the southwestern portion of that state. Many people were destitute. I'm sure many were despairing. Not all, though, because in situations like this people pull together. Sometimes, even when there is no earthly way, all of a sudden, there is light on the horizon and help is found. In situations like this people pray. "God, help us," and, "God, we need you; please come here and get us out of this mess."

Paul attributes the work of God in his life to the prayers of the Corinthians. He is grateful that they helped by praying for him and lifting him up to God. He acknowledges that prayer is time well-spent. Prayer draws us close to the One who has resources that we know nothing about. God can provide when there seems to be no way out.

Your family, your church, your neighbors, your work associates, your fellow students, and the missionaries you know all need your prayers. You can help by praying for them. Let's not neglect prayer this week. Let's give up a favorite this or that to find the time to pray. Would you join me in praying for everyone who receives this email? Ask God to give them wisdom and bless them and encourage them. Ask God to shine His light on His Word as they read, so that they can get the maximum out of it. Ask God to use the difficult stuff in their lives so that they can reach others.

I pray that God will bless you today.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings happen in the good and tough times,

Pastor Steve

"Yes!"

August 27 - 2 Corinthians 1: 12-22

Good Day to All of You,

It is difficult when someone does not believe in you. When someone puts you on the defensive and makes you justify what you are doing, you feel put on the spot at the very least. We all desire for others to love us and believe in us. Sometimes we need this too much, even to the point of feeling despair if a single person shows disapproval with us.

At one time or another we will have to face the fact that someone does not think too highly of us. This is hard if it is a person with whom we have to rub shoulders on a regular basis. We might find ourselves living in dread that we will have to walk under the disapproving gaze of our critic. It takes real skill to work with people whom we feel look down on us. It takes a gracious attitude, and a willingness to live with the incongruence of the situation.

Paul's second book to the Corinthians is full of explanations of the apostle's authority, because there had come to the city some "super apostles," self proclaimed very spiritual men who were throwing mud at Paul's claim of apostleship. In Chapter 11 we will see these men in more detail, but here in the beginning of the book Paul has to defend his own apostleship and authority to instruct them in Christ. By the way, Paul hated to have to speak like this, but he felt he had to in order to preserve the simplicity of the message of the gospel. These rabble-rousers were diluting the gospel of Jesus.

Paul's motives were pure. He wanted the glory of God and the expansion of the gospel. He was not interested in the promotion of his own name. Yet he knew that for the sake of the future of the church in Corinth he would have to level the big guns at those who were demeaning his motives. So Paul says that he acted toward them out of "holiness" and "sincerity." He was not interested in worldly acclaim; he was all about proclaiming the message of Christ in the spirit of grace and in the power of God.

Some might have been saying that Paul was wishy-washy, but he flat out says that he is confident in Christ. He reminds them that his message was the straightforward message he had always proclaimed in Christ—a message founded on the promises of God, one that deserved a "yes" and "amen." You see, Paul believed the Corinthian folk were his spiritual kids. He believed in them and loved them and wanted the very best for them. He just hated to see them sink into spiritual pride or immorality or unethical behavior or idolatry or false beliefs. So as a good spiritual father, he really let them have it on the chin. He wanted them to grow up and start acting like mature believers and not spoiled brats.

How about us? Would Paul have to write us the same way he had to write the Corinthians? Would he have to weep over us and correct us from ungodly errors? Would he have to slap us and give us a wake up call so that we didn't fall into harmful beliefs and practices? Paul wanted to come to them in a loving way, but he was ready to bear the rod if that was what was needed to wake up this struggling body of believers.

Paul gives the church several reasons, right off the bat, to believe in him. He says that God is at work in his life giving him the confidence to stand. He then says that God had anointed him. In other words, he was commissioned by God to be an apostle and to have authority over the churches. Then he makes it clear that he is God's property. It was God who was working through him in order to exhort the church. Then he affirms that the Holy Spirit is in him, directing him and reminding him of what is to come. All of these proofs are designed to assure the church that he is the man to follow, and that they ought to reconsider the words of those who were putting him down.

Paul makes it clear that the promises of Christ are always positive. All of the promises are true, and they

will stand under the most intense scrutiny. The promises do not vacillate from one minute to the next. The very promise we learned today will be applicable tomorrow and the rest of our lives. In other words, Paul is affirming to them that what he has taught them from the Word stands. He didn't go back and forth and use Scripture first one way and then another; he was decisive about the meaning of the Word and meant what he said when he instructed them.

The application for us is the same. The promises of God, called by the Apostle Peter "precious promises," form the basis of our confidence in Jesus Christ. It is His promises that give us the hope we have in this life and in the life to come. Without the promises we would be left to guess about what God's will is and what He wants for us. And so Paul calls the Spirit a "guarantee" of what is to come. The Spirit internally teaches us truth about the lives we live now and the life that we will all enjoy when we are in heaven and are transformed into a person who will be altogether perfect.

God's blessings are yes and amen,
Pastor Steve

Addendum:

I wonder if the Corinthians were a bit fickle about Paul's apostleship because they did not fully appreciate his background in Judaism and in the Holy Scriptures. As Gentile believers, Judaism and the Bible would not have been a part of their daily life. They would have been treated as a common thing rather than a holy thing. Paul would have to remind them that God had spoken through the prophets and in Jesus and through him.

When other teachers came along promising them deeper things, they were naïve enough not to reject it simply on the basis of Paul's work among them.

"Satan's Ploy"

August 28 - 2 Corinthians 1: 23-2:11

In the old days, before the wonders of modern technology, the Titleist golf ball was wound on the inside with rubber bands. My grandpa would allow me to tear into one of those spheres and pull apart all of the rubber on the inside until I reached the small hard core. It was quite an undertaking. I'd pull those pieces of rubber as they clung to the ball and, bit by bit, I'd get to the center. When I was done I had a heap of rubber like a mushy rubber band salad.

Relationships can sometimes be like that mound of rubber. If someone were to ask you to take that mess and create a viable golf ball with what you had left you would probably look cross-eyed at them. Yet many of our relationships in and outside of the church are just like that. They have become so messy and complicated that it doesn't seem like there is any hope for restoration. Like putting a square peg through a round hole, you end up feeling frustrated because of the way things have gotten tangled up.

On top of all that, what really adds insult to injury is when a person glosses over the problems in a relationship and tries to ignore their affect on the situation. It's like trying to ignore a 600 lb. pink elephant on the living room floor. It just won't go away. You can say it isn't there but the reality is that everyone in the room is keenly aware of its presence. No, the solution will usually have to fit the problem, and if the problem is immense then the solution will require blood, sweat, and tears too.

Have you ever been in a tough relationship or maybe you are in one right now and you wonder how you are going to make it work? Maybe you have tried every possible way except moving to Nebraska in order to work it out, and still you haven't really made any headway. Can you shuck corn? You know that your heart's desire and God's will is for you to make things right in the situation but for the life of you there is no way to see the way to go.

Relationships can be messy. They can challenge us way beyond our abilities. From the very beginning of time people have hurt others and the results have been tough. Bickering and fighting and slander and name calling and murder have all happened because people could not get along. This is true today and has been true since the clock began ticking in the human race.

The Apostle Paul says that it is in the arena of human relationships where the devil tries to take advantage of us. If he can get us to hate or condemn or obsess over someone else then he has us where he wants us. At that point we take our eyes off of the Lord and focus on the problem. We let the person rent space in our heads. We think too much about them and let them dominate our thoughts. Instead of letting the Word saturate us we are busy knocking down so and so in our minds. The twist here is that many times we do have legitimate gripes about the person who is on the screen of our minds day and night. We replay what they did to us over and over until we work ourselves up to a frenzy and then we are tempted to play out all sorts of wrong behaviors.

The chances are pretty good that the man Paul is talking about here in this chapter is the same guy from 1Corinthians 5. Do you recall that it was there where the apostle turned the man over to the devil so that he would learn the lesson that moral depravity should not be tolerated in the church. It looks like the man turned it around and acknowledged his wrongdoing. So here in 2 Corinthians Paul says that the church should forgive him and restore him to fellowship before the devil has an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. It could have been that some felt like the man hadn't gotten enough punishment and that he deserved to be punished more. Paul says that it is important to forgive so that the focus will not rest on the man but on the forgiveness offered in Jesus.

Paul reaffirms his love for the church by offering his forgiveness too. Even though this situation gave the church a black eye it could be rectified if the man changed his ways. Paul was quick to forgive and restore the man because of his attitude when called on the carpet for what he had done. It would actually honor the Lord if the man started to live in a God honoring way. Paul felt so close to the Corinthians that what happened in their fellowship affected the way he felt as well. He was right there with them in heart, wanting the best for them and he would applaud them if they would obey his letter.

Is there someone in your life who needs to hear it straight about the way sin has been affecting him? Are you the best person to go to him and lay it on the line? If not you, then who? The devil is a cunning tempter when it comes to breaking relationships. It is always better to try and restore a relationship rather than let it go by the wayside. This is especially true if the friendship is in the Lord and the other person goes to the same fellowship as you. Go to him and try to work it out.

If the person changes, comfort him.

If the person changes, the devil will be stumped.

If the person changes, you will have won a brother.

If the person changes. you will give the church a boost.

If the person changes, we will all see Christ's forgiveness in action.

God's blessings rain down on God-honoring relationships,

Pastor Steve

Day 241

"Much Deeper Than Rules"

August 29 - 2 Corinthians 2:12 - 3:6

True Brothers and Sisters,

Tell me a little about your best relationship. Why would you consider that relationship to be the best? What is it about the way you interact with the other person that excites you? Why is it that of all your relationships and interactions with people, you feel most connected to the person now in your mind? Think for a minute. Can you put your finger on the answer to that question?

All of us have relationships based on rules. Every month you have to meet at such and such a place and follow the rules of the particular organization you are involved in. The group may serve a common purpose, so you sense a camaraderie with the people, but the main focus is on keeping and practicing the rules of operation in the group so that you can proceed in the same direction together. Members of the group tend to develop relationships around their common interest in the cause their group promotes.

For example, I was a member of a group called TIP. TIP members are ordinary citizens who come to the aid of people in crisis. TIP means Trauma Intervention Programs. A TIP member goes through a rigorous training and then is required to come to a monthly meeting for ongoing training. TIP has a book about three inches thick with rules and regulations that guide the organization. This is very important because TIP is available in cities all over and the board of directors wants it to be uniform no matter where you go. Without rules, the group would be disorganized and have trouble staying afloat.

On the other hand, I have found that if we only focus on the rules and do not work on relationships with other members of the group it soon takes all the positive motivation out of it. It's like a bubble bursts. But when we interacted with one another in the meetings and on calls, or even in our private social lives, we developed a closeness that was very meaningful.

We were not designed to merely live by rules. God designed us for relationship and this includes relationship with Him, too. When you focus on rules exclusively it will suck the life right out of a group.

There are people who tend to annoy others because they are "by the book." They also tend to nitpick. If someone is even a hair off kilter when it comes to expressing a rule or acting on a rule, the nitpicker will stand up and challenge the others. Their focus is on rule keeping. On the other hand, when relationships are close, people can laugh and kid each other when it comes to breaking certain rules. In that kind of environment you are not always on your guard and defensive. You can let your defenses down because you know the others believe in you. If you were to make a mistake, they would handle it in a way so that you were not humiliated.

The religious leaders of the New Testament era were very much about keeping rules. Jesus said of them that they would strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. He meant they so focused on the smallest of rules that they took their eyes off of the bigger picture. They would, for example, obsess about the tithe they were required to pay on their income and produce, but then would forget about things like mercy and love and the judgment of God. They loved rules because they wanted to be right. They took more pleasure in doing things right then they did in developing a strong relationship with God.

We can get so wrapped up in rule-keeping that we forget that God desires a relationship with us. Relationships built on keeping rules may appear to be working on the outside, but on the inside people are often fed up. They feel like they can never do enough to maintain the happiness of the others. For example, God gave the Ten Commandments as a guide to holy living. But in essence it was like a mirror to show us that we could not keep all of the rules. It shows us that we would need God's love and mercy if we wanted to really be connected to Him.

That's why when Jesus covered the commandments in His Sermon on the Mount, he interpreted the Law so that it related to the way we thought on the inside. Jesus was bringing people to the point where they would acknowledge that they needed Him. If they could keep the rules without His help, then He wouldn't have had to come to save them. But because man was lost, they had to relate to Him on the basis of grace and lordship or leadership. As soon as a person turns to the Lord he finds a rescuer and a leader who will also be a best friend. Does this negate the rules? By no means. The rules continually remind us that we need the Lord in our lives. The rules were not meant to give life, but to lead us to the One who gives life.

So when Paul talks to the Corinthians he focuses on relationships rather than rules. He emphasizes the importance of what is going on in the heart. He even feels like he has these people in his heart. They are his delight and he wants them to know that. Paul is saying that the relationships they have developed are good evidence that God is at work in their ministry. The Corinthians themselves become the letter of recommendation, rather than approval coming from some other source. Why? Because they are, according to Paul, in each other's hearts.

Paul goes on to stress that the new covenant gives life because it brings us to God through Christ. It is about the work of the Holy Spirit who works on the inside and gives us true spiritual life. The letter (I assume Paul has in mind here "of the law") kills because it does nothing for relationship. It will either frustrate us to death or cause us to cry out for God's mercy, where we can find some relief from the tyranny of keeping the letter of the law.

If you are a Robert's Rules of Order kind of person, that is fine and good as long as you do not try to create relationships based on your knowledge of the proper way to make things run. Otherwise, no one will want to be around you after a while.

God's blessings of life come through the Spirit,
Pastor Steve

Day 242

"The Work Of The Holy Spirit"

August 30 - 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Someone recently commented that it is tough for her to love the unlovely. She is struggling with the command to have love, because she has to deal with a person or two who is rude, arrogant and unkind. Can anyone else identify with this?

I think that most of us can because naturally we love those who love us. We feel like we're on top of the world when we have exchanged loving words and feelings with someone. But try to love the unloving, and you can quickly become discouraged.

I'll never forget a Christian friend of ours who moved into our old condo when we moved up north. She was adamant that she was going to love our grumpy old neighbor lady until she found the Lord. We were a bit skeptical. We had been this woman's neighbors for four years, and so the thought of our friend doing the impossible was—well, hard to believe.

It didn't take too long before the war began. Needless to say, they didn't get along very well. We can have all kinds of good intentions but the reality oftentimes doesn't fit our wants. Before long, our

friend couldn't stand this person she was going to "kill with kindness." She wanted to "kill" her all right, but it wasn't necessarily with kindness.

You see, our love does go a long way, but it does not necessarily guarantee that the people we love will change. Sometimes it makes them even more resistant. Paul says that God has to remove the spiritual blinders from them before they will be able to see God's truth and light. It is like a veil that covers their eyes and prohibits them from beholding the good things of God. Our friend thought that because she could so easily see spiritual things, she would be able to transfer them to another person. It didn't work.

Paul gives us more insight into the work of the Holy Spirit in this section of our reading today. And that is exactly what we need. We need to be aware of the Spirit's work in our lives so that we can cooperate with Him, be led by Him, and be filled with Him. "The Lord is the Spirit." It is important to identify that the Holy Spirit is God. He is not the Father or the Son but is Himself God. Again, "The Lord is the Spirit." It doesn't get much more clear than that.

God is at work in your life. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He has made Himself known as such. We cannot change that or add to that. He is who He is and that is that. Some people would like to separate the Spirit from the other members of the Tri-Unity of God, but you simply cannot do that. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives, making Jesus and the Father clear to us so that we can know God and enjoy Him.

In this portion of Scripture we learn that the Spirit is the great liberator of our lives. He is the one who wooed us to Jesus. According to Jesus, the Spirit convicted us of sin so that we would see our need for a Forgiver to make things right with God the Father. The Spirit removed the blindfold from our eyes and allowed us to see the love of God in Jesus. Once the blinders were off we could see spiritual things. We saw everything in a whole new light.

Jesus said in John 3 that you could not see the kingdom of God unless you had been born again. The "see" there means to understand or perceive. What He's saying is that once you come to Him or turn to Him and are born from above, you will begin to see spiritual things for the first time. When you read your Bible, things that once were very cloudy will be as bright as the noonday sun.

The Spirit is the One who removed this dark covering from your eyes. He enabled you to see the things that Paul says were once hidden but now have come to light. These are things that God has made known, things that once were mysterious, but now have been revealed to God's prophets and apostles. They've been passed on to us so that we could understand them too. The Holy Spirit has given you your spiritual freedom. You were once a subject of the kingdom of darkness, but he has transferred you to the kingdom of His beloved Son. Think back to when you first came to Jesus. Can you identify some ways the Spirit was working in you at that time? Was he urging you to accept Jesus at an evangelistic event? Or, when a friend was telling you about Him, was the Spirit whispering to you about your need of Him? Did you go forward at some crusade because you felt compelled to give your life to Christ? It was the work of the Holy Spirit that brought you into the wide-open pastures of spiritual freedom.

Not only does the Spirit liberate us, but He also works in us to conform us into Christ's image. We saw this in Romans 8, remember? He does it by removing the veil that kept us in the spiritual dark. When that's gone, we are confronted with the glory of the Lord, which reflects on us and changes us. We don't always feel this but it is truly what is happening in our hearts. God is doing a work in us by the Spirit.

When Jesus was in the process of preparing His apostles for His departure he told them that He would not leave them as orphans but would come to them in the Person of the Spirit and be with them always. He said it was necessary for Him to go because if He didn't then the Spirit would not come. It was important that the Spirit, who is omni-present (everywhere present all of the time with no constraints of space and time), would come and be with every member of the church everywhere in the world. Jesus, as long as He was in His pre-resurrection body, would be localized. It was better for Him to send the Holy Spirit, who would be with all of us everywhere always. Does that make sense?

Put your faith in these verses about the Holy Spirit.

Don't allow your own weaknesses to distract you from what God wants to do in you.

Rely on the Spirit.

Ask God to fill you with the Spirit today in an extraordinary way.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings are distributed by the Spirit,

Pastor Steve

"Fixed Eyes"

August 31 - 2 Corinthians 4: 1-18

My Dear Friends,

If a nearsighted man takes off his glasses, the people and objects around him will look smudged and indistinct. Everything will be out of focus. He can squint and strain his eyes, but the result will probably only be frustration.

Some people have trouble mentally focusing on any project. They are distracted very easily and pulled away from what they are doing by the smallest of intrusions. The thing they are working on and trying to concentrate on is not so all-compelling that they cannot be interrupted by something else. Because of this, their life is usually fragmented and unorganized.

Is your life focused? Do you know why you are doing the things you do? Is there purpose in your steps? Do you get up in the morning with renewed energy and meet the day with the expectation that you will be one step closer to your dream? If not, why? Have urgent things crowded out the important things? Or have you forgotten what is important enough to you to give yourself wholeheartedly to them?

Years ago I read an article on the subject of focus that hit me between the eyes. After I read it I realized just how unfocused I was. I thought I was able to really concentrate on the important things, but the truth was that I, like so many others, was allowing myself to drift with the current cultural thought patterns or to be taken in by the latest fads. The article was about golf legend Jack Nicklaus.

Nicklaus was able to focus so intensely that when he bowed over a putt he became oblivious to anything else around him. It was just him and the putt. So when he went to stroke the ball he knew exactly which way he would hit it and how hard he should hit it. As he stood over the ball he was so into what he was doing that the crowd and his score and the weather and the money on the line were all in the distance compared with the attempt he had at hand. He was a focused man.

Why is it so hard for us to focus? I think it is tough because life is full of motivational things that do not last or maintain our interest. They cannot sustain our desires long enough to last very long. Nicklaus has a single-minded focus on winning golf tournaments. Whether you are talking about an athlete or a politician or an engineer or a musician or a contractor, it is those who have a strong internal drive to be the best at what they do who get the job done efficiently. They are not distracted by outside forces; they are so intent on doing what they have put their hand to that no one or no thing will ever get in their way.

Paul was focused and single-minded. He considered himself a servant of Christ. He did all that he did so that the message of the Gospel could be advanced. His motivation was Christ and His glory. He brought Jesus to others so that they could experience Him like he had. His faith was for everyone and he was committed to giving it to all.

Paul's integrity was being questioned in Corinth. That is why he has to defend his motives for serving

the Lord. In the later chapters of 2 Corinthians he will introduce the false apostles who were dragging his name through the mud. As he defends himself he makes it clear to the church that it was only through the Lord's power that he was able to endure the kind of difficulties that he and the other apostles were experiencing. Paul describes the Christian life as a jar of clay filled with God. God fills and inhabits us so that we can experience His transforming power in our lives.

Paul shares with them the secret of his success despite all the difficulties of his life in Christ. He says that he does not fix his eyes on the temporary things but on the eternal things. He knew that no matter what he went through here it would never compare with what was to come. He always had his eyes on the prize. He could put up with a lot of heartache now if it would turn into eternal fruit later. He was focused on spiritual ministry and not on things like prestige or power or money or any other weak motivation for doing ministry.

Let's list a few of the "eternal things" that it would be good for us to center on:

The spread of the gospel: it will effect salvation in those who embrace it.

Growing in God's love: spiritual fruit will be seen in love.

Healthy church life: the honor and advancement of the church was a priority for Jesus and it ought to be the same for us.

Forgiveness: grudges and resentments will only lead to distractions. Forgiveness will promote a godly and free life.

Prayer: prayers are seen in Revelation as going up like incense before God.

People: We must spread God's love to people all over the world. Making people our priority will not be a distraction as long as we do not make pleasing them our aim. Our aim should be to love people and bring Christ's love into their life.

Heaven itself: looking forward to the ultimate destination should make us aware of our attitudes now. We can put up with tough stuff now if heaven is in our thinking.

Recently I sat and held the hand of an elderly friend. She said many times that she was happy I had come because she was hoping that I'd be by. She knew that her time to die was near. Truthfully, I had been trying to avoid the issue because of my heart for her. Anyway, as I sat and held her hand we talked about heaven and spending time again in the future and her family and how the world was becoming more and more unfriendly to believers. I said goodbye. Her journey is almost over and I will follow her someday. By the way, one of the final things she needed to do before she could go in good conscience was tell her sister about Jesus. She had been able to do that earlier that day.

Goodbye, friend. I'll see you again in much better health.

God's blessings come when we focus on eternity,
Pastor Steve

"What Happens Next?"

September 1 - 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10

I will never forget the Christmas when I discovered one of my presents hidden in my parents' closet. Why I was in the closet I cannot remember but the important thing is that I got to test drive a remote-controlled army tank long before Santa had a chance to come down my chimney. I snuck back into the closet as often as I could to enjoy what I hadn't yet received. Somehow my mom found out I was up to something and called me on it. I think they were going to take my treasure back to the store so that a less naughty boy might find it under his tree, but in the end, unable to resist my pleas, they kept it and on Christmas gave me what I had already had a taste of beforehand. You know, because there were a couple of weeks when it was re-hidden and I didn't know where it had been stashed, once I got it on Christmas day there was a new excitement about being able to enjoy it all over again.

When you've had a taste of something you long to be able to enjoy it in its fullest as soon as possible. I guess that my story would be more interesting if the tank had inspired me to command a tank in a war. It didn't, but we could imagine it happening to someone else. Could you imagine an army tank commander saying that he was motivated to serve because of a special gift he had discovered early before Christmas when he was a kid? That idea is conceivable.

Well, in this life there a number of experiences that give us a taste of what life after this world will be like. Sometimes we are aware of these events and at other times we are oblivious of them. For example, some people can see a beautiful sunset or peer into the Grand Canyon or experience a lightning storm and be drawn to God in a way that makes them long to be with Him and enjoy all that He has to show. Others see these same sights and simply take them for granted.

In Ecclesiastes there is a passage that says God has put eternity in our hearts. I think that means every person. There is a longing in all of us to know and experience God's heaven, where eternity is a reality. Those who aren't thinking about God or heaven or eternity still spend their lives seeking to experience ultimate happiness, or order, or beauty, or fulfillment. We all seek to know what heaven must be like.

Paul takes this a lot further. He says that the Holy Spirit is our guarantee of what is to come. He is the down payment, the deposit on a treasure yet to come. What does this mean? Remember back in Romans 8 where Paul says that the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God? The Spirit is at work in our life. He draws us to Jesus and makes the life of Jesus real to us. He is like a matchmaker. He introduces us to Jesus and makes Jesus real to us. This is the introduction to a love we will one day experience in heaven, but which we could not even fathom now.

I have a friend who is admittedly weird. She thinks differently than the average person. She can talk about her death and in the same breath about what she is going to buy at the market. Death to her is not the end but the beginning. I have heard others comment that they wish they could adopt her view on life and death. For many people, it's taboo to even talk about their own death. My friend revels in the thought. She is even looking forward to it. We have been in a small group together and there was another member of the group who had cancer. It was so good for this person to be in the group because of the open way we talked about dying. It was not a taboo subject around us. We even wrote our own funeral services. Sound weird? Actually, I think it is very healthy. Why ignore the inevitable? Isn't it going to happen? Of course it is.

Paul makes it clear that once your old tent is folded up you will have a new tent. This new tent will be fit for heaven, the place where a holy, holy, holy

God lives. He says that the longing for this new home causes groans down here. Why wouldn't we want to be where goodness and love reign 24/7? Actually 24/7 will not be an accurate description then; there will be no more time restraints. No more limitations. Only completeness in the presence of God, our Maker.

In the meantime, Paul makes it clear that it is his ambition to please God. He wants to live for God and please him while he's in this body or the new one. But it wouldn't take him long to make a decision if he had a choice, because he had physical limitations that made it difficult to serve God on earth. Who doesn't? Paul should be an encouragement to us to keep on doing the right thing even if we do not feel like it. Pretty soon here Paul will talk about his thorn in the flesh, which was God's reminder to him that grace was sufficient and that the power to serve came from God and not from him.

From time to time I'll talk to people who just don't have any more energy for ministry. They think their tank is empty. They are contemplating rearranging their schedules to do other things. Now, I'm all for a balanced schedule, but the bottom line is that we need the power of God to do the will of God. We cannot do it all alone. But it's not going to be easy. So many people make the mistake of thinking that if it's hard, it must not be God's will. Don't say that to Paul. His ministry wasn't easy. In a few chapters he will chronicle some of the struggles he had—struggles that he bore with gladness for others.

Along these lines you might want to take a look at Philippians 3 and 4 to get a feel for the way Paul looked at serving and pleasing the Lord.

God's blessings make heaven a reality,
Pastor Steve

Day 245

"Out Of My Mind"

September 2 - 2 Corinthians 5:11- 6:2

Dear Friends,

It is perfectly fine to be so into Jesus that nothing else even compares. I know a little something about what it's like to be completely focused on just one thing. I'll tell you what, when I fell—and I mean fell—in love with Babette the summer before my ninth grade year, I learned what it meant to have a one-track mind. It was Babette for breakfast and Babette for lunch and Babette for dinner, and in the in-between times it was more Babette. I could not think about anything else. When I was with her I regretted having to go and when I was not with her I couldn't wait to be with her. I was smitten in love, I thought.

Of course, that relationship ran its course. A relationship with God through Jesus, on the other hand, is for life. It is the kind of relationship that just keeps getting better over the years; like a good marriage, our connection can keep growing closer. Are you beginning to sound like a broken record to your friends and family because every time you're around, the Lord comes up or the cross or the gospel or what you think God is doing currently in your life? Jesus never gets old!

Paul was totally a Jesus person. He loved the Lord with all of his heart and wanted nothing more than to serve Him by serving the church. And so this letter to the Corinthians takes on a very personal tone. Paul wants to reassure them that he is for them all the way, for Jesus' sake. He wants them to believe that he is for real and that he has their best interest in mind. This is obviously making the apostle very emotional.

He is reaching out to them from his heart, and he wants nothing more than their wholehearted acceptance of him.

Have you ever wanted something so much that you may have ended up looking a bit silly when you tried to get your point across? Well, Paul wanted nothing more than to get his point across to the church. He would do anything to get into their hearts and win them for the sake of his gospel, the gospel of the Lord Jesus. He was naturally afraid that someone who came in with a contrary point of view might dissuade them from holding firm to the message of the gospel.

Because of these factors Paul is writing with emotion. He thinks he may even be coming across as a kind of crazy guy. Would the church understand him and be able to make the needed adjustments, or would he have to make another visit in order to set the record straight? And so he states: "If we are out of our mind is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us..." (5: 13, 14). In other words, no matter how we look, no matter how we are coming across, no matter what others think about us, and no matter even what you think, we are doing this because we love God and we love you. Love drives us to do what we do.

Another very important aspect of Paul's writing to the Corinthians is his emphasis on the work of Christ. He continually goes back to what the Lord Jesus has done for us. He wants them to focus on Jesus, and not on false teachers and teachings. He constantly comes back to the cross of Christ, through which we have been reconciled to God. I believe the pinnacle of this is recorded in 5:21, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Now that is an awesome promise and a truth that ought to make us yell with thanksgiving to God.

Let's accept Christ's work of love on the cross for us today. It is only His righteousness that will make a way to God. Fortunately for us, we have received Christ's righteousness based on His works. All praise be to Him!

God's blessings can make us very emotional,
Pastor Steve

Day 246

"Suck It Up!"

September 3 - 2 Corinthians 6:3 - 7:1

If you have great purpose, then you will have great resolve to accomplish that purpose. Whether you are an athlete or a businessman or a parent or a public official, you will put up with almost anything if you love and believe in what you are doing.

If you are a parent, then you know just how challenging parenthood can be. Despite the stress they cause, you love your kids dearly and do not want to do something to injure them. I can remember how difficult it was for me when I was holding a crying baby, with no clue what to do except continue to hold him and be patient. I felt like I wanted to trade him back in, honestly. But, of course, I put up with the frustration and fought back thoughts of gloom and doom.

I would admit that my greatest fault with my young children was that I yelled way too much. There were times in my home when it sounded like a drill sergeant was present. If my kids were getting into mischief or if they were just bugging me in some way, I'd raise my voice and push them until they did what I wanted them to do.

I recall one time right after we had moved that I got extremely impatient with the kids and blew my top. I had stacked quite a few boxes in the garage

against the walls with the intention of getting to them later. The kids, wanting to roller skate, moved the boxes to the center so that they could circle around them. When I came out the back door and saw what they were doing I lost it. "What do you guys think you are doing? I didn't want those boxes moved."

I can still see my little daughter cowering around the other side of the house and coming into the living room where I was brooding. She said she was sorry in a very sheepish tone. At that point I realized that I had been unreasonable with them. They were just arranging things so that they could have some fun; what was so wrong with that? I actually ended up apologizing to her and the others and I encouraged them to go out and enjoy their time skating.

When we love someone we ought to put up with much inconvenience for their sake. Love drives us to do everything in our power to help and protect and further the wellbeing of the other. In Jesus' sermon on the Mount of Olives, not long before his arrest and crucifixion, he said, "the love of many will grow cold." It's no wonder then that so many people are not kind or considerate of others. They do not love, and are therefore not motivated to put up with what others would consider no big deal.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he has endured much hardship for the sake of the gospel, and I think he is inferring that he's suffered for them as well. It has been his great love for the redeemed ones that drives him to endure. For Paul, his brothers and sisters in Christ were his family. He saw the Corinthians this way as well; they were in his heart, as he has said. Therefore, he is willing to put up with all kinds of inconveniences in order to remain true to the Lord and not bring any disrepute on the gospel.

Take the time to go back over the list Paul gives of all the things he dealt with. Maybe being misunderstood would be the worst, I don't know. It probably would depend on the kind of personality you had. Paul took his ministry very personally and he carried the burdens of the churches in his pocket. He did not separate himself from the work he was doing; his work was who he was. Why? Because it was all so centered around Jesus. What he did was for the Lord.

This section of Scripture begs at least two questions:

First, what is it that you have a passion for? What do you love?

Second, what are you willing to endure for the sake of what you love?

Having answered those questions, you can begin to take steps in the direction of making a difference right where you are. A close friend of mine has a vision for change in society. He knows that he is fighting an uphill battle to make these changes. Changes in policy, especially in the area in which he works, are very few and far between. So should he give up his dream because others do not see his vision or should he fight on even thought it feels like he is fighting a losing battle much of the time?

My dear friend, what do you love and how much grief are you willing to endure for making a difference? Paul knows your heartache. He also knows what it feels like to be resisted. Keep fighting the good fight!

God's blessings take time,

Pastor Steve

"Sorry!"

September 4 - 2 Corinthians 7: 2-16

Regret is a part of our life experience. We have all done things that we have trouble dealing with. Even if we have sought forgiveness, there is still that residue of bad feelings associated with our actions. I have known some very fine people who have learned to mask their guilty feelings so well that you would think they didn't have a care in the world; in actuality they struggle on a daily basis with the consequences of their awful choices.

I once met up with a really rough character. He was greasy and dirty and scraggly and unkempt. He was tough. He had been a biker for decades, living the hard life on a Harley. He was definitely a Romans Chapter 1 sort of fellow. I found him very interesting to chat with, and we talked about all kinds of stuff. I wanted to share with him the difference Jesus had made in my life. Soon enough, the conversation turned to our views on God.

He told me that he had done a lot of very bad stuff in his lifetime. You could tell that he was beginning to bare his soul a bit. He admitted that many things he had done were not right, but he said that there was only one act that haunted him. Of all the crimes, there was only one thing that made it hard for him to live with himself. I thought that must be true of most people; that they could live with some sins and not with others. The conscience is hard to figure out. One man's nagging conscience is another's playground. Why was it that only one thing bothered this guy?

How about you? Is there one thing that nags at you like there is no tomorrow? Is there one act of insanity, one night when you threw caution to the wind and for the moment didn't care what the consequences were, and now that night still lives with you in a bitter sort of way? Or, maybe it's a season in your life that you look back on and wince at the thought of. "That wasn't me!" you think. You still cannot believe that the person you see in your head had any resemblance to you. But the scene plays over and over like a rerun of a bad movie, and each time you are reminded of your involvement in something that now makes you sick.

My biker friend had killed a dog with his bare hands. He squeezed the life right out of a living thing. That scenario stayed with him every day. As he related to me his feelings of sorrowful guilt, it was as if it had happened the day before, even though it had been several years earlier. He had no clue how to deal with it. There was something about the cruelty of it that bothered him. I know it bothered me to hear him talk about it. I felt his pain and also the brutality of what he had done.

The Corinthian church was a group of newer believers who had been living in scandal. Remember all of the difficult things Paul had to deal with in his first letter to them? They were divisive and immoral and unethical and off-the-mark biblically. He had to write them a very difficult letter in order to get them to shape up. Fortunately, the letter had a big impact on them, and did inspire love for the apostle. When Paul's ministry companion, Titus, brought back word of the church's repentance, Paul was relieved.

He was happy that they had not made a half-hearted attempt to make amends, but were ready to change their way of living. Their sorrow over the things they were doing motivated them to become more Christ-like. Then, they could see God taking their wrongdoing and turning it around to make them more ardent followers of Jesus. Paul calls this "godly sorrow."

On the other hand, when a person has done something he regrets and tries to make up for it to merely appease his own conscience, the false "repentance" only leads to death. Death here means futility or the inability to find meaning in the thing that you

have done. People in this position get so wrapped up in their own inward battles that they are unable to find peace with themselves in the light of their actions.

Godly sorrow catapults a person into a life change that produces all kinds of good fruit. Of course that doesn't justify the sin, but it does make the best possible use out of it. It gives purpose to something that only seemed to be producing spiritual, emotional, and social death.

Have you done wrong? Is your conscience bothering you today? Let the wrong drive you to Jesus first of all. Then, let it drive you to resolutely give yourself to the work of the Lord to such a degree that you can leave behind the terrors of the past. The dog killer needed Jesus' forgiveness and a purpose for his life. Because he had neither, his conscience was pinning him down. And so I talked with him about the cross. There is no other place to put away sin but at the cross. There a person can deposit his sin, and get up free from the guilt and weight of it all. Then he can go and serve the Lord, finding meaning for the things that once tagged along in his mind and bothered him to no end.

True sorrow brings change, life change that ends in the glory of God. Worldly sorrow, the kind of sorrow that makes people feel bad because they got caught, only leads to death and the condemnation of the sinner. Fortunately, the Corinthians turned back to the Lord and the heart of the apostle. This made Paul so thrilled you can read in his words shouts of joy.

God's blessings come after true repentance,
Pastor Steve

P.S. The gospels record that Judas repented after having betrayed the Lord. In your opinion, what kind of repentance did Judas demonstrate? He did throw the silver back, but think about where his next steps led. Was this godly sorrow or worldly sorrow?

"The Mark of Every Believer and the Cost of Discipleship"

September 5-6 - 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15 and 8:16 - 9:5

Dear Friend of Jesus,

What gives? Does love give? Love longs to give. Love grows deeper and stronger the more it is exercised. Love works out not with a clenched fist but with an open hand.

Think for a moment of the feeding of the 5,000 and the 4,000. Jesus gave, and the gift multiplied. One act of compassion spread to everyone and the love of Jesus was made known to a multitude. The gospel writers say that the numbers listed only represented the men, not the women and children, so there were actually thousands more fed.

Can you think of one Bible verse that talks about Jesus taking? It seems to me that His entire life was about giving. Remember at the end of Romans 11, Paul says that no man has given to God so much that God has become his debtor. God is no man's debtor, because all things are from God and to God and for God. He is the source of all things and in Him all things exist.

I sometimes wonder about the giving nature of God. God could be anything He wanted, but He is by nature loving. He gives even when He knows that the object of His generosity will reject Him. How much has God given to us that we simply take for granted? Think of the oxygen in our atmosphere. Isn't this place a gift from God? There is no other known planet in our universe that could sustain life the way we know it on Earth. God has given us so much.

God's greatest gift to us was His one and only Son, Jesus, who gave us His life so that we might have the kind of life that lasts forever. Romans 5 told us that He demonstrated that gift when we were still in our sins, and 2 Corinthians 5 told us that God took the initiative to reconcile us to Himself. God gives.

We can be thankful, we can walk in Jesus' steps (see 1 John 2:6), and we too can be givers. Giving is a good gauge of Christian character and growth. Since you committed your life to Jesus, have you become a more giving person? Do you think of ways to give to others more now than before you were a Christian, and do you follow through and give of yourself in ways that sometimes inconvenience you?

Paul spends several passages talking to the Corinthians about giving. They had made a promise to give earlier, and Paul desires to see them follow through. He uses the giving nature of God in Jesus to remind them of the responsibility they have to meet the needs of others in the church who were needier. Paul was looking for equilibrium. Those who had more should help those who had little, so that the wealth would be distributed evenly.

John talks about this same subject in his first little letter. He says that as Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay our lives down for one another. This can be applied in many ways, but he specifically talks about meeting the needs of those who are destitute if it is in your power to help. If you give, then you are meeting someone else's needs and fulfilling the law of love.

How do you do when it comes to giving? Would your friends say that you are generous? What if all Christians were just like you when it came to giving; what kind of church would it be? Do you hold too tightly to your money, or are you a giver?

Let's not forget to use discretion in our giving. There are times when we should not give because it would not be the best thing for the person who is presenting a need. Maybe that person needs to take some initiative and work harder rather than rely on other hard workers for support. Maybe what the seeker needs most is your time, so that you can teach him what he can do to get back on his feet.

For Paul, the Corinthian's fulfillment of their pledge will secure the good news he has heard of their support of his ministry. It will also move them from a selfish point of view to a "ministry to others" place. That is the kind of movement that pleased the apostle, because of its effect on the church. Paul was most concerned about them becoming more and more Christ-like. Their giving simply solidified that direction.

God's blessings inspire us to give,
Pastor Steve

"Cheerful Giver"

September 7 - 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Paul's attitude in ministry can be summed up by the word "giving." He gave of himself so that others could be saved or if they were already saved, grow in their faith in Christ. Also, he was often busy delivering money (as he is here) so that he could bring relief to the poor saints

Paul was like his Lord. Jesus was a giver and Paul modeled his life after Him. Think of the countless hours Jesus spent with His disciples. Consider all of the people who he reached out to and healed of some malady. The gospels are replete with accounts of the Lord's gracious attitude of giving to others.

I have known many people with a Christ-like attitude of giving. They are inspiring. You can count on

them to get the job done when someone is in need. They don't dilly-dally, they get right to work and do a good job meeting the needs of others.

Paul emphasizes that the attitude God loves is that of a "cheerful giver." You can give and give and give, but if you are giving for some inferior reason then you will fall short of the kind of "spirit of giving" that God wants to see in His children. So give, that's good, but do it with a smile on your face and with joy in your heart.

Give joyfully because you have the opportunity to give as Jesus gave. Don't begrudge the opportunity to reach out and bless someone else. Don't give it a second thought or worry about the cost. This is what Jesus meant when He said about giving not to let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. Don't make a spectacle of your giving, just give.

If cheerful giving is a barometer of your spiritual progress so far, how are you doing? When was the last time you gave all that was left in your wallet because the need outweighed your need to have cash on hand? Have you been ready to give or does it take you quite a bit of persuasion before you relinquish your cash?

Paul was excited about the way the Corinthians (Gentiles) wanted to give to the poorer brethren in Jerusalem (Jews). This would demonstrate Christ's love and be an indication that the wall between the two races had truly been decimated.

God's blessings come to cheerful givers,
Pastor Steve

"All Your Mind"

September 8 - 2 Corinthians 10: 1-18

How many thoughts can you have at one time? I know that sometimes it feels like 10,000, but the answer is one. We can only think one thought at a time. While you read that last sentence it was impossible for you to think about your duties or that party coming up or that new car you're looking forward to buying. We all think one thought at a time.

I'm not saying that we all think the same way. That is far from the truth. Some people think in a very methodical way. The thoughts come slowly and at a very even pace. These folks are not usually rattled very easily, because they are able to process one thought and then another without having a train of thought that take them down dark alleys.

Other folks think in more of a picture form. They are more imaginative. They see scenes and respond to them. Sometimes the scenes flash in rapid succession and at other times they are fixed images. People who think like this are usually creative and have some talent in the arts.

There are those whose thoughts come in such rapid-fire movement that they feel like their mind is out of control. This is especially tough when they have a disturbing thought and it is followed by another and another and so on. Finally, they get worn out; they feel like their thoughts are controlling them and that they really have no say in the matter. This person is susceptible to feeling alienated from others because the thoughts they have are sometimes disturbing. Interestingly enough, the person who thinks this way is usually very bright, with the ability to think very logically and brainstorm problems at lightning speed. The problem is that their thoughts often frighten them.

Of course, all of us have elements of these traits. It is very hard to pinpoint a single way that a person thinks. Regardless of the way you think, you can still

only have one thought at a time. Therefore, the key to developing our thinking ability is to learn to deal with thoughts one by one.

Thoughts are fascinating, aren't they? In your mind right now you can go to London and look up at Big Ben. I've never physically been there, but even as I wrote that last line I was there looking up at a place I have only seen in books and on TV. Our minds are phenomenal in their ability to process great amounts of information and select what we want on the stage of our minds right now. Our minds are like a great catalog system storing all of the experiences of our lives.

Our minds are impressionable. What our eyes take in has an impact on our thinking. Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body; if your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light, But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness," (Matthew 6:22,23).

What we hear has an impact on our thinking. We should never underestimate the power of music's impact on people, especially the young people of our generation. Our minds are very complicated and will often come up with something that is "off the wall." Have you ever been walking along, minding your own business and boom, in comes a thought and you say to yourself, "Where did that come from?"

If you have a history of seeing and hearing a bunch of evil stuff, guess what is usually at center stage in your mind? You don't have to guess, do you? Most of us know all too well how difficult it is to X-out the thoughts that dominate our thinking. Have you ever been to a movie and later wished you had never seen it? The thoughts and images of that movie are still lingering around the corners of your brain. They want in and they like to control you and upset you. They are persistent and mean and they make us wish that we had never bought that tub of popcorn and sat through it. But we did, and now we need help to deal with the thoughts that hinder. Paul addresses this in our reading today.

Let's quote the same passage from the Message paraphrase: "The tools of our trade aren't for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire massively corrupt culture. We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ. Our tools are ready at hand for clearing the ground of every obstruction, and building lives of obedience into maturity," (2 Corinthians 10: 4-6). The NIV says "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." "The tools" God gives us are meant to bomb away that stuff that wants center stage. It is God's Word, God's Truth that captures and destroys those mind-warping thoughts. Christ is in the business of renewing our minds, of washing away all of the old dead thoughts and giving us a mind that thinks God's thoughts after Him.

I saw the power of this many years ago when I began to take God at His Word. If He says I'm forgiven, I'm forgiven; if He says I'm a new creation, I am a new creation; if He says I am His workmanship, I am His workmanship; if He says He will work all things together for good in my life, all things will work together for good; if He says I can trust Him then I can trust Him. You get the picture. I started to believe that instead of all of the thoughts that accuse and point the finger at me.

You see, our minds are not what they were originally created to be. Our minds have become depraved, along with the rest of us. It's kind of like our minds are the stick shift and our heart is the transmission. We get thoughts and they put our hearts into gear and we obey the direction they would take us. It used to be that you were in control of the shifter, but now Christ is in the driver's seat and He is moving you in a different direction.

Making Jesus the Lord of your life means turning over the sovereignty of your mind to Him. If greed, for example, is at the controls of my mind, then I will not reflect the control of Christ. When Christ is at the controls, generosity will be the outcome. I will want to give to others and help others who are truly in need. Greed has the opposite effect.

Paul calls the Word a sword in his description of the armor of God in Ephesians Chapter 6. It can be used to cut off thoughts that would not be honorable to the Lord. Remember that when the enemy tried to tempt Jesus with thoughts of self-aggrandizement, Jesus resorted to Scripture to ward off his flaming missiles. Jesus would not even for a moment entertain

a thought that would be contrary to the Father's will for Him. He took every thought captive.

This is more difficult for the person who gets thoughts in rapid-fire succession. He will have to interrupt the barrage and deal with the first thought in the order of the train of thoughts. Once he does this he will see the benefit of taking control of his mind and having Christ reside over his thoughts.

Lastly, remember that Jesus included in the Great Commandment the phrase to "love the Lord with all of your minds." I believe that this goes well with Paul's comments. Taking charge of our thoughts and not allowing God-dishonoring thoughts to dominate our inner workings is a key way of loving the Lord with our minds.

What have you been thinking about lately? Are those thoughts under the rule of Christ or do they seem to be taking you places that will be dark and dangerous? Take a look at your thoughts today and begin to replace cruddy ones with God's Word. "The law of his God in his heart, none of his steps shall slide," (Psalm 37:31).

God's blessings renew our minds,
Pastor Steve

Day 252

"Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up"

September 9 - 2 Corinthians 11: 1-15

How Are You Today?

"All religions lead to God," many say.

"All roads will end up in heaven," say others.

What do you believe about that? Do you think all roads lead to paradise? If so, what about justice? Can a person do whatever he wants, even hurt other people, and still end up OK?

An even bigger problem would be the claims of Jesus. If we trust the Bible and the witnesses who recorded the words and deeds of Jesus, how can we go with the idea that everybody is OK no matter what, even if he doesn't believe in the Savior?

In our reading today we see that there are Jesus imposters who appear to be very much like the real thing. Every non-Christian cult in our day presents a Jesus that may at first look similar, but in truth is far from the authentic Jesus of the New Testament.

For example:

"The Jesus Christ of Mormonism is a created being, the first spirit child of heavenly Father God and his senior wife (Mormons often refer to Jesus as "our elder brother"). Mormonism teaches that their Jesus helped to make and organize this world. He was subsequently challenged in his bid to be savior by his younger brother, Lucifer (now the devil). When his alternate plan of salvation was rejected by heavenly Father, Lucifer rebelled and led a third of the hosts of heaven in a battle against the forces of good—the "war in heaven." (Another portion of the preexistent spirits was not so valiant in fighting Lucifer's forces and was condemned to live on earth in Negro bodies as punishment.) At the "meridian of time" Father God came to earth and had sexual intercourse with Mary in order to beget Jesus in the flesh, making him the only spirit so favored and therefore the "only-begotten of the Father" in Mormon interpretation. Mormonism teaches that Jesus' Old Testament name is Jehovah and that he has become a god through his consistent efforts and good works. He is also said to have been a polygamist," (Walter Martin's Cults Reference Bible, p. 48).

On the exterior, Mormonism appears to be just another Christian group but when you get down to their views on the Lord you can quickly and easily see the contrast. Another problem with Mormonism and most every other cult is their insistence that the Bible is not all that's necessary for truth. They have developed other "holy" books that add to and take away from the faith that "was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The men who wrote the Bible were inspired by God and were also eyewitnesses of the things they recorded for us. When men come along centuries later in order to reform the faith by creating something new, we should be suspicious.

This was happening in Paul's day and continues to happen today. Men love to come in and use God-talk to influence people for their own power trips. Usually they are very charismatic and influential. But those are not qualifications to represent God. Paul appeals to his humility and willingness to let God work in the Corinthians. He makes the point that he did not play God in their lives. Paul was committed to letting the Holy Spirit work in the church and build up the believers.

So what would Paul do when wolves came in? He warned the church to beware of them, and he expected the shepherds to protect the flock. In Acts there is a moving scene along the Mediterranean shore where Paul is saying goodbye to some leaders. He says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit had made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with His own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them," (Acts 20:28-30).

Paul's example acts as a litmus test for distinguishing between the real and the fake. False leaders and cults will exalt themselves. They will appear very spiritual, even super-spiritual, but their real aim is to not promote the cause of Christ but to promote their own cause. They are proud, not humble. Secondly, they bring a different Jesus.

This may be new to some of you. Maybe you never considered that there would be imposters out there. Maybe you are asking the question, "How do I know my church is teaching the true Jesus?" Good question! Does your church believe in the Bible as the sole source of authority? If yes, then good. Does your church tend to depend too much on the teachings of just one person? If yes, then this could be a red flag. Some twist the Scripture because they only pay attention to their own teaching and do not learn from other teachers in the church. Does your church believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, that He lived a perfect life fulfilling all of the requirements of the law, that He was arrested, beaten, mocked, crucified, and rose three days later in His new resurrection body? If yes, good. Does your church believe Jesus is the head of the church today and that someday in the future He will return to receive His church and judge those who did not believe in Him? If yes, you are on track.

Does it really matter what I believe about Jesus? Yes. There are many false Christs out there who would have you believe that they are the way. The apostle John warns in one of his little letters that many anti-christs have gone out into the world. They deny the Son, and by doing so deny the Father.

It is so important for us to worship in truth. We need to focus on the truth as well, because then we will be worshipping God for who He is and not an image of Him that we project from ourselves. Jesus said that true worshippers worship God in spirit and in truth; it is these folks that God seeks to have as His worshippers.

Paul's motive is love for the Corinthians. He didn't want them to fall prey to the clutches of false teachers, no matter how charismatic. He wanted them to experience the joy of knowing the true Savior. This was his experience and he wanted it for them. I believe he would want it for our local churches as well.

Let's worship in truth today by focusing on the truths about the Savior from the New Testament.

God's blessings help us distinguish the true from the false,
Pastor Steve

Day 253

"Treated With Love"

September 10 - 2 Corinthians 11: 16-33

Let all that you do be done in love,

Love is often misunderstood. We all want love, and we would like to think that we are loving, but the truth is that love isn't always the most attractive position. Love got Jesus crucified. He appeared weak and unable to defend Himself. He was very much misunderstood, and yet He did all that He did in love.

For example, when you love someone you are able to put up with his idiosyncrasies, whereas an outsider looking at the same person would be apt to judge him harshly. Love overlooks those things. Isn't that the reason we enjoy being around people who truly love us? They accept us right where we are, warts and all, and they give us the feeling that we are all right in their eyes no matter what.

When married couples begin to quarrel the reason is usually tied to a lack of understanding and love because of some weakness or habit of their partner. They are feeling irritated. Then they begin to focus on that particular problem and pretty soon what started out as a small thing becomes a huge situation. They find that rather than overlooking the problem or calmly talking to their partner about it, their attitude becomes one of irritated nagging. This leads to an emotional escalation that can lead to isolation, separation and even divorce.

The antidote to this spiral is more of the love of Jesus in the individuals and in the relationship. Jesus' kind of love helps us to love another right where they are, and not demand that they be somewhere else. That doesn't mean we should be soft on sins. Sin brings a destructive aspect to any relationship. But more of Jesus' love will be like a salve on an irritating sore. We cannot love like Jesus unless we ask him to give us the love that enables us to see our partner in the light of what God can do in his life.

When we consider the love of God, described by Paul in I Corinthians 13, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit, enumerated in Galatians 5, you can begin to grasp the humble nature of God's love. For example, take gentleness and kindness and apply them to that strained relationship. If you were able to act kindly and gently with the other person, what impact would that have? I can guarantee that it would go further than nagging and harsh words.

This was Paul's problem as far as the Corinthians were concerned. Paul, the once militant legalistic and pharisaic defender was now humble and gentle and concerned about the hearts of others. In other words, he was like Jesus. When he had established his relationship with the motley group in Corinth he had established a humble trust in the work of the Spirit in their lives. He did not demand or control or connive in any way in order to get their attention or keep it. He had come to them in a loving and Christ-honoring way.

What's the problem with that, I can hear someone saying? Well, once more charismatic men came by and began to take the reigns of the church, the believers were too easily led astray by the overbearing nature of these wolves in wolves' clothing. Paul says that they out-and-out abused the sheep.

Why is it that people take this kind of treatment? Even today there are people who take advantage of others. Husbands and wives are involved in domestic assaults on a regular basis. The most frequent 911 call involves some form of domestic abuse. Employers will sometimes take advantage of their employees in a sexual way, abusing their power by manipulating others. The employee usually doesn't feel like there is any other way out. Oftentimes when young people are sexually abused they will be made to think that it was their fault, and they shouldn't blow the whistle because then they will have to admit their "guilt." Abuse happens in a variety of forms. It is usually propagated by people who are driven to control others for their own selfish ends.

When abuse happens in the church it becomes an especially sensitive and emotional subject. Spiritual leaders are usually well respected and receive the kind of trust that goes beyond the norm. When they mishandle that trust, people are hurt. They become disillusioned. They will often play the blame game in order to deal with their wounded souls. God gets blamed and those who knew something but didn't do anything get blamed and the church gets blamed. They will even blame themselves.

Well, these "false apostles" in Corinth were being abusive, and Paul is quick to point out the difference between his ministry and theirs. After he spells out their dominance of the church, he says, and I think with some sarcasm, "To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that." In other words, Paul was too weak in a worldly or carnal sense. He treated them with kindness and love and not with a dominant spirit like these who were coming in and upsetting the work he had accomplished.

Instead of demanding from the church, it was Paul's approach to be an example to them. And so he goes on to list for them not his demands, but his credentials from the school of hard knocks. This was not something that Paul enjoyed doing. He felt foolish having to write about it. But he did it in order to remind the church of what he endured for the sake of the gospel and for them. Troubles were his credentials. He did it all for the sake of the gospel, for his belief in the cross and the resurrection.

Peter talks about this topic in his letters. He too had to deal with false teachers. He said that leaders had to be examples and they were not to "lord over" the flock. Jesus is the one Lord. The leaders were to follow Him and make Him known in a humble way; they were not to demand or force the sheep to go their way. Love is not rude or pushy or self-serving.

God's blessings are not forced,

Pastor Steve

Day 254

"Spirituality Is A Pain In The Butt"

September 11 - 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

Paul's personal struggle with the Corinthians was born out of an unsubstantiated feeling of mistrust, caused by a small group of false apostles who were lying about Paul. The physical distance between the apostle and the people didn't help matters either. Please follow me as I quote from a survey of the New Testament, in order to better explain Paul's circumstances at the writing of this second letter to the Corinthians.

After writing I Corinthians from Ephesus, Paul had found it necessary to make a "painful visit" to Corinth and back—painful because of the strained relationship between Paul and the Corinthians at the time. Luke does not record this visit in Acts. It is to be inferred, however, from 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1,2, where Paul refers to his coming visit as the "third." Without the inferred painful visit Paul had visited Corinth only once before. The statement in 2 Corinthians 2:1, "For I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit" (RSV), implies a past painful visit which can hardly be identified with his first coming to them, with the joyful tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.

For whatever reason Paul made the short, painful visit, he was apparently unsuccessful in bringing the

church into line. Upon returning to Ephesus, therefore, he wrote a now lost "sorrowful letter" to Corinth, which at first he had regretted having sent (2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8—the descriptions hardly fit 1 Corinthians). This is the second lost letter to Corinth. The sorrowful letter commanded church discipline against an obstreperous (unruly) individual who was leading the opposition against Paul in the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 2: 5-10). Titus carried the letter to Corinth. Meanwhile, knowing that Titus would return via Macedonia and Troas, and anxious to hear from Titus the reaction of the Corinthians, Paul left Ephesus and waited in Macedonia, where Titus finally met him and reported the good news that the church as a whole had repented from their rebelliousness against Paul and had disciplined the leader of the opposition (2 Corinthians 2:12,13; 7:4-16). (A Survey of the New Testament, Robert H. Gundry, p.285)

Maybe this is more information than you care to know, but I thought it would be good to give some background so you understand the kind of trouble Paul had. Despite the difficulties, Paul was tenacious. Frustrated too, and angry I'm sure, but he had no intention of giving up on the church that was near and dear to his heart.

The power Paul experienced through God had transformed him, and he wanted the church to experience this power as well. He was willing to put up with almost anything so that others might know Christ as he knew Him. He spent the better part of the last chapter listing the kind of commitment he had for Jesus and the gospel. He had gone through a myriad of difficult times for the sake of the gospel. Paul saw these trials as his sacrifice for the church. True, he did it for Jesus and the gospel, but he also did it for the members of Christ's body, His church.

God had not only allowed Paul to suffer, He had also permitted him to be privy to great revelations of God. Paul even intimates that he had an out of body experience. The "man" that he says he "knew" is himself. Whether this experience was out of his body or in it was hard to distinguish, and is not the important thing. The important thing is that he saw heavenly glory and was in the presence of God so deeply that there was no earthly way to describe it. Think about having an experience like that. What a privilege! It probably occurred when he was in Lystra where he had been stoned. He was thrown out of the city in a heap of flesh and bones. Those around him thought he was dead. Then, all of a sudden, Paul gets up and goes right back where he was persecuted so that he can continue to preach the message of the gospel. Maybe he was motivated to do this because of what he had just witnessed. It would make sense that Luke doesn't record the reasons why Paul did this. He would have been tongue-tied because of the experience. What could he say? He had just been in the heavenly places.

Paul makes it clear that spiritual accountability brings personal humility. You can imagine that a person would begin to get a big head after seeing the things Paul saw. You could become conceited. Even a good stoning is not that big of deal in the light of seeing God (to some degree). But there was something else bugging Paul. He prayed about it. Then he prayed about it again. It was still there. Then he prayed about it a third time. No relief. God simply said to him that His grace would help him to live with it. It would be the thing to keep him humble. This thing would force other people to give the credit for all Paul's blessings to God.

Suffering is the way to humility. Suffering keeps us dependent on God. Suffering deflates our conceit. Before suffering, we had our act together and were the envy of others. Like Job, others sought our counsel because we were so spiritual. Then we met suffering, and our image was not as important any more. Now our prayers were desperate. Now we needed God more than ever. Now we were not as attractive. But we became humble. Now we don't look in the mirror as much. Now we are more interested in eternal and spiritual things and do not boast about the flesh to nearly the same degree.

Here's this passage of Scripture in the Message paraphrase:

"Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty!

At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

'My grace is enough; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.'

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become."

Do you have a weakness that's plaguing you? Have you prayed about it over and over? Do you hear the Spirit saying to you what He said to the apostle?

"My child, I will be strong for you in your weakness; let it go. I am with you."

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings sometimes come disguised as troubles,

Pastor Steve

Day 255

"How Can I Strengthen You?"

September 12 - 2 Corinthians 12: 11-21

To Those Who Walk by Faith,

How do you do when you are under pressure? Think about a time when someone hurt your feelings, or when someone did something to you at work that made you feel really small. How are you impacted by it?

Where do you turn when the internal pressure valve has reached its maximum capacity? Some may resort to drugs and alcohol, but where do you go? Some may blow up and take out their frustrations on perfectly neutral bystanders, but where do you look? Some may give up and throw a pity party, but where will you find the strength to go on? These questions confront all of us from time to time and it's a good idea to think about our source of strength before we need it to cope and find success in our situation.

God has designed the church so that each member would be strengthened by the whole and by the parts. In the book of Ephesians, Paul will elaborate on this, but even in the Corinthian letters the edification of the body of Christ has been a clear target. The church is to build itself up in love. The leaders are to equip the members for the work of service and the members are to carry out their work so that the whole church is strong and thriving. How has the church made a difference in your life? Can you remember a time in your life when the church really rescued you from the grips of discouragement?

Paul loved the church and especially the Corinthians, whom he had brought to Christ through the preaching of the gospel. He would not give up on trying to reach out and strengthen them so that they could grow up in their faith in Jesus. Did it bother Paul that the church had become disorderly and fickle and immoral? You bet, but he was not going to let that dissuade him from trying to bring them under the Lordship of Jesus.

In our section of Scripture today he speaks, I would venture, like a wounded kid who has been burned by his best friend. I don't mean to say that he was being immature. No, I just think he stoops to their level so that they could hear what he was thinking and how he felt. So he says things like, "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it," and "Forgive me this wrong!" I think he's speaking tongue in cheek. Then he calls himself a "crafty fellow" who caught

them through trickery. What in the world does he mean by that? Probably the best way to take it is that he sent himself incognito through Titus and the brother (probably Timothy), and they did Paul's footwork while he was elsewhere.

He ends this section by saying he was a bit antsy about visiting them again. He was afraid there may be some disappointment he'd have to face if there was still a remnant who hadn't done what he'd asked. For some reason there was an aspect of Corinth that intimidated Paul. Remember in the first letter how he said that when he was there he felt nervous and hesitant, even though he knew the Lord had sent him to talk about the crucified Jesus? Paul was like us, wasn't he? He was sometimes shaky about what the Lord wanted him to do, but he did it anyway. That would be a good model for us to follow.

I hope you have someone in your life like Paul. I hope there is someone who cares about you so much that they'd go out of their way to strengthen you even if you weren't as concerned about them. Everyone needs a Paul.

If you are a leader in the church then I admonish you to be like him and be a strengthener. Jude said, "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh," (verse 22).

God's blessings come after tenacious perseverance,

Pastor Steve

Day 256

"A Few Notes On Spirituality"

September 13 - Isaiah 30: 19 – 32:20 and 2 Corinthians 13: 1-14

I think most people these days would say they are "spiritual." To deny being spiritual would be like saying you don't have a soul. Some people even think animals have souls, so it would be hard for them to say that they are without one. Some equate spirituality with being sensitive or having a heart for others. Some associate it with religious symbols or relics that they view as sacred. Even for people who wear the cross without ever thinking to ask why Jesus died there, the symbol is not without meaning. It's just that it makes them feel spiritual. I'd say this is kind of like feeling "spiritual by association."

When Jesus met a Samaritan woman who was drawing water from a well, He told her, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews," (John 4:22). Jesus makes it clear that you can be a worshipper in ignorance. Interesting, isn't it? You can act out a form of worship and feel very spiritual, and still not be on the target of true spirituality.

That woman found out that Jesus Himself was the way. He was the "salvation from the Jews" who would create the way to God through His own blood. In the meantime, He told her that He had water that would quench her thirst always. In other words, He was the source or fountain of real spiritual life. And something very profound happens to the person who tastes of His water. They are never satisfied with the water of the world again. They may go back and drink the murky stuff, but it tastes nothing like it once did because they find themselves always longing for the "living water."

Does Jesus really make that much difference? Decathlete Dave Johnson would say so. Following a tumultuous childhood in Missoula, Mont., that included throwing rocks at cars and running from police, Dave

and his family moved to Corvallis, Ore. In his senior year of high school, a football teammate introduced him to Christ. Dave's faith carried him through the 1996 Olympics where he won a bronze medal. He says, "I'm just a soldier for God, and maybe learning my story could make a difference in their lives. I've learned that Christ is there to give our lives meaning and purpose," (Testimony in "Man of His Word," Promise Keepers, p. 212).

When medical corpsman Bob Weiland detonated a Vietnamese land mine in June of 1969, the force may have blown the legs off the former high school all-conference athlete, but it certainly didn't shatter his strong heart and determination. The experience shook his determination, perhaps, as he rehabilitated for a year and also battled malaria, but it did not shatter. But as Bob recounts, the seeming unfairness of losing a potential baseball career was nothing compared to the overwhelming joy of being alive. Bob professes that his faith in God has protected him from possible bitterness (Ibid, p. 116).

Christ does not change just well-known people; every day people experience the life changing power of the gospel. Lyndee slumped in the chair as she told me her story. She had been trying for years to find spiritual fulfillment. She eventually landed in Christian Science where she found the terminology and rules too sophisticated for her. She had thought they must be right because they sounded so smart. After she heard the true message of the cross and God's plan of salvation, she said that even she could understand it. She prayed and asked the Lord to forgive her and lead her life. Lyndee went away with joy in her heart and a bounce in her step. It's been years now, and Lyndee is still experiencing the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. She loves the Lord and has gotten involved in her church.

Each of these people discovered that Christ is fulfillment. To know Him is to know life and peace and joy. They have each told how they have gotten into God's Word, where they have a daily walk with the Lord. Truly, Jesus has made the difference for them.

There are a couple of key verses in our reading today that point to true spiritual experience. First of all Isaiah says, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.' Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold, and you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, 'Away with you!'" (30:22-23)

True spirituality is built on hearing God's Word and acting on it. Jesus said this in Matthew 7: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mane and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell and great was the fall of it," (verses 24-27).

Another obvious application of Isaiah's message is that true spirituality will necessarily lead to change, both spiritual and moral. You will turn from the former idols of the heart and embrace Christ as your only God. You will treat the former lovers as filthy rags and you will want to discard them as soon as possible. You will not want to live with them any longer. Jesus has moved in, and there is no longer any room for the garbage that dominated life for so long.

Peter put it this way: "The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you, but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead," (1 Peter 4: 3,4).

Paul concludes the epistles to the Corinthians by saying, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (13:5). And if Christ is in you, then you cannot easily invite sinful habits to occupy the same residence. They will become putrid, stinking up the place and dishonoring the main guest, the Lord Jesus. Christ is at work in the growing Christian, developing in him the qualities that He possesses.

As we conclude, look back at the passage in Isaiah for a moment. It gives us the assurance that God will direct our steps. God will show you the way to walk.

He will direct you. Like a loving father, God will take you by the hand and lead you through both stormy and sunny weather. He speaks to you through His Word and gives you direction. Take confidence in this assurance today. Let God know that you appreciate His direction in your life.

God is speaking to you; do you hear Him? "This is the way, walk in it."

God' blessings are spoken by the Lord Jesus,
Pastor Steve

GALATIANS

Day 257

"A Different Gospel"

September 14 - Galatians 1: 1-24

To My Friends Who are Loved by Jesus,

Sometimes you have to call a spade a spade, cut to the quick, deal with the bottom line or not mince words.

Galatians is that way. Paul is angry. Having just finished Corinthians, it doesn't take a scholar to guess why he is so upset with the church in Galatia. Paul was zealous for the cause of Christ and the message of the good news. The integrity of the Message was at stake here.

For a person or religious group to add one ounce of self-effort to the work of salvation would be a mockery of the complete and finished work of Jesus on the cross at Calvary, where His bloody sacrifice built the way for sinners to approach a holy and righteous God. Yet, there were those in Paul's day, like there are today, who pervert the gospel of Jesus by requiring human regulations for a person to be saved.

This was an issue, you may remember, that had already been dealt with at the Jerusalem council, a meeting recorded in Acts 15. Salvation was through faith in the finished work of Jesus, period. We are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, period. This was the good news. This was the Message. If anyone or any thing said something different, they were not in the right camp, and Paul would go so far as to say they were "accursed."

Let's face it: the good news would not be good news if its effectiveness hinged on us. Our position would be very insecure. And as a matter of fact, I don't think anyone could ever be sure of his salvation if it depended on man and not on Christ solely. The good news is good news because sinners like you and me can have forgiveness and a place in the kingdom of God based on the righteousness of Christ, given to us freely through the grace of God. That is something to get excited about! If my salvation depended on how well I kept the law or a set of regulations, there would always be the uneasy feeling that I had not done enough.

Paul identifies those who add requirements to the message of the cross as persons who are preaching "another gospel." The Greek here means another of a different kind. In other words, there are no similarities between the two. If you are deviating from the message of the cross then you are in another camp and are no friend of the historical and Biblical Jesus. You are preaching a false Jesus, a different Jesus, a phony Jesus. You may call him "Jesus" and make him like the Jesus of the Bible, but in actuality you are perverting the gospel by putting man's regulations on the message of grace. Paul calls it "falling from grace."

Consider Paul's attitude about this subject in the light of where he has come from in his own life. He is a man who has moved from law to gospel. He now measures his spirituality based on Christ's merits and not his own. This was not true before—as he says, he excelled beyond many of his peers in Judaism. Paul wants to please God and not man. Therefore, he is bound to preach the gospel as the Lord Jesus has revealed it to him through revelation. This revelation, I'm sure, includes the message of the other apostles as well as the words Jesus gave him when He appeared to Paul over the years. Any variation from the true

message would not be pleasing to God but would, in Paul's words, be condemned by God.

He says that he would not be the servant of Christ if he tried to please men. So he continued to proclaim Jesus as the way and the cross as the means of salvation.

It is so easy for us to get wrapped up in pleasing others. That kind of attitude appears to be good because you are being agreeable. But it can also make you wishy-washy. We will not grow if we are only trying to please others. It is important to set our sights on pleasing God; then we will have convictions about what is true and what we should believe. If we seek to please men, we will have a difficult time being servants of Christ.

Let's ask God to direct us today.

Let's pray and ask Him for direction.

Let's be servants of Christ and not go with the crowd.

Let's stay true to the true gospel.

God's blessings only come through the true gospel,

Pastor Steve

"Let's Talk To A False 'Brother'"

September 15 - Galatians 2:1-10

We have worked very hard this year to give a bird's-eye view of Scripture. We have emphasized a Christo-centric approach to the whole of the Bible so that we wouldn't get bogged down on side issues that take us away from the central place Christ holds. When we hit the target in this way it will begin to give us a good perspective on the 66 books. One of the many qualities of Scripture is its continuity. There are 40-plus human Bible authors, who lived over the course of two millennia, who dealt with a wide variety of situations, and yet they still speak of God and for God in a unified way. The books of the Bible form a patchwork quilt of Truth, each book a vital part of the whole.

From time to time someone will come along with "another gospel" that is a distortion of the true gospel Paul preached. In Galatians Chapter 1 Paul makes it perfectly clear that there is no room for this. Paul made it plain that the gospel stood on its own two feet and didn't need the approval of a man or men to validate its truth and power. Paul had no tolerance for any man who came along and changed the message to suit his own agenda.

This problem was never more acute than when the legalists arrived on the scene, misquoting Scripture and twisting arms and arguing their case and upsetting the faith of some. According to Acts, Paul was constantly under their watchful eye and ire. They did not believe the good news Paul taught, and they went on the defensive in order to maintain the traditions of their elders.

Let's take a shot at writing a letter to a false brother. I guess Galatians as a whole could be viewed as such a letter, but really this little epistle is meant to warn the church about problem people who bring in heresies that disrupt the work of the gospel. OK, here's an attempt to tell the truth to a false brother who may be the guy sitting next to you at church service.

Dear Fake Freddy,

No one can question your passion for spiritual things. I have been listening closely to your comments on the life of Jesus and your reaction to the good news that we have been preaching in His Name. But I am alarmed by the detour you have taken from the teaching of the apostles. They, of course, are our authority because of their tightness to the Savior. How can you defect from their words and create so much dissension among the brothers?

There is no doubt that you can make a case for your beliefs. I think you focus more on your ability to argue than on your position itself. I can't count the number of times I have seen you in heated debate with church members. It looks like you want to take them captive and control their way of life by manipulating them. Don't you realize that you are only leading them down the wrong road, away from the freedom we have in Christ? I think you are putting a burden on them that even you cannot carry. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus? He said the scribes and Pharisees laid burdens on men and weren't willing to lift a finger themselves. Aren't you doing the same thing by demanding that they keep a set of rules that even you could not keep 100 percent of the time?

The most dangerous thing about your departure from the truth is that you claim to be Christian. Remember, not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," to the Savior will make it into His kingdom. I'm sure you even believe that you are a Christian. However, you can't ignore the fact that one must follow the writings of the apostles and not add or take away from them if he wants to be considered a brother. Your legalism appears to make you a super-spiritual person, but it is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that the church depends on for salvation. Your approach nullifies the work of Christ on the cross. Do you think that you can add to His work and earn a special place of favor with God? There is no way!

Freddy, you exclude yourself from the faith by demanding that those in the circle of your influence keep rules in order to be in the "in crowd." Speaking of that, I think that's a big part of your problem. Your position necessarily moves the glory away from God and to the men who keep your rules. How can God get the glory—which, by the way, was a major position of all of the apostles—when you have set up a merit system in which people will receive adulation for the work they do? This takes the rightful focus off God and puts it on men. We shouldn't live to please men but God, who has given us His Spirit.

My hope is that you will change your attitude and come to the source of life. Only Jesus can give the kind of freedom that I'm sure even you desire. Believe me, you would appreciate the gospel much more if you would take ego out of the equation and give Him the place He deserves—first place.

I pray that God would work in your life and lead you to change your mind about these things. I would warn the church that your positions are not Christian positions and that you need to come to Christ and let go of the legalism that motivates you.

Sincerely,

Brother Teddy Truthful

Some of you may think that the letter is a bit harsh. Isn't it too judgmental to give Freddy such a lashing? No. Because not only does he need to be warned, but those whom he influences need the same medicine. It's one thing to hold false beliefs, and another to promulgate them to deceive others.

Galatians is a red flag book. It is a harsh book. Galatians is the only epistle of Paul's where he doesn't praise the church before he gets into the body of his writing. On the other hand, those who are liberated from all forms of legalism are set free through a book like this because it emphasizes our freedom through Jesus. Jesus is the Great Liberator. He has set us free from sin and the law and death and any man who would add to the gospel.

Enjoy the book of Galatians. It just may change your life. That's my prayer for you.

God's blessings can come after a rebuke,

Pastor Steve

Day 259

"The Verse That Changed My Life"

September 16 - Galatians 2:11- 3:9

I think most people have a watershed moment that shapes the rest of their life at some time or another. Sometimes these experiences can be very detrimental, and at other times they can have a fantastic impact. Maybe you met someone who influenced you so profoundly that your life was never the same. Maybe it was the day you met your future spouse, or when you entered the military. Maybe it was when you proved yourself at something, like a college class, or an athletic event, or the ability to give up a bad habit.

When did the biggest change in your life occur? Is it associated with something positive or negative? When you think about it, does it still bring back emotions and senses that arouse strong memories in you? Have you spent a good deal of your life trying to avoid thinking about that moment? Do you need a boost in order to get over a memory that is more crippling than helpful? If so, I hope my experience with God's Word will have a positive impact on your heart and bring some healing where a wound still festers.

A few years after I had given my life to Christ I found a Scripture memory system that challenged me to memorize a good number of Bible verses, 60 in all. The key to the system was review. You didn't go on to a new section of verses until you memorized the others word-perfectly. I started off with the verse about being a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Then I got to Galatians 2:20. It seemed to be a long one and I felt my resolve being challenged as soon as I read through it the first time. I tackled it one phrase at a time and in a few days I had it down. I was bugging everyone around me to test me. I'd meet someone on the street and say, "Hey, buddy," and give him my card, "test me on this Bible verse, would you?"

Mission accomplished, and off I went to memorize the next one and the next one and so on. I had no big expectations, I was just happy to be learning a few key Bible verses. I hoped they would give me a framework in order to understand the Bible. Each day I would spend some time learning the new verse on my schedule and I would also review the verses I had already learned. It was a challenge, but I felt like it was having a good impact on me so I continued this process for some weeks.

One day I was strolling down the boulevard in my hometown, on an errand of some kind; I had a bit of time before I would reach where I was going. Then it happened. Galatians 2:20 was rolling around in my mind.

"I have been crucified with Christ... I have been crucified with Christ...hum, I have been crucified with Christ...nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me...I have been crucified with Christ."

At that moment I believed it: I, like Paul, had been crucified with Christ. It gave me a peace and assurance that I had never experienced before. It was a spiritual experience so closely tied to God's Word that one moment I thought one way about God and my life, and at the next moment I felt very different about God and my life. I was experiencing the power of the Truth of God to change a person's life. From that moment on I felt so much more deeply in love with God and in tune with His purposes for my life.

Of course the verse says even more. It points out that Christ lives in the believer and it highlights that Christ loves me in a special way: He loves me so much that He would die for me. This verse was my watershed. It formed the basis for my future study of the Bible. To me, it was the pinnacle of the Biblical landscape. I could run with it and communicate it with others. It made sense. I needed to have been crucified with Christ, or the sin problem would be too tough for me. I couldn't battle sin on my own, and I knew I needed a savior. "I have been crucified with Christ..."

I have since gone on to study this verse and the book of Galatians in the Greek New Testament. That work has only strengthened my resolve that Christ does love me and is in me. Paul's strong words to the Galatian church are in response to men, particularly Judaizers (men who said that the cross was not enough but that to be saved you had to keep perfectly the law of Moses and be circumcised), who came in to nullify the grace of God. Paul would not relent for a minute. He stood his ground and let them know that only Christ could save a person and that attempting to keep the law would be a losing proposition.

There is something profoundly important about letting the Words of Christ circulate through you. This practice has life-changing consequences. It will give life to your spiritual man like nothing else. Would you join me today in making His Word first place in our lives?

He loves you and gave His life for you. Meditate on these things.

God's blessings sometimes come unexpectedly,
Pastor Steve

Day 260

"Prisoners Of Sin"

September 17 - Galatians 3: 10-25

God has wired creation to glorify Him, and man has been trying to rewire it for centuries and centuries. The problem is that the more man tries to make life human-centered, the more he short-circuits the Manufacturer's design.

People wonder why it's so hard to make life work. As soon as they get one problem apparently resolved, pop, there's another one. Man strives to create a world where all is well and happiness is the prevailing feeling. Then the morning headlines remind him that life on this planet is laced with unsolvable problems.

For example, the problem of death continues to haunt us. Yes, we tend to live longer these days because of the advances of modern medicine, but the truth is that we will all still die. That is a problem to be reckoned with. The more we try to advance life and health, the more frustrated we get when we realize the destiny of all men. I recently did a funeral where the son said of his deceased mother, "She lived as long as she could." To me that says much. We would all love to keep living; the problem is that in the end we run out of gas.

Of course, this is where the good news of faith in Christ gives us hope for this life and the life to come. The Bible makes it clear that we will all keep living even after we die. The question is whether we will live in Christ's kingdom or outside of it. Faith in the work of Christ is the answer to the death problem. According to Paul, this work was a work of condemnation, in which He was cursed so that we wouldn't have to be. That is what makes Jesus really good news.

On the other hand, when man gets into the control box and begins to reconnect the wires to other circuits, then the intended original purpose is eschewed and the result is chaos. God intended man to walk with Him and have a relationship with Him. Man went his own way and created gods in his own image. God intended for men to love one another and learn to get along. Man has sought autonomy and has walked over his fellow man in order to accomplish his own selfish pursuits. God intended for man to have a rich, abundant life and be in harmony with his Creator. Man has sought to live apart from his Creator and live by his own rules in order to find his own way. The results have been disastrous.

Paul says that "the Scripture declares that the

whole world is a prisoner of sin." Man doesn't have a knowledge problem or a philosophy problem or a money problem or an oil problem—man has a sin problem. I realize that we beat this subject like a dead horse while we moved through Romans, but here again Paul reiterates for the sake of the Galatians the all-important teaching that man is captive to sin.

We are all P.O.S.'s. We are prisoners of sin. In Romans 7 Paul made it clear that sin dwells in our mortal flesh and brings us into captivity on a daily basis; what we would like to do, we don't do, and what we would like not to do, we do. Only through Christ's deliverance can we experience freedom from the bondage of sin, which will enslave us all of our lives unless we commit ourselves to Christ and see ourselves in Him. Even then, our weakness in the flesh is a constant reminder of what used to hold us captive, because the flesh is weak and often succumbs to its temptations.

The lure of the flesh will constantly challenge our freedom in Christ. The flesh will pull us back into bondage and try to take us captive in our mind or body, so that we become ineffective in our service to the Lord. The law is like sin's prison guard, meant to remind us of the offenses we commit, landing us in sin's domain.

God's promise of forgiveness and life through Christ did not come through law. The promise was given as God's guarantee to those who would put their faith in Jesus. Now we are no longer under the watchful and glaring eye of the law, because we have been acquitted by the work of Jesus on the cross. Essentially, we have been justified by faith. Remember, justified means to be declared righteous. That truth is our ticket out of the cell of sin.

Has a certain sin been getting you down lately? Are you feeling somewhat hopeless because certain sins remind you of a great big metal door slamming behind you? Do not despair. God's key of faith and forgiveness will bring you out into the open pastures where the Good Shepherd will restore your soul.

God's blessings come through faith,
Pastor Steve

Day 261

"Redemption And The Continuity Of Scripture"

September 18 - Isaiah 43,44; Galatians 3:26 - 4:20

Guilt is a mean bedfellow. We keep so many of our experiences hidden inside, and much of that secret stuff is making us guilt-ridden.

Once, while baptizing some fellow believers, I looked down into the water and saw a whole lot of nasty-looking stuff under the surface. Unfortunately, one of the persons being baptized saw it too and was terrified about coming up covered with the stuff. It turned out the pool was full of soot. Someone had made a bonfire the day before and the residue landed there. It really was gross.

Guilt is kind of like that. We look down in the pool of our hearts and minds and see—well—crud. We know it's there and it bothers us, but what to do with it is a mystery. Most of us just avoid it by not looking down. When we get glimpses of it, like pangs of the heart, it hurts but, by and large, we just try to get used to it.

Does it affect our day-to-day living? You bet it does. It creates conflict and anxiety and the need to shift blame off of ourselves. We sometimes think that people are aware of it in us because it radiates and irritates. We reason that if it bothers us so much, others must be able to see it. Guilt affects the way I relate to others and to God. Sometimes it drives me to do things I would not ordinarily do and at other times

I am driven into silence because I am weary of its hold on me. It's hard to talk about; it is so deeply personal and we fear we may be misunderstood if the cat were to be pulled from the bag.

Being set free from guilt is an inward job. You can't just decide to feel better about those haunting feelings you have. Attending church regularly, balancing the scales with good works or repeating some motto will not dissolve the problem as quickly as you'd like. I think guilt could be the factor in most cases of drug and alcohol addiction or any other addiction that takes your mind off of the real issue. Guilt is tenacious. It shadows your steps and talks to you at the most inopportune times. You can be skating through a day without a care in the world and then bam, there's your familiar enemy right on your heels.

One of the truths made evident over and over throughout the Bible is that the Holy Spirit will apply the Scripture to our lives in such a way that we can find true inward freedom from the "demons" that upset us. The book of Galatians is a good example of this. Galatians is a reader's digest of Romans, so I don't feel as inclined to dissect it as thoroughly as we did in Romans. I would suggest that you go back and re-read Romans for a reminder of the great work of Christ that justifies us before God. I do want to emphasize that the Spirit is working in our lives and He is able to make the truths of the Word so effective in us that we will begin to experience the liberation of His power. Remember in Acts that the Spirit was given so that the church could have power and become witnesses to the effectiveness of the gospel. The Spirit illuminates the truths of the gospel so that we will rely not on ourselves and our methods, but on Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Let's look at a couple of word pictures in Isaiah and compare it with what Paul is saying in Galatians. It just so happens that in today's reading we have a clear example of the continuity of Scripture. In other words, what Isaiah says so parallels Paul, who wrote Galatians approximately 750 years after Isaiah that it appears that they were written by one and the same author. Well, in a way they were. It was God's inspiration that produced both books. "All Scripture is God-breathed..." Paul writes to Timothy, so it should not surprise us that the books have an uncanny oneness. God's Word is like no other collection of books on the planet. No wonder it has been a best-seller throughout the centuries. It alone bears the stamp of God's design and skill. Peter said that he and his companions who witnessed the works and words of Jesus were carried along, as if by wind, as they penned the holy Word.

Isaiah says that the Redeemer will "blot out" our transgressions and that He will remember our sins no more. Both of these truths are something only God could do. Can you forget some hurtful thing that another has done to you? I regularly hear people say, "I can forgive but I cannot forget." You might not be able to, but God can. Also, God is the only one who can forgive sins. Take a look at Mark Chapter 2 and see that Jesus took this privilege on Himself. He forgave the sins of others.

The imagery of blotting out something is vivid. If there was a list of your sins somewhere, let's say in God's back pocket, He could take it out and accuse you of any number of things on that list. In other words, He has the dope on you. He knows the things you've done publicly and privately. He could really throw the book at you. But what if God blotted out the list and made the offenses indistinguishable?

Listen to how Paul puts it in Colossians: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross," (2:13,14). Here the Bible says that He set it aside and nailed it to the cross. Isaiah says that He also blotted it out. I can't help but think that it was blotted out by the blood of Jesus. Peter says that we have been forgiven through the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus (2 Peter 1). It is His own blood that blots out the list of guilt-producing sins that trip us up.

Second, God says through Isaiah: "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist," (44:22). This word picture is especially poignant for those who have lived along the coast. It seems like every morning there are clouds and mist there. Then the afternoon comes and the yucky weather gives way to wonderful warmth. God says that He removes our sins like that. So the next time

you see clouds or there is a mist in the air, wait for them to go away and then remember that God has removed your sins in this way.

Paul's teaching in Galatians parallels Isaiah. He says that Christ delivered us from the law by fulfilling the law and dying for us law-breakers who were guilty because of our law breaking. He says that we now have the Holy Spirit who confirms that we are children of God. This new relationship with God through the Spirit marks a vast difference from our former life of self-gratifying idolatry.

Guilt is associated with sin. Sin is the cause of guilt. Until you believe that your personal sins are blotted out and driven away like a mist, then you will still be hounded by its force like a bull dog that won't let go. When you accept what Christ has done on the cross to buy you out of the slave market of sin, you'll experience lasting freedom from the chains of guilt. The Spirit may be speaking to you today to give up the guilt and let Him renew your relationship with the Father as a beloved son or daughter.

God's blessings solve the guilt problem,
Pastor Steve

"Get Rid Of The Slave Woman"

September 19 - Galatians 4:21-5:6

Most of us have learned the art of self-justification. We've all developed ways to sidestep our own wrongdoing.

I can remember one day when I was in the third or fourth grade I blew the paper from a straw into the air and was immediately sent to Table Eight. Table Eight was where the bad kids ended up. I cowered to the bench, horrified by my errant ways, and sat there with my tail between my legs until the bell rang.

I went home that day with a heavy conscience. I had broken the rules. I was a sinner. But maybe if I kept a low profile I could keep the truth from those who believed I was perfect. My grandparents thought I was an angel. My parents probably suspected something, knowing how I treated my sister from day to day, even though I could justify every crime against my sibling because of her obnoxious attitude toward me. What I didn't realize was that Mr. Fry, the principal, had already called my mom to give her a head's up on my criminal behavior. The hammer was about to fall, my mom said...when dad got home.

Let's face it—we all break the rules. We'd love to be the exception to that fact, but as soon as we raise our proud heads to declare that we have finally arrived, we fail in some way or another. We are back to looking for a way to tame our wild hearts. We only wanted to find peace and happiness—that was why we ventured into the keeping of the law—but as soon as we got neck-deep we realized that we wouldn't be able to tread water in the deep end forever.

I once heard an interview with Dr. Laura Schlessinger. The interviewer asked her if she had a relationship with God, knowing that years before she had converted to orthodox Judaism. She answered that she did not have a relationship with God. That was a pretty shocking response. She had not found in that system of religion a way to have a relationship with God. Why? I suspect it is because she is both honest and a perfectionist, and so she would have to admit that the weight of keeping rules in order to feel accepted by God was too great a burden to bear. When you seek to know God on the basis of law, you fall short of knowing Him. He never intended it that

way. The law was only given to show us that we needed to humbly come to God and give our lives to Him, receive His forgiveness and walk with Him.

Paul uses an allegory to teach us about the contrast between the law and the gospel. An allegory is a teaching device that takes something from the lives of people and their circumstances to make a point about a truth that matches what's going on in their lives. Therefore, the people and/or events represent some truth that God wants to convey to us.

In this allegory the main characters are Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael. Paul says that Abraham and Sarah and Isaac represent God's promises that are to be received by faith, and Hagar and Ishmael represent the law because Hagar's son Ishmael was the result of man (in this case Abraham himself) trying to do God's will in his own way. God had promised Abraham a son. Because of their age, Sarah and Abraham didn't figure they would be able to produce a child. Abraham decides to fulfill the promise on his own by taking his handmaid Hagar and having a child with her. Sarah agrees. Once the baby is born the rivalry between the women becomes fierce and Hagar and Ishmael are sent packing. Sarah eventually gets pregnant and has the promised son, Isaac.

The law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai because of the people's propensity to move from faith in God to self-indulgent living. Thus the Ten Commandments are designed to bring us back to God; to move us in God's direction so that we will worship Him alone.

Ishmael was the result of his father's attempt to play God. We get the same result when we believe we can keep the whole law and find perfection and peace and ultimately please God. On the other hand, Isaac was the result of a promise God had given, and represents the grace of God to an undeserving household.

The problem since the time of Isaac and Ishmael is that the two half-brothers have not stopped fighting. And so it is with those allegorically who cannot get along because they are in two separate camps. There are those who see their lives as self-justified. They think they consistently keep the law, and despise the other side. The others know they have broken the law, but lean on God's grace for justification. These folks understand that no person can keep the law perfectly. For if they could, then Jesus would not have had to come and die on the cross. And so the tension continues.

It was continuing in Galatia in Paul's day. There were those who were downplaying the cross and emphasizing rule-keeping. Paul said that this was a disastrous place to stand. He reasoned that if they stood in that spot they were falling from grace and nullifying the cross of Jesus.

Do you lean on the cross for your justification before God? Do you trust God's promises, believing that God sent Jesus into the world to save those who trust in Him? Or are you going 50/50? Do you think that somehow you will be able to help God out by adding to the work of Christ with your own works? If so, Paul says to watch out; what you are doing will only result in strife and frustration.

Let's cling tightly to the cross. We are only justified by faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. The rest of us will have to go to Table Eight.

God's blessings are by promise,
Pastor Steve

Day 263

"It Only Takes A Little"

September 20 - Galatians 5:7-26

How many times has someone played with fire, only to result in mass destruction? It takes just a bit of something dangerous to create or ignite something much bigger.

There are times when we make bad choices and get bad results. Other times we sit on our hands, don't take any steps, and end up creating havoc by default. If we tolerate evil, for example, we may feel like things are A-OK, but in reality we may be on the brink of a big problem. Throughout the history of the church there have been trouble-makers who have come in to undo the faith of some. If leaders in the church had not stopped them, they could have created a tidal wave of bad thinking and behavior. Tolerating wrongdoing is tantamount to acquiescing to its outcome.

Fear sometimes paralyzes us from standing up and speaking the truth about a situation. We know we ought to say something, but our nervous stomachs tell us to avoid the issue, that it would be easier if we minded our own business. Remember back in I Corinthians 5, where Paul had to expel the immoral person from their midst because the church was tolerant of his behavior? Paul couldn't believe that they would allow such corruption. He was not afraid to take the ball and deal with an issue that could have far-reaching influences on Christ's church. In the context of that problem, Paul quotes the same idea that we have in our reading today. He says that if sin is tolerated, sooner or later it will spread to every extremity of the Body.

This same principle is true when false teachings come into the church. A distortion of the gospel would result in ineffective ministry and the weakening of Christ's church, which is built on the confession of Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Getting Jesus wrong is no small problem and Paul knew it. He also was well aware of what the legalism of the Pharisees would do if it was allowed to enter. Pretty soon church members would be detoured from Jesus, walking down a road of self-righteousness that would lead to a denial of the Faith. To Paul, this was a frontal attack on the gospel and the freedom it produces in a person's life. He took a stand against it.

Why is legalism so attractive? Because it lends itself to the flesh. It creates an avenue for people to boast in themselves. It feeds the ego. If I can earn status with God and men, then I will have power over other men. That is the attitude a legalist has. The legalist is also happy with the way he can win over others to his foolish views. It amazes me what people will fall for, even in the face of blatant wrong. Remember Jim Jones and the tragedy in Jonestown? This man led hundreds of people from California overseas, and they all ended up dead.

I also think people want to feel like part of the in-crowd. Some will do anything to win the approval of others. In a legalistic religious system they can find acceptance by conforming to the rules of the group. The problem with this is that it distorts the Gospel. It automatically takes the emphasis off of Jesus and puts it on the people. It also creates a hierarchy based on how well individuals do compared to the rest. If you are the star rule-keeper then you will stand out. Note "you will stand out;" it is at that point about you and not about Jesus. Let me remind you that God will not share His glory with anyone.

One last observation before we go for today. When I talk to people in Christ's church, I have seen a trend to focus too much on issues, ethics and morality and not enough on Jesus. Christianity is about an adoration of Jesus and a relationship with Jesus and a focus on Him in the gospel. It is not primarily about presidential races, right and wrong choices and the value of being chaste. There is no doubt that those things have a bearing on our life and impact us in many ways. But they are not to be emphasized apart from the gospel, which is Christ crucified and resurrected.

God's blessings are gospel oriented,
Pastor Steve

Day 264

"I'm Out Of This World"

September 21 - Galatians 6: 1-18

The world says, "Might makes right."
God says, "Through the weakness of Christ's gruesome death, you are righted."

The world says, "Material gain is true gain."
God says, "Taking up your cross is true gain."

The world says, "What you have in this life is all you have."
God says, "The cross gives you the hope of eternal life."

The world says, "Keep the rules, be perfect, and you will prosper."
God says, "Believe in the cross and you will be forgiven."

The world says, "Man can achieve ultimate happiness on his own."
God says, "Through the cross I have made the way for a long happiness."

The world says, "Earn status, impress others, achieve success."
God says, "Deny self, take up your cross, follow Jesus."

The world says, "Praise the accomplishment of the human spirit."
God says, "Boast in the cross of Christ; this world is not your home."

The cross points up and out. The cross was God's doing. God had it planned from all eternity. He orchestrated the whole affair. Jesus' words to Pilate can be heard echoing down the corridors of time, "You have no authority over me unless it's given to you from above." God did for us what we could have never in a million lifetimes done for ourselves.

Paul, the once ardent self-promoting religious guy, is now saying that the cross of Jesus is his only reference for boasting. Of all the things Paul could have harped on to help us draw near to God and gain an appreciation for Him, he chose the cross. He could have majored on athletics. Athletics have always been a big part of world culture. He could have focused on politics. Maybe if governments managed things properly, we could live a better life. Paul could have emphasized religious devotion and ministry to the poor. There is no doubt that some people have a rougher time in this life than others. He could have stressed the importance of miracles and dwelt on the need for more manifestations of God's power. He could have camped on a hundred different things. He does talk about these subjects in his writings, but his main thing is Christ crucified. We saw that in his ministry in Corinth and we see it here in Galatians. It is a theme woven not only in Paul's letters but throughout the Bible. It runs like a scarlet thread from Genesis to Revelation, so that we might forever be reminded that God's plan was guaranteed to succeed. It, and it alone, could bring a person to the holy God of the Bible.

The cross, despised by the world, was the one thing that occupied Paul's mind most of all. It separated him from the world. The world could not understand how the death of Jesus could have any meaningful significance. To the world, the cross was just a tragedy. To Paul, the cross was the object of his salvation and the hope for eternal life. Paul considered this truth to be the wedge between himself and the world. It was the reason he no longer considered himself a part of the global crowd. The cross saved him; it was the final blow by which he died to the world's system. He could no longer get as excited about self-righteous sorts of things. No longer did he see self-promotion as important. No longer did he really care how others saw him.

This mentality is the reason Paul encourages his readers to keep doing the good things that will reflect a grateful heart. He says to do good to all. This echoes Jesus' words to "let your light shine before all men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven," (Matthew 5:16). Gratitude and thankfulness are much better motives for serving than guilt and duty. We tend to put our heart into service when we want to please the one we are serving.

For Paul, the cross was the focal point from which all spiritual life flowed. Morality and ethics and labor for its own sake pale in comparison to a life of virtue and character pouring forth from a heart transformed by the cleansing blood of Jesus. His blood changes the fabric of our lives and impacts the steps we take.

God's blessings drip down from the cross,
Pastor Steve

EPHESIANS

Day 265

"So That You May Know Him Better"

September 22 - Ephesians 1: 1-23

I once officiated when a couple renewed their vows to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. What a privilege it was to gather with their children and grandchildren to honor a couple who were going the distance. When the bride came to the backyard altar to meet, again, her beloved of fifty years, her eyes were all aglow. He met her with a winsome smile and took her hand, and they stood before me to do it all over again.

A question popped into my mind on the spot and I asked them, "Are you guys still learning new things about each other?" He said that was true and she nodded as well. Think about that, 50 years and they are still gleaning, from time to time, new insights into the heart of their partner. I think that is a beautiful thing.

The depths of God will never be tapped. He is so deep, even beyond our wildest imagination, that to think that you have a handle on His nature is like saying that you understand the mysteries of the universe. Remember that when Job challenged the Almighty, the Lord appealed to the intricacies of all that He had created to help Job realize that his own understanding fell horribly short of being able to comprehend the way of God. In the end Job learned to trust that God was able to meet the needs of His own.

There is a flavor of this in the first chapter of Ephesians. Paul says that God has revealed some of His mysteries to the church so that those in Christ could appreciate the way God chose them from the beginning, out of love. And it's not just His own who are in the confines of His will, for He works out "everything in conformity with the purpose of His will," (verse 11). Not only did God choose you in Christ, but He also sealed you with the Spirit as a guarantee that you would one day receive the inheritance God has bought for you.

After reading this first chapter, God wants you to grasp the earnestness of His love for you, and the lengths He went to save you. These deep thoughts are intended to inspire appreciation for the God who loves you and has brought you to Himself. Our natural response is utter amazement. Why would God do these things in my life? I don't feel worthy for Him to work His will in me. Why was I adopted? God knows that I am not the cream of the crop. Why me, Lord?

Paul says the answer is "in accordance with His pleasure and will." It is grace again; grace that baffles us and upends our conventional thinking that in order to be loved I must be lovely. Paul calls it the "riches of God's grace." Believe me, if you have experienced this kind of love you feel like the richest person in the world.

Paul's response to this grace is prayer. He prays for them with thankfulness. He wants God to make Himself known to them. Go back and read the things he desires for them. How often do you hear these kinds of prayers being prayed today? The things Paul prays for are like a mirror reflecting back the glory of God.

He wants them to experience wisdom and revelation so that they can know God better. Too often we lean on our own understanding and spiritual background to know God. Paul knew it took more than that. They needed supernatural wisdom and revelation in order to become more acquainted with the Father.

He asks for their eyes to be open spiritually so that they can grasp the true nature of the hope we have in Christ. No half-hearted, man-centered prayers for Paul. No, he wanted them to be spiritually alert, awake to the truth of God and leery of the schemes of the evil one. He also wants them to be aware of the prize, the inheritance awaiting them on the other side of this veil. And lastly, but not least, he wants them to know the power of God. This is no ordinary power, but the power that raised Jesus from the dead. This power gives life and vanquishes the enemy. As soon as Paul mentions the power of the Lord his mind goes on and on about the superiority of Jesus and how He rules over all. He rules over all powers and is the head of the church.

Are you still learning new things about God? Are you alive to God today or are things getting stale? What do you know you have to do to bring Paul's prayer to life in your own situation? Maybe now is a good time to stop and pray his prayer for yourself.

"God, give me wisdom and revelation. Renew my hope in your inheritance, and let me experience the power you promise to live the Christian life. In Jesus Name, Amen."

God's blessings reveal more of God's heart to us,
Pastor Steve

Day 266

"The Gift Of God"

September 23 - Ephesians 2: 1-22

How separated is a sinner from God? How far away were you from God before Christ bridged the gap? Was God next door, or nowhere to be found? Did God come into view gradually, or did He burst into your life all of a sudden? How desperate is a sinner's alienation from his Creator?

I grew up never thinking about whether I was anywhere near God. Life for me was simply rolling along, and I guess I never really cared much about eternal issues. When I did wrong things, I buried them. When I did right things, I felt self-justified. I was on a selfish mission and wasn't concerned how far God was from me.

When a person is separated from God the distance can be misleading, because in a certain respect God is all around us. We live in His world, and His creation screams His involvement in all that is made. So as we walk through God's world, we can feel like all is well, because God built the place we live in. And the Holy Spirit is alive and well in those who are close to God. Our association with these believers gives us a false sense of security. Have you ever heard someone talk about a Christian parent or grandparent as if their faith somehow made up for the gap between him and God? Also, because mankind was made in the image of God, people tend to think they are gods. Through success, or strength, or the ability to help others, or the smarts to build something or discover something or cure something, man tends to exalt himself to god status. How can you feel very far from God when you are Him?

Paul says that we are spiritually dead. He doesn't say we are sleeping or in a coma or injured or misled; he says we are dead in our trespasses and sins. By the way, trespasses means premeditated violations of God's law, and sins means all wrongs in general, premeditated or not. The point is that man's Pre-Jesus condition is dire. For a moment, apply this to the person who thinks that by obeying the law or keeping a set of rules he can be saved. Have you ever seen a dead man working? Picture a skeleton sitting next to you at work. "Who's that?" someone asks. And you tell

them that it is a dead guy trying to earn his way into heaven. Crazy, isn't it? Dead people do not work.

Jesus talked about this problem. Someone asked Him if it would be OK to go back home and bury his parent. Jesus told him to let the dead bury their dead—you follow me. Who are the dead? Obviously they are the spiritually dead. The physical dead would have a hard time burying anyone.

Spiritual birth is a resurrection from the dead. Those who were dead are made alive by Christ. You were dead, unresponsive to God, and bound by the darkness in your dead world. In that condition Christ came along and raised you out of the darkness and transferred you into the kingdom of light. When a baby is born you will often hear a parent emphatically say that the experience was a miracle. The spiritual birth is like that. It is a miracle work of God in your life.

In God's kindness he did something for you that you could not earn, nor did you deserve. He raised you. It was because of the riches of His grace that you have received the great gift of salvation. God didn't look into your future and see that you were any more special than anyone else; God simply placed His favor on you and brought you up from your spiritual grave. Paul says that no man can boast about his own part in the process because it is God's work from first to last. It is the magnificent gift of God, given freely in Christ.

"But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ," (2:13). We were "far away," farther than we ever really realized. We can only comprehend that when we understand that it took the bloody death of Jesus to bridge the gap. Only his sacrifice can bring a sinner into the presence of the holy God. All other approaches are landings on a different runway. Only the blood of Jesus can unite a person to the one true God.

This runway is lit for landing. Are you approaching His way, or your own? In this day and age people tend to play fast and loose with their knowledge of God. There is a way, Proverbs says, that appears right to man but the end of it is the way of death. To land there is to crash and burn.

God's blessings are abundant in grace,
Pastor Steve

Day 267

"Pray Like Paul"

September 24 - Ephesians 3: 1-21

The Best Regards Of The Day,

I recently received a correspondence from someone in prison who said that he had always believed in God but he had no idea how to pray. Have you ever been in his shoes? I sure have. I can remember thinking that I'd love to be able to pray, but at the same time I felt unable to muster any words.

Even now after several decades with the Lord, I am still sometimes befuddled by the subject of prayer. Let's face it: most of us see prayer as the last resort when we are in a fix. I have been in many situations where I had no clue what to do and all I could think to do was cry out to God for help. Prayer becomes an emergency option. I'm sure you've heard people say, "You haven't got a prayer." What do they mean by that? Aren't they saying that no matter what you do, your situation is a lost cause and not even a plea to God will make any difference?

Think for a moment about the content of your prayers. Do you have a prayer list that you work through when you talk to God? Is it mainly people that you are praying for? Do you pray for yourself? What do you bring to God when you are in His presence in prayer? Do you see your prayers being answered?

Prayer was Paul's motivation for ministry. For him, prayer had purpose. His prayers were based on the solid truth of the Word, as well as revelation that he had received from the Lord Jesus. Take a second look at his prayer here in Ephesians 3, and you will see his emphasis on the truth that Jesus was alive after a brutal death, and that His power was available for the "saints" so that they could experience God in "all" His fullness.

How does that sound? Wouldn't it be a wonderful experience to have the power of God in your life? And note the application of this power. Isn't it mostly about knowing the love of Jesus? Think about the transforming power of love. When you know someone loves you and wants the best for you, there is a welling up of great purpose in your daily life. Paul knew that kind of love, and he was driven to share it with others.

Do you know that God loves you?

Do you believe that Jesus lives in your heart and that He is right there with you through it all?

Are you experiencing the power of God to live beyond yourself, and is that power making the love of Jesus real to you?

God loves you. He gave Jesus to demonstrate that once for all and forever. Jesus rose. He lives now in your heart by faith. Do you believe that? If so, today you can see in some way how much he truly cares for you.

Let's walk in love.

I was traveling with some friends to Seattle to take in a baseball game and we had some time to kill, so we thought we'd visit the fastest-growing church in the country. That's what I had heard, anyway. Unfortunately, I had neglected to look up the address of the church before making the trip so I wasn't quite sure how we'd find it. Well, that morning we went for coffee and when we got to the counter I asked the gals there if any of them had heard of this church. One gal said she was a member there, and of course she was able to give us directions. Coincidence? No. God loves us and shows us that He does in little ways every day. Thank you, God.

God's blessings come with great power and love,

Pastor Steve

Day 268

"Let's Grow Up"

September 25 - Ephesians 4:1-16

Do you remember growing pains? I will never forget them. We tend to remember the really painful experiences in life, don't we? I can remember getting up in the middle of the night with a cramp in my leg that put me in a desperate position. I'd dance around my room, holding the back of my leg or I would stretch out on the floor and try to work the cramp out. Any way you look at it, it was painful growing up.

If you could go back and re-do junior high, would you? No? Well, why not? We did more painful growing in those two or three years than at any other time, didn't we? Do you remember how you felt in junior high? It seemed like every day was a test of your maturity. The bummer for the boys was that the girls were already growing up, while we were caught in some undefined purgatory, not knowing what we were or where we were going. I was always getting stomach aches in class. I'm sure I was nervous about wanting to fit in like most of the others, but I was also overly conscientious about grades and reputation and doing well in sports. Junior high was a real defining time for a good number of us.

How much of your life and your time have you spent covering up the truth about yourself? Do you understand what I mean by that? Are you who you really are, or do you have a collection of masks that you conveniently put on to adapt to the different people and places in your life? Do you interpret events in your life accurately, or have you embellished them to fit an image that you would like to maintain? Do you tend to downplay the experiences in your life because you think no one would like to really see and understand the real you? Maybe you think you are too boring to let people take part in the day-to-day you. Do you need a friend, a confidant, who can accept you right where you are, holding your friendship in confidence so that your privacy is protected?

Some people are loners and some people are clowns. I think people join the circus and become clowns because the costume allows them to be the person they would really like to be—fun, outgoing, relational, and downright silly. Remember the class clown in your school? He was the guy who could make everyone laugh and he didn't seem to care if the teacher was perturbed by it. He found his strength in being able to entertain. The loner, on the other hand, deals with life by escaping from the pressures that people lay on him. Loners are just fine when they are all alone. They may not want to fit in for a variety of reasons. They may think people treat them rudely and they would just as soon be by themselves than in a crowd of folks. Sometimes their aloneness is an unhealthy escape from problems they ought face and overcome. They can become cynical and bitter, seeing life through the lens of dreariness. Both of these types are characteristically on medication that their doctor believes will boost them out of the doldrums.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul, as usual, is expounding on the life of the church. He talks about the different leadership roles and then he turns back to church unity. Remember, before Jesus left He emphasized that love would be the defining mark of the Christian. He said, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another." The Lord had given specific instructions that we were to love one another as He loved us. Paul must have had these thoughts in mind when he wrote about unity. He talked about not acting like kids when it came to understanding the truth of God. That way, he reasoned, you would not be tossed and manipulated by disruptive teachings. Paul said something along these same lines to the Corinthians, who also needed to hear about Christian maturity: "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature," (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Paul says the road to spiritual maturity is by "speaking the truth in love..." We must focus on being truth-tellers. We must resist the temptation to cover, hide, and run; but instead stand our ground and talk about truth. Specifically, Paul is talking about staying in the truth of the Bible, God's truth. We also need to be honest with God, others, and ourselves in regard to our lives and our circumstances. As we have said before, in any given day we will probably have thousands of thoughts, and of these a certain percentage will be bogus. If you begin to base your life on bogus thoughts and fantasies you will sink your ship before you know it. On the other hand, if you focus on those thoughts that are true, whether they are happy true thoughts or unhappy true thoughts, you will find a sense of control and freedom that will bring you into maturity.

Look at Jesus' example. He always spoke the truth. In John 8 there is the classic bout between Him and the unbelieving Pharisees. They accuse Him of not being true. He didn't yell or swear or get all riled up. He simply answered their accusation with truth. And then He also told them the truth about themselves. It wasn't always pleasant, but it was true, and truth will always defeat what is false.

The truth has a way of dispelling lies. People believe lies about all sorts of things. Why? Because we tend to believe those that seem authoritative. If the person telling us something has a deep voice, a superior attitude, or a first-class education, then we cower before their falsities. Others believe untruths about their family background, or their part in some event that they are blamed for, or some cutting remark that a parent has made. These zingers leave a mark that only grows unless you deal with them before they have a chance to define your life.

While it's clear that truth-telling is critical, the attitude in which we tell the truth is important as well. Paul says to do it in love. Peter says that we are to talk to others with "gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:16).

I like to use the word "kindness." So many err here. They speak the truth, but very harshly and with the intent to set someone straight. They use the truth like a hammer to break apart and wound. Have you ever used truth like that? I have. God wants us to gently and firmly talk about what is real. If you do, you will become more real. Paul says we will be like Jesus and grow up into Him. We'll follow in His footsteps.

I cannot help but think about Jesus when he stood before Pilate. Jesus said, "You have no authority over me..." Pilate thought he was sovereign, but he wasn't. Finally Pilate said, "What is truth?" And he walked away, not staying to hear Jesus' reply. I would have loved to hear the Lord's answer to that question. He may have said, "I Am." Some, like Pilate, don't want to hear the truth. They have other things to do and they would rather not take the time to find out what is really the fact of the matter.

How about you? Do you speak truth? Can you quickly size up a situation and talk about it in a matter-of-fact and truthful way? If so, add more conversations about God's truth to your life and you will have the ingredients for Spiritual growth. It's God's will for us. He loves to see us mature and become more like His special Son.

God's blessings come when we speak truth in love,

Pastor Steve

"Get Practical"

September 26 - Ephesians 4:17-5:7

The Lord Is Good,

Bad habits are hard to break. Talk to a junk food junkie about eating healthy and their stomach will do a somersault at the thought of fruits and vegetables. It is so difficult to change our ways, that most of the time it takes a monumental wake up call to get us moving in the right direction. Maybe we get on the scale and realize that we have 50 pounds weighing us down, and we get mad and determine at that very moment to do something about it.

Marketers spend millions and millions of dollars every year to try and help us reach our goals. Most of them offer easy solutions to complex problems and very few, if any, offer motivational tools to continue the product or process until we actually see results. Meeting our goals always boils down to finding the motivation to persevere when we do not feel like moving ahead. Most of us move on to the latest gismo or gadget that promises results in half the time with half the energy expended.

For the follower of Jesus there is a lifetime process of putting off the "old man," that corrupt and self-serving fellow who wants to dominate our day-to-day lives. When we get up in the morning, there he is, beckoning us to take the low road, look out for number one, and use people to gain egotistical ends.

Paul is consistently urging us not to live like we once did and not to follow the sinful ways of the Gentiles. He warns us that these are habits that will draw us away from a close walk with the Lord. He speaks confidently of the believer's new attitude and position in Christ. He says, in contrast to the old way of life, in order to push them in the right direction: "You however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of Him and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus," (4: 20,21). I have to say that I just love this Scripture. Knowing the truth in Jesus is the primary motivation for a person to change his ways.

Jesus changes lives. Think for a moment about

how He has changed you so far. You may not be where you want to be, but you certainly are not where you were, are you? The fact that He changes lives should give us much hope for the things that still need to turn around. Fortunately, Paul gives us direct help when it comes to applying the Lord's will to our lives. This statement is tried and true, and if we will take it to heart and put it into motion, we will be less bothered by sins that weigh us down.

So what does he say? Generally he is saying that we need to REPLACE old habits with new, spiritually-charged ones. For example, if you have been in the habit of lying, stop doing that, but don't stop there. Begin to speak the truth on a regular basis; before you know it, the truth habit will replace the bad habit of lying. Paul goes on to give some very specific advice. He says to not let anger get the best of you. It is better to talk out your anger feelings before the situation spirals out of control through thoughts that make things even worse. Again, if you are a thief, begin to use your hands to make things for others rather than take things away from them. Also, watch what you say. If you let unhealthy thoughts make their way into words there will be no end to the corruption that results. On the other hand, if you use your mouth to build others up you will not have time to tear them down with words.

Replace hatred and malice with kindness that prays and reaches out to those you struggle with. Replace obscene talk with words that bring others closer to God. Replace bitterness with forgiveness. Again, it is not enough to give up the old habit and not replace it with the better thing. If you don't replace it with the good, you will probably slip back into the bad habit sooner or later. Jesus taught that when demons are driven from a man they go out and find other demons to come back to that house (body), and if they come back and find the house swept clean, but unoccupied, then they bring all of their friends and overwhelm the person. The vacancy needs to be filled by God and godly things so that the demons would be helpless to enter again. It is not enough to kick an old habit, you must re-supply with a good habit if you would like long term results.

Is there an area in your life that aches like a sore tooth? What can you replace it with that will enable you to move in a good direction? Is it time for you to talk to someone who might be able to steer you in the right way? Take the time today to pray about it, and then pick up the phone and call that person. Pretty soon you may be on a course where you won't even be able to remember the hold that area once had on you.

God's blessings cannot be replaced,

Pastor Steve

"Are You Full?"

September 27 - Ephesians 5:8-33

I had a grandmother whose mission in life was to fill me up. The moment I opened the door to her house I heard, "Are you hungry? Sit on down and I'll fix you something." My grandma was from Oklahoma so she could fry almost anything. I remember her chicken most of all. Even though I am not a big chicken fan, I loved it the way she made it. It was truly finger-licking good. For some reason she wasn't happy unless I was full. The truth is she would fill me to overflowing, topping off the meal with some rich dessert. If you had a grandma like mine then you know what I mean, and as I write you are getting hungry just

thinking about it.

I'll never forget the big holiday meals and how much we had to eat. There was turkey and prime rib and mashed potatoes and cheese broccoli and fruit salad and tons more. After we were done with the meal, the house looked like a bomb had gone off; not because of the mess we had made, but because of all of the bodies strewn all over the house anywhere they could find a place to repose. You'd think we had just run a marathon judging from the way we looked and from the snoring sounds shaking the walls. We were just...satisfied. Plus, all of the blood in our heads and other parts of our bodies had made it down to our stomachs to digest the mother lode. And so we were sleepy and content.

You know the 23rd Psalm—the one about the Shepherd and the sheep? Remember that the sheep are made to lie down in green pastures. Sheep will do that only after they have had their fill and are satisfied; only then will they recline, usually just kicking back chewing the cud. This is a wonderful spiritual analogy for us. Jesus fills us with the kind of food that really satisfies. He said that He was the bread of life. And He said that His words give life. After He feeds you, you can lie down with contentment and satisfaction, secure from the pressures of life. If we have drunk from the "still waters" and have eaten from the rich pastures, then we can recline in safety and under the protection that only God can offer. We are under the care of the Good Shepherd, whose rod and staff will lead us. But for now, we are enjoying the assurance of being full.

In Ephesians, Paul commands us to keep being filled with the Holy Spirit. That's the way the verse reads in the Greek New Testament. Make it your ongoing practice to be filled with God's Spirit. Remember, the Spirit is God, so actually you are asking God to fill you with Himself. In Corinthians Paul said that we are the temple of the living God. God lives in us because of Jesus and by His Spirit. So how can we stay full each day?

Paul begins with a "what not to do." Don't live recklessly. Don't let wine take you down a road of debauchery. That's the kind of careless life that God cannot inhabit. In Galatians Paul talked about not walking in the "flesh," but in the "Spirit." Then he listed the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. If you compare what he says in Corinthians with Galatians you'll see that the Spirit is pushed out when we walk in the flesh; for example, in Corinthians Paul says that our bodies are not for fornication. Fornication defiles the body and the spirit. You cannot be full of the Spirit and at the same time be engaged in an improper relationship. The two are mutually exclusive.

Paul says worship, thankfulness and accountability are key ingredients for being filled with the Spirit. Let's take a glance at each of these and then add a fourth point from one of Paul's other epistles.

Worship: The act of worship, specifically worship through music, has a profound impact on most people's hearts. The Psalms were originally set to music. Jesus, just before the events that took His life, sang a hymn with His disciples. In Revelation the hosts of heaven are seen in worship, singing. Worship reminds us of the nature and ways of God. It reaches our hearts with words and melodies that draw us into the presence of God and bring God closer than ever. Do you know a worship chorus by heart? Pause now to hum or sing it, would you? Draw near to God and be filled with His Spirit.

Thankfulness: This attitude acknowledges God's sovereign involvement in every detail of our lives. We are to give thanks "for everything." How can we do this? We can when we can acknowledge that God is there with us in every circumstance. Pause now to say or write a prayer of thankfulness. Remember, that thing that is tough right now is there so you will hold on to God and find His grace sufficient. We cannot ever disconnect prayer from the name of Jesus. He is the reason we can give thanks in everything. He said He would never leave us or forsake us. Never. He is there with you right now. Maybe you are on your way to the hospital to visit someone you care about. He is right there by your side, and when you pray for them, you can be sure He will guide your words. Give thanks and be filled with the Spirit.

Accountability: We are to submit to one another. We need one another. We need to be connected. Are you connected to a group of believers who hold you accountable for your actions? This kind of fellowship group can be a lifesaver because they remind you of the good things of God, but still allow you to have

doubts and struggles. We all struggle and we need friends there to hold us up. Connect to others in the church and realize that you are being filled with the Spirit in the process.

Paul also associates our relationship with the Word of God to being filled with God. God's Words in us correlate with having God in us. Listen to what he says in Colossians: "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful (sound familiar?). Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him," (3:15-17). Doesn't that sound like what we have just been looking at in Ephesians? Sure it does, because Paul emphasized these things so that we could be filled with the Spirit.

What does it mean for you to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly?" Try to answer that question today. If you do, and then practice the answers you find, you will be in the Word and at the same time filled with the Spirit. A friend of mine recently said that when he is in the Word he can only do what God wants him to do. The Word has such an impact on his mind and heart that it puts him right where he wants to be—close to God and filled with Him.

Let your cup overflow today!

God's blessings fill you up,

Pastor Steve

Day 271

"Be Strong"

September 28 - Ephesians 6: 1-24

Some chapters in the Bible are so full of practical wisdom that it is tough to summarize them. The book of Proverbs, for example, is like that. In one chapter in Proverbs, you can have 20 or so helpful truths to think about. The problem is, if you read right through the chapter you will not be able to assimilate all of the important things that you read. Ephesians 6 is like that.

Allow me to give you some helpful tips on how to take a chapter like this and get the most out of it. First of all, let's get down to brass tacks about the amount of time we spend in the Word. If you are going through the New Testament, then you are probably making your way through the reading pretty quickly. Some of you may read more slowly but wouldn't you admit that while you're reading there are other things looming in the back of your mind? All of us are distracted from the most important things in our lives. The tyranny of the urgent seems to constantly push out the first priorities. So let's look at a few ideas that will help us squeeze more out of our reading from day to day.

Let's begin with a more general tactic. Some Christians have adopted a particular book of the Bible and have called it their "lifetime book." Of all 66 books, they read, study, and think about one book more than all of them. Well, Ephesians would be a fine book for this purpose. It says so much in such a small space that you could read it constantly and even memorize a great deal of it, and still benefit 20 years from now. Could you imagine if you read the book of Ephesians every day for five years, how much you'd know about it and how much easier it would be to recall verses from its pages that would help you in dealing with

problems? It would become a spring of living water always ready to fill you when you were feeling dry. Maybe it's time for you to try this idea on for size. If so, get a journal, an "Ephesians Journal," and begin to record insights that you glean as you meditate on its pages.

Secondly, read with your mind. Don't put your mind into neutral when you read, but rather engage it in the process. Think about what you are seeing on the page. It is way too easy to read with our eyes and feel like we have actually comprehended our reading matter, when in reality we only engaged our eyes but did not bring the thoughts very far into our minds and hearts. We need the word to get our attention. In Hebrews it says that we need to pay more careful attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away from it. That applies to our Bible reading.

Have you ever swum in the ocean? I grew up near the beaches of Southern California and I was in the water a great deal. I realized at a very young age that I needed to mark where I went into the water with some landmark, because I would look up and discover I had drifted 50 or 75 feet away from where I went into the water. The currents were pulling me away from my spot. When we do not engage our minds and hearts in our reading, it is very easy to drift spiritually. So engage your mind and let the Word penetrate to that place where you formulate your thoughts and make decisions. Then you will see how the Bible can act like a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (Psalm 119:103).

Prayer before Bible reading will prepare you to receive the meat of the Word. God's Spirit, who inspired the Bible in the first place, is right with you and He wants to help you to glean from His Words truths that will build up your faith in Jesus. So ask Him to guide you. Ask Him to make His Words come alive so that they transform you, giving you the eyes you need to see spiritual truth. Ask God to open your eyes so that you can see the wonders of His glorious Word.

Third, read it again. If at first you do not get something out of your reading, read it again. Go back to the words over and over. Let them sit on your mind and simmer there until they have their fullest impact on your life. Old truths, the ones you have lived with for years, can have a new impact on you as you consider their applications to today's challenges. Take Ephesians 6 and place it like a tin plate over your life today and see if you cannot find some needed help for serving God. I love verse 18, about prayer. Prayer is a subject that all of us need to think about. From this verse we see that there are all kinds of prayers that can be used when we are faced with the issues of the day. Try it on for size.

Fourth, group subjects together for further study. For example, here we have the subject of the Armor of God. Maybe put a box around that section and begin to think about the different pieces of the armor. Think about how each piece of equipment could help you to better fight off the flaming missiles of the evil one. Or, do you have a friend who needs reassurance about some problem they are facing? You could encourage him to take up the whole armor of God so he too can stand. Also, don't neglect the first part of the chapter, which deals with the relationships in families. These few verses can be very helpful in dealing with issues at home. Now go back to the margin in your Bible where you read about the armor and look for cross-references that apply to the subject. For example, you can learn more about the armor by reading 1 Thessalonians 5.

Lastly, make your Bible reading and study a priority. The more you learn, the more you will be able to take the truth and apply it to your life.

God says through Isaiah, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word," (66:2).

Now, there is food for thought.

God's blessings are attached to His Word,

Pastor Steve

Philippians

Day 272

"Joy In The Faith/Joy In Christ Jesus"

September 29 - Philippians 1: 1-26

What A Day!

I had such joy when...

...I got my first base hit in an organized baseball game.

...I caught a wave body surfing in the Pacific Ocean.

...I heard the Beach Boys live.

...I played tackle football one-on-one with Tony Palombo.

...I bought a pack of baseball cards and got my favorites.

...my family ate out at the Pizza Show restaurant.

...I wrestled with my Irish Setter named Zach.

...I drove off in my first car, a Ford Maverick.

...Babette held my hand all the way home from school.

...I stood on the Mount of Olives and saw Jerusalem.

What does your list look like? Isn't it kind of funny that most of our "joys" are really the simple and inexpensive things? Sometimes we forget about those things that have had significance because we are too busy looking for happiness. There is a lot of truth to the old adage about stopping to smell the roses. It might be a good idea to pull out a piece of paper or a journal and make a list. As I wrote those things above, my heart was really warmed.

I will never forget a heart-to-heart talk I had with a friend while sitting in my VW one day. For some reason I was feeling so satisfied with my life that I told him that if I died today, I could say that I had lived a good life. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has made a statement like that. The problem with it was that my greatest joys were still ahead of me. I was oblivious to them at the time, and I had no inkling that in just a short time I'd be experiencing the goodness of the God who created me.

The joys associated with a relationship between you and Jesus are hard to pen. Peter said, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls," (1 Peter 1: 8,9). God's joy is experienced more on the inside than the outside. It's not like riding a wave or hearing a great band or holding a girl's hand; God's joy is more like the feelings of a criminal who hears that he is pardoned for all of his crimes. Total relief. Favor that was not expected. Or, maybe it can be illustrated by the joy a cancer patient has when he hears that his cancer is in remission. He is relieved. He is grateful. He is at peace, knowing that he has a new lease on life.

The Greek word for joy is a derivative of the Greek word for grace. The word rejoice is also attached to this very important biblical word. God's favor, given freely and lavishly in the work of Jesus, is the foundation for joy. Grace is expressed through the gospel, the good news. Free forgiveness through the cross, plus the resurrection of Jesus, equal the power of God that brings salvation, inner healing, to the lost sinner.

Paul says to the Philippians that he is united to them in a "partnership in the gospel." Once a person receives the gospel he is made new on the inside. To define that experience by comparing it to the other joys I have had in life is to do it injustice. No words can accurately describe the love of Jesus. Joy is in Jesus. I

have heard someone say that the word JOY prioritizes the road to joy: J = Jesus (put Him first); O = others (serve Jesus by serving others); Y = you (put yourself after Jesus and others). Following this order you will maintain joy.

Do you have this type of joy? Are you still looking for inner peace? Have you been saved from your sins, and yet you tend to take that for granted and look in other directions for peace and joy? Paul says that there is "joy in the faith" and "joy in Christ Jesus." Let's make Jesus the Leader of our lives today and rejoice in Him.

God's blessings bring joy,
Pastor Steve

Day 273

"Wanted: Servants (Like Jesus/Pro Jesus)"

September 30 - Philippians 1:27-2:11

Good Day, My Friends,

The greatest joy is serving Jesus. However, in order to serve you will have to come to terms with a couple of important prerequisites.

First, you have to admit that you are not the center of things. You cannot serve the Lord and simultaneously be consumed with self. Jesus' message to those who followed Him was "deny yourself." In the Sermon on the Mount He said that it was the humble, the "poor in spirit" who would inherit the kingdom of God. Second, you must use the gift that the Lord has given you to serve Him. This trusted gift will be your most reliable source for service. It, like salvation, is given freely and will make you an effective servant in the King's business. It would be a mistake to try to be a spiritual hero by doing what others are equipped to do. Your gift will open doors for you to serve Jesus.

I see serving Jesus as a privilege. It would be like being the president's personal assistant or bodyguard. Imagine how excited you would be to learn that you would be side by side with the most powerful man in the land. How much greater is it to be associated closely with the Lord of lords and King of kings? Jesus said, "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him," (John 12: 25,26).

Jesus' own example of servanthood is a powerful motivator for us to serve as He did. We have the privilege to walk in His shoes. Jesus said in the gospels, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many," (Matthew 20:28). Jesus served. He laid down his own conveniences for us. How can we do differently and expect to follow Him? Can being a servant be a brutal pathway? You bet. But Jesus took that road and we have the opportunity to follow Him.

It is so tempting to look for the easy way out. Our spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. We want to do the right thing, but we are pulled down by sinful attitudes that speak to us of "our rights," and "our problems," and "our aches and pains," and "our glory." Remember Romans 7? Welcome to the club. Serving God is no easy proposition because we tend to get in the way of the very thing we want. Thankfully, if we have a willing heart, the Holy Spirit will work in us and through us to serve Jesus.

He humbled Himself and eventually He was exalted again. In the same way, Jesus promises that He will exalt the humble. It may not be today or tomorrow or in this lifetime, but one day those who serve the Lord will be exalted. Servants of Christ are not measured by the world's standard. They are measured by how

dirty their hands and knees are.

Join me in getting dirty for Jesus' sake. We can trust that our service for Him will not be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

God's blessings will eventually meet the humble,
Pastor Steve

Day 274

"Friends Make The Difference"

October 1 - Philippians 2:12-30

Dear Friends,

Tell me about friendships that have made a difference in your life. What do they mean to you? Did they ever save you when you were in a pinch? Once upon a time I had parked my car, pushed on the emergency brake and went into the store to pick up a few things. When I got back into the car and released the emergency brake, the whole thing came undone in my hand. Now what was I going to do? Well, I have a friend who is a mechanic at a local dealership and he insisted on coming down and releasing the brake for me. He said if I did it I'd probably break my arm when the lever snapped back. I listened to him, and in no time he was there for me. Oh, how good it is to have friends.

I think Paul considered all believers his friends. He addresses the Philippians as "dear friends." I have experienced that camaraderie among believers myself, even ones I have never met before. A few years ago I was making plans to go up to Vancouver, B.C. to take in a hockey game with a friend of mine, and I remembered that a young fellow that I had met down here lived up there. I called his home and his dad answered. I explained the situation and asked if he wouldn't mind if we crashed at their place the night after the game. He said that wouldn't be any problem and he insisted that we eat dinner with his family when we arrived. Before we hung up he said to me, "What was your name again?" I don't think he had any clue who I was or how I had known his son. Yet, because we had the Lord in common, he was willing to open his home to me. By the way, the dinner was awesome and we had a nice visit.

Paul mentions two very special friends in this chapter, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy was Paul's personal assistant and trainee in the work of the gospel. Epaphroditus appears to be connected to the Philippians originally and was at some point looking to help Paul in some way. After falling ill and then recovering, Paul speaks in very endearing terms about how grateful he was that his brother in the Lord and friend was spared so that he could carry on the work of the gospel.

Both men were in love with the church. They risked their own comfort to reach out to the church and make things better for her. These were the kind of men that Paul needed in his work because of the demand of his own schedule. They were trustworthy, with the same kind of heart for others that the apostle had. He could count on their willingness to do the work with a determination like his own. Paul mentions that there were few like Timothy, who was sold out to the work of the gospel. He says that most men were more interested in their own things then in the work of the Lord.

I hope that you have solid Christian brothers and sisters like Paul did. If you haven't experienced this enrichment, I wish it for you. A friend in Christ can be as close as a brother or sister. Christian friends will care for you and pray for you and always wish the best for you. If this has been a weakness in your Christian life, now is the time to venture out and join a small group,

where you can meet some fellow believers and get to know them better. You have to be a friend to make a friend. Put yourself out there and see if the Lord doesn't weave your heart together with a believer you can serve with in the ministry in some way.

One last thought. People will be more attracted to you if you take Paul's advice in verse 14: "Do everything without complaining or arguing." People shy away from whiners. Be a builder and you will have more friends than you can shake a stick at.

God's blessings will make you friendlier,
Pastor Steve

"Remember Lot's Wife"

October 2 - Philippians 3:1 – 4:1

Today you and I will have 24 hours to use. Many of them will be used for work and sleep. But we still have a good number of hours left over to do good. When I get home in the evening and nothing is planned, I can very easily waste several hours watching TV. Sometimes my wife will coax me off of my easy chair to go for a walk. To her credit, she goes almost every evening. My first thought is that I'm too tired to get my lazy you-know-what off the seat. But if she is successful and I get up and going, you know what happens? I usually find more energy that I didn't know I had. Where in the world did it come from? I'm not sure, but there it is, waiting for me to prime the pump by taking a step forward.

How motivated have you been lately? How much humph do you feel right now? Do you wish the coach would take you out of the game? Do you need a breather? Have you felt physically and mentally tired?

One energy-robber is backward thinking. When we dwell on the past, either victories or defeats, we can get bogged down in the mud of what was. Some may sit around and talk about the glory days and others may mope and complain about all of the bad breaks they have had, but they are both wasting their time.

Paul had reason to dwell on his past. What a life! He went from persecutor to persecuted, from darkness to light, from Pharisee to Apostle, from anti-Christ to Christ. If you met up with him at the local pool hall he'd be the guy in the corner with quite a story to tell. Despite this, Paul knew that what was behind was behind and that he needed to press forward. He needed a future vision. He knew that he couldn't see where he was going by looking in the rear view mirror.

What is your dream for your future? Bruce Wilkinson has a book out called "Dream Giver." In it he states that God has put in all of us a "dream." All of us have a destiny from God and in God. He goes on to talk about the obstacles that keep us from taking hold of and fulfilling that dream. Much of the time it is voices in our heads from the past that tell us all of the reasons why we cannot achieve it. What's your dream? Think about it, and then ask yourself, "Why not?" Think about what it would take to fulfill that dream.

In the meantime, are you looking back too much? Do you need to find a way to let go of the past and focus on the future? God says, "Yes!" This is such a good subject to be praying about. If God has a dream for each of us, then don't you suppose that we will fulfill it by first going to God in prayer and seeking His direction? Of course.

Remember Lot's wife? She was warned not to look back on the city of Sodom, but she couldn't help it and looked anyway. She turned into a pillar of salt.

Why was it so important not to look back? Because the old life kills. It kills motivation. It kills drive. It kills moral integrity. It kills a godly influence on our children. It waters down our commitment to moving forward with God. If you sit around dreaming of the way things used to be, you will never move ahead. Solomon said, "Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this,'" (Ecclesiastes 7:10). If you dwell on the past, you will not see clearly where you are going today. The victories and defeats of the past are short-lived. What's in store for today should occupy the front burners of our minds.

Jesus said, "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God." If we are not plowing our own field, we will always wonder why others are getting ahead while we seem stuck. God has a field for you to plow. If you look back you will probably end up with a team of oxen in another man's field. How often do we try to live our lives in the shadow or work of another? How often do we fantasize that the grass will be greener on the other side of the fence? Our side would be just great if we'd work it today. Let's put our hands to the plow!

How does your field look? Lots of weeds? Well, it's time to start pulling them up and planting good seeds. God will help you. He will show you the significance and value of your field. Some people dream of property ownership. Well, whether you own a home or not, you still have a piece of property to till. It's your life. God gives you a plow and a field and wants you to move forward.

Remember the parable of the Sower and the Soils? Those who produce fruit produce it in different quantities. Some produced thirty-fold, others 60 and still others 100 times more. Are you content with 30? If not, what do you need to do today to get it in gear and move on to 60?

First of all, evaluate how much of your time you spend living in the past. If you find that the past occupies a lot of your energy, forget it and move into the future. Don't let it drag you down. If you need to, talk to a friend who could pray with you about this. Let them know that you don't want to dwell on that failed job or marriage or what a good ball player you were in high school; you want to move on. Maybe they can help you identify the kind of talents you have to plow your field superbly.

I can visualize your field. It can be lush and green and full of good crops. These fruits of righteousness will produce a crop of food that will have eternal significance.

God's blessings come from calloused hands,
Pastor Steve

P.S. When was the last time you went in for a physical check up? Sometimes our inner life is influenced by how we feel physically. If you ache or have pains, go see your doctor and let him scope you out.

P.S.S. I can hear the history teachers out there saying that I'm giving their students an excuse not to study history. That is not true. I believe that studying history helps us to appreciate where we are and to hopefully avoid the blunders of the past.

Day 276

"Prayer Matters"

October 3 - Philippians 4: 2-23

Hello Friends,

A couple of the pearls of truth Paul brings up today can be life-changing. The first has to do with worry and the other with contentment. Is either of these subjects applicable for you this week?

Worry is dissolved by prayer.

Contentment is gained by faith.

Pray specifically. For example: "God, I am so concerned about Sally's job interview tomorrow. I commit it to you and pray that you will help her. Thank you for promising to be with us in every circumstance. Lord, Sally needs your help. Please be her strength. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

That is a specific supplication. I am praying for Sally's particular interview. I have handed it over to the Lord.

If I sense something is wrong in my home I would need to pray more generally: "God, I am feeling a bit anxious and am not sure why. Give me your strength and wisdom to be able to deal with what is going on. God, you know what is going on and I commit it into your hands. In Jesus' Name, Amen." That is not as specific, but is a prayer for a general area of my life.

By faith, begin to give thanks to God for His answers and His peace. It will be that peace, Paul says, that will put keep guard over your anxious heart and mind.

Paul said in another place, "godliness with contentment is great gain,"(I Timothy 6:6). If you have God, you have all that you need. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want (or, 'I have everything I need')," (Psalm 23:1). If God is in your life you've hit the big payday, so to speak. You will not need one single thing more to truly satisfy. Even if you ran out of food and money and died, with God, you'd be OK.

We live in an age of discontent. People whirl around us without stopping to enjoy life, and they just scoop us up and carry us along on their merry-go-round of busyness. I guess misery loves company. People driven by discontent can be described by a word I heard just the other day—"cutthroat." The "need" to succeed is rampant today. Materialism is the god of our age. If you have stuff to spend your time and energy on, then you're told you must have done well. Despite all that, it's no secret that the rich and the poor are equally discontent.

Paul says he was content with little or much. The Lord was his Shepherd. He said that he could do all things through Christ who gave him strength. The Creator of the universe was energizing him. He was a content man. Paul could certainly speak bluntly when needed, but he was not a complainer. He put up with much inconvenience to do the work of the Lord. He also believed that the Lord Himself was supplying his needs. Paul knew that God had resources beyond his imagination.

Are you feeling content today?

Are you still looking for something else to bring you fulfillment?

To whom do you turn when you need satisfaction?

The greatest appetite-pleasers do not even compare with the beauty of a moment or two in prayer. While you talk to God, something beautiful happens that cannot be described. God makes Himself known to you and works in you. Let that knowledge ruin worry and produce the fruit of contentment.

God's blessings are gripped in prayer,

Pastor Steve

COLOSSIANS

Day 277

"Colossians, An Overview"

October 4 - Colossians 1:1-23

At one time people thought the earth was flat. Think about how daunting that idea would be for someone who wanted to explore the world. To think that they might drift off of the face of the earth probably put a tremendous amount of fear in their hearts. Did they really need to be afraid of a fall? Of course not! They were operating under false premises.

This is where we all fail. We sometimes operate under assumptions that are not founded on the compass of God's direction. What we believe in will mark our path in life.

One of the most common misconceptions is that if people got to know you for who you truly are, they would not like you. Because of this fear many of us, like many of the would-be explorers, do not venture out and make new acquaintances. The truth is that when people know the truth about us, they appreciate that we are human like them and have many of the same challenges. But let's face it; many of us still believe that we do not have much to offer others.

We tend to act on what we believe. If we believe people won't like us, we stay at home. If we think we can make friends, we try to get involved with others. Do you believe that "practice makes perfect?" Then you will practice. Do you believe that education will lead to your future success? Then you will get into a good school. Do you believe that it is important to keep the law? Then you will be a responsible citizen. What we believe defines the steps that we take. Those steps then define who we are.

This is the approach Paul takes in his letters. He tells us the truth about God and then he makes applications based on that truth. If you believe the truth, you will act accordingly. The reason we act poorly is not because we have a poor self-image, it is because we have a poor view of God. If you have an accurate and truthful view of God, you will act much differently. That is also the reason why many new believers do not make life changes after coming to Christ. They believe in Jesus, but do not add His truths to their thinking process, and they are left with the old thought patterns that were primarily self-centered. They end up seeing God through themselves rather than seeing God as He is and allowing that understanding to change them. Does that make sense?

In Colossians, chapters 1 and 2 are teachings and chapters 3 and 4 are an application of those truths. And, just like in a number of his other letters, Paul is challenging false beliefs about Jesus and the Christian life. There was a group in Paul's time that had some really bizarre views on Jesus Christ. Of course, much like modern cults, they believed they had a corner on the truth. The problem is that they had mistaken views about Jesus. One of their views was that Jesus was not really human. In their opinion, He couldn't be God, if he was a true man.

Paul's emphasis in this little letter is the supremacy of Jesus. To Paul it is the life and death and life of Jesus that should center our faith and our lives. It is the cross that frees us from the real guilt we owe to a holy God. We are now free from sin and alive to God because of the cross. The cross is central, not rules laid down by any man. The cultists may say you

have to do this and do that, but Paul says you have to appropriate the cross. When you do that, you will be able to grow in Christ.

The outcome of this relationship with Jesus is a life of love. Love for God first, and then for others—especially those in the church, but also to those without the gospel. The life of Jesus in you will produce a new set of morals and ethical standards. These qualities of the new life are a result of focus on the Savior. Paul says, "Set your mind on things above..."

Let's think about what we believe. Let's apply what we believe. These beliefs are much more important than the shape of the earth or our self-confidence level. These beliefs provide the foundation for the rest of our lives. Now you have a reason not to lie, Paul asserts, because you have put off the old man with his deeds. This is that same "crucified with Christ" thinking that pops up in all of Paul's works. The reasons not to sin are not about earning a place in heaven. They are clearly about expressing the new life that comes from your belief in Jesus.

What you believe will impact you today. I encourage you to take the things you believe seriously. Let them be tested over and over. Truth will stand and cannot be upended. Charles Spurgeon, when asked about his defense of the Bible said, "Defend the Bible? I'd just as soon defend a lion." Truth will endure.

God's blessings are centered in Christ,
Pastor Steve

Day 278

"The Mystery"

October 5 - Colossians 1:24-2:5

I think all of us want to think we have some exclusive inside information. That could be why we join clubs and teams. Do you remember when you first joined a group and you had to learn the rules or the secret codes? My dad and I joined Indian Guides. That name wouldn't be politically correct these days. We wore vests and headdresses and lots of beads, and we had secret sayings, and we went on campouts and had weekly meetings. I thought it was really cool.

Growing up is kind of like this too. The more we learn about the "secrets" of how life works, the greater the curiosity we have about the adult world. Kids have all sorts of misconceptions about the world. When a family has a fair amount of money I think the kids sometimes think that it grows on trees. When you grow up in the Midwest it must be hard to believe that the ocean really exists. I grew up just a few miles from the Pacific and believe me, I did not take the easy access to the beach for granted. Just recently I learned something I didn't know. Five years ago Native American tribes lowered the blood line requirement to 1/16 in order for a person to receive the benefits of inclusion. I got kind of excited because my great grandmother was full-blooded Cherokee, I have been told. Another group that I could be a part of! Come to think of it, maybe that's why my dad and I got into the Indian Guides.

My grandpa was a Mason. It's kind of like a club in the secretive pseudo-religious category. It is very hard to pin down what a Mason really is. I remember my grandpa had a hat in a glass case with lots of sparkly stones on the front. It had a tassel on top made of gold thread. It kind of reminded me of the hat Fred Flintstone wore at the meeting of the Water Buffaloes. Do you remember that? It also gave me a sense of wonder about the mysteries of the group. A Mason must be a really cool thing to be because it was so unknown. You had to be on the inside to know what

was going on.

Needless to say, different religious structures have certain rites and rituals that are sometimes difficult to understand. All of these systems are more akin to the occult than to historic Christianity. They create these in-group patterns to make themselves distinct and separate. Groups that use these clandestine practices are also very controlling. The Watchtower of the Jehovah's Witnesses is a good example of this. They set up rules and regulations for their members that put great pressure on the average guy. He may work to fulfill the demands, but he will end up feeling guilty because the requirements are more than any one person can do. I am also leery of their meeting halls. There are no windows. Again, this probably doesn't prove anything, but it adds an element of secrecy that may pull some in, out of curiosity.

It is human nature, sinful human nature, to want to be special in some way or to feel above the rest. We want to think that our group is the "in-group." Sometimes we can be easily deceived when we want our group to be right no matter what. Recently someone came to me with a book I had loaned to someone else. The person I had given it to read it and passed it on to this second person. The second person came to me because she had heard a number of bad things about the author of this book. I was able to tell her why I had loaned the book in the first place, and I was also able to say that while I didn't line up directly behind this certain author, I did appreciate some of the strengths of his views. I think careful challenges like this are healthy. This creates dialogue, as it did the day I spoke to this particular person. I am usually willing to be corrected or challenged when it comes to the truth.

OK, let's put aside all rules and regulations and the quirks of any group we have been involved in. Then let's open God's Word to test these thoughts.

First of all, Paul does talk about a mystery. He says it is something that has been hidden for a long time. There was a time when the mystery of God was still unknown. Prophets and priests and kings desired to know the secret of this great mystery, but it seemed like it would never be revealed. There were clues all over the Old Testament. But remember that there were 400 years between the Old Testament and the New. During that period of history there was not much spiritual light. Like the dark times of the medieval age, these pre-Christ times were pretty bleak.

During the Roman period, any group who did not pay tribute to the Emperor was oppressed. In some ways the Jews were tolerated, but there was no mistaking the fact that the Romans were in power and that there would be no rebellion. One of Jesus' disciples was called a Zealot. This was a group of Jews who were openly rebellious of the Roman rule. Interestingly, Matthew was a loyal tax collector for Rome. I wonder how those two guys got along.

The Romans had been ruling with an iron fist. They had improved roads, perfected travel on waterways, and developed a system of commerce next to none. Rome had extended its sovereignty throughout the known world. It was into this consolidated world that God sent His Son.

The mystery was unveiled in a person—Jesus Christ. He is the mystery. He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament dreams of a Deliverer. He came, and the mystery went. The unknown became known. The unreal became real. The darkness became light. "He was the true light that lights every man coming into the world."

Embrace Christ, and embrace the mystery. No secret meetings required. No special or exclusive wisdom needed. Only Jesus. Take Him and you will have all the wisdom you will ever need.

Paul put it ever so clearly in 1 Corinthians 1: 28f., "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as if is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

So many people get hung up on the methodology of the church. They are unhappy about this or that. They may even think there are hypocrites in the pews. They may think very little about Jesus, but dwell on the way their church does ministry. If they are happy about the way things are going they applaud, but if they are a bit disgruntled they complain. Their focus is on the church and not on Jesus. He is the point.

Let's put our focus on Him today and talk about Him before we talk about our methods of serving Him.

"It is Christ in you, the hope of glory." He dwells in you. Realize this and let it penetrate into the way you think today.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings have been revealed in Jesus,

Pastor Steve

"Reality Is In Jesus"

October 6 - Colossians 2: 6-23

Greetings in the Triumphant Name of Jesus,

Just how clearly can you describe and praise the King of the whole universe? Put up with me for a minute while I give you a rough illustration.

Years ago I was invited to a dinner where an Open Doors speaker was going to talk about the mission of the organization. The man up front said his name was Brother David. I have to admit that the "Brother So-and-so" thing has always struck me a little odd. Come to find out that I'm the one who is a little odd. Anyway, Brother David got up and very humbly talked about what God had been doing in his life. I really had no clue who this man of God was. Had I been paying better attention to the message I would certainly have hung out afterwards to meet him and bend his ear some.

This brother had led a mission to smuggle two million Bibles under the cover of darkness into China. Two million Bibles! I didn't grasp the significance of this until later, when I was reading his autobiography. Two million Bibles! I was in the room with greatness and I missed it. What was I thinking?

Well, for one thing he came across so humble. He didn't pat himself on the back or make a big deal out of what he had done. He was very careful to give all of the credit to the Lord for what was going on in his life. Maybe you've heard of his associate, Brother Andrew, who is famous for smuggling Bibles into the Soviet Union in the decades after WWII.

My point is that sometimes we miss Jesus because of His meek and gentle spirit. And we forget that through Him all things were created, that in Him is ultimate reality, and that through His cross He spoiled (rendered spoiled or inoperative) the powers of darkness. We forget that Jesus has liberated all of those who have come to God through Him, so that they are no longer regulated by rules and regulations, but are heirs with Him of God. That is the Jesus who deserves all praise and in Whom we all should keep growing. We must be planted in him, abiding in Him, and not dependent on the world's philosophy to get us by.

Sometimes we are too easily swayed by the wind of our culture. If some deep baritone voice announces that we descended from apes, men are more often convinced by the inflection of the voice, than they are the truth of the matter and the evidence. At times we are swayed by the personality of some professor who catches our attention, but is anti-Christ in his thinking. Yet people flock to him because of his charismatic tenor. The Colossians were in this boat.

The fallacy of Gnosticism, which proliferated in the first century, was appealing because men could feel like they possessed secret god -knowledge that made them the insiders. This secret knowledge was merely a man-made philosophy designed to make its adherents feel like they were the "knowing ones." They reduced Jesus to a non-man, kind of like a phantom; perfect, but because he wasn't really human He could not be considered a man. To the Gnostics, all material things were evil and only spiritual entities were good. And so they concocted a notion that God is a string of aeons—emanations of light or god—and that only those with special knowledge can enter into the light. This knowledge made them feel extra-spiritual, but they ignored the fact that Jesus lived among men as a man, eating and sleeping and walking and talking just like all other men.

To the Gnostic, knowledge was the road to reality, or progression to godhood, or light, but with Paul the truth or reality was in the man Jesus.

That's why Paul said, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form." Paul goes on to say that because Jesus is the reality behind all things, we should not let anyone set up a phony spiritual standard through which we ought to become "spiritual." Jesus is all that's needed.

Are you in Jesus?

Have you committed your life to Him?

If so, then you are complete in Him. His fullness is your identity.

Your sins have been removed like a spiritual circumcision.

You are now attached to the Head, Jesus, and are strengthened and supported by Him.

God's blessings come from the Head,

Pastor Steve

"A Word to Husbands and Fathers"

October 7 - Colossians 3:1 – 4:1

I've been a husband for 36 years and a father for 33 and a papa for 10. I am very fortunate to have the wife and kids that I have. We've had our share of difficulties like everyone else, but for the most part I have been very fortunate. Right now I feel very connected to them.

For me, the word "connected" has been the key to enjoying an ongoing growth in our relationships. You just can't grow when you are disconnected, just like you cannot communicate with someone when the line has been disconnected. You could yell and scream into the phone, but it would do no good because you are not hooked up any longer. There must be a connection with the person we want to be close to, or we will automatically grow apart.

How many people do you know that have said something along the lines of "we just drifted apart," and before you knew it they were not interested in each other any longer. As a counselor I hear this scenario regularly. Two people who started out head over heels in love with one another can barely remember those times as they relate to me how far they have drifted away from each other. They are so isolated that it is tough for them to see a way back together. As they drifted they lost hope. Life became a drag and there seemed to be no end in sight the way they were going.

Staying connected with the people we love is a very important decision we must all make. If we don't, we will drift. That is the bottom line. If you were to ask me today if I am connected with my middle child, I could tell you. I know. I just know. Connection is a felt condition. Let me ask you, if you are married, are you connected to your spouse today? If you said "Yes," then my next question is how do you know the answer to that question?

Here's what I'd say. Let me give two realistic scenarios:

1. I feel connected because yesterday my wife and I were able to go to lunch and talk. We discussed a few goals and made plans to go out again next week. We both truly enjoyed our time together. We held hands, hugged some, and exchanged words of commitment.

2. I don't feel connected lately because just a few hours ago we exchanged biting remarks. We didn't even try to resolve the situation but left each other with a feeling of anger on both sides. I am thinking about how insensitive she was and I am telling myself that I will not talk about it until she comes to me. Dinner tonight should be a pretty cold occasion.

This is true when it comes to our kids as well. We know when we are connected and we know when we'd like to wring their necks. I was talking to someone lately who was having trouble with one of her kids. We got to talking about the challenges of disciplining a kid who was once again going through the "me" stage of life. As we chatted I told her about a time my two boys were fighting in the back seat of the car. Honest to goodness, I was tempted to pull over and let them out, then take off. I could feel my muscles steering the wheel to the roadside, and it was only reasonable resolve that forbade me from doing this foolish thing. But believe me, I wanted to do it. At that point we were pretty disconnected. You know what she said? She said that she had done that very thing. Of course she came back soon afterward and picked her kid up, but she had actually done it. She has more guts than I do.

Sometimes our disconnectedness from the kids can lead to tension in our marriage. Once we begin to disconnect with one person we will be more apt to disconnect with almost everyone. This is where some people turn away from the people they love and connect with Jack Daniels. The problem is that Jack will take us places that we never intended to go. Jack will lead us down the road of ISOLATION. When we disconnect from people, we will go down the people-less road that always leads to ISOLATION. Isolation is what we should try to avoid at all costs. Isolation is your enemy. Do not let yourself step one foot down that path.

Let's face it; there have been marriage problems from the very beginning. And troubles with kids go way back as well. Remember that Adam and Eve may have been together in their disobedience, but the results were the death of their perfect relationship. Then the kids didn't get along and the one kid killed the other and then tried to cover it up. From the beginning, we knew we were in trouble.

Generally speaking, Jesus spoke to families indirectly. He talked about how families would be disrupted by the extent of an individual's commitment to Him. And He taught that we ought to show respect for all: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," for example. When we respect our mate and our kids we will stay connected. Jesus taught us to forgive those who had something against us. Forgiveness keeps us connected to the ones we love. Paul, on the other hand ,was more specific about the duties of the husband and wife and kids. Paul probably got questions from members in the church who were struggling with God's will regarding their relationships.

Sometimes I'll hear, "I love my partner but I'm not 'in love' with him." Do you understand what is being said? I think they have a level of commitment, but do not have all of the happy feelings that a relationship sometimes brings. I tell them to love their partner if they love their partner. Show them your commitment even if you do not feel like it. Put one foot in front of the other and make a step in the right direction. Paul writes down here one of God's commands: for the husband to love his wife. He makes no allowance for how they may be feeling about things. Life is difficult, and our feelings go up and down, but love never fails. Also, what's done in love will create a stability and connectedness in the relationship that will prepare the couple for future challenges.

Paul qualifies this love with a very practical point: he tells the men not to be so harsh. Isn't that just what the doctor ordered? We are so tempted to be too harsh. We men like to take control by running over the very person we want to be connected with. Harshness doesn't translate into closeness. When we are harsh, we lose the respect of our wife and kids, don't we? I would admit that this has been a weakness for me over the years. I love my wife and kids, but I am often too harsh towards them. Usually for me that means that I raise my voice to a deafening level and demand that what I want done is done. Come to think of it, I'm subtler with my wife; I can be mean with her without raising my voice.

If harshness is followed by remorse and a request for forgiveness, then you can re-connect. Make sure that the person you hurt is given enough time to truly forgive. Sometimes they may offer forgiveness because they think they have to, but inside they are still struggling with how you acted. You do your part, and let them process it. You will know when there is a genuine re-connect.

There is a point where we can be too tough on our kids. We can break their tender spirits. Paul says not to "embitter" them. Have you left a sour taste in your kids' mouths? If so, it is possible you disciplined them for the right reasons in the wrong way; you went overboard. I heard a story of a father who made his kid stay out in the dark all night even though the child was scared stiff of the outdoors at night. That was too extreme. Kids can take only so much and then they get discouraged. They may then feel disconnected from their father and would rather not relate with him then spend time being pushed around.

How are you doing?

Are you connected with _____ today?

What do you have to do to reconnect? Go ahead and push Control-Alt-Delete and start over.

"God, we want to be connected with You. We need Your help to connect with the people we love. Thank you for making us to be connected with others. Give us the courage to re-connect with those we have been too isolated from lately. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

God's blessings keep us connected,

Pastor Steve

"Devotions"

October 8 - Colossians 4: 2-18

What do you do every day? I'm talking about something that you do without fail each and every day of the year. You are committed. You are devoted. You would rather keel over dead than not do this thing that drives you over and over again. Some people struggle with this; they can't think of one thing they do every day. They would even say there is a day every now and then that they don't brush their teeth.

Without talking too much about this, I'm sure you can see the benefits of consistently doing something every day. Practice makes perfect. Years ago I listened to some tapes by a guy named Earl Nightengale, and he said some things that stuck with me. One of the points he made was that a person could become an expert in any field by spending at least 15 minutes a day in that subject, either studying it or doing it, whatever it might be. When you think about that it really does make sense. It may take 20 years, but think about the number of hours you would have put in by that time. To me it is common sense. You're going to spend those 20 years some way. What's better, becoming an expert at something you enjoy or watching TV? There's really no comparison, is there?

What is it that you are devoted to consistently? That's a little redundant, isn't it? If you're devoted to something, you will be consistently committed as well. Last weekend a gentleman approached me before church and, with tears in his eyes, asked me to pray for his mom, who had been dealing with some heart issues. His devotion to his mom touched me. I could easily tell that it would mean so much for him if I said a prayer for her. So we prayed right there in the parking lot. When I was done there were even more tears

in his eyes. Another example is my wife's devotion to our kids. She would not miss one of their games if she could help it. She even goes to away games and tournaments. Our three kids were in three different sports and they played all through the week, sometimes on the same day. She doesn't let that distract her; she went to one game and then the other. So it was soccer from 4-6 p.m., and then off to volleyball from 6-8 p.m. Then we'd come home and eat some dinner. She was devoted to her kids.

The best motivation for devotion is love. Guilt isn't good. Neither is self-glorification. Obligation is an OK motive, but it doesn't hold a candle to love. Look at young lovers. Man, are they devoted to one another. Unfortunately, later on the devotion seems to wane. Why? They begin to let their love grow cold. When the love diminishes, so does the devotion. If we set our affection on and devote ourselves to something, we will love it. And the reverse is true as well; if we love something actively we will commit to it and stand up for it and promote it.

Allow me to talk for a moment about another example. I love the TIP program. T.I.P. stands for Trauma Intervention Program. TIP people are well-trained individuals who show up on the scene of very difficult events in people's lives to administer emotional first aid. I have seen TIP in action. I have seen it work over and over. Where there has been a fire or a death or a bad accident or someone in serious trouble, TIP is called. A gracious TIP volunteer arrives on the scene and does what he is trained to do. TIP volunteers are devoted to helping perfect strangers during very difficult times. The people who are helped often meet that devotion with gratitude. At the scene, the victims are usually pretty oblivious to TIP's presence, but afterwards, when the emotional part of things settles down, then they express appreciation for the devotion and love of their TIP volunteer.

Let's get to our Bible reading today. Paul says, "Be devoted to prayer..." Paul says giving ourselves ever more heartily to prayer is worth our time and attention. Why? I think because of the difference it had made in his own life, and also because he knew what Jesus had said about prayer. One of my favorite Jesus verses on prayer is Luke 18:1, "Men ought always to pray and not lose heart." So based on that thought and Paul's own experience, he commands us by the Spirit to devote ourselves to prayer.

When we are devoted to prayer, we show our devotion to the Lord. We are devoted to those persons with whom we spend the most time conversing. Has prayer had an impact on you yet? If not, it's time to try it on for size. Let's carve out some time today for prayer. If you have even 10 minutes to pray, go ahead and do it. Take the step to be alone with the Lord and begin talking to Him after a moment or two of quiet. Allow time to listen as well as talking. God will speak to you, usually through reminding you of something in his word. God speaks through His word.

I recommend a prayer group or prayer partner. Spending time alone is good, but also think about a small group to pray with. The other members will be able to spur you on in your prayers.

Also, don't forget to lean on the Holy Spirit as you pray. He will neatly lead you in your prayers. He will internally show you the way you ought to pray for things.

If someone asks you to pray for them, make sure you do it right away. If you can, pray with them right on the spot even if you are talking to them on the phone. Let's pray everywhere and in every way. Don't delay prayer; make it your first reaction.

What could you do this week to move in the direction of devotion to prayer? Let's write a few goals in this respect in the margin of our Bibles next to Colossians 4.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings are yours in prayer,

Pastor Steve

1 THESSALONIANS

Day 282

"Let's Check Our Motives"

October 9 - 1 Thessalonians 1:1 - 2: 16

Honest to goodness, I want the best for you. I want you to be rich in the things that are lasting. I want for you to love God, to serve Him, to know Him, to work through the difficulties of maintaining a good relationship with Him. I want that for you. Some of you I know well and others I haven't even met but that doesn't matter to me. I want to see good things in your life and I want you to experience the good grace of God. I know my heart well enough to be certain that I say these things truthfully.

We are all on a journey and are all growing at different rates. In this process, though, I believe the heartbeat we all share is love for God and others. That is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (look again at Romans 5:5). We want to love and be loved. When we are loved in this way our lives become rich and fulfilled. When you compare this with the selfish pursuits many of us have been on, there is really no true comparison. We want God to grant us the kind of love that changes a person from hard to soft, from inflexible to flexible, from self-centered to Christ-centered and others-centered.

Remember, Jesus was a perfect man. He was inwardly immune from all of the effects of sin. I wonder if he ever had a cold. He had a perfect body, but I don't know whether he got sick or not. My suspicion is that His perfection extended to His physical life, but I'm not totally sure about that. But inwardly, at the control center of His life, was only perfection. His motives were always true-blue. What He said never had to be taken back. Every word was a well-crafted word from God.

But let's think practically too. If Jesus asked for directions, or stopped to use the facilities, or was having lunch at the local pub, or was bathing, he probably talked like everyone else. But even then He was acting and speaking out of pure motives. Paul said to Titus, "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure, but even their minds and consciences are defiled." Jesus was always pure. One hundred percent. His motives were right and second to none.

After Paul left Thessalonica, his enemies began to fabricate an attack on his character. They were Jews who opposed the message of the gospel. They, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, were opposed to a Jew embracing the message of Jesus as the Messiah. They believed that Jesus was an imposter and didn't deserve the designation "Anointed One." Therefore, it's no wonder Paul uses his letters to the fledgling church to vindicate his true motives.

Motives are so important. They are the "why?" of why we do things; the fuel of our lives. Most of the time we are aware of our motives, aren't we? Whether they are pure or not, we know what they are. Sometimes, however, I think even our own motives belie where we really are because we are confused from time to time. Upsetting circumstances can do this, as well as a challenge from someone who catches us off guard. Maybe we were going along thinking everything was just fine and out of the blue someone comes along and challenges our intentions. We shake our heads and look baffled because we honestly can't say what motivated our actions or words.

Someone recently asked me about something I had said to her a while back. She wanted to know why I said it. Honestly, I didn't remember saying anything of the kind. She even remembered what she said back to me. She was concerned that my comment was negative against her. Well, I knew that I didn't feel any negative feelings about the subject she had brought up. As a matter of fact, I was pretty much ambivalent about it. I'm sure you have had a situation like this. Guessing someone else's motives is a tricky business. It's better to ask if you think it's important, like my friend did. I just wish she had given me the benefit of the doubt.

Paul makes several comments about his motives. These words will help us to think about what propels us too. Paul says that his true motive is to please God and that he was not as concerned about man's applause. Paul lived for an audience of One—God. This, of course, will force his critics to think of Paul's work for God and will remind them of his miraculous conversion to Christ. It's important to note that Paul was aware that God was testing his heart. He didn't need man's approval, because the Lord was weighing his heart from day to day. I think this knowledge led him too. What I mean by this is that Paul would trust that God was directing him to go here or there and to do this or that, based on how strongly he believed the Lord was working on his heart.

Then Paul talks about flattery and greed. He makes it clear that these twins were not members of his family. He knew that he was not driven by self-promotion or affluence. He was a Jesus man all the way. He was doing what he was doing for God and not for any man.

What can we learn from this?

Think about our own motives. Confess bad motives for forgiveness.

Open our hearts to God's work in them.

Don't worry so much what people think about us.

Expect criticism if you make God the Leader of your life.

Ask God to help with your motives, that they would be pure.

God's blessings help us to check our motives,
Pastor Steve

Day 283

"Pray Earnestly"

October 10 - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Let's Pray Every Day and in Every Way,

"Excuse me, Lord," she said and got up in mid-sentence from prayer to answer her classroom door for a student. Mrs. Peak knew the secrets of prayer. I had learned early on in our association that prayer for her was more than a discipline; it was her life. She lived to pray and she prayed to live. I saw the fruits of a life of prayer wrapped up in that old-fashioned little lady and I wanted to know more about prayer's depths.

Time in prayer is never wasted. Prayer is to God, as conversation is to bosom buddies. Prayer unites. Prayer is the vehicle for relationship. Prayer is the greatest privilege a person has on earth, and it glues people together with the oneness Jesus prayed about in His model prayer of John 17. We can squander time in many areas of our lives, but in prayer we will always go away with a sense of time well spent.

I was so impressed by Mrs. Peak's faithfulness that I asked her if she'd like to get together with me for prayer. That request turned into a classroom of experience that has not since been equaled in my experience. I have sat under doctors of theology and have heard some of the premiere teachers in the Christian church, but no speaker or seminar has come close to rivaling the education I received as I sat week after week with Mrs. Peak and bowed my head in prayer. You see, prayer is not learned by theory but by practice.

The thing that took me most off guard was the way God entered into our times and directed the conversation. There was a real sense that the Holy Spirit began at some point to direct our prayers in certain directions. One minute we were praying about this or that, and then out of the blue one of us raised a topic that each of us felt was very appropriate for the times we were living in. I guess I'd say we were in sync and hitting the "will of God target" while we prayed. That had to have been God's work, because if we were to merely try and figure it out on our own I know I couldn't pull it off.

Like all other Christian schools we needed students to survive. I was the principal and Mrs. Peak was a teacher who had taught there for 30-plus years. Therefore, pretty regularly we'd pray for the progress of the enrollment situation. Well, one day while we were praying it seemed like the Lord was putting a particular number in my mind for the next go-around of registrations. So I prayed about that number. When we finished, Mrs. Peak thought that was quite a faith step to ask about such a number, but she was more than happy to agree with me about it. When the numbers started to roll in and the superintendent was pleased beyond compare, Mrs. Peak and I simply looked heavenward and gave thanks. We knew where our bread was buttered.

Paul prayed throughout his life. He prayed as a Pharisee. And when the Lord sent Ananias to find Paul in Damascus, He told him that Paul was praying. I'm sure the tenor of his prayers had changed dramatically after he met Jesus on the road. Before, prayer was about form and ritual. Now prayer was his link with the living Lord. Real praying is from the heart; it connects us to the Lord in a living way.

Paul's prayer in our reading today is that he would be able to once again visit the Thessalonians and build their faith. He talks about praying earnestly night and day so that this hope would become a reality. He wanted to be an encouragement to those he had won to Jesus. He wanted God's will for their lives, and would do all he could to see their spiritual development.

Notice the motive of Paul's prayers. Prayer is always more meaningful when it is accompanied by ministry to others. Then we can most certainly pray in the will of God and be assured that our prayers are on target. Remember that God looks at the heart and He wants to give us the pure desires of our hearts.

Have your prayers been dragging lately? Do you want to spend more time in prayer, but feel interrupted by TV and the radio and the phone? Take some time today to simply bow before the Lord and let Him move you in prayer one way or another. The Spirit will pray for us on the inside with expressions too deep for words (remember that from Romans 8?).

God's blessings meet us at prayer time,
Pastor Steve

Day 284

"Moral Boundaries"

October 11 - 1 Thessalonians 4: 1-18

God Always Gives Us Much Hope,

I was once in a taxicab barreling through the streets of Cairo, Egypt. It would have been quite a positive and memorable experience, except for the fact that my life was flashing before my eyes. It seemed to me like there were no rules of the road whatsoever. Cars were coming and going from all angles; the cabbie slowed only momentarily when he reached an intersection where cars were blocking his pathway. I don't think there was a speed limit either. We were bookin' it!

When there are no boundaries, life is chaotic. Recently a hurricane ravaged the southeastern part of our country. What was so upsetting in the aftermath of the storm was the rampant looting of homes and stores and businesses. People thought that the things that belonged to others could be theirs because of the circumstances. Stealing is stealing though, and the laws against stealing were declared by God to reflect the justice of His nature.

We all live within certain boundaries from day to day. Some of us like to push the limits of those boundaries in the name of freedom, but the truth is that we often hurt others or ourselves when we cross the lines God gave us.

Could you imagine a sporting event with no lines? What would a baseball game look like with no foul lines, base lines, bases, or umpires? How about a football field with no sidelines, yardage markers, or end zones? What about a basketball court with no boundaries, free throw lines, shot clock, or rules about fouls? It would be mayhem. No, the lines in our lives are good and I think most rational thinkers would agree. We like to compete within the limits set us for us, so that we feel like there is an equal playing field.

In our reading today Paul brings us back to the importance of sexual morality. He gives us the boundary lines that will enable us to live in a sexually healthy way. His approach is to warn the church not to act like those without God, who blur the lines so badly that anything goes, no matter what the consequences or who's hurt. He says that the Gentiles erase the lines and do whatever feels good at the time. They do not practice self-control or discipline their bodies to do the right thing. Not unlike the free love (actually free sex) movement in America in the '60s and '70s, Paul witnessed the moral bankruptcy of his culture in the first century. The lines may have been blurred by the culture around him, but in Paul's mind the standard for a child of God remained crystal clear, according to God's blueprint.

God created man to be either celibate or monogamous. He created man and woman in His own image so that they could experience meaningful relationships. This "intercourse," this "dialogue" was designed to be a microcosm of the relationship God desires with all of us. God wants us to treat one another with respect. We are not built to use other human beings for our own gratification. This includes images of humans that can so easily pull us into their web.

Remember the state of things before the flood and before the destruction of Sodom? Sexual immorality was out of control. People were using whoever they "needed" to fulfill their own base desires.

Make no mistake about it, the devil is on the loose and he has an eraser in his hand to try to get rid of the moral boundaries in your life. When he came to the first couple in the garden he spoke cunning words about how exalted they would feel once they disobeyed God. They would be like gods, he said. He encourages the same thing with sexual sin. He tempts you to do the sexually secret and naughty thing in order to give your life some pizzazz. He tells you that what you're missing out on is an extra-marital affair where you will experience adrenaline-producing power, and the sensation of being on top of the world. What he doesn't tell you is that you will fall off that mountain so fast you'll wish you had never heard his hissing words. James says that we ought to resist the devil and draw near to God. Once near to God, we will be able to see the boundaries that keep us safely away from a world of hurt and regret.

Paul makes it clear that the principles he shares are not the words of men, but the words of God. Therefore, if you reject them, you reject God. He also reminds us that we have the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the counselor, the helper, the comforter who makes Jesus distinct for us. He will remind us of the truth and bring the playing field back into focus.

God's blessings are within the lines,

Pastor Steve

Day 285

"Good Spiritual Advice"

October 12 - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

How are Things Going?

Do you ever take a power nap? The secret is not to fall asleep for too long. If you do you'll be in trouble because you'll wake up groggy and cranky. On the other hand, a 10-minute break for zzz's can give you the pick-me-up you need to keep going. Since my alarm on my watch broke I've been having trouble keeping it to only ten minutes though.

Paul is a master at giving us spiritual boosts, like little power naps for the day. At the end of 1 Thessalonians he strings together several poignant points for us to use. They're kind of like spiritual vitamins. The more regularly we take them the better. And before you know it, we'll feel much more spiritually fit. Another way to look at it is by using a dumbbell illustration. The heavier the weights we lift and the more often we lift them, the more progress we will make in our program. If we were to liken that fact to these truths in 1 Thessalonians, we can see that we need to practice them regularly before we will see any progress in our spiritual discipline. Just like the power nap gives us a new start in the day, we need spiritual refreshers too.

Let's catalog Paul's words and make a comment or two on each of his points:

Honor your leaders. Take the time to pray for your leaders and from time to time let them know that you are supportive of them. Encourage them.

Live in peace. Practice being as peaceful toward others as you possibly can. Avoid arguments that are not constructive. Let Christ's peace dwell in you.

Be assertive in reaching out to others. Some people are idle, others are timid and some are just weak. Paul asks us to reach out and encourage each kind of person. Is there someone in your life right now whom you could encourage?

Practice kindness. Were you kind to others today? If not, there's always tomorrow.

Always be joyful. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Be full of the Spirit and practice being joyful. Remember, it takes focus on Christ to be joyful in difficult times or circumstances. Take a look at Acts 16 where Paul and Silas are in jail and still worshipping God.

Pray.

Give thanks. God wants this.

Listen to the Spirit. Be open to the Spirit talking to you and leading you. Take a moment right now to open your heart to the work of the Spirit. Paul qualifies this advice by saying we must be careful not to equate every impression we get with the Spirit. Test every impression with the solid Word of God. Anything contrary to the Word is not of the Spirit.

Do people ever ask you for spiritual help or ad-

vice? Take a look at the spiritual ammunition we just covered. Any of these areas would be a good place to take someone who was interested in spiritual insight. It's good to have this kind of help available so you can go to it in time of need. God will use these short thoughts at just the right time so that you can build someone up.

Have you ever been with someone who needed to find a Word from God to help them and your mind went blank? That has happened to me more times then I can tell you. Can you see yourself using this chapter to guide someone closer to the Lord? Think about how simple that might be.

For example, a friend is feeling upset because of her circumstances and she doesn't know what to do. I would ask her to carve out a bit of time to have a heart to heart talk with God. I would simply invite her to pray about her circumstances and commit them to God. I might ask her if she believed that God was in charge of her circumstances and at work in her life? If so, we could talk about the reasons to give thanks. Hopefully this would excite faith in her so that she could go away trusting the Lord rather than her circumstances.

What if a person thinks that God is telling them to do something? We can pull out of this chapter some very helpful advice. First of all, it needs time for testing. Is it in line with God's Word? Does it correspond with the way God deals with people generally in the Word? Is it a good thing? Does it have any evil connotations? Do the good and avoid the evil. God is not telling you to leave your spouse for that guy at work. That's evil. Has someone been on your heart to help financially? That's good, go ahead. Should you take that step up at work even though it means stepping on someone else to get there? That doesn't sound good; avoid a move like that. Put it all to the test before you make a rash decision. People make unadvised decisions every day and the consequences can be very disastrous.

Which applications do you see? Take a few minutes today to apply something in your life to 1 Thessalonians 5. The truth is unified, but the applications are endless. Try them on for size and then share them with a friend.

The more we are in the Bible, the more we will feel comfortable giving it to others. First though, let's get in the habit of applying it to ourselves. We need to build ourselves up in the Lord so that we can build others.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.
God's blessings come in bite-size pieces,
Pastor Steve

2 THESSALONIANS

"Take Heart, Judgment Is Coming"

October 13 - 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

God's Grace To You,

In the end no one will "get away" with anything. It would be better to come clean now, because a day of reckoning is on the horizon. No man can hide from the God who knows all and sees all.

Second Thessalonians, like much of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, was written to clear up misconceptions about apocalyptic events that would shortly come to pass. Paul had it on good authority that the judgments of God would "soon" descend on those who rejected the Savior during his time here on earth. This explains some of the cryptic statements Jesus made right at the end of His life:

While being led to crucifixion, the Bible says,

"A large number of people followed Him, including women who mourned and wailed for Him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then, "'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23: 26-31).

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," (Luke 21: 20-24).

"As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you ad the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you," (Luke 19: 41-44).

After Jesus was crucified and resurrected, the Holy Spirit established the church. The gospel was then extended to the Gentiles, but the Jews as a whole rejected the message and the ministry of their former colleague, Paul. Wherever Paul went, the Jews opposed him. These opponents of his would follow up his visits with slanderous and misleading accusations. People were then forced to go with the flow by conforming to the general attitude of the Jewish leaders, or show themselves to be dissenters by going with Paul's message of salvation in Jesus.

Let's go back to the first letter to the Thessalonians and quote Paul there:

"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all

men in their efforts to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last," (2:14-16).

I tend to believe that what Paul is talking about in 2 Thessalonians is a fulfillment of what Jesus said in the gospels. Paul is simply piggybacking on what the Lord has already said, applying it to the difficult times the church is having with the Jewish persecutors. In 70 AD the Romans fulfilled these prophecies of judgment, devastating the city of Jerusalem under the forces of Titus. The descriptions of that annihilation are very similar to the apocalyptic imagery given by both Jesus and Paul.

Let's quote the Jewish historian Josephus on the destruction of Jerusalem to give you a taste of what that time was like.

"Josephus then describes the Romans burning the temple and placing Jerusalem under the ban: 'While the holy house was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children and old men, and profane persons, and priests, were all slain in the same manner; so that this war went round all sorts of men, and brought them to destruction...'" (The Last Days According to Jesus, R.C. Sproul, p. 121).

If nothing else, the destruction of Jerusalem diverted the attention of those who were doggedly persecuting believers in Jesus. The devastation in the holy city traumatized the entire nation of Jews, no matter where they lived. Therefore, it ushered in a time of peace for the church, whereas before they were the target of much cruelty. You can go back to Acts 17 to read about Paul's missionary work among them.

Are you being mistreated in some way because of your beliefs in the Lord? Have your former friends been talking about you behind your back? Do you sometimes feel isolated because the people around you do not understand the spiritual changes in your life? Eventually the Lord will take care of all that. He is patiently giving room for the persecutors to turn.

Remember Paul. He too was once an ardent antagonist of the church. In his own words, he said that he ravaged it. So you be patient also. God will take care of the judgment part of things in His own good timing. In the meantime...

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings will come after judgment,

Pastor Steve

"A Legend In His Own Mind"

October 14 - The man of sin, 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-17

The devil is real. He is at work in the world doing nothing but unbridled bad stuff. He figured in the Biblical story from the beginning and he will be there in the end. Then he will be thrown into the lake of fire alongside the beast and the false prophet of the beast. In that lake he will remain forever.

The devil has subjects. I'd call them friends, but I think they are merely subject to him because of their decision to follow at one point or another. The Apostle John said, "...the whole world lies in the power of the evil one," (1 John 5:19). Wouldn't it be awful to switch sides and then realize it wasn't as good as you thought it would be, but there was no way back? Revelation 12 indicates that the devil was cast out of heaven with a host of demons; these were merely bad angels who went Satan's rebellious way.

The devil is full of himself. It was pride that got him in the beginning and it is pride that keeps him deceiving those under his control. In Daniel an evil being, probably the devil but maybe the Anti-Christ or Beast, is mentioned several times. He aspires to be God. He is puffed up and thinks more highly of himself than he really is. "By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great," (Daniel 8:25). In several places the Bible says, "He shall speak words against the Most High," (Daniel 7:25). In Revelation Chapter 13, which is full of info on the Beast, it says, "And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words..." (13:5). The devil is a legend in his own mind. He is the most self-absorbed individual in the universe.

Notice above that the Beast is given a mouth of blasphemy. Who is in control of the Beast? The devil, who else? He is the mastermind behind the rebellion against God up to the very end. Paul assures the Thessalonians that the coming of the Lord hasn't happened yet because before this event the apostasy (falling away) will occur and the man of lawlessness will be unveiled. Again, who is behind this man? That wicked devil who has caused so much death and destruction in the world. Jesus said that his purpose was to rob, kill and destroy (John 10:10). He's a bad apple through and through.

Believers ought to focus on Jesus Christ, not the devil. Victory over the devil is through Christ, through his cross and His power. At the cross Jesus disarmed spiritual wickedness and the devil. Now, we shouldn't be ignorant of the enemy's schemes, we just shouldn't major on dealing with the devil. Even James says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Resist the devil and he will flee from you," (James 4:8)

Paul makes it clear that when the devil moves powerfully in the world will be an indication of the end times. He is described as a "man of lawlessness." He makes his own laws and does things in his own way. He acts like God. The problem for the devil is that his wickedness will be judged when the Lord comes, and then he will be consumed by the fire that proceeds from the Lord's mouth. In Revelation this judgment is described as coming as a sword out of Christ's mouth. These images are ways of describing the retribution that he will receive for all of the evil he is responsible for throughout history.

End times issues are like a patchwork quilt. In different books we get pieces to that quilt, each containing clues to many of the events of the end. But we do not get a full picture of the way all events will come down. Especially confusing is the chronology. The sequence of events is hard to discern. Maybe God doesn't want us to focus on this. I would think if He did, then He would have made the events more clear. One thing is for sure: in the end God will prevail, the devil will be judged, the people of God will be vindicated and the unbelievers will be judged according to their works at the Great White Throne Judgment.

The coming of the Lord hasn't occurred yet. It will occur, in God's timing. In the meantime we are called to be faithful and wait. Sooner or later it will happen or we will die and be with the Lord. The second coming is mentioned to motivate us to serve the Lord now—to occupy ourselves faithfully until He comes so that when He does come we may be found doing the things He wants us to do.

We should also learn from the devil's pride. He thought he could go it alone. He didn't need God. I hear people say that from time to time, indicating that they think God is a crutch. Independence from God is folly, because He is the one who holds all things together. When He wraps things up someday it will not be good to be disconnected from Him.

God's blessings come to those looking for His coming,

Pastor Steve

Day 288

"Not Busy…Busybodies"

October 15 - 2 Thessalonians 3: 1-18

I believe that time is our most precious gift. Each of us has the same allotment and each of us decides what to do with it.

Do you use your time or does the clock control you? Do you have the time to do the things that you believe are the most important? That's a silly question. Of course we have the time to do the important things, but the problem is that instead we often elect to do the things that are of least importance because they scream for our attention. The tyranny of the urgent is a mean bully who manipulates us unwittingly to do the things that add up to…well…nothing.

It seems like the good life would be a life of idle ease, of constant relaxation and the freedom to do a whole lot of nothing. Imagine swinging in your hammock throughout the afternoon hours, snoozing and dreaming and unhindered. Now that would be "the life."

People dream of a life like that, but when they reach retirement it usually isn't what they thought it would be. As a matter of fact, I often do funerals for men who die just after reaching retirement. A man like this will have worked all of his life to experience the "good life" and then when it comes, he realizes everything he's losing by saying goodbye to employment. He no longer has the discipline of the time clock or the camaraderie of his fellow workers or the purpose for which he worked all of those years. Grief for all that can hit a guy pretty hard.

It might be too easy to pick on the retired guy. What about the guy who lives for the weekend? What about the guy who feels like he deserves a diversion from the grind? He engulfs himself in the pleasures of weekend mania. Sports and movies and games and new toys dominate his weekly routine. Is that so wrong? Or the guy who spends the entire weekend on the couch mindlessly viewing whatever comes on the tube next. Doesn't he deserve that? I guess it depends on whether you want to use your time for yourself and selfish pursuits or for what matters. It is really up to us to decide how we will use our time.

Among the Thessalonians were those who were idle and busybodies. They lived to meddle in the affairs of others, but really had no personal purpose. I'm sure many had adopted the attitude I sometimes hear today, which is that the coming of the Lord is so imminent that we ought to pull up a chair and forget about hard work. We'll get caught up in the clouds any day now for sure. They were using the coming of Jesus as an excuse to stop working. So they sponged off of others. Paul has some very harsh warnings for the person who adopts this attitude.

Look how the apostle appeals to the Lord's authority: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anybody's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'"

Wow; now that is as plain as day. God does not want his church to be a breeding ground for leeches. He wants each of us to take responsibility for our own walk with Him and live in a purposeful way.

Paul told Timothy the same thing: "…they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to," (1 Timothy 5: 13).

The old adage "idleness is the devil's workshop" is very accurate. We must watch ourselves and examine the way we are going so that we do not get sidetracked from the Way. Yes, there is a way that seems right to a man but the end of that thinking is disaster. To go God's way is to live in the light of His Word and seek to honor Him with all of our lives.

Start with prayer. Make a time with God the first priority and then go from there. Prayer is the vehicle by which we draw near to God and invite Him to guide and direct us. God Himself will teach us about love and walking in the light of His counsel.

Idleness leads to sin.

Purposefulness leads to God's honor.

God's blessings are wrought with calloused hands,

Pastor Steve

1 TIMOTHY

Day 289

"A Violent Man and the Worst Of Sinners"

October 16 - 1 Timothy 1:1-20

Celebrate the Day,

I declare that today is a day of remembrance. It's not Memorial Day or Veteran's Day or the Fourth of July; no, today is the day I want you to think very hard about how far God has brought you from your early days of faith. Today we will remember where we came from, and find, I hope, ample reason to rejoice in Jesus.

Recently a dear friend wrote me a letter I'd like to reproduce for you here.

"Hi Pastor Steve: I was talking to a friend this weekend

she attends the local church in my town. She told me when she

received Christ's salvation she felt a joy beyond compare. But now, although she's still a Christian she has lost that joy she experienced at first. I feel kind of the same way—we do not know how to get our joy back. Any suggestions will be appreciated. Signed, Your friend."

Is there any one else who could easily echo those words? This is not an uncommon experience for the believer. The Christian life is like a dangerous pilgrimage that can take you to some scary, out-of-the-way places. This reminds me of the story of Christian in the Pilgrim's Progress, written by John Bunyan. When he begins his journey, he is met by very difficult obstacles, though he is determined to leave the City of Destruction and make it to the Celestial City. Along the way he is met by many and varied dangers, toils and snares. For a person to find joy along the way, while he is fighting the temptations and trials of his journey, takes much faith indeed.

Let me suggest that you sit down and survey the territory from which you have come. Do you remember the first steps you took as you walked along the road that took you out of the kingdom of darkness? Do you recall the depths of selfishness you were in, and how exciting it seemed that God would receive a sinner who needed grace to get up and go? Think for a moment about your initial experience in the Word of God, and how it seemed like such a mystery until the Holy Spirit began to make the words come alive. Can you make your way around the Bible a lot better now than then? Can you remember where the Sermon on the Mount is and the love chapter and the chapter where Jesus talks about being born again? Just think about how far you have come.

Sometimes we forget what God has done in our lives. It is helpful to imagine where you'd be today without the Lord in your life. What selfish highway would you be on if it weren't for the love and grace of God in your life? It would probably be a lonely road. Think about your loyal Christian friends. Think about the way you feel in worship and how it delights your heart when Christ is honored. Think about how Christ has saved you from the trap of addictions and obsessions that plague so many people. God has brought you a long, long way.

Paul was aware of this in his life. He actually thought he was the worst of all sinners. He had acted so violently against the church that it just amazed him that Jesus had come into his life. So if you know anyone who says that he just cannot see how God can save a wretch like him, remind him of Paul and his outlook about where he had come from. Paul had so much to be thankful to God for. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says that he is who he is by the grace of God. He's saying that if he could be saved, then anybody could.

Where would you be today without Jesus?

More importantly, where are you today because of Him?

Do you see yourself as the "chief of sinners" like Paul?

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," (1 Timothy 1:15).

God's blessings reach violent and sinful men,

Pastor Steve

Day 290

"Ladies, Shhhh!"

October 17 - Philippians 3:1 – 4:1

Men are too passive, women are too boisterous. Don't you hate generalizations? Of course, some men are gregarious and loud and some women are passive, but generally speaking, guys say little and women talk. In some households the gals speak for their guys. Paul says that this is not God's way.

Interestingly enough, this pattern occurred even before the first couple disobeyed God. The perfect man sat by passively and partook of the forbidden fruit after the perfect woman succumbed to the tempter's guile. They believed the devil over God and went the way of the horny toad.

But if God's design is that the man would lead, then why didn't Adam stand up and oppose the anti-God voice? The Scripture indicates that the woman was truly deceived and the man was disobedient. Remember this verse in Romans 5: "...sin came into the world through one man..." (verse 12) and, "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners..." (verse 19). The woman is absent from this accusation. Interesting.

In the church the Lord has set up an orderly way to manage things. This extends to the home, but in 1 Timothy Paul is concerned about the way the church does business when they gather. He is conscious of the need for order and accountability. He is not invalidating the role of women. He is merely laying down His design for Christian life and worship. This discussion reminds me of 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul said some very pointed things about the order of worship. There he is concerned that worship be understandable, and for the male elders to stand up and judge whatever utterances may be given in a worship environment.

God is essentially saying that the buck stops at the desk of the men. They are to lead. They must lead the church and their wives and their kids. That doesn't mean that women cannot give input or may not teach when they are under the authority of a man or men, but they are not to take the role of leader. Paul says clearly, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission."

Mutual submission in the Church under Christ's leadership is always the norm. In Ephesians 5 Paul says that we are to "submit to one another out of respect for Christ." The man's role is not a dominant one, but one of loving leadership. He is to lead by emulating Jesus. He must be a servant-leader. He is to lead as Jesus would, teaching the flock the Word of the Lord so that they, both men and women, can grow up into maturity in the Lord.

Even a woman's style of dress can be significant, because it may indicate whether she is a submissive

type of person or not. If she dresses by putting on the Ritz, she may not be as interested in godliness as she is in drawing attention to herself. You know, every time Matilda enters the meeting hall, every head turns to see what new kind of costly jewelry she'll be wearing or how her hair is fixed. She always parades the latest styles and eye-catching attire. Matilda needs to dial it down and focus on building up the body of Christ rather than her own little thing. Matilda needs to realize that Christ is the head of the church and that she needs to dress and behave more submissively. Am I being reasonable or am I just making you mad? I'm trying to properly interpret Paul's words. Go back and read him and judge my thoughts by what the Bible says.

Men, there is a good lesson here for us. Are you too passive? Do you often say nothing even when you have an opinion? Do you consider yourself "laid back?" That's an excuse I often hear, which is supposed to somehow validate passivity. Men need to be more assertive and loving in their leadership. We need to first simply consider ourselves leaders. Our kids need to know that the final decision on things rests on our shoulders. Their mom may make a decision for the kids, but if the kid complains, he'll have to deal with dad. Dad should be in the driver's seat. Dad should be talking to his wife about decisions and procedures in the home, and when the rules need to be enforced, Dad should be right there enforcing them.

In the church, men should be in roles of leadership. Men need to take the reigns and steer the fellowship so that it goes in an orderly way. It should not be tossed here and there by some new-fangled teaching or some loud voice that wants to take over. When godly men are in places of leadership you can be assured that the church will be moving forward.

Women, try not to take Paul wrong. It is too easy today to let our "liberated" culture dictate the direction of the church and our homes. The lesson for you is to decide if you see yourself in a submissive role. Are you submissive and supportive of your husband? Are you speaking positively about the male leadership in your church? Do you seek to support those whom God has placed over you?

Women are good talkers. I am still amazed at how long my mom could talk on the phone with her mom when I was growing up. I think it was hours at a time. Now my wife can do the same. After I have talked to my mom for half an hour I am pretty much done. She can keep going, but the truth is that I have already run out of things to say. Women sure can talk longer than men.

My question is, what kind of a listener are you? Can you talk without really listening? I'm not accusing you, just wanting to know. Proverbs says that when words are spoken in multitudes, sin is unavoidable. Do you sometimes get in trouble because you have said something too hurriedly and have injured someone with your words? Paul says to us that we need to slow down and be quiet, in church especially.

Let's bow for a moment of silence.

God's blessings work in an orderly way,

Pastor Steve

"Leaders Beware"

October 18 - 1 Timothy 3: 1-16

Leaders in God's church must be called to that task. They also must demonstrate the qualities laid down in this chapter, and they need to be aware of the responsibilities that attend their work. It is a difficult assignment. Those who want to be leaders are doing a good thing, but it is still hard.

It sounds like leaders need to be like Jesus. Now that's a tall order, isn't it? Can you imagine the job description for that employment ad? Wanted: someone willing and able to model the character of Christ. When you think about that long enough—especially if you are a leader in Christ's church—that could be very disconcerting. It might be helpful to take a look in a couple of other sections of Scripture in order to shed some needed light on this topic.

Peter said, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who will also share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away," (1 Peter 5: 1-4). There is that pesky word "example." John said, "Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did," (1 John 2:6).

These kinds of passages can either melt us or motivate us, but they cannot leave us neutral. We who lead are called to take seriously the expectations God has for us. Is there any other way to look at this?

Let's revisit the expectations Paul lays out.

He says we cannot be the kind of person who elicits scorn when our name is mentioned. He says we ought to be committed exclusively to our wives. We shouldn't go overboard in any area except in our commitment to Jesus. We ought to love to hang out with others. We should also be gentle like Jesus and not bully others. Drinking and fighting and materialism ought not to characterize us in our day-to-day lives. Our families ought to be in order, and the kids should be able to express their own faith in the Lord. We must have some spiritual mileage under our belt so that we do not make silly spiritual mistakes that give the devil an advantage. And we should have friends in the community of non-believers so that we can have an effective witness to them. Sound reasonable for a leader in Christ's church? I think so. Does it mean that you have to have each and every quality mastered if you would be an elder in the Body of Christ?

To think that any one leader has mastered all of the qualities of an elder would be to say that he had reached absolute sanctification or perfection. Yet, Paul doesn't seem to be leaving a lot of room for discussion. He just says that these things are the way an elder ought to be. So we ought to take the high road in our interpretation and not attempt to water down the passage to fit our own wants. We can safely say that Paul does not mean that an elder must be perfect in every way at all times, because of what the elder John says in his first little letter at the end of the Bible. John makes it clear that if we had the idea that we never sin, we would merely be deluding ourselves.

Those who lead need the empowering of the Holy Spirit in order to be examples to the flock, as Peter puts it. The Holy Spirit actively enables us to be Christ-like. Therefore, leaders must be continually full of the Spirit in order to be the kind of examples the church needs. Of course the command to be full of the Spirit is for all believers, but that directive is even more pertinent for leaders because of the need to set the pace for others.

Do you desire to lead? Then spend your spiritual energy on being filled with the Spirit. As you overflow with the Spirit you will have what it takes to give to

others the life-changing power of Jesus. If you want to lead, Paul says, that is a good thing, but be careful not to rush into leadership for selfish reasons. Follow Jesus and then turn around and see who is following you. If no one is there right now, don't lose heart; continue to follow Jesus and eventually you will be a fisher of men.

God's blessings come through the elders,
Pastor Steve

"Watch Out"

October 19 - 1 Timothy 4: 1-16

Don't forget to take time for yourself. Over the course of the year we have talked quite a bit about Christian service and what it takes to be a servant of God. The truth also is that servants can sometimes get very wiped out when they do not take time out to refresh themselves.

Do you already do this? Do you take time to relax, reflect, and revive your soul? Do you have a hobby or two that allows you the opportunity to unwind? Is there an appointment on your calendar that you are looking forward to because you know it will be a blast? If so, then you are probably finding enough energy and more to take care of the bigger responsibilities that are required of you.

I have talked to enough people in conflict to know that weariness plays a huge role in upsetting one's well being. When we neglect sleep it will catch up to us in no time. We will automatically become more edgy and demanding of the ones we love. They will wonder if tonight will be Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. You have to take charge of the hours you sleep in order to be balanced. As a matter of fact, I have heard that the experts say that an adult needs nine hours of sleep every night. How many hours do you get?

Paul told Timothy to "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." Timothy had a lot of responsibility in the fledgling church. He was going to follow in Paul's footsteps. Many times in Acts and the epistles Paul refers to Timothy as his own son in the faith. Paul and the young man had a very close relationship. They depended on each other. Paul knew that Timothy would need to balance his life in order to stay healthy enough to lead others. Paul knew the pressures could get horribly intense. And in the heat of the many spiritual battles, it would be easy for Tim to lose focus on what was important. So Paul tells him to watch himself too.

Also, Paul reminds him to make sure his teaching is right on. It would be so easy to drift with the tide and go down the detours that would inevitably pop up. Instead, Paul wants Timothy to hang on to the core teachings so that he will be able to teach the Body of Christ. It was no different back then than now. People are easily led down rabbit trails and neglect the pure teaching of the Word. Also, as we have said many times, truth gives life. The more you hit the target when you study and teach others, the more freedom in Christ the church will experience. Freedom in Christ was a passion of Paul's.

Do you take the time in your schedule to relax? I mean to let your body and mind and spirit kick back. No demanding activity or stress, just good old-fashioned fun. You know what? Spirituality can be fun. If you spent three carefree hours reading the book of Colossians, marking it and praying about its words, believe me, you'd tell me you had a great time. It's fun to be in God's Word. At the same time you will revive your soul. You will fortify your soul and insulate it from the fiery darts of the wicked one.

It is so important to find time to evaluate your life and reflect on what's true. Some people say they do not have one minute in their day to do this. Not even one minute. They may say they are too busy, but the same person will not be too busy to watch a two and a-half hour movie. Why? Because the movie is "relaxing." I wouldn't argue that it is wrong to watch a movie; the only point I'm making is that if we have time to watch movies and TV then wouldn't it make sense to spend some time during our day reflecting on what's important for our lives?

Do you have a spare hour? After reading this message, could you take a full uninterrupted hour and spend some alone time, relaxing and reflecting and reviving your soul? You may have to put something else on hold, but give it a try. See if it doesn't match up to the thing on your agenda and maybe even knock it for a loop. Everybody's busy, but everybody is also stressed out and on edge. Let's get off the merry-go-round today and take some time to know ourselves and do some good business with the Lord.

Make today or a time this weekend a Season of Reflection. Paul told Timothy he and others would prosper if he would take the time.

God's blessings revive our souls,
Pastor Steve

"Keep Yourself Pure"

October 20 - 1 Timothy 5:1-6:2

I have sat with a good number of ladies who have wept with feelings of disgust because of the sinful concessions that they have made to men, sexually. They feel used and mistreated. They feel small. They are confused because "love" did not give them the thing they were most after—acceptance and security and safety. They have sometimes been used and discarded in ways that would make even the most seasoned counselor squirm.

Often these women had been warned about the damage sexual impurity and unhealthy relationships can bring. Maybe they thought they were in love, maybe they feared rejection; for whatever reason, they ignored the warnings.

Why does it seem to be human nature to ignore good and healthy warnings? In 2005 Hurricane Katrina ravaged the state of Louisiana with Category Four winds and rain. There had been fair warning that she was blowing in, but hundreds of people, for a variety of personal reasons, chose to ignore the warning. The results were disastrous.

God's Word warns us for our own benefit. David said in Psalm 19 that the Word of the Lord was the most precious commodity that a person could have. Let's quote him: "The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward," (verses 9, 10).

Sexual purity is probably the most critical topic of our day. Moral laxity and bankrupt values plague our society. Essentially, whatever sells drives the marketers of our day. If exploiting people in the sexual area elevates the bottom line, they'll do it. Kids are growing up with a really flimsy moral backbone. As a result, communities are being guided by unrighteous values. When this happens people end up getting hurt. They are looking for intimacy and love and connection, and

what they get is pain and sexually transmitted diseases and fractured relationships. So how do you live in the world and stay free from its pollution?

You have to be purposeful about your approach to handling moral questions in your own life. Then you must take a stand against the attacks of those who would downplay the importance of your convictions. Taking action against moral weakness means guarding against the things that you allow through your eye-gate and into your mind. This means that you will have to take safeguards when it comes to your use of the internet or the media or any other vehicle through which the rotten stuff can enter.

If you do use the internet there are very good filters that will not allow you or your children to browse sites that would be harmful. It is better safe than sorry in this regard. Sometimes something that seems innocent can lead to something that's not. Once my son was using the computer in my office while I was busy outside. He clicked on music.com, and up popped a porn site. He tried to exit but couldn't. The sites just kept coming up one after another. Finally he gave up and turned the computer off. When I returned, I noticed that he had been online so I decided to check my history. You can imagine the shock I felt as one carnal site after another appeared. My son had gone home in the meantime, but at the moment of the revelation I knew I would be having a tough talk with him. I went home, rounded him up and brought him back to the office. I talked to him about the importance of treating God's gift of sex with respect and explained that those kinds of sites exploited people sinfully. He was trying to interrupt me to tell what had happened, but I was on a roll and didn't want to lose the opportunity to teach him a lesson.

Actually, to his credit, he had already told my wife what had happened. I then felt a sense of pride that he knew it was wrong and these things needed to be avoided. I was amazed that these kinds of "pop ups" were right there on an innocent search for music. It is a lure. It baits you and then leads you down a path of moral destruction.

Paul told Timothy to keep himself pure. Paul knew that the message of the gospel would suffer if the church leaders were involved in any kind of immoral activity. It would be up to Tim to carry the torch once Paul died, and the aged apostle was careful to warn his young son in the faith of the pitfalls of moral laxity. He couldn't afford to follow in the ways of the flesh and give himself over to sensuality. If he did, he would lose personal spiritual power and become ineffective in ministry.

Besides making every effort to guard the images that enter your mind, it is always key to remember God's emergency room in 1 John 1 and 2. There you'll remember that God gives us the process for walking in the light as God is in the light. Once we step foot in the darkness it is essential that we agree with God that our action is sin, confess it, and receive the cleansing forgiveness that God offers in Christ. Without daily cleansing, hour by hour and minute by minute, we will have an impossible time keeping pure.

Christ is the model here, as He is in every area of our walk with God. Jesus was tempted in all ways and yet did not sin. He lived an absolutely pure life. Purity is the result of walking with Him and obeying Him. When He is our focus, the sins in darkness are a lot less appealing. You know you are growing spiritually when the sins that once were alluring are now despised in your eyes. They make you sick. You no longer want their influence in your life.

Paul will tell Titus, "to the pure all things are pure." In other words, while you are in the process of daily cleansing, you will begin to view sin as sin and right as right. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5). That is a benefit worth living for!

God's blessings are pure,
Pastor Steve

"Sound And Godly"

October 21 - 1 Timothy 6: 3-10

Gimmicks come and go. Sensations dazzle for a while and then fade away. There is sometimes a lot of hoopla about almost nothing and then you are left with—well, nothing. Fads are fads. They attract our attention for a time and then they are gone. Take hair-dos for example. In your lifetime, how many different kinds of hairstyles have you been through? In the seventies I had long bushy hair that rested on my shoulders. Enough said.

In the church there are also fads that come and go. Prophecy gurus have been at the forefront of this kind of thing. It used to be that an Israeli general couldn't go to the bathroom without someone using that as an indication of some prophetic significance. In the late '70s there was a "ministry" in Orange, California called The Amazing Prophecy Center. Before the leader ran off with his secretary, he would teach week to week on some new development designed to make his audience believe he had the inside skinny on the second coming. That "amazing" center no longer exists.

The ministry of prophecy has also taken a beating in the church. Self-proclaimed prophets have come and gone, sometimes causing division in the church with their far out "words" from God. These messages have ranged from the mundane to the ridiculous.

Sometimes the "prophet" will just mimic Biblical language and speak like a flowery oracle. "Thus says the Lord, the First and the Last, the Almighty, Yea, my children, I have called you and loved you with an everlasting love. You can trust me to meet all of your needs and take care of you, Yea, I tell you my children that you are the apple of my eye, etc., etc.," No harm done. Really he is just making God's Word sound more imminent and alive. I wonder why he thinks he is more in tune with God to speak this way. Wouldn't God just talk in the way I would normally talk to Him? Jesus didn't seem to have a special accent or emphatic way of saying things that was his "God talk."

Then there are those who have made actual prophetic predictions. I remember a book that guaranteed that the end of the world would happen in 1994. On New Year's Day 1995 those books were on the bargain table. I was in an environment once where a man who was supposed to be a pretty significant voice in the church declared by the Holy Spirit that his colleague would have a boy and God would do great exploits in the boy's life. This was before sonograms. He had a girl. Oops. He wasn't speaking by the Spirit, obviously. It did sound pretty dramatic in the meeting when he proclaimed this prophecy. I'm sure people were impressed at the spiritual insight of the prophet. But he was wrong. Back to the drawing board.

The illustrations could go on and on. So how do I know if something is right or not? Paul gives Timothy instruction in these things so that he can lead the church effectively. Paul knew the time would come when wolves dressed in sheep's clothing would infiltrate Christ's Body. Paul says that there are two tests to determine if some new teaching is of the Spirit or not. This simple approach would help young Timothy keep things prioritized. It must have been difficult for a young pastor to keep his priorities squared away.

First, Paul says the teaching has to conform to sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is the teaching honoring to the Name of the Lord Jesus? Does it highlight Him, or the teacher? Does it promote the things Jesus talked about and did? Can you find a verse in the gospels to confirm the actions of the speaker? Remember, Jesus quoted the Old Testament in His ministry and the apostles quoted the Old Testament and the Words of Jesus. We are to quote all of the above and not promote our own thing.

Someone might say, "Could the Spirit though bring up some new thing today that is not under the umbrella of the prophets, Jesus or the apostles?" The

answer is no. Otherwise, by what authority would we know it was of God? Now, it is no problem drawing good applications from the Bible to help people in various walks of life; but to do so independently would be wrong. Sometimes teachers will bring up topics not covered in the Word, but they are usually exposed for what they are, self-proclaimed prophets. Be careful. The enemy comes as an angel of light. For example, the Mormon angel Moroni is described as an angel of light. The problem is that his words do not conform to the instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, is the godliness test. By the way, before we dive into this one let me say that you need to do both tests. You need to make sure the teaching conforms to the Words of Jesus and then you can use this one. Consider: does the new teaching lead to godliness? Does it promote humility and love? Does it result in spiritual fruit like the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5? Usually when a strong-minded teacher comes on the scene he creates controversy by touting his ideas and drawing people into his camp. This leads to divisions in the Body of Christ. Remember Paul's reaction to this kind of thing in 1 Corinthians Chapter 1? He makes it clear that this kind of behavior does not glorify God or lead to godliness. It only shows that the men involved are spiritual weaklings.

Now take this paradigm and use it as a grid to test whether the new thing you are excited about is really of God or not. If we don't use our heads and test the spirits, we could find ourselves going down a path that leads away from sound doctrine, the teachings of our Master Jesus.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings can be discerned,

Pastor Steve

2 TIMOTHY

"Fearless"

October 22 - 2 Timothy 1:1-18

The way Paul was being treated in prison at the time he wrote this book, he must have had an inkling that his death day was near. This last letter of Paul's was written some time after the period described in the last chapter of the book of Acts. At the end of Acts he was in prison, but had the freedom to come and go. Based on what we read in 2 Timothy, his imprisonment was now more serious. Possibly Caesar Nero had already begun killing the rebels who would only worship a king named Jesus. Paul knew his time was at hand.

Paul was also concerned for the welfare of his true son in the faith, whom he loved dearly. So he writes Timothy one last letter to encourage him to be strong in Christ Jesus. This would mean the possibility of martyrdom if the Roman persecution didn't wane. Paul knew that the future of the church rested on the shoulders of those who would take the gospel around the world. Timothy would be one of the leaders who needed to stand strong in the face of whatever opposition came up.

In Paul's thinking, Jesus had been with him all along. The Lord had visited him at certain crucial points in his ministry. The Lord had guided him from city to city and continent to continent. Even on his way to Rome, when all seemed lost because of a violent storm that sent the ship off course, Paul told the passengers that an angel of the Lord had appeared to him to strengthen him and give him guidance for everyone on board. He reasoned that if the Lord had been constantly faithful so far, then he would be with him up to the end. He says, "...I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day," (1:12).

If you are not currently involved in a ministry, do you believe that there is a ministry out there for you? What part of the gospel work, as Paul calls it, are you most interested in? What obstacles are in your way to keep you from taking a more active role in spiritual ministry? I think prayer is the place to begin on this matter. Are you praying for family and friends who have not yet received Jesus and the message of the cross? Prayer helps us set our hearts on the things that will last forever.

Are you like me and Timothy? Are you sometimes timid about your involvement in the good news work? Timothy had stomach problems, and I can't help but wonder if he didn't stress out about the responsibilities he was being entrusted with. I don't know if this is true, but there are other indications in Paul's letters to him that he struggled with being assertive about his faith. Let's take a look at one of these examples.

Paul said to him, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of power and of love and of self-discipline," (1:7). The Apostle John said that it was our faith in Jesus that overcomes the world. Peter said that we need to be ready to talk about the hope we have in Jesus with a polite attitude.

Recently a friend of mine has been dealing with a very difficult situation. Her mom died a few months ago and now her dad is in seriously bad health. She lives in an area that is extremely New Age. Her family relies on cosmic consciousness and crystals and all kinds of anti-Christ practices. Being in that environ-

ment is very tough for my friend. She prays, while her sister uses crystals to try and help their dad. It feels so weak in the face of all of the spiritual pressure.

The enemy uses all kinds of bells and whistles to make it seem like prayer is not an effective tool. But that is merely a deception. Prayer is the most powerful tool, weapon, and practice in the universe. There really is no need for her to be timid about it, but in the light of her circumstances it feels that way. Can you relate to this at all?

Paul wants Timothy to know that the power of God is sufficient. He wants him to believe that his spiritual gift will enable him to do battle. He wants him to be ready to go to battle with the faith that is in Christ Jesus. Paul makes it clear that this power through faith is a gift from God, designed and implemented before the worlds were created. Don't waver in your belief in the power of God; lay hold of it and use it for spreading the good news.

Then there is love. Love does so much. Love disarms. Love sacrifices. When you walk in the Love that God has given you, you will find the patience you need; patience that allows you to wait for God to show you how He is working in someone's life. Ministry is more about what God is doing and less about what we do. I'm not saying that we shouldn't do anything. I only mean that our job is to simply love people and be ready when the Lord opens the door to talk to them about the grace of God in Christ. People will sometimes recognize a spirit of love in you, and it will draw them to you like a moth to a flame. Love is a powerful tool for reaching others.

When God is at work in a person he will manifest sound thinking skills. God will help us to use our noodles. He will enable us to discipline our minds so that we will be prepared to serve Him. Sometimes we neglect our own spiritual disciplines and find ourselves up the creek without a paddle. God works through our minds to give us wisdom and strategies and plans to succeed. A sound mind will keep you from making rash decisions before you have thought the matter through.

Are you a bit timid? Take Paul's words to heart and say them over and over to yourself. "God has not given me a spirit of fear..." Then say the rest of the verse and remind yourself of what God has given you. Another place that parallels these thoughts is Romans 8, where Paul talks about a "spirit of adoption." The basis of this secure declaration about power and love and self-discipline is our family relationship with God the Father. My Dad says I take after Him and He has given me a different spirit.

God's blessings make us fearless,
Pastor Steve

"Let's Argue"

October 23 - 2 Timothy 2: 1 - 26

When was the last time you were in a knock-down, drag-out argument? I don't mean a disagreement; I mean you really wanted to do some serious damage. You were right, he was wrong, and that was that. You were ready to make your case at any expense.

There's a little line in the fourth chapter of Genesis that simply says, "Cain spoke to his brother Abel." Then he killed him. Words can kill too. I wonder if Cain was giving Abel the business before he did him in. Murder begins in the heart, works its way through the mouth, and then leaps into action.

Some people argue boisterously. Some argue with subtlety. I think they call that being passive-aggressive. Some can argue because they really want to get to the bottom of the matter and understand the other person. Others argue because it is a personal thing and they just want to win an argument.

Paul warns Timothy several times not to make a big deal about petty things. He tells him not to argue about hair-splitting issues that will lead to division and hard feelings. In the light of the glory of the gospel, it just isn't worth it. Paul talks about those who love to quarrel about the fine print in genealogies, or myths, or controversial subjects that get your blood pressure up. Paul doesn't want Timothy focused on these things, because they are not the main things. That doesn't mean that no doctrines are worth sticking up for. Of course some are. But it is very easy to enter into a dead-end argument.

Have you ever gotten into an argument with someone and found that by the time you left you had forgotten what the original subject was? That is an indication that you were arguing for the sake of pride, and not to find out the truth. One of the reasons couples have so much trouble resolving conflict is that they cannot stay on one subject. They begin with one issue, but as soon as it gets a bit heated, out comes the dirty laundry list of past wrongs that they use to whip their partner. It is hard to stay on one subject. On a whim, our emotions turn our minds in different directions. If we could constructively come to a compromise on issues, agreeing what the responsibilities of each party will be, then we would be on our way to resolving a conflict and making it water under the bridge. Then we could go on to something else.

The section we read today at the end of 2 Timothy 2 is one of my favorite parts of the Scripture. Essentially, it says there is no need to quarrel because God is the one who will straighten people out. Our role is to state the truth as gently and clearly as we possibly can. God's role is to lead the other person to a change of mind. If God does this for them, then that person will escape the talons of the evil one. If God doesn't loose them, he or she will continue to do the will of the enemy.

Let's list the requirements of the servant and take a closer look at one or two of them:

The servant of the Lord:

1. Must not quarrel.
2. Should be kind to all.
3. Must be a teacher of truth.
4. Must not be resentful.
5. Should gently instruct those who oppose him.
6. Should be hopeful about God's intervention.
7. Should focus on his own spirituality and walk with God.

Let's camp at that seventh point for a bit. When you and I are good examples, our lives will impact others. If we stoop to the level of an arguer, we will lose the direction God wants us to go. When we complain and argue, we just show that we need help too. Arguers like to pull us into their net, don't they? We must rise above them by instead focusing on the qualities Paul lists: righteousness, faith, love and peace. Those are the kind of attributes we all need. And notice Paul says to do this with others who are pure in heart. We need the encouragement of others to spur us on to love and good deeds.

Number four is important. When we take opposition too personally, we can become resentful. We resent the person and the arguments and the weird feelings it all creates. Then when we run into the person at the market we just dread having to chat with her. She has wounded us with her words, and at that point we'd rather avoid her and be resentful than try to make things right.

It takes the pressure off when you are counting on God to truly convince someone about the truth. We do what we can, but God has to give a person the ability to repent or change his mind and go a different direction. Until then, he is blinded by the "god of this age." Let's trust God's sovereignty in the lives of those who resist the truth and have all kinds of excuses for not practicing it.

I recently spoke to someone who needed to move in a different direction because he was being destructive. This man told me he was a Christian, and then told me you couldn't trust the Bible and that there were hypocrites in the church. Instead of arguing, I gently told him you could absolutely trust the Bible and that there were more genuine people in the church than fakes. I hope he listened. God, grant him repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.

God's Word rocks, and God's blessings untie the shackles that bind,
Pastor Steve

Day 297

"Every Single Little One, No Exception"

October 24 - 2 Timothy 3:1-17

Jesus had the very highest view of Scripture. He said not one tiny mark or accent within the Scriptures would go unfulfilled. Every little bit of Scripture would show itself to be the truth. If your view of Scripture is near- or far-sighted, then you are not with Jesus on this. When Jesus quoted Scripture he didn't pussyfoot around. He quoted it as God's Word. There is no greater authority on the Old Testament Scriptures than the man who is called "The Word of God" (John 1:1-14). But what about the New Testament Scriptures? What did Jesus say about them?

Jesus gave the apostles, his day-to-day companions, the authority to record the New Testament. He said that the Spirit of God would be given in order to lead them into all truth and would bring to their minds the things they would need to remember in order to accurately pen the Holy Scriptures. Remember, the apostles were not outsiders. They were involved in the most intimate matters that Jesus wanted them to know.

I love the way the Apostle John puts it: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon, and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us," (1 John 1: 1-2). They were close. They knew the mind of Christ. They had the Spirit of Christ to remind them of the things that needed to be written down under inspiration.

Paul says that there is a purpose to the Bible. Some people will pick up the Bible and use it any old way they chose. Some will use verses here and there out of context in order to prove some point they want to make. Some will only read the New Testament and say that the Old is outdated and not useful for today. Some will say that the Bible is good to read to make you a better person, but it is full of errors and cannot be trusted. Some people will say that they have tried to read the Bible but couldn't understand a word of it.

Paul says the Bible is for the knowledge of salvation and for guiding the believer's life. In 3:15 he says that the Scripture is able to lead you to salvation. In it is the message of the gospel, the message a person needs to hear and accept before he is welcomed into the kingdom of God. You can also think of the Bible as a map. It is meant to guide your steps and to lead you in certain directions. It becomes the toolbox needed to make it through life. The Bible acts as the agent of Salvation and the means to living the Christian life.

Psalm 119 makes that clear. Let's reiterate here: "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stand firm in the heavens...if your law had not been my delight I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life... To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless," (verses 89, 92, 93, 96).

The Bible is from God, breathed by Him. Isn't that awesome language? He breathed His word. He used humans, but he so moved them that His own breath conveyed words to the parchment. God inspired His own Word. That makes sense. Funny, isn't it, that those who criticize Scripture are thousands of years removed from the very eyewitnesses who penned the Words? I'll go with the Prophets like Jeremiah and Jesus Christ and Paul and Peter and James and John and Jude. How about you?

God's word equips us. If we were going to hike a big mountain for several days, we would need the right gear to get to the top. Believers need the Word to get them trekking.

Paul also says the Word is profitable, or useful, for:

Teaching. God is making Himself clear through His Word. God wants us to know Him, and we need the clear and understandable teaching of Scripture to do that. Good teachers throughout church history have painstakingly made the Word clear to the church.

Rebuking. When we've gotten off course, the Spirit uses the Word to slap us in the face and wake us up to the direction God wants us to go. I'm sure you've experienced that this year, while going through the Bible. You may have drifted off track for some reason, when you read a section of Scripture and immediately realized that you were off track and needed to rectify your situation.

Correcting. Once you realized that you were off track, you needed to know how to get up and going. We've talked several times this year about God's hospital in 1 John 1—keep that passage in mind. When you need spiritual help, you can turn to the Word and to Jesus. God is faithful, and He has helped countless numbers of his children back onto the road.

Instruction in Righteousness. The road that He helps us onto is continuous instruction in the right way to live. Once on this road, you sense the pleasure of God and the fellowship you can have on a daily basis with Him. Remember that the Lord is your Shepherd, and that you have everything you need. He makes you to lie down in green pastures and leads you beside quiet waters. He leads you in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.

How far in your hike up the mountain are you? Do you have all of the tools you will need to make it to the top? Have you left something behind? Do you have Isaiah and Exodus and Luke and Peter in your sack? If not, you can stop and pull out the map and add those tools to your arsenal. God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

God's blessings made His Word inerrant,
Pastor Steve

Day 298

"Keep The Faith"

October 25 - 2 Timothy 4:1-22

It seems like everyone thinks he has faith. Have you ever heard someone say, "Keep the faith?" I'm not sure it has much meaning for most. It sounds spiritual, and like a kind of cool thing to say because it might be a God thing. Isn't it surprising that things the in-crowd says are often very spiritually charged, and yet have little meaning to the one saying it?

The phrase "God bless" sometimes fits into this category. At least God's name is being used in a positive way when someone says this to you. People who rarely ever think about God or spiritual things don't think twice about invoking His Name or giving a blessing on His behalf.

Was there ever a time in your life when you used spiritual jargon but really had no genuine faith in God? Think about Paul's outlook on knowing God. He had the lingo and ritual down pat before he met the risen Jesus. He thought he was very spiritual, but in reality he was far from the one true God.

Like Paul, there are a good number of people today who think they are spiritual because they know some things about God or they make statements in His name. They reassure themselves by talking the God-talk, but their hearts are still a long way from Him. It's hard to admit that you are truly estranged from God and need to reach out and find Him. It is easier to learn a few key chosen phrases and associate occasionally with others who are considered spiritual.

When Paul talked about keeping the faith, it

meant so much more than can be fully explained. To Paul, it meant his life. It wasn't just a quaint phrase or slogan. He poured out his life for the Lord and for the church. For Paul there was a big difference between "faith" and "the faith." "Faith" can be very vague. Really, it can mean almost anything. You can have faith in anything that comes into your mind. "I have faith in myself," I once heard someone say. Faith in and of itself does not mean anything. In Acts there is a story of a man who had seven sons who tried to cast out demons like Paul. The demons said that they knew Paul, and they knew Jesus, but these men were strangers (they didn't have the faith). As a result, the demons had their way with them.

Paul's view was pregnant with meaning because it had changed his entire life. He went from being Paul-centered to Christ-centered; His life went from being about him to being about Christ and making Christ known. He gave up his life to find life in Jesus Christ. Now at the end he says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," (2 Timothy 4:7). This wasn't any fight, or any race, or just any faith. It was the fight, the race, and the faith. Jesus had said that He was the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6).

That little definite article "the" seems so insignificant by its size and place in the sentence, but it actually is very weighty in meaning. "The" acts as a pointer, as a highlighter if you will, maybe a floodlight. It sets apart the noun in an exclusive way. If Jesus was one among many truths, then the article would not have been needed. John uses it to make sure that we understand the exclusive nature of Christ's nature. He is "the truth." This declaration was no flippant statement; he was saying that the gospel had been the substance of life, both for him and for all of those who embrace the saving power of Christ.

In Alcoholics Anonymous they encourage their people to focus on a "higher power." This person or object is meant to remind you that you need someone or some thing bigger than yourself. They don't really care what you call your higher power, as long as it foots the bill. To them it doesn't matter what it is, as long as it seems like it is helping you. The problem with this approach, of course, is that faith in ourselves, or in worthless objects, or in faith itself, will not hold up once the pressures of life descend.

It is a good time for all of us to reconsider our commitment to the fight, the race and the faith. It is far more than church attendance. It's good to go to church, but there is more. It is far more than singing a few inspirational songs. It's good to sing songs, but there is more. It's probably far more than a church social with a lot of good food. There's nothing wrong with good food and fellowship, but there is more. It is more than doing good works to feel good about yourself. What's wrong with good works? Nothing, but there is more.

"Keep the faith!" If you do, you just might suffer as Paul and his companions did. If you do, you may be in circumstances that will make you feel very uncomfortable. If you do, you will find yourself talking about the gospel to people who are in need of forgiveness. If you do, you will never again use flippant Christian jargon to look cool or be cool. You will know what is at stake when you acknowledge that command.

In a way, it's kind of like a soldier who has been wounded in battle. Someone may say this person, "Always be faithful!" That's the motto of the Marines, isn't it? But if you've been in war, that admonishment will have so much more meaning than it would to the person who had never seen combat. When you've been in combat, the cost becomes much greater and the meaning of the mottoes becomes much clearer. Soldiers are in the service to fight and protect our freedoms. In the church, we are in the service to battle for the Lord's interests. That was Paul's goal and he followed through to the bitter end. He kept the faith, no matter what.

God's blessings enable us to keep the Faith,
Pastor Steve

TITUS

"Sound In The Faith"

October 26 - Titus 1: 1-16

Salutations,

A believer in Jesus ought never to stop growing. Think back to the picture of the Vine and the branches. Jesus makes it clear that His will for us is to bear fruit. He doesn't mean apples or oranges or tangerines; He means true spiritual fruit. If you stop growing in this way, life becomes spiritually empty.

Since my first encounter with the Lord back in the 1970s I have been through a number of ups and downs. Who cannot relate to that? But no matter where I was, from that time forward I knew that satisfaction and hope and joy were only found in Jesus. I am thankful that the Lord is patient with me and has put up with a great deal of selfish whining through some of those years.

The teaching of the Word of God is meant to result in our movement from selfishness to godliness. The book of Titus, Paul's last pastoral letter, stresses that the result of following Jesus is a change towards His likeness. Paul expects Titus to take the bull by the horns and move the faith forward. He is not to let anyone bully him when it comes to standing up for the tradition of the gospel. Paul told this young pastor to rebuke those who do not conform to the teaching that leads to soundness in the faith.

These days it's hard to find anything that is sound. It seems like things just break down rather than give us lasting results. We go out and buy some new product and within a week it's next to the garbage. Why I keep so many things in my shed that are broken down I'll never know. If you went out there today, you'd see weed whackers and old paint equipment and boxes filled with gadgets and meaningless odds and ends. I guess I think I'll get around to fixing some of it but, the truth is that I won't. I think I put up with the broken down stuff because I'd like to think that somehow, magically, it will all be put right again. We even lack soundness within ourselves because we seek soundness in the temporary things of this world.

Paul encourages Titus to be sound in the faith. This means that he should keep the message of the gospel fresh in his mind and be ready to share it with anyone who has an ear. It also means that he must stand against those who oppose the teaching. He must be able to clearly articulate the message and put those who distort it in their place. Soundness, when you're talking about music—depends on the quality of the instrument you are using. The gospel message is as sound as can be, but sometimes we don't hit the right notes when we become too lackadaisical in the way we use it.

Paul's emphasis on lifestyle and Christian example are a constant reminder to us that the gospel was meant to change our lives. This is an ongoing change. The love of Christ forever transforms us into His image. Those who think they can somehow embrace Christ but have no significant change towards godliness are mistaken. Purity and Christian character are the bedrock of cutting-edge ministry to others.

A powerless Christianity is no good to anyone. People need to see the hope that their lives can change if they follow Jesus. When they see someone who claims to be a believer stumbling around in his selfishness and sin, the message of the gospel is di-

luted, and there is nothing but confusion. Jesus wants to change us today no matter how much progress we have already made.

How about you? Are you sound in the faith? Do you know the message of the gospel fairly well? If someone is watering down the truth, can you put him in his place? Do you live for Jesus every day and rely on Him even when times are tough?

Today is a day to hear His voice and follow Him. Being sound in faith happens when we hear the sound of His voice. He is sound, His message is sound, and we can be sound in the faith so that we will be ready to be used by God in the next hour if need be.

People will be drawn to you if you are sound. Most people are sick and tired of everything breaking down. Your soundness will attract them to the Lord.

God's blessings are sound,
Pastor Steve

"What Difference Does It Make?"

October 27 - Titus 2: 1-15

Grace and Peace to You,

Your life is significant. God has made you to be significant. What you do and what you say will impact someone for better or for worse. The fact that you can think and reason and make decisions proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are a meaningful creature.

I once read 2 Corinthians 5:17, that famous verse about our new identity in Christ, to a man in the park to whom I had just introduced myself, and he told me he did not care to be called a "creature." I was reading from the only Bible I had at the time, and the version in which I had memorized the verse, the old King James, uses the word "creature." Creature, of course, means "creation," which is how it reads in other translations. The point is, that if you are "in Christ" you are new; the old has gone, the new has come. This is a very remarkable place to be, and exactly where we need to be. We all need to be someone different than the old sinful self that has dominated us from the womb.

Paul's encouragement to Titus, one of his "sons" in the faith, ought to also inspire us to live beyond the humdrum of daily existence. It motivates us to love godliness and hate sin. He reminds us that there is a common element in the learning process all believers go through, whether they are older men, older women, or younger people. Did you notice that "self-control" is a common thread running through Paul's comments to Titus about the things he ought to teach?

What would more self-control mean to us? I think I would probably watch what came out of my mouth more. I'd think twice before going to an R-rated movie. I'd think before I moved forward with an important decision that would affect my life or the lives of others. I'd consider what alcohol might do to me in the long run. I'd be aware of my weaknesses and not put myself in temptation's way if I thought I'd be susceptible to falling in a moral morass.

Self-control is about—you guessed it—being in control of yourself. At the point of complete self-control, you are the captain of your ship and you take full responsibility for what happens on board. You are responsible for the maintenance and operation of the vessel. You decide who gets on board and what role each will play on your ship. You are the one in charge of reading the map and charting a course for the future. You will be sailing through both calm and stormy waters, but it is you and no one else who will have to take the heat when something goes wrong or breaks down. You will not be able to pass blame, complain, or run away. You will take the glory or the fall no matter what anyone else says or does. All aboard!

You will always be tempted to look at the other vessels sailing by on the starboard side and wish that you were as magnificent as they are. It will be difficult to maintain your course when it feels like other ships have it easier and are higher class than yours. Your eyes must always be locked on the affairs of your own boat; to daydream may be disastrous both for you and your passengers. All aboard!

Paul also teaches that self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us. He says that God will help you to take care of yourself. He tells Titus to teach the church members to practice self-control as a top priority, probably because it represents one of the main aspects of the life of Jesus. Jesus has given us the grace needed to be self-controlled. He indicates that this grace is sufficient to help us live godly lives, Christ-honoring lives, in the world.

So what is the condition of your ship? Is it in need of repair? Have you been distracted lately from doing the things that will keep it sailing no matter what the weather may be? Which parts need attention? Do you need to study the map so that you do not veer off course (that means- be in the Word)? Do you need to encourage the crew (in other words, maintain the fellowship of the church)? Do you need to put in a call to the ship's designer and builder in order to get a better understanding of how and why it was made (that's continuing in prayer)? Or is it possible you need to forge ahead and be that example to the other boats at sea, so that they too can find their purpose for being afloat (be a witness to others)?

God's blessings move us forward,
Pastor Steve

"Rebirth"

October 28 - Titus 3: 1-15

Good Day,

After my wife finally delivered our first child, she looked like she had been hit by a Mack truck. There is a reason why they call it "labor." I, of course, was the coach. I recall being in a lunchroom down the hall eating a ham sandwich, and hearing her scream from the delivery room. Some coach I was. Despite all of the rigors of the experience, our little bundle arrived. She was two full weeks past her due date. Just the wait was grueling.

But when my daughter was finally born, the reality of what had occurred in our life was just a hair short of miraculous. Life had come. A living, breathing human being was added to the human race. How did that happen? Yeah, I know about the seed and the egg and all that, but how did it really happen? We played our roles, but the outcome is still so amazing that it defies logical explanation.

Our third child weighted in at 10 pounds, 5 ounces. When the mid-wife lifted the brute from the womb and laid him on my wife's stomach, she gasped. They thought he would be in the 8-pound range. Oh no, he came out in the heavyweight class. The crazy thing was that she had him naturally, no meds, and with a minimal amount of screaming. I think that was because I was a better coach by then, and was able to help control the situation better. If you believe that, then I have some land in Arabia to sell you.

My favorite delivery story happened to some friends of ours. She so wanted to have a natural deliv-

ery that she made her husband promise not to allow her to have any drugs during labor. Anita is a fiery little Italian gal who commands your attention when she has her heart set on something. Her husband, Donny, is an attentive husband who enjoys making his beloved wife happy. During delivery things were going along fine for awhile, but once she reached the transition stage she asked Donny to get her some medication because it was more than she could bear. Donny was ready for this and politely told her "no," thinking that he would eventually be the hero because of his faithfulness to her previous request. Anita became more and more animated and desperately repeated her plea. Donny resisted, reminding her of their earlier conversation. Anita clenched her fist, rose up as best she could and walloped him right in the nose. The nurse went to order the meds.

The fact that "this child" is born leads me to believe that her existence was designed by God. He is the one who formed her in her mother's womb. Her personality and her face and her body and her heart and her mind are all so set that it makes no sense to think all of it happens by chance. My daughter and my sons were somehow, by God's grace, created. Doesn't David say in the Psalms that we were "fearfully and wonderfully made?" That is no accident. God is the author of life from first to last. He is not surprised by how someone looks or feels or acts. God is our Maker.

Likewise, God is the author of our new birth, our rebirth in Christ. His salvation of our souls is not dependent on anything we have done. Paul is reminding Titus of the love, wisdom, and sovereignty of God. He says that God worked our salvation out on the basis of His mercy. In other words, even though we deserved judgment, God overlooked that and gave us pardon through Jesus. He says that the rebirth was a work of God, and that the Holy Spirit actively moves the hearts of those on whom God's mercy rested. This rebirth and renewal has brought washing from sin and a fresh start in life for each and every person who has received the grace of God.

If you take a look at John 3, you'll see this same emphasis. Jesus said that you would have to be "born of the Spirit" in order to be "born again," or "born anew." That is the same idea Paul stresses in our reading today. All that God has done for us in Christ gives us a new heart, one that is now clean and upright. This is a gracious gift of God and one that we ought never to take for granted.

Paul tells the young preacher to remember to honor this gift from God by following up with works that will reflect the thankfulness a renewed person feels. This attitude will keep him from getting trapped in meaningless arguments that lead to all kinds of disruption. Instead, the church is to be busy doing things that bring glory to God.

God's blessings reflect God's mercies,
Pastor Steve

PHILEMON

Day 302

"Charge It To Me"

October 29 - Philemon

Oh, Happy Day!

I've met some characters in my life, but probably no one like Ollie. He was quirky and had a fire for God that burned in his heart. He was also very Pentecostal. When I met him, I had no idea what the word Pentecostal meant. Ollie had intensity in his eyes, a deep love in his manner, and a very boisterous demeanor. I was a bank teller at a local savings and loan, and he'd come to my window from time to time. That is where our common faith in Jesus ignited.

I too was pretty demonstrative about my faith while I worked. I wore a badge, like a name badge, that said, "Jesus is Lord." I'm not so sure I'd like to admit this, but I'd sneak gospel tracts into customers' passbooks when I was done making the transaction. We had a strong Jewish clientele and I now wonder what they must have thought when they came upon those booklets. I guess you can see why Ollie and I hit it off from the get-go.

I can remember that on several occasions while Ollie bent over at my window that he'd be saying, "Glory," and "Hallelujah," and "Praise Jesus," right there in front of everyone. It didn't bother me a bit. One day when he began to speak in tongues though, I got a bit nervous. Ollie was Ollie. The bank manager was a longtime friend of my family, and while he did try and tone me down, I think part of him was respectful of my convictions. But what could he say about good old Ollie? He was a customer and you know the old saying: "the customer is always right."

"Glory!" "Hallelujah!" "Praise Jesus!" Something magical happens when you share your faith in Jesus with someone else. This is true whether the person is a believer or not. There is just a special spiritual experience when you are able to talk about any aspect of what Christ has done for the world in general or in your life in particular. Paul says that it clarifies our understanding of the Lord and it reminds us of all the good we have because of Jesus. This is why small groups in church are so important. When you get together with other believers and share your beliefs, you build each other up and also solidify your faith in the Lord.

The book of Philemon is like a little postcard. In it, Paul is appealing to a friend—a friend with whom he had shared the bond of faith in Christ. I wonder if the original had a picture on the front of some beautiful spot in Israel, maybe the amphitheater in Caesarea. Or maybe it was a funny one with a Far Side joke. Of course, I am speculating horribly here; more than likely it was on a small piece of parchment, rolled up and tied together so that it could be carried in the most practical way.

Onesimus, whose name means "useful," had escaped his master's homestead and was off to experience the world. How he meets up with Paul is unknown, but it seems to me that since the apostle is in prison they probably met there. Maybe Onesimus was the trouble-making type. Anyway, while in prison Paul leads the young man to the Lord and realizes that he has potential to work with him in the gospel. Paul could tell when he had a live one on his hands, and Onesimus must have fit the bill of someone who could work on the gospel road. When Paul appeals for

Onesimus' release from Philemon, he says that he was at one time "useless," but now he was "useful;" a play on the meaning of his name.

Don't you love how Paul appeals to his Christian friend Philemon, the slave owner who was Onesimus's master? He knows that as an apostle he has the authority to demand the request, but he appeals on the basis of love, so that Philemon will also forgive Onesimus and join him in the redemption of the runaway slave. Onesimus is now a brother in Christ and Paul wants Philemon to see him that way. He wants him to forgive, and free the slave to work now for Paul. This request will test Philemon's ability to forgive. It will also force him to trust a man that he is probably pretty angry at. Have you ever been in that position?

From time to time we will be asked to forgive someone who has wronged us. Have you ever had a friend remind you of the option of forgiveness rather than anger and bitterness? It usually catches us off guard, because we are so taken up with the wrong done to us that we don't even think about forgiving and canceling that debt. In the case at hand, Paul is so convinced of Onesimus's potential and his sincere faith, he tells Philemon that he will personally take care of any debt or wrongdoing caused by Onesimus's behavior.

It would sure be fun to know what happened to the former slave. Where did he go? What did he end up doing for Christ? Wouldn't it be weird if your salvation could be traced back to the witness of Onesimus? He told someone the gospel, and then that person told someone and so on and so on, then one day you were told.

Maybe today would be a good day to cancel out the debt someone owes you. I hold accounts too long and with way too much attention sometimes. What would it do for Christ's sake if we decided to take that second option—to cancel the debt and be done with it? Do you have anyone like Onesimus in your life? Maybe Paul is telling you it's time to let him go, and if he owes you anything God will take care of the account.

God's blessings make forgiveness possible,
Pastor Steve

HEBREWS

Day 303

"Angels All Around"

October 30 - Hebrews 1: 1-14

He was so odd looking. Kind of like a hobbit, though back then I didn't know what a hobbit even was. He met me unexpectedly on the rooftop of the cafeteria at the community college. I was sitting and reading my Bible and there he was, disheveled, hurried at first, and apparently lost. He asked for directions, then immediately asked me what I was reading. I told him I was reading the Bible. He asked me what it was about. I told him the story as best I could.

Then he asked me a very penetrating question: "Would you die for Jesus?" I had only been a Christian for about a year and honestly didn't know how to answer. As I mulled over my response, I looked up and he was gone—in the opposite of the way I had directed him.

That question was a catalyst for renewed dedication to Jesus Christ.

Who was this odd fellow? Later on I thought that just maybe he could have been an angel sent from God to challenge me. I don't know that for sure. But I'll tell you what; it certainly was a weird experience. And, it pushed me closer to God. Angel? Maybe, maybe not. If he was a genuine angel, I can tell you that the outcome was a good one. Later on in the book of Hebrews we read that we should entertain strangers because sometimes they will be angels in disguise. A bit spooky, eh? God uses angels.

Angels are "ministering spirits." They are our allies in the spiritual journey. They help us in ways that are usually hidden. I have heard story after story through the years about the oftentimes strange intervention of an angel. Just recently someone told me an unbelievable story. She was T-boned on a busy highway. The car had smashed into her door and she was so injured that the paramedics were calling the accident in as a fatality, thinking at first that no one could have survived. She was not dead though, far from it. She remembers seeing the paramedic and hearing him tell her that to get her out of the van he would have to pull her in a direction that could be very painful. About that time another man in street clothes was with her, sitting in the passenger seat. He put his hand on her shoulder and told her everything would be all right. That reassurance was enough to give her the courage to acknowledge the medic.

After she came out of surgery and had gotten her mind back together, she asked someone about the accident and mentioned the man who was sitting with her in the front of the van. The person told her that was impossible, because her side of the car had crunched into the passenger side and there was no passenger side left. Remember how the man was there at just the right time to give her the encouragement she needed to go on? He was ministering to her in a way that facilitated her recovery. An angel? Probably.

In Hebrews Chapter 1 there is an emphasis on angels. Angels had formed a pretty big part of Hebrew history. Often in the Old Testament we have the Angel of the Lord leading the nation in some way or another. A discussion on angels would be very common-

place for the Jews. They believed in them and had record of their involvement in the life of the nation. Many New Testament scholars believe that various mentions of the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament are pre-incarnate visitations of the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

As magnificent as angels are, (God calls them "winds, His servants flames of fire,") they are still far inferior to the Son. The Son receives worship from the angelic host because He is the firstborn (a term used not for birth order but for preeminence and place of position and authority), the beloved Son of the Father. It is their relationship that defines the role of Father and Son. Those are functional terms to describe the closest of relationships. They are separate, yet also one, as Jesus declares in John 10:30. But the Father also says that the Son is God: "But about the Son He says, 'Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom,'" (1:8). Because the Son is God, He deserves and gets total submission from the heavenly host.

Jesus is God's ultimate and final revelation. Even the last book of the Bible is titled: The Revelation of Jesus Christ. In the past God used mouthpieces to make His will known, but now God has arrived in the flesh to make Himself as clear as He can be made known. You get God when you get Jesus, you miss God when you miss Jesus. Jesus is the great light Isaiah talked about, who would come into the world to illuminate (with truth and light) everyone in the world. "Those who sat in darkness saw a great light," the prophet declared (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus is that light. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the father," (John 14:9).

Hebrews is all about the superiority of Christ. He is above everyone and everything. He is all in all. He is everything. The writer begins with angels and will describe His superiority over all of creation, and over the Jewish religious system and the offering of sacrifices. Hebrews makes Jesus our great prophet, priest and king.

When you're done with Hebrews I think you'll love it for life. It has meant so much to me over the years. Just a short word of warning going in to this medium sized book: Be careful not to judge all of the parts before you have read the whole. I think Hebrews may be one of the most misquoted books of the Bible. Verses from the book are often taken out of context to prove things that, I believe, the writer of the book never intended. I'll explain more as we enter in to the most holy place where Jesus is, and where we can talk to God face to face.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

Pastor Steve

"Are You Afraid? Let's Talk"

October 31 - Hebrews 2: 1-18

In the mind of a kid (and in most adults) death is an enemy. Death is a robber who takes away what is precious to us. He comes at horribly unexpected times, blindsiding us. I can remember as a kid, I could work myself into tears thinking that my mom and dad could die in a car accident. If I heard a siren while they were out, I had them dead and buried in my mind before the night was even young. When we fear death, we try to avoid it at all costs. It's like the big bully on the playground. As long as he's not in the vicinity, we feel safe.

Death is man's big dilemma. We spend billions of dollars every year keeping people alive, and medical research continues to grow beyond our wildest

expectations. Yet, we still have the death problem. The mortality rate stays the same. Death still knocks, sooner or later, at everyone's door.

If you have had a death or two in your family, then you know how it feels. Once you are over the shock of the situation, then the hard reality sets in. You have to live without that familiar voice in your life. It robs life of life, doesn't it? I have heard people say more than once, "Life will never be the same again." I don't know if it's easier to have gone through the experience once already, or to have never gone through it, when we are faced with the death of another person we love. I don't think that experiencing that pain once necessarily prepares you for another one. Every death is so personal and different that it is hard to say that we could ever be braced well enough. Death is death. It sucks. That's how you say it in Greek.

Let me ask you: are you afraid of dying? Do you panic a bit when the subject of death comes up? Would you rather avoid the subject?

The Bible has much to say about death. The Bible says that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," (Romans 6:23). The Bible says, "It is appointed unto man once to die and after this the judgment," (Hebrews 9:27). 1 Corinthians 15 is another place to turn on this subject. But here in Hebrews 2, we have a classic passage on the victory of Christ over death and the devil. One of the many benefits of being "in Christ" is the freedom you can experience from the fear of death or the devil.

I think one of our problems with death is that we have no control over it. Most people, if they were in control of their death, would probably opt out. They would find an exclusion clause and start living again. The fact that at the end of life a person must submit to something outside themselves is frightening. There are a certain number of folks who have talked themselves into a blissful experience after death and have assuaged their fears somewhat. But the jump into the unknown makes most men feel a bit intimidated. We do pretty well when we know what to expect, or when we can hold the reigns to some extent. But when it comes to death, no one can tell us how it's going to be because they do not know.

The doctor cannot say without reservation, "Now, you are going to go down a long tunnel and meet a great light and you'll feel all tingly and warm." He can't say that for sure. Some people will share their wishful thinking to bring some reassurance, but if the person asks whether they know for sure, what are they going to say? They simply do not know; they have not been there and done that. The truth is that at the point of your death you are completely out of control. It is not in your hands or the doctor's hands or the government's hands, it is only in the hands of the Almighty. He holds the keys of life and death. He determines a person's years and decides the number of breaths he will take. That is God's business and not ours.

People fear death because they have to trust God with it. If they do not have faith in God's Word, then where will they place their faith when death comes knocking? God has experienced death in human terms. Jesus became a man. He took on flesh and blood like every other man and experienced the bumps and bruises of life like all of us. His death, though, was different because of its effect on things above and below and in-between. His death was the deathblow to death and the master of death, the devil. The cross was the crushing blow to the powers of darkness. Colossians says that He spoiled principalities and powers at the cross. He made them useless there. There, at the cross, was a victory of epic proportions. Let's go over the verses in Hebrews one more time.

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death," (2:14,15). Jesus knows all about death and victory over it. He has been there and He was not captured by it. He nullified it. In death we can take His nail-pierced hands and find the same victory. He died so that we could look forward to death. We can approach it with optimism, buoyed up by our belief that He sovereignly holds the keys to the unknown. It is unknown to us but known to Him.

The devil is still busy today trying to convince people that he is in control of the mysteries of the death experience. He does all kinds of goofy stuff through occult practices which are just an attempt to deceive

people. Only Jesus has the answer to the death problem. Paul said in another place, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." If I had a choice, I'd rather be with the Lord, he says; but that is up to the Lord so whether I am alive or dead I will serve the Lord.

All of us will die as we lived. Out of fear, some men die a thousand deaths before they die. Others live in faith, find victory over death, and are swallowed up in the victory of Christ, going on to live with Him forever.

"Father, this verse gives us the liberty to pray for a person's liberation from the fear of death. God, open up the heart and mind of each and every person reading this right now and deliver them from the bondage of the fear of death. Replace it with a faith and confidence that you are ultimately in control of our death day. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

God's blessings have taken care of the death issue,

Pastor Steve

"True Belief"

November 1 - Hebrews 3: 1 - 19

Goodness is God's Gift,

It is hard to believe, but whole generations have perished in unbelief. That is a tragedy. There is usually a remnant, just a small portion of the whole who do not cave in to the status quo. But when the majority go down the road of destruction, the small group who do not take the same route are made outcasts and considered irrelevant by the masses.

Noah and his family are an example of this. He labored 120 years, building a boat that had no practical purpose, unless God was truly speaking to him about a coming cataclysmic judgment. Jesus said that His coming would parallel the times of Noah. He said people would be going about their lives, doing the things they were used to doing, when He returned in judgment. Noah and his family were saved because he dared to believe God's Word and didn't go with the crowd. I would think that maybe after 50 or 60 years of labor with no flood in sight, he would have felt some hesitation and temptation to join the others, but he stayed the course despite being "different."

The Hebrews this letter is addressed to knew something about being different from the crowd. They were Jews who had acknowledged Jesus. Since their initial contact with the gospel of salvation through Jesus, they had experienced many difficulties. At first they put up with the difficulties and supported one another, but now they were wavering for a number of reasons. I can think of four of them:

1. Both the Roman rulers and the Non-Jesus Jews in Jerusalem increased their persecution. This resulted in the loss of property and rights on the part of these "believers."

2. Even though they had acknowledged Jesus, their commitment appears to be a halfway obedience. They had not yet counted the cost to give up all to follow the Savior.

3. They had not had enough solid teaching about Jesus to give them the kind of spiritual stability on the rock of faith in Jesus. Remember, Jesus said to Peter that He would build His church on Himself and that the gates of hell could not resist it.

4. The strong Jewish tradition of this group pulled them back to what they were used to doing religiously. When the heat is turned up, we tend to revert to what we are comfortable with. In the face of the dangers of putting your faith in Jesus, and the pressures that family members and friends put on them, many were vacillating.

This scenario happens in our day, as it did back then. Some folks will acknowledge Jesus, and then backpedal when the heat is turned up. They will sometimes fall away because their fledgling faith is not built on the Word and the evidence. When a anti-Jesus voice comes along and raises a question they cannot answer, they are shaken in faith and fall down. I remember that when I was new in my faith, my parents put a bit of pressure on me by saying that I was going through a phase. I told a cousin about my new found faith and she pooh-poohed it by saying that she had been baptized and had gone through it too. I couldn't get over how she made my faith feel invalid, like it wasn't really vital, but just another inconsequential part of life.

The Hebrews writer answers the questions of wavering souls by continually bringing us back to Jesus. He began with the superiority of Jesus over angels and over death and over the devil. Now he says that Jesus is superior to the hero of Jewish faith—Moses. Judaism is built on Moses. That's why, I think, the author brings up the illustration of a house. He says that the builder of a house is always considered greater than the house itself. This may be an allusion to Moses being the builder of Judaism. But the author of Hebrews says that God is the builder of all things. This is an allusion to Jesus being God. If you read it again, you'll see that he wants us to look to Jesus who is the creator of all things (see the beginning of Chapter 1 again). Anyway, the focus is on Christ's superiority to good old Moses. This would be very significant to any Jew who had grown up reading Moses' words and hearing them read week in and week out. These new professors of faith needed to be instructed on the greatness of Jesus because they didn't know what they had gotten into; they were unaware of how great their Lord was.

The writer then reminds them of their own history. They are warned not to be like their ancestors. They are accused of unbelief and of not listening to the Spirit. If you connect this with Chapter 2, where it says they neglected the great salvation of Jesus, you can see God's concern for these people. When Moses led the nation out of Egypt and headed for the promised land, they ended up spending 40 long years in the wilderness because of their unfaithfulness, wandering from place to place. The general population—well, actually everyone but Joshua and Caleb—were buried in the wilderness. They died because they were unbelievers. They had everything, but they didn't respond to the grace of God. They saw the miracles and experienced God's constant provision, but still turned their back on the Lord.

The application for us is to treasure our faith as a precious gift. We must act on our faith, and live by faith. We also enjoy the company of those with genuine faith. When true believers converse, the emphasis is not on the exterior things, like church life or rule-keeping or pleasing others. It is on the interior, where God has done a work that has changed us; it is the place where we hear His voice and follow Him. We should have no interest in following in the footsteps of those who took advantage of their spiritual privileges for their own benefit. Rather, we ought to be thankful for every gift God has given and share those gifts with people who haven't experienced the grace of God yet.

Let's serve God from the heart with all sincerity.

God's blessings are attached to real faith,

Pastor Steve

Day 306

"Better Than Sealy"

November 2 - Hebrews 4: 1-13

Now we are moving into the circulatory system of the book of Hebrews. Now we can see where true spiritual life comes from. The book is full of life-giving truths that are couched in rebukes for mishandling the truth about the Christ. Remember when your dad got on one of your brothers or sisters for something and you were listening because you didn't want the same judgment? Well, Hebrews is like that. We are learning from the mistakes of others and our hearts ought to be saying, "No, not me, I don't want to fall into that sin," and, "God, help me to keep my eyes on Jesus."

Did you get a good night's sleep last night? I think that to some degree our rest is an indicator of how things are going for us in our minds and hearts. When we are sleeping restlessly, it is sometimes caused by unresolved issues that are affecting our spiritual lives. Paul said in Ephesians 4 that we shouldn't let the sun go down before we resolve something that is causing anger. If we do, he says that we will be giving the devil an opportunity to take advantage of us. In 2 Corinthians Paul says that unforgiveness is one of the devil's tools to distract us from God's purpose for our lives. And when we have anger or unforgiveness looming over us, it is more difficult to rest peacefully.

About a year ago my wife and I decided we needed a new mattress. I liked the idea of a new one but hated the prospect of having to go test them out. Have you done this, it feels so...weird. There you are in the store, with hundreds of mattresses, and you lie down on one. Then the salesman asks you questions and your wife asks you questions and you're thinking you'd just like to leave. I was good with the very first mattress I lay on. After we had it delivered, we discovered that the one we got was way too firm. A couple of two-by-fours would have been softer. We went back to another store and began the process all over again. This time my wife was determined to lie on every mattress. Needless to say, I hadn't realized the kind of effort we would have to put into the sleep process. But once we found the right one and paid the greater amount of money, boy, was it worth it. I have slept so well on this mattress. Now I'm glad that I didn't settle for any old mattress because the quality of my sleep is much better now.

I say all of that to highlight what Hebrews says today. God has a special rest for the person who will live by faith in Him. This rest is likened to the rest God had after he created the world and everything in it. God rested on the seventh day. He took a day off, not because He was tired, but to look back and enjoy what He had done. It was very good to Him to look with admiration on His own work. He was pleased with the creativity of His new endeavor.

Now God wants us to enter into the rest that Jesus Christ gives. It is a rest based on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Through Him we can enter it. We are no longer scrutinized based on our works but are freely accepted by God in Christ. All of our sins have been forgiven. What is a greater release for the soul of a man than knowing he is freely and fully forgiven? He no longer has the hammer of the law hanging over him, because Jesus fulfilled the law on his behalf. That is true rest. The basis for our rest—the finished work of Christ on the cross—will take up a large portion of the rest of Hebrews. It is on the ground of His blood that we can cease from striving with our own works for acceptance and instead strive to let go of our own works and focus on the work of Christ for us.

There are two more important thoughts before we finish this chapter. First is the priority of God's Word and the second is God's omniscience. I'll explain that one in a minute. Here we go talking about the importance of God's Word again. Hebrews says that it is the Word of God that can penetrate a person's soul

and reach into the very heart of a person. Get this: the Word of God is alive. It is not an inanimate thing with no power in and of itself. It has the power to change a person's life. It can reach into the deep recesses of a person's inner being and make a difference. Remember, Jesus said that His words were spirit and they were life. I think the Hebrews writer is connecting God's peace or rest with His Word. It is the Word deep in the heart of a person that gives true rest. Think about Psalm 119 again: "Those who love your law have great peace." Do you see the correspondence?

The other thought, which fits into this perfectly, is that all things, including the hearts of all men, are laid bare before the Lord. He sees it all. He knows why we are not getting a good night's sleep. He knows about that hidden thing and He waits for us to bring it before Him. He also knows those who have the peace that He gives. He sees into their deepest parts, and lives there by His Spirit. Remember Isaiah 26: "Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee because he trusts in Thee; trust in the Lord forever because the Lord is an everlasting rock."

Sweet dreams.

God's blessings make us rested,

Pastor Steve

Day 307

"Christ is our Great Priest"

November 3 - Hebrews 4:14 - 5:10

Today's reading in Hebrews showcases the priesthood of Jesus. He is the great high priest who offers Himself to God as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Belief in Him gives the forgiven sinner access into the halls of grace in the Father's house. He is both the one who offers, as priest, and he is the offering himself. He comes to the holy place not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with His own blood to offer a once-for-all sacrifice.

Also, the Hebrews writer is emphasizing that if you let go of Jesus, you forsake the one way of salvation. Jesus intercedes for His own, just as he did when he prayed His high priestly prayer in John 17, but he now prays for us from heaven. It is a place marked by His blood. It was through His suffering and His perfection He became a high priest who could put away our sins once and for all.

Jesus' duties are very practical for us. We need His intercession for us if we would come, as the book invites, very boldly to the throne of God. It is only through Jesus that we can enter. In 1 John the Bible says that His blood continuously cleanses us from all sin. It is an ongoing function of the miracle blood of the Savior.

I delight in the work of Christ on the cross because it means the blessings of eternal life for the helpless and spiritually bankrupt son of Adam or daughter of Eve. We come not on our own merit, but in the merit of Christ. If a person were to disregard the work of Christ in order to come to God in his own way, the results would be very bad. Man, on his own, is only deserving of death; he cannot make a way to God apart from Jesus.

Do you pray in Jesus' Name? It is not so much the formula of the prayer, but the authority of it. You can say all of the right words, but if your prayer does not carry the worthy authority of the Lord Jesus it will fall on deaf ears. Come to God through Christ, and pray with thanksgiving for the great work of Jesus for you. You will then know the authority that touches the unapproachable presence of the Holy.

Those that are Christ's have the privilege of com-

ing to God with the authority of Him. We are His and so we can come to His Father (and ours) through the way He blazed. We come to God with prayers in line with the will of Jesus because when we pray we are thinking about ways to grow closer to God and we are wanting to please the Lord. We also know that when our prayers are not answered as we'd wish, then we can fully trust the will of Jesus so that things will be worked out in His way and in His good timing.

All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name, To Him Be All Glory!

God's blessings are mediated by the Priest,
Pastor Steve

"Here's An Object Lesson"

November 4 - Hebrews 5:11 – 6:12

How do you learn? Educators are finding out that a good number of students need an object lesson in order to grasp a point. If they can see it and touch it and examine it and smell it, then the chances are much better that they will comprehend what you are trying to teach. If you think back and try to remember your favorite teachers, I'll bet they did object lessons regularly.

God is the Master teacher. He uses all means necessary in order to teach us so that we can grow spiritually. Remember, Jesus often spoke in parables in order to make a simple parallel between something everybody knew about, to something they needed to know in the spiritual realm. A little later on in Hebrews we read that "we are all taught by God." God is our instructor. I can remember looking forward to having class with certain teachers. Every time their classes were in session I was there, because I enjoyed the way they taught and the authority with which they taught.

God's classroom is the school of life. Every morning when we wake up, God takes His place at the podium and conducts class. You and I have the opportunity to listen and take notes, or we can screw around and not get a cotton-picking thing out of it. God teaches every day. He doesn't stop because of a few screw-ups. The Word of the Lord goes out into all the earth—day to day God's speech is uttered. When the final exam is given there will be no excuses; God has made His lessons clear for all to learn.

Do you look forward to learning from God? Paul told the Thessalonian believers that they were "taught by God to love one another." There is God Lesson 101. He is teaching us to love the unlovely. He wants us to experience the kind of love that He embodies. Think back to those teachers who you wanted to emulate. You'd do almost anything to be like them and copy their traits. I have had a handful of teachers like this; they made a very important contribution to my thinking. I think if I could pick up even just a couple of things from them then I'd be a happy man. But there is Someone far higher than them that we are called to emulate. Paul says in Ephesians 5 that "as dear children, be imitators of God."

I'd like you to think about what that would mean to you today. In what ways has God taught you already? If you are like me, the lessons are sometimes lost in my "busy" schedule. So let's take a moment to reflect on the great lessons our Father has already taught us. Let's list a few:

1. The greatest object lesson is the cross.

2. God has a definite plan for our lives. Jesus illustrated this by talking about the Vine and the branches. Take a look at a tree and be reminded.

3. God is in the control room of the universe. Pharaoh and Moses are our reminder that this is certainly true.

4. Trust is so important. Like a child in the arms of his loving parents, we must trust the Lord.

5. Life is short. Picture the leaf, the grass, and the steam of a kettle.

6. Eternal life is a gift. Remember the Prodigal Son.

7. God keeps His promises. Remember the rainbow.

...and countless more...

Now let's take a look at Hebrews 5:11-6:12. There were people being addressed in the book of Hebrews who were off-center about the teaching of the Christ, the Messiah. They had been enlightened about the truth in Jesus, but had continued to attach themselves to their old traditions, which were contrary to the gospel. Temple sacrifices would be one example here. You could not continue to make animal sacrifice and still hold on to the crucified Jesus, the final sacrifice.

The writer makes it clear why he is being so hard on some by saying to the rest, "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation," (Hebrews 6:9). There were those who had the cross in focus, and there were those who didn't. The apostles didn't want them to be discouraged. Instead, they were to remember that God was for them, that He knew their trials, and that it would be worth it in the end if they continued like those in their own history who walked by faith in a patient way.

In days of old it was idolatry that pulled the people away from God. In the days of the Hebrews it was a misapplication of the cross that tripped them up. Either way, it is God's way that gives life. Any other way "produces thorns and thistles (and) is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned," (Hebrews 6:8).

I trust for better things in your case, dear friends.

God's blessings bring true salvation,
Pastor Steve

"An Odd Fellow"

November 5 - Hebrews 6:13 – 7:10

May Your Day Be Bright,

How many times have you heard that "God works in mysterious ways?"

That's not just a cliché; it is a true statement. God's way of doing things doesn't always match the "conventional" way. God has surprises up His sleeve.

Life is not very predictable. If it were, it would be boring, wouldn't it? We need wonder and amazement and awe in our lives in order for us to look forward to what's next. If you believe Jesus is alive and at work in your life, like a carpenter working on a house, then you will be pleased as your project progresses to the next phase.

I try as hard as I can to see what God is doing in my life, especially when things aren't going my way. The other night I was dealing with a difficult conflict when I recognized the battle going on in me—the same one that Paul talks about in Galatians 5. I could feel myself vacillating from ideas "in the Spirit" to the things related to being "in the flesh." "Do I concentrate on love or on enmity?" "Do I give in to bitterness or will I take the path of joy?" These were the questions swirling in my head. Just the fact that I was dealing with the issues was a good thing for me. It made me feel more in control of the outcome. I could give way to the flesh or the Spirit. Paul said that I should walk in

the Spirit and not yield to the influence of the flesh. It helped me to see that even my current difficulties are a part of God's progress in my life.

In today's reading Hebrews introduces this unusual character, a man who illustrates that God works in every way and in mysterious ways. His name is Melchizedek. He may throw you for a loop if you don't know his background. We first meet Melchizedek in Genesis, when he comes out after Abram has won a battle against multiple kings. Melchizedek pronounces a spiritual blessing and then receives a cash offering from Abram's spoils. Who is this guy?

Hebrews says that he is a king and a priest. He is an example of the dual roles Christ fills. He is "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the son of God, he remains a priest forever," (7:3). Melchizedek's priesthood would be a forerunner of the priesthood of Jesus. He is a god-like figure. Who but a god would be "without beginning of days or end of life?" Again, to the Jews, Melchizedek would be ingrained in their thinking since Genesis was a book they knew from an early age. The writer is saying that Melchizedek and Jesus are similar. And their similarity is in the permanency of their priesthoods. They would be priests forever. Remember, the Hebrews author has already called Jesus "the apostle and high priest of our profession" (3:1). It was so important that these Jewish believers realized that Jesus was the end of the temple priesthood as they knew it.

Both Melchizedek and Jesus were kings and priests, and were possibly also similar as prophets. The New Testament doesn't necessarily indicate that Melchizedek was a prophet, but in Genesis 14, after Abram's victory, Melchizedek pronounces a prophetic blessing over him. Take that with a grain of salt, I'm pushing it a bit. The point is that Melchizedek's priesthood is a picture of the priesthood that would end all priesthoods because "Jesus is a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Another reason this is important is that Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi, the tribe designated to offer sacrifices and serve the temple. That doesn't disqualify Him though, because He has authority based on His connection to the priesthood of Melchizedek. Melchizedek set the precedent for a non-Levitical priesthood way back in Abram's day. Make sense?

Jesus is our priest. He is our advocate with the Father. He gives us access into the holy place because of the offering of His blood. Our acceptance with God is based on His righteousness and not our own. We can come to Him freely today and receive mercy and grace and help when we need it.

Do you need it today? Are you spiritually battle weary? Let your Great High Priest take you into the presence of the holy, holy, God, and you will find wholeness there.

God's blessings sometimes come in unusual packages,

Pastor Steve

"A Better Covenant"

November 6 - Hebrews 7:11-28

God's Word is Alive,

In the beginning things were very good. Then they went sour. Man saw to that. Then God stepped in to improve the situation, and throughout the centuries He has been revealing better and better snapshots of Himself. We were made to experience God and live on God. Through His revealing process, God allows us to assure ourselves that we have

God, and not some far out concept of Him that would only give us a facsimile of His power and His person.

God turned the light on His truth to a greater and greater degree throughout history until He finally brought the full measure of His revelation in the person of His Son. Remember how the book opened: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Jesus is the culmination of God's bright light of revelation. I see this progression like a dimmer switch. In the beginning things were pretty dark, and then the Lord began to turn the knob, so that it got a bit brighter all until he had it at full brightness once His Son entered time and space.

The Law was designed to point out where a man had fallen short of the perfection of God so he could deal with his isolation from the Almighty. This is especially true of the parts that dealt with the Levites who were responsible for the temple service, which allowed the worshipper access into the courtyard of the Lord where he could be made right with God. However, the Law was imperfect because it did not provide a lasting solution to the problem of sin. The worshipper would only be temporarily relieved of his guilt, until he sinned again. Then he was right back into the fix that brought him to the priests the first time. The blood of the animal sacrifices covered sin but was not able to put away sin once for all. This made the Law a burden to the person who truly desired to make things right with the Lord. Think also about the insecurity of not really knowing if you were covered or not. What if you had missed some sin that you were not aware of and were actually alienated from God because of it, even though you were ignorant of the fact?

That is why those who attempt to live under the burden of the Law today are in the same predicament. You can try to pull yourself up and do the right thing, but no one can do the right thing all of the time. That is why Paul stated in Romans that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The idea behind "fallen short" is the ongoing state of falling short day in and day out. All sinned in Adam and all continue to fall short of the perfection of a God who is so pure and holy and perfect that man cannot stand in His presence and lift his head up.

The Hebrews writer puts the spotlight on the permanence of Christ's priesthood, as opposed to the temporary fix of the Law's sacrifice system. He makes it clear that the Lord has all of the credentials necessary to be a go-between for us so that we can lift our heads to the Most Holy. Jesus' resume is the guarantee of a covenant that will seal our relationship with God on the basis of His own blood, not on the wobbly wheels of our own righteousness. Don't you love this verse: "Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens," (26). He is our hope, a much better hope than the Law gave us. This is a rock solid covenant. This covenant is based on the finished work of Jesus on His cross, His blood, and His substitutionary suffering for us miserable sinners.

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (7:25). Enough said!

God's blessings are given by the Great High Priest,

Pastor Steve

Day 311

"Newer and Better"

November 7 - Hebrews 8: 1-13

Don't we all hope for something better? You might "have it all" in others' eyes and still desire something more. Something inside of us longs for newness. Regretfully, some take this too far and trade in their old spouse for a new one before they have tried to renew their love. Once you've experienced something new, you long to experience it again.

I bought a brand new VW in 1985. I loved that car. My son drove it before a deer came along and totaled it. That was a tough day when we had to go to the wrecking yard and pay our last respects to a car that had over 300,000 miles. That day I was thinking back about all of the good memories I had driving it. And I was reminded that all things in this life fade away or are totaled in one way or another. Newness never lasts no matter how hard we try to keep it that way.

In Hebrews 8 the author continues his discussion of the priesthood of Jesus. The benefit of this priesthood is that it entails a new covenant, guaranteed by Jesus Himself. The terms of the covenant weigh heavily on what God has done in Jesus and what He does for those who believe in the new covenant.

The old covenant could never take away sins, because the effect of the sacrifice was only temporary. The new covenant has a lasting effect, based on the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. The old covenant was based on the work of a priest, who had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins and then another for the sins of the people. The new covenant is based on the "once for all" sacrifice of Jesus, which takes away the sins of the believer forever.

Jesus gives us promises that ratify the new covenant. These promises are better than those of the old covenant, because the person bringing an animal for sacrifice really couldn't be completely sure that he had made atonement for all of his sins. Plus, he had to continuously come to offer sacrifice because of the regular sins all humans are prone to. It was a daily, bloody mess. The new covenant is not based on law-keeping but on the grace of God.

Let's note what God does for us under the new covenant. First, God writes His Word in our hearts. In other words, He gives us a heart for Him. That's why your heart is warmed when you learn a new truth in the Word. It just confirms the truth that God has written inside you.

Second, God is now our Father; He is not some vague entity or abstract metaphysical being, He is a personal God who loved us so much that He gave His Son as the guarantee of the covenant.

Third, we are given knowledge of God. This is a supernatural thing. God is only known by those to whom He reveals Himself. Jesus said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him," (Matthew 11: 27).

Fourth, He gives us forgiveness of our sins. He doesn't even remember them any longer. That is an example of complete unconditional love.

The cross keeps our faith new. I encourage you to make it a daily habit to meditate for a few minutes on some aspect of the cross. It was at the cross where the new covenant was ratified. Today I invite you to think about Jesus' beatings, or the mockery, or the crown of thorns, or the spit dribbling off of His face, or the scourging, or the crucifixion, or His last words on the cross. You name it, wherever you focus around the cross, you will experience a renewed appreciation for the grace of God and the new covenant He created.

Meet you at the cross.

God's blessings are blood-red,

Pastor Steve

Day 312

"How Much More"

November 8 - Hebrews 9: 1-15

The Top Of The Day To You,

Once you have gone over some good ground it is a good practice to think back and remember the benefits of that territory. Those who have visited the Grand Canyon or Yosemite or Sedona can recall the majestic eminence of those places and remember the impact that view had on them. This is true of previous Scriptures we have covered.

In Romans we learned that redemption in Christ is superior to all other states of affairs, even those that existed before the fall of man. Christ's righteousness is not even to be compared to the righteousness of the first man, because the Lord is so much greater than he was. And so it follows that the sacrifice of the "last Adam" (Christ), has a much greater positive effect than the sin that Adam originally introduced, whose negative effect spread to all men. In other words, our status in Christ takes us not back to square one, but way beyond that place.

Someone might criticize this, saying that Adam's original environment was perfect and ours today is far from it. This is a good point, except for the fact that our redemption in Christ gives us an inheritance reserved in heaven. This inheritance, according to Peter, "...can never perish, spoil, or fade..." (1 Peter 1:4). Yes, earth is no longer paradise, but what we have now in Christ is greater than what Adam had. We will see Jesus, our Creator, face-to-face one day, and be like Him in His perfection. Now that's something to look forward to!

Hebrews is all about the superiority of Jesus. He is superior to the angels and Moses (the giver of the Law) and the Levitical system of offerings and feasts and priests. He is the culmination of the promises in the Bible of a coming Man who would fulfill all that the Old Testament stood for. The law and the sacrificial system and the need for a priest were all completed in Christ. He is all in all, the beginning and the end.

Hebrews compares the potency (the efficacy, if you will) of the blood of animals to cover sin with the blood of Jesus. The entire system of forgiveness laid out in the Law was based on the shedding of blood. The offender would bring his animal, usually a lamb or goat, to the entrance of the Tabernacle and confess his sin over the animal as he laid his hand on its head. The priest would then cut the animal's throat, pouring the blood on the altar of burnt offering. The sacrifice would clear the offender's conscience, but only temporarily, because the current offense was the only offense covered by the blood.

I can hear someone saying, "Are you kidding me? God wanted the life of an innocent animal in place of some guy's petty sin?" The answer to that question is "yes," and the reason is that God takes sin seriously. Remember, Adam and Eve were "banished" from the Garden of Eden because they disobeyed God's Word. They "only" ate from a piece of fruit, but that bite was a statement of independence from God and of man's desire to be his own god apart from his Creator. We can try to minimize sin all we want, but the Lord has made it clear from His Word that sin is an affront to a Holy God who made us in His image and wants us to be one with Him.

Let's quote Hebrews 9: 13 and 14 and make a few final observations.

"The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

Jesus was the final sacrifice. No others were necessary after Him. As a matter of record, within 40 years of His crucifixion the entire system of sacrifice in Judaism was abolished after the Romans toppled

the city of Jerusalem. That was the exclamation mark on God's promise to put an end to sin. If you read the book of Daniel with the idea of Jesus' final sacrifice in mind, they can mold together in your thinking. Here are Daniel's comments:

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy. Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him," (9:24-27).

We'll be exploring these ideas again when we get to the book of Revelation, but here take special note of verse 24, where it says that sin will be put away. That is the difference between Christ's sacrifice and the sacrifices under the Levitical system. Christ's sacrifice puts away sin and all of its relatives once and for all. You know sin's first cousin, guilt? Well, he is dissolved by the blood of Jesus. Another relative, shame, is answered by the blood of the Lord Jesus too. And the conscience is cleared because the sin that weighs the inner you down is put away once for all in the sacrifice of Jesus.

The result is unadulterated service toward God. When your conscience is clean you can serve God with a pure motive, working for him out of gratefulness for what He has done for you.

Come to the cross today, would you?

Let His blood purify your heart and give you the freedom to love and serve God from a renewed position. The blood of Jesus puts sin away once for all. Would you celebrate that truth today? You can. Let's do.

God's blessings are so much more than we deserve,

Pastor Steve

"The Blood Of The Covenant"

November 9 - Hebrews 9: 16-28

Have A Wonderful Day,

I was only in Cub Scouts for a short time, but I remember why I thought it was fun to be a scout. There is something about putting on a uniform that makes a person feel special. I remember there was a handkerchief with a sliding emblem that had a bear on it. Then there were badges that represented certain things, like what troop you were with or what rank you had earned. There was a scout handbook that you went through to find out about the ongoing journey a scout should take.

I remember that on the days we had meetings, we'd wear our uniforms to school, and we wore them like a badge of honor. We thought the girls were especially impressed with a man in uniform. Anyone within view would identify us by those navy blue duds and believe we had been set apart for some special reason.

To this day I am still impressed with the men and women in uniform who serve our country. Don't they look sharp? But imagine the contrast between a fresh Naval Academy grad in uniform and someone who was serving in a war . The one is prim and proper and neat and squeaky clean, and the other is gritty and sometimes dirty and often tattered and torn. Both are impressive, because both represent something important and special; both are set apart for a special purpose.

The Bible is a story of God setting people and things apart for special reasons. God called Abraham, for example, from his native land to go north and west into a promised land, a land that would one day be set apart as the inheritance of his offspring. God set apart Moses from birth to one day be the deliverer of an oppressed Israelite people. Once Moses led the people out of bondage they constructed a place of worship for God in the wilderness and set apart all of the furnishings and equipment of the Tent of Meeting for the special purpose of worship. Inside the Tent, and later in the Temple of Solomon, was a golden box which contained the tablets given by God; a bit of manna, the food from heaven; and Aaron's rod that budded, a sign of God's favor on the priest who was called for the special purpose of bringing the people into the presence of the Holy One.

Centuries later when the Christ appears for salvation, He prays that His people would be "sanctified," (set apart) as they follow in His footsteps as He had "sanctified Himself." Jesus was set apart from all eternity as the Lamb who would give His life for the sins of the world.

This imagery brings us back to the original Tabernacle, where the blood of innocent animals was offered as atonement for people in need of forgiveness. Blood was the foundation of the entire system. Blood was used to set apart the whole place where sin was atoned for. Blood was even sprinkled on the building and the altar and the book of the covenant. God's covenant was an agreement based on the death of an innocent life; based on blood. I have often tried to visualize the bloody mess and stink and laundry problems the temple workers must have endured. God was going to great lengths to impress on the minds of His people that blood was necessary for the forgiveness of the soul.

And so the writer of Hebrews says, "But now He (Jesus) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself," (9:26). Hebrews is the book of finality. In Christ the entire sacrificial system is completed. He is the end of the sacrificial law for those who believe in His blood. His blood is enough.

You, as a believer, are set apart for a special purpose by the finished work of Jesus. His blood sets you apart like nothing else. Peter says that we were not redeemed with gold or silver but with the precious blood of Jesus, a Lamb without spot or blemish.

God's blessings are completed in Jesus,

Pastor Steve

"It's Over"

November 10 - Hebrews 10: 1-18

Remember, the book of Hebrews lays out the gospel for Jewish believers and Jesus confessors. The writer needed to emphasize the work of Christ in comparison to the Jewish system of worship. It would have been so natural for these Jewish believers to attempt to fit Jesus into their system,

rather than let Him revolutionize their lives His way. Traditions are hard to shake off.

This is a common problem, no matter what background you are from. We tend to put Jesus in the categories we are used to. For example, if we grew up in a very strict disciplinary environment then we may tend to see Jesus as a demanding teacher who expects us to dot every "i" and cross every "t." If we grew up in a laid-back situation where there were very few rules, we might see Jesus as a laissez faire buddy-type who is most concerned about our happiness. People who are meek by temperament will often view the Lord as a gentle Shepherd or a lover of kids. Those who are more aggressive will see Jesus getting the job done in the temple or focus on His scolding of the Pharisees. In other words, we seem to view Jesus from our own situation.

In this chapter of Hebrews we have many significant phrases that can energize your life if you grasp them and let them sink into you. The author says things like, "make perfect," and "once for all," and "to take away," and "for all time," and "made perfect," and "no longer." Just reading those words tells you that something is final. Something has been taken care of indefinitely. You shouldn't have to worry about it any longer, because it has been taken care of permanently.

Fortunately, the finished product the writer is talking about here is our salvation in Christ, the perfect sacrifice that makes us perfect because of Him. If you can grasp that last sentence, then you can put to bed that nagging thought that somehow, no matter how hard you try, you just don't cut it. "Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy," (10: 14). The sacrifice was perfect because the man was perfect. The sacrifice was perfect because Jesus was doing the will of God. Don't forget Isaiah 53 where the prophet said, "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him." Why? We'll answer that question in Hebrews 12. Don't peek. We have some pretty deep water to cross before we get there.

So, in the light of the one perfect sacrifice, what would it mean to disregard it and begin to offer animal sacrifices as a part of your worship? That will be our focus tomorrow. Keep going over the Word. It's a lamp and light. Make it your delight and you will never go astray.

God's blessings give us reassurance,
Pastor Steve

"A Dreadful Thing"

November 11 - Hebrews 10: 19-39

Hello Friends,

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left," (Hebrews 10:26).

Now there's a hard pill to swallow. Who hasn't "deliberately" sinned after coming to the knowledge of the truth? I have. Does that mean there is no hope for me? No. Do you want to know why? Because I have a great high priest who forgives me for my sins by means of His own blood. So what in the world is the author saying here? Good question!

Remember the context of the book of Hebrews. These were "believers" who were mixed up about where Jesus stood in relation to their Jewish practices. They had made a good start but were now waffling (10:32-35). God is reaching out to them and warning them of the grave danger of rejecting His way through His Son.

It is clear that the sin referred to here is very specific. "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (10:29). It is a rejection of the person and work of Christ that damns a man.

To "trample the Son of God" would be to disregard the high status with which Jesus spoke about Himself and His relationship with the Father. The Apostle John recorded something that fits here. "Though He had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in Him," (John 12:37). John says that this was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Then he records, "Therefore they could not believe," (12:39). Why? Persistent unbelief. They reached a point of hardness where they were unable to turn. John unveils their motives when he says, "for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God", (12:43). I'm sure it must have looked quite awkward that some of these Hebrews, who had joined the crowd at first, were turning their back on the true great high priest and were instead moving back under the law.

To treat the blood of Jesus as an "unholy thing" was the real crux of the matter. Non-Christian Jews saw the cross as a failure and a mockery of God. How could Jesus be the Messiah and be crucified? They didn't buy that He was who He said He was. They believed a man was justified before God through keeping the law of Moses; circumcision and animal sacrifice being the two great hallmarks of that law. They so emphasized circumcision that it became the number one issue with them.

Paul says in Galatians 6 that circumcision is nothing and that it only puts the glory in man's court rather than giving it to God. When we put the cross in perspective, we give the glory to God, Paul says. If circumcision saves, then the cross is unnecessary. The cross, seemingly a failure, is actually God's greatest act of love for lost sinners. Therefore, Paul says he will boast and glory in the cross of his Lord Jesus Christ. To return to an emphasis on circumcision and animal sacrifice is a rejection of the only means of salvation. Without the cross there is only judgment to look forward to.

Isn't the expression to "insult the Spirit of grace" unusual? It speaks volumes about what is going on here. They are rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings the grace of God in Christ to the world. He, the Spirit, convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. But some resist and do not receive the gracious gift of God.

Instead of yielding to the Spirit, they sought to establish their own righteousness by being perfect law keepers on their own. This was a rejection of God's gift in Christ. And again, the result was the glorification of man rather than God. This is a slap in the face of God. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes," (Romans 10:1-4). How insulting it must have been to God to have His great work rejected by His old covenant people.

In our day and age, of course, there are no animal sacrifices to go back to. Some people today go that route when they claim to be followers of Jesus, and they talk about Jesus, and they even go to church, but their heart is far from God and they do not repent of their sin. As a matter of fact, they coddle their sin and treasure it above faith in Jesus. This mixture of sin and a supposed relationship with Jesus puts them in mortal danger of being in the Hebrews 10 class. It is not an enviable place to be, for the consequences are disastrous. For them there remains no sacrifice for their sin.

God is looking for a people of faith. "But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved," (Hebrews 10:38,39). This is the subject of the entire next chapter; it is the famous hall of faith, a catalog of people who lived by faith.

God's blessings are in the Walk of Faith,
Pastor Steve

Day 316

"Faith Is..."

November 12 - Hebrews 11:1-16

Rise Up, O People of God,

Faith is real. Faith is not imagined or made up or a leap in the dark. Faith has substance. You can get your hand around faith and examine it, the way you would examine some natural phenomena. Faith is not ambiguous or open for various interpretations. Faith is concrete.

Faith in the right person and things can be the greatest motivator. Faith gives us purpose, because we all need to believe in what is true. By faith we can see what is true, and the result is great hope. Faith answers the questions that every person muses on from time to time: how did we get here, why are we here and where are we going? Most people think faith is something you muster up inside yourself in order to maintain your stability. When someone says, "keep the faith," they mean, "hang in there," or "don't give up." But that is not what the Bible means by faith.

The Hebrews were having trouble "keeping the faith." Faith for them had been reduced to a series of self-propelled motions. Faith was minimized, because the object of their faith wasn't the Sovereign Almighty God but rather themselves. They had traded in faith in God for faith in their own works. You can only function this way as long as you can continue to compare your works with another's. Paul uses this reasoning in Galatians 6. He says that they wanted others to be circumcised, not to please God but so that they could boast about their recruitment of others.

People regularly join churches for the wrong reasons. They may do it so that they can find prospects for a business they are in. Sometimes they do it so that they can find a mate. They aren't necessarily interested in Faith, but in using others to promote their own thing. Remember, God knows the heart and He distinguishes between the sincere and the insincere. He weighs hearts. All that glitters isn't gold, and God knows the difference. When people use the prevalence of hypocrites to argue against The Faith, they are ignorant of the fact that God knows already who has true faith and doesn't. So what is faith?

Faith is trust in the unfailing promises of God. Think with me about what the author of Hebrews has tried to convey so far. Jesus is superior. He is the sole object of our faith. His identity and His promises are the foundation for faith. If you invalidate Him, you are departing from The Faith.

Back in chapter 6 God made it clear by saying: "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, He guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things (the oath and the fact that God keeps His promises), in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," (Hebrews 6:17-20).

The men and women of faith held up as examples of faith in chapter 11 all lived pre-cross. We, like them, look to the sure promise of God to anchor our souls in truth. When that anchor secures your faith you will find a substantial and lasting relationship with God. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him," (verse 6).

Can you ultimately trust the promises of God no matter what kind of wind is blowing through your life right now? Jesus said that a life built on Him could weather the storms (Matthew 7).

God's blessings are substantial,

Pastor Steve

Day 317

"Unpredictable"

November 13 - Hebrews 11, Part II (17-40)

I attended the baptism of a friend the other night. A few years back, this person didn't even think that God was real. Yesterday, I was having lunch with another friend who had cancer surgery about six or seven years ago. Back then he thought that maybe he'd be alive five more years at the most. He said that he felt like he had been blessed. I also spent time at the home of a sweet lady who had just learned that her beloved uncle had died. He was older, but his death was still a bit unexpected. She said that her dad had told her way back when not to question God's will. LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE.

Some people spend the bulk of their life trying to make their life better. I guess it depends on what you mean by better, but I think self-preservation or self-advancement is a dead end when all is said and done. Don't we really thirst for a purpose that transcends ourselves? Remember, Jesus frequently called people to "deny themselves." He made it pretty clear that choosing to follow Him was going to be a change of direction. There would be a change from one allegiance to another, namely, from self to Jesus. Of course, once a person turns to the Lord he finds the kind of life that a person could only dream of. I remember when I was a kid, thinking about the possibility of knowing God. I used to lie in bed and dream of what that would be like. Now that I know Jesus is real it is still hard to believe that God has made Himself known to me. I feel so unworthy. God is good.

The life of faith is not a cakewalk. It is more like an adventure. Maybe a journey would be a good way to describe it. As soon as you pray that God would take your life and do with it what He wants...10, 9, 8,...3, 2, 1, blastoff! You are now somewhere in space and He is in the control room. It doesn't usually make for a neat and tidy existence. There are bumps and bruises along the way. This is verified by the examples set forth in Hebrews 11.

I think these bumps along the journey are the reason so many people become disillusioned with their faith. When they came to the faith, someone must have told them that life would begin to be easier for them. Then when the opposite happened, they reasoned that Christianity really didn't work. They were given the impression that Christianity was for themselves and their comfort and affluence, so when it didn't turn out that way they threw in the towel. If they had read Hebrews 11 early on they may have had a different expectation about the Christian life.

Faith is trust in the promises of God, based on the work of God in creation and redemption. This trust will lead believers down roads that can be very dangerous at times. For example, Job, who for some reason is not mentioned here, but is used by James in his epistle, is our model for developing patience. Patience is one of those virtues that most closely identifies us with the Master. So if God is going to work patience in us, then He will no doubt allow us to go through circumstances that will try our current level of patience.

The examples in chapter 11 are not about perfect lives, but about men and women of faith. They believed the promises of God and acted on them even when their circumstances were of the contrary. Let's quote some here:

"I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions (like Daniel), quenched the fury of the flames (like the three Hebrew boys in Daniel), and escaped the edge of the sword (like Jeremiah); whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead (like in Elisha's day), raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused

to be released (like James in Acts 12), so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison (like Paul in Acts 16). They were stoned (like Stephen in Acts 7); they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword (like Paul in Rome, church tradition says). They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect," (11: 32-40).

Welcome to the journey. You'll be blessed even when it's bumpy.

God's blessings can be on a dangerous road,
Pastor Steve

"Get The Spoon"

November 14 - Hebrews 12: 1-13

Some kids are disciplined out of anger and that is not a good thing. Some kids were beaten by a parent and they still bear the scars, both physically and emotionally, from that trauma. Some kids were never spanked and turned out poorly or well. Some kids were spanked and turned out like saints. Discipline is not an easy business.

Because we, as parents, discipline our kids for the wrong reasons from time to time, it doesn't negate the importance of correction. If kids are left unattended they will usually end up spoiled and undisciplined. There are always exceptions to the rule, but by and large if a kid runs the place, he will begin to make unreasonable demands that put the parent at his beck and call. And God never intended for us to have child-centered homes. When the kids run the place the parents will be continually exhausted.

Good parents discipline their kids for good reasons. They desire for their child that he will go God's way. Therefore, a little bit of pain now, in discipline, will go a long way in helping the child to learn how to live life in a God-glorifying way. Everybody benefits when a child is well disciplined. The child learns his limits and grows in the framework in which he was created. The parents will experience the freedom of trust and pride when the child responds to their discipline properly.

God is a good disciplinarian. The word "disciple" and the title of "disciplinarian" go together. A disciple is a committed follower of Jesus. He is interested in learning the Jesus way of doing things. The Apostle John was well aware of this relationship when he wrote his epistles. He says, "Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked," (1 John 2:6). God's purpose is to make us like Jesus. God does it because he loves us and wants the best for us. If we kick and scream and resist His discipline, where will that leave us? If you are a parent, how do you feel when your kids will not listen to you when you are trying to correct them? Pretty crummy, huh?

The Hebrews needed to learn these things because they were dealing with persecution for belief in Jesus. That's why the author tells them to focus on Jesus and remember His suffering. He says, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood," (12:4). In other words, persecutions and struggles are inevitable, but God

has a purpose in it all, just as He had in Jesus' life and death.

Are you facing some struggles in your life right now? Do you feel the pain of some disappointment at home or at work? Do you sometimes wonder why being a Christian is worth it? Occasionally, do you feel like maybe life was better before you got on the discipleship pathway? If so, you are not alone. This has been the temptation of believers down through the ages, including those in the Hall of Faith in Chapter 11. It's all worth it, though, because it is part of the process God puts us through to be like His Son. So don't "grow weary and lose heart," but look to Jesus who Himself suffered so greatly for us. Once again, the Bible reminds us of the centrality of the cross to our faith.

You'll find the strength to go on by looking to Jesus for strength. He authored our faith and He will complete it. Simply let Him work in you today. You are His poem.

God's blessings are seen after a spanking,
Pastor Steve

"A Consuming Fire"

November 15 - Ezekiel 28:1-29:21 and Hebrews 12: 14-29

Let's try something a bit different. Allow me to encourage you by simply making some observations in our reading today. This will be like a notepad where I will write down important ideas that apply to our Christian walk. I am including Ezekiel because of its relevance to Hebrews today. I would encourage you to read the Old Testament too. Take the time today to read the section in Ezekiel and take a look at my notes below.

Notes:

Why do seacoast towns, like Tyre, tend to exalt themselves?

The natural beauty draws people and captures their attention

Port cities are in the best location for trade on the oceans

When we exalt ourselves we are acting like Lucifer, the "guardian cherub" who was blameless until rebellion was found in him.

God humbles the proud. "Lord, I humble myself today before you."

God judged Israel for leaning on Egypt and Egypt for deceiving Israel

God is primarily interested in HOLINESS. He is holy/a consuming fire!

God of Old Testament same God of New Testament, even scarier

Hebrews needed to see how God's holiness related then and now

Spiritual Jerusalem, Mount Zion, is home to the believer in Jesus

God lives there; myriads of joyful angels; a list; perfect spirits; a bloody Jesus with better blood

God shakes everything until the only the immaterial remains

We have God, so we are thankful and worshipful

Cross Bible references:

On Lucifer:

"Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard

a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death,”

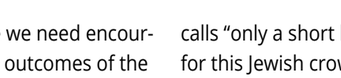
Revelation 12:7-11

On God shaking things up:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells,” 2 Peter 3:11-13

God’s blessings make us holy like Him,

Pastor Steve



”Keep On Keeping On“

November 16 - Hebrews 13: 1-25

We need each other because we need encouragement. One of the many outcomes of the Fall in Genesis 3 is that we quickly become discouraged. Sometimes it’s because we do not think we have made enough progress in our lives. We feel like we should be further along on the journey. Do you ever feel this way? Maybe you’ve made some progress, but it seems like you have a million miles to go. The Bible was meant to build our encouragement and patience so that we, like the Biblical characters, might one day inherit the promises.

Hebrews has been a very demanding book, but I hope you have seen its overarching emphasis on Jesus and what He has done for us by dying for our sins. He has brought us to God. He is the priest of a new covenant and the mediator of that covenant through His own blood. Through Jesus we have ready access to the Father’s presence, where we can find grace to help us when life is difficult. Has life been tough for you lately? If so, then take heart; you can come to God to find the strength you’ll need to carry on.

The Hebrews author wraps up the book, which he calls “only a short letter,” with a variety of reminders for this Jewish crowd. He has been tough on them because of what’s at stake here: believing in Jesus. He wants them to hang together, work with the leaders, protect the sanctity of marriage, put Christ in His proper priestly role, and to pray for the work of the gospel.

Which of those “exhortations” stands out the most to you? I like the imagery of Jesus as a Shepherd. Think about that. He is the Good Shepherd who lays His life down, becoming “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He is the final sacrifice for sins and supercedes all other sacrifices, past or present or future because of His own righteousness. This same righteousness He shares with us through our faith in Him.

Another important area is the difference between law and grace. Another way to put it is between law and gospel. The contrast is stark. The law is there to show us we need the grace of God. Only by grace can a person stand before a perfect God and not be consumed. Law and self-righteousness will only lead to frustration because those who live under the law must meet all the standards of the law, and that’s impossible. And so in Hebrews we see the contrast between the old system and the new. There is the dichotomy between the role of the priesthood in Israel and the role of the Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus. No wonder the writer says, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess His name” (13:15).

Jesus is the dividing line. He defines what is true and it is by His authority that the old fades away and disappears. I have always found it ironic that the Jews, probably by default, stopped offering sacrifices sometime after A.D. 70 because Jerusalem had been devastated by the Roman legions. Why would they do that? Without blood sacrifice there is no forgiveness of sins. Well, Jesus is the end of the law to those who believe, and so He had ended the need for a sacrificial system. Now “no one comes to the Father but through Him.”

I hope the book of Hebrews becomes one of your favorites over the years. It is a Bible book that I have come back to over and over again. It has improved my prayer life because of the “free access” it offers through the blood of Jesus. Jesus says, “Come to me.” And I say, “Lord, I come.”

God’s blessings are at the hand of the Good Shepherd,

Pastor Steve

JAMES

Day 321

"A Book For Life"

November 17 - James 1: 1-27

Sometimes life can become very confusing. You may have a decision to make and it is not clear what you should do. You probably want to do the right thing, but what that is isn't clear. Frustration sets in and you either make the decision too quickly, based on the first thing that comes to your mind, or you defer the decision to a future time and just try and ignore it in the meantime.

What do you do when you don't know what to do? Do you make rash decisions or no decisions at all? I tend toward indecisiveness when the rubber meets the road. I figure if I don't make a decision then I'll be safe. Can you relate?

Well, don't look any further because here is a book full of one-stop shopping for spiritual advice. James offers so much in just a few short chapters. It is the New Testament version of the book of Proverbs. It gives us very practical insight into how the Christian should relate to God and others.

Let me warn you that James is very blunt. He doesn't pull any punches when he talks about behavior. James believes that Christians act differently because of their "glorious Lord." He tells us to live above and beyond the status quo. We are to live godly lives and reflect the kind of spirit that Jesus walked in. This attitude will affect our lives at every turn. We are to be consistent in church and out. We cannot afford spiritually to be one way in church and another way when we walk with others outside the church.

James is writing to believers who were Jewish and had been scattered about. They had been, like the Hebrews, persecuted by those who were anti-Jesus. James says that the troubles they have encountered for the sake of Jesus are being used by God to produce Christian character or fruit in their lives. There is a purpose to their trials. Because of this they could endure the hardships.

But life, for them and for us today, sometimes feels like it is throwing us into stormy seas that rock our boat. James says that we should simply ask God sincerely and with confidence for the answers to our dilemma. James calls it "wisdom." Wisdom is the ability to know how to apply the truth of the Word to our situations, and especially our struggles. God gives wisdom in abundance when we ask for it. In particular, He will respond to your request for help when you are stumped about what to do next.

Let's be careful not to go ahead on something until we have sincerely prayed about it. It just makes spiritual sense to acknowledge God when we are in the decision-making process.

Let's not allow others to pressure us when we need to consider some direction or another. I have found that all too often people will say "yes" without giving the matter much thought. I think it is because they want to please others that they just can't say "no" to anyone.

James parallels Hebrews, reminding us that you must live by faith and pray in faith if you want the Lord to hear you. Remember from Hebrews that "without faith it is impossible to please God." Faith must be genuine. It is based on your confidence in the risen Jesus.

Make your faith sincere by telling God how you truly feel about Him, and then praising Him. A good relationship with God will always translate into proper behavior with others.

Have faith in God.

God's blessings proceed from God's liberal wisdom,

Pastor Steve

Day 322

"A Prayer"

November 18 - James 2: 1-26

I had a teacher in seminary named Neil Anderson. Dr. Anderson wrote several books dealing with the importance of knowing and experiencing freedom in and through Christ. I very much appreciated his insight into the Word and his ability to apply it to the general Christian population.

One element in his books is the importance of praying through the words of Scripture. For example, he'll take a person through the steps of forgiveness while they are praying. Or, if a person has been harassed by the devil, he'll pray with them "warfare prayers" so that they can realize the victory that Jesus has already won on the cross.

I'd like to take a break from the ordinary way I write you each day and follow the example of my former teacher. Here are a couple of model prayers to pray in order to encourage your own prayer life and help you hone in on praying for the things that matter most.

Dear God,

Thank you for your grace that has been poured out into my life. I know that you are at work in my life, and even though sometimes I am not aware of it, I believe you work in me day by day, making me like you.

Thank you for your leadership in my life. Thank you for the sacrifice that you made so that I could experience Eternal Life and know you through the Lord Jesus.

God, I need your wisdom today so that I can make the choices that will align me most squarely with your will. Thank you that the Bible promises wisdom for those who ask with faith. I need and I want to experience your wisdom today in every decision I make. Give me your wisdom, Lord, so that I can fulfill your purposes for me.

Fill me, too, with your love so that I can treat others as I would like to be treated. Help me to lay aside any prejudices that would exclude others whom you have made in your image. Today I want to act toward others the way you would act toward the same people. Give me your Spirit in measure so that I can love as you love.

I pray too, today, for my family and friends, that they would experience your grace in their lives. Give them the tools necessary to make the decisions that would best glorify your name. And help all of us to do as Paul asked us in his letters—to do all things in the name of Jesus so that His name might be glorified.

Lord, hide me in you. Work through me. Energize my faith so that I will do what I do today for you, and not in the selfishness of my own heart. God, today I am your servant, so let me lift up others and be an encouragement for them.

God, one last word about my words. Work with me to control my tongue. I want your ability to think before I speak. Remind me through the day to speak words that will build up and not tear down.

Thank you Jesus, for your victory over the evil

one; keep me from him and his devices. I forgive others who have injured me and commit them to you, because I do not want to hold on to a grudge or allow the taste of bitterness to invade my heart.

God, Ezekiel reminds me to pray for your strength to resist temptation that would come my way. None of us are immune from the desires of the flesh, which can lead us down a road of destruction. I want to learn from the evil practices of the Israelites so I won't fall into the same pit of idolatry or immorality.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

God's blessings make us prayerful,

Pastor Steve

P.S. How do we harmonize James 2 with Romans 4? In James it says that a man is not justified by faith alone but by works; in Romans 4 Paul says that a man is justified without working for it. What is going on here? Simply put, Paul is talking about saving faith in the Lord Jesus and His cross. James, on the other hand, is talking about a person who says he has faith but is devoid of true faith.

So the focus in both chapters is on the nature of true faith. True faith saves the soul and it also produces good fruit or works. Good works do not justify the soul, but they do qualify the kind of faith a person has. Anyone can say he has faith, but only true saving faith will produce fruit that will glorify God. That is why James brings up the demons who believe; they believe in Jesus, but do not have saving faith in Him. Phony faith will not save anyone. True faith will justify a person before God and produce holy works (see John 15 as a parallel to this short discussion).

"Small, but Powerful"

November 19 - James 3:1-18

Are you a builder or a destroyer?

"A destroyer?" you ask. "That sounds like a rude question; how could you imply that I'm someone who tears others down?"

No, you heard me right. We are either builders or destroyers and there really isn't much middle ground.

Each and every day we may be contributing to others or we may be taking away, but we are always having an influence. That influence may be small, yet we will impact someone today. You are an influencer whether you like it or not. All of us are. God made us that way.

"OK, I hear your point, but I'm not sure what you mean; in what ways am I having an impact on others?"

This is an important question because the more we consider the truth of this, the more sensitive we will be to the way we treat people. Those who build give others a positive example to follow. They use their energy for constructive purposes, and point others to the source of eternal life and life itself, Jesus; they give of what they have for the common good, they embrace the hurting and lonely, and they speak the words of God in a loving way.

Those who tear down, work for their own selfish ends. Their life encourages others to live selfish lives as well. It is an "If he can do it, so can I" attitude. Those around a person like this are looking out for themselves so that they do not get burned. Destroyers do not point others to Jesus because they are not Jesus people themselves and do not see the benefit for them of following Him. Instead of giving, they hoard and sometimes even expect others to take care of their needs. They only embrace themselves and their own ideas, and they speak disparagingly of the Word

of God because they are only interested in the words that proceed from the space between their ears.

In Chapter 2, James talks about the importance of having a working faith. True faith, he says, produces actions that reflect the high quality of that faith. This is the kind of faith that reaches out and loves others in Jesus' Name. This is the kind of faith that takes action against the destructive behaviors of the evil one, the devil. This kind of faith captures God's will and gives it to those who are needy for God. Is it any wonder then that after James's frank discussion about real faith that he goes into the power of the tongue?

Jesus said, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart," (Luke 6:45). It is in the secret places of the heart that a man's true life resides. If genuine faith in Christ is in those rooms of the heart then the result will be Christ-likeness. If Self is on the throne, then selfishness and pseudo-faith will result. The mouth speaks what is in the heart. I believe a person can, for a time, mask the true inner person and feign being someone else. You may even appear to be a very spiritual person, but eventually the mouth will catch up with the heart and the true intentions will come out.

Look at the deadliness of the tongue again in James 3:6. The tongue can create more destruction than you might think. It is fueled by the most evil of forces. It is like a fire fed by the hordes of hell. The devil and his helpers are able to ignite a person's tongue and cause untold havoc. Jesus said that the devil was a liar and the father of lies. He works overtime lying to you about all sorts of things, especially the truths of the Word of God.

If the devil can get us to contradict or water down the Word of God, he knows that he can lead us off track. Just one little doubt can work on our souls, cause us to be overly sensitive to our own failures and send us off course. So don't believe the lies for even one moment. Instead, set your mind firmly on the truth of God's Word and let the Lord be the one to lead you.

Why is the tongue so deadly? James says it is driven by a three-fold force: the earthly (that which is driven by selfish ambition); the unspiritual (that which is driven by the natural man who is self-centered); and the demonic (that spirit which opposes all of God's glory). Envy and selfish ambition are the gasoline on the fire that keep it raging against all that is good. The tongue merely facilitates the boiling caldron underneath the surface.

Some people may say that they live neutrally. They speak neither encouragingly or disparagingly about anyone. They live in their own little world and don't bug anyone. The problem with that approach is that the people who are closest to you do not know how to read you; chances are that they will read from you that you do not care about them. If you do not encourage others, then they will think that you feel negatively about them. That may not matter to the guy on the street who has no clue who you are, but it will matter to your kids and grandkids, or the people you work with, or your closest neighbors. Neutrality is really not a virtue at all.

In contrast to this is the behavior of the wise man. His life is characterized by fruits that reflect the work of the Holy Spirit. He has the Spirit inside, driving him to do good. He is more interested in helping his neighbor than taking from him. He is a builder rather than a destroyer. His tongue moves in praise of God and in the edification of man, who, as James reminds us, was made in the image of God.

God's blessings give wisdom from above,

Pastor Steve

Day 324

"Do This"

November 20 - James 4:1-17

Enjoy The Day,

I love games. I especially love to watch professional sports. I grew up attending Los Angeles Dodger ball games; I have also been to pro basketball, football, and hockey games. There is something magical about watching these games and witnessing the athleticism of the athletes.

Life is not a game. Some people act as if the people they know are the opposition in the big game. And so they struggle for superiority and domination. They are more concerned about winning than loving. I think this is the result of a humanistic and Darwinistic mindset that has pervaded our modern culture. But life is not a game and those who treat it as such will only increase their frustration. the older they get. God did not design us for gamesmanship, but for love and community.

The more we treat our fellow man with contempt and try and win our own way in life, the more we will be like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. It just does not fit. God made all of us in His image and His image is primarily expressed through love. When we seek to promote ourselves at the expense of others we do what we were not designed to do. I may love games, but I must be careful not to play them with the people in my life.

James is concerned about the same thing in this chapter. He indicates that the people were spiritually backwards. They were fighting and arguing and hurting one another. They were acting carnal and selfish. They were grieving the Spirit of the Lord, but apparently they didn't feeling bad about this. They were treating lightly the things that were nothing to be laughed at. They were playing games with their faith.

James has some very harsh words for them. He tells them to stop laughing and weep instead. They needed to face their sins and turn from them so that they could be made right with the Lord.

James gives them a very simple yet profound way to take care of this problem. He tells them to seek the Lord and shut the devil out. Obviously, they had been giving the devil free reign and he was wreaking havoc in their midst. If you give that liar an inch he will take a mile. He will enter where he is welcome and take advantage of anyone who will not stand against him in the name of Jesus.

If you change your spiritual tone and pursue God, you will find a oneness with God that will also bring harmony back into the fellowship of the church. James says that God will be near you when you seek Him. It's you and God only; the devil is not invited. He must run because you have made the Lord your Lord, your Leader, the only one you adore.

There is no mixing God with the devil. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot love God and hate your brother. You cannot love sin and push the devil away at the same time. Sin is his vehicle and he will ride it all the way into your life if you let him. But if you come to God and embrace Him, you will be rid of the enemy's nuisances.

Has your spiritual life lost its edge? Is spiritual fervor a distant memory? Have you lost the motivation to be in the Word with enthusiasm every day? James says that if you draw near to God, you will be back on track. OK, so what does it mean to "draw near to God?" Well, first come to Him honestly in prayer and let Him know your intentions. Let Him know that you want to be near Him. Next, when you talk to Him, mourn the allowances you have given to the devil. This includes the sins that came along with the enemy's involvement in your life. Then, celebrate the forgiveness that is yours in Jesus. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sins. Then, make sure to keep God's Words at hand so that you will have daily ammunition to resist the devil. Remember what Jesus did when He was confronted by that evil guy. We ought to do likewise.

God's blessings come after tears,

Pastor Steve

Day 325

"Be Sensitive"

November 21 - James 5: 1-20

Hearty Greetings,

Are you sensitive to the needs of others? When you see someone in need, do you consider what would be the best thing for them? Do you see a need and barge in too fast because you want the credit for meeting the need? Or, are you tempted to pass by because it would be a big inconvenience for you to get involved?

It takes some wisdom and discernment to know what to do when a need is presented to you. What is your approach?

When the Good Samaritan saw the bloodied and bruised man on the side of the road he reached out to take care of his immediate problems. In his case that meant bandaging wounds and carrying him to a place where he could recoup. Remember, there were others who passed the injured man by for a variety of reasons.

Everyone acts differently when under stress. During stressful times it is so hard not to focus on our own problems and ignore those around us. We may be on edge, a bit testy and unable to even see what is happening with others. When we are stressed out, people who are happy and carefree annoy us. Stress can accumulate over time and then create such pressure that a person just explodes.

We all have our limits. A car has a red zone on the tachometer for a reason. It is a warning: if you run in this zone too long your motor may seize up. Have you ever felt like your life was running at 8,000 RPMs? It may be an adrenaline rush for a while, but before long you'll start to sputter and slow down.

Psychologically, I think it's a good idea to simply be aware of where you are on the stress scale. Have you had a number of major events in your life lately? Chances are you will be a bit on edge. You will be looking for ways to relieve the stress. Being aware of our own stress load and the limits of our own minds and bodies will help us to decide where to go from there. People under a great amount of stress need to eat properly, get a good night's sleep and have a good network of friendly support. Remember, Ecclesiastes says that if you have friends, they can help you up when you fall. On the other hand, if you feel all alone when there is a major incident in your life, you will feel so much more pressure. Truly, "two are better than one."

James has some things to say about reaching people, and he puts his counsel in broad language so that we can have a guideline to work from. Here's what God says:

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray." Let's be the first to pray with someone about their trouble. When we bring our burdens to God, we're relieved, knowing that He will somehow take care of us. When a friend tells you about his problems, listen carefully and then suggest that the two of you pray about the things that are weighing him down. Pray specifically for the things that he has brought up and commit him and the problems to the Lord's grace. Remember Philippians 4:6-7.

"Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." Proverbs says that the worst thing you can do is sing happy songs to a sad heart. But if a person is experiencing a happy time in his life, then by all means encourage him to give God the credit through a happy song. This can be a hard thing to do if you do not feel happy yourself. But I trust that you have been praying about your troubles and now you can reach out and rejoice with someone who is happy. By the way, if you are happy, don't assume that everyone is. We will sometimes project our mood, good or bad, on the rest of the world. In the story of the Good Samaritan we are not told what the mood of the Samaritan was, only that he was empathetic and reached out to the man in trouble.

"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up." When you are feeling horribly and cannot even get up out of bed, and feel good for nothing, you are the one that needs special attention. James says to bring the leaders of the church together to pray for the sick. The promise then is left up to God to do a healing work. Is this verse a carte blanche promise that every time the elders pray over people they will be healed? Of course not, because there is a day of death for everyone. If it was a person's time to die, he would die no matter how much oil you poured on him. The promise is still valid, though, and we should believe when we pray that God will raise the sick up. Of course, God knows what He is doing in a person's life and the outcome is in His hands. James simply states that the "Lord will raise him up." I think we should pray accordingly.

Whether you are in trouble, happy or sick, or you come into contact with others in one of these states, the key is sensitivity. Let's be sensitive to the needs of those God has placed around us. Let's ask ourselves the question: "How can I best help this person?" Sometimes the best thing you can do is stay out of it. Other times you will have to make a trip to the hospital. Whatever it is, as you walk by the Spirit, you will be led by Him too.

I hope you are happy today. If so, sing out loud.

If you have troubles, spend a bit of time praying.

If you are sick, give me a call and I'll pour oil on you.

God's blessings keep us sensitive to others,

Pastor Steve

1 PETER

Day 326

"TRINITY"

November 22 - 1 Peter 1:1 - 2:3

I Hope You Have A Sunny Day,

Getting to know God is a lifetime pursuit. A person may say he knows God, and I think that is a fine thing to claim, but to what degree do we really know Him? I do not mean to discourage you in any way, because I do believe He is knowable; all I want to say is that there is something about God that is incomprehensible. God, by definition, is beyond our understanding.

What we can do is take what God tells us about Himself and learn to appreciate that knowledge. We call it revelation when God makes something known about His character. God reveals things that we can only know if our ears are spiritually in tune with what God is saying. For example, I have always enjoyed the wonders of creation, but before I came to Christ I never connected the creation with a Creator. It just never came into my mind. After Christ came into my life I began to link the creation with my Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible is another example. As a kid I really did treasure the old King James Bible my grandma had given to me. The problem was I didn't understand much of what I read in there. Part of the problem, of course, was that we didn't use King James English where I went to school. Every now and then, especially on Sunday mornings, I'd pull the Bible out of my drawer and begin to decipher what I was reading. I soon put it away again. It takes light to see light, I found out later. It isn't until you come to the source of all spiritual light that you can understand or even see what you are reading. Jesus said, "Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." He means that spiritual things are perceived in the life of a spiritually alive person. The Psalmist said, "In Thy light we shall see light."

Part of the revelation of God is the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit; He is also called the Spirit of Christ. The relationship between the persons of the Trinity (Three Persons/One God) is a fascinating study. They are one in nature but different in function, yet they act in unison. There is perfect oneness in the Godhead. Now, how God was who He was in the "beginning" our finite brains cannot comprehend. It gives me goose bumps to think about God pre-existing. God always was, no beginning, no ending, He just is. For example, in Exodus 3 God makes Himself known to Moses as the great "I am." Again the emphasis is on eternal existence, without beginning of days or end of days. In John Chapter 8 Jesus says to his adversaries, "Before Abraham was, I am." Jesus identifies Himself as the great "I am." Then in John 14-16 Jesus teaches about "another comforter", one like Him who would be with the disciples until the end of the age. All three persons work together. They are involved in creation and redemption. And so Peter brings each Partner into perspective in the beginning of his little letter.

Peter addresses "God's elect" who are distinct from the world and have been exiled from their homes. He says that they have been "scattered." This is probably a reference to the dispersion due to persecution; the rest of Peter's writings attest to this. Then

Peter gives us information about each member of the Trinity.

"Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." This means that God picked us before we were His. He loved us so much that He selected us out of the rest of humanity that we might be His very own. Remember Romans 8:29, 30—"For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified."

"Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit." It is the Spirit Who brings us into a relationship with Jesus. Jesus said, "All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that He (The Holy Spirit) will take what is mine and declare it to you," (John 16:15). And Paul warned, "And do not grieve the Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." The Spirit puts the spotlight on Christ, matches us with Him and speaks to us in His name. He is a wonderful comforter.

"For obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood." It was the Spirit who brought us to Jesus and it was Jesus who forgave our sins by His work on the cross. Peter would say later in this same letter, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit," (3:18).

Let's talk practically for a moment about how we relate to the Trinity. God is our Good Daddy. He loves us and invites us to call Him Father or Abba (meaning "daddy"). We come to Him the way we would approach a good earthly father. We need to spend time with Him and get to know Him by reading His words and talking to Him through prayer.

Jesus brings the Father's love into focus through His sacrifice for us. Jesus gives us confidence that we can come to the Father because He has paved the way for us by the cross. Both the Father and the Son live in the believer by the Holy Spirit. "...I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you," (John 14:20). "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him," (John 14:24). "The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you," (John 14:17).

Another important way to view the Trinity is in the practice of prayer. We pray to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. God the Father is the One to whom we direct our prayer. Our prayer is heard because of the Son. The Holy Spirit guides us on what to pray for.

May the God of all, live in you today and may you experience His power as you go about your day.

God's blessings come from the Trinitarian God,

Pastor Steve

"Precious"

November 23 - 1 Peter 2:4-25

The Top Of The Day To You,

I love the word "precious." Besides its use in Lord of the Rings, the word brings me thoughts of the things and people that are near and dear to my heart. What is precious to you? One thing that's precious to me is fellowship with others in Jesus. I think the Spirit of Jesus is close to those who meet in His Name. There is a great joy when we come together and emphasize the Name of Jesus. I just love that.

We will guard what is precious to us. We will protect it and cherish it unto death. If we lose something precious we plummet into the grief process. We can be having a great day, then find out that something precious is gone and become instantly depressed.

Remember, Jesus said that we shouldn't fear man, who can destroy our bodies; we should fear God, who can destroy both body and soul in hell. I haven't talked much about hell in my e-mails. I guess it's not a subject that I enjoy discussing. Anyway, hell essentially is the loss of all that is precious to you. Hell is eternal separation from God. Hell will not be a pleasant place. If you value and hold precious the things God despises, then you will lose your soul in the end. If you lose those things in this life, then in the end you will gain your life.

People sell their souls for the basest of pursuits. How many people have sold their soul for a bottle of alcohol? The number is countless. Alcohol has claimed more souls for the fiery pit than almost any other addiction. Paul said in Corinthians that no drunkard will enter the kingdom of heaven? Why? Because his allegiance is to Jack Daniels and not to the Lord.

Many have cashed in the potential for spiritual freedom for the sake of money. Jesus said that you cannot serve God and money. Both are masters that demand your all.

The list of diversions is endless. How hopeless people must feel when they realize they have lost their soul because of their addiction. What was most precious to them becomes the thing that trips them up.

I remember a time when I first realized what is precious to God. It was midnight, but still about 90 degrees, and I was having trouble getting to sleep. My two friends and I were sacked out on the ground under the stars in Palm Springs, Ca. My new faith was still a mystery to me, but I knew that Jesus must be real because I had never experienced such an outflow of love before. Love was coming my way from God, I thought, and also from a new found family of believers. This experience was different than any other trips I'd had to Palm Springs. This time it wasn't about drinking and carousing. I think the friends were a bit put out with me because of this, but I couldn't help it, I was a different person than the one they knew just months before. Maybe that's why I was a bit restless; I don't know.

Then something came to me. I heard a voice. The voice wasn't an audible one, like the one in that movie "Field of Dreams." This was an impression in my mind—strong, persistent, unmistakable, mysterious. "1 Peter 2:4." Then again, "1 Peter 2:4." Honestly, I had no clue what that was. I did not know that there was a 1 Peter in the Bible. I turned over and closed my eyes. "1 Peter 2:4." Then it dawned on me. I had my old King James Bible in the back of my little orange VW bug. I got up and went to the car, rummaged around for the Bible and sat with it under the faint dome light in the front seat. I searched the index and there it was, 1 Peter.

I turned to the page and looked for chapter two. I perused the page until I found verse four. "To whom coming, as unto a living stone; disallowed indeed by men but chosen by God and precious." Then I heard, "You are precious to me." At that moment a flood of peace overwhelmed me. I was precious to God. I was loved beyond reason. I was a child of the living and loving God. At that moment the world could have come to an end and I would not have cared. I was loved. I was precious to my Maker. Praise the Lord!

You are precious to God. He does not want to lose you. He treats you as the apple of His eye. He watches over you to keep you in all of your ways and He guides you in the way He chooses. God keeps us by His own power. Remember Jesus' prayer in John 17, where He asked the Father to keep us from the evil one and to secure us in His Name. This truth is the single most important thing for you to grasp: God values us.

God's blessings in Jesus' Name,

Pastor Steve

Day 328

"Be Understanding"

November 24 - 1 Peter 3: 1-22

Who understands you best?

It's probably someone who has spent a great amount of time with you, listening intently to the things you express. It is someone who takes what you say with a grain of salt, not being too judgmental when you spout off about some bothersome part of your life. This person has most likely been with you through thick and thin. This person knows your personality, your likes and dislikes, your hopes and dreams, your goals, and your quirks. But most importantly, despite knowing you in and out, this person still accepts you.

If you are married, then wouldn't it be nice if your partner was this special person? The intimacy in marriage is much more than physical intimacy. It is about the oneness you work on as you navigate your way. You share personal things. You talk about confidential things. Your partner should know you better than almost anyone else. Isn't that why divorce can become so nasty? One or both partners take the unknown things that are to be kept secret, and he or she makes them into the missiles that hurt so deeply. We know things about our partners that could be very damaging if they were known publicly. That's the nature of intimacy.

Have you ever just needed to unload a truckload of baggage that was bothering you, so you tell the hair stylist because you have always felt comfortable with her? You feel better and acknowledge her caring attitude. Then it happens. Later that same week it gets back to you that you said such-and-such. You unloaded on the wrong person. She told all and now your few moments of venting are coming back to haunt you.

We all need a confidant. We need to be able to be ourselves—good, bad and ugly—with someone we can trust. We cannot afford to hold in what is sizzling inside. When we do, it will become much bigger in our own mind than it is in reality and it will tie us in a knot. Have you been there? Are you dealing with this right now? I hope that you can develop a relationship with someone who holds your trust absolutely sacred.

Peter instructs husbands to be considerate toward their wives. We husbands are to respect our wives by being understanding. We need to appreciate the differences between us. It is so natural to treat others with a "get it together" attitude. So we give quick advice, bark out commands and offer criticisms without thinking about what the other person is thinking.

Just the typical emotional differences between husbands and wives should wake the men up to listen more intently. Now I realize that not everyone fits into a mold. But there are needs that women have, needs that are connected to the physical differences between the sexes, which we men must appreciate if we are going to have harmony. Don't women need the assurance that they are going to be taken care of and protected? Isn't the woman often weaker in the physical sense, and doesn't she need her man to do most of the more physically demanding jobs?

My wife's grandparents were, before their recent deaths, pillars of their community. Grandpa never met a stranger and grandma constantly did works of service for family and friends. To me they were a model couple. Grandpa had a remarkable sense of humor. He was always making quips and playing practical jokes on perfect strangers, not to mention those of us in the family. Well, on the front of their home out in the desert of southern California, in big wooden cut-out letters, were the words "HERS" and "HIS." On the house portion it said "Hers" and on the garage it said "His." That was the way things were, too. He was the fixer and mechanic and project guy and Grandma managed the house. She was so efficient; if you got up early in the morning to use the bathroom, by the time you got back, the bed would have already been made. On the other hand, if you needed an oil change or a brake job, Grandpa would be at it before you had stopped in the driveway. That was just the way they were.

They were both strong in their own way, but I think they fulfilled their roles like Peter says here. He helped her where she was physically unable, and he treated her as a co-heir of the life God had given to them. I have never met someone as considerate as grandpa. He treated his bride like a queen. They were married more than 60 years. They lived in harmony and their prayers were heard because they did not hold a grudge or put each other down in public. I never once heard them return an insult for an insult, but I did hear many mutual blessings. Those of us who are married ought to do likewise.

A word to the unmarried: I think we learn to be good partners (if that is God's will for us) by learning to submit to authority before we are married. The chances are, if we are generally rebellious before we marry, then we will show the same attitude afterward. Learn to depend on others and ask for help when you need it. Also, practice returning a blessing for an insult. It is so easy to give tit for tat, but God wants us to be like Jesus and return a blessing to those who put us down. It may be hard to do—maybe even supernatural—but try it on for size and see if it doesn't make for a better life. Jesus knew how to live well, and we would do well to follow in His footsteps.

God's blessings make us understanding people,

Pastor Steve

Day 329

"How to Serve & How to Suffer"

November 25 - 1 Peter 4: 1-19

Have A Great Day,

Peter is practical. I love learning from people who make things clear to me. They talk about the day-to-day matters that affect my life. I need that, because I tend to get wrapped up in the details and lose sight of the big picture. When someone comes along and helps me organize the details, soon enough the bigger picture becomes more clear.

All too often I major on the minors and neglect the majors. The minors have a way of yelling for our attention. But when I give my attention to them, I am drawn away from the really important things. Jesus said that the Pharisees ignored the important things, like mercy and judgment, and instead focused on the less important things, like rules they had concocted about tithing.

One of the important things Peter teaches us about is suffering. Peter says suffering is God's tool to teach us to live right. Let's face it, when we feel horrible we can either turn to God or turn away from Him. God's purpose is that suffering will cause us to throw ourselves on the Lord. When we suffer, we are partaking in the sufferings of Christ. Hardships are designed by God to help us focus on our spiritual lives and not run to the world's medications to numb our condition. Suffering brings us back to the heart and soul of life, where we turn from sins and live in trust of God.

Others may not understand why you are now attending Bible studies and going to prayer meetings instead of going to the parties that you once lived for. These people are still driven by their ungodly lusts. They cannot fathom that you are now interested in doing God's will and living a godly life. To them, it seems boring and old fashioned. They do not see the benefit of a life in pursuit of the Holy One. You, on the other hand, were once blinded like them, but now you

see spiritually and are driven to do what God wants for you to do.

Peter exhorts us to use the gifts God has given us to reach out to others. First of all, we must be clear-headed so that we can pray. Then we are to love one another in a way that guards the integrity of our friends. Love covers a multitude of sins, in that we are to welcome notorious sinners who come to Christ; their sins can be forgiven no matter what background they may be from. Then we are to speak God's words to one another so that the church may hear the Lord speaking to them. There is no other guarantee of God's clear voice besides the clear communication of His Word.

At crucial times in my life I have had others speak God's Word to me. It brought a sense of clear direction and purpose. God used them to direct me and shed light on the way before me. Those who know the Word of truth can open it at any given time and speak the Word of God to you, guiding you on your way. Don't ever isolate yourself from the Word. The Word is a lamp and a light and will give you the kind of direction you need to make your way in this dark world.

When we have the Word of God in our lives, we can be patient when difficulties come. James talked about letting trials have their perfect work. The result would be a more patient Christian. Peter says we will be more like Jesus. He also says that we shouldn't gloat about our sufferings if we bring them on ourselves. If we have broken the law or are meddlers in the affairs of others we ought to repent of those things rather than grumble that we are suffering so much. True suffering occurs when you take a stand for Jesus in some way and then receive flack for it. In the days this letter was written, the church was being persecuted on all fronts. Peter wanted his flock to remember that God had a purpose even in suffering.

Are you suffering? God wants you to be patient. He desires that you continue to use your spiritual gifts to reach others, and He expects you not to grovel if your suffering is self-imposed.

God's blessings are sometimes painful,
Pastor Steve

"God Humbles The Proud"

November 26 - 1 Peter 5: 1-14

It's a Sweet Jesus Day,

The king looked over the vastness of his kingdom and marveled at his own creation. He was pleased that he had excelled above and beyond the average mortal. He felt invincible. He was the sole power on the planet. What he said was law and his audience was desired by all. How much greater could one man get? There was no one to compare with him. Then...

God humbled the man. The Bible records that he was put out to pasture for seven years, eating grass like the beasts of the field. He descended from riches to rags. He was brought low, so low that his humanity was reduced to that of a beast. Who ran the kingdom in the meantime and how his subjects responded to this is not recorded. What we do know is that for the time being, the king was out of commission. The man was Nebuchadnezzer.

Every great kingdom throughout history has had its day, but in the end each of them ended. The superior became inferior. The mighty became weak and subservient. The powerful militaries were reduced to slaves of other nations. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, and others., have all had their day. Those "invincible" peoples are now reduced to a story on the yellowed pages of archaic history books. No human endeavor lasts by its own sovereignty.

When the king came to his senses seven years later, he praised the God of heaven, who alone is sovereign. He honored the God of heaven and gave Him the credit for all that was. This was a far cry from where he had been seven years before. Now he had a clear view of God and he humbled himself, even though, of course, God had first brought him to his knees through the process. God humbles the proud and gives grace to the humble.

Peter also recognized the sovereignty of God. Just think about his life for a moment and realize that he was a very proud man who was humbled by the truth and love of Jesus Christ. Peter was, in his own flesh, a warrior of sorts. He was ready to fight for what he thought was right. Jesus assuaged him and made it clear to him that His way would be different than any human method. The picture of Peter weeping on that cold, spring morning after he had denied his Lord is a reminder to us that God humbles the proud. Peter's brash and dominant personality would follow him throughout life, but he would also learn the lesson of humility and he would begin to live a life of grace and love.

Peter now applies the lessons he has learned to his position of elder in Christ's church. He considers himself a fellow elder with those who are spiritually on the front lines taking care of the flock given to their charge. Each of the qualities he asks the elders to demonstrate is flavored with humility. For example, elders are to serve willingly and not for money. Leadership among many of the elders would be a vocation, but they are admonished to lead with a good attitude, working from the heart and not out of compulsion.

Elders are to be examples and not lords over the flock. People will naturally want the elders in their life to tell them what to do. Peter says that the elder is to lead the way while giving the sheep the tools to make their own decisions. The biblical elder is a follower of Christ; not perfect, but centered on his own relationship with the Lord so that his daily life is guided by the Great Shepherd. Elders follow Christ, and the sheep follow their example and follow too.

Humility is the key to spiritual leadership. Leaders who are exercising their leadership in their own strength and talents may get much done, but they often wear out because they end up carrying a load that's too heavy. That's why Peter says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you," (5: 6,7). The proud man will not feel the need to cast his worries on God, because he will be busy trying to do it on his own. The humble man will be conscious of his need for God and put himself under the Lord's hand, where he can give up his worries to the Sovereign One.

Long live the king who acknowledges God's sovereignty!

God's blessings give grace to the humble,
Pastor Steve

2 PETER

Day 331

"Let's Add"

November 27 - 2 Peter 1:1-21

It's A Good Day To Truly Live,

Are you looking forward to Thanksgiving? I have so much to be thankful for. Even if I could list everything, I think I would still miss half of it. So much is given to us (by grace) that we are unaware of, most of the time, because of our finite perspective. Ephesians 1 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." How much do I not acknowledge? Much!

Something has hit me pretty hard the last couple of days while reading Peter. Remember when Peter says add to this, that; and to that, this; and so on and so on? I think what he's getting at is that we can always be growing. In 2 Peter the colorful apostle is preparing himself and his flock for his impending death. Jesus had predicted that Peter would experience an uncomfortable death, and now the time had arrived. Possibly the heat from Rome had been turned up at this point. They were pretty touchy about the Christians calling Jesus Emperor ("Lord") over and above Caesar.

Peter's heart beat with the desire that those he knew would be strengthened even after he was gone. A few years back I knew a man who was dying of cancer and only had months to live. He made a video tape for his kids of all the advice he could think of so that they would have direction after he was gone. I'm sure that now that they are in their twenties, they pull out those old tapes from time to time and have a good cry and lean on their father's words. Peter was like a father to the believers he was writing to in the Lord. Soon he would be gone, and then what would happen to those in Christ whom he loved so much?

Those of us who have been saved for 15, 20 or 30 years need to hear this. We need to be reminded that fruitfulness is an ongoing process and doesn't end when we have read the Bible through, or after we have had a lull period in our walk, or after we felt like we had sinned one too many times. Peter says, "Don't give up, don't listen to false teaching, grow in the knowledge of Jesus and add to your life these qualities." What a great challenge!

Don't these qualities Peter lists look like the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5? Sure they do. Peter wants us to focus on them so that we will have a goal, a spiritual goal, that can be reached only through God's Spirit working in our lives. But it is our response to do the work of addition. Look again at what he wants us to add. Aren't these the very things we see in others that we admire? Let's go ahead and add. Why not? Isn't it time?

I think, though, I can hear someone saying, "I'm too busy. I can't add one more thing to my life." But aren't all of these qualities things we can do along the way while we are doing our daily things? Sure they are. We can still go to that game our kids are in, we can just be friendlier to the people around us. We still can shop, but let's smile at that lonely person we just walked past. These are qualities that we need as we go along. So we add without taking anything away.

The more of Jesus and the less of ourselves that we live with, the greater the spiritual maturity we will see. Mark this portion of Scripture and come back to it. The result of this kind of fruit in your life will be spiritual confidence and growth in the knowledge of Jesus.

God's blessings add up,
Pastor Steve

Day 332

"Filthy Lawless Men (An Accursed Brood)"

November 28 - 2 Peter 2: 1-22

God's promises will lead us on,

There are "bad apples" in the world. This has been true from the beginning and we still experience it today. Sometimes we are fully aware that someone is rotten to the core and at other times we are completely in the dark. Maybe they appear to be caramel-coated on the outside, hiding the worm inside. If you have ever bitten into a rotten piece of fruit you know what I mean.

There is rotten fruit among the believers in the church. There are secret agents of the enemy right in our camp. They are trying to destroy the faith of some by means of bad teaching, the kind of teaching that downplays the superiority of Jesus. These people are bullies. They sound very convincing as they push their way forward, but they do not have the Spirit of Jesus. They are in the game for their own profit and they will exploit you in any way they can.

Over the years I have run into a few men who fit this category. I have seen the guy in the sweaty, double-breasted suit, with fancy jewelry and a hypnotic voice, preaching away about all sorts of things, most emphatically about the offering of money for his ministry. These money mongers use the gospel to squeeze the dollars out of the lives of unsuspecting souls. It's not long before you read that they have run off with their secretary and have left their wife and children behind. Sometimes musicians will use their talents as a platform to lambaste the church and guilt them into giving large sums of money for their own pockets.

Let's pull out some of Peter's phrases that describe these men:

false (2:1)
heretics (2:1)
greedy (2:2)
ungodly (2:5,6)
filthy and lawless (2:7)
unrighteous (2:9)
corrupt and sinful (2:10)
bold and arrogant (2:10)
slanderers (2:10)
blasphemers (2:12)
brute beasts (2:12)
creatures of instinct (2:12)
like beasts (2:12)
carousers (2:13)
blots and blemishes (2:13)
revelers (2:13)
eyes full of adultery (2:14)
seducers (2:14)
experts in greed (2:14)
accursed brood (2:14)
wanderers (2:15)
springs without water (2:17)
mists driven by a storm (2:17)
enticers (2:18)
slaves of depravity (2:19)
vomit eating dogs (2:22)
wallowing pigs (2:22)

I guess "bad apple" does not really do an adequate job of describing this kind of person, does it? This person's moral backbone is like jelly. It bends to any and every whim. It is hedonistic and narcissistic. This person uses God's holy things to promote his own cause: himself.

Do you know someone in the church who is opinionated and heady and full of himself? A person who always wants to promote his latest faddish idea and will not take any correction when called on the carpet for his extreme views? If so, beware; you may have one of these rascals on your hands. Remember, be always discerning and do not allow yourself or the body to get taken in by these spiritual villains. They may sound very spiritual, but their motives are all about themselves.

God's blessings keep us from the bad apples,
Pastor Steve

"That Day Means Something For Us Today"

November 29 - 2 Peter 3:1-18

God Is At Work In Your Life Today,

Someday God will make all things new. But before that, "Everything will be destroyed," according to Peter. The present environment in which we live, the domain of Satan, as Paul calls it (Ephesians 2), will be demolished.

A few years ago I was watching on TV as workers destroyed several hotels in Las Vegas. I also remember when the Kingdome in Seattle was imploded.

What a sight! That huge structure, in a matter of seconds, was brought to its knees. In the same way, the timer is ticking on our world. Someday God will bring it all down in a fiery crash.

Some have disputed this truth ever since the prophets first predicted it. Men use the argument that it will never happen because it hasn't happened yet. That's kind of like a Californian saying there will never be a deadly quake because they have survived the ones they have had so far. It is not very good reasoning. Peter makes it clear that God withholds judgment so that people can be saved from the coming wrath. God is patient. God's heart, His wish, is that all men will repent and turn to Him. He knows, of course, that not all will turn; and so some day, He will pull the plug.

God created this place and He can take it back. It is His, to do with as He chooses. Peter reminds his friends that God spoke the worlds into existence by His Word. He talks about the first chapter of the Bible to remind them that the very water God used to shape the globe, He also used to undo it at the flood in Noah's day. He will not do that again, but will use fire to dissolve what we now see.

We do not know when this will happen. Those who say it will happen in our generation only join a long line of prognosticators who have believed the same in their generation. Could it happen today? Yes. But no man knows the day, nor should we hang our prophetic hat on some news headline that appears to indicate that the end is now.

What we can do is respond to the fact of the world's eventual demise in the way Peter lays it out for us. He simply tells us that in the light of these truths we ought to be ready for the end by living holy lives. We should not live for our own pleasures, but for the glory of God. In Paul's terminology, we should offer our bodies as sacrifices for God; he calls our body parts "instruments of righteousness."

Second, we ought to be students of the letters of Paul. Why? Because the Holy Spirit, according to Peter, was inspiring his communications with the church so that we today might have adequate instruction. Peter indicates that it is the "arrogant and unstable people" who distort the Words of Scripture written by Paul. Those who humbly study his Words will benefit from them, because they are the voice of God to us. They will make us more spiritual and help us to prepare for the last days' troubles.

Lastly, all of us ought to keep growing in Jesus. We must daily experience His grace so that we can walk in the Spirit and do the things that are pleasing to Him. We must also grow in our knowledge of the Savior so that we do not end up falling prey to people like the ones listed in the previous chapter. We need to be on guard against anyone who would distort the gospel of Jesus.

And so we look for His coming with anticipation of all that He has in store for us. Allow this to motivate you to be holy as He is holy, and pursue the things that make for a godly life.

God's blessings will be accomplished with fire,
Pastor Steve

1 JOHN

Day 334

"God's Emergency Room"

November 30 - 1 John 1:1-2:11

Good Day,

Have you ever been in a car accident? Years ago I was stopped at a light when I heard a loud screech from behind, the slamming and locking of breaks, and then—bang, crunch!—I was rear ended, and my VW van was totaled. My passenger and I weren't hurt, but it was very upsetting.

Some accidents happen to us and others are our fault. In some we are the only ones hurt, in others we impact someone else. Accidents happen. All of us hope our insurance will be sufficient to cover whatever problems arise. Sometimes that's true and other times it isn't. No matter what the accident entails, it makes us feel crummy. We are left to deal with tough emotions. We feel hurt, frustrated, fearful. We sometimes want to point fingers and assign blame in an attempt to lessen the burden we feel.

If you are like me, you usually avoid going to the emergency room at all costs. For some it's because of the money. Recently a family member of mine had a bad fall. He thinks he may have even broken a bone. When he went to the emergency room they would not accept his insurance for some reason, so he chose to not accept treatment. As his pain mounted he had second thoughts, however. I think some people are a bit embarrassed to be in the emergency room. I once saw someone come in who had glued his own eye shut with Super Glue. They see it all in the ER.

Whether we injure ourselves or others, physically or morally, from time to time we all need to check in at God's Emergency Department (G.E.D.). We probably need to check-in more than we do. The Great Physician will be there to help us with some of the most upsetting dilemmas in our life. You might be wondering what it's like in the GED. What do you need to do? What will the Doctor do for you?

First of all, we need to meet the Doctor. When you go to a hospital emergency department you usually get whichever doctor is on duty at the time. That's not the way it works with God's E.D. There, you will meet not an angel or a saint, but Jesus Himself. John makes it clear at the beginning of this short letter that Jesus himself is the one who came to give life. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." As we read previously in John's gospel: "But as many as received Him (Jesus) to them He gave the authority to become sons of God, even to as many as believed in His name," (1:12). Do you believe in Jesus? Have you received the gift of salvation by asking God to forgive your sins and be the Leader of your life? If so, you have met the standards to come to G.E.D. Your card is current.

Now you can come. No appointment necessary. Jesus makes house calls or office calls or will meet you in your car or anywhere else you may be. The next thing to do is be completely honest with Him about what you have done. How did you get yourself into this mess? What was the root cause of the problem? Talk to Him about it. Don't leave out any details. John says, "Confess your sins." Confess means to agree with God's Word that what you have done is wrong or sinful. Jesus knows the sincerity of your confession. As we all know, some confess their wrongs to merely get off the hook. Jesus wants us to be truthful, so that we can replace that sin with God's antidote and keep from repeating it over and over.

At this point Jesus faithfully takes your sin and cleanses you from all sin. You are now in the light, forgiven, cleansed, walking in truth. But that's not all.

A good doctor always gives us the advice we need in order to stay healthy. He may say that we need to eliminate some stress in our life by eating better and exercising. He may put us on some medication in order to make sure the infection we have doesn't spread.

Well, the Great Physician gives us His word so that we will know the next step. We may need to spend some time in the hospital recovering. There, nurses will follow the doctor's orders regarding our health. We may need an infusion, or we may need to have physical therapy. Think of the nurses as the Holy Spirit, Who comes into our lives to make us more like Jesus, to practice the life patterns of Jesus and to walk with Jesus from day to day.

No one is without sin. If you say that, John says you are lying. It's those of us who visit G.E.D. who know what it is like to continually walk in the light.

How about you, do you need a lift to the hospital? We all do.

John wrote these things so that we would see the negative impact of sin on our lives and be more interested in walking in the light. But he was also realistic when he said, "But if anyone sins…" (2:1ff.).

See you in G.E.D.,

God's blessings bring true spiritual healing,

Pastor Steve

Day 335

"Temporarily Out Of Order"

December 1 - 1 John 2: 12 - 27

Life goes by so fast. Before you know it we won't be here. Someone will, but it won't be us. Even if you have 60 years to go, before you know it you'll be at the 59-year mark. My grandma lived to be 92. To her, her life was like a vapor. Eighty-seven may sound old to you, but talk to someone who is 86 and in pretty good health and they'll tell you that 87 ain't that old. Time flies.

Bottom line: this world is only temporary. The Bible says that some day God will fold it up like an old coat or scroll. One day there will be new heavens and a new earth; the former things will pass away. So what is the benefit to dwelling on the present when it is just going to disappear? It would be like buying 8-track tapes at a garage sale. What are you going to do with them? They are obsolete. Remember when you first heard the Partridge Family album? You were overjoyed that you could bring them into your home. Now you would be embarrassed if anyone found out you once liked them. Everything passes away. Well, not everything; John says that the person who does the will of God will last forever.

Because of the temporary nature of this world, John tells us not to love it. The world system (John does not have in mind the beautiful aspects of creation) won't last, so don't put your stock in it. It will deceive you into thinking that good times will go on and on, but they never do. Life will run out soon enough and then God will wrap things up once and for all. Those who hang on to this world end up being frustrated by all of the disorderliness of it. This world has a great big "Out of Order" sign hanging between North America and Europe and another one on the other side of the globe. If you buy into

this world you will go belly up.

All that is in the world that really tantalizes us will be so fleeting in the end.

"The Lust of the flesh." All of the pleasures of the flesh remind us that we've got to have more. Lust never satisfies, but makes us thirsty for "some more of that." Sometimes I think of the relationship of Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe, which ended in divorce not long after they married. She said of him that he was built like Michelangelo's David and, of course, she was like a goddess. You would think that would be sufficient, but it wasn't. He just couldn't accept the sex appeal of her image and the kind of schedule a movie star kept.

"The lust of the eyes." The eyes are never satisfied. They always want more. They look and envy others who have what they want. They stare until they get what they want and then when they have it, they are off looking at someone or something else. Jesus said, "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore your eye be single, your whole body shall be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:22,23). It is not a coincidence that the very next verse in Matthew's gospel talks about money. Jesus says that money will oftentimes come between a person and the Lord. If we turn our eyes to the Lord, we will be full of light. If we turn our eyes on the sinful pleasures in this world we will be shrouded in darkness, a very great darkness indeed.

"The boastful pride of life." Man thirsts for godhood. He wants to be king of the hill. He wants autonomy. Man competes with God for first place. Once a person experiences independence and/or wealth and/or popularity and/or acclaim, he will be tempted to worship at the altar of ego and give his devotion to himself. Man may feel like a god for a moment, but in the end, like Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel's day, he will be humbled. God is able to humble those who walk in pride.

This verse in John echoes what is written in Genesis when the woman was tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (like the lust of the flesh), and that it was pleasant to the eyes (like the lust of the eyes), and a tree to be desired to make one wise (like the boastful pride of life)...she took...and ate...he did eat," (Genesis 3:6). The devil's temptations are no different today. He still pulls us to things that are going to bring us down.

Are you putting too much stock in the temporary things?

Do you need to do a spiritual inventory, adding some lasting things and taking some of the worldly things off of the shelf?

The things of this world will pass away, but God's things will last forever. Let's take in God's things and give them out to the thirsty ones around us. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need."

God's blessings are not temporary,

Pastor Steve

"KISS"

December 2 - 1 John 2:28- 3:10

The Spirit Takes You On His Wings Today,

God is always at work in His true children. He has taken up residence in them and leads them from the inside out. They walk in the light by their ongoing confession of sins, and the result is continuous cleansing by the blood of Jesus. Both

God's indwelling and the work of His Word and Spirit guarantee that you will not walk in sin. John is clear that those who continue to walk in sin are actually children of the devil.

There have been a few times over the years of my Christian life when I wanted God to leave me alone. Disappointment with my circumstances was eating away at my faith. I, like many others, struggled with why God was allowing me to go such tough things. I remember wishing that God would just leave me be. I was tired of trying to figure out how He fit in my world. But you know what? That very night I found myself talking to Him like a little kid would talk to his daddy. I couldn't help it. I needed to talk to Him and give Him my pain. I felt alone much of the time during those days, but I did sense that God was with me when I came to Him in my feeble way.

The Spirit moved me even when I was the guest of honor at my own pity party. Part of me was tired and upset at all of the confusion around me, and the other part of me—the God-centered, Spirit-filled part—was there to guide me when I was unable to make a way on my own. It is like the instruction Jesus gave to Peter, James and John in the garden in the wee hours of the crucifixion day. Jesus told them to pray, because the flesh was weak even though the spirit was willing. Despite these words, the blurry-eyed apostles could barely stay awake. They wanted to be there for the Lord in His hour of trial, but they were too fatigued to keep going.

Jesus came to take care of the "strong man," the devil. The devil is busy tearing down anyone and everyone for his own pleasure. Jesus was revealed to destroy the devil's works. He takes what is broken down and bedeviled and makes something beautiful out of it. God plants His seed, which is a picture of His word, in each believer. This seed begins to grow so that the believer desires to flee sin or confess that he has sinned. Let's look at some very helpful parallel verses:

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field, the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you", (1 Peter 1: 22-25).

"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you," (James 1:21).

"I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10).

The Word of the Lord is a powerful force in the life of the believer. It insulates us from the devil and it keeps us from walking in sin. John says that no one who is born of God walks in sin. He cannot, because of the powerful influence of the Word in his heart. Psalms says that the Word of God in a person's heart guarantees that his steps will not slide (Psalm 37:31). Remember that Jesus used the Words of God when he was doing battle with the devil in the wilderness.

John is very simplistic. If you do right you are of God; if you don't, you are not of God. If you walk in sin, you are in Satan's camp. If you do righteousness, you are in God's camp. No one who is born of God can stand to continue in sin because the Spirit in him will prompt him to make it right. He will confess it to God, find forgiveness, and seek to repent by learning what the Bible says about finding freedom from his sin.

Have you been telling God to leave you alone lately? Have a talk with Him before you hit the hay. He is there and He will guide you to do the right thing. KISS = Keep it simple saints.

God's blessings overcome the devil and give you spiritual confidence,

Pastor Steve

Day 337

"Oh, My Conscience"

December 3 - 1 John 3:11 - 4:6

The weeping prophet, Jeremiah, had much to say about the human condition. God had called him to go right up to the most public place in Jerusalem and proclaim the Word of the Lord. In an often-quoted verse the sage says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (17:9). Let's face it: sometimes we do not have the ability to make heads or tails out of the condition or direction of our hearts.

I would liken the conscience to the transmission of a car. As the transmission takes the power of the motor and gears the vehicle forward or backward, so the conscience takes the energy of the heart and gears it in either a positive or negative direction. The conscience is the mechanism in us that is sensitive to right and wrong behavior. If your conscience is malfunctioning, then you will feel stuck, unable to go anywhere, even if your motor has all of the power it needs to perform. Our conscience is tricky and needs to be well tuned in order to work in sync with our heart.

Some people live their lives in first gear because they have never been able to conquer the high demands of their own conscience. Our consciences have been developed in us from the time we born. All of the stimuli in our lives, whether good or bad, have had an impact on how our conscience is developed. Some people's consciences are so sensitive that they are always feeling guilty, even for things they have not done.

On the other hand, there are those who have a seared conscience. Paul talked to Timothy about these folks in his first pastoral letter to him: "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron," (4:1-2). The conscience can be so hardened or calloused that it is unable to respond to what is good and sound.

The conscience can work overtime when a person has unresolved conflict in his life. That's why it is tough for feuding couples to live in the same home. Their consciences become like targets, and the verbal zingers their spouse gives them from day to day penetrate like darts, causing a world of discomfort. Unless the conscience is cleared, the couple will probably end up in divorce court. There is only so much one conscience can take before it feels like it will explode. The Apostle John talks about the conscience condemning us. Who cannot relate to that?

Think back to Hebrews, where there was a key verse about our conscience: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened to us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water," (10:19-20). There is hope for the conscience, because once it is cleansed it can operate in a more fluid and efficient way.

A bad conscience is equated with bad behavior. A good, clean conscience is equated with good behavior. This is similar to what Jesus said about a good and bad tree; the fruit of the tree is determined by the condition of the tree. If the tree is healthy then the fruit will be good; if the tree is unhealthy then the fruit will correspond.

A story I have already shared bears repeating: When we moved into our home several years ago we had a pine tree in our backyard. It was a beautiful and stately tree in my estimation, because of its lush green color and huge size; it was probably 60 or 70 feet tall. My wife didn't like the tree because it blocked what little sun we get in Oregon, and she wanted to have the tree removed. I refused. Then the needles began to brown and die and fall off the big tree. When we had the tree uprooted and taken away, the excavator showed me that the tree was rotten from the base up about twelve feet. My wife was vindicated and I was glad the tree came out before a wind storm landed it on our roof. After all, at its core it was a bad tree.

John's advice about the conscience is so helpful. Follow me as I sum it up like this:

The person who is walking in the light and loving his brother and doing good things for others has no reason to let an overly sensitive conscience bother him. Why? Because God knows the truth about us. He knows whether we have a cleansed heart and conscience. So if our heart condemns us He is much greater than our heart and knows all things. He knows the truth about us and does not Himself condemn us. I think John would emphasize that if you are struggling with conscience, try showing your love with your actions rather than talking about how you love others. When you combine this with the truth about what God has done for us in Christ, and our ministry to others, you will develop a conscience that is healthy and constantly experiencing the cleansing promised in the Word.

How is your conscience today? Do you need cleansing? Are you focused on things that are disrupting your inner wellbeing? Go in today for a transmission service. God has the Midas touch.

God's blessings clear the conscience,
Pastor Steve

Day 338

"Motivation To Love"

December 4 - 1 John 4: 7 - 21

Recently I heard a friend say that she loved people now, comparing her present state of mind to a time in her life when she could take 'em or leave 'em. God had taught her to love people. I had an uncle who said that love was what made the world go around. I'm not sure about that, but I do know that love is the single greatest motivator in our lives.

Things that we love can take charge of our lives. Consider a typical teenage love story. A lethargic, unmotivated and lazy young man can suddenly leap buildings at a single bound in order to impress the love of his life. A well-meaning parent may tell him that he's going through a phase and will be over it soon, but he scoffs at the thought. He thinks his parents just do not understand the depth of his devotion. He would walk across hot coals and swim the English Channel for the love of this young lady. I admit that this was my story when I was 13 or 14 but I probably never acknowledged that my folks were right in the end. What kid does?

The Apostle John knew something about love. He was very close to Jesus. Among the 12 disciples, he was included in the inner three who were able to spend more special time with the Savior. He was leaning on Jesus' chest at the last supper, and he was one of the first to the empty tomb. Jesus entrusted Mary to him while suffering on the cross. John was particularly near to Jesus.

Well, love begets love. A loved person loves. Love motivates and spreads to others. John was the "Love Apostle." When you read his gospel, you see that he wrote to emphasize the Lord's deity. John was in love with God, because he was able to touch God in the flesh. John then took his experience with Jesus and spread it to all of us through his inspired writings. He is the authority on the subject of love because he

knew love. That is why he could write so fluidly about love.

He says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Love is not to be measured by human means. So often this is the way we define love and the result is a watered-down feeling that will not last. This can be very detrimental when one person compares his love with another's. You can quickly get disillusioned when you believe your friend is loved more than you. When we measure ourselves against others we will end up playing the fool. On the other hand, when we measure our love by God's love, we will be satisfied. We will always have the love of God.

"Dear friends, since God loved us, we also ought to love one another." John's reasoning is not complicated. God's love for us motivates us. It is not there to just make us feel good. It is there to motivate us to love others. Like my friend, if you struggle to care about and love others, you can begin to love people because you yourself are loved by God. Do you want a reason to make a change in the love department? Consider the love of God. Look at the cross and see the love God has for you. Then see others in the light of that kind of love. It is sacrificial, messy, down-and-dirty love.

When you love others in Jesus, people will see God in that love. Do you want your life to count for the long haul? Do you want your tombstone to talk about love someday? God will be visible in you if you His love work in you towards others.

Friends, let us love one another.

God's blessings are full of His love,

Pastor Steve

"Welcome To The Candy Store"

December 5 - 1 John 5:1-21

What my dad called the liquor store, my friends and I called the candy store. You could buy both there. The man who owned the business was a big hulk of a guy we called Mac. My dad was known as Mac too, so when they saw one another they exchanged Mac greetings. "Hey Mac, how's it going?" the owner would say. Then my dad would shoot back, "Good Mac, how's it going your way?" Macs have a bond; that's just the way it is.

One of our favorite pastimes as a kid was exchanging Pepsi bottles for cash and using the money to buy our favorite candy. Mac had it all—Abba Zabbas, cigarette candies (we loved to pretend we were smoking those), Big Hunks, Sugar Daddies, licorice (my personal addiction), jujubes, candy necklaces, Good and Plenty, Sugar Babies, Sour Tarts, and a hundred others I have forgotten about. You could even buy bubble gum in a little treasure bag and the gum looked like gold nuggets. Does anyone remember those?

Some sections of Scripture are like a spiritual candy store, and 1 John 5 is one of them. Let's try a bit of it on for size. Caution: If you don't exercise it, it is so sweet you are bound to get spiritually fat and lethargic. So take it and eat it and believe in it and do it, and you will find spiritual strength for the day.

John says if you love and believe in God, then you will love Jesus and want to do what He says. Interestingly enough, John says that the Lord's commands are not a bother. Have you found that to be true? Have you, like Job and Jeremiah and Jesus, found that the words of God are a delight and not a burden? Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus didn't come to condemn us but to save us and to build us up in Him. When we take in the Word we will have the spiritual energy to do His will.

Do you want to do His will? John says that this is an indication that you have been born of God. On the other hand, are you the type of person who is always weighed down by the law? Do you often feel guilty and unable to measure up to God's standard? Then you may not have been born of God yet. Those who are God's children find encouragement in His Word.

Are you an overcomer? This is another indication of faith. Most people do not feel like overcomers. They feel like they might just squeak by if they are lucky. That was not John's attitude. John so identified with Jesus that he knew he shared the Lord's victory. Have you ever felt like you shared in someone else's victory? Maybe this happened on a sports team or in a drama production or on a project. When paramedics come to the scene of an accident, their objective is to help the victim. It doesn't matter who gives CPR, there is a shared relief and sense of accomplishment when someone is helped back from the brink of death because the entire team was there.

John says that faith in Jesus overcomes the world. Is the world getting you down for one reason or another? Take the time to acknowledge that Jesus has overcome what troubles you. Jesus said, "In the world you will have trouble but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," (John 16;33). In God's family, every single individual who has faith in Jesus is an overcomer. Remember reading in Daniel, "...but those who know their God will be strong and do exploits," (Daniel 11:32, KJV). Faith in Jesus goes a long way.

If you have the Son of God, then you have "a testimony in your heart" and you have "life." John says, "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (5:12). What a gift: eternal life! Have you received that gift? God offers it to you. All you have to do is take it and enjoy. Paul said, "...the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," (Romans 6:23).

Based on all of these truths, John says that it is his desire for his readers to have the assurance that we have eternal life. Not "maybe" or "I hope so;" but "so that you may know." Amazingly, a person who has tried all his life to keep some imagined standard to feel blameless or worthy only needs to receive God's free gift of salvation, and he will know the assurance that gift brings.

There is still more in the back of the candy store. But I think you've digested enough calories for one setting. Once you've worked out the ones above, go on and apply the rest of the chapter. How sweet it is!

God's blessings are pure honey,

Pastor Steve

2 & 3 JOHN

Day 340-341

"Postcards To Those We Love"

December 6 and 7 - 2 and 3 John

Fellow Laborers,

As the Apostle John grew older, his fatherly care for the flock intensified. He, like Paul and Peter and others, knew that outsiders would bring in destructive heresies to challenge the truth of the gospel. John's heart was for his "dear children" and he wanted nothing more than for them to grow in the truth and of God.

It is so difficult to see our children get into things that will harm them. I'm still not sure how my parents survived the onslaught of the wacky things I explored in the late '60s and '70s. It is tough for parents to watch their kids go down paths that they know may be dangerous. This is especially true when parents think their kids aren't listening. We do not want to see our kids hurt. But you know what? We learn some of our most valuable lessons when we hit dead ends, wake up to our mistakes, and head in a better direction. It is tough to see this happen to those you love, but it is true for them as well. In the meantime, I'd encourage you to stay as close to them as you possibly can and give them good instruction in the ways of a godly life. Remember that this is caught more than taught; your kids are watching you, looking at the decisions you are making and the roads you are traveling.

A friend of mine has been divorced now for about a year after almost 20 years of marriage. I have so appreciated his practical concern for his kids through the process. He knows that if he were to date again, that it would be very important for him to show his kids how to date in a godly way. He knows what God's standards are and he wants to make sure that he sets a good example for them. He knows that God does not want him to live with someone before marriage. He knows that he must treat the opposite sex with respect. He is aware of his responsibility to give priority to his children over any dating relationship.

Truth and love must be wedded in order for true spirituality to happen. When Jesus taught about true worship He said that the Father was seeking worshippers who would worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Love without truth is sentimentality. Truth without love is legalism. Love and truth together create a real spiritual life.

Sometimes people will think they have had a "spiritual experience," but the truth is that they have felt the temporary satisfaction of a watered-down love. False teachers come along all of the time and promise great things, but their true intent is to trap you in either a web of sentimentalism or a dose of out-of-context Bible verses.

Everybody wants to be loved. And so, because of this, people are easily deceived into believing that so-and-so really cares, when the truth of the matter is that so-and-so only wants your money or is using you to satisfy his own lusts. False teachers, sexual predators, and obsessive manipulators all have the same thing in common: they want to use others for their own selfish gain. They will play on a person's weakness for attention and exploit them recklessly. People are vulnerable because they crave love and respect. But because they are unaware of the true intentions of their "friend," there is a deep gap between what they are looking for and what they can truly expect.

On the other hand, some people desire to know what is true: the truth about life and love and happiness and whatever else is unknown. Some even allow themselves to be manipulated and controlled in order to hear what they think is true wisdom. False teachers—those who do not know the gospel of Jesus or the teaching that leads to godliness—will prey on the spiritual blindness and intellectual weaknesses of their victims. Jesus warned that false teachers would arise. He said they would be wolves in sheep's clothing. They would look good, but really they were there to tear you apart. Do not have anything to do with them, He warned. Flee to the Shepherd who will give you safe pasture and food aplenty.

Here are a couple of things to think about. John was writing to those in home fellowships. We need to meet with friends in our homes for interaction around Jesus today. This will build your faith and prepare you for the challenges in your week. Also, note how close John feels to these people. He is very interested in their welfare. He wants nothing more than that they would thrive in the Lord. Are you thriving in the Lord lately? If so, keep it up and don't hold back; keep on encouraging the church. If not, think about instilling more love and truth this week. Remember from John's first letter: we are to love in deed and in truth. Step out this week and love others from the heart. But do not neglect your Bible. When we get away from the solid food of Scripture we will weaken our hold on the sure Word of God.

Lastly, note John's connection of physical health with spiritual health. I think there is something very important here. So many of our modern day maladies are connected to stress. Stress produces all kinds of bad reactions in our bodies. John wanted them to prosper physically, even as their souls prospered. The soul is the control center of our lives. We must guard it and maintain it in order for our bodies to run efficiently. Proverbs says that as a man thinks in his heart, so he becomes. The soul will give life to the body as we grow strong in the Lord and live in the power of His might.

In a few days we will be exploring some of John's writing again. Until then I trust that you are prospering in body as you are in soul.

God's blessings give health to the body,
Pastor Steve

JUDE

Day 342

"Hey Jude"

December 8 - Jude 1-25

O, Happy Day,

Most of us hate conflict, don't we? When tensions run high we prefer to bury our heads in the sand and not listen to the debate. For some of you the word "politics" is taboo. You cannot stand it. You would rather avoid discussions about the latest governmental scandal. Most of us would like the world to be a peaceful place; to heck with all of the strife and wars and tensions. On the other hand, most of us would admit that we enjoy the liberties that were won by those means.

Jesus lived in a world of opposition. His way was not on a rose-petaled path, nor was His journey a walk in the park. He faced opposition and misunderstanding at almost every turn. Even after the crowds had responded to Him and were enjoying the miraculously multiplied loaves and fishes, He knew that they only sought Him for what they could get, and not for the truth. People were fascinated with Him, but sometimes for all the wrong reasons. They gawked at Him in amazement, like a person would stare at a display in an art gallery. They followed Him in the hope that He would do some wonderful work, like spectators at a circus, waiting for the next act. They thought that maybe this man was a benefactor who could make life easier for them. Jesus faced all kinds of tensions.

Jude must have been a thorn in Jesus' side at one time or visa versa. You see, he was one of Jesus' brothers. Imagine growing up in a household where one of your siblings is the Son of God. Jesus wasn't like the other kids. He was much more righteous. I have often wondered how Jesus' perfection looked when He was a kid. You know, kids will be kids, right?

Well, for whatever reason God decided to leave those details out of the Scriptural account of Jesus' life, and instead re-introduces Jesus at the age of 12. By then the Lord was very aware of His Messianic destiny. Remember when He was in the temple talking with the men about spiritual matters? Though we don't know exactly how they felt, I imagine Jude and the other kids must have thought Jesus was crazy. John says in the gospel that Jesus' siblings did not believe in Him. And if you didn't believe in Him, what other option was there except to think that He had lost His marbles?

By the time this letter is written, however, Jude is a believer. We read in Acts 1 that he was among the 120 who were waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. What brought him to that place is uncertain. That is true of most of us who now believe, isn't it? We were once, at best, skeptical about Jesus Christ. But now we love Him and believe that He is who He said He was, and so we follow where He leads with anticipation that He has good things in store. We once were doubters, full of excuses as to why a decision for Jesus would not be a good idea, but at some point we began to change. We turned to Him and found a Savior, a rescuer from our sin and—oh, happy day—the Lord became real to us. Now we have something of substance to live for and we're ready to do what it takes to make that treasure known.

Verse 3 of this little epistle is key. Jude realized that he would have to warn the church about opposition to their common salvation in Jesus. He mentions these pests at the end of his letter, describing them as dividers who are devoid of the Spirit. Whether the church liked it or not, whether we like it or not, we will have to stand in opposition to all kinds of philosophies and religious quirks that are contrary to sound doctrine. Jude asks us to "earnestly contend" for the faith, to stand up and make a statement for the true Jesus and the true gospel.

Paul said the same thing to the Corinthians: "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ," (2 Corinthians 11: 2,3; KJV). All of the Bible writers were aware of the corruptive power of unsound doctrine. They condemned any one who brought a teaching that did not reflect the glory of Jesus. They knew that if the corrosion began it could eventually rust out the whole.

I'd be interested to know how many aberrant teachings you have been exposed to over the years. Today, as in the apostles' day, men and women come along and tout their spiritual wares in the name of Jesus, but their motivation is not to proclaim the true Jesus. Instead they present a Jesus whom they can use to sell themselves and get fame or money or meaning. Jude wants us to know the real gospel of Jesus and be able to tell a phony if we hear one. This salvation—that which was predicted by the prophets, heralded by John the Baptist, proclaimed and embodied by Jesus Himself and preached by the apostles—is set in stone more firmly than any earthy rock.

Jude also makes it clear that "the faith" was given in its completed form to the church from the first century. It was complete. It did not need clarification or additions. It was all there. And what's more, this gospel was authoritative, because it was delivered by those who were eyewitnesses to the events that occurred and the words that were spoken.

At the end of Revelation it says that those who tamper with the words will receive the judgments described in the book. Those who believe in later additions to the Bible will argue that the warning in Revelation applies to Revelation alone. But here in Jude we are also warned that the salvation that leads a person into a saving faith in Jesus was once for all given to the church.

Both the believers in Jude's day and believers today needed to know what they believe and stand firm on those truths.

God's blessings are signed, sealed and delivered,

Pastor Steve

REVELATION

Day 343

"Center Stage"

December 9 - Revelation 1

Dear Friends,

I have always enjoyed radio. I can remember laying on the beach, cooking in the sun and listening to my little AM/FM transistor. It's funny how voices you regularly hear on the radio become like familiar personalities to you. They can feel like an old friend even though you have never actually met them. I recall one disc jockey who would read my mind and play all of my favorite tunes as I wedged my toes in the sand and sipped Vernors from a bottle. For some reason that combination of things sticks firmly in my memory bank.

The odd thing was what happened in your mind when you'd meet up with one of those personalities or see their picture somewhere. For example, there was a Christian apologist named Walter Martin who did a program called The Bible Answer Man. He used to close his program by saying, "May God bless you as you open up your heart to His Son." That always struck me as comforting. Anyway, when I finally met Martin I was so surprised to find that he was nothing like I had imagined. He was a hulk of a man who wore a toupee and he had a grin so big he looked sort of cartoon like. I can't remember what I had expected, but how he looked took me off guard.

Think about all that you have learned about Jesus to this point. You have a picture of Him in your mind. I don't necessarily mean how He would look physically, but how you view Him in the light of all of the knowledge you have of Him. Revelation is the picture of the voice that you have been hearing all along. To hear His voice through His Word and in your spirit is revealing, and is only made more complete because of the clear picture of Jesus here.

The Revelation or unveiling of Jesus Christ is the big picture of the last book of the Bible. It is an unveiling of the final work of God before a new heavens and new earth are set up. The book is both simple and complex. It's simple in the sense that you can see that God is finishing His righteous judgment of the earth. It is complex because the timeline of those events are, I believe, very unclear. Man wants to think he can figure God's timetable out by exploring the mysteries of Revelation. I believe God is warning us through Revelation to prepare for His coming. Jesus is very clear about that. He says the book is from Himself. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (1:8). Interestingly enough, at the end of the book it is clear that these titles are describing the Lord Jesus who is the "Almighty."

Up to the very end of time and on into eternity, the cross will always be the banner over those who have put their trust in Jesus. Look what John writes in chapter one: "To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" (1:5). He loosed us from the entanglement of our sins through the cross. Remember Hebrews 12 when you think about this. We look to Jesus. Why? It was the blood of Jesus that freed us from every weight and sin which tries and, often succeeds, to trap our lives. It is only the cross and Christ's work there that can set a prisoner of sin free. Only Jesus can make the crooked path straight. Only Jesus can take a mess and make something good out of it. Only Jesus' blood. When He comes in the clouds all men will see Him including those who pierced Him. I think the Spirit is urging us to forgive someone today for Jesus' sake. Who just popped into your mind? You know who they are, don't you? You have had it in for her or him for some time. I urge you to forgive them today. Would you take a moment right now and acknowledge the thing they did that injured you and then forgive it. I am not asking you to like them or reconcile with them or even call them. Just forgive them. Would you? Remember when Jesus was hanging on the cross that He forgave "them" because they really didn't know what they were doing. He didn't condemn them or complain about them or demand his rights or throw a fit. He forgave. At that time He chose to offer them, the very ones who nailed Him to the cross, a pardon from that sin. That doesn't mean that God wouldn't bring them to justice one day. That is certainly a theme in Revelation. But for now we are asked to forgive for Jesus' sake and leave the judgment up to God. Remember that Paul talked about this in Romans 12 and Jesus Himself emphasized it, especially in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

Jesus forgives, but Jesus also judges. He does not put up with game playing when it comes to spiritual things. He is "seen" by John as terribly bright and awesome person. He has eyes like a flame of fire and His attire is resplendent as if with polished bronze. At His first coming He came to save, but at His second coming He will exercise His authority to judge. Jesus' appearance to John emphasizes His holiness. See here His glory, His righteousness, His brightness. His hair is white, His eyes are aflame and His countenance is stronger and brighter than the sun. Who can stand in His presence? And so John falls. The righteousness of the Savior is terrifying. For those who live in sin Jesus is ominous. He comes with a rod of iron (Psalm 2) to judge the nations in righteousness. Those who are playing with spirituality and have not taken Him seriously will be in for a rude awakening. He was once the suffering servant, in Revelation He is the conquering King. Revelation is written to wake us up and remind us of the seriousness of the things the Lord has said to us. Remember in the great commission at the end of Matthew that the Lord told the disciples to instruct others about all things He had said. So Revelation is meant to stir us from our spiritual lethargy. We must put off sin and cling like crazy to our Lord. We, who hate sin, love the Lord who will judge the earth. His coming, for us, will be a vindication of His righteousness and the establishment of His rule. And so John is instructed to write what he has seen which is most likely the events leading to the current climate in the Roman world.

He is to tell it like it is about the current condition of the churches, which he does in chapters two and three. Then he will unveil the horrible but deserved wrath of the peoples of earth and, on the other hand, He will set up His glory with His people who will forever reign with Christ. Jesus is concerned about those who say they are His, but they don't live like it. He holds the elders of the churches in His hands (or, these "messengers" may be angels who are assigned to the churches; the Greek word angelos can be translated "messenger" or "angel") and He walks among the churches, but He will call them to repentance before He brings judgment that will consume them for their hypocrisy. Jesus is center stage in the book of Revelation. He will not share that honor with anyone else. Let's behold His glory and be humbled by it as we journey through a look at the end of the world. Enjoy the Revelation. There is a blessing to those who read it (1:3). Let's read it with hearts wide open.

God's blessings to those who await His coming,
Pastor Steve

Day 344

"Problems In The Church"

December 10 - Revelation 2: 1-17

God Be With You,

There is a phrase in Zechariah that boldly stands out: "for whoever touches you touches the Apple of His eye" (2:8). God values His people. If you have faith in Jesus, His Only Begotten Son, then he treats you like a son or daughter. And like a good daddy He watches over His own.

The church ("the called-out ones") is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5). God is very jealous for the purity and well-being of His church. We are the "apple of His eye." I have to admit that from time to time I get tunnel vision when it comes to the church. I only focus on "my" church and see the church through its eyes. Then I'll meet someone from another fellowship and am reminded that the church is much bigger than I am thinking. God's church spans the globe.

It should not surprise anyone that the church has its own unique set of problems. Over the years we have heard many people talk about bringing the modern church back to the quality of the churches of the New Testament era. But you do not have to read very far through the Book before you realize that Jesus had to address many problems. Remember his scolding of James and John, two pillars of the first century church, who were rebuked for their militaristic attitude toward the Samaritans? Then all you have to do is begin to read either of the Corinthian letters or Galatians or Philippians and you will see a church in need of correction.

The New Testament emphasis on Grace is the explanation why God can love an imperfect people so perfectly. He went to great lengths to redeem, buy back, a people who would become His possession. These people would form His inheritance and they would be the grateful possessors of God Himself. You'll remember this from Romans 8 - joint heirs with Christ of God. The church has been given so much and the Lord expects us to guard it until that day referred to in Zechariah when "the Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and His name the only name" (14:9). In the meantime, we will need to deal with problems.

In Revelation 2 Jesus addresses the seven churches of Asia Minor so that they would know His will for them. Each church had its unique message. God gave these messages so that we could learn from each one. Like Cracker Jacks, there is a surprise in every package. We cannot stand back and point the finger at this or that church. Doesn't God, rather, want us to learn from the failings of others? We are the church universal. You may meet in some local, but you are just as connected to the church abroad. Remember when Paul talked to the Corinthians about their problems, how he said it was as if he was right there "in spirit" beholding what they were doing? The church is connected no matter where she gathers.

The very first message is the need to love the Lord. Love is the greatest motivator. When you act and devote yourself out of love you will see great results. Jesus said that the Church in Ephesus had left their first love, namely Him. Why is it that we will usually come to Christ and revel in His love for us and our love for Him and then we can so easily move into a kind of formalism that chokes our spiritual life? Maybe it is because love is sort of messy sometimes. When you are in love, sometimes others do not understand how you are acting. They look at you like you are nuts. "You're going to church again? Why? Don't get too fanatical!" "Why are you always talking about Jesus? That's fine for religious days and Christmas and Easter but not in ordinary life?"

It is also easy to get wrapped up in our responsibilities and forget why we are worshipping Jesus. This happens in marriage much of the time. Couples marry because of love but quickly loose the spark because of the stresses in their lives. Then they forget to date and talk romantically and give each other the necessary time to relate lovingly.

There's a neat little outline to remind yourself of the importance of making your love for the Lord a top priority. I. Remember - think about the way it was when you first fell in love with Him. Connect with Him on a love level. II. Return - don't wait, today come to Him and let Him know how much you love Him. III. Repent - turn all the way back to Him and do the first works that were connected with the time when you were head over heals in love and could only talk about the impact Christ was making on your life.

"I love you Lord, and I lift my hands to worship you. O, my soul rejoice. Take joy, my king, in what you hear, may it be a sweet, sweet, sound in your ears." Love Him like before and more,

God's blessings give us "first love" love,

Pastor Steve

Day 345

"Tolerance"

December 11 - Revelation 2:18-3:6

Look Up,

Jesus is described like no one else. I love His descriptions in Revelation. They are rich with meaning and significance. They always say something about His character. Since He is God it shouldn't surprise us that He is different than all others. Let's take a glance at a few of these descriptions and then finish with a discussion about Jezebel.

"These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands" (2:1). In chapter one it says that the stars are messengers to the churches and the lamp stands are the churches (1:20). If the messengers are pastors then this description of Jesus would be a great encouragement to them. If it is a reference to angels, that too is an encouragement because of the angelic presence in the church, not to mention the Lord's own presence. He walks among us. Remember, Jesus had said that if two or three are gathered in His name He is right there.

"These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again" (2:8). His superiority to all things is emphasized since He is the beginning of all things and will wrap up all things. His death and resurrection always remind us of His love for us on the cross and His presence with us through the Spirit each day.

"These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (2:12). This can refer to the penetrating power of His word and also the sword that will come out of His mouth to bring judgment on those who did not know God or give glory to His Name. "These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (2:18). I can't help but think of Ezekiel's vision of the Lord and all of the blazing metaphors that describe the majesty of God. The fire and burnished bronze may also refer to Jesus' holiness. Such utter purity and unadulterated essence is unknown on earth. Only Jesus has eyes and feet like this. Praise His Name!

"These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). Jesus is sovereign. He loves us and will take care of us. We are in His hand. "And I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no on is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

Against the backdrop of Christ's brilliance and superiority is the woman Jezebel, who leads God's people away by her fleshly and worldly cunning and tact. By means of immorality and idolatry she dissuades the faithless to follow her ways. If this was true in the first century it is even as bad or worse today. Our immoral and money-conscious society pulls us every day into a lifestyle of worshipping things and using people. Because the "flesh is weak" so many carelessly fall into the traps she sets.

Interestingly enough the Lord gave her room to repent. God is so gracious. She didn't turn though and so she will go into great tribulation with all of those who have followed her ways. Jesus is furious that the church would even tolerate her for one minute. Like the immorality in Corinth, the church at Thyatira was not quick to judge immorality in their midst. The result is more immorality. If it is not curtailed then it will spread. Paul said to the Corinthians that a little leaven would leaven the whole. The only solution would be to remove it.

Whether Jezebel was a real person then or a figure of speech for those who would act in her spirit is not the important thing. You'll recall that it was Jezebel, wife of the evil king Ahab, who pursued the good prophet Elijah and threatened his life because he took a stand against the idolatry of the day. Maybe John is talking here about those who follow her spirit. Either way, tolerance of evil is not acceptable with the holy Lord. Tolerance is tantamount to complicity.

Do you usually call a spade a spade or do you "beat around the bush," most of the time? Jezebel needs to be resisted and thrown out. To ante up in her game will be a losing proposition. Let's remember, immorality dehumanizes and idolatry minimizes God. Let's look into the flaming eyes and follow the will of the First and the Last.

Blessings from the One whose eyes are like a flaming fire, Pastor Steve

"Keep The Word"

December 12 - Revelation 3: 7-22

In Awe Of God's Works,

When someone commends us, something happens to ours souls that is hard to describe. If you could see on the inside of a person who is being commended I think you'd see a Popeye-like person whose chest is puffed way out and whose arms are flexed with a strength that seems super human. We all need commendation. Our souls need encouragement. We need to think that we matter and have accomplished something that will matter in some way.

When I began my teaching career I had the opportunity to work with a man who had a PhD and who, more importantly to me, believed in me. He loved me and was willing to pour his knowledge into me. I will never forget the evaluation times I had with him. I was hanging on his every word. When he would speak words of commendation I was elated. I couldn't believe that he thought I was doing a good job. I was on top of the world. It mattered to me that I was able to please this man I admired so much. Yes, he did correct some errors I had made and I was willing to take that medicine, but it didn't matter because I knew that He cared about me. We all need that, don't we?

Jesus had some pretty severe warnings for the churches in these beginning chapters, but He also had a few commendations. Remember, the churches during these times were under a cloud of persecution, the pressure was on, and the true nature of the saints was being manifested. Some needed to repent of their carnal and unspiritual ways. Some needed to stop playing games and serve the Lord. Others needed motivation because they had become apathetic with spiritual things. Jesus makes it clear that in some fellowships there were such severe spiritual fallacies that He would not be able to keep His presence there unless they repented.

Jesus honors the church of Philadelphia by saying that they have kept His word and have not denied His name. Jesus said in the gospels that if we confess Him before men then He will confess us before the Father, but if we denied Him before men He would deny us before the Father. He expects us to let others know where we stand. He wants us to make a clear testimony about Him. He doesn't want us to play church and put on a show for others, no, He wants sincere faith that demonstrates itself in genuine heart-felt works. This church of "brotherly love" was serious about their faith in Jesus and they were enduring patiently the kinds of attacks that were stumbling others.

Wouldn't you love for Jesus to say this about you? Let's think for a moment about what it means to keep His word. To keep means to guard or treasure. It means that His words become the most important possession in your life. If you look back at Psalm 19 or 119 you will have a wealth of verses that encourage us along these lines. We all need daily reminders of Jesus' Word. The day we put our Bibles on the shelf and lean on our own understanding is the day we will begin to slip away from what God's desire is for us. Think about what Jesus said in John fifteen: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be given to you" (15:7). The abiding word in our lives puts us in a daily position to pray on target and receive what God has for us. Jesus Himself, when confronted by the devil had the ammo of the Scripture to put him to flight.

Paul makes it clear to Timothy that the Word is inspired by God and should be used for sound teaching so that the believer will be aware of where he has erred and will turn back to the good path God wants him on. He says that the Scriptures were communicated by God so that the man of God could be equipped to do the works of God. Therefore, keeping the Word means acting on the Word. No matter what the cost, no matter what others may think, no matter the circumstances, we ought to act on the Word of God and keep its truths so that we too, like this church in Revelation, may receive the commendation that we are Word keepers.

Those who have taken a stand down through the centuries for God's Word against the traditions of sinful systems or sinful men have found that God blesses their faithfulness. They will have to endure troubles for it, but in the end Jesus is the one who will be giving the final exam. Is it time for you to take a stand in your life? Have you been tolerating sin and anti-God behaviors of those you have an influence over? "Lord, I want to keep your Word!"

God's blessings will lead us to make tough decisions, Pastor Steve

Day 347

"Brilliance"

December 13 - Revelation 4: 1-11

Wow!

What if there was nothing? If there were nothing, then what would be? Is it even possible to fathom a state of nothingness? If you try then that "state" itself would be something, wouldn't it? If you open a box and there is nothing inside, can you truthfully say that there is nothing in there? Isn't there air in there? Air is something, isn't it? So for us mortals to conceive of nothing puts us into a mental tilt position where our minds may search its recesses for answers but none are forthcoming.

If there were no earth and no people and no atmosphere and no solar systems and no anything then we would still have to admit that something would have to be there. Our existence warrants that because otherwise how would be justify being here then? In nature, things do not typically appear out of nothing. There is always a reasonable explanation for what we observe. Now, there are some magicians who make it appear that you can bring something out of nothing and they dazzle us with their ability to fool us. But we know that they know what's up, don't we. We have even asked ourselves how they did that and we thought it would be cool if we knew their secret so that we too could impress our friends.

If there were nothing physical, God would still be. When the Lord revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), He told him that He was the "I Am." He is the self-existent one; in Revelation terms, He is the one who is, who was and who is to come. God is there. If all were lost, God would still exist. He has always been and always will be; God is self-existent.

He is not dependent on anyone for His well being or being, He is. How God got there in the beginning is a mystery. If we could answer that question then we would be Him, wouldn't we? God has mysteries and secrets that none of us are privy to at this point. In Deuteronomy, Moses said that the secret things belong to the Lord but the things He has revealed we can know. Paul said that on earth we see through a glass darkly, but someday when we are face to face with Jesus we would experience a knowledge that would be far superior to what we have to work with now.

Jesus takes John into heaven and what we see there is spectacular. There the spotlight is on the one enthroned in the center. Around God is an array of beings, angels and people and unusual creatures and spirits to be exact, who are busy serving and worshipping God. The heavens are declaring the glory of God like the atmospheric heavens did on Earth. All honor and praise and power and everything is directed to Him who sits on the throne. He is awesome. He is our all in all.

It is so important for us today to get a head start on heaven and begin to make the Lord the center of all things in our lives. He can be the center of our relationships and our money and our jobs and our worship life and our prayer life and our families, etc. Christ desires to be at the center of our lives and live in our hearts by faith. He becomes the honored guest in us, the King on the throne of our hearts, the head of State of our state. To get there He need only be invited with a humble attitude that repents of anything that would not be conducive to a compatible relationship with the Lord.

Let's think about the crowd in heaven. There are twenty-four elders. These could be twelve apostles and twelve representatives from the twelve tribes of Israel. That is a guess. It makes sense, but is by no means certain. There are four creatures who have eyes all about them. Weird, huh? Well, the eyes are probably to stress that they see all. Maybe they are God's watchdogs. They may represent the four gospels and aspects of Jesus in those books. The first

creature was like a lion. Matthew portrays Jesus as the kingly lion and the lion of the tribe of Judah. Jesus is our King.

The second creature is like an ox. Mark writes about Jesus as the Servant of the Lord. The ox was used to plow the fields. Jesus showed an avid work ethic that involved meeting the needs of people, especially their spiritual needs. The third creature was man-like. Luke portrays Jesus as the perfect man. In Luke Jesus is described as the Son of Man. He was a man in every sense but did not succumb to the evils all other men choose. The fourth creature was like an eagle. John portrays Jesus as the God over all. The eagle majestically glides over all creation and with precision vision can spot even the smallest movement on the ground.

Let me just say that I do not know about the seven spirits who are before the throne. Do you? I cannot think of one cross-reference in the Bible that would help us to understand them better. The number seven is used sometimes to denote completeness. It could mean that the perfect number of spirits were there. Peter talks about the spirits of just men made perfect. And a little later in Revelation we see the souls of those who are martyred during the tribulation under an altar in heaven.

Let's spend the day today thinking about this scene and how outrageously brilliant it is and how the Lord is glorified with the words "holy, holy, holy." This is another reminder that God is so far beyond us and He is there and He is the answer to the question, "What would be if nothing was?"

God's blessings are stupendous, Pastor Steve

Day 348

"A Scroll With Seven Seals"

December 14 - Revelation 5: 1-14

There is a popular expression these days when someone is overcome with admiration for another. They raise their hands up and then sweep them down and say, "I'm not worthy, I'm not worthy." It's usually done in fun but also serves as an encouragement to the one "worshipped." It's an admission that the other person has done something that you think is awesome.

Remember when Daniel saw a vision of the Lord. He fell down and was mesmerized for days. Here in Revelation John sees the original vision of the Lord Jesus and he falls down as a dead man. I love the story of the reaction of the guards who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus - the Bible says that they were so shocked they looked like dead men. Their jaws were probably dragging on the floor. When Peter witnessed a miracle of the Lord, He told Jesus to get away from him because he was unworthy. He felt unworthy in the presence of pure worthiness.

All of us need people that we look up to. We need some in our life who we feel stretch us to be better than we are. When we think of him or her we are challenged to be better at our discipleship. We are challenged to go on with the Lord and do better in our service of the Master. I have already told you of a few people God placed in my life who have challenged me through the years. Let me say a few words about Carl Petersen again. Remember, he was the fellow who first prayed for me and then died about three years later of cancer. One thing that has stayed with me was something Carl's mom Hazel said that he said. Are you with me? Anyway, she told me once how much

Carl loved the Old Testament. For some reason that thought stuck with me all of these years. And guess what, I too have learned to love the Old Testament. People we think are "worthy" will have an impact on our future.

When John sees a scroll, sealed with seven seals, he begins to weep because no one was found worthy to break the seals and reveal the contents of the scroll. The scroll contained the will of God for the future and John wanted to know what it was. Then, a Lion, a relative of David, a Victor - a Lamb steps forward. He was worthy. Only he could take the scroll and unloose it. His supremacy is then extolled In John's vision and in the admiration of the heavenly host. First of all, John sees Him as having been crucified. Think for a moment about a crucified man coming to life and bearing the marks of His cross. John sees Jesus in heavenly glory as if He had been slain. How remarkable a picture that is!

I imagine that the Lord Jesus will bear the marks of the cross for eternity. That and that alone will be the memorial that constantly reminds us of the cost of our redemption. No wonder He alone was found worthy to unveil the seals that would bring the first wave of judgment upon the earth and on all ungodly sinners who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

He is in the center, the center of the throne, and of the living creatures, and of the adoring host of angels who gather to sing of the worthiness of the Lamb.

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (4: 12-13).

How can I respond to such perfection? I too can worship. I can raise my voice and my hands and praise Him for all that He has done for me, especially the cross. God, I worship you with all of my heart!!! Join me, will you?

God's blessings come from the Worthy One, Pastor Steve

"Hide Us"

December 15 - Revelation 6:1-17

God Is Remarkable,

A day of judgment is coming. The Bible is clear about this all of the way through. The Revelation of Jesus is the final word on that big day when mankind will receive what they deserve because of their sin. Some say that God loves the sinner and hates the sin. I have never understood that because how can a person be separated from what they do? Man acts out what he is on the inside and God judges that.

Now if someone were to ask if it pained the Lord to judge the sinner or if it grieved Him that the sinner would be indicted, then I would understand that. God hates death and He desires that all would be saved, but His justice will punish the sinner along with his sin. Really there will be no consolation for the sinner. He won't find it appealing to say to himself that even though he is judged God loves him anyway. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but He fits vessels to demonstrate his glory and power by bringing wrath on the sinful.

The worthy Lamb, the Lord Jesus, opens the seals and the judgments of God are poured out. This judgment will affect everything. Mankind will be conquered, men will kill one another, poverty and destitution will prevail, mayhem will be the name of the game, the saints will be martyred, the heavens will be wrapped up and the earth will be wrenched by earthquakes. It will be a devastating time. It will be like no other time in human history. God's final judgment will be thorough. No one will escape God's all-seeing eye and be able to hide from His wrath.

Men will try to hide anyway. Those proud folks who lifted their fist to heaven and cursed the acts of God will be in hiding to try and escape the wrath of the Lamb. They want Him to leave them alone. They are not interested in coming out into the light. They hide because they are not fit to be in the presence of the Lamb, for they are still in their sins. Those who live in darkness will remain in darkness forever. The great day of God's wrath is a day of darkness for those who have not obeyed the gospel of Jesus. And so they run and hide and squirm away from the One who could save if they had only turned to Him. They don't though and the results are gruesome.

When we go our own way and desire that God leave us alone, we run the risk of getting what we want. Pride pushes a person in that direction, doesn't it? In Romans one, several times it says that "God gave them over..." God gives man the reigns of his own life and destiny and when man messes it up, God becomes his enemy as if it were God's fault in the first place. Man can blame God and curse God and hide from God, but all of that will be meaningless in the end because when all is said and done, God will have the last say and He will judge man according to truth.

There is an emphasis in Revelation on the omniscience of God. In other words, He knows it all, all of the time. There are eyes on the creatures around the throne and, no doubt, this is a reminder of the vision of God. Here in chapter six it is the creatures who introduce the riders of doom. All things are open before the Lord.

There is no good reason to try and hide anything from Him. Let's be an open book before the Lord and also confess our sins to other brothers and sisters in Christ. The soul that walks in the light delights in letting God in on all aspects of his life. Keep it all out in the open, it will not pay to hide from the Lord.

God's judgments are deserved,

Pastor Steve

"A Great Multitude & the Last of the Seven Seals (the Trumpet Judgments)"

December 16-17 - Revelation 7: 1-17 & 8:1-9:12

Let's Open Our Hearts To The Lord,

Back in Romans and in Galatians we established that the church is the New Israel. Paul refers to the "Israel of God" after making it as plain as he could that salvation was only through faith in Jesus. God began with Israel (the Jews) and then the door opened to the Gentiles (the non-Jews) and then because of grace given to Gentiles through Jesus Christ, the Jews would be included back again through Jesus. The result would be that one day all of Israel, the true spiritual Israel, would be saved by the deliver who would arise out of Zion. This would include a multitude of people saved through Jesus Christ from every nationality around the globe.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to see those 144,000 sealed in Revelation 7 as that full group of believers who had been rescued from their sins through the blood of the lamb. It is more natural to see the 12

x 12 formula as signifying a complete number rather than a literal 144,000. In other words, the number represents all of Israel, the redeemed, those who are God's servants. What are they sealed for? Are they kept from the harm the angels are bringing on the earth? In 9:4 the swarming locusts are unable to hurt those who have the seal of God. Are they sealed to identify who they are, the believers? Are they part of the group John sees in heaven before the Lamb? In Ephesians 4:30 it says that the Holy Spirit has sealed us until the day of redemption. Could it be that Revelation 7 alludes to the safety those in the true Israel have because heaven is guaranteed. The Spirit sees to that. He is the down payment working in the life of the believer until heaven becomes home.

Those described as before the throne and the Lamb are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation. They were not spared completely from the troubles of that time. Their consolation is that their robes have been whitened by the blood of the Lamb. Or, they were saved by the death of Jesus. They are those who have believed in the cross for salvation. They are from every tribe and nation and people and language. They are, no doubt, Jews and Gentiles alike. They are a great multitude who have embraced the efficacy of the cross of Jesus. They have believed that Jesus saves and that their eternity is dependent on the work of Jesus on the bloody cross. These images which begin in chapter seven are the depiction of the wrath of God coming on the whole earth. All living will be affected by the outpouring of God's judgment on sin and those who have not been sealed. Paul wrote about this in 1 Thessalonians. "But of the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need that I write unto you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief. You are all the children of the light and the children of the day; we are not of the night nor of the darkness...for God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1-5, 9; KJV).

Let's be careful not to draw unreasonable conclusions from these verses. Some would say that the church will not experience any trouble from the time of the great tribulation. They believe that God will take His people out of the tribulation before the wrath comes down. The problem with this is all of the language that identifies believers, the elect, those washed by the blood of Jesus, who are definitely in the great tribulation. I'm chicken enough to think that I will not have to face something like this and God will keep me in my American bubble, but I am also smart enough to realize that believers have suffered troubles from the beginning. How can we teach that God will rescue the church from tribulation during the great tribulation when believers around the world today are facing torture and death at the hands of persecutors? Well, what I think we can say is that the wrath from God that will come is not directed at believers. Just as the judgment on Adam's sin has affected all, including little babies and the mentally disabled, I believe the judgment is on the sins of those who have sinned. Whereas the babies and young children are, according to Jesus, fit for the kingdom of God (Matthew 18). Does that mean they will not be affected by the judgment? No, because they are there and will be impacted by the events of the tribulation. This will become even more evident as we journey in Revelation through these tough times.

The angels blast the trumpet judgments. These sounds herald one after the other of God's righteous judgment on a blasphemous people. The last three angels pronounce woes of severity that only add to the devastation. The earth is now being decimated. Sin is being punished. The end is at hand.

Do end time descriptions like these frighten you? If so, remember that the promises that Jesus has given us apply to our entire lives. In the world we will have troubles, but the Lord invites us to cheer up because He has overcome the world. The devil too. God is our hope and our security and we will be able to count on Him forever.

God's judgment should not be feared by the believer,

Pastor Steve

Day 352

"God's Righteous Judgment Unfolds (the Trumpet judgments continue)"

December 18 - Revelation 9:13 - 10:1

The devastation continues. The tribulation is a time unparalleled in history. There have been other disasters, but nothing compares to this time. Imagine a third of mankind being wiped out simultaneously. If there were six billion, think about two billion being destroyed by this fierce army. By the way, I don't know who this army is. Some have suggested China. I don't know; it is anyone's guess.

Think again for a moment of this huge angel who plants one foot on the sea and the other on land. No wonder Hebrews says that we humans were made a little lower than the angels. They are, in some ways, so far beyond us in power and might. God is using these angelic hosts to accomplish His will at the end of the world. Doesn't it make you wonder about how an angel feels about his place in God's program. What exhilaration they must feel to be part of God's righteous judgment on the earth and how they must quickly obey their Master's voice when He says to them, "Go!"

Along these same lines, when we are exercising our spiritual gifts there is a Holy Spirit guided sense that we too are accomplishing the will of God. We can sometimes discern His pleasure when we are about His business. That is why it is so important for us to remain Christ-centered and for us to abide in Jesus as a branch clings to a vine (John 15). Our gifts are only effective when we are using them for the glory of the Lord. They are not meant to bring honor to us; we only receive the satisfaction of knowing that what God has gifted us with is for His pleasure. As we enter into a time of reflection before the New Year it would be a good idea to talk with God about His use of our gifts for His own honor. What would happen if every Bible believing person walked in the Spirit-led manner God intends? Wouldn't the name of Jesus be glorified more and more?

The tribulation time is a time when the angels will fulfill a purpose that they have been waiting to do for a long time. This is their hour and they will glorify God by assisting Him in judgment. The mighty angel with a foot on land and sea had in his hand a little scroll which he gave to the Apostle. John ate it and in his mouth it was like honey but soon enough it made his tummy sour. Get the Rolaids! The Word of God is sweet, but the effect of it when the reality hits is tough. I'm sure the people would love to hear a pleasant word from God. They would love to hear about some form of relief, but the Word of God for them would be nothing but more darkness. The time was at hand and the sound of the final trumpet would herald the consequence of a full judgment on sinful mankind. I was at a funeral recently and was not expecting it to bowl me over the way it did. The truth of the word was sweet at the time and I was reminded that death is the lot of all men, but later that afternoon the reality of death grieved me, it was sour in my belly. Who doesn't cry out for relief from the horrible consequences of sin? The scroll John ate was sweet with truth, but the outcome was the awful truth that sin brings death and destruction.

Despite the judgments which are in the face of all sinners, they still do not express sorrow for the sins that separate them from God. They still do not repent and turn to Jesus. We read earlier that they hide from the face of the Lamb. Here they are portrayed as hard hearted and firm in their own ways. Let's review: "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood - idols that cannot see or hear of walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts" (9:20,21).

Both John, in one of his littler letters, and Paul, in several places throughout his writings, point out that the world is under the control of the evil one. They

teach that mankind, apart from God's grace, is held captive by Satan to do his will. Notice in the verse above that John equates the worship of demons and idolatry in the same breath. All idolatry, or the worship of things, reflects Satan's honor and not God's. In Romans one, Paul says that men exchange the glory of God for the worship of objects. This apparently will be the case right down to the end. To worship the creation removes God from His rightful place of worth. It also puts man in the place of God since he is worshipping things like himself. This behavior then reflects back on the man and leaves God out of the equation. So man does what he wants. He does not want God to interfere with his worship or his morals. Man becomes a law unto himself. He refuses to repent and worship God since he is so entrenched in self-glorification. Even in the light of God's judgment he refuses to give up his pleasures and turn to the fountain of life. He's doomed. Let the trumpet sound; the fullness of God's judgment is here.

As we read of these terrible days, let's remember our unbelieving neighbors who need now to hear of the good news of Jesus. Only through Him can they be rescued from a grim future. The world is winding down and the Judge is standing at the door.

Come Lord Jesus!

God's judgments are ominous,

Pastor Steve

Day 353

"Woes on Earth"

December 19 - Revelation 11: 1-19

Let's Look At The Signs Of The Times,

In our last reading John is told that he will continue to prophecy about the end of time events. Here he takes elements from the book of Daniel and the book of Zechariah. The two witnesses are described by Zechariah in his prophecy and the tribulation period with events happening in three and one half year increments are laid out in the book of Daniel.

We are now introduced to the heavy hitters of the tribulation period. The beast comes up from below and kills the two witnesses of God. These two comrades speak God's truth for three and one-half years. They will become a thorn in the side of those who do not want to repent and turn to God. They are prophets who declare the unadulterated truth of God. For those who want God to leave them alone, they represent nothing but trouble. Up until their demise they were able to perform extraordinary powers that demonstrated that they were God's men. Those who tried to harm them were met with calamity.

Obviously these characters are very unique. This kind of spiritual warfare will be truly unprecedented. But even in our day, behind the scenes, there is spiritual warfare that, even though we cannot see it, is happening on a grand scale. We may not be able to feel it all of the time but the effects of it are truly experienced as we go through our days. Remember Ephesians six where Paul says that we are all wrestling against the unseen forces of hell. I don't know about you but wrestling to me seems to be one of the most difficult of all athletic events. The grappler is out there by himself on the mat straining and moving against an opponent that has been training to pen him. It is strength against strength. It is man on man. No wonder Paul exhorts us to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. How else could we contend with the enemy? We would be mincemeat otherwise. Do you feel a bit battle fatigued lately? Are you trying to fight the fight in the strength of your own might? Let's go to the Lord in prayer and put on His armor and clothe ourselves in His strength so that we might find His victory over the evil one.

After the seventh trumpet sounds, loud voices proclaim the sovereignty of God over the whole earth. Don't you just love this proclamation: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever" (11:15). All men will bow before the kingship of the Lord Jesus. He will reign. This time is the fulfillment of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15 where he talks about all of God's enemies becoming subservient to Jesus.

This declaration is the beginning of the end for all of the forces of hell and every hell bent individual on earth. There will be weeping and cursing and great attempts to control the outrageous wrath of the Lord, but to no avail. This is the time of the end and the reality is that God is in control of the whole shooting match. This ought to remind us of Psalm chapter two where man is trying to get a one-up on God and the Lord sits in the heavens and laughs at the arrogance of man. This arrogance is epitomized in the attitude of the Antichrist.

He is obstinate and charismatic and deceptive and will even demand worship so that man replaces the one true God with the anti-God, Antichrist. Rather, blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek and the peacemakers, etc. We are the humble who submit to Jesus and desire above all else to do His will. There is no room for the pride of man in God's economy because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5). All pride will be vanquished eventually by the Lord God. He alone will be exalted; we are only the sheep of His pasture. Fortunately, we will not listen to any other shepherd who would masquerade in spiritual looking clothing and try to lead us down the wrong path. We hear the Lord's voice and follow Him (John 10).

God's judgments will squish the proud,

Pastor Steve

Day 354

"Frustrated Dragon"

December 20 - Revelation 12: 1 - 13: 1a

The ambition of most of mankind and the ambition of the devil is very much the same: the drive to be a god. Have you ever been asked, "If you could be God for a day what would you do?" Man and angels thirst for power. That is why lust and greed are two of the most powerful negative motivators there are. When a man feels that he is invincible or when he has achieved a great feat, there is a sense of superiority that vaults him, in his own mind, over other men.

For some money is their standard of superiority. They have collected a certain amount of money and they believe that qualifies them for special status. All it may mean is that they will have more worries. Money is no guarantee of immortality. Many don't heed the warning on the bills "In God We Trust," and they live trusting in money to guide their way. Solomon says that money will take wings and fly away. Have you ever experienced that?

Recently someone was talking to me about a person whom they believed had sold his soul to the devil. What do you think about that thought? Can a person sell his soul to the evil one? Jesus put it in terms of losing your soul. That is, losing your very self in the end because you lived for self rather than for God, which was the purpose for which you were

created. Jesus said, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" Answer, "It doesn't profit him anything because in the end he winds up spiritually bankrupt." The fate of the devil himself was locked up sometime in the past when he fell because Jesus said that hell was created for the devil and his angels. Peter adds, "...God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment..." (2 Peter 2:4).

The devil has, throughout his career, been on a quest for godhood. He dared to challenge the Almighty in the heavenly realms and he delights in challenging God's will on earth. He is the red dragon of Revelation. The reference to sweeping a third of the stars and casting them to earth is usually interpreted to be the other angels who went his way. He is said to be the one who attempted to wipe out the Christ child (through King Herod who had all of the kids around Jerusalem killed who were two years old and under) when he was just a little guy. He is also after the church, the spiritual Israel (compare verses 6 and 17). For a period of about three and one-half years God would hide her in a special place.

The dragon is hurled to the earth by the mighty angelic forces of Michael the Archangel. Then John repeats a voice he hears from heaven which gives the complete victory to the Lord. At this point the kingdom of Christ prevails and the condemning devil is thwarted. The dragon is called "the accuser of the brethren." He works hard at making us look bad and accusing us of awful things, things that Jesus died to forgive. The brethren in Jesus also overcome through Jesus. John says, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

John says that the devil is "full of fury." Why? because he was aware that his time was short. And so he attempted to destroy the people of God but was frustrated by God's plan to shelter them for 3 ½ years. This was probably the time when persecution subsided. The persecution here like the one related to the woman's child is most likely the one through the Roman legions of Titus in the seventh decade A.D. Jesus had already said in Matthew 24 that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies they should flee to the mountains or there would be no hope. Many believers had to leave their familiar surroundings and move to the deserts where they could be free from Roman rage.

Picture the dragon standing on the shore of the sea with fury and hate in his eyes. He is a defeated foe but relentless in persecuting God's people who hold to the testimony of Jesus. He would do all in his power to try and trip up the plans of God but it was already established that "now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ" (12:10).

Jesus frustrates the devil. Paul said to the Thessalonians, "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:2). To the Romans he said, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (16:20). To the Ephesians he said that they should be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might so that they could stand against the schemes of the evil one. Jesus has already won a decisive victory over the devil. John said, "Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The devil knows that his days are numbered and he constantly feels the crushing blow of the cross. He experienced it the day Jesus died and he experiences it every time a believer takes up the name of Jesus and comes to the Father in the name of the Crucified One.

It's as if the game has already been determined. You can watch the replay as many times as you'd like and the result will always be the same. God has won. Believers have won. Let's make that our testimony. We will overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. Christ died for me, He has won the victory!

God's blessings come through the cross,
Pastor Steve

"A Call"

December 21 - Revelation 13: 1b - 18

Church history is riddled with persecutions against the saints. Even in our modern era there are reports out of China and South America and other parts of the world where the believers are being tortured and killed because of their faith in Jesus. Some present day saints in North America haggle about whether believers will escape the tribulation and martyrdom when the church throughout its history has not escaped the fury of the dragon.

Some would say that God will spare the church from such persecution because He wouldn't want His people to experience such torture. Huh? This is not consistent with the will of God for many faithful followers of Jesus throughout the millennia. In the Roman era and in the time that John wrote Revelation, the church was in the crosshairs of the evil one. As a matter of fact, John says, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." Right after John introduces the beast, that insolent and warring tool of the dragon, that worshipped false-god who exalts himself above God and His Temple, he issues the call. We are to be ready for whatever comes our way. It will take tenacity and trust. It will be a difficult time like no other in our lives. It will test all that is in us and will try our commitment to the Jesus in whose name we are being attacked.

The entire world will follow and worship the beast except for those who have their names in the Lamb's book of life. These will be the target of the beasts. The second beast will deceive the world and cause those who do not worship the image of the first beast to be killed. He will also have the power to control the economy by not allowing anyone to buy or sell unless they bear the mark of the beast on their foreheads or right hands. Pastor Steve, do you know who the antichrist is? No. Is he on the scene today? I don't know. John said that there were many antichrists so that we could tell it was the last hour. That was true in the first century and I believe it is true today. I tend to believe those who think there was a last hour before the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in A.D. 70.

Is our faith strong enough to withstand the persecution that so many believers endure around the world? Don't you think that it will be necessary for us to be tried before we could know if we would stand or not? I believe God gives grace in the midst of trial. The famous book Fox's Book of Martyrs tells of whole families singing to the Lord as the lions were let loose in the Coliseum. They loved not their lives to the death. Hebrews 11 describes this kind of believer as "of whom the world was not worthy." They looked for a better country, one in which righteousness dwelt. And so they lived differently and were not so much concerned with their own comfort as they were with serving God in the face of hostile persecution. Could it be that much of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century under the tyranny of those antichrist Roman rulers and the Jewish rulers who remained antichrist long after the crucifixion and resurrection? Could it be that God came in judgment in some respect when Jerusalem was felled in A.D. 70? If so, it would make the "I come quickly" statements more understandable in the light of almost 2000 years since the "last days" and the "last hour" was initiated.

Either way, the call still applies. We are like lights in a dark world where the darkness hates the light and would love nothing more than to put out the light. John said, "They loved darkness more than the light because their deeds were evil" (3:19). Let's consider the call to remain faithful even when the heat is on.

God's strength and blessings are there when needed,
Pastor Steve

Day 356

"144,000 And Three Angels"

December 22 - Revelation 14: 1-13

The Hour Has Come,

There has been and will be defining moments in every person's life. Usually these times are remembered because of the significant nature of the event. For example, on a Thanksgiving day many years ago, I went to the home of a family whose family time was interrupted by a fire that destroyed the entire upstairs of their house. They were preparing dinner downstairs when they began to smell the awful odor of burning wires coming through the vents. Before they could do anything about it they were forced to evacuate because of the smoke and flames coming from the bedrooms upstairs.

That day will be etched in their minds for years to come. Hopefully, the rebuilding process will dull the ache of the event, but nonetheless they will still be reminded when the turkey is on the table that they had a very upsetting Thanksgiving in the past. It could be that if they work hard at forging ahead they will be able to focus on the future and not worry about the past, but this will take a concerted effort because of the memories. Unlike these possibilities for this family will be the catastrophic nature, the finality, of the events described in Revelation.

The events recorded by John are final. There is no happy future for those who receive the mark of the Beast and worship his name. They will be condemned along with all those who oppose the Lord. Paul said, "They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (2 Thessalonians 2: 10b-12). To some degree this makes the book of Revelation difficult to swallow. The reality of a future judgment is looming all of the time. Remember in chapter one that there is a promise of blessing to those who read this book. As I've been turning the pages and breathing in all of this judgment I have been wondering how that blessing is received. Let's keep reading until we come upon it and, for now, let's remember that the judgments of the Lord are right.

We meet again the 144,000 who are reigning with the Lamb. They are sealed by the name of Jesus and the Father, they alone can understand the song of heaven, they have been redeemed, are pure and follow Jesus wherever He goes. Again, who are these chosen ones? It sounds like a picture of the church to me. On the other hand, if you wanted to get very literal it appears that they are all men (they didn't defile themselves with women) and that they are a group chosen from among the chosen, a select group. But if you read Paul's description of the church, the Bride of Christ, in Ephesians five it sounds to me like this pure group could also be the 144,000. Otherwise, who are these people and why did the Lord chose them?

John then sees three more angels who are busy serving the Lord. The first one has the gospel and is proclaiming it to all men. It appears to be a final appeal to repent and turn to the Lord and serve Him. Remember in Matthew 24 that Jesus said the end would not come until the gospel reached the world. Possibly this is the culmination of that prophecy.

The second angel pronounces the fall of Babylon. A little later this will be the topic of discussion again. The immorality and abominations of Rome are more than likely in view here. Remember that Peter told us he was writing from Babylon when, in fact, he was in Rome. Babylon represents all that is corrupt. This corruption is in power and in worldliness and in immorality.

The third angel warns of the devastation and eternal torment that waits those who do not follow Jesus but worship the Beast. The picture is of unending suffering and damnation. There is no hope at that point. So for those yet unsaved who are alive during the tribulation it would be good for them to heed the gospel and persevere even unto death rather than fall prey to the same fate as the Beast who deceives the nations. He may be powerful but he is a liar and the henchman of the devil himself. At this point in the judgment it would be better to be dead than at the mercy of the Beast. So "blessed" are those who die in Jesus from this point onward.

God's blessings to those who die in the Lord,

Pastor Steve

Day 357-358

"Visions of Heaven & Seven Bowls of God's Wrath"

December 23-24 - Revelation 14:14 - 15:8; 16: 1-21

A Great Day Is Coming,

God has control of the plagues, the judgments (16:9). Men hated God even more for the wrath that He was pouring out on them. They had nowhere to escape, but instead of turning to Him they cursed Him and did not repent of their evil deeds. They had built their own kingdoms and had their own lives and didn't want God or anyone else, for that matter, to bother them. They would go down with the ship cursing the God who had made heaven and earth and them.

On the other hand, those with faith in Jesus endured to the end. They are seen in glory with harps, yes, harps and they sing a song that vindicates God's righteous judgments. When the temple is opened there is a sense of the holiness of God and there is smoke and God's glory and power is manifested. God is awesome! Who can stand in His presence apart from the righteousness of Jesus. Only through Jesus can a person hope to endure to the end.

Revelation only paints two possible endings for mankind. Man is either in glory with the Lord or in torment separated from Him. There is no middle of the road in Revelation. That is what makes it so frightening. Yet today so many people go middle of the road, don't they? They walk with one foot in the world and one foot in church. They are sold out to no one except what is expedient for the moment. Think about the bowl judgments for a moment. What will you possibly be able to hold on to when those bowls are being poured out? Will riches help? Will status help? Will church membership be comforting? What can possibly help? At that juncture it will not help to trust in anything but Jesus. So if that's the end of all men doesn't it make sense to be totally sold out to Him now? Why wait?

We live in a Babylon culture. We live in an age of materialism and hedonism and humanism. Man loves to be at the center of his existence. He feels comfortable there. He is secure in his own filth. As in the earlier chapters of the Revelation, he thinks he has it all but doesn't realize that he is actually very spiritually poor. From the beginning of time man has tried to create his own way to immortality. Isn't that the idea behind the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11? Man is reaching the point where he feels like nothing will be too hard for him because he will be his own god. Man's ingenuity deceives him into thinking that he is more than he truly is.

God's wrath is poured out on Babylon, on Rodeo Drive, on Sachs Fifth Ave. Remember back in 1 John that the apostle said that we ought not to love the world or the things in the world because all that is in the world will one day hold up like a rock in a wet paper bag. Those who do the will of God though will endure and find peace and life. The last great battle, the battle of Armageddon is about to take place. The man will be blessed who is not caught with his pants

down during this time. Otherwise, he will be caught off guard and get sucked into the winepress of the great wrath of God. God would have us come into the light today. No more hidden sins or secret lives. We need to come clean right now before it is too late. Once the bowls are poured out and the end is at hand there will be no hope for those who live in darkness.

Let's worship God. Let's not be numbered with those who curse. If we turn away from these our robes will be white, bleached in the blood of the Lamb.

God's judgments are gruesome but right,
Pastor Steve

"Revelation in Context"

December 25 - Revelation 17: 1 - 18

Seize The Day,

The imagery of Revelation 17 can best be understood in the context of the Roman Empire, the Apostle John's world. In the Roman Empire, also called "Western Babylon" you would find:

magnificent architecture,
dangerous sporting events,
roadways of superior design and breath,
an army that could not be rivaled Emperors who demanded worship,
various cults and the worship of many gods,
worldwide rule through governors, prefects, and military presence,
widespread immorality in a variety of forms,
economic control of the world,
brutal internal strife

In Daniel's vision of the Roman Empire the metal iron is used to describe the strength of this great power. Their might would rival any known ruling power from the past. Babylon was dominate but not to the degree that Rome reached. Of course, by the time the Romans came to power there had been advances in every form of civilization. Rome was anti-Christian. Remember when Paul got there to be tried how the authorities didn't even realize the impact of Christianity on civilization yet. That, of course, would change as the gospel spread and began to reach people all over the world.

Immorality has always been an issue in any society. It works like a cancer and eats away at the structure of that society. It undermines the good sense of decency and order in the community. Moral corruption can consume all that is good and rot away the moral fabric much like decay rots a tooth. Pretty soon the nerves of that civilization will be frayed. Morality should be a concern for people in every generation. Along with it come corruption and crime and deceit and theft and disease.

Think about the life of Caesar Nero: his "violence-studded life, including the murders of his own family members, the castration of a boy Nero 'married,' and the brutal murder of his pregnant wife by kicking her to death. Bizarre behavior was noted by the historian Suetonius, who wrote that Nero even 'devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, a lion or tiger was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes" (Sproul, The Last Days According to Jesus, p. 186).

"Nero began his reign as emperor in A.D. 54. His imperial persecution of the Christian community was launched in A.D. 64, the same year as the famous fire that many believe was set by Nero himself. It is often assumed that the persecution of Christians, whom Nero blamed for the fire, was a diversionary tactic to shift blame for his own actions to others. Nero committed suicide in A.D. 68, when he was but 31 years of age" (Sproul, p. 186).

The description of Rome in Revelation 17 fits perfectly what history tells us about it. She may have been a party animal - a morally bankrupt prostitute, but she also would fall - "The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction" (17:8). This beast or king is from the others - "He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction" (17:11). Look at the royal description of the woman in verse 4 - she is as royal and sparkly as it gets. She rules over the whole earth with power and majesty. "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:17).

She is linked with Babylon for her world dominion and culture. She is also drunk with the blood of the martyrs. She would torture the Jesus people and devise every cruel way to make them suffer. This was so true of the persecutions in the first century. Their Lord had been whipped at the stake and crucified and His followers would face some of the same kind of tortures. Most are well aware that all of the apostles were martyred except John, the writer of the Revelation.

If we are right on the chronology then the five fallen kings beginning with Julius Caesar would make Nero the present king. He was a brutal anti-Christ ruler. After him there was a power struggle for the thrown until the reign of Domitian. It's not quite clear whether he would be the seventh or eighth king. We do know that he was drunk with the blood of the saints.

Despite the lack of certainty about the antichrist there is no disputing that the spirit of antichrist was present in Rome and had a terrific impact on the church of Jesus. Those believers who lost their lives for the gospel were faithful to the end. Much of the Christian community hid in catacombs, caves underground where they could find a refuge from "the beast." These believers are a shining example for us who may not be experiencing it in our land today but cannot be guaranteed what the future will bring.

The lesson for us is to, like them, remain faithful to Jesus come what may. We are also reminded not to complain about our little inconveniences along the way. When we compare our "suffering" with the church in the Roman days, it's as if we live in Disneyland.

God's blessings are not in Babylon,
Pastor Steve

"In One Hour"

December 26 - Revelation 18: 1 - 17a

So much can change in one hour. Life may be going along as planned and in the duration of an hour everything could change. The mistake men make is to think that life will always be what it is for them in their prime. This makes life deceptive. When things are going well we fantasize that it could only get better. Realistically though, we have no clue what life will be like an hour from now.

When Biblical writers speak of the second coming or the end of the world they highlight the fact that a great multitude will be caught unawares. This crowd will be going about their business thinking that they

will continue forever running the company or running a marathon or raising a family. Then the end will come and life as they knew it will cease. Peter says, "Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of His coming? for ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation'" (2 Peter 3:3,4). Then Peter says that they should have understood that the flood of Noah's day could occur again in a different form, namely, with fire the next time.

Jesus and Paul warn of judgment coming like a thief in the night. Jesus put it in terms of a manager who had a trust but acted foolishly because his Master was away and he felt like he could get away with riotous living. Paul told the Thessalonians that the day would come when men thought everything was just fine. "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them like labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (1 Thessalonians 5:2,3). This language sounds so much like Revelation 18 even though the emphasis of that chapter appears to be linked to the Roman Empire in chapter 17.

In Revelation 17 and 18 the world power is connected with Babylon and is pictured as ruling in luxury and influence. Their power and rule apparently extended to all parts of the world. When she is destroyed, the merchants of the earth mourn because they had received so much advantage by doing business with her. The world wonders after the beast, the leader of this empire, because of the affluence and immorality that it provides. She appeals to the base nature of man: lust and greed. I'm sure you have heard the expression "if there's a will there's a way." Well, when man's will is linked to the potential for lust and greed, he will find a way to fulfill his desires. The Roman Empire was a pinnacle of this mantra.

Chapter 18 of Revelation highlights the devastation of this empire. And whether John is pointing to Caesar and his friends or means to say that the world system as we know it comes suddenly to an end, we are still left with the reality that man's government will one day cease. I am sure that the common guy walking the streets of Rome in Paul's day assumed that the Roman dominion would continue on forever. I would have to admit that I will think this way about the U.S.A. from time to time.

We are real close to reading about the end of the world as we know it. It could be that the end of civilization, as we know it is in view here. It will be a time of "woe." There will be no escaping the judgment. All that was held dear will be lost. The economic security will perish and man will be stripped of his ability to earn his way to success.

This ought to make us sensitive to the materialism around us today. We often admire the rich and luxurious and forget that all of their wealth will one day come to an end. Peter said, "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3: 11-13).

God's blessings have little to do with material gain,

Pastor Steve

Day 361

"Indescribable Description"

December 27 - Revelation 18:17b-19:10

Too Glorious To Capture With Ink Are God's Glories,

God's works have a tendency to put things in perspective. Sometimes we cannot see the forest for the trees as the saying goes, but when we look more carefully at what God has done there is a feeling of relief from the frustrations of living on a planet that has been infused with sin. Paul said in Romans 8 that the whole creation groans in futility until the restoration that will one day come through Jesus.

When you look at the stars, or stare at a newborn baby as she coos and kicks and waves her arms, or you sit in a warm living room and watch the snow fall through a picture window, or you stop outside your front door in the spring to watch a spider spin his masterpiece, or you witness a star basketball player make an athletic maneuver that makes you shake your head, or you spend some great quality time with your spouse and you both feel that unspoken oneness that is the privilege of a loving married couple: when you experience these glimpses of God's works you can see the glory of God and be at peace with Him and have His peace in you.

When Revelation pictures the saints in heaven worshipping God, there is a sense of the wholeness and tranquility of freedom from the weight of sin. I don't believe we will know the lightness of freedom from our sin until we get to heaven. There we will have been transformed into Christ's likeness to such a degree that the burden of sin will be no more. Perfect spiritual health. We do get glimpses of this here, but they are always stained a bit with ulterior motives and selfish pursuits.

In the meantime, while we wait for heaven, it is best to pursue a life of worship. It is good to check our motives with trusted friends who will monitor our desires and it is good to put the Lord first and self last. Paul said in Romans 12 that we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices which translates into our reasonable service of worship. In heaven there will be unadulterated and authentic Christ-focus. We will be glad to give Him all of the honor and ascribe to Him all of the power and glory and everything else. Here, there are times like this, but let's face it, we all too often want self to get some of the credit.

I love when I hear others talk about what God has done in their life. This is much more enjoyable than hearing a person talk about what they have done for God. Along these lines though is the meaning of the white garments worn by the saints. John says that these clothes represent the righteous deeds of the saints. So there is a place to talk about works that have flowed from service to Jesus. I can't help but think of the verse in Hebrews that stresses that God does not forget the things that you have done in His name.

The bride of Christ is joined to her Groom. The wedding feast is ready. Luke says in his gospel that once the redeemed are seated, the Lord Jesus will serve them. Picture that, will you. The Lord, scarred hands and all will take the role of a servant and make us welcomed on His big day.

The question is: To what degree do you want your life to glorify God? Is it your pleasure to want God's pleasure? Would you rather see the Lord in the spotlight than yourself? Do you enjoy seeing friends and family focus on Jesus and His works and does it irritate you when someone, including yourself, is too into self to make the Lord the focus of attention?

God's blessings are for those who glorify the Lord,

Pastor Steve

Day 362

"The Rider On A White Horse"

December 28 - Revelation 19: 1 - 21

Bravo, God!

The horse is a striking symbol of majesty and power. I have always loved the way Job describes the horse: "Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying. He paws in the valley and exults in his strength; he goes out to meet the weapons. He laughs at fear and is not dismayed; he does not turn back from the sword. Upon him rattle the quiver, the flashing spear and the javelin. With fierceness and rage he swallows the ground; he cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, he says 'Aha!' He smells the battle from afar, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting" (Job 39: 19-25).

God is saying that when you look at a horse you can see His power and wisdom and love. The horse is a good example of one of the wonders of God's creation. The horse Jesus appears on is white, no doubt symbolizing the purity of the rider who has come to judge. When Jesus first came, born of a virgin, he said that He did not come into the world to judge the world but that the world might be saved. That was then, now He comes in judgment on a white horse.

Look at the way He is described. Take in the majesty of His authority. There is no earthly comparison. When I was in third grade, my class was on a field trip to the Los Angeles Airport. As we were touring the terminal some official person approached my teacher and told her that Robert "Bobby" Kennedy would be arriving soon and he invited our class to meet the senator who was on his way to being president some day. We all got to shake his hand and I never washed that hand since. We thought we were really special because we had touched a Kennedy. I have a different view today. The point though is that there is no comparison to that future time when I will be hugged by Jesus.

Let's look at two of the elements of His description. First, He is wearing a robe dipped in blood. This sight sums up Genesis to this point, doesn't it? He is seen in bloody clothes. After a ballplayer finishes the game, tired and sweaty, maybe even a blood stain or two, he goes to the showers and appears in the club afterwards clean and well-dressed. Jesus worked, on the cross, for us and when we see Him on the white horse He has on a bloody coat. If you can't love Jesus for this then I don't think there is hope for you. Secondly, out of His mouth comes a sword that will bring judgment. In the Bible the sword is a figure for God's Word. It would be the clear teaching of God's Word that would stand in judgment over the whole world. Remember the rich man who died and was in hell and wanted Jesus to go and warn his brothers that they should prepare to not end up there too? Jesus said that if they didn't believe Moses and the prophets why would they take His word. The Word of God will stand forever and will be the edge of the sword that will bring all men into judgment.

It has been our privilege to go through the entire New Testament this year verse by verse. I trust that you have experienced the life-changing power of it. It is sharper than a two-edged sword and is able to change us in our heart of hearts.

"God, continue to use your Word to change our lives."

God's blessings come on a white horse,

Pastor Steve

Day 363

"A Great White Throne"

December 29 - Revelation 20: 1 - 15

In Awe Of God,

The martyrs are raised and reign with Christ. Their sacrifice is vindicated. The devil is given more rope for a short time to deceive the nations. A great army from the north attacks God's people, but God intervenes and the devil and his buddies are confined to torment.

When a criminal, let's say a murderer, is locked away in prison for life there is a sense of relief. When a sexual offender is let out of prison and has a sign in his front window warning the neighbors about his past behavior, how secure are you then, especially if you have little kids? We live in a dangerous world. Some people with very little mental amperage and a history of emotional isolation own guns. Some day there will be final justice. In the meantime, we have judges who do their best to uphold the law even when they personally may want to render another verdict. How often do you hear the family of a murdered loved one pronounce eternal fire on the guilty person. Honestly, I feel a bit uncomfortable with this because judgment is in God's court. Yet, I do understand why could they feel that way.

Ultimately all people will stand or, should I say, bow before God. Paul said that a day would come when "every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Throughout the Bible when man is confronted by the presence of God, he is weakened and brought to his knees. If Jesus is already your Lord or Master, as some newer translations call that title, then you will not be brought under the same kind of scrutiny.

Have you ever been caught doing something you should not have been doing? I think I was a sophomore in high school, taking Algebra from Mr. Barth, who looked more like a drill sergeant than a math teacher. His arms weren't unlike that of Popeye. My friend, Steve Thomas, who sat to my right one over, had agreed that we could expedite the exam if he did questions 1-5 and I took 6-10. Then we'd exchange papers and get it done. I was busy at work when the hand of God rested on my left shoulder. I guess it wasn't God, but you couldn't have convinced me of that at the time. Good old Mr. Barth had been watching me look over Steve's way and he was ready to lay the law down. "Mr. McGuyre, I have seen you cheating on this exam. You can put your paper away and see me after class." I could see Steve through the corner of my eye; he was cowering away with undetected stealth.

If Mr. Barth was tough just imagine what it will be like to stand before an all-seeing, all-knowing, everywhere-present God in your dirty clothes. Paul has said, "For all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God." It is the "glory" part that will throw us off. We are not God's buddies, so that we can stand before him with our dirty rags and try to convince ourselves or, even worse, Him that everything is OK. Things have gone horribly wrong. Remember in Romans chapters one through three that the Apostle makes it clear that there is not one righteous man who can stand before God in His perfection and holiness. Only through the

righteousness of Christ can a man see himself standing before the Lord of all creation. Again, no doubt, the white throne highlights the fact of God's purity and holiness - His otherness.

John sees the dead. All of them were there, even ones who had been buried at sea. God is able to raise everybody even if they have been cremated. God is on His thrown and the Earth and sky disappear from His presence. Maybe this is a reference to the impending doom at the time of judgment. Judgment is a dreadful time. There are books, plural. It appears to be different kinds of books. The dead are judged by their deeds recorded in the books. Interestingly,

no one makes it whose name is in the book of deeds. No one will be justified by works in God's presence. Only those who are found written in the Book of life survive, but the others are cast in the lake of fire with the devil and his angels. This is the second death.

Judgment for the unbeliever will be unbearable. Judgment for the believer was unbearable too, but was borne by Jesus on the cross. He was forsaken so that we could be forgiven. Paul said, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." He bore our sins on His body on the cross. Those in Him will be identified with the Man in the blood stained coat. Those who stand in their own deeds will be judged and found wanting - "there is none righteous, no not one."

We have more to be thankful for then we realize. Jesus paid the price for us so that we can stand before God and receive reward rather than judgment. This should motivate us to serve God while we live. We are all running a race, a long distance race, and the end is in sight even though it sometimes gets exhausting. A little exhaustion is nothing compared to the fate of those who are not in Jesus.

God's blessings by the Man in the bloody coat,
Pastor Steve

P.S. Some believe that the 1000 years is a literal reign of Jesus, from Jerusalem, where God's people will reign with him on earth for exactly 1000 years. Others see the 1000 years as a reference to the Chrsitian life which is the result of being raised with Jesus (salvation) and living our lives for Him (the "first resurrection" is a reference to reigning with Christ in heaven before the second coming and the resurrection of the body). I'd recommend a book called The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views edited by Robert Clouse. Take a look at this old InterVarsity Press book, it may challenge the view you hold.

"Everything New"

December 30 - Revelation 21: 1 - 27

Disappointments - life on planet earth is brimming over with them; heartaches - we all have them, no one is immune from the grip of emotional pain; sadness - remember Nehemiah, melancholy runs in epidemic proportions today; broken relationships - divorce is rampant and past breakups affect most people in their adult years; broken down stuff - our favorite this or that sits unused, bent or frayed, only reminding us of what once was; death - my friend has a fish tank and lately the water has been too acidic or something. Today one of his fish was so sick it reeled and circled and rested at the bottom of the tank, dull, lifeless, on the brink of extinction. That was sad, that is life.

No wonder Paul talked about heaven as if he was groaning to be there. He knew that his time on earth would be useful to God as long as it lasted, but in the meantime he saw his earthly body as a tent ready to be folded up and put away. Paul even went so far to say that all of creation groans waiting for the unveiling of what God has in store for His own. If you have sunk your roots down deep on this terra firma you will be in deep weeds sooner or later. This world is passing away. It's a fixer-upper that will be used as a "burn to learn." That is a fireman's expression for a property that wasn't worth salvaging so they burned it down intentionally so that the firemen could learn how to use their equipment.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (21:1). He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (21:5). Think about that. Some might be tempted to think this heavenly place is merely the absence of sorrow, pain and suffering. God by way of John is trying to get us to see that it is so much more. It is glorious. God, paints a picture in human words to help us move in that direction but still we, even the most spiritually perceptive among us, are dull to fully grasp what is being said here. A good analogy would be the "much mores" in Romans 5. What was lost through sin is not just regained in Christ but we have much more in Christ. Heaven will be heaven because of all that we have been saying about Jesus Christ over this past year on our journey through the New Testament. If you have begun to grasp the majesty and beauty of this man who loves you with all of His heart, then you will be able to get a glimpse of the heaven that He dwells in.

Listen to Hebrews again: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (12:22-24). Abel's blood saved no one, Jesus' blood could cover the sins of the world.

I am overwhelmed by the grace of God. And out of gratitude to Him may we bring with us as many people as we can between now and then. Let's keep thinking about those around us who don't yet have the light of the gospel. Let's pray for them and bring them to Jesus.

Lastly, I find it fascinating that there is no temple there. In chapter 11 we read about a temple in John's vision. Here we have no temple. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple. We will be in God there. We will be in God's light.

Now I know why the writer of Hebrews concluded that magisterial letter by saying, "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (13: 20,21).

God's blessings make all things new,
Pastor Steve

"The End is the Beginning"

December 31 - Revelation 22: 1 - 21

Hi and Goodbye,

The end is better than the beginning. In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth; in the end God will create a new heavens and a new earth. In the beginning man lived without community outside a cursed garden with several rivers; in the end there will be a river feeding trees for healing. In the beginning man rebelled against God; in the end man will walk with God in washed robes made clean through the blood of Jesus. In the beginning there was darkness and chaos; in the end there will only be light. In the beginning man was cursed because of his sin; in the end man would be blessed because of the grace of God.

"The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" Revelation 22: 17.

Do you know how much God loves you? Look at the cross.

Do you realize that God is at work in your life? Think about the resurrection.

God's Blessings always,
Pastor Steve

Now these [Berean] Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Acts 17:11 (ESV)