

TUNE MY HEART



*a devotional companion to the
5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan*

October—December 2026

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught in John 15 that his disciples will abide in Christ by having Christ's words abide in them. Someone who abides in Christ will produce much spiritual fruit for our Lord. Psalm 1 describes the blessed man as one who delights in the Word of God. The blessed person is rooted in the Scriptures and will flourish like a tree with deep roots near planted near abundant water. From cover to cover the Bible teaches that growing, mature Christians will be deeply anchored in the Word of God. That is our prayer for you, dear reader.

Many Christians desire to be better students of the Bible, yet don't know the general story of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, God is telling one big story. The 5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan, created by our brother Scott Aniol at G3 Ministries, is designed to take readers through the major narratives of Scripture as well as the Psalms and Proverbs over the course of one year. The plan is designed for only five readings a week, with the weekend set apart for catching up on missed days and preparing your heart for corporate worship. This devotional is designed to accompany this particular Bible reading plan.

Whether you've read the Bible many times before or are reading it for the first time, we trust this resource will be helpful to you. As you grow in seeing God at work in his big story, we pray you will grow in your love and knowledge of Christ. May you abide in Jesus as his words abide in you.



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FOR GOD FOR THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD

The Apostle John clearly wrote with an evangelistic bent: he wanted people to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (20:30–31). He organized his gospel tract around three common components: things Jesus said, the things he did, and how people responded. The first half of John’s masterpiece is marked by seven signs or miracles that serve as evidence of Jesus’s identity as the Son of God, while the second half is dedicated to Holy Week. John 5 brings us to the third of the gospel’s seven signs, which features a healing at the Bethesda pool. Jesus demonstrates his sovereign knowledge when he knows the man’s situation without being told. He displays his supernatural power by commanding the man to walk and sin no more. He discloses his deity as the Son when persecuted by the Jews.

Nowhere in the Old Testament did God forbid doing good on the Sabbath. The Jews persecute Jesus not because he has broken God’s law but man’s law. They ignore the clear miracle that Jesus has performed! Who can do something like this? Only God! Instead of responding to Jesus in faith, they persecute him as a Sabbath-breaker. Jesus does not defend himself by explaining how he hasn’t really broken the Sabbath. Instead, his response discloses his deity as the Son of God. God the Father is busy at work every moment sustaining all things, yet he does not break the Sabbath. God “works” every day, including the Sabbath, by giving life, taking life, and causing the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Jesus says he is working on the Sabbath just as his Father works on the Sabbath, which is a claim to be God. The Jews understand he is “making himself equal with God” and seek to kill him.

Jesus is clearly teaching the foundation of what Christians have understood as the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is fully God just as the Father is fully God. The Father and Son are both worthy of worship as God. The Father and Son are equal in works, power, and sovereignty, even though they exercise different functions. The Son has been sent on mission by the Father, and there are many witnesses to Jesus’s work. The Apostle mentions many witnesses throughout the book, but in this text he emphasizes the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus’s own works, the Father, and the Scriptures all testify to the identity and the deity of Jesus. The Scriptures given through Moses pointed to Jesus. To believe God’s Word is to believe that Jesus is who he says. Dear reader, do you believe?

Monday, October 5

Read: Mark 6:1–29; Psalms 127–128

Following Jesus involves rejection. This should not come as a surprise to us, but it often does. Jesus never hid this in his teaching, but Jesus also demonstrated this in his earthly ministry. We see Jesus being rejected. We see him warning his disciples that they will be rejected. We are given a graphic illustration of what this rejection may look like in the death of John the Baptist. Following Jesus comes with a cost.

Jesus himself is rejected in his own hometown of Nazareth. Those gathered in the synagogue that Sabbath day did not deny his authoritative teaching. They did not deny his wisdom or his mighty works. The hometown crowd could not deny what he had done, so they focused on who he was. They recounted his humble vocation. They listed his ordinary family members. The people were offended. They stumbled over the identity of Jesus and rejected him. We know this rejection will only grow and intensify all the way to the cross, yet it's remarkable that those who knew Jesus best understood him least.

Like so many others, Herod Antipas was confused about the identity of Jesus. He wondered if Jesus was actually a resurrected John the Baptist. Mark explains this superstitious idea by telling of the death of John. The faithful prophet had preached God's standards for marriage to the unbelieving Herod. The adulterous Herodias especially took offense to John's message, while Herod himself was torn between fear and possible faith. He heard John gladly and was perplexed by him greatly. Ultimately, the king weakly gave in to his wife's schemes with his stepdaughter being used as a pawn in the whole demonic story. Amidst the sumptuous dishes of the feast, the head of John the Baptist was served to the king on a platter. The rejection of the prophet's message resulted in the death of the prophet.

Sandwiched between these two narratives, Mark tells us of when Jesus sent out the twelve disciples in pairs. They're going on a short-term mission trip, traveling light and trusting God's provisions. Jesus isn't laying out a missions manifesto in these short verses, but he is reminding us all of the cost of discipleship. Not everyone will receive you, as he plainly tells the twelve. Considering the greater context of the chapter, we realize that not only will some people not receive the message of the gospel, but some will reject the messengers as well. The rejection of John the Baptist resulted in death. Jesus was rejected to the point of death. The Bible promises that believers will also be rejected, possibly even to the point of death. Dear Christian, are you counting the cost of following Jesus?

Reading Scripture can be dangerous. We often believe we already know familiar texts and do not read them carefully. All four gospels narrate Jesus feeding the 5,000 while all but Luke tell of Jesus walking on the water. We tend to harmonize the texts to the point of neglecting the four distinct witnesses Scripture gives us. Let us ask why John has told us these familiar stories. What does he emphasize that the other gospels do not?

John connects the feeding of the 5,000 with the Passover feast, the second one he mentions. Crowds are following Jesus because they see the miracles he does for the sick. Even as Jesus tests Philip, John is clear that the Lord knows exactly what he will do. He is sovereign over this situation. Philip's answer focuses on the financial impossibility of feeding the crowd, but Andrew's weak faith notices there is some food available. Jesus takes control of the situation and instructs his banquet guests to sit down. Careful readers may notice the reference to much grass in verse 10 and think of the shepherd in Psalm 23 that leads his sheep to lie down in green pastures. Jesus is feeding a crowd of approximately 20,000 people based on the presence of 5,000 men. The presence of leftovers certainly means the absence of hunger. The Good Shepherd has provided a feast for the sheep without a shepherd. Yet, many clearly still do not believe in Jesus as the Christ. Moses promised in Deuteronomy 18 that a greater prophet would be raised up in the future, yet Jesus is more than a prophet. John wants us to see that the people seem to be focused on their full stomachs and only want to enthrone the king who fed them.

Jesus withdraws from this situation. He will not be forced into any position that is not in keeping with his Father's perfect will. The disciples would have welcomed a present earthly kingdom now just like the crowds. Jesus takes them from the height of popularity where they helped him serve the thousands and he sends them into the storm. John doesn't focus quite as vividly on the fierceness of the storm, and he doesn't mention Peter walking on the water to the Lord. John's simple account focuses on Jesus identifying himself. He says, "It is I," which could also be understood as, "I am." Just as God revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14 as, "I AM WHO I AM," Jesus here reveals himself as the great I AM. Jesus is God. The crowds do not see and believe. The disciples still do not truly see and believe. Do you?

Wednesday, October 7

Read: John 6:22–71

Jesus was no megachurch pastor. Yes, Jesus knew how to draw a crowd, but he also knew how to drive a crowd away. The Lord preached this message in the Capernaum synagogue (6:59) and did not compromise the truth in order to keep his crowd. Jesus was willing to make his hearers uncomfortable, and he taught truth that still makes us uncomfortable today. Yet, taking Jesus at his word brings great comfort to those who believe.

Jesus called out the crowd for following him only to get earthly blessings. The Lord calls them to work instead for eternal food, which comes simply through belief. The people point back to Moses and his manna, but Jesus corrects their thinking. The Father gave them bread from heaven in the wilderness, and the Father still gives bread from heaven. The bread from heaven is Jesus himself. To the woman at the well Jesus identified himself as the living water, and to the listening disciples he declares, “I am the bread of life; He who comes to Me will never hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.” We often treat belief in Christ as if it were merely assenting to or agreeing with a short list of facts about Jesus. Here Jesus himself treats belief as if it is hungering and thirsting after him. Those who truly believe in Jesus will hunger and thirst for him. We will live our lives as if we truly believe that life can only be found in him.

Jesus is not unwilling to give uncomfortable teaching and trusts the Father to bring salvation as he sees fit. The Son has come to do the Father’s will. The Son will save all the Father gives to the Son. The Son will raise them up on the last day. He will never cast out anyone whom the Father gives him. He’s willing to speak the truth plainly even to the grumbling crowd, because he knows ultimately that the Father must draw people to the Son. Jesus is willing to make us all even more uncomfortable by speaking of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Of course we know he does not mean a physical eating (nor is he referring to the Lord’s Supper), but the reason we know this is because the Spirit has given us life. Some so-called disciples weren’t ready to truly follow Jesus and walked away after hearing his hard words. Many churches today would see this as failure, but Christ sees this as faithful. However, Peter believes that Jesus’s words are true. The Christ truly does have the words of eternal life. To whom shall we go? May we hunger and thirst after him.

Life is full of questions, but some are more important than others. This text presses his disciples on the most important question anyone will ever ask: who is Jesus? The conversation begins by Jesus asking what others say about him. The answers given are not bad; they're just wrong. In a surprising moment of clarity, Peter gets the answer exactly right. Jesus is the Christ. He is the Anointed One promised by God. All of Mark's fast-paced gospel has been building to this question: Who is Jesus? Peter answers, "He's the Christ!" Now the gospel writer shifts his attention to the question, "What kind of Messiah will he be? What did Jesus come to do?"

Jesus states the matter plainly to the twelve. The Son of Man came to die. He will be a suffering Messiah, a rejected Anointed One. Jesus teaches that he will suffer many things, he will be rejected, he will be killed, and he will rise again. We suspect the disciples did not hear the part about resurrection. If they heard, they certainly did not comprehend. Peter is so shocked by Jesus's words that he actually begins to rebuke the one with all authority. Jesus will not allow Peter to keep this a private matter and he turns to all of the disciples and rebukes Peter. The quick-to-speak apostle is not thinking clearly. He does not have his mind set on the interests of God, but rather the interests of man. How often we fall into this same trap. We desire to bypass the cross and go straight to the crown. We desire to miss the suffering and immediately enjoy the glory. Jesus teaches us a different way.

The Lord calls many around him and begins to speak about discipleship. To follow Jesus requires denying self. We must follow Jesus by way of the cross. Before Jesus has even made plain that he would die the shameful death on the cross, he is telling his followers that they must die to self. To take up their cross is to invite the possibility, even likelihood, of death. We naturally wish to preserve our own lives, but the gospel is worth more than life itself. Jesus is worth more. Are the comforts of this life and the fleeting personal glory of this age really worth the cost of our souls? Jesus warns against being ashamed of him. What kind of Messiah is Jesus? The kind who will give us life and demand our lives. The question for you, o reader, is whether you believe Jesus is who he says. Do we really believe Jesus is worth it all? If we do, let us truly follow him.

Friday, October 9

Read: Mark 9:1–29; Psalms 133

For most of Jesus's ministry his glory was concealed. In humility Jesus emptied himself by being made in the likeness of men, found in the appearance of man, even a slave. From the cradle to the cross, his glory was hidden from the human eye. On the high mountain of transfiguration, Jesus gave three disciples a glimpse of his glory. Jesus ascended the mountain with his inner circle, and his appearance changed before their eyes. Not only that but two others appeared with Jesus, two who seemed to come from nowhere. Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets or Scripture as a whole, are conversing with Jesus. What a mountaintop experience! Peter knows this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and he doesn't want it to end. He suggests that three tents be prepared on the mountain, one for each prophet which puts them all on equal ground. What a terrible idea, Peter. Jesus is greater than Moses! Jesus is greater than Elijah! Peter's idea is so bad that the Father himself shows up and speaks from the cloud, "Listen to Jesus!" The Law and the Prophets point to Jesus.

Peter wanted to stay on the mountain. It's good to be on the mountain with God, but there's a lost and dying world in the valley. Jesus and the three apostles immediately encounter great needs when they come down the mountain. A desperate father has come to Jesus's disciples seeking relief for his demon-possessed son. The disciples have previously been able to follow the example of their Lord, but this time they fail. They're unable to make a difference in this boy's situation. Jesus presses for the father's faith, and the man declares his weak but sincere faith—his desperate faith that Jesus alone can save his son. The disciples failed to demonstrate their faith in prayer and were unable to see the power of God on display. This didn't stop Jesus. He speaks and even the demons obey.

Too often we focus on the mountaintop experiences of the Christian life and seek to go from one spiritual mountain to the next. Peter was one of three humans who had this heavenly experience. It was a preview of all that will be true in the kingdom of heaven. How easy it would have been for Peter to live the rest of his spiritual life based on that one experience. Instead, Peter tells us to trust the more sure word. (2 Pet 1:16–21). The sufficient Scriptures are not myths but rather everything we need for life and godliness. We must reject the desire to live off the spiritual experiences of the past and instead trust the more sure word of God. We say we believe this. Lord, help our unbelief.

Peter still didn't understand Jesus. Yes, he made the true confession—Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Yes, Peter got a glimpse of the glory of Jesus on the mountain. No, Peter still does not fully understand Jesus. Tax collector Matthew uniquely tells us of Peter's confusion over the temple tax. When the government agents approached Peter and suggested that the Teacher was committing tax evasion, Peter rashly said that Jesus would pay. Knowing what had happened, Jesus reminded Peter that the royal family is not taxed for the support of the kingdom. Sons are exempt. Peter fails to see the implications of his earlier statement, that Jesus is the son of the living God. He fails to see how even the temple points to the Son; therefore, a temple tax should not be collected from Jesus. And yet, Jesus pays the tax. What a miraculous manner in which the Son of God condescends to our flesh and avoids unnecessary offense. Think of all the events that took place in order for Peter to obey the Lord's command. Someone lost a coin in the sea. This one fish that God ordained swallowed that coin. This one fish just so happens to be where Jesus tells Peter to go fishing at the exact time that Peter is there fishing. No one else has caught the fish before Peter arrives, but when Peter casts his hook he finds this one certain fish on his hook, and this one certain fish has one certain coin on it to pay the temple tax. Is Peter starting to get the picture? Sadly, no.

Luke explicitly tells us the disciples are still not understanding Jesus, but they were afraid to ask for clarification. Jesus keeps talking about being delivered into the hands of men, but what does that really mean? The disciples are too afraid to ask, but they're not afraid to argue. They're not afraid to hinder someone from working in Jesus's name simply because he's not wearing their team jersey. Jesus sees and knows. He knows what they are thinking. He sees how they treat one another. Once again Jesus calls his disciples to humility. They shouldn't be jockeying for position in the kingdom. They shouldn't be puffed up with pride. Neither should we. We are called to be humble followers of Christ. We are called to have the humility of a child. Children are not perfect. They are not sinless. They are not noble in every way. They are, however, dependent on their parents. We are to be humbly dependent on our heavenly Father. We follow the example of our Lord, who humbled himself, even to death on a cross.

Tuesday, October 13

Read: Matthew 18

Matthew 18 is one of Jesus's five extended sections of teaching in this Gospel. He explains what life in the community of faith—the church—must look like. We enter the kingdom in humility. We avoid sin in ourselves, and we avoid causing sin and temptation to sin in others. No one in the community will perfectly live out these principles, and Jesus gives us instructions on how to deal with sin in the community. He specifically tells us how to handle forgiveness in the church. What a sermon from the perfect preacher!

Using a child as an object lesson, Jesus teaches that entrance into the kingdom of heaven requires a humble conversion. We enter the kingdom entirely dependent on the grace of the king. We welcome others into the kingdom in the same manner, and we never put stumbling blocks in the way of fellow believers, fellow children in the kingdom. We do not treat this as a little matter, for indeed Jesus teaches that it is better to take big steps to deal with even the littlest sins. We must not put temptations in the path of other believers, because little stumbling blocks can cause big stumbles. Jesus calls us to deal radically with sin. Take serious precautions because sin is serious. Temptation is serious. Eternity hangs in the balance. It is worth the work of avoiding sin, and it is worth the work in pursuing lost sheep who have gone astray. If our Lord rejoices over finding a straying sheep, should not the community of Christ rejoice over a wandering sheep that returns to the fold? Should not Christ's church pursue wandering members with the love of the Father?

Jesus tells us how to pursue wandering, sinning brothers and sisters with clear instructions. Go and show. Pray they will listen. If they do, we have won back our brother, and in this we must rejoice. If they refuse to listen, we continue to follow Christ's instructions. He told us that the church must recognize on earth the realities of heaven, so if someone persists in unrepentant sin we must treat them in the same way we would other lost people. That is, we proclaim the gospel to them, but we do not treat them like brothers and sisters. We must take sin seriously in the community. We also must take forgiveness seriously in the community. We don't keep count, but we are eager to forgive provided that the offender will only repent. Our king, the Lord of the church, has forgiven us far more than we will ever forgive anyone else. Therefore, we must always be eager to extend that same forgiveness to anyone who will repent.

The Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) looms large in the background of John 7–9. It celebrated God's faithfulness to his people while they wandered in the wilderness after the exodus. The festival was celebrated by making temporary dwellings to live in for the week as well as certain water-drawing and lamp-lighting traditions, which provide context for Jesus's references to himself as the light of the world and being water worthy of drinking. Not everyone understands what Jesus is saying or doing. Even his own brothers fail to recognize him as Messiah. Many questions swirl around and about Jesus, and some even seek to kill him. Yet, Jesus continues to preach the truth.

Jesus listened to all the questions going around and corrected the poor understanding of many people. It seems that each day of the festival is filled with more debate, more questions, and more confusion. When some people try to offer an unbiblical answer concerning knowing the Christ's origin, Jesus exclaims that the people do know him and know who sent him. Jesus knows the Father because the Father sent the Son. He is on a mission. Like before, some want to seize and threaten Jesus. The shadow of death is already looming large in the story, Jesus will not be harmed one moment too early. His hour had not yet come. On the climax of the last day of the feast, Jesus uses the elements of the celebration as object lessons. Jesus proclaims that he is the true water that will quench the thirst of everyone and anyone who will come to him in faith. Anyone who walks in darkness can walk in the light of Christ because he is the light of the world. Many still do not believe. They question and taunt him. They judge Jesus wrongly. He hints at his future death, that he will one day be lifted up on the cross. Yet, now is not the time and no one can seize him any earlier than the Father allows. Many did not believe, but many did.

Your Bible likely makes some note concerning the historical accuracy of John 7:53–8:11. It is not found in the best and oldest Greek manuscripts, and when it is found in later manuscripts it's often in a variety of locations in John's Gospel. You will notice that moving from 7:52 to 8:12 keeps the narrative moving smoothly while the questioned text is an interruption to the story. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to treat the text as trustworthy, sacred Scripture, albeit misplaced at this point in John's Gospel. Rightly understood, the text is consistent with all of Scripture and should be interpreted as such.

Thursday, October 15

Read: John 9

As the Light of the World, Jesus is able to give sight to the blind. The healing of the man blind from birth answers and causes many questions, yet begins with a single question: Whose fault is this, Jesus? We often think in those same terms—if something bad happens in life, it must be because of a particular sin. The truth is that all suffering is a result of Adam's original sin in the garden; yet an individual person's suffering is not necessarily the result of their own personal sin (but it is possible). In this instance God's sovereign plan is the reason for this man's blindness, in order for the glory of God to be displayed in his life.

After Jesus vividly touches the blind man, he sends him away to wash. What should be a cause for rejoicing becomes the source of confusion and even willful blindness. The controversy over the formerly blind man answers many questions we may have about willful unbelief. We see people in the text creating unreasonable standards. They demand more and more evidence but never have enough. Even when their questions are answered, they refuse to believe the answer because they do not like the answer. In other words, their minds are made up no matter what the facts are. Like the man's parents, sometimes people are purposefully blind to Jesus because of the fear of man.

This man's testimony concerning the Christ is the same as ours: I know that I once was blind, but now I see. What amazing grace! The formerly blind man attempts to help them see the truth. His answer in verse 30 supposes that only God can give sight to the blind. If this man gave him sight, he must be from heaven. He must be God. Rather than listen to the man's logic, the willfully blind teachers close their minds to his argument. Their minds are made up. Facts are not needed.

The formerly blind man now has physical sight, but the Son of Man who is the Light of the World enlightens his spiritual eyes and gives him spiritual sight. Jesus reveals himself to this man in a saving way. After Jesus reveals himself to the man, he responds in belief. He who was blind to the gospel can now see Christ. His story is our story. We were blind, but Christ has caused us to see. The story of the willfully blind teachers is sadly the story of many we know and love. No amount of our evidence will be enough. We can answer every question, and they will still refuse to believe. Pray that the Light of the World will enlighten their eyes.

Jesus's kingdom is full of shocks and surprises. Luke illustrates this in a variety of ways. When Jesus heals ten lepers of their disease, only one comes back to thank him. That would strike most readers as an ungrateful attitude on the part of the nine. Who is this one man who has realized how great a mercy has been shown to him? It's a Samaritan. How shocking to the Jewish mind. As we learned in John 4, the Jews were deeply prejudiced against the Samaritans, and yet here's this unclean foreigner who is the model worshiper of God. He has saving faith when the rest do not. What a plot twist to the kingdom story.

Scorning Pharisees ridicule the idea of Jesus as king of the kingdom, so they begin to ask for signs of the kingdom. Jesus quickly dismisses their ignorance but gives further explanation to his disciples. The day will come when followers of Christ will long to see his bodily presence of the King, but he will be gone for a season. After being rejected and crucified, he will be resurrected and ascended. The day will come when Christ will return, and when that day comes there will be no time to prepare. Like a flash of lightning across the sky, so sudden will be the King's return. So prepare now. Repent now. Enter the kingdom now at the invitation of the king.

Some parables leave the reader puzzled, but often the narrator explains. Jesus told a parable to show his followers that they should pray at all times and not lose heart. So when we read the parable of the unjust judge, we shouldn't assume that God is somehow unjust. We shouldn't understand Jesus to be teaching that we have to nag God in order to get an answer from him. Instead, we should pray at all times, and never lose heart. Will we be faithful and pray earnestly, even as we eagerly await our king's return?

The second parable is also about prayer, this time directed towards those who trust in themselves and their own righteousness. It was actually self-righteousness used to view others with contempt. How often are we like the Pharisee, thanking God we're not as bad as the next person? May we be more like the tax collector, who saw his need and humbly repented to God. He knew he needed God's mercy and desperately cried out in prayer. Jesus explains that the humbly repentant man was justified. As justified kingdom citizens, may we humbly, earnestly pray with hearts of gratitude for all that our King has done.

Monday, October 19

Read: Luke 10:25–42

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of Jesus's best known and least understood parables. It arose from a real conversation; Jesus didn't make it up for no reason. A scholar of the law wants to justify himself, so he engages the Lord on the subject of eternal life. This question is not unique to this lawyer, and yet he answers it better than most in the gospels. Jesus points the man to the perfect law of God. God's Word will have God's answers. The scribe knows the right answer and summarizes the law correctly, but that's not enough. He wants affirmation from Jesus. He wants to justify himself. Like a good lawyer, he wants to show how well he can parse the law. His particular question, "Who is my neighbor?" gives rise to this parable.

The man's question was about the law, and his response came from the law. Rightly understood, God's law teaches in many places that God is a God of mercy who desires mercy more than sacrifice. The parable shows how easily someone can miss the heart of the law while keeping the letter. We look at the priest and Levite as unneighborly, calloused men who would not help someone in need. Perhaps there's truth in that assessment, but we must remember that priests and Levites served in the temple of God. They were not allowed to touch dead bodies or else they would be made ceremonially unclean and unable to do their jobs in the temple. This man appears to be dead, and so to help him would cause them to be unable to serve God. That's the law. How shocking for a Samaritan, not bound by God's law, to come and minister according to the true logic of the law. God's law should have moved the priest and the Levite to compassion, yet they did not love their neighbor rightly which meant they didn't love God rightly. This Samaritan modeled what it looked like to show mercy and to be a true neighbor as the law intended.

Even as the lawyer's question brought about the illustration of how to rightly love neighbor, Martha's distraction brought about the illustration from Mary of how to rightly love God. Mary chose the good portion. She worshiped Jesus above all else. Rightly understood, the law is pointing to Christ. We cannot truly love our neighbors rightly without loving Christ above all. We cannot truly love God rightly without loving Christ above all. Let us love our enemies. Let us love our neighbors. And let us love Christ above all.

The opening narrative in Luke 14 finds Jesus healing for the third time on the Sabbath in this gospel; yet, he clearly is being watched carefully. It seems like Jesus is being tested at the Pharisee's house, and this man with dropsy is a pawn in the Pharisees game. Our Lord uses the same impeccable logic he has used before, and it still cannot be defeated. However, this time after Jesus silences the critics, he begins to look around the table and he begins telling many parables that speak directly to various groups at the dinner.

Jesus speaks to those with the place of honor at the banquet, and calls them to humility. He next speaks directly to the man who invited him to the banquet with a parable of a banquet in the kingdom. Jesus has just modeled before this very host how to have compassion on the outcast, which is what Jesus tells the host he should do. Jesus is rebuking the rich and powerful Pharisees with these parables. He's not afraid to speak the truth to important, influential people and is not swayed by the opinions of man. Jesus's teaching certainly makes the banquet guests uncomfortable, so someone speaks up in an attempt to change the subject. To this man Jesus gives a third parable. In what seems unthinkable, all of the invited guests come up with an excuse to escape the banquet. So, the host must begin to invite those undesirable guests, like the man just healed from dropsy.

Jesus's trilogy of banquet parables is not communicating that the kingdom of heaven is only for the poor. No, Jesus also gives parables in the same chapter about a rich man building a tower and one about a powerful king. Disciples of the kingdom do not enter based on wealth or status. To follow Jesus we must carry our own cross. We must follow after him. We must love Jesus more than any relationship on earth. We must count the cost. The rich man considering building another tower counts the cost. The king considering going to war counts the cost. To follow Jesus requires that we count the cost. We must be salty disciples determined to be savory and not useless. Jesus's teaching goes against the grain of so much of modern Christianity. We have dumbed down the gospel to create an "easy-to-believe" version of Christianity that bears little resemblance to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Jesus has taught us to count the cost. When we do, we see that following Jesus is worth it! We used to be the spiritually crippled, lame, blind out in the highways and hedges, but Jesus has invited us to his banquet. Let us count the cost and follow him!

Wednesday, October 21

Read: Luke 15; Psalm 136

A lost sheep. A lost coin. A lost son. These familiar parables are told around the banquet table as the Pharisees continue to listen and grumble against Jesus. Tax collectors and sinners are coming closer to be able to hear Jesus's teaching, and this is all the Pharisees and scribes need to see to have something else to grumble about. As our Lord works the room offering customized parables cutting to the heart of the crowd's hearts, he turns his story-telling sights on them.

Perhaps the tax collector is intended as the recipient of the parable of the lost sheep. Tax collectors would understand the financial impact of losing even one sheep and would understand the great rejoicing over finding the lost sheep. Anyone listening should be able to hear the point, yet the Pharisees do not understand God's joy over a sinner who repents and enters the kingdom. God rejoices over saving the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but the Pharisees and scribes fail to even see that they are lost and do not understand such joy. The lost sheep has been found.

Everyone in the room could hear and understand the second parable, but perhaps it was particularly meaningful to a female sinner, even one like the prostitute at the banquet in Luke 7. Indeed Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, no matter their sinful past. Jesus assures the listening room that the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. The lost coin has been found.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is often isolated and sometimes misinterpreted, but we see now that it can't be isolated from the context beginning in Chapter 14 and even the overall flow of Chapter 15. It would have general applicability to everyone at the banquet, but also particular significance for those grumbling over Jesus's eating and receiving sinners. The younger son's rebellion and foolishness pictures all of us in our lost condition. The shame and humiliation covers him as he begins to see what sin has cost him. He repents and returns home to a loving father with outstretched arms ready to receive him. Our heavenly Father sees our shame and humiliation and is ready to joyfully receive us through Christ if we will only repent. The older son looks a lot like the grumbling scribes and Pharisees around the table. The older brother could not rejoice over the salvation of the younger brother. The older brother served faithfully, and he wants recognition for it. The scribes and Pharisees want recognition for their supposed service to God. They cannot rejoice in the salvation of the tax collector and sinners. Yet God rejoices over any sinner who comes to him in faith. Lost sons have been found.

RAMAH MONTHLY

Jesus offered many parables concerning his kingdom, each one intended to teach another truth. The kingdom is like a shining diamond, and each parable helps us to hold the kingdom up to the light and see more of its beauty. When we understand the kingdom truths of Scripture, we become like that head of the household who can bring out both old and new treasures. Depending on the occasion we can shine this or that light upon the Scriptures and see the glory of Christ and his kingdom. The kingdom nor entrance into it can be bought, yet it is worth absolutely everything. The laborer buying the field and the merchant buying the pearl of great value both illustrate the idea that the kingdom is worth everything. Life in Christ is worth everything. No matter you will give up in pursuing Christ, you have not lost anything. As we often sing, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.”

Life in the kingdom brings eternal joy, but a life of rejecting the King will result in being separated from the righteous and being thrown into a fiery eternity where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus tells more about this future judgment in Matthew 24–25 as he speaks about the future. In Chapter 25 specifically, Jesus gives more parables of the kingdom. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus teaches that we are to be ready for the kingdom to come at any time. Everyone understood how a wedding worked in that day. Preparations would already be made, but the wedding could not begin until the groom arrived. For anyone who did not take the groom’s coming seriously, they would most certainly not be ready. Jesus teaches us to take seriously his promise of coming again and to be ready.

In the Parable of the Talents, a master is giving a great measure of wealth to a variety of servants. When the master returns, one wicked, lazy slave is not ready to give an account because he was afraid of the Master. Our view of God in heaven impacts how we live on earth. The slave thought his master to be harsh and exacting, so he did nothing with what had been entrusted to him. When we see God rightly, we can live rightly stewarding everything for the glory of God. He teaches us to be wise stewards of what God has given us. This includes using our gifts to help other brothers and sisters in need. Christ is coming. We must be ready. Christ is coming. We must live now in light of the eternal life we will enter then.

Friday, October 23

Read: Luke 16:19–31, John 11

Jesus told many stories throughout his ministry, often making clear when he was speaking to his audience in parables or figurative language. In Luke 16:19–31 Jesus tells a startling story that many believe to be a true story. He doesn't begin with the normal introduction of many parables. Jesus has just been giving non-figurative teaching in the text. There are proper names for characters, something that doesn't happen in parables. Whether a parable or a true story, Jesus certainly is correcting the Pharisees with this story, for we're told that the Pharisees were lovers of money (Lk 16:14). The rich man would appear to have the blessing of God on his life, at least when viewed through the eyes of the Pharisees. This Lazarus would seem to have the curse of God on his life. His eating table scraps, his open wounds, and his close association with dogs would have made Lazarus more unclean than the Pharisees could stand to hear. Certainly he must be cursed by God. All of this is reversed at death. The rich man sees that his riches can buy him no pleasure in death, for Hades is the place of the dead. Now moved with compassion that seemed lacking in life, the rich man pleads for the souls of his brothers. Abraham's words ring out: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead." A different Lazarus does indeed rise from the dead, but the Pharisees are not convinced.

John 11 provides the powerful illustration of who Jesus is for all who will see. Jesus is sovereign, understanding the sickness and death of Lazarus from a divine perspective. Jesus is a loving friend who goes to comfort the mourning family. Jesus is compassionate as he is moved to tears in the face of his own grief and sorrow at the death of a close friend. Jesus patiently meets Mary and Martha in their individual responses to the death of their brother. Jesus teaches Martha as she questions God during her grief. Jesus comforts Mary as she weeps in her grief. Jesus is the authoritative resurrection and life for all who will believe. He is the one who can raise the dead! This isn't the first time Jesus has raised the dead, but surely it is the most public display of his power. Many Jews are there watching, and the Pharisees persist in their rejection. They plot to kill the Christ, the Son of God. They fail to see the glory of God on display in the resurrection of Lazarus. Will you believe like Martha or reject him like the Pharisees?

Often those closest to Jesus failed to see him the clearest. Jesus has repeatedly taught that his disciples must be marked by humility, but instead they are often busy arguing about who is greatest. James and John have heard Jesus teach about his kingdom and even the promise that the Twelve will reign with him (Matt 19:28). This prestige is not enough. The sons of Zebedee want even greater glory, and they're willing to use their own mother to get it. While we can commend Salome for believing that Christ will indeed be king over a coming kingdom, she must also be condemned for failing to see the kingdom clearly. Her sons foolishly think they can drink the cup of God's wrath that Jesus will endure on the cross, yet Jesus foretells that they will drink from the cup of rejection for following the king. James will die as the leader of the Jerusalem church while John will live a long life of faithfulness only to be exiled in old age. They will certainly one day reign with Christ but for now they must learn how to serve like Christ. Will they ever see the king clearly?

As Jesus travels the Jericho road to Jerusalem, he encounters a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Somewhere along the way, this beggar has learned of the Provider, the merciful Jesus. Bartimaeus correctly understands that Jesus is the Son of David, the promised King. He trusts that Jesus can do what no one else can: give him sight. Blind Bartimaeus clearly sees what the disciples failed to see.

Jesus taught that we must receive the kingdom of heaven like a child, dependent on the promises of the heavenly Father (Lk 18:17). He taught that those who are reliant on their wealth will find it impossible to enter the kingdom (Lk 18:24–27). As Jesus enters Jericho he encounters a child-sized rich man who will enter the kingdom. What is impossible with man is possible with God! The rich, young ruler had refused to give away his possessions which meant he failed the test to truly love God above all. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, willingly and gladly makes restitution for the money he has stolen over these years. Salvation has come to the house of the rich tax collector. Anything is possible with God!

Jesus is really clear about his mission. Do you see it clearly? He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. He came to seek and to save the lost. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

Tuesday, October 27

Read: John 12:1–11, Matthew 21:1–11, Luke 19:39–40

The opening narrative in John 12 provides a startling contrast between two disciples—a devoted woman and a deceiving traitor. Mary brings a valuable fragrant oil that is worth around a year's wages and pours it out as an expression of love and adoration for Jesus. No price was too high for Mary to identify with her Redeemer in his suffering, for she was anointing him for his soon-coming death. Mary's act of worship was roundly condemned by those who supposedly knew who she was anointing. The same disciples who had confessed Jesus as the Christ were now condemning Mary for this extravagant expression. Judas, the same man who was jealous of the cost of the expensive fragrance, gladly betrays the Son of God for a far cheaper price. Judas has already made the devilish deal with the chief priests before gathering with the other disciples for the Passover. Judas had been intimately familiar with the Son of God, yet rejected him for his own personal gain. Reject the way of Judas; it only leads to death. Follow the example of Mary and her brother Lazarus. Jesus has raised us from spiritual death; let us pour out our lives in loving service to him.

As Jesus prepares to leave Bethany and enter Jerusalem, he makes clearly purposeful preparations. Our Lord's sovereignty is once again on display as he directs two disciples to just the right place at just the right time for just the right animal. His instructions to secure a donkey are no less than a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy from the prophet Zechariah. God through the prophet told the people to expect to see their king enter Jerusalem on a lowly beast of burden. Jesus no longer is keeping his identity a secret; it's as if he's waving a banner, "Here comes your king!" The crowds cry out "Hosanna," which means, "Save us, now." Even though the crowds are rejoicing in the coming of their king, we know that they do not truly understand their king. Jesus is the king they need, but not the king they desire. The crowds are looking for the Messiah King to overthrow the Romans now. They are looking for a solution to their earthly distress now. The people are looking for the mighty, powerful king to rule and reign now. They are not expecting a gentle king. A king who will save his people from their sins. A king who will rule and reign from the throne because he first conquered on the cross. The crowds were still perplexed about this man on the donkey, asking "Who is this man?" The Scriptures make the answer plain: He is King! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

As the cross comes nearer day by day, Jesus continues to confront the hypocrisy and empty religion of the Jewish people. The final week of conflict intensifies with the cleansing of the temple. Jesus had done this at the beginning of his ministry (Jn 2:14–16), and he does it again at the end. Our Lord cares that he is worshipped rightly according to what he has taught in the Scriptures. The cleansing of the temple shows how the religious leaders had corrupted the Scriptures and twisted worship into something God never intended it to be.

To better grasp the significance of the temple cleansing, we must consider the cursing of the fig tree. Mark sandwiches his account of Jesus driving out the merchants and money-changers from the temple between his account of Jesus cursing a fig tree that was not bearing fruit. Bearing leaves is a fig tree's way of announcing to you that it has figs. This fig tree was guilty of false advertising: its leaves indicated that there would also be fruit, but there was none. What was true of the tree was more true of the temple to a far greater degree. The temple of Jerusalem was to be a house of prayer for all nations. It should have been the place where people could go to get spiritual food but there was none. On the outside it had all the appearances of giving life, but the temple and its teachings would not actually support life. The cursing of the fig tree is an acted out parable of the curse of the temple. Even as the house of worship lacked prayer, Jesus gave his disciples a lesson about faith-filled prayer. Mountain-sized faith is not necessary. Mustard seed-sized faith will do.

Mark detailed five accounts of controversy in the beginning of Jesus's ministry, and now he begins to relay five more intensified accounts of controversy. The religious leaders are continuing to challenge the authority of Jesus. Our Lord answers their question with a question. If the religious elite deny that John the Baptist was a prophet of God, the crowds will have their heads because the common people truly believed that John was a prophet. If the religious leaders agree that John had been sent from heaven, then they open themselves to the obvious objection: "Why didn't you listen to him?" The cowards refuse to answer, so Jesus refuses to answer their question. This does not stop Jesus from answering them in a parable, though. While some parables were meant to conceal the truth, this parable is quite plain and the leaders know it. They continue to reject Christ, failing to see him as the true Cornerstone. You should not make the same mistake.

Thursday, October 29

Read: Matthew 26:14–29; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34

It was all planned from the beginning. The cross. The betrayer. The details of the entry into Jerusalem. The details of this final Passover meal that becomes the Lord's Table. It's all part of God's perfect plan.

Sundown arrives and the celebration of the Passover meal begins. Having strongly desired to eat this meal with his disciples before his suffering began, Jesus leads the twelve in the ancient custom they've celebrated every year of their lives. Through this meal the Jewish people have remembered Yahweh's deliverance from death in Egypt for over a thousand years, but on this night Jesus changes the familiar language. The Bread of Life (Jn 6:35) takes bread, a usual part of the Passover meal, and speaks the unusual words: "Take eat; this is my body." Taking one of the cups, an ordinary element of the Passover meal, Jesus utters the extraordinary words, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured for many for forgiveness of sins." In one simple meal, Jesus unveils the feast of salvation.

Jesus is giving himself for us as our substitute. The Passover emphasized to generations of Israelites that God delivers his people through the death of an innocent substitute. This truth was pictured through the sacrifice of a spotless lamb, a ritual that continued year after year for generations because the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sins. But Jesus now makes clear that he is the perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice given for us. (Heb 10). Centuries before this night, God had promised through the prophet Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant with his people and forgive their sins. Jesus will ratify this new covenant with his own blood the next day on the cross, for this is exactly what he came to do. It's all part of the plan.

Christ told his disciples that he would not enjoy this meal with them again until the feast of the Father's kingdom. However, Jesus did leave his church instructions to participate in this Lord's Supper until the Lord comes again. The Apostle Paul gave the earliest account of this meal in his letter to the Corinthians. He explained how the meal is a remembrance or a memorial of the substitutionary, saving work of Christ. He explained how the meal is a communion meal that pictures the communion or fellowship we have with Christ and that we have with one another because of Christ. Paul also explained that this meal at the Lord's Table is an evangelistic meal, for in obeying Christ's instructions we proclaim his death until he comes again. It's all part of the plan.

RAMAH MONTHLY

Jesus will be denied. He will be betrayed. For the sake of the Scriptures, these things must be fulfilled. How does Jesus respond in the face of such treachery? He prays. Jesus is deeply grieved to the point of death, not at the prospect of the physical pain, but rather because the cup of God's wrath is about to be poured out on Him. He who never sinned is about to bear the weight of all of our sins. He who perfectly obeyed the Father in every way is about to bear the punishment for each of us who fully disobeyed the Father. As Jesus contemplates the quickly approaching reality of bearing your sin and mine, what does He do? He prays.

It is within the Father's ability to remove this cup from the Son. It is possible, but it is not the Father's will. For your sake and for mine, it was the Father's will to crush the Son (Isa 53:10). And so the Son prayed not once, not twice, but three times, "Not my will, but yours be done." If our Savior saw fit to pray during the hour of his greatest temptation, his greatest trial, ought we not to attend to the matter of prayer? No matter our temptations, no matter our trials, ought we learn from Christ to pray? Jesus left His closest disciples with the assignment of watchful prayer that they might not fall into temptation. Yet upon each successive return from prayer, Jesus finds the disciples not alert, not in prayer, but asleep. It's not that they didn't want to pray, but while their spirits were willing, their bodies were weak. Have you desired in your spirit to grow in prayer, yet your human flesh, plagued with weakness, seemed incapable of the discipline of prayer? Take courage, for our Savior is in prayer!

While Jesus was devoted in prayer, what was it that caused Him to pause three times? His concern for His disciples. Jesus, while "being in agony He was praying very fervently, and his sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground." (Lk 22:44). Yet He paused His prayer to check on His disciples. His compassion rested on them. His entire journey to the cross was for them—and us. That's our Savior. He is a sympathetic High Priest (Heb 4:15) who prayed for us in the Upper Room (John 17), prayed for us in the Garden of Gethsemane, and lives to pray for us even now (Heb 7:25). Oh, to pray like our Savior! Our flesh is certainly weak, but are our spirits even willing? Do we want to pray like our Lord prayed? Are we willing to yield to the will of the Father?

Monday, November 2

Read: John 18:12–27; Mark 14:53–65; Matthew 27:1–10

Those who have repeatedly opposed Jesus's ministry from the very beginning once again unite to see the Son of God silenced. The chief priests, the elders, the scribes—in short, the whole Sanhedrin are seeking false witnesses to testify against Christ. They are willing to beg, buy, or bully their way to just the right lies needed to put to death the Way, the Truth, and the Life. These pathetic perjurers can't even get their stories straight. The Jewish leaders egregiously broke their own rules in this mock trial in order to crucify the Lord of Glory. Rather than gathering in their normal meeting place, the Jews gathered at the home of Caiaphas, the high priest. Trials could only legally be held during the day, yet this illegal proceeding takes place at night. The witnesses at this trial did not agree, and safeguards put in place to protect defendants were ignored. Does Jesus wish to refute these false witnesses who are manipulating His words and assassinating His character? No. "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter... so he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). Now the high priest, acting as prosecutor, directly examines the witness: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" This is a Jewish way of avoiding using God's name directly, but the question could not be more clear. Are you claiming to be God? To this direct question, Jesus answers with the same name that God revealed to Moses: "I am" (Ex 3:14). At this, the prosecution rests. Could the verdict not be more clear? The jury unanimously agrees that Christ is deserving of death. Let the execution begin.

While the Judge of the Earth endures a mock trial, Peter himself is facing a trial of public opinion. Like so many professing Christians today, Peter attempts to follow at a distance. He doesn't want to be too closely associated with His Savior, lest that lead to the same fate. Peter's judge is not the high priest, but instead a servant girl who has no power and no authority. Yet her interrogation is intense. Three times she charges Peter with being a follower of Jesus and three times Peter denies it. Peter's guilt escalated as his professed connection to Christ dwindled. First, Peter didn't understand the question, then he denied being a disciple, until finally Peter denied even knowing Jesus. The same Jesus that Peter confessed as Savior, he now professes to be a stranger. Remembering Jesus's words, a rooster announces Peter's guilt. Both trials are over. Peter's verdict led to shame, then repentance, and ultimately restoration (see Jn 21:15–19). Jesus's verdict led to shame, death, and ultimately resurrection.

With their conviction complete, the Sanhedrin march Jesus before the Roman governor Pilate. While Jesus is guilty in their Jewish courtroom, he must stand before a Roman tribunal. Their desired outcome is the death penalty, but they cannot carry out this verdict. They must stir up the Gentile authorities to execute this Jewish teacher, so they begin vehemently accusing Jesus. They say he is one who misleads the people. They mislead Pilate, saying that Jesus forbade paying taxes to Caesar. These false charges describe a political revolutionary who is promoting rebellion and seeking to set himself up as an earthly king. These charges would certainly warrant legal action, if true. Pilate recognizes the insufficiency of their indictment and declares, “I find no guilt in this man.” What ought to have been the end of the story simply leads to the next scene, for the crowds grow more urgent in their demands, but they give Pilate a political out. Perhaps he can pass the buck to Herod who is governing Galilee but happens to be in Jerusalem at that time. Herod has long been curious about Jesus in the same way he was intrigued by John the Baptist before beheading him. Ultimately unsatisfied, Herod punts the political football back to Pilate, but a wicked friendship emerges. Two men who were opposed because of their desire for power are now united by their desire to oppose the one who truly has all power.

What is striking in this miscarriage of justice is how many times Jesus’s innocence is declared. Not once, not twice, but three times Pilate demands the crowd give a suitable reason for his death. Perhaps Pilate can appease the crowd by merely punishing Jesus and then releasing him. But the cries of the crowd are persistent: “Crucify him! Crucify him!” In the end, Pilate decides to grant their demand. He releases Barabbas and signs Jesus’s death warrant. He condemns an innocent man and sets the guilty one free. Our sense of justice might be angered when we watch this drama unfold, but isn’t this the story of the gospel? We sing “in my place condemned he stood.” We are guilty like Barabbas. We don’t deserve to go free. We deserve the death that the innocent Christ died in our place. The murderous rebel goes free while the innocent lamb of God is slain. This is exactly what Isaiah told us would happen.

*He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our peace fell upon Him, And by His wounds we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5

Wednesday, November 4

Read: Matthew 27:27–61; Psalm 22

The time has come that the Scriptures will be fulfilled. Jesus will be crucified outside the city walls like a common criminal. He has been beaten and scourged into such a weakened state that he cannot physically carry his cross the rest of the way to the place of the Skull. A man named Simon passes by the wrong place at the wrong time and is conscripted by the soldiers to carry the cross for Jesus the rest of the journey. Here this stranger is literally taking up a cross and following Jesus; he seems to be the only true disciple in sight.

The physical suffering—the torture that Jesus endures—is what so often captures our attention. Psalm 22 even reads like a first hand account of that suffering. Yet, physical suffering is not where the Bible places the greatest emphasis. Yes, the crucifixion is more bloody, more cruel, more abhorrent than we can comprehend, and Christ endured it for us. This should certainly increase our affection for Christ, yet the gospel writers emphasize not the external suffering, but the internal. They tell us of the shame, the humiliation, the rejection that Christ endured. Those who passed by taunted Him, derided Him, and expressed their deepest contempt for Him. Even the two criminals experiencing the same crucifixion Jesus experienced reviled Him. The overwhelming weight of the wrath of God poured out on the Son led Christ to lament from the cross, using the language of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What our Savior endured is beyond our full comprehension.

Yet all was not rejection at Golgotha. The deep feeling of abandonment did not mean that Christ was truly abandoned by the Father on the cross. The Father received the sacrifice of the Son on our behalf. The curtain of the temple—symbolizing the barrier between God and man—was torn in two, from top to bottom. That’s something that only God could do! God accepted the work of Christ on our behalf! The crowds at the cross debated who Jesus truly was, but God proclaimed that Christ is who He said He is when the curtain was torn. The sinless son of God has offered up Himself for us, bringing all who trust His name to paradise with Him. The Roman soldier standing at the foot of the cross watching all of this unfold recognized the true identity of the man on the middle cross. “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” God has accepted the sacrifice of the Son. A Gentile has proclaimed the correct identity of the dead man on the cross. Have you? Do you see who Jesus is? Hallelujah, what a Savior.

Nothing and no one could stop the cross of Christ. Temptations to bypass the cross failed. Angry mobs could not cause the cross to happen too early. Jesus went to the cross right at the appointed time according to the Father's perfect plan. Having failed to stop the cross, the Deceiver wants to discredit and deny the cross. The Pharisees really had been listening to Jesus's promise that he would rise again. They didn't believe that he would be raised, but they wondered if the disciples would attempt to steal the body and fake a resurrection. After all, liars always assume everyone else is lying. When the laughable attempt to secure the tomb failed, the chief priests and elders bribe the soldiers to say that the body was indeed stolen. The lie has spread among Jew and Gentile alike down to this very day. The Deceiver continues to feebly do all he can to deny and discredit the cross that he could not stop.

The truth is that the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. The first witnesses of the resurrection are the two Marys. They didn't expect the empty tomb anymore than the terrified soldiers. In the midst of their confusion, they see an angel shining like lightning dressed in pure snow. The angel announces, "He has risen; He is not here! Come and see. Go and tell." What Jesus had prophesied has now become reality. He told the Jews about himself, "Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up." (Jn 2:19). Just as Jesus took the twelve-year-old girl in Mark 5 and raised her up, now Jesus too has been raised up. Just as Jesus took the boy at the bottom of the mountain in Mark 9—the one who was convulsing under the power of an unclean spirit, and Jesus cast out the demon and took the boy by the hand and raised him up—now Jesus too is raised up. Just as Jesus stood at the tomb with Mary and Martha and commanded with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" (John 11:43) now too Jesus has come forth. He is not here. He is risen. So many times Jesus has taken deadly situations and brought life. Now he is alive forevermore. Everything in God's big story has been building to this point.

Come and see. Search the Scriptures. Cross-examine the witnesses. See if the things the Bible says are so. After being convinced that the Lord is risen, go and tell. Tell others that Christ has defeated sin, death, and the grave. Do not be silent. He is risen indeed.

Friday, November 6

Read: Luke 24:13–45; Psalms 138–139

When the Apostle Paul gives a detailed defense and explanation of Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he mentions that the resurrected Lord appeared to many people, totaling well over 500 eyewitnesses. The majority of those accounts are not preserved in Scripture. However, we do get a few of those episodes recounted in the New Testament, including the appearances in Luke 24.

Jesus draws near to two disciples on the road to Emmaus as they were headed home from Jerusalem. These two disciples did not understand what had taken place any more than the women who had gone to the tomb looking to anoint Jesus's dead body or than the apostles who thought the women's report was ludicrous. No one seems to have been expecting the resurrection or understood it when it happened. Jesus teaches these two disciples on the road to Emmaus (and us) that they should have been expecting it all along.

The disciples sadly tell this "stranger" about Jesus the Nazarene. Their description is accurate. The facts are right. Their words are true. But they were wrong about Jesus. Christ does not mince words: these supposed-followers of Jesus were not following the story of Scripture. Instead, they were foolish and slow of heart. All of the Old Testament (summarily referred to as "Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" in verse 44) has been pointing forward to Jesus. This message was not merely for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Lord conveyed the same truth to his disciples back in Jerusalem. They should have expected the resurrection. It was promised time and time again. Let us not be slow of heart and miss Christ.

Jesus teaches us a great deal in just a few recorded appearances on that first Resurrection Sunday. He establishes eyewitness testimony to verify the reality of his resurrection. He shows us that all of Scripture is pointing to himself, even if Christians still wrestle today with the details of how that works out. Our Lord also gives us a preview of our glorified bodies. Jesus vanished from the midst of the two disciples and seems to just suddenly reappear in the Upper Room later that same evening in Jerusalem. He isn't recognized at first sight, yet he clearly is recognizable. He is not a ghost. He eats a meal with them even in his glorified body. Jesus gives a preview of our resurrection bodies in his own, for we shall be like him. Jesus teaches us the main point of Scripture, showing how the Bible foretold everything that happened in Jerusalem. Jesus provides more than enough eye witnesses to validate his resurrection. Let us not be foolish and miss Christ.

RAMAH MONTHLY

The Apostle John provides further examples of Jesus's resurrection appearances. Skeptics sometimes suggest that the disciples were predisposed to believing in resurrection and were easily persuaded that Jesus was alive. Or perhaps the disciples hallucinated or were easily manipulated. The Bible tells us the truth—the disciples were not expecting the resurrection and did not easily come to believe in the resurrection. They were just as skeptical as anyone else might be. People don't come back from the dead! Yet, Jesus is alive, and he is conclusively showing his disciples that he lives. The Lord graciously brought Thomas face to face with the undeniable evidence. Only then did Thomas believe. Yet John wrote his gospel that all of us who have not seen the risen Lord would believe and have life.

Before the crucifixion, Jesus had told his disciples to meet him in Galilee after the events in Jerusalem took place. John 21 presents the disciples waiting for Jesus in Galilee just as they had been told. Some people suggest that Peter's statement about fishing means that Peter is returning to his former life and in some sense is rejecting Christ (again). Yet the text does not support that at all. However, Peter's previous denial of Christ does quickly come into view. It was by the charcoal fire that Peter denied the Lord three times, but now Jesus stands by a charcoal fire with a meal prepared for his children as he graciously restores Peter three times. Not only does Jesus welcome Peter back into the fold, but he gives the rock some work to do: feed my sheep. The Chief Shepherd has appointed his undershepherds to shepherd the flock of God. Shepherds love Jesus by loving the people of God and feeding them the word of God (see 1 Pet 5:1–4).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus called his disciples to come and die. Peter has been restored and will continue to follow Jesus, but the Lord makes clear that Peter will follow him even unto death. John reports that Jesus predicted the fact and manner of Peter's martyrdom. Understanding the promise of his own future crucifixion, Peter wants to know about John: what will happen to him? Jesus's response to Peter is a good reminder to all of us to focus on faithfulness in what Christ has called us to do without getting distracted and even envious of God's grace in the life of other believers.

The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed. He has appeared to many witnesses. He patiently comes to us in the midst of doubt and denial. He graciously restores and commands us to serve him. In his grace, let us be found faithful.

Tuesday, November 10

Read: Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:44–53, Acts 1:1–11

In the Bible the end is only the beginning. The end of Jesus's physical, earthly ministry is only the beginning of his heavenly intercession and his work through his church on earth. In Matthew 28, many disciples went to Galilee as Jesus had instructed them, with some even still doubting the truth of the resurrection. Here on the mountain Jesus gives his famous commission to his disciples that they should make more disciples. Jesus is the king with all authority. He commissions his followers to make disciples of all nations. He commands those disciples to obey all things that Jesus commanded (all of Scripture). He promises to be with his people at all times. What a promise! What a command! The marching orders of our king are still in effect today.

Jesus has opened the eyes of the disciples to see him in Scripture. They understand that all of the Bible—the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms—points to Christ, and the Scriptures proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ. This saving message must be proclaimed in the name of Jesus to the nations in order that they might be saved. Jesus promised his witnesses that they would not obey this commission in their own power. He promises that the strength of the heavenly Father will clothe them and equip them for gospel proclamation. Luke ends volume one of his writing describing Jesus blessing his disciples in the manner of a high priest before the Lord ascends into heaven.

The Book of Acts is Dr. Luke's second volume written to the most excellent Theophilus. He begins volume two by recapping volume one. Luke has written an orderly account composed of things that Jesus did and taught until his ascension, but the second volume will simply carry on with things Jesus did and taught after the ascension. These are truly the Acts of Jesus in and through his church. For over forty days Jesus taught his apostles and prepared them for the work ahead. He promised them that the Holy Spirit would baptize them soon. He pointed to the empowerment that would come in order to be witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This geographical map will be a sort of outline for the book of Acts as we watch Christ work through his Spirit in his church taking the gospel to the end of the earth. The time has come for Jesus to ascend to the Father. The disciples are watching intently as Jesus was lifted up into a cloud out of their sight. The angels promise that Jesus will return in the same manner. When he returns, the end will only be the beginning.

The apostles are obediently waiting in Jerusalem for the coming Holy Spirit just as Jesus instructed. As they wait, they are gathered in prayer in the Upper Room. Along with continual and fervent prayer, the gathered disciples turn their attention to Scripture. Peter points their attention to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8. He also explicitly states that the same Holy Spirit on whom they are waiting to descend is also the author of Scripture. The Spirit spoke through David and foretold the circumstances of Judas a thousand years before they happened. Based on the ancient prophecies, Peter leads the other apostles to replace Judas with Matthias. Notice that apart from the indwelling Spirit, the apostles had to rely on the casting of lots to make the decision between two potential qualified candidates. This is the last example of casting lots in Scripture. We are in a far superior position for making godly decisions with the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. Pentecost was one of the harvest festivals in Israel and included an offering of firstfruits. The Spirit comes as the firstfruits of believers' inheritance (Eph 1:11, 14). The Spirit also gathers together those 120 gathered disciples as the firstfruits of Christ's church. Those gathered in prayer as well as those watching and observing would not have been able to understand what was happening spiritually without the illustrations God provided physically. Luke describes a noise like a violent rushing wind, tongues appearing like fire, and the ability to speak in languages never previously studied. Who is marked by these wondrous signs? All 120 of them (verses 3–4). Under the Old Covenant, the Spirit came and went and empowered believers for particular purposes. Now all believers are permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit. What a far superior position is ours!

Peter again preaches the Scriptures to those gathered in Jerusalem. Peter preaches the fulfillment of Scripture, for this miracle of languages is not a result of alcohol but is instead a result of a fulfilled (at least partially) prophecy. Peter preaches the sovereignty of God alongside the responsibility of man, for it was God's foreknown and predetermined plan that Jesus would be crucified at the hands of the lawless men in Jerusalem. Peter preaches the gospel call as he tells all who will hear to repent and turn to Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The harvest is bountiful in Jerusalem. Christ is building his church in the very place where he was slain. His Spirit makes a radical difference in the lives of those who believed just as he still does today. What a blessed position is ours!

Thursday, November 12

Read: Acts 3:1–4:31; Psalm 2

Acts 3–4 provide both visualizations and explanations of the gospel. The summary conclusion at the end of Acts 2 explained the activities of the infant church as well as the apostles. We were told that signs and wonders were being done by the apostles, and now we get an illustration. Peter and John are going to the temple to pray, but they first encounter a lame beggar who is unable to enter the temple because of his condition. The beggar is asking for alms, but Peter heals him in the name and power of Jesus. The lame beggar is now able to enter the temple and worship God. This is the power of the gospel on full display. Christ takes beggars and turns them into worshippers.

The marvelous miracles produce a crowd which presents another preaching opportunity for Peter. The apostle explains the gospel that has just been illustrated in the life of this beggar. Faith in Jesus, the one who was slain, is the reason for this beggar's strengthening and salvation. Peter's Scripture-saturated sermon boldly convicts those in Jerusalem because they "put to death the Author of life" (3:15). This is the city where Jesus was crucified, and yet this is the city where grace is being freely offered. Peter's preaching presses guilt upon all who will listen, but he also reminds them of God's sovereignty over their actions. God graciously offers forgiveness if they will only repent and believe. In turning from their wicked ways and turning to Christ, they will be saved. What grace! If God can save those who murdered his Son, I know he can save me.

Many of those who heard Peter's gospel proclamation did indeed believe. However, the same temple rulers who plotted to trap Jesus less than two months earlier are greatly agitated by Peter and John's preaching of the risen Christ. The familiar cast of opponents from the gospels gather again to oppose Jesus's apostles just as they opposed Jesus himself. Peter and John are questioned, and Peter's Spirit-filled response doubles down on this question of Jesus. The leaders don't want to hear them preach the gospel of Jesus, but Peter is clear that they have no other message. This miraculous healing comes from no one except Jesus. Salvation comes from no one except Jesus. Peter and John make clear that they cannot and will not stop preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, yet they are released. They return to the church and report what has happened. With Psalm 2 as their guide, the gathered church earnestly prays. They are filled with Scripture and Spirit. The gospel that worked in these early Christians is still at work in us today.

Luke's second summary passage in Acts 4:32–35 gives us insight into the community of Christ (see 2:44–46 for the first). The Jerusalem congregation truly understood that they were one in Christ. They understood this not only spiritually but even communally. Those early Christians were committed to meeting one another's needs if they were able. Luke's description is not comparable to forced communism or socialism as some would suggest. The church willingly, voluntarily met one another's needs because of the difference Christ had made in their hearts and lives. They generously gave and entrusted the distribution of their offerings to those who had need. Along with the great generosity of these early believers, there was great power due to the great preaching of the apostles and great grace was upon them all.

Against the backdrop of this overall summary of the community of believers, we get specific examples: the positive example of Barnabas and the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira. Barnabas will later become prominent in the book of Acts as Paul's missionary partner, but we first meet him as simply a generous, encouraging brother. In stark contrast to this good generous example of the Son of Encouragement, we also see the deceptive example of Ananias and Sapphira. We're not told why the couple felt the need to lie to the church since there was no mandate to give the proceeds of their property sale to the church. It was clearly a voluntary matter, yet Luke is clear that both Ananias and Sapphira knew what they were doing. This was not a sin of omission or an accident. It was an intentional commission of sin. God has been on record from the beginning that he takes sin very seriously. Christ takes sin seriously in his church. The couple has tested the Lord, and they will not escape. The somber notes of divine judgment ring out over this passage. Should we in Christ's church be any less serious about sin today? Should we quickly gloss over the Lord's instructions concerning church discipline? This early snapshot in the life of the church reinforces what God has been telling us since the Garden when the first husband and wife sinned together: obedience brings blessings but disobedience brings consequences.

This passage also teaches us more about the Holy Spirit. Peter's questions to Ananias in verses 3–4 make clear that the Holy Spirit is God. The Spirit is personal. He is a he, not an it, and he is God. The Spirit continues to build the church of the living God. Luke explains that taking sin seriously did not dampen church growth. Instead, the church grew "more than ever" (5:14).

Monday, November 16

Read: Acts 5:17–6:7

Things were going so well at the Jerusalem church. People were being added to their number more than ever. Multitudes were coming to Christ. People's lives were being changed. This surge in popularity surely means nothing will go wrong with the people of God, right? There's a certain prosperity gospel among even conservative Christians that falls prey to this type of thinking. Things are going so well with the Jerusalem church, how could God allow persecution to rear its Satanic head again?

Not only are Peter and John arrested again, but this time the whole band of apostles are placed in the public jail. The jealous high priest and his gang of Sadducees (who don't believe in a resurrection) think they will be able to put a stop to all of this preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. Yet, the opposition of the state is no match for God. This comical scene unfolds in such a way to strengthen and encourage the church: nothing will stop the gospel of God.

An angel of the Lord delivers the apostles from prison and the night and tells them to go back to the temple and continue preaching. Meanwhile, the mighty, powerful rulers of Israel summon the jailhouse for the prisoners to be brought to receive their proper punishment. The officers must sheepishly report back: The jail is secure. The guards are on duty. But the prisoners are gone! As the chief priests and the captain of the guard stand there perplexed, someone reports: "They're at it again! Those men are preaching in the temple again!" The apostles peacefully return with the captain. The high priest pleads, "We told you to stop preaching. We told you to stop condemning us. You haven't stopped!" Peter's words echo down to us today: "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). God not only thwarts the plans of the leaders, he uses one of their own to persuade them to not kill the apostles.

Opposition to the gospel did not hinder the growth of the church, it only strengthened the preachers. The suffering they received did not silence them; they rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer shame for Christ. Oh how different is their thinking from ours today. The church continues to grow to the point that the apostles need assistance in ministering to the physical needs of the church. The apostles will devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Word. The congregationally chosen and pastorally blessed deacons will aid in the service of the tables. And the word of God keeps spreading. Even priests are coming to faith in Christ. Despite opposition and moments of division, things truly are going well.

RAMAH MONTHLY

The early church chose Stephen as their first deacon, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5). The text of Scripture zooms in on Stephen as the gospel continues to go to the ends of the earth. The apostles have faced hostility and opposition, and so too does the first deacon. Stephen is marked by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised before he ascended (1:8). When his enemies could not defeat him in debate, they began to spread lies about Stephen hoping to create false charges against him that would lead to his death. It worked with Jesus, perhaps it will work with Stephen. Yet, as Stephen stands trial, he is marked by a remarkable peace that manifests itself in his appearance. After all, Christ did promise to be with his disciples even to the end of time (Matt 28:20).

Like the apostles, this deacon does not miss the opportunity to proclaim God's Word. Stephen's defense does not look like a legal strategy but instead is a sermon. He tells the story of how the God of glory has been at work among his people Israel since the days of Abraham. He tells the story of God's people to that generation of God's people. Moving from Abraham to Joseph to Moses, Stephen skillfully tells the story of God's faithfulness to his people. Then he moves to their unfaithfulness. The sermon sounded fine until Stephen applied the text to his actual audience. When he connected the dots between the stiff-necked, hard-hearted people in the past and the ones putting him on trial in the present, they became furious. The sermon and the trial are over as far as this jury is concerned. Stephen is unfazed as he gazes into heaven and sees Christ standing at the right hand of God. Upon hearing of his vision, the gathered congregation drive Stephen outside of the city and stone him to death. Stephen's dying prayers sound like the prayers of our Lord. He truly was full of the Holy Spirit.

The martyrdom of Stephen leads to much persecution in the early church. Yet, the Lord uses this to scatter the gospel to Judea and Samaria (1:8). The passage ends with the threat of Saul raging. The one who held the coats for the murderers becomes a murderer himself. His hearty agreement with their actions toward Stephen is followed by his own personal missionary trip to stamp out Christianity. Yet we know this is not the end of Saul's story. The Holy Spirit will take the stiff-necked Saul and give him a new missionary heart. The living Christ continues to build his church.

Wednesday, November 18

Read: Acts 8:4–40

As God's people are scattered, so is the gospel scattered. Persecution in the aftermath of Stephen could have spelled the end of the young church, but it actually was God's means for spreading his people with his messages to his nations. After telling us the story of the first deacon Stephen, now Luke tells us of what the Lord did in the ministry of Philip. Do you remember what Jesus told the apostles that the gospel would go? From Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria. Samaria would be where most Jewish men would not want to go, due to long standing prejudice and generations of hostility. But where do we see Philip take the good news? Samaria. The Spirit is at work through Philip doing the same mighty acts Jesus had done.

The variety of vignettes given in Scripture can sometimes raise more questions than God intended to answer us at that time. Did Simon the Sorcerer make a false profession of faith? Was he a sincere convert who was sincerely wrong about the Spirit? Was the man known as “the Great Power of God” merely fascinated with the great signs and miracles he observed? It's not clear if Simon's repentance was sincere. What is clear is that the Spirit is not only for the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea. The Holy Spirit indwells the believers in Samaria just as he has the believers in Jerusalem and Judea. God sovereignly chose to delay baptizing the saints of Samaria in his Spirit in order to make this very point. We will see a few other examples of this sort of thing in Acts, but the rest of the New Testament testifies that every individual Christian is endwelled with the Spirit into the body of Christ at the moment they are saved (1 Cor 12:13).

The Spirit also led Philip to dialogue with an Ethiopian eunuch, who was returning from Jerusalem. As a eunuch he would not have had the full privileges of worshipping God, yet he is wrestling with the words of God trying to understand the message. The Spirit graciously uses Philip to open the Scriptures to this man, resulting in his profession of faith. In this missionary context where the eunuch will be the first believer among his people, Philip baptizes him immediately and sends him on his way rejoicing and returning to preach the good news to his own people. Philip himself is moved by the Spirit elsewhere. Many things in this passage may have been descriptive of the historical event rather than being prescriptive for our Christian practice today. Nonetheless the saving message of Isaiah 53 is still used today to save many for his glory.

The Spirit is at work. The gospel is advancing. Our focus has been on Stephen and then Philip just long enough that we may have forgotten the threat of Saul. Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He's seeking Christians whom he may devour. Paul believes the Way must be stopped, but on his way Saul is stopped. The Lord sovereignly, graciously changes a hardened opponent of the faith and he changes him into a faithful follower. Saints, our testimonies may not be as dramatic as Paul's, but it is no less miraculous. It took just as much of God's grace to save you and me as it took to save Paul. What a comfort this truth should be in the life of a believer. Our Lord so closely identifies with his church that while Saul has been violently opposing the church of Jesus Christ, and Jesus says that Saul has been opposing Christ himself. After all, Jesus did promise to be with us. What a comfort this truth should be in the life of a believer.

The Lord atoned for Paul's past in an instant and changed his future forever, but in the present many people are still afraid of this man Saul. Word had traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus and the disciple Ananias already knew of Paul's reputation when instructed to lay hands on Saul. Obedient to Christ, Ananias goes to Paul, calling him brother as the Spirit fills Paul and strengthens him for service. The disciples of Damascus welcome Paul, but the Jews are bewildered. Is this not the one who was supposed to extinguish all talk of the Way? Now he is spreading the fire that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Saul is persuading many that Jesus is the Christ. Now Paul must be stopped like Stephen and Jesus before him. Paul faithfully flees this danger and escapes, for the Lord has much work for him to do.

The Jerusalem church is not as welcoming to Paul at first as the disciples in Damascus. They doubt he is truly a believer. Barnabas the Encourager vouches for Paul, so he begins boldly preaching in Jerusalem. Paul already seems to have a unique ministry with Greek-speakers (the Hellenists). God has plans for this man Paul. The Spirit is alive and at work in his church. Threats, jail, and even martyrdom cannot stop the work of the Spirit. Christ will build his church. The gospel has spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Despite the threats, the church is at peace and being built up. What a comfort this reality should be in the life of the church today.

Friday, November 20

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 bedridden 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.

Tuesday, November 24

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.

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 bloodthirsty 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.

Thursday, November 26

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.

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.

Monday, November 30

Read: Acts 15; Psalm 145

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).

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 poor in the streets or in the courts; the Lord will defend them (22:22–23)
2. Warns against being friends with an angry, wrathful person; 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)

Wednesday, December 2

Read: Acts 16

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 Christians 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.

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.

Friday, December 4

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.

Tuesday, December 8

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.

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.

Thursday, December 10

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.

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 hymn-writer 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.

Monday, December 14

Read: Ephesians 5:18–6:20

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!

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).

Wednesday, December 16

Read: Romans 1, 3

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.

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.

Friday, December 18

Read: Acts 20:1–21:16

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."

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).

Tuesday, December 22

Read: Acts 22:30–23:35; Proverbs 31

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.

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.

Thursday, December 24

Read: Acts 27; Psalm 146

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.

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.

Monday, December 28

Read: Acts 28; 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.

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.

Wednesday, December 30

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.

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:

Coffee and Fellowship: 5:45 p.m.

Prayer Meeting: 6:00 p.m.



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