

RAMAH MONTHLY

*The Acts
of Jesus*

*a monthly devotional
for Ramah Baptist Church*

November — December 2025
The Book of Acts – Part 2

INTRODUCTION

Saints,

Press on in your study of God's Word. You'll never regret one moment spent knowing Christ through the Scriptures. This month's readings complete the Book of Acts, encourage us in the Christian life, and point us to our Lord's return. It also concludes our journey through the big story of the Bible. Don't let this be the only time you consider the big picture of what God has done. Whether this plan or a different Bible reading plan, commit to continuing on in Scripture in 2026.

The Scripture text for Sunday's sermon is also included each weekend so that you can read and pray over the text in advance. You'll be amazed at how much more you get from the Lord's Day service when you prepare your heart in advance.

At the end of the booklet is this month's hymn we are continuing to learn together including an introduction from Pastor Laramie and a recording link to listen to the hymn. Again, you'll be amazed at how much more you'll grow in singing God's praise with just a short amount of preparation.

We pray this resource better equips you in knowing, loving, and serving our great God.



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FOR GOD FOR THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD

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Monday, November 17

Read: Acts 9:32–43; Psalm 141

Christ has dramatically saved Saul and commissioned him as an apostle to the Gentiles, but he is not the only apostle to the Gentiles. Luke shifts the narrative's focus back to Peter who is continuing to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Oh the progress the Spirit has made in Peter! He has gone from a denier of Christ to becoming a bold preacher of the gospel in the midst of persecution. We last saw Peter preaching the gospel to the Samaritans (8:25), and now he is going "here and there among them all" (9:32 ESV). The gospel goes forth.

The Book of Acts will soon shift to focus primarily on the ministry of the Apostle Paul, but the author still has more to say to us about the ministry of Peter. Bible students have noticed what a balanced portrait Luke gives in the parallel narratives of Peter and Paul. Just as Paul will do miraculous healings and raise the dead, so does Peter. Should this surprise us? They preach the same gospel. The same Spirit is at work in them both. As we will later see Paul often traveling the major trade routes, so we see Peter doing the same thing. Peter is about 23 miles northwest of Jerusalem when he comes to Lydda. He finds a man with a debilitating paralysis that has left him bed-ridden for eight years. This sounds like the same type of severe illness that Jesus often faced in his ministry (like the paralytic who was let down through the roof in Mark 2). Peter has the same healing success that our Lord had, yet Peter knows it is not his own strength of power that made any difference: "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you" (9:34). Christ is building his church.

Peter continues on the road to the sea to the town of Joppa. In Lydda Peter had found an unbelieving man ("a certain man") and healed him, but in Joppa he found a believer named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek) who had died. She would appear to be beyond the point of helping and yet rather than immediately burying her, the saints had placed her in an upper room and sent for Peter. Perhaps the powerful apostle can make a difference. In another scene that reminds us of Jesus's power over death in Mark 5, Peter prays for Tabitha and the Lord answers the prayer. Just as we saw in Jesus's ministry, the miraculous wonders validate the messengers who are preaching the gospel. Because of the signs done through Peter, people hear the saving gospel of Jesus and believe. Christ is continuing to build his church.

Luke wants us to know that something big is happening in Acts 10:1–11:18. We know this by the amount of space he gives to this narrative; it's the longest in the book. We know this by the way things are repeated multiple times in the text. What is this big deal Luke tells us about? Gentiles are brought into the church of Jesus Christ.

We first meet Cornelius who is a Roman centurion, but more importantly is a “God-fearer.” Cornelius has been praying, and now an angel appears telling him that his prayers will be answered. Apparently these prayers will be answered through Peter, whom Cornelius must summon. But where is Peter? In the house of Simon the tanner, a profession that would have made him an outcast among the Jews because of the continual handling of dead animal skins. The Lord is already preparing Peter for an even greater dividing wall of partition to be broken down (Eph 2:14).

The Lord uses Peter's hunger and devoted time of prayer to make clear what Jesus had already done in Mark 7:19: he has declared all foods clean. There's an even greater point to be made as the story progresses. Peter travels with Cornelius's servants back to Caesarea and hears the vision of this righteous and God-fearing centurion. As he begins preaching, he states clearly that God shows no partiality between nations; anyone from any nation came to God through Christ. Before Peter is even finished preaching, it becomes clear that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on these Gentiles. The same sign of tongues that marked the Jewish believers at Pentecost now marks this first harvest of Gentiles at Cornelius's house. These new Christians are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ just as the rest of the Christians have been. Truly God shows no partiality.

Word spreads throughout Judea that the Gentiles have received the word of God. The apostles and many faithful brothers seem to have no issue with what God has done, and yet there are some of the circumcision party in Jerusalem who indeed show partiality. Like the food they've viewed as unclean for centuries, they have a hard time not thinking of Gentiles as unclean. Peter begins to give a defense of all that God has done, both through his vision and through the Spirit coming upon the Gentiles. The Spirit has baptized the Gentiles into Christ just as he has baptized Jewish converts into Christ. God has granted repentance that leads to life to Jew and Gentile alike. Who was Peter to prevent God's way? Let us never prevent God's gospel from going forth.

Wednesday, November 19

Read: Acts 11:19–30; Psalm 142

Persecution sometimes is a tool the Lord uses to spread the gospel. After the martyrdom of Stephen, many Christians fled Jerusalem and were scattered to predominantly Gentile cities. Luke narrows his narrative focus to the city of Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire at that time, with a population of around a half million people. Jewish believers dispersed from Jerusalem began to share the gospel with their kinsmen of the flesh there in Antioch. It would seem that they hadn't yet heard about the events of the previous chapter and a half. But then came brothers from Cyrus and Cyrene to the mission field of Antioch, and they began to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles as well. Verse 21 speaks for itself: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord." How encouraging this is to us today. The early church grew not because they had the right programs, the right vibes, or the right sales pitch. Only the hand of God can save sinners. Praise God, the gospel goes forth!

The church at Jerusalem was still functioning as a "mother church" for the blossoming mission field around them. Just as Peter and John had been sent to Samaria to see the work of the Lord in person, now Barnabas is sent to Antioch. He sees with his own eyes the grace of God at work in Antioch. Barnabas the Encourager encourages the saints to press on in faithfulness to Christ. He seeks out and brings Saul of Tarsus back to see what is taking place in Antioch. They spend a year there building up the church in the Scriptures. It was there in Antioch that believers were first called Christians. They didn't call themselves Christians ("little Christs"). A hostile, unbelieving world saw the actions of these disciples and said, "They're acting like Jesus did." As the gospel goes forth, let us pray that it makes such a difference in us that even the world sees our imitation of Christ.

A Jerusalem prophet named Agabus indicates by the Spirit that a large famine was coming. The text doesn't take time to explain the nature of prophecy or even the historical details of the famine. Luke wants us to get another glimpse of how Christians cared for one another during worldwide catastrophe. Those "little Christs" gave in support of the brothers and sisters throughout Judea who were suffering during the famine. The church was focused on caring for one another because they were one in Christ. Those Christians took the words of Jesus seriously, and they loved one another (see Jn 13:35). May it be said of us.

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The Spirit has poured out the life-giving gospel to the Gentiles. The church is abounding with health and vitality in Antioch. Those people were following the footsteps of Jesus so closely that they were spitefully called “little Christs,” and yet these Christians remained faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. Luke paints a picture of life in Antioch, but back in Jerusalem the picture is death. Herod the Great’s grandson Herod Agrippa is on the throne breathing threats of death on God’s people. In the case of the Apostle James, Herod’s threats are fulfilled. He harasses the Jerusalem church and kills the brother of the Apostle John in the first death scene in this chapter.

Herod sees that the Jews are pleased by James’ death, so he decides to arrest and begin the same death march for Peter. In eerie echoes of the death of Jesus, Herod must wait until after the feasts to present Peter to the blood-thirsty crowds. In the meantime, Peter is placed in jail and surrounded by guards. Herod doesn’t want a repeat of the embarrassing escape from chapter 5. Meanwhile, the church prayed. An angel of the Lord appears in Peter’s cell and leads him to safety in dramatic detail. Even Peter doesn’t fully understand what is happening until he is safely outside the prison and in the street. Realizing what the Lord has done, he eagerly goes to John Mark’s mother’s house to report his rescue to the saints. The church is still praying. The church didn’t seem to expect their prayers to be answered. What a challenge to us today. Let us be a church that continues steadfastly in prayer. Let us pray in faith, believing that God truly hears and answers our prayers as he sees fit. The second death scene did not end in death but Peter’s deliverance. The apostle’s supernatural rescue once again leads to “no small disturbance,” but Herod wickedly executes the guards who were unable to keep Peter in custody. They faced the same fate as the prisoner they could not contain.

The final death in the chapter is the most gruesome of all. Herod has been at odds with the people of Tyre and Sidon, but now those leaders are seeking to make peace with him. The people cry out in flattering worship that Herod eagerly accepts (unlike Peter who rejected attempted worship in 10:26). As Herod’s heart is filled with vanity and pride, he is immediately stricken in judgment because he does not give God the glory. The arrogant ruler is brought low unto death. Yet the word of the Lord continued to grow and multiply. Out of death, the Spirit continues to bring life.

Friday, November 21

Read: Acts 13

Luke the historian shifts his attention in chapter 13 back to the church in Antioch and zooms his focus in on the Apostle Paul. Antioch is blessed with various prophets and teachers that God has saved from unique backgrounds. The church corporately sets apart Barnabas and Saul for the work of missions. The church is responsible for commissioning and sending missionaries, and later we will see these missionaries returning to report to the local church that sent them.

Paul's first missionary is recounted in Acts 13:4–14:26. He and Barnabas first go to the island of Cyprus, Barnabas's home. We see Paul's normal pattern of missionary work first established here in Cyprus. Paul goes to the synagogues first, proclaiming the Scriptures to the Jews. Even as some seek to hear the word of God, others are opposing the word of God. Yet the word of God is powerful and overcomes even the schemes of Satan that attempt to stop the gospel from going forth. Here in this second paragraph of the chapter we see that Saul begins to be frequently referred to as Paul. It's not that the Lord changed Saul to Paul in salvation as is commonly said, but that the Hebrew Saul most often used the Greek form of his name "Paul" as he ministered in Greek places.

The bulk of the chapter focuses on Paul and Barnabas ministering in Pisidian Antioch in Syria, not to be confused with the Antioch where they came from. (History tells us that the Syrian king Seleucus named many cities after his father Antiochus.) Paul and company go to the synagogue there. Without explaining why, we're told that Paul is given the opportunity to preach there in the synagogue. His sermon seems to have three movements as well as echoes of how Stephen preached before his execution. Paul gives an overview of Israel's history (16b–25), followed by preaching the good news of Jesus (26–37), and he concludes by urging his hearers to come to Christ for the forgiveness of sins (38–41). Paul's sermon falls on listening ears. The people plead with the men to return and preach again on the next Saturday. Even after the service was over, men followed them encouraging them. Next week it seems as if the whole city is gathered to hear this message about Jesus. But just like we saw in the preaching of Jesus, the Jews are jealous over the crowds listening to the preaching of Paul. Yet, the rejection of the Jews leads to preaching to the Gentiles. Those who receive the word of God receive eternal life, but those who reject the word of God also reject eternal life.

Weekend Devotion: The Christian Virtue of Thanksgiving

Gratitude is the heart's response to grace, or at least it should be. Take Psalm 117, the shortest psalm in the Psalter and thereby the shortest chapter in Christian Scripture. It reads: "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!"

The psalmist cannot help but be overcome by gratitude and praise. And this is for a single reason only: God's never-ending, covenant love which endures toward His people forever. Two elements of this petite psalm should jump right off the page at us. First is the scope of those who should be grateful. Does the psalmist believe that Israel alone should shout in acclamation? Is it limited to those who have Hebrew blood coursing through their veins? No. It is all the nations! All peoples! The psalmist in a moment of jubilant thanks seems to peer from the old covenant into the eschaton, presaging the words of John in Revelation 7:9–12, which read:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples* and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and *thanksgiving* and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Emphasis added).

As the plan of salvation comes to fruition, all, including the heavenly host, cannot help but fall down in praise and thanks to almighty God. It is the instinct of redeemed creatures when they receive blessing without merit. And that is the second element which is apparent in Psalm 117: That for which the psalmist is so grateful is not something which he earns or deserves. It's not something he believes he is owed. In fact, it has nothing to do with him, other than the reality that he is a recipient of this matchless gift. It is God and what He has done, without reference to our worthiness, which elicits such incredible and intense proclamations of thanks.

Gratitude is not merely passive and reflexive. It is also active and willful.

More than that, expressions of genuine heartfelt thanks seem to point others in a palpable way to grace. For instance, take the following description of gratitude published not by evangelicals, but by the American Psychological Association in a book titled, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*: “What marks gratitude is the psychological response to the gift, whatever its nature, and the experience, however briefly, of the transcendent emotion of grace—the sense that we have benefited from the actions of another.” It appears that even those writing in the purely secular sphere recognize that grace is the central feature of the experience of gratitude, though they fail to apprehend the One whose gracious nature stands behind such experiences (Eph. 2:8).

Furthermore, gratitude is not merely passive and reflexive. It is also active and willful. For example, Paul, when he writes famously to the Philippians (4:4–7), states:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

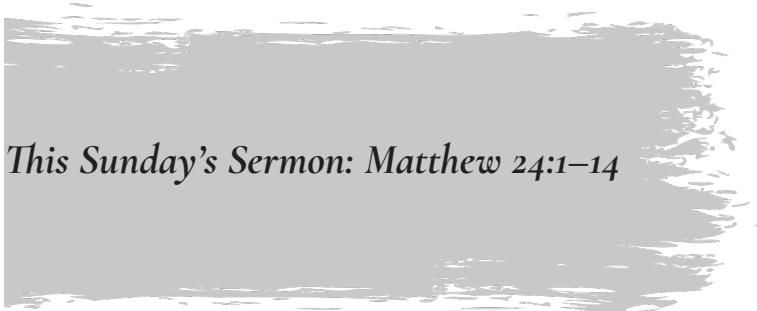
According to Paul, when we willingly choose to focus on those things for which we are thankful in the Lord, it has a heart-shaping effect. Even when our hearts and minds would rather be focused on the negative. And what is that effect? When we steward our minds to meditate on the gracious gifts of God, then peace from God, which surpasses all ability to cognitively work out, seems to rule in our hearts.

I often tell my counselees that “Help!” is a perfectly acceptable one-word prayer. So too is the twice as long “Thank you!” The former is for the languishing soul, the latter for the exultant. One begs for grace, the other acknowledges grace already received.

One last point on the virtue of gratitude for this Thanksgiving: thanks is one of the major tributaries which finds itself terminating in that beautifully deep and wide river we know as awe. As we become those who intentionally transform our lives to recognize the nearly innumerable gifts given to us by God, our hearts are taken by the currents of gratitude and become those which so easily and often find themselves in awe and wonder simply worshiping at the throne of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

This Thanksgiving as we sit around with our families celebrating and rehearsing the gifts for which we should be thankful, may our praise not be platitudinous, dim, and drowsy, but rather earnest, vivid, and energetic. Coming, as for the believer they do, from grace-inundated lives, pointing toward a generous and gracious Giver, with the hope of the glorious grace we will have in its fullness one day when Christ returns and our feast of thanks finds its richest fulfillment (Isa. 25).¹

¹ Josh Squires, The Christian Virtue of Thanksgiving (article found at Ligonier.org)



This Sunday's Sermon: Matthew 24:1-14

Monday, November 24

Read: Acts 14; Psalm 144

Rejected by some and received by others, the gospel goes forth. After leaving Pisidian Antioch because of the opposition by the Jews, Paul continued about eighty miles southeast down the road to Iconium. His method is the same: he goes to the synagogue first and preaches the same gospel. The response is the same: some repent, some believe, and some oppose. God's gospel is at work. Even while fleeing for safety, Paul and company continue to proclaim the gospel everywhere they go.

Going into the region where the Galatian churches will be, Paul heals a lame man in the same way that Peter and John healed a lame man. The same gospel that is preached by Peter is preached by Paul. The same gospel that goes to the Jews also goes to the Gentiles. The crowds of Lystra remembered their local folklore; they believed that Hermes and Zeus had once visited their land in human form, and they were expected to visit again. Seeing Paul and Barnabas heal a lame man convinced the crowds that the gods were indeed visiting again! Herod had welcomed idolatrous worship in his royal robes, but Paul and Barnabas tore their garments in horror that they would be worshipped as gods. Speaking to a non-Jewish audience, Paul doesn't point to specific Scriptures but uses creation itself to point to the truth about the living God. False religion blinds the eyes of its followers, and the crowds were barely restrained from offering sacrifices to the missionaries. As we saw with Jesus, crowds are fickle. Those who were ready to worship Paul and Barnabas are now ready to stone them after the Jews from previous cities arrive and turn the crowds against them. In what will become an almost common occurrence, Paul is stoned and left for dead. Yet, God's plans will not be stopped, and Paul miraculously gets up and goes back into the city. However, they do depart for safety back to Derbe.

Paul and Barnabas continue to preach the gospel wherever they go, and then they revisit where they've already been. As their first missionary journey concludes, Paul and Barnabas return to the cities where they've already established churches. The text indicates that these visits are spent more on personal edification of the saints rather than public proclamation to the lost. Just as Paul will later explain to his sons-in-the-faith Titus and Timothy, even now he demonstrates that great care must be taken in appointing elders in every church. Faithfully fulfilling their missionary task, the men return to their sending church Antioch. They report to the saints who sent them out all that God had done. They rejoice in how the gospel has gone forth.

What should Christians do when disagreements arise in the church? Is division always a sign of failure? Do we need to perform any physical act to ensure our spiritual salvation? These big questions arise in every age, yet we find great guidance in considering how the early church answered these questions in Acts 15.

A group of false teachers named Judaizers come to Antioch teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. It's not enough to trust in perfect fulfillment of the law by Jesus Christ; you must also keep the law of Moses to ensure your salvation, so they taught. Paul and Barnabas heavily debated those false teachers, and eventually the Antioch church determines to send a group to Jerusalem to seek the counsel of the apostles and elders. Unfolding like a courtroom scene, the narrative presents Peter making a great plea to the jury. He reminds everyone that God made the choice to save Gentiles by belief in the gospel. The Gentiles received the same Holy Spirit the Jewish believers received. The grace that has been extended to the Jews has also been extended to the Gentiles. Peter is outraged that anyone would seek to place a yoke on the Gentiles that no one would be able to bear, namely earning their salvation by works.

James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church, affirms all that Peter has said. He points to the many Old Testament Scriptures that promised long ago that God would save Gentiles. He presents a solution that will maintain Gentile freedom in Christ while also not promoting offense to the Jewish believers. In short, it's a unifying decision that maintains the unity of the Spirit in the young church. No physical works will be required for salvation, for this would be an unbearable burden. The announcement of the apostles is made known to the church, and yet it's important for us to remember today that we don't have to go to Jerusalem when we have disagreements. The apostles are dead and gone, yet we have their wisdom in the complete, trustworthy Scriptures.

Some days later, Paul and Barnabas prepare to go out to the mission field again but they are divided. This time the disagreement is not theological but practical. A careful reading of the New Testament shows that the Lord used all of these faithful brothers for his purposes. Division did not automatically mean failure, although it was surely painful at the time. In the providence of God, Mark is eventually associated with Peter (1 Pet 5:13), but by the end of Paul's ministry, he too has reconciled with Mark (2 Tim 4:11).

Wednesday, November 26

Read: Proverbs 23–24

Proverbs 22:17–24:22 is sometimes called “The Thirty Sayings of the Wise.” The key phrase in 22:20 can be translated as “excellent things” (LSB) or “thirty sayings” (ESV). The same phrase is translated as “noble things” in 8:6. However you take the phrase, this is a discernible unit of proverbs to which we must incline our ears and hear the words of the wise (22:17). This list provides a short interpretation or description of the sayings. Notice how many warn and instruct in normal, ordinary areas of life. God’s Word is sufficient for life and godliness. Get and apply wisdom today!

1. Warns against robbing the poor; the Lord will defend them (22:22–23)
2. Warns against being friends with wrathful people; you’ll be like them (22:24–25)
3. Warns against securing another person’s debt (22:26–27)
4. Warns against stealing property (22:28)
5. People with great skill will be honored (22:29)
6. Warns of being entrapped by deceptive hospitality from a wealthy host (23:1–3)
7. Warns against workaholicism (23:4–5)
8. Warns against the generosity of a stingy host (23:6–8)
9. Warns against wasting words with a hard-headed fool (23:9)
10. Warns against cheating orphans; their Redeemer is God (23:10–11)
11. Wisdom should be pursued (23:12)
12. Affirms corporal punishment in rearing children (23:13–14)
13. Explains the motivation of a parent in rearing children (23:15–16)
14. Warns against envying sinners (23:17–18)
15. Warns against keeping company with drunkards and gluttons (23:19–21)
16. Honor your parents by getting wisdom (23:22–25)
17. Warns against the danger of sexual sin (23:26–28)
18. Warns against the danger of drunkenness (23:29–35)
19. Warns against envying or keeping company with evil people (24:1–2)
20. The benefits of wisdom (24:3–4)
21. True strength is found in wisdom (24:5–6)
22. The fool can’t offer wisdom in tough situations (24:7)
23. Those who plot evil will be known for plotting evil (24:8–9)
24. Be strong and courageous in adversity! (24:10)
25. Act decisively in the face of evil; God sees and will repay accordingly (24:11–12)
26. Wisdom is sweet to the soul (24:13–14)
27. Warns against joining the wicked in their sins; they will fall (24:15–16)
28. Warns against rejoicing over an enemy when they fall (24:17–18)
29. Don’t fret over the wicked for they will fall (24:19–20)
30. Respect authority (24:21–22)

Paul's second missionary journey began at the end of Acts 15 and is described in greater detail in chapters 16–18. Having gone a different path from Barnabas and John Mark, Paul and Silas pick up other traveling companions. Young Timothy of Lystra joins Paul's party. They are delivering the announcement of the Jerusalem Council that maintains Christian don't have to be circumcised to be saved, and yet in this case Paul believes it to be wise for Timothy to be circumcised. Paul wisely applies the gospel to all of the circumstances in chapter 16, even when it comes to dealing with governmental authorities. We should pray for wisdom to apply God's Word as carefully as does Paul.

Reading the text carefully, we also notice another traveling companion added to the company. In verse 10 we noticed that Luke begins to write in terms of "we" instead of "they." Luke himself has joined Paul's group. God is building the group he wants to carry out the mission he has planned. Now is not the time for Paul to go to Asia; that will come later in chapter 19. For now, God leads Paul's missionary band to the district of Macedonia, specifically the city of Philippi.

The gospel is on display in a variety of circumstances during Paul's time in Philippi. The Lord opens the heart of a wealthy woman named Lydia to the gospel. She and her household repent, believe, and are baptized. A demon-possessed servant-girl follows the missionaries and begins crying out that these men are sent from God and are declaring the way of salvation. Yet, the gospel has no partnership with Satan, so Paul casts out the demon from this girl in the name of Jesus. But now her masters get angry at Paul and Silas because they have cured their cash cow, so Paul and Silas are beaten with rods, receiving many wounds and are thrown into the inner prison and their feet are placed in stocks. In another miraculous jailbreak in the book of Acts, Paul and Silas have the opportunity to escape. However, they stay for the sake of the jailer who suspects he's about to meet the fate of the guards we saw in chapter 12. Recognizing that only God could have caused the midnight earthquake and restrained every man from escaping prison, the jailer demands to know, "What must I do to be saved?" The consistent gospel of Acts is preached again: believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved. The jailer's entire household believes this message and is baptized into the body of Christ. The church continues to be built up and the saints are encouraged. The gospel goes forth.

Friday, November 28

Read: Acts 17; Proverbs 25

Acts 17 details Paul's preaching in three different cities. In each location he is careful to consider the unique circumstances and beliefs of his audience, yet always relies on the sufficiency of Scripture in his preaching. As we have already seen, some will receive the gospel, some will reject the gospel, and some will oppose the gospel. While there had been no synagogue to visit in Philippi, in Thessalonica Paul returns to going to the synagogue first and reasoning from the Scriptures. This gospel message miraculously saves many, yet is still rejected and opposed by others. Paul's message that Christ is king continues to upset the world down to this very day.

No matter how many times they reject him, Paul never seems to weary of taking the gospel to his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom 9:3). Fleeing Thessalonica to Berea, he goes again to the synagogue. In Thessalonica, Paul showed us how to reason from the Scriptures. Now the Bereans show us how to receive the Scriptures: with eagerness and examination. With many people believing in Christ, even prominent Greeks, Paul would certainly consider the mission to be a success. Yet opposition continues to follow him, with Jews pursuing Paul from Thessalonica to Berea in an effort to turn the people against Paul. God continues to work providentially, this time moving Paul along alone to Athens.

In Athens, Paul is face to face with all of the magnificent reminders of the city's idolatry. The temples, the architecture, even the culture in the marketplace all screamed to Paul that the city was lost and alienated from God. He reasons with the Jews from the Scriptures in the synagogue, but he would also go out in the public square daily. Epicureans were focused on pleasure while Stoics were consumed by self-control, yet both popular groups viewed Paul as just another babbler of worldly philosophies. They often spent time considering new ideas for the sake of amusement, so they decided to give Paul's message a try. Given this unique evangelistic opportunity, Paul begins to preach the gospel of the One, True, Living God who is Lord of all. Paul doesn't quote specific Scriptures; he actually quotes from their own philosophers to show them their incoherent worldview. In ignorance, the people of Athens have worshipped all sorts of things nonsensically, but God is commanding them to repent. Judgment is coming. Escape the wrath to come by taking refuge in the resurrected Christ. Some reject the gospel, but some believe. Preaching this same resurrection message today will bring us the same general outcomes. Some will reject us. Some will oppose us. But some will believe! Go tell someone about Jesus Christ today.

RAMAH MONTHLY

Weekend Devotion: What Is Thanksgiving Day?

The First Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is an American holiday that stretches all the way back to a time long before America became a nation. The Pilgrims landed in 1620. They faced brutal conditions and were woefully unprepared. Roughly half of them died in that first year. Then they had a successful harvest of corn. In November of 1621 they decided to celebrate a feast of thanksgiving.

Edward Winslow was among those who ate that first thanksgiving meal in 1621. He noted:

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we gathered the fruit of our labors. . . . And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want.

In addition to the fowl eaten that first Thanksgiving, the American Indians also brought along five deer as their contribution to the feast. Presumably they also ate corn.

Over the centuries, Americans continued to celebrate feasts of thanksgiving in the fall. Some presidents issued proclamations. Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation for a perpetual national holiday set aside for thanksgiving. In 1863, with the nation torn apart by the Civil War, he declared:

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

Ingratitude

So we have a holiday of thanksgiving born in and further nurtured during times of great adversity and struggle. We might think that times of adversity and challenge would spawn ingratitude, while times of prosperity would spawn gratitude. Sadly, the reverse is true. A chilling scene from the animated television show *The Simpsons* demonstrates this. Bart Simpson was called upon to pray for a meal, to which he promptly prayed, "Dear God, We paid for all of this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

Prosperity breeds ingratitude. The writers of the Heidelberg Catechism knew this. Question 28 asks what it benefits us to know that God creates and sustains all things. The answer is it gives patience in adversity and gratitude in prosperity. Moses also knew this. In Deuteronomy, he looks ahead to times of material prosperity for Israel,

then sternly warns, inspired by the Holy Spirit, not to forget God. “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’ ” (Deut. 8:17). We did this all ourselves. Thanks for nothing. Human nature trends toward ingratitude.

**What does it benefit us to know that God creates and sustains all things?
The answer is it gives patience in adversity and gratitude in prosperity.**

Another culprit breeding ingratitude is our entitlement culture. Simply put, why should we be grateful for what we deserve and what we have a right to? I was owed this, goes the culture, therefore why would I say thank you?

To Whom Are We Grateful?

A third culprit concerns what UC Davis professor of psychology Dr. Robert Emmons calls the “to whom” question. In his scientific study of gratitude, Emmons came to the realization that gratitude raises a singular and significant question: When we say thank you, to whom are we grateful?

The interesting thing here is that if we trace this “to whom” line of questioning back, like pulling on the threads of some tapestry, we find a singular answer at the end of each and every thread. The answer is God. To whom are we grateful? We are grateful in an ultimate sense to God.

Our Benefactor does “good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). Theologians call this common grace. God as creator cares for all His creation and provides for our needs. He gives us our very lives and our very breath.

Our Benefactor also does good by giving His most precious gift, the gift of His Beloved Son. Theologians call this saving grace. Gifts often cost the giver. What a costly gift the Father has given us in sending the Son. So Paul exclaims, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift” (2 Cor. 9:15).

The Necessity of Thanksgiving

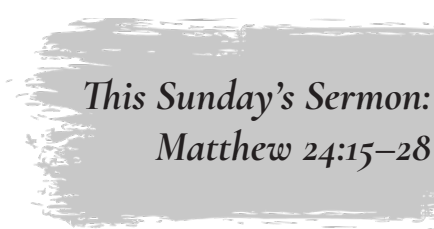
When we consider God as the “to whom” we are thankful, we may well be seeing both the necessity of thanksgiving and the eclipse of thanksgiving. As culture veers more and more towards a secular state it shrinks back from gratitude. So vainly we think we did this all ourselves. So wrongly we think we deserve, or even have a fundamental right to, all of this. We also know what is at the end of the string if we pull on it long enough. We know that we will be confronted with a Creator. We know we will be accountable to a Creator. Saying thank you means we are dependent, not independent.

We would rather be ungrateful. Paul says we know God from all the evidence He has left of Himself, but we don't want to "honor him or give thanks to him" (Rom 1:21). Then the downward spiral begins. A culture of ingratitude careens ever downward into decline.

We should not be counted among those who see the fourth Thursday in November as nothing more than a day of football and over-indulgence. We should be thankful for one day set apart to consider all that we have and realize that all that we have has been given to us. Of course, such gratitude should in no way be limited to one day out of 365.

Having been imprisoned for one year, four months, and eighteen days in a Nazi cell measuring 6 ft. x 9 ft, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what is certainly a reminder of the meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday:

You must never doubt that I'm traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I'm being led. My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I'm so thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of and thankful for God's mercy and forgiveness.



This Sunday's Sermon:
Matthew 24:15–28

Monday, December 1

Read: Proverbs 26–27

Proverbs 25–29 are more wisdom from Solomon but were compiled by King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah brought much revival to Judah during his reign; part of the revival came through promoting the wisdom of Solomon.

26:1–12 describes the fool in every verse. Verses 4–5 teach us how to deal with a fool, even though they appear to contradict one another. There are times when we must not devote time to answering a fool according to his folly because we will simply become foolish. The debate will never end. The fool will never be satisfied with the truth. On the other hand, there are times we must answer a fool according to his folly in order to prevent the fool from thinking he's right. To apply these verses appropriately we must pray fervently for wisdom. Fools do not deserve honor. Proverbs are wasted in their mouths. Fools are strongly corrected in this passage, yet there is someone whose situation is worse: the person who thinks they are wise in their own eyes. What a condemnation to those who think they are wise. How convicting to each of us, for we often think we are wise. We will not be wise apart from the wisdom of God in Christ.

The sluggard is comically convicted in 26:13–16. This is how sin works: the sluggard actually thinks he is wise. Verses 17–22 give a variety of examples of people who are careless with their words. They insert themselves into the arguments of others. They jokingly deceive people, stir up strife, and gossip. 26:23–28 deals with the liars and the destruction they bring. Clearly our words matter. This is a constant theme in Scripture. From examples (positive and negative) in narratives to teachings from our Lord and the Apostles, this wisdom is all over the place. Let us pray that God would help us to tame our tongues (Jam 3:1–12).

The familiar refrain calling a son to listen to the wisdom of his father is found in 27:11. Proverbs 27:12–28:1 are bookended by the theme of danger or evil. The simple one who lacks wisdom will run foolishly into danger (27:12). The wicked will run even when there is no danger (28:1). Only wisdom will prevent a young man from falling into the category of the simple or the company of the wicked. The Proverbs as a whole impart the wisdom of God. It's not just that the young should read them on their own, but parents should pass this wisdom of Scripture on to their children. Dear reader, do you have wisdom? The wisdom of God? Who will you share it with today?

Proverbs 28–29 continue to address a wide variety of topics. The careful reader will notice that these topics are not far removed from our normal daily lives. Whether as a nation or as individuals, whether our finances or our relationships, God's Word speaks into our lives. 28:2–12 seem to be organized around the theme of righteousness in society. A land filled with transgressions will be marked by many leaders jockeying for power (28:2). When the land is marked by righteousness, there will be great glory (28:12). Verses 3 and 8 relate to the poor. Will they be treated with oppression or kindness? Keeping the law is the chief factor in whether someone will be counted with the righteous or the wicked (28:4, 7, 9). It is only by integrity that society will flourish, and integrity can only come by keeping the Word of God. Wicked rulers over a nation are like wild animals seeking whom they may devour (28:15).

Prosperity and security unite Proverbs 28:19–27. Hard work is praised. Honesty and integrity are valued. Get-rich-quick schemes are rejected. Bribes, stealing from parents, ignoring the needy, and stirring up strife due to greed are all condemned. Isn't it remarkable how many areas of life that God speaks to? Financial matters affect everyone yet we so often fail to seek God's wisdom in God's Word. Study the Scriptures diligently and pray that God would give you wisdom and strength to work hard and steward your resources well for his glory.

Hezekiah's collection of Solomon's wisdom ends with a stark statement: the unjust and the upright cannot tolerate one another. You can't be characterized as both. You can't coexist with both. You can't have friends who are both. The unjust man is deplorable to the righteous, and the righteous man is hated by the wicked. This shouldn't surprise us. Jesus warned us that the world would hate us (Jn 15:18–20). A reasonable explanation isn't necessary. The world hates the righteous simply because they are righteous. John tells us that this goes all the way back to Cain and Abel. Cain murdered his brother because Abel was righteous and Cain was not (1 Jn 3:12–13). God's Word tells us not to be surprised when the world hates us, but we're always surprised. We're always taken aback when lost people reject us, especially when we're nice to them. This is yet another reminder of why we need God's wisdom. We need to know how to be righteous in an unrighteous world. We want to flourish in Christ in the midst of a world that promises life but only delivers death. God's Word has the wisdom we need.

Wednesday, December 3

Read: Acts 18; Proverbs 30

Corinth marks the final major stop on Paul's second missionary journey. From Athens he arrived in this leading city of Greece. Paul finds fellow Jewish tent-makers Aquila and Priscilla. During this period Paul is supporting himself rather than relying on a particular congregation. He works and lives with this couple who had fled from Rome. Paul continues his evangelistic efforts in the synagogue seeking to persuade both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrive with a gift from the Macedonian church, Paul again focuses exclusively on preaching the gospel of Jesus the Christ. He has demonstrated his patience in preaching (see verse 4) but when the people openly oppose his preaching even with blasphemy, Paul moves on. Using language from Ezekiel 33, Paul declares that he has faithfully proclaimed the gospel to them. Their judgment will be their own fault.

Compassionate Paul leaves the synagogue and goes all the way next door and keeps right on preaching. In what must have been shocking to everyone, the leader of the synagogue converts to Christ. Many Corinthians believed and were baptized. We've seen opposition force Paul from a city multiple times in Acts. Even though there is and will continue to be opposition in Corinth, the Lord makes clear to Paul: "Do not be silent, and do not leave. I have many people in this city." Wow, what a promise from God! Paul can labor diligently in the face of hostility knowing that he will not be harmed, and more importantly, his work will bear fruit. Paul labors diligently in Corinth for eighteen months proclaiming the Word.

Opposition indeed comes to Paul's preaching and he is once again hauled before legal authorities. But this time before Paul even begins to open his mouth, the proconsul says, "I'm not getting involved in your religious debates" and drives the Jewish opponents away. The new leader of the synagogue Sosthenes would likely have been the one to present the case to the ruler. Failing to make his case, he becomes the scapegoat for everyone's frustration and is beaten right there in front of the judgment seat. Yet the Lord eventually saves this man, and he becomes part of Paul's ministry (1 Cor 1:1).

Paul eventually makes a short visit to Ephesus, promising to return one day if the Lord allows. With this his second missionary journey is over, and he reports again to the Antioch church. The final paragraph of Acts 18 introduces us to Apollos, an eloquent preacher whose education is inadequate. Yet he humbly submits to further private instruction, and his ministry only grows. The message Paul and Apollos preach is the same gospel: Jesus is the Christ.

RAMAH MONTHLY

What do you do when you meet someone who professes to be a Christian, but you're unsure about the faith they profess? Ask questions! Paul meets followers of John the Baptist who do not have a complete understanding of Jesus and the salvation John promised. Upon hearing and believing, they are baptized. Not in the name of John, but in the name of Jesus. The Spirit comes upon this group just like he came upon the church at Pentecost and later the Samaritans and the Gentiles. The sign of tongues makes its final appearance in Acts (and the rest of Scripture except 1 Corinthians) as evidence that the Spirit now indwells this group just as the Spirit indwells all believers.

Earlier the Spirit had prevented Paul from entering Asia (16:6), but in God's perfect timing Paul's gospel spread from the lecture hall throughout all of Asia. Just as God had done extraordinary miracles by the hands of Peter, the Lord also does extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul. Luke presents a balanced picture of these two leading apostles and the work being done in the name of Jesus. Yet, there are always people who want to use the name of Jesus for their own gain. The seven sons of Sceva attempted to co-opt the name of Jesus in an exorcism, but their efforts failed. In an unexpected reversal the demon subdues and shames the seven sons, for they did not actually come in the name of Jesus. Many have Jesus on their lips but not in their hearts.

Paul purposes in his heart to go to Jerusalem again and eventually to Rome. The rest of the book will detail Paul's journey to Rome. He will indeed go, but not as he expected. Paul's third missionary journey (which began in 18:23) continues in Asia, while controversy about Christianity rages. As Asians converted to Christ, they left behind their idolatrous former ways, and this was impacting the wallets of men like Demetrius in Asia. This false teacher preaches a false sermon in a false worship service that lasts for hours on end. The congregants become a confused mob dragging Paul's companions into the theater, but not really knowing what they were rioting about in the first place. A government employee is finally able to calm the crowd and tells the craftsman to use the legal system if they have a complaint. Mob violence will hurt Ephesus's reputation, the clerk explains. In his providence, God uses a pagan politician to protect his saints. God moves in mysterious ways, yet modern readers must wonder if we practice our faith in such a way that our fellow citizens even notice.

Friday, December 5

Read: 1 Corinthians 1–2, 13

Contemporary Christians often have an idealized picture of the earliest Christians. We sometimes like to think that the earliest church was the purest form of the church with relatively few problems. The church at Corinth should put an end to any misconceived notions of a “super spiritual” or “less sinful” early church. The letters to the Corinthian congregations may seem to be discouraging upon first reading due to how much of their content is focused on correction. Yet, the letter is saturated with rich gospel truths which can spur us on to holiness just as they did in Paul’s day.

Despite the challenges that will be raised in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul is thankful for the grace of God that is evident in that local church. They have been called as saints and enriched in Christ. When you read all that is theirs in Christ in 1:4–9, you wonder how the Corinthians could have been so off the mark. The first problem Paul addresses in the letter is their divisions over personalities, particularly in relation to their baptism it seems. The apostle corrects their thinking by pointing them to the cross. 1 Corinthians 1–2 are a beautiful expression of the wisdom of God as seen in the cross of Christ. This is the message Paul preached in Corinth. He did not cater to their preferences or expectations; he preaches the saving gospel of Jesus Christ that is foolishness to the world.

Chapter 13 is one of the most famous chapters in Scripture and is often associated with weddings and romance. While it’s true that we learn a great deal about love in this memorable chapter, is it true that Paul gave it to us so we would get warm butterflies inside? When we read the chapter in context, the answer is a resounding “no.” In chapter 12, Paul has addressed the Corinthians concerning their confusion over spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are to be for the edification of the entire body of Christ, not for the edification of one member. These gifts are to be a source of unity rather than a source of division. The Corinthians earnestly desire certain spiritual gifts, but they do not desire love. 1 Corinthians 13 should be understood as a condemnation of the Corinthian church for their failure to love one another rightly. All of the gifts and all of the actions that are done without love for one another are worthless. The gospel that seems foolish to the world actually produces love for Christ and love for his saints in his church. It was true in Corinth, and it is true for us today.

Weekend Devotion: In the Beginning

The first words of a book are important. They can make you read it or make you close it! Some time ago I began to read the biographies of two contemporaries who were on opposite sides of the American Revolution. One biography began with an explanation of the subject's complex family tree and varied royal connections; the other with these words:

In the cold, nearly colorless light of a New England winter, two men on horseback travelled the coast road below Boston, heading north.

You can guess which book I kept reading. The first quickly lost my interest. Family connections can be very confusing and—at least outside the family—are interesting to only a few. But I wanted to know more about the two men on the Boston coast road; who were they and why were they there in the first place? My attention was captured immediately (and sustained to the last page).

The opening section in Matthew's Gospel isn't exactly an attention-grabber for most of us. It is a long list of largely unfamiliar names. Some of them we may not even be sure how to pronounce. We don't usually read this part of Matthew in Christmas services!

But these opening words would have grabbed the attention of Matthew's first Jewish readers and hearers (and most of them were hearers). Literally they read, "Book of [the] genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, Son of God." To a certain generation, "Genesis" is a famous band from the 1980s and 90s; but for Matthew's audience "genesis" meant "beginning." It is the name of the first book of the Bible, the story of the original beginning.

This word choice was not accidental. Matthew's book is the story of a new genesis—of a new beginning. His Gospel, and indeed the Christian gospel message as a whole, is about God establishing his kingdom and beginning what Paul called a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Matthew's Gospel has sometimes been described as "The Gospel of the kingdom." He tells us how Jesus taught about "the kingdom," how his miracles were signs of its presence, and how he explained the new and different lifestyle of its members (Matthew 4:23 – 7:29). Matthew also ends his Gospel with an indication of Jesus' kingship. Jesus' last words to the apostles are these: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (28:18). Now his rule will be extended to the ends of the earth and to the close of history.

The gospel story is all about how Jesus Christ, the son of David, in God's kingdom restores life to what it was meant to be. In other words, it is about a new genesis.

Think back to the original creation. In that first beginning, God created mankind, male and female, as his image and likeness. He said, "Let them have dominion..." (Genesis 1:26). They were royal children appointed to reign over the kingdom of creation. But Genesis tells the story of their tragic fall from that privileged role. Their calling was to turn the dust of the earth into a garden (1:26 – 2:25). Instead, they sinned and became part of that dust themselves (3:17-19).

But now, as we stand in the opening pages of Matthew's Gospel, God is bringing about a grand reversal. The whole story of the Old Testament has been a preparation for it. Now the new beginning has begun. What follows will tell the story of how Jesus undid the effects of Adam's fall, and accomplished what Adam and we have failed to do. The result will be a "new creation": what Matthew calls "the new world" (Matthew 19:28)—literally the *palingenesia*—the beginning again!

So, Matthew's opening words are good news for anyone who needs a new beginning. That's why his Gospel ends with Jesus telling his apostles (who were all Jews) that they were to go to the ends of the earth with the message that the dominion, and authority, and the kingdom of God, have all been restored. Christ has inaugurated a new genesis in which all who come to faith in him will share.

But still, we're left with the question: why then this seemingly endless list of names?

The answer lies in the three ways in which Matthew describes Jesus. First, Jesus is the Christ. Matthew mentions this fact four times here (1:1, 16, 17, 18). "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah," meaning the anointed King whom God had promised to send to deliver his people from bondage. That's who Jesus is.

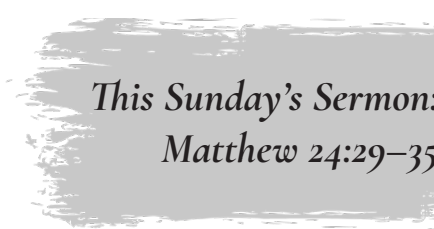
But Jesus is also the son of David (1:1). Why is that important? Because God had promised that a descendant of David would reign over a kingdom that would stretch from one end of the earth to the other. That king would restore the world Adam marred.

And Jesus is also a son of Abraham (1:1). For even earlier God had promised that this same person would be descended from Abraham, and in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed—they would experience the blessing that Adam had forfeited through his sin (Genesis 12:1-3).

There is more to come in Jesus' genealogy. It isn't at all what you might expect. But that will need to wait. For today let us ponder the fact that Advent is all about the new beginning God has made possible by sending his Son for us.

Perhaps a new beginning is what you need most. As you reach the end of another year, is there some aspect of the previous twelve months in which you wish you could start over? If so, Matthew wants you to know that you can find that new beginning in Jesus Christ.¹

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Dawn of Redeeming Grace* (2021), pg 14-17



This Sunday's Sermon:
Matthew 24:29-35

Monday, December 8

Read: Psalm 119

Psalm 119 is a monumental tribute to the character of God and his Word. As the longest chapter in the Bible, it is actually lengthier than some entire books of Scripture. The author has designed this hymn to be sung by God's people. We can say that with confidence because of how the psalm writer has organized his text. Psalm 119 is an acrostic, a poem where each stanza begins with the 22 consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza contains eight verses with each verse beginning with the letter for that stanza. For example, stanza 1 begins with the Hebrew letter aleph (think the English letter a), and all eight verses within stanza 1 also begin with aleph. We may not always notice this in English, but this shows the great craftsmanship with which the psalmist wrote. His technique would have made it much easier for Hebrew people to memorize the lengthy psalm. He's not just telling people to meditate on God's Word. He's giving them the tools to do the job.

It's worth meditating on Psalm 119 because of how the text points us to God's Word. The psalmist uses a variety of terms to express how God has revealed himself to us by speaking. We would call it "special revelation" in terms of theology, and we would practically refer to this revelation as the Bible. The hymnwriter speaks of God's law, his testimonies, his precepts, his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his word. Each expression causes us to reflect on the rich depth of God's communication. Almost every verse references in some way the words of God. Psalm 119 speaks of God's words as being righteous, true, and sure. It is appropriate that we trust God's words, place our confidence and hope in his words, and we believe his words. For the diligent student of Scripture, it's no surprise that the psalmist's words are true. It's no shock that this is how God's Words are described because these words also describe God himself. He is righteous. He is true. He is sure. Psalm 119 causes us to reflect on these things.

The entire psalter began with the idea of being blessed. The blessed person is the one who delights in the Word of God. Most of us reading Psalm 119 would have to admit that we do not delight in God's Word the way the psalm writer did. But we want to. We want to love God's Word this way. Returning to Psalm 119 over and over will surely work in us a love for God's Word. Then we will delight in his character and his revelation, and we will be blessed.

Most Christians desire to live a Spirit-filled life, yet many Christians are confused as to what that means. Paul helps us understand in Ephesians 5–6. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (5:18), so this must be something we are able to do. We are passive when the Spirit actively indwells us at conversion, so this command must be a different experience. To better understand what Paul is saying, we look to his parallel passage in Colossians 3:16–17. It is almost identical to Ephesians 5:18–20, but the difference is clarifying. Comparing the two passages helps us understand: letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly is to be filled with the Spirit. There's no other secret formula for the Christian life. When we fill up our minds with the word of Christ, we are also filling ourselves with the Spirit of God.

Continuing in the text, we see that being filled with the Spirit will be demonstrated in ordinary areas of life. We gather with the saints in corporate worship being built up together as we worship God. We live lives submitting to the authorities over us. We resist the attacks of Satan by being strong in the Lord. The Spirit-filled life looks like normal faithfulness using the ordinary Christian habits God has given in his word. Dear saint, never let someone tell you that you are missing out on the Spirit-filled life because you do not have whatever extraordinary experience they tell you is necessary. Christ died for his church. He cherishes his church. He nourishes his church through the ordinary means of grace he describes in his word.

A large part of the Spirit-filled Christian life is submitting to authorities God has placed over us. The word Paul uses carries the idea of voluntarily lining up under another's authority. It's the picture of a soldier willingly submitting himself to a commanding officer. The soldier is made in the image of God just as much as the commanding officer, yet the soldier willingly submits to the authority of the officer over him. Submitting to the Spirit often looks like submitting to the authorities in our lives. Paul gives specific examples of wives submitting to their husbands, children submitting to their parents, and slaves submitting to their masters. Those are not the only authorities a believer must submit to, and yet those are the relationships that generally make up the majority of our daily lives. Whether at work or at home, we honor Christ by submitting to the authorities over us. Whether in corporate worship or spiritual warfare, we are filled with Christ by being filled with Christ's words. Let us be controlled by the Spirit of Christ!

Wednesday, December 10

Read: Philippians 3–4

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is an overwhelmingly joy-filled letter. He has much to teach that church and every believer about the Christian life. He warns against false teachers, in this case those who would insist upon the external work of circumcision to ensure the internal saving work of Christ (3:2–3). Paul explains that if anyone had good reasons to trust in their external works as confidence for salvation, he would be able to boast. He gives his impressive pedigree in 3:5–6, but clarifies that all of those things that are viewed as grounds for boasting in the world's eyes are actually losses for the sake of Christ. Every credit to Paul's account became a debt in light of Christ. None of those worldly credits amounted to anything when measured against the value of Christ. The great value is knowing Jesus Christ personally as Lord; Paul says "my Lord" in verse 8. The Christian's goal is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (3:10).

Paul's imagery shifts in verses 12–16 from the accountant to the athlete. Paul continues to run the race of the Christian life, not progressing according to the law but growing in the likeness of Christ. He is not perfect, but his focus is on the prize of being conformed to the image of Jesus. He leaves the past in the past and leans into the future like an athlete straining forward to cross the finish line. Don't give up, dear Christian. Run the race with joy!

The details of Paul's life and his personal reflections on his own walk with the Lord are not designed to draw attention or praise to Paul himself. No, the call is to follow Paul's example which is really to imitate Christ. There are godly examples and worldly examples. The "enemies of the cross" are bound for destruction, because they are driven by the appetites of the flesh (3:18–19). But our citizenship is in heaven, and our joy is in Christ. This is why we are called to rejoice (4:4). Our anxiety is to be replaced by prayer which produces peace (4:6–7). We are to dwell and think on things that are good, beautiful, and truth—categories that must be defined by Scripture and not self (4:8–9). These things aren't actually in the eye of the beholder. Imitating Christ will indeed bring peace, joy, and contentment. We can be content in any and every situation because Christ strengthens us (4:13). Knowing that our God has all riches in glory in Christ and will supply our needs as he sees fit moves us to joy and praise (4:19–20).

The gospel that saved both Jew and Gentile in the Book of Acts is further explained in the Book of Romans. Christians are often intimidated by this letter as if Paul set out to write an academic treatise that mere mortals can't comprehend, but that is clearly not the goal of the letter. Part plea for church unity and part missionary support letter, the letter to the church in Rome provides a robust explanation of the gospel. Paul previews the themes of the letter in his introduction in 1:1–7. Paul's apostolic authority, the fulfillment of Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the obedience of faith, the missionary mandate, and the glory of God are all previewed in Paul's introduction and further explained in the letter. He goes on to explain how he has often desired to come to Rome but has been unable to so far. (This letter was written from Corinth several years before Paul actually went to Rome as we read about in Acts.) He is eager to preach the gospel to the church in Rome, not because they don't believe the gospel, but because the gospel is what drives our ordinary Christian lives. Paul is under obligation, he is eager, and he is unashamed of the gospel, which reveals the righteousness of God (1:14–17).

Beginning in 1:18 and continuing through 3:20, Paul unpacks the exceeding sinfulness of sin. The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, but the wrath of God is constantly being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness. All people have the knowledge of God, for it is plain to them. They are without excuse. Yet sinful hearts suppress the truth in shocking exchanges. They exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for idols of corruptible mankind (1:23). They exchange the truth of God for a lie (1:25). Sin is so wicked that women have exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural (1:26). Sin is not merely a Gentile problem, but it is also a Jewish problem. In 3:10–18 Paul strings together a series of seven Old Testament references expounding human sinfulness. If seven is the number of completion or perfection, then we are perfectly, completely sinful people. Not as sinful as we could be, but impacted by sin in every way.

Yet in the gospel we see the truly great exchange (3:21–26). Christ's righteousness exchanged for our sins. Christ's favor for our shame (grace). Christ's innocence for our guilt (justification). Christ's payment for our sin debt (redemption). Christ receiving God's wrath in our place (propitiation). This is good news. This is the gospel for all who believe.

Friday, December 12

Read: Romans 8, 12

The gospel that saves all who believe secures the Spirit's work in the lives of his people. We saw the Holy Spirit at work in the church in Acts, but many Christians fail to recognize the Spirit is at work in us today. For all who are in Christ, the Spirit is at work in us. We must not fall prey to distortions about the Spirit's work. Let us trust Scripture and learn of and love the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 8:1–4, Paul teaches that the Spirit has set us free. We are no longer under condemnation, so let us walk in the Spirit, not the flesh. The Spirit has given us a new way of life, according to 8:5–8. We don't have to fix our minds on the flesh because we no longer walk in the flesh. Let us set our minds on the Spirit for we live according to the Spirit. The Spirit indwells us, as 8:9–11 explains. The Spirit who gives us life has given us a new way of life and dwells in us. We are not debtors to the flesh but to the Spirit (8:12). We are led by the Spirit because we live by the Spirit (8:13–14). The riches of Roman 8 explode in verse 15: we have been adopted as sons of God. Now we have access to God, and cry out to him like a child crying out to his father. We have assurance (8:16). We are heirs with Christ (8:17a). This is the gospel at work in the lives of believers!

The more the gospel is at work in our lives, the more we will bear the family resemblance. However, the family resemblance will often come through suffering. Glory is coming soon, but suffering is a present reality that leads to groaning (8:18–21). Creation is groaning for its redemption (8:22). As we suffer, we groan within ourselves (8:23). But as the Spirit helps us in our weakness, he prays for us with groanings too deep for words (8:26). This confidence in the Spirit leads to the great praise and confidence of 8:28–39. Praise the Father! Praise the Son! Praise the Spirit!

In light of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in light of the Spirit at work in us, believers should live holy lives that are acceptable to God as living sacrifices. This is our daily spiritual worship. We should not be conformed to the image of the world but instead to the image of Christ. We grow in grace through the blessing of the local church and its gifts. In and through the Spirit we live Christ-honoring lives.

Weekend Devotion: “The Hopes and Fears of All the Years”

Looking at the list of names in Matthew 1:1-17, you could be forgiven for wishing Matthew had simply said, *Jesus was descended from David and Abraham!* You can barely take it all in. Matthew is cramming almost 2,000 years of Bible history into 16 verses- over 100 years per verse! 42 generations are listed. Most of us don't even stop to check his arithmetic. It is hard to concentrate on so many names that mean almost nothing to you.

But pause for a moment and you will realise Matthew is telling us something. He has sorted the names into three groups of 14 generations each: from Abraham to David; from David to the Babylonian exile; and from the exile to Christ. Why?

And—since we know from elsewhere in the Bible that there were more than 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus—why does Matthew abbreviate them? And why three groups of 14? It looks like a deliberate pattern. But what does it mean?

One attractive explanation is that to Mathew's Jewish readers, the number 14 had special significance.

Numbers often have significance for us too. The jerseys of famous sportsmen used to have only their team number, not their name, on the back. Simply to say the number was virtually to say the player's name. To most moviegoers today, “007” means only one thing: James Bond.

To a Hebrew who loved numbers, 14 might well seem significant: it was King David's number! In Hebrew his name was written D-V-D. using the consonants *dalet* (D), *vav* (V), *dalet* (D). In antiquity letters also denoted numbers (even today we might write the year 2021 using “Roman numerals” or letters: MMXXI). In the Hebrew alphabet *dalet* is the fourth letter; *vav* is the sixth letter. D-V-D therefore is $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$.

Matthew goes out of his way to make the point that the number of generations is significant. In case we miss it, in verse 17 he tells us three times, *Notice the 14 generations*. So did his first readers hear “David, David, David” playing in the background to these verses?

Whether or not this link with David is the right way to understand Matthew's threefold division of Jesus' genealogy, it is undoubtedly part of his message. It is the first thing he says about Jesus. He is “the son of David.” The angel who appears later in Joseph's dream seems to underline it. He reminds Jesus' adoptive father that he is “Joseph, son of David.”

So, Matthew identifies the central figure in his book in several ways. Four times he tells us that his name is *Jesus* (1:1, 18, 21, 25). Four times we are told he is the Messiah (1:1, 16, 17, 18). And the genealogy as a whole focuses on his *royal identity as son of David*.

The message? Jesus is the legal heir to the throne of David. This is the family tree of Israel's greatest king. God had made a covenant with him promising that from

his line the Messiah would come. On his deathbed David confessed his faith in God keeping that covenant: “He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure” (2 Samuel 23:5).

At times (as the genealogy indicates), that covenant promise seemed doomed. But now Matthew has traced it to an artisan’s home and to Jesus. He is the promised king. News of his reign will spread to the ends of the earth and to the end of time (Matthew 28:18-20). God’s long-awaited King has come; his kingdom is about to be established as that of David’s legal heir.

There were times during Israel’s history when God seemed to have forgotten his promise or even appeared to have been destroying it himself (as numerous psalms eloquently lament). God’s people felt that he had shunted them into a cul-de-sac and left them there. Yet this genealogy shows us that God was keeping his promise all the time, from beginning to end.

Perhaps this explains why, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ genealogy moves *forwards* from Abraham to Jesus rather than *backwards* from Jesus (as in Luke 3:23-38). Matthew’s message is this: from the very beginning God knew exactly where he was going. Throughout the centuries he was directing history towards this moment. Despite his people’s failures and trials, despite various cataclysmic events (Like the exile in Babylon). the longest-standing and most difficult-to-keep promise of God has come to fulfillment in Jesus.

What a lesson for us! Matthew is painting on the large canvas of history a picture of God’s sovereignty and faithfulness. But God is no less trustworthy when he paints his purposes on the smaller canvas of our own lives.

We sometimes get lost; but God is never lost. We are often confused by our circumstances; God never is. We have doubts about his purposes; God knows what he is doing. His promises never fail. God may seem slow to us, but he is always moving his purposes on at exactly the right speed. God is never late. He is always on time. And his timing is perfect.

In the coming of the Lord Jesus, God has kept his promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s seed (Genesis 12:1-3). Therefore, we can trust him to keep his promises to us too— promises to work for our good, to be with us by his Spirit, and to bring us home to be with him in glory for ever. For “all the promises of God find their Yes in him, That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Amen?¹

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Dawn of Redeeming Grace* (2021), pg 19-22

 *This Sunday’s Sermon: Matthew 24:36–51*

Paul is a man on the move with over a dozen locations mentioned in our reading, yet in big strokes he moves from Macedonia to Troas to Ephesus and then towards Jerusalem. He encourages many churches that he helped start, while also continuing to mentor other leaders who will carry on the work in some of those locations. A humorous yet important event took place in Troas. The church was gathered on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week. Among the congregation was a young man named Eutychus, which means "Lucky." Young Lucky was unlucky enough to fall asleep in the window during Paul's lengthy sermon and then fall out from the third floor to his death below. But he was lucky enough to die under the ministry of the Apostle Paul, who raises Lucky to life again. This anecdote is important because it once again shows us the balance between the ministry of Paul and Peter who also raised Dorcas to life in Acts 9.

The journey and the narrative march on. As Paul and company make their way to Jerusalem, he sends word to the Ephesian elders to meet him. There are several things the apostle knows that he must share with the pastors (also interchangeably called elders and overseers in this passage). Through many dangers, toils, and snares, Paul boldly overcame the plots of the Jews and testified from house to house about repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Paul tells his beloved brothers in ministry that he knows chains and affliction await him in Jerusalem. His prayer is to finish his course well, and we praise God because we know that Paul did run the race and keep the faith till the very end (2 Tim 4). We take for granted that we can continue to communicate with our missionaries on the field, but Paul is deeply emotional knowing he will not see these brothers again. Paul also knows that false teachers will creep into the congregation, from within and without. The shepherds must be on guard for themselves and the flock. Paul's words echo down to this very day to every faithful pastor. May we love our congregations as much as Paul loved the Ephesian church. May churches love their pastors as dearly as the Ephesian church loved Paul.

Paul continues the journey to Jerusalem with the same determination our Lord had as he went to the cross. The journey is filled with sorrowful goodbyes, perhaps well-intended but false prophecies, and an accurate prophecy of how Paul will one day be bound. Friends naturally beg Paul to flee the danger as he has many times before, but Paul is determined: "Not my will, but the Lord's be done."

Tuesday, December 16

Read: Acts 21:17–22:29

Paul has finally returned to Rome and finds a welcome reception from James and all the elders. They rejoiced to hear all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. The leaders tell Paul that while he has been fruitful on the field, rumors have also spread about him. Thousands of Jews have followed Christ while also maintaining many of their cultural traditions. These Jews have been told that Paul has been teaching converted Jews out on the missionary field to forsake Moses which is to forsake their heritage. This is not an issue of adding works to salvation like in Acts 15, yet we see there are still tensions between Jew and Gentile as Christ builds his church. The rumors against Paul are not true, and he is more than willing to become all things to all men and remove this offense (1 Cor 9:22). He is not a lawbreaker, and he willingly follows the advice of the Jerusalem elders for the sake of gospel unity.

The plan does not have its intended effect due to Jews from Asia throwing the temple crowd into confusion with lies based on assumptions. These falsehoods stir up the city to the point that Paul is dragged from the temple and is beaten towards death until rescued by Roman soldiers. Seeking to establish the truth, the commander begins to ask for testimony but the scene devolves into chaos. For his own safety, Paul is physically carried by the soldiers because the mob is out of control. Under arrest Paul asks to speak to the commanding officer. The commander realizes that Paul is not the criminal he suspected, and Paul is given permission to speak to the people. Notice how Paul is able to wisely navigate this situation in speaking both Greek and Hebrew when helpful.

Against charges of teaching people to reject their Jewish heritage, Paul speaks to the crowd in their Hebrew tongue. Saul of Tarsus once again recounts his pedigree, his past, and his personal conversion. The devout Jew invokes the name of other devout Jews in his testimony, and the people listen to the point that he invokes his mission to the Gentiles. The crowd dramatically protests once again, which causes the commander to demand an “examination” by flogging. Determined to get to the bottom of the matter, he plans to beat a satisfactory answer out of Paul. Again acting wisely, Paul invokes his Roman citizenship, his by birth and not by payment. The flogging is cancelled and the commander has a new attitude towards his prisoner. The punishment is on pause, but this is only the beginning. Jesus will still show “how much [Paul] must suffer for My name” (9:16).

Like Jesus before him, Paul must stand trial before the Sanhedrin. The commander of the Romans grew frustrated when his plans to flog Paul were stopped by Paul's appeal to his Roman citizenship, so the commander put Paul on trial before the Jewish leaders. He begins to give a defense as he will on more occasions in the future, but Paul is violently struck at the command of the high priest. Paul uses strong but truthful language concerning the high priest that was first used by Christ. Several good explanations for Paul's actions exist, yet when charged with breaking Exodus 22:28 he apologizes. Paul is a lawkeeper who lives in good conscience before God.

Again demonstrating great wisdom in challenging circumstances, Paul pits his opponents against one another. Seeing that the Sadducees and Pharisees are working together against him (like they did against Jesus), Paul invokes the debated doctrine of the resurrection. The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection, and they couldn't let this opportunity pass without once again denying the doctrine to the Pharisees. The Pharisees are suddenly not so opposed to Paul, certainly not in contrast with these resurrection-deniers. They fervently defend Paul. Fearing for Paul's safety once more, the commander delivers him safely to the barracks. The Lord stands by Paul's side as his true safety and assures him that he will indeed go to Rome to bear witness to Christ. He will certainly make it out of Jerusalem alive.

The Jews conspire to ensure Paul's death, but their plot is found out. Paul's nephew reports the plot to him after entering the barracks. It is striking how freely Paul is able to receive guests and also receive treatment that non-Roman prisoners did not receive. Paul instructs the centurion to take his nephew to the commander, and the centurion agrees. The commander receives this messenger willingly. The commander joins Paul's side in this feud with the Jews. The commander authorizes nearly 500 soldiers to safely transport Paul—one man—to Felix the governor. The commander writes a letter to Felix explaining the situation and vouching for Paul. Only God could grant any prisoner such favor in the eyes of his captors.

Proverbs 31 brings us to the end of our journey of regularly reading this portion of wisdom literature. We've seen in the life of Paul the importance of applying God's wisdom to our daily lives. We will not be able to apply God's Word if we do not know it. Return to Proverbs often. Ask God for wisdom. He will give it generously and without reproach (Jam 1:5). Pray that the Lord would enable us to apply his wisdom as well as Paul has done.

Thursday, December 18

Read: Acts 24–26

God has granted Paul favor with the Roman commander guarding him. The apostle has been delivered safely to Felix at Caesarea for trial. Tertullus, the lawyer representing the Jews, flatters Felix and makes three charges against Paul. Only the charge of stirring up riots would matter to Felix, yet only the charge of being a Christian was actually true. Without flattery Paul cheerfully makes his defense, for he is innocent. Felix understands the religious landscape, and sends Paul back into custody but with some liberty. Hoping for bribery, Felix would send for Paul often and listen to him all the while being alarmed by the boldness in which Paul preached the gospel. As a weak leader, Felix refused to decide the case and Paul remained in prison for two years.

There's a new authority in town, and Festus is willing to hear Paul's case. God providentially defeated the Jewish plot to ambush Paul when Festus announced that Paul would remain in Caesarea for the next tribunal. When the day arrives, the Jews make many serious charges against Paul, none of which they can prove. Seeing through the plots of the Jews and sensing the futility of the present circumstance, Paul appeals his case to Caesar as a Roman citizen. Yet again, a weak leader does not swiftly deal with the case. After some days, the Jewish king Agrippa and his wife Bernice arrive in town. Festus explains his standards of fairness and evidence to Agrippa, who requests to hear Paul himself.

Paul does not waste the opportunity to preach the gospel to King Agrippa. He explains that he is only being faithful to the promises God made to their people. Paul is honest about his past. He tells how he persecuted Christians. He tells once again about the Damascus Road conversion. Paul gives a theological defense, knowing that Agrippa understands the arguments even as the Jewish king does not believe in the Jewish Messiah. Agrippa, like the Sadducees, is incredulous that Paul believes in the resurrection of the dead. Paul is pressing the king to make a decision for Christ, and Agrippa knows it. The king says this is a big decision to make in a short amount of time. Paul doesn't let go of the comment and admits that he wants everyone, including Agrippa, to become a Christian, whether in a long or short time. Following the hearing, Jewish King Agrippa and Roman Governor Felix agree that Paul should go free. He's done nothing wrong; this is a religious argument. Yet, Paul has appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar he will go. It won't be in the manner he hoped, but Paul will indeed go to Rome.

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The journey to Rome will take Paul on a deadly journey across unfriendly waters. Luke is with him, for verse 1 speaks in terms of “we.” Luke writes an authentic historical account going into great detail about the voyage. Looking at the big picture of Acts, we remember that Jesus told his disciples that the gospel should and would go from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria even to the ends of the earth. Paul’s journey to Rome brings this book to a close, and it shows us just how hard the journey to the ends of the earth has been. We will see how the Lord sovereignly protects Paul and company every nautical mile of the way.

The first leg of the journey along the coast is less eventful, yet the clouds of difficulty are on the horizon because the “winds were against us” (27:4). In Myra they board a large grain ship and set sail for Italy. The sailing is slow and difficult. The normal route is not possible because of strong winds. After docking in Fair Havens for a considerable time, it has become too late to safely continue on the journey. The Day of Atonement and the fast associated with it would have occurred in late September or early October. Noting that has already passed, Paul suggests they stay put, despite the poor harbor conditions. Sea travel typically ended by some point in November until resuming again around February. Winter months were simply too dangerous to sail, even for the most seasoned of sailors. But the pilot and captain of the ship insist that they are seasoned enough to make the journey, and their words are more persuasive to the centurion. They decide to sail to Crete and winter there.

Winds shift quickly. A moderate south wind seemed to affirm their decision as they set sail. A violent northeastern wind certainly made them question everything. Unable to face the wind, the ship is carried along by the wind wherever it wills. Attempting every method they have, the sailors attempt to weather the storm. As the storm rages and the hope of salvation wanes, Paul is given a vision from the angel of the Lord. Paul must stand trial in Rome. That’s been God’s plan the whole time. God has granted the lives of all on the boat with Paul. Tensions rise as land nears, and the soldiers must ensure that the sailors do not abandon ship. The centurion must ensure his soldiers do not kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. Ultimately in a dramatic scene, even as the ship breaks up, everyone makes it safely to land. The gospel will go to the ends of the earth.

Weekend Devotion: Cherchez la Femme?

“Cherchez la femme.” Literally, the French phrase means “Look for the woman.” But as an idiom it means, “If there’s a problem, then a woman will always be at the root of it.” That, of course is more than a little unfair. No one ever said “Cherchez l’homme,” even although men constitute approximately half of the human race!

But when it comes to the genealogy of Jesus, “Cherchez la femme” is good advice. Women are mentioned only occasionally in biblical genealogies (as in 1 Chronicles 1:32, 50). Usually these family trees take the form “X [the father] begat Y [the son]” and make no mention of the mother. What sticks out in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ genealogy is that mentions *five* women altogether. There must be a reason for this. And why only *these* women? After all, *every man* listed had a mother.

The question to ask is this: what do the following women have in common? Tamar (Matthew 1:3); Rahab (1:5); Ruth (1:5); and the wife of Uriah the Hittite (1:6).

For one thing, they were probably all non-Israelites. They didn’t naturally belong. For another, there were question marks over their lives: Tamar gave birth to the twin sons of her father-in-law, Judah (the sad story is told in Genesis 38:1-30); Rahab was a Jericho prostitute (Joshua 2:1); Ruth was a Moabitess (Moabites and their descendants were permanently barred from the congregation of Israel, Deuteronomy 23:3); Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, was the object of King David’s adultery (2 Samuel 11).

Luke doesn’t mention these women in his genealogy of Jesus. So why did Matthew draw attention to these skeletons in the cupboard? I suspect he is giving us hints of three important biblical principles:

1. God extends his grace beyond the chosen people and brings Gentiles into his covenant;
2. God overcomes the effects of sin and shame as he works out his purposes; and...
3. God keeps his promises in ways we could never have anticipated.

The first principle is present in Matthew’s Gospel like a pair of bookends. He begins by mentioning these Old Testament “outsiders” who were brought into Jesus’ family history and goes on to tell us about more outsiders—wise men from the

east—who visited him after he was born. Matthew concludes with Jesus commanding the apostles to go to outsiders—indeed to “all nations.” (Matthew 28:18-20).

The second principle reminds us that Christ understands what it means to have sin and shame in our family story.

Jesus did not come into a squeaky clean world any more than we do. He came into a fallen world, and into a family that had blots in its history. He did so out of love for us, and everything we learn about him proves that he is able to sympathise with us.

Whatever it is that causes us shame—from sin or abuse in our past to painful memories that continue to linger—the Lord Jesus understands. He does more than merely see the burdens we privately carry; he has experienced them himself. He was “made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a faithful and merciful high priest ... we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness ... Let us then with confidence draw near ... that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15-16).

It was to save the kind of people who appear in his family tree that Jesus came. The apostle Paul learned that: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full assurance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15).

The third principle reminds us that God never loses control of his purposes. True, like the psalmists, we sometimes feel that he has. But when we do, we need to say to ourselves, “Remember Jesus’ genealogy!”

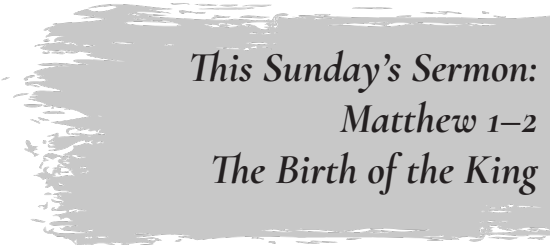
God’s ways may seem hidden from us, and we may feel we are in the darkness. But “if I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and he light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night I bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Palm 139,11-12). God sees a clearly in the dark as in the day; he knows what he is doing and where he is going. He can even weave the dark threads of man’s evil deeds, tragedies, and disasters into his purposes and use them for his glory.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba—and yes, eventually the young virgin Mary too—would not have been able to see what God would ultimately do through their lives. So it is in every age and for every believer. But God sees the end from the beginning.

If I had been with Matthew when he was writing his Gospel, I would have been tempted to say, “Matthew, please don’t begin with a long family tree. It will put most people off reading the rest of the story!” But I am glad that he did because written into his genealogy is this message: God keeps his promises; he knows what he’s doing; he knows exactly where he is going; and he is able to rescue us even from past sin and shame.

In what corners of your heart and mind do you need to remember that today?¹

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Dawn of Redeeming Grace* (2021), pg 24-27



This Sunday’s Sermon:
Matthew 1–2
The Birth of the King

Read: Galatians 4:4–7; Titus 3:3–7; 1 Timothy 1:15–17

Galatians 4:4–7 Jesus Christ came to earth in the perfect time table of God. Time had been filling like drops of coffee in a cup, but when God's plan could not hold one more drop of time Jesus was born. Jesus is both God ("God sent forth His Son") and man ("born of a woman"). Jesus was born under the law and perfectly submitted to the law so that he could save us lawbreakers. Because of the perfect law-keeping life of Jesus Christ, we are adopted into the family of God. Just as we saw in Romans 8, we have the Spirit of God which allows us to cry out to God as his children. We are no longer slaves, but sons. Because we are sons, we are heirs. We are part of the family of God and his riches are our riches. His blessings are our blessings. This is a result of the God-man coming in the fullness of time.

Titus 3:3–7 As we seek to live godly lives, it's important that we remember who we once were. Titus 3 gives a sadly accurate picture of how wicked we are apart from the saving work of Jesus. This was our sinful condition. What made the difference? The kindness and affection of God our Savior appeared. Remember he came in the fullness of time at a real moment in time. He saved us, not by our works but his. Not by our righteousness but his. This is our salvation. He has declared us righteous as if we had never sinned. This is our justification. He has poured out his Spirit on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. Notice that both Father and Son are spoken of as our Savior because Father and Son are one. The Father is God as the Son is God as the Spirit is God. This is the Trinity. The Spirit has regenerated and renewed us, giving us new life—eternal life. This is the gospel.

1 Timothy 1:15–17 Why did Christ Jesus come into the world? To save sinners. Sinners who recognize their need of a Savior. Paul saw his sinful condition, knew that he was a foremost sinner, yet recognized that Jesus had shown him mercy. The mercy shown to Paul is an example to me and you. If Christ Jesus can save Paul, he can save me. He can save you. Dear reader, have you believed upon him for eternal life? If not, why not? Call on Jesus today and live. If you have, praise the King of the ages. Praise the immortal, invisible, the only God. To him be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Tuesday, December 23

Read: Acts 28:1–31; Psalms 147–148

Safely swimming to the island of Malta, Paul and company spend the three month winter period there. Luke recounts how the kind people welcomed them. The kind people were also fickle people, for when Paul was bitten by a snake they assumed he was a criminal until he survived and they then assumed he was a god. Paul had strongly rejected worship in Lystra, but here the people do not attempt to worship him. Instead Paul performs many healings on the island and presumably preached the gospel. Upon ultimately reaching Rome, Paul is welcomed and encouraged by the Christians there.

Everytime we've seen Paul go into a city with a synagogue, he goes there to preach the gospel. He is faithful to reason from the Scriptures with his fellow Jews. Here Paul calls the leaders of the various synagogues in the large city to meet with him so he can explain his presence in Rome. They inform him that they have no prior knowledge of his situation and no predetermined attitude towards him. However, they do want to hear his theology because they have heard about The Way and how it is spoken against everywhere. When the meeting arrives, a great number come to hear Paul preach all day. From all of the Old Testament, Paul shows them that Jesus is their promised Messiah. He calls them to repent and enter the kingdom of God. As we've seen so many times, some do not believe but others are persuaded and believe. The Jewish leaders are actually divided among themselves over Paul's interpretation of Scripture. Just as it happened with Jesus, the departure comes when Paul applies Isaiah 6:9–10 to their present generation. The Holy Spirit spoke through Isaiah concerning their fathers' deaf ears, hard hearts, and blind eyes. Now Paul tells them that the salvation of God will go to the Gentiles; they will listen.

The narrative of Acts ends before Paul makes his appeal to Caesar. Presumably that is because Luke wrote the book during Paul's lengthy imprisonment there in Rome. Paul had freedom to preach the gospel without hindrance and with all boldness while in Rome. Piecing together the hints we have in Scripture, Paul not only preached in Rome but also wrote letters while there (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon). History suggests to us that Paul was released from Rome and did eventually make his way to Spain and other ministry. He encouraged the saints and equipped others like Titus and Timothy. However, Paul was later arrested again and executed shortly after writing his final letter to Timothy. Acts was written to show how the gospel spread and flourished. May it flourish among us today.

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Jesus is coming again! This is the blessed hope of the Christian life (Titus 2:13). The Apostle John got a glimpse of the returning Lord in the unveiling, that is, the Revelation. “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things which are written in it, for the time is near” (1:3).

In Revelation 1, John greets the churches of Asia with a lengthy Trinitarian greeting. Father, Spirit, and Son are included in the greeting of 1:4–6, but the greatest attention is given to Jesus. John recounts a vision on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day. The Beloved Apostle is given instructions of what to do (1:11), but then he turns to see who spoke to him. John sees a breathtaking vision of Jesus that is rich with Old Testament imagery. The powerful sight brings John to the ground, but the voice he’s heard so many years before comforts him. John must write down the message Jesus has for his churches.

In Chapters 4–5 John is given a vision into the throne room of heaven. The Apostle sees the one seated on the throne. The glorious splendor of God can hardly be put into words, yet John describes the scene. The language is filled with echoes of creation. Like in the Old Testament companion to this scene, God’s holiness is expressed to the highest degree (see Isa 6). The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders (whoever they are!) praise God. He is the one seated on the throne. He is the one who is worthy to receive glory and honor and power because he is the Creator.

The scene continues despite the chapter division’s interruption. From the overall glory of the one who is seated on the throne, our attention zooms in on a scroll filled with writing and completely sealed. A loud voice proclaims the problem of heaven: who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals? We’re not explicitly told what exactly the scroll is, whether a will or a deed or something else. What is clear is that the story is coming to a screeching halt if no one can open the scroll. John recognizes the inability of all the occupants of heaven to open the scroll, and he weeps. Hear the good news of heaven: The Lion of Judah, the Root of David has overcome! He can break the seals and open the scrolls. This Lion is none other than the slain-yet-standing Lamb Jesus Christ. He is worthy of all worship, and he is coming again! Saints, do you long to see Christ return? Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Thursday, December 25

Read: Revelation 21; Psalm 149

We draw near to the end of the story. The battle is over. The victory is won. Christ's enemies have been destroyed. We now get a glimpse of a new heaven and a new earth. While still a heaven and earth, this new heaven and earth will have significant differences from the present one. There will be no more dying, mourning, or crying. Sin is gone. The curse is gone. The painful effects of living in a broken world are gone. Jesus is making all things new. He has prepared the new Jerusalem as a holy city with the same care that a bride adorns herself for her husband. Best of all, God will dwell with his people forever. In the first heaven and earth, sin destroyed the fellowship of God with his people. Reconciliation came only because God became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). Now God Himself will dwell with his people forever in a new heaven and a new earth. These are not fanciful words that Christians have conjured up. These words are faithful and true. God's invitation is clear: to the one who thirsts, Jesus will give from the springs of the water of life. We will be his inheritance, his children. But to the ones who do not thirst for Christ, they will receive the second death.

John is carried high and away to get a look at the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. This glorious city of God is brilliant beyond description. John offers shining images of walls and gates and foundations that are as beautiful as the finest jewels in the world. The splendor of the Garden of Eden seems to be a shadow compared with the vivid picture of the holy city. However, some things are missing from John's vision. There's no sanctuary (temple) in heaven, for God and the Lamb are the sanctuary for the people. No sun or moon are needed; God's glory and the lamp of the Lamb are bright enough. The present gates are just for looks; they will never be closed. Only those written in the Lamb's book of life will be in heaven. To be sure, they will be from the nations of the earth (21:24). There will even be Christian kings in heaven (21:24). But no one will be there who did not come through Christ. The promised serpent-crusher of Genesis 3:15 has crushed every enemy under his feet. The invitation he gave in the beginning still stands today as you read. Come to King Jesus today, while there's time. Worship him in every area of your life (Ps 149). Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

We've come to the end of God's big story. God's story began in a garden. It ends in the city that is greater than the garden. God's very good creation of Genesis 1–3 was cursed due to sin. At the end of the story, there will no longer be any curse. God created Adam and Eve to work and tend the garden. They were placed as priests on earth to worship their Creator, but they failed in the garden. In the holy city, God will have a kingdom of priests to worship and serve him. This is only possible because of the saving work of the Lamb. On the first earth, to look upon the face of God meant certain death. But in the new heaven and the new earth, thanks to the saving, sanctifying work of God, we will see his face and live. This testimony is true. Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, has promised that his words are faithful and true. He has told us that he is coming, and that he is coming quickly. Jesus is coming again, bringing his rewards and his judgment in his hand.

Some prophecies were sealed up as a secret, but Jesus said this prophecy is not a secret. It's not sealed up. He's announcing that he's coming again. And for the unrighteous and for the filthy, this should be terrifying. Christ is coming in judgment. But for the righteous and the holy, for the ones who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), this promise should bring great anticipation. We should love his appearing (2 Tim 4:8).

Until he comes again, we have a story to tell. We must tell others of the root and descendant of David, the bright and morning star Jesus Christ. We must warn them of the judgment that most assuredly is coming. We must invite them to trust Christ, just as the Spirit and the bride even now say, "Come." We must worship God and keep the words of his book. We must live lives of praise to the Lord (Ps 150). We must keep our garments pure and spotless, unstained by this world. We won't live perfectly, but that's not what allows us to take part in the tree of life. We don't receive the water of life because we've earned it, but because it's been offered freely without cost.

Come to Christ today. Experience his grace today. The end of this story is really only the end of the first chapter. We will be with Christ forever and ever. The end is only the beginning. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Hymn of the Month

“Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending”

Few hymns capture the drama and hope of Christ’s return like “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.” Originally penned by John Cennick in 1750 and later refined by his friend Charles Wesley in 1758, this hymn invites us to look beyond the ordinary rhythm of our days and fix our eyes on the blessed hope of Christ’s appearing (Titus 2:13).

We begin by beholding the exalted Christ. The One who was once slain now returns in glory, surrounded by a multitude of saints. The cross was not a moment of defeat. Christ has always reigned as the eternal Son. But through his death and resurrection, he accomplished redemption and publicly triumphed over sin and death. When he returns, the reign that is already his by eternal right will be openly displayed, and every eye will see that the Lord himself rules over all.

Yet his appearing will not be received the same by all. Scripture says “every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7). Those who treated him with indifference, who rejected or mocked his sacrifice, will see him and mourn. Christ’s return brings both salvation and judgment.

Creation itself will respond. The mountains, seas, and skies will no longer appear permanent or immovable. The trumpet of God will sound, the day of judgment will be proclaimed, and no one will be able to look away or delay their response.

But for the people of God, this day is our long-awaited joy. The redemption we have tasted in part will be ours in full. The Savior who bore our sins will claim his kingdom, and we will be with him forever.

So we pray with longing and confidence:
Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

-Pastor Laramie



Scan this QR code
with your phone to
access a recording
of this song on Youtube.

Lo! He Comes, With Clouds Descending

Charles Wesley, 1758, alt.

HELMSLEY

Select Hymns with Tunes Annex, 1765

87 87 12 7



1. Lo! He comes, with clouds de - scend - ing, once for
 2. Eve - ry eye shall now be - hold Him, robed in
 3. Eve - ry is - land, sea, and moun - tain, heav'n and
 4. Now re - demp - tion, long ex - pect - ed, see in
 5. Yea, a - men! Let all a - dore Thee, high on

fa - vored sin - ners slain; thou - sand thou - sand
 dread - ful ma - jes - ty; those who set at
 earth, shall flee a - way; all who hate Him
 sol - emn pomp ap - pear! And His saints, by
 Thine e - ter - nal throne; Sav - ior, take the

saints at - tend - ing swell the tri - umph of His train:
 naught and sold Him, pierced, and nailed Him to the tree,
 must, con - found - ed, hear the trump pro - claim the day:
 men re - ject - ed, com - ing with Him in the air.
 pow'r and glo - ry, claim the king - dom for Thine own;

al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le -
 deep - ly wail - ing, deep - ly wail - ing, deep - ly
 Come to judg - ment! Come to judg - ment! Come to
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le -
 O come quick - ly, O come quick - ly, O come

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lu - ia! God ap - pears on earth to reign.
 wail - ing, shall the true Mes - si - ah see.
 judg - ment! Come to judg - ment, come a - way!
 lu - ia! See the day of God ap - pear!
 quick - ly! Al - le - lu - ia! Come, Lord, come!

Weekly Calendar at Ramah

Sundays:

Sunday School: 9:45 a.m.

Worship Service: 11:00 a.m.

Equipping the Saints: 5:00 p.m.

Wednesdays:

Prayer Meeting: 5:45pm



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