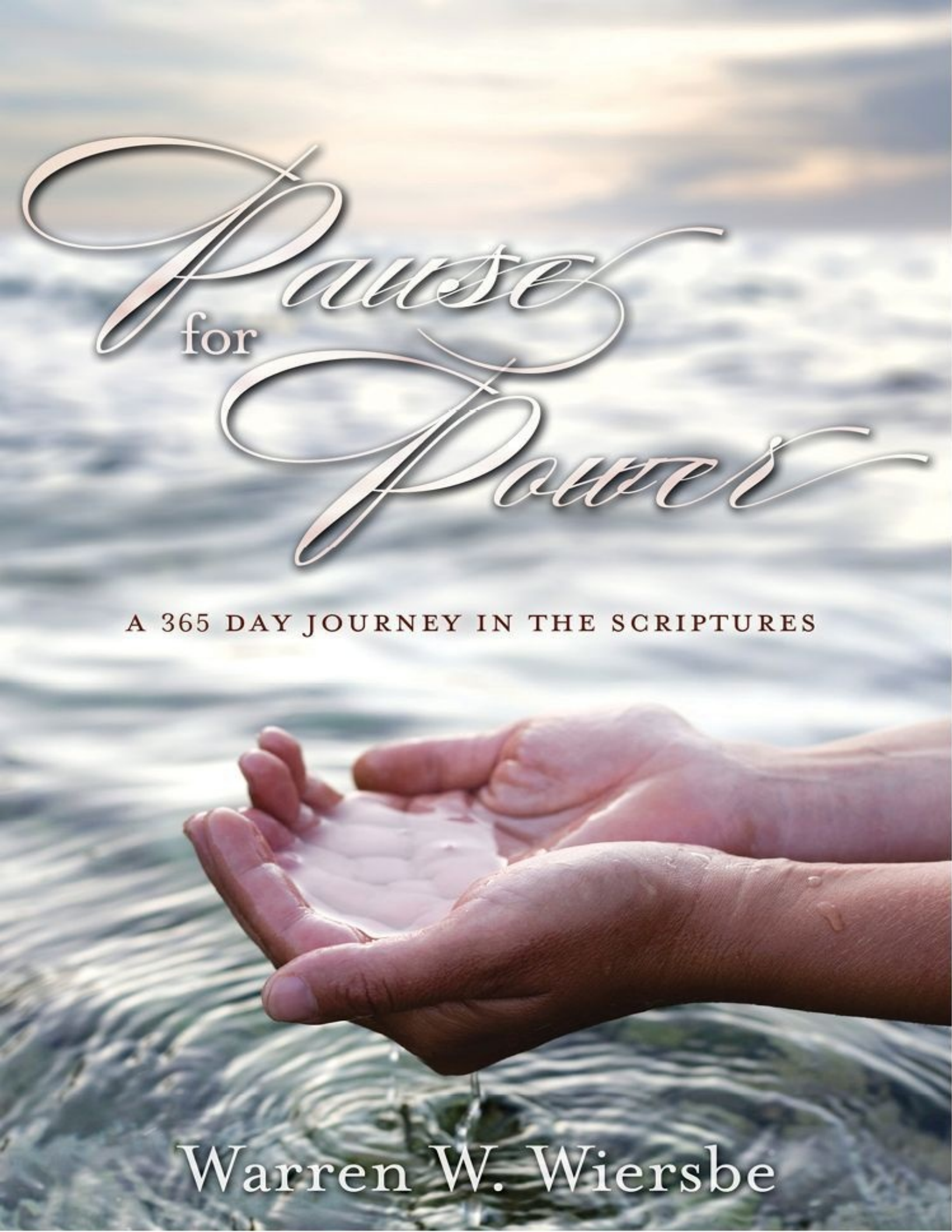
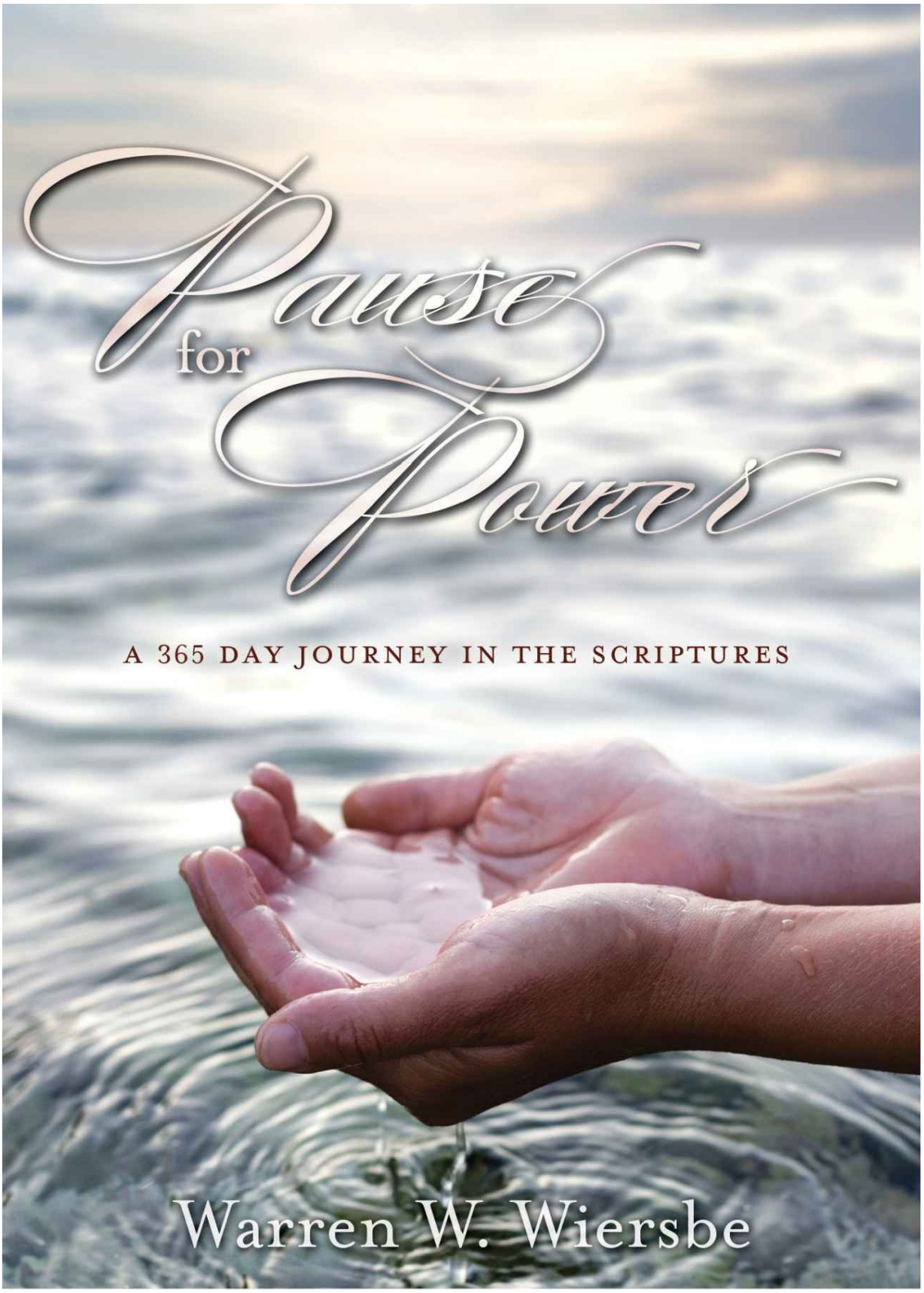

Pause for Power
A 365 DAY JOURNEY IN THE SCRIPTURES
Warren W. Wiersbe


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transforming lives together

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Second Edition 2010

A Year in the Word

In the pages that follow, you'll hear Isaiah's invitation to wayward hearts, wrestle with Job's dilemma, examine what Hebrews says about the breathtaking work of Christ, and listen in as Paul writes letters to infant churches. Such a task might seem daunting at first, but with the help of *Pause for Power,* it will take you only a few minutes a day. And here's the best part: Over the course of a year, you'll have read fifteen books of the Bible.

The devotions are undated, so you can start any day of the year. They're also blended, so you can enjoy a variety of biblical voices and themes each week. One day you might contemplate Paul's letter to the Philippians, and the next you might consider a wise saying from Ecclesiastes.

To get started, simply turn to Day 1, read the associated Bible passage in your favorite translation, spend time with the devotion, then ponder the question of the day. Repeat daily. In twelve months you'll have studied Job, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. But more importantly, you'll have gained insight into God's Word—insight that will bring you closer to the Author Himself.

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Day 1
Consistent Actions

Read Romans 2:1—3:20

> *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.*
>
> Romans 2:7–8

God had given Israel great material and spiritual riches: a wonderful land, a righteous law, a temple and priesthood, God's providential care, and many more blessings. God had patiently endured Israel's many sins and rebellions, and had even sent them His Son to be their Messiah. Even after Israel crucified Christ, God gave the nation nearly forty more years of grace and withheld His judgment. It is not the judgment of God that leads people to repentance, but the goodness of God; but Israel did not repent.

In Romans 2:6–11, Paul was explaining a basic principle of God's judgment: God judges according to deeds, just as He judges according to truth. Paul was dealing here with the consistent actions of people's lives, the total impact of their character and conduct.

True saving faith results in obedience and godly living, even though there may be occasional falls. When God measured the deeds of the Jews, He found them to be as wicked as those of the Gentiles.

Something to Ponder

Is it possible for people to grow to have consistently good (not perfect) character and conduct? If so, how? How does this fit with Paul's claim that no one is righteous apart from Christ's sacrifice (Rom. 3:9–10)?

Day 2
Devoted to Devotions

Read Colossians 4:2

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Colossians 4:2

It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get our will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth. Prayer is not telling God what to do or what to give. Prayer is asking God for that which He wants to do and give, according to His will (1 John 5:14–15). As we read the Word and fellowship with our Father, we discover His will and then boldly ask Him to do what He has planned. Richard Trench (1807–1886), archbishop of Dublin, said it perfectly: "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of His willingness."

Of course, it is possible to pray in our hearts and never use the gift of speech (1 Sam. 1:13), but we are using words even if we don't say them audibly. True prayer must first come from the heart, whether the words are spoken or not.

Something to Ponder

As you pray, in what ways are you "watchful"? In what ways are you "thankful"?

Day 3
The Mark of Maturity

Read Philippians 1:6–10

> *This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.*
>
> Philippians 1:9–10

Paul found joy in his memories of the friends at Philippi and in his growing love for them. He also found joy in remembering them before the throne of grace in prayer.

This is a prayer for maturity, and Paul began it with *love*. He prayed that they might experience *abounding* love and *discerning* love. Christian love is not blind! The heart and mind work together so that we have discerning love and loving discernment.

The ability to distinguish is a mark of maturity. When a baby learns to speak, he or she may call every four-legged animal a "bowwow." But then the child discovers that there are cats, mice, cows, and other four-legged creatures.

One of the sure marks of maturity is discerning love and loving discernment.

Something to Ponder

With daily decisions, do you tend to seek what is good, or do you try to discern what is truly best?

Day 4
Avoiding Oblivion

Read 1 John 2:17

> *The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*
>
> 1 John 2:17

Every great nation in history has become decadent and has finally been conquered by another nation. Some nineteen world civilizations have slipped into oblivion. There is no reason why we should think that our present civilization will endure forever. “Change and decay in all around I see,” wrote Henry F. Lyte (1793–1847), and if our civilization is not eroded by change and decay, it will certainly be swept away and replaced by a new order of things at the coming of Christ.

Slowly but inevitably, and perhaps sooner than even we Christians think, the world is passing away, but those who do God’s will abide forever. Long after this world system—with its vaunted culture, its proud philosophies, its egocentric intellectualism, and its godless materialism—has been forgotten, and long after this planet has been replaced by the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1), God’s faithful servants will remain, sharing the glory of God for all eternity. And this prospect is not limited to Moody, Spurgeon, Luther, or Wesley and their likes—it is open to each and every humble believer. If you are trusting Christ, it is for you.

Something to Ponder

If you are expecting to share the glory of God for all eternity, what things are you doing now to prepare for such an encounter?

Day 5

Sovereignty and Responsibility

Read Romans 9:14–33

> *Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."*
>
> Romans 9:14–15

Moses was a Jew; Pharaoh was a Gentile, yet both were sinners. In fact, both were murderers! Both saw God's wonders. Yet Moses was saved and Pharaoh was lost. Pharaoh was a ruler, and Moses was a slave, yet it was Moses who experienced the mercy and compassion of God—because God willed it that way. Nobody can condemn God for the way He extends His mercy, because God is righteous in His judgments (see Ps. 19:9 KJV).

Paul wrote of divine sovereignty and then human responsibility. Here is a paradox: The Jews sought for righteousness but did not find it, while the Gentiles, who were not searching for it, found it! The reason? Israel tried to be saved by works and not by faith. They rejected "grace righteousness" and tried to please God with "law righteousness." The Jews thought that the Gentiles had to come up to Israel's level to be saved, when actually the Jews had to go down to the level of the Gentiles to be saved.

Something to Ponder

When you can't fully understand God's working, what do you do to maintain your faith?

Day 6
Sins of the Saints

Read Hebrews 2:3–9

> *This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*
>
> Hebrews 2:3

We have the idea that believers today "under grace" can escape the chastening hand of God that was so evident "under law." But to whom much is given, much shall be required (Luke 12:48). Not only have we received the Word from the Son of God, but that Word has been confirmed by "signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (Heb. 2:4). The phrase "signs and wonders" here refers to the miracles that witnessed to the Word and gave confirmation that it was true. Today we have the completed Word of God, so there is no need for these apostolic miracles. God now bears witness through His Spirit using the Word. The Spirit also gives spiritual gifts to God's people so that they may minister in the church (1 Cor. 12:1–11).

I have often told the story about the pastor who preached a series of sermons on "the sins of the saints." He was severely reprimanded by a church member. "After all," said the member, "sin in the lives of Christians is different from sin in the lives of other people."

"Yes," replied the pastor, "it's worse!"

Something to Ponder

Do you agree that sin in the lives of Christians is worse than sin in the lives of other people? Why?

Day 7
Heart Gifts

Read 2 Corinthians 8:10–24

> *Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 8:11

During my years of ministry, I have endured many offering appeals. I have listened to pathetic tales about unbelievable needs. I have forced myself to laugh at old jokes that were supposed to make it easier for me to part with my money. I have been scolded, shamed, and almost threatened, and I must confess that none of these approaches has ever stirred me to give more than I planned to give.

We must be careful here not to confuse *willing* with *doing*, because the two must go together. If the willing is sincere and in the will of God, then there must be a "completion of it" (2 Cor. 8:11; see Phil. 2:12–13). Paul did not say that *willing* was a substitute for *doing*, because it is not. But if our giving is motivated by grace, we will give more willingly.

God sees the "heart gift" and not the "hand gift." If the heart wants to give more, but is unable to do so, God sees it and records it accordingly. But if the hand gives more than the heart wants to give, God records what is in the heart, no matter how big the offering in the hand may be.

Something to Ponder

Think about a time you gave willingly and a time you gave grudgingly. What made the difference?

Day 8
Measuring Sticks

Read Philippians 3:4–7

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Philippians 3:7

Every Jew could boast of his own blood heritage. Some Jews could boast of their faithfulness. But Paul could boast of those things plus his zeal in persecuting the church (see Phil. 3:5–6). We might ask, “How could a sincere man like Saul of Tarsus be so wrong?” The answer is simple: He was using the wrong measuring stick!

Like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22 KJV) and the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:10–14), Saul of Tarsus was comparing himself with standards set by people, not by God. As far as obeying outwardly the demands of the law, Paul was a success, but he did not stop to consider the inward sins he was committing.

When he looked at himself in comparison with others, Saul of Tarsus considered himself to be righteous. But one day he saw himself as compared with Jesus Christ! It was then that he changed his evaluations and values and abandoned “works righteousness” for the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:20–24).

Something to Ponder

What is something you may be clinging to that would be better to “consider loss” in order to continue to grow spiritually?

Day 9
Paul's Witness

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–28

> *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:9

One of the greatest witnesses of the resurrection was Paul himself, for as an unbeliever he was soundly convinced that Jesus was dead. The radical change in his life—a change that brought him persecution and suffering—is certainly evidence that the Lord had indeed been raised from the dead. Paul made it clear that his salvation was purely an act of God's grace.

Paul's readers would say, "Yes, we agree that Jesus was raised from the dead." Then Paul would reply, "If you believe that, then you must believe in the resurrection of all the dead!" If there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. If He was not raised, there is no gospel to preach. If there is no gospel, then we have believed in vain, and we are still in our sins! If there is no resurrection, then believers who have died have no hope. We will never see them again (1 Cor. 15:12–19)!

The conclusion is obvious: Why be a Christian if we have only suffering in this life and no future glory to anticipate? The resurrection is not just important; it is "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3–4), because all we believe hinges upon it.

Something to Ponder

What difference does your hope of resurrection from the dead make to the way you will live today?

Day 10
It Just Isn’t Fair

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1–13

> *Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 8:12

If there is no God, then we have nobody to blame but ourselves for what happens in the world. But if we believe in a good and loving God, we must face the difficult question of why there is so much suffering.

Some people ponder this question and end up becoming either agnostics or atheists, but in so doing, they create a whole new problem: Where does all the good come from in the world?

Other people solve the problem by saying that evil is only an illusion and that we shouldn’t worry about it or that God is in the process of evolving and can’t do much about the tragedies of life. They assure us that things will improve as the process of evolution goes on. Solomon didn’t deny the existence of God or the reality of evil, nor did he limit God’s power. Solomon solved the problem of evil by affirming these factors and seeing them in their proper perspective.

During the darkest days of World War II, somebody asked a friend, “Why doesn’t God stop the war?” My friend wisely replied, “Because He didn’t start it in the first place.” Solomon would have agreed with that answer.

Something to Ponder

How do you deal with the existence of suffering?

Day 11
Get Out of Babylon!

Read Isaiah 45—48

> *See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.*
>
> Isaiah 48:10

The Jews had become comfortable and complacent in their Babylonian captivity. They had followed the counsel of Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4–7) and had built houses, planted gardens, and raised families; and it would not be easy for them to pack up and go back to the Holy Land. But that was where they belonged.

Had they obeyed the Lord in the first place, they would have experienced peace and not war (Isa. 48:18–19), but it was not too late. He had put them into the furnace to refine them and prepare them for their future work. "Leave Babylon" was God's command (v. 20). God promised that He would go before them and prepare the way, and they had nothing to fear.

One would think that the Jews would have been eager to return to their land to see God do new and great things for them. But they had grown accustomed to the security of bondage and had forgotten the challenges of freedom. The church today can easily grow complacent with its comfort and affluence. God may have to put us into the furnace to remind us that we are here to be servants and not consumers or spectators.

Something to Ponder

When were some times you could have avoided a lot of trouble if you had obeyed God in the first place?

Day 12
Hope: It's Alive

Read 1 Peter 5:12

> *I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.*
>
> 1 Peter 5:12

"While there's life, there's hope!" That ancient Roman saying is still quoted today, and like most adages, it has an element of truth but no guarantee of certainty. It is not the fact of life that determines hope but the faith of life. A Christian believer has a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3) because his "faith and hope are in God" (v. 21). This "living hope" is the major theme of Peter's first letter. He is saying to all believers, "Be hopeful!"

The writer's given name was Simon, but Jesus changed it to Peter, which means "a stone" (John 1:35–42). The Aramaic equivalent of "Peter" is "Cephas" (v. 42), so Peter was a man with three names. Nearly fifty times in the New Testament he is called "Simon," and often he is called "Simon Peter." Perhaps the two names suggest a Christian's two natures: an old nature (Simon) that is prone to fail, and a new nature (Peter) that can give victory. As Simon, he was only another human piece of clay, but Jesus Christ made a rock out of him!

Something to Ponder

What situation in your life is most in need of new hope?

Day 13
Be (and Stay) Encouraged

Read 2 Corinthians 13:11–14

> *Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 13:11

Our God is the "God of love and peace." Can the outside world tell that from the way we Christians live and conduct the business of the church? "Behold how they love one another!" was what the lost world said about the early church, but it has been a long time since the church has earned that kind of commendation. Like Christians today, the Corinthian believers desperately needed the blessings of grace, love, and communion. The competition in the Corinthian church, resulting in divisions, would have been eliminated if the people had only lived by God's grace and love.

The church is a miracle, and only the miracle ministry of God can sustain it. No amount of human skill, talents, or programs can make the church what it ought to be. Only God can do that. If each of us is depending on the grace of God, walking in the love of Christ, and participating in the fellowship of the Spirit, then we will be a part of the answer and not a part of the problem. We will be living this benediction—and being a benediction to others!

Be encouraged and then encourage others.

Something to Ponder

What things do you do to try to build unity with other believers?

Day 14
Order in the Church

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1–16

> *I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 11:3

Eastern society at this time was very jealous over its women. Except for the temple prostitutes, the women wore long hair and, in public, wore coverings over their heads. For the Christian women to appear in public without the coverings, let alone to pray and share the Word in church, was both daring and blasphemous.

Paul sought to restore order by reminding the Corinthians that God had made a difference between men and women, that each had a proper place in God's economy. There were also appropriate customs that symbolized these relationships and reminded both men and women of their correct places in the divine scheme. Paul did not say, or even hint, that difference meant inequality or inferiority. If there is to be peace in the church, then there must be some kind of order; and order of necessity involves rank. However, rank and quality are two different things. The captain has a higher rank than the private, but the private may be a better person.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever felt inferior or unequal at church? What (if anything) did you do about that?

Day 15
The Apostle

Read Galatians 1:1–10

> *Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.*
>
> Galatians 1:1

In the early days of the church, God called special men to do special tasks. Among them were the apostles. The word *apostle* means "one who is sent with a commission." While He was ministering on earth, Jesus had many disciples ("learners"), and from these He selected twelve apostles (Mark 3:13–19). Later, one of the requirements for an apostle was that he had to have witnessed the resurrection (Acts 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:15).

Paul's miraculous conversion and call to apostleship created some problems. From the very beginning, he was apart from the original apostles. His enemies said that he was not a true apostle for this reason. Paul points out that he had been made an apostle by Jesus Christ just as much as had the original Twelve. His apostleship was not from human selection, but by divine appointment.

But in his ministry, Paul had a second basis for authority: He founded the churches in Galatia. He was not writing to them as a stranger, but as the one who had brought them the message of life!

Something to Ponder

Why is "relationship" important to Paul's claim of apostleship? How do your relationships affect your ministry?

Day 16
Idol Time

Read Colossians 3:5–11

> *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*
>
> Colossians 3:5

Greed (or *covetousness* in the King James Version) is the sin of always wanting more, whether it be more things or more pleasures. Covetous people are never satisfied with what they have, and they are usually envious of what others have. This is idolatry, for covetousness puts things in the place of God. "You shall not covet" is the last of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17). Yet this sin can make us break all of the other nine! Greedy people will dishonor God, take God's name in vain, lie, steal, and commit every other sin in order to satisfy their sinful desires.

Do believers in local churches commit such sins? Unfortunately, they sometimes do. Each of the New Testament epistles sent to local churches mentions these sins and warns against them.

What we desire usually determines what we do. If I create in my children an appetite for candy, then I must satisfy that appetite. If they become overweight and unhealthy, then I must change their appetites, and I must teach them how to enjoy foods other than sweets. "Create in me a pure heart, O God" (Ps. 51:10) should be our prayer.

Something to Ponder

What things do you do to prevent covetousness from getting out of control and hindering your spiritual maturity?

Day 17
Secrets of Church Success

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10–23

> *Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 3:18

Young ministers often asked Dr. G. Campbell Morgan the secret of his pulpit success. Morgan replied, "I always say to them the same thing—work; hard work; and again, work!" Morgan was in his study at six o'clock each morning, digging treasures out of the Bible. Lazy preachers and Sunday school teachers will have much to answer for at the judgment seat of Christ—and so will preachers and teachers who steal material from others instead of studying and making it their own.

It comes as a shock to some church members that we cannot manage a local church the same way we run a business. This does not mean we should disregard good business principles, but the operation is totally different. There is a wisdom of this world that works for the world, but it will not work for the church.

The world depends on promotion, prestige, and the influence of money and important people. The church depends on prayer, the power of the Spirit, humility, sacrifice, and service. The church that imitates the world may seem to succeed in time, but it will turn to ashes in eternity.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you try to help your church be the best it can be?

Day 18
Truth First

Read Galatians 2:1–5

> *This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.*
>
> Galatians 2:4

Echoes of the Jerusalem Conference are heard repeatedly in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul mentioned the "yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1), reminding us of Peter's similar warning (Acts 15:10). The themes of liberty and bondage are repeated often (Gal. 2:4; 4:3, 9, 21–31; 5:1), as is the idea of circumcision (Gal. 2:3; 5:3–4; 6:12–13). Today's Christians need to appreciate afresh the courageous stand Paul and his associates took for the liberty of the gospel. Paul's concern was "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14) not the peace of the church. "Peace at any price" was not Paul's philosophy of ministry, nor should it be ours.

Ever since Paul's time, the enemies of grace have been trying to add something to the simple gospel of the grace of God. They tell us that a man is saved by faith in Christ plus something—good works, the Ten Commandments, baptism, church membership, religious ritual—and Paul made it clear that these teachers are wrong. In fact, Paul pronounced a curse on any person (human or angel) who preaches any other gospel than the gospel of the grace of God. It is a serious thing to tamper with the gospel.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever been tempted to pursue peace at any price instead of truth? Explain.

Day 19

Commotion versus Commitment

Read 1 Peter 3:1–2

> *Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:1

While standing in the checkout line in a supermarket, I overheard two women discussing the latest Hollywood scandal that was featured on the front page of a tabloid. As I listened, I thought: *How foolish to worry about the sinful lives of matinee idols. Why clutter up your mind with such trash? Why not get acquainted with decent people and learn from their lives?*

When Christian couples try to imitate the world and get their standards from Hollywood instead of from heaven, there will be trouble in the home. But if both partners will imitate Jesus Christ in His submission and obedience, and His desire to serve others, then there will be triumph and joy in the home.

We cannot follow Christ's example unless we first know Him as our Savior and then submit to Him as our Lord. We must spend time with Him each day, meditating on the Word and praying; and a Christian husband and wife must pray together and seek to encourage each other in the faith.

Something to Ponder

What couple do you know who best demonstrates the meaning of real love? What do you think is their "secret"?

Day 20
Defending God

Read Job 34—35

> *Listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong.*
>
> Job 34:10

Theology ("the science of God") used to be called "the queen of sciences" because it deals with the most important knowledge we can have: the knowledge of God. Theology is a difficult science, for it is our attempt to know the Unknowable (Rom. 11:33–36).

"The essence of idolatry," wrote A. W. Tozer, "is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."[1] So, whoever attempts to explain and defend the Almighty must have the humble heart of a worshipper; for "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

As we read Elihu's speeches, we get the impression that he was not growing; he was swelling. We also get the impression that his listeners' minds were wandering (Job 33:1, 31, 33; 34:2, 10, 16). Yet Elihu emphasized that God is sovereign, and the book of Job magnifies the sovereignty of God. During the debate, it appears that God is absent, but He is aware of how Job feels and what Job and his friends are saying. Elihu was right on target: God is sovereign and cannot do wrong.

Something to Ponder

What are some questions of theology that have come up in your interactions with skeptics or people of other faiths?

1 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 11.

Day 21

No Longer Babies

Read Romans 14:13–23

> *Let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.*
>
> Romans 14:13

When a child comes into a home, everything has to change. Mother and Father are careful not to leave the scissors on the chair or anything dangerous within reach. But as the child matures, it is possible for the parents to deal with the youngster in a more adult fashion.

Young Christians need the kind of fellowship that will protect them and encourage them to grow. But they cannot be treated like babies all their lives. The older Christians must exercise love and patience and be careful not to cause them to stumble. However, the younger Christians must "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). To gear the ministry of a local church only to the "baby Christians" is to hinder their growth as well as the ministry of the more mature saints. The weak must learn from the strong, and the strong must love the weak. The result will be peace and maturity to the glory of God.

Something to Ponder

Are you more or less mature than the others in the programs you're involved with? What does this tell you about your role in each of those programs?

Day 22

Which Master Will You Choose?

Read Colossians 4:14–18

Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.

Colossians 4:14

Demas is mentioned only three times in Paul's letters, and these three references tell a sad story. First, Paul calls him "Demas … [one of] my fellow workers" and links him with three good men—Mark, Aristarchus, and Luke (Philem. 1:24). Then, Paul simply calls him "Demas," with no special word of identification or commendation (Col. 4:14). But in the third reference, Paul tells us what became of him: "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:10).

At one point in his life, John Mark had forsaken Paul, but he was reclaimed and restored. Demas forsook Paul and apparently was never reclaimed. His sin was that he "loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10 KJV). Christians today can succumb to the world just as Demas did. How easy it is to maintain a religious veneer, while all the time living for the things of this world. Demas thought that he could serve two masters (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13), but eventually he had to make a decision; unfortunately, he made the wrong decision.

It must have hurt Paul greatly when Demas forsook him. It also hurt the work of the Lord. This decision hurt Demas most of all, for he wasted his life on that which could never last.

Something to Ponder

What tends to lure you away from the faith if you aren't careful?

Day 23

Times, Good and Bad

Read Ecclesiastes 7:13–29

> *When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 7:14

God balances our lives by giving us enough blessings to keep us happy and enough burdens to keep us humble. If all we had were blessings in our hands, we would fall right over, so the Lord balances the blessings in our hands with burdens on our backs. That helps to keep us steady, and as we yield to Him, He can even turn the burdens into blessings.

Why does God constitute our lives in this way? The answer is simple: to keep us from thinking that we know it all and that we can manage our lives by ourselves. “A man cannot discover anything about his future” (Eccl. 7:14). Just about the time we think we have an explanation for things, God changes the situation, and we have to throw out our formula. This is where Job’s friends went wrong: They tried to use an old road map to guide Job on a brand-new journey, and the map didn’t fit (Job 2:11—37:24). No matter how much experience we have in the Christian life, or how many books we read, we must still walk by faith.

Something to Ponder

During times of adversity how do you try to see what God may be trying to teach you?

Day 24
Minor Matters

Read 1 Timothy 6:1–10

> *If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing.*
>
> 1 Timothy 6:3–4

The first mark of a false teacher is that they refused to adhere to "the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching" (1 Tim. 6:3). A second mark is the teacher's own attitude. Instead of being humble, a false teacher is proud, yet he has nothing to be proud about because he does not know anything (1 Tim. 6:4; see also 1:7).

A believer who understands the Word will have a burning heart, not a big head (Luke 24:32; see also Dan. 9:1–20). This "conceited attitude" causes a teacher to argue about minor matters concerning "words" (1 Tim. 6:4).

The result of such unspiritual teaching is "envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction" (1 Tim. 6:4–5). The tragedy of all this is that the people are "robbed of the truth" (v. 5) while they think they are discovering the truth! They think that the weekly arguments in their meetings, during which they exchange their ignorance, are a means of growing in grace; meanwhile, the result is a loss of character, not an improvement.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the minor matters that tend to become arguments in your church? How can you help eliminate these?

Day 25
A Coming Harvest

Read James 5:7–9

> *See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*
>
> James 5:7–8

If a man is impatient, then he had better not become a farmer. No crop appears overnight, and no farmer has control over the weather. He must have patience with the seed and the crop, for it takes time for plants to grow. A Jewish farmer would plow and sow in the autumn months. The autumn rain would soften the soil. The spring rain would come in February or March and help to mature the harvest. The farmer had to wait many weeks for his seed to produce fruit.

Why did he willingly wait so long? Because the fruit is valuable. The harvest is worth waiting for. James pictured the Christian as a spiritual farmer looking for a spiritual harvest. There are seasons to the spiritual life just as there are seasons to the soil. Sometimes, our hearts become cold and wintry, and the Lord has to plow them up before He can plant the seed. He sends the sunshine and the rains of His goodness to water and nurture the seeds planted, but we must be patient to wait for the harvest (Gal. 6:9–10).

Here, then, is a secret of endurance when the going gets tough: God is producing a harvest in our lives.

Something to Ponder

What are the situations in which you are usually most impatient? Why?

Day 26

All Together Now!

Read 1 Peter 2:4–8

> *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:4–5

A contractor in Michigan was building a house, and the construction of the first floor went smoothly. But when the workers started on the second floor, they had nothing but trouble. None of the materials from the lumberyard would fit properly. Then they discovered the reason: They were working with two different sets of blueprints! Once they got rid of the old set, everything went well, and they built a lovely house.

Too often, we Christians hinder the building of the church because we are following the wrong plans. When Solomon built his temple, his workmen followed the plans so carefully that everything fit together on the construction site (1 Kings 6:7). If all of us would follow God's blueprints, given in His Word, we would be able to work together without discord and build His church for His glory.

Something to Ponder

Think of people you have frequent conflicts with (or whom you try to avoid). What might you do to try to create better unity with each person?

Day 27
Run for Your (Spiritual) Life

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27

Run in such a way as to get the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24

Athletes must be disciplined if they are to win the prize. Discipline means giving up the good and the better for the best. Athletes must watch their diet as well as their sleeping schedules. They must smile and say, “No, thank you,” when people offer them fattening desserts or invite them to late-night parties. There is nothing wrong with food or fun, but if they interfere with people’s highest goals, then they become hindrances.

We Christians do not run the race in order to get to heaven. We are in the race because we have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Only Greek citizens were allowed to participate in the games, and they had to obey the rules both in their training and in their performing; any contestant found breaking the training rules was disqualified. Famous athlete Jim Thorpe had to return his Olympic gold medals because it was discovered that he had previously played on a professional team.

In order to give up his rights and have the joy of winning lost souls, Paul had to discipline himself. That is the emphasis of 1 Corinthians 9: Authority (rights) must be balanced by discipline. If we want to serve the Lord and win His reward, we must pay the price.

Something to Ponder

In what ways has your spiritual life been like a race so far?

Day 28
Tongues

Read 1 Corinthians 14:36–40

Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

1 Corinthians 14:40

The gift of tongues is the God-given ability to speak in a known language with which the speaker is not previously acquainted. The purpose is not to win the lost, but to edify the saved. Not every believer had this gift, nor was this gift an evidence of spirituality or the result of a “baptism of the Spirit.”

Only three persons were permitted to speak in tongues in one meeting, and they had to do so in order and with interpretation. If there was no interpreter, they had to keep silent. Prophecy was the superior gift, but tongues were not to be despised if they were exercised according to Scripture.

When the foundational work of the apostles and prophets ended, it would seem that the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues would no longer be needed. “Where there are tongues, they will be stilled” (1 Cor. 13:8). Certainly God can give this gift today if He pleases, but I am not prepared to believe that every instance of tongues is divinely energized. It is unfortunate when believers make tongues a test of fellowship or spirituality. Let’s keep our priorities straight and major on winning the lost and building the church.

Something to Ponder

Why do you think Paul gave so many instructions regarding the proper procedures for speaking in tongues?

Day 29
Seat of Honor

Read Hebrews 8:1–6

> *We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.*
>
> Hebrews 8:1–2

There were no chairs in the Old Testament tabernacle because the work of the priests was never finished. Each repeated sacrifice was only a reminder that none of the sacrifices ever provided a finished salvation. The blood of animals did not wash away sin or cleanse the guilty conscience; it only covered sin until that day when Jesus Christ died to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Jesus Christ, however, *is* seated because His work is finished. He is seated at the right hand of the Father. This great truth was introduced early in the book of Hebrews (Heb. 1:3), and it will be mentioned again (10:12; 12:2). This enthronement was the fulfillment of the Father's promise to the Son, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 1:13). Not only did the high priest of Israel never sit down, but he never sat down on a throne. Only a priest "in the order of Melchizedek" could be enthroned, for Melchizedek was both king and priest.

Something to Ponder

As you think of Jesus seated in heaven, what are some assurances you feel that are related to the work He has finished?

Day 30
The Harvest

Read 2 Corinthians 9:1–15

> *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 9:6

Farmers reap immediate physical benefits as they work in their fields, but they have to wait for the harvest. Christians who are motivated by grace reap the blessings of personal enrichment in their own lives and characters, and their enrichment benefits others. The final result is glory to God as others give thanks to Him. Paul was careful to point out that grace giving does not bring credit to us; it brings thanksgiving to God. We are but channels through whom God works to meet the needs of others.

God enriches us so that we may give even more bountifully (2 Cor. 9:8–11). One of the blessings of grace giving is the joy of giving more and more. Everything we have—not just our income—belongs to God, is given to God, and is used by God to accomplish His work. We are enriched in everything with Him and with others.

Grace giving means that we really believe that God is the great Giver, and we use our material and spiritual resources accordingly. We simply cannot outgive God!

Something to Ponder

When you give to the church, to what extent do you want to see definite (and perhaps immediate) results? What does this say about your motivation for giving?

Day 31
Not in It for the Money

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1–18

> *What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 9:18

The unsaved world is convinced that most preachers are involved in "religious rackets" to take money from innocent people. No doubt there are people who "use" religion to exploit others and control them. But we must make sure that nothing we do in our own ministry gives the impression that we are of their number.

A wrong attitude toward money has hindered the gospel from the earliest days of the church. Simon the magician thought he could buy the gift of the Holy Spirit with money (Acts 8:18–24). Ananias and Sapphira loved money more than the truth, and God killed them (5:1–10).

For eighteen years, Dr. H. A. Ironside served as pastor of Moody Church in Chicago. The first time I heard him announce an offering, he said, "We ask God's people to give generously. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, we do not ask you to give. We have a gift for you—eternal life through faith in Christ!" He made it clear that the offering was for believers, lest the unsaved in the congregation stumble over money and reject the gospel.

Something to Ponder

How can money propel the cause of the gospel? How can it become a hindrance?

Day 32
Mixed Messages

Read James 3:9–17

> *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*
>
> James 3:10

If you and I are going to have tongues that delight, then we must meet with the Lord each day and learn from Him. We must get our "spiritual roots" deep into His Word. We must pray and meditate and permit the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with God's love and truth.

But James issued a warning: A spring cannot give forth two kinds of water, and a tree cannot bear two different kinds of fruit (James 3:11–12). We expect the spring to flow with fresh water at all times.

If the tongue is inconsistent, there is something radically wrong with the heart. I heard about a professing Christian who got angry on the job and let loose with some rather strong words. Embarrassed, he turned to his partner and said, "I don't know why I said that. It really isn't in me." His partner wisely replied, "It had to be in you, or it couldn't have come out of you."

The tongue that praises the Father, and then turns around and curses men made in God's likeness (James 3:9), is in desperate need of spiritual medicine.

Something to Ponder

Think of your comments to others today. What percentage of them were "fresh water" comments? What percentage were "salt water" (or bitter) comments?

Day 33
Better Than One

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7–16

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work.

Ecclesiastes 4:9

Two are certainly better than one when it comes to working, because two workers can get more done. Even when they divide the profits, they still get a better return for their efforts than if they work alone.

Two are better when it comes to walking (Eccl. 4:10). Roads and paths in Palestine were not paved or leveled, and there were many hidden rocks in the fields. It was not uncommon for even the most experienced traveler to stumble and fall. How wonderful to have a friend who could help him or her up.

Two are better than one when it comes to warmth (v. 11). Two travelers camping out, or even staying in the courtyard of a public inn, would feel the cold of the Palestinian night and need each other's warmth for comfort.

Finally, two are better than one when it comes to security, especially at night (v. 12). It was dangerous for anyone to travel alone, day or night; most people traveled in groups for fellowship and for safety. If two travelers are better than one, then three would fare even better. Solomon had more than numbers in mind; he was also thinking of the unity involved in three cords woven together (v. 12) —what a beautiful picture of friendship!

Something to Ponder

What have you done lately to help someone's work go a little easier?

Day 34
Surprising Worship

Read Job 1:20–22

> *The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*
>
> Job 1:21

The hosts of heaven and of hell watched to see how Job would respond to the loss of his wealth and his children. He expressed his grief in a manner normal for that day, for God expects us to be human (1 Thess. 4:13). After all, even Jesus wept (John 11:35). But then Job worshipped God and uttered a profound statement of faith (Job 1:21).

First, he looked back to his birth: "Naked I came from my mother's womb." Then Job looked ahead to his death: "And naked I will depart." He would not return to his mother's womb, because that would be impossible. He would go to "Mother Earth," be buried, and return to dust. Nothing he had acquired between his birth and death would go with him into the next world.

Finally, Job looked up and uttered a magnificent statement of faith: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." Instead of cursing God, as Satan said Job would do (Job 1:9–11), he praised the Lord! It takes real faith to say in the midst of sorrow and suffering, "May the name of the Lord be praised."

Something to Ponder

Do you think Job's worship during his great tragedy suggests that he was in denial of his situation? Explain.

Day 35
Group Consideration

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26–35

God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

1 Corinthians 14:33

We must use the Word of God to test every message we hear, asking the Spirit to guide us. There are false teachers in the world, and we must beware (1 John 4:1). But even true teachers and preachers sometimes make mistakes. Each of us must evaluate the message and apply it to his or her own heart (Acts 17:11).

Our public meetings are more formal than those of the early church, so it is not likely that we need to worry about the order of service. But in our more informal meetings, we need to consider one another and maintain order. I recall being in a testimony meeting where a woman took forty minutes telling of a boring experience and as a result destroyed the spirit of the meeting.

Evangelist D. L. Moody was leading a service and asked a man to pray. Taking advantage of his opportunity, the man prayed on and on. Sensing that the prayer was killing the meeting instead of blessing it, Moody spoke up and said, “While our brother finishes his prayer, let us sing a hymn!” Those who are in charge of public meetings need to have discernment—and courage.

Something to Ponder

If you were a professional church consultant, what objective suggestions would you give your pastor for how to improve your church worship services?

Day 36

Step toward Knowledge

Read Ecclesiastes 8:14–17

> *No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 8:17

People who have to know everything are destined for disappointment. Through many difficult days and sleepless nights, the Preacher applied himself diligently to the mysteries of life. He came to the conclusion that "no one can comprehend what goes on under the sun" (v. 17). Perhaps we can solve a puzzle here and there, but none of us can comprehend the totality of things.

Historian Will Durant surveyed human history in his multivolume *Story of Civilization* and came to the conclusion that "our knowledge is a receding mirage in an expanding desert of ignorance." Of course, this fact must not be used as an excuse for stupidity. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). God doesn't expect us to know the unknowable, but He does expect us to learn all that we can and obey what He teaches us.

A confession of ignorance is the first step toward knowledge. "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2). The person who wants to learn God's truth must possess honesty and humility.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the mysteries of life that you frequently ponder?

Day 37
Everybody In!

Read Colossians 1:24–27

> *To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*
>
> Colossians 1:27

God has initiated a new program—His mystery—that was not explained by the Old Testament prophets. The mystery is that today God is uniting Jews and Gentiles in the church (Eph. 3:2–6). Imagine what this message meant to the Gentiles. They were no longer excluded from the glory and riches of God's grace!

We who have grown up in Christian surroundings have a tendency to take this for granted. But think of the excitement this message must have generated in a church composed of new believers who had no background in the church.

I was privileged to minister in Africa for three weeks, and there I was introduced to some of the finest Christians I have ever met. I taught the Word to more than five hundred national pastors in Kenya for almost a week, and each service was a challenge and blessing to me. Many of the pastors still had the marks of paganism and idolatry on their bodies, yet their faces were aglow with the joy of the Lord. I went to Africa to minister to them, but they ministered to me!

Something to Ponder

What are some ways you can minister to people who usually minister to you?

Day 38
Loss Suits

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1–8

> *The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 6:7

The church at Corinth was rapidly losing its testimony in the city. Not only did the unsaved know about the immorality in the assembly, but they were also aware of the lawsuits involving members of the church.

Paul detected three tragedies in this situation. First, the believers were presenting a poor testimony to the lost. Even the unbelieving Jews dealt with their civil cases in their own synagogue courts. To take the problems of Christians and discuss them before the "unjust" (1 Cor. 6:1 KJV) and "unbelievers" (v. 6) was to weaken the testimony of the gospel.

Second, the congregation had failed to live up to its full position in Christ. Since the saints will one day participate in the judgment of the world and even of fallen angels (vv. 2–3), they ought to be able to settle their differences here on earth.

There was a third tragedy: The members suing each other had already lost (v. 7). Even if some of them won their cases, they had incurred a far greater loss in their disobedience to the Word of God. Better to lose money or possessions than to lose a brother and lose their testimony as well.

Something to Ponder

How do you feel when someone takes advantage of you? What would be a biblical approach to this sort of circumstance?

Day 39
Kid Stuff

Read Colossians 3:18—4:1

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Colossians 3:20

John H. Starkey was a violent British criminal. He murdered his own wife, then was convicted for the crime and executed. The officials asked General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, to conduct Starkey's funeral. Booth faced as ugly and mean a crowd as he had ever seen in his life, but his first words stopped them and held their attention: "John H. Starkey never had a praying mother!"

Children have rights, but they also have responsibilities; and their foremost responsibility is to obey. They are to obey "in everything" and not simply in those things that please themselves. Will their parents ever ask them to do something that is wrong? Not if the parents are submitted to the Lord and to each other.

Children who do not learn to obey their parents are not likely to grow up obeying any authority. They will defy their teachers, the police, their employers, and anyone else who tries to exercise authority over them. The breakdown in authority in our society reflects the breakdown of authority in the home.

Something to Ponder

How is children's obedience to parents significant in regard to their eventual obedience to God?

Day 40
Holding It Together

Read Colossians 1:16–17

[Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17

A guide took a group of people through an atomic laboratory and explained how all matter was composed of rapidly moving particles. The tourists studied models of molecules and were amazed to learn that matter is made up primarily of space. During the question period, one visitor asked, “If this is the way matter works, what holds it all together?” For that, the guide had no answer.

But the Christian has an answer: Jesus Christ! Because “he is before all things,” He can hold all things together. This is another affirmation that Jesus Christ is God. Only God existed before all of creation (Gen. 1:1–2), and only God can make creation cohere. To make Jesus Christ less than God is to dethrone Him.

It used to bother me to sing the familiar song “This Is My Father’s World.” I thought Satan and sin were in control of this world. I have since changed my mind, and now I sing the song with joy and victory. Jesus Christ made all things (John 1:1–3), He controls all things, and by Him all things hold together. Indeed this is my Father’s world!

Something to Ponder

If you increasingly believe that Jesus holds all things together, what are some situations you are currently facing in which you should trust Him more?

Day 41
Ignorance Is Amiss

Read 1 Peter 3:7

> *Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:7

When someone asked Mrs. Albert Einstein if she understood Dr. Einstein's theory of relativity, she replied, "No, but I understand the doctor." In my premarital counseling as a pastor, I often asked couples to write down the three things each one thought the other enjoyed doing the most. Usually, the prospective bride would not only complete her list quicker than the groom, but she would also have more correct answers.

It is amazing that two people can make plans to live together for the rest of their lives and not really know each other! Ignorance is dangerous in any area of life, but it is especially dangerous in marriage. A Christian husband needs to know his wife's moods, feelings, needs, fears, and hopes. He needs to listen with his heart and share meaningful communication with her. There must be such a protective atmosphere of love and submission in the home that the husband and wife can disagree and still be happy together. When either mate is afraid to be open and honest about a matter, the couple is building walls and not bridges.

Something to Ponder

If you are married, what are some practical things you and your spouse can do to try to improve your listening skills? If you are not married, how can you cultivate the ability to listen to others with your heart?

Day 42
Why Trials?

Read 1 Peter 1:6–7

> *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:6

All God plans and performs here is in preparation for what He has in store for us in heaven. He is preparing us for the life and service yet to come. Nobody yet knows all that is in store for us in heaven, but this we do know: Life today is a school in which God trains us for our future ministry in eternity. This explains the presence of trials in our lives—they are some of God's tools and textbooks in the school of Christian experience.

Peter illustrated this truth by referring to the goldsmith (1 Peter 1:7). No goldsmith would deliberately waste the precious ore. He would put it into the smelting furnace long enough to remove the cheap impurities; then he would pour it out and make from it a beautiful article of value. It has been said that the Eastern goldsmith kept the metal in the furnace until he could see his face reflected in it. So our Lord keeps us in the furnace of suffering until we reflect the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ.

Something to Ponder

What have your previous trials taught you about yourself?

Day 43
Motives for Obedience

Read 1 John 2:1–6

If anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him.

1 John 2:5

Obedience to God's Word is proof of our love for Him. There are three motives for obedience. We can obey because we have to, because we need to, or because we want to.

Slaves obey because they have to. If they don't obey, they will be punished. Employees obey because they need to. They may not enjoy their work, but they do enjoy getting their paychecks! They need to obey because they have a family to feed and clothe. But Christians are to obey their heavenly Father because they want to—for the relationship between them and God is one of love: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

This is the way we learned obedience when we were children. First, we obeyed because we had to. If we didn't obey, we were spanked! But as we grew up, we discovered that obedience meant enjoyment and reward, so we started obeying because it met certain needs in our lives. And it was a mark of real maturity when we started obeying because of love.

"Baby Christians" must constantly be warned or rewarded. Mature Christians listen to God's Word and obey it simply because they love Him.

Something to Ponder

What are some of God's commands you obey primarily out of obligation? Which do you obey because of the benefits you receive? Are there any you obey out of sheer love?

Day 44
Whether Vain

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

> *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:2

"Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon liked that word *vanity;* he used it in some form thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about everyday life. The word means "emptiness, futility, vapor, that which vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind."

From the human point of view ("under the sun," Eccl. 1:3), life does appear futile, and it is easy for us to get pessimistic. The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as "a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that."

What a relief to turn from these pessimistic views and hear Jesus Christ say, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Or to read Paul's majestic declaration, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Life is not in vain if it is lived according to the will of God, and that is what Solomon teaches in this neglected and often misunderstood book.

Something to Ponder

How would you define your current philosophy of life? Finish this statement: "Life is _____."

Day 45
Spiritual Exercise

Read 1 Timothy 4:7–16

> *For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*
>
> 1 Timothy 4:8

Clergyman and author Phillips Brooks said, “The great purpose of life—the shaping of character by truth.” Godly character and conduct are far more important than golf trophies or home-run records, though it is possible for a person to have both. Paul challenged Timothy to be as devoted to godliness as an athlete is to his sport.

As an athlete must control his body and obey the rules, so a Christian must make his body his servant and not his master. When I see high school football squads and baseball teams going through their calisthenics under the hot summer sun, I am reminded that there are spiritual exercises that I ought to be doing (Heb. 5:14). Prayer, meditation, self-examination, fellowship, service, sacrifice, submission to the will of others, witnessing—all of these can assist me, through the Spirit, to become a more godly person.

Spiritual exercise is not easy; we must “labour and suffer reproach” (1 Tim. 4:10 KJV). A Christian who wants to excel must really work at it, by the grace of God and to the glory of God.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the ways you labor and strive in your spiritual endeavors?

Day 46
Do You Understand?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1–25

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 14:1

A ministry that does not build up will fall down, no matter how spiritual it may seem. When we explain and apply the Word of God to individual lives, we have a ministry of edification. In this section, Paul repeatedly shows concern for understanding. It is not enough for the minister to impart information to people; the people must receive it if it is to do them any good. The seed that is received in the good ground is the seed that bears fruit, but this means that there must be an understanding of the Word of God (Matt. 13:23). If believers want to be edified, they must prepare their hearts to receive the Word (1 Thess. 2:13).

Congregationalist minister Dr. Joseph Parker preached at an important meeting and afterward was approached by a man who criticized a minor point in the sermon. Parker listened patiently to the man's criticism and then asked, "And what else did you get from the message?" This remark simply withered the critic, who then disappeared into the crowd. Too often we are quick to judge the sermon instead of allowing the Word of God to judge us.

Something to Ponder

In what ways have people "built you up" this week? What opportunities did they miss?

Day 47
Gone but Not Forgotten

Read Job 29

How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me.
Job 29:2

Job had opened his defense by saying that he wished he had never been born (Job 3). Here he closed his defense by remembering the blessings he and his family had enjoyed prior to his crisis. This is a good reminder that we should try to see life in a balanced way. “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (2:10). Charles Haddon Spurgeon said that too many people write their blessings in the sand but engrave their sorrows in marble.

When we are experiencing trials, it is natural for us to long for “the good old days”; but our longing will not change our situation.

There is a ministry in memory if we use it properly. In days of disappointment, it is good to “remember the deeds of the LORD … remember [His] miracles of long ago” (Ps. 77:11). But the past must be a rudder to guide us and not an anchor to hold us back. If we try to duplicate today what we experienced yesterday, we may find ourselves in a rut that robs us of maturity.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever wished you had never been born? If so, what caused those feelings?

Day 48
Marked for Christ

Read Galatians 6:11–18

> *Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*
>
> Galatians 6:17

In Paul's day, it was not unusual for the follower of some heathen god or goddess to be branded with the mark of that idol. He was proud of his god and wanted others to know it. In the same way, Paul was "branded" for Jesus Christ. It was not a temporary mark but a permanent mark that he would take to his grave. Nor did he receive his brands in an easy way: He had to suffer repeatedly to become a marked man for Christ. It was also the practice in that day to brand slaves so that everyone would know who the owner was. Paul was the slave of Jesus Christ, and he wore the Lord's mark to prove it.

It is worth noting that *sin brands a person.* It may mark his mind, his personality, even his body. Few people are proud of the sin marks they bear, and conversion does not change them. (Thank God, those changes will come when Jesus returns!) How much better it is to love Christ and live for Him and be "branded" for His glory.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you "branded" for Jesus?

Day 49
At Ease

Read 1 John 3:18–24

For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

1 John 3:20

A “condemning heart” is one that robs us of peace. An “accusing conscience” is another way to describe it. Sometimes the heart accuses us wrongly, because it “is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). The answer to that question is “God understands the heart!”

We must be careful lest the Devil accuse us and rob us of our confidence (Rev. 12:10). Once we confess our sin, and it is forgiven, we need not allow it to accuse us anymore.

We should not treat sin lightly, but we should not be harder on ourselves than God is. There is a morbid kind of self-examination and self-condemnation that is not spiritual. If we are practicing genuine love for others, our heart must be right before God, for the Holy Spirit would not share His love in us if there were habitual sin in our heart (Rom. 5:5). When we grieve the Spirit, we turn off the supply of God’s love (Eph. 4:30—5:2).

Something to Ponder

In what ways does the Devil accuse you and rob you of your confidence? What does it take to regain that confidence?

Day 50
A Common Problem

Read James 1:4

> *Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*
>
> James 1:4

As we read the epistle of James, we discover that the Jewish Christians were having some problems in their personal lives and in their church fellowship. For one thing, they were going through some difficult tests. They were also facing temptations to sin. Some of the believers were catering to the rich, while others were being robbed by the rich. Church members were competing for offices in the church, particularly teaching offices.

One of the major problems in the church was a failure on the part of many to live what they professed to believe. Furthermore, the tongue was a serious problem, even to the point of creating wars and divisions. Worldliness was another problem. Some members were disobeying God's Word and were physically sick because of it; and some were straying away from the Lord and the church.

But James was not discussing an array of miscellaneous problems. All of these problems had a common cause: spiritual immaturity. These Christians simply were not growing up.

Something to Ponder

Think back to your life one year ago. How have you matured spiritually since that time?

Day 51
Rising Above

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9–21

> *I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.… For when I am weak, then I am strong.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:9–10

God does not give us His grace simply to help us endure our sufferings. God's grace should enable us to rise above our circumstances and cause our afflictions to work for us in accomplishing positive good.

What benefits did Paul receive? He experienced the power of Christ in his life. God transformed Paul's weakness into strength.

Something else happened to Paul as a result of his suffering: He was able to glorify God in his infirmities. This does not mean that he preferred pain to health, but rather that he knew how to turn his infirmities into assets. What made the difference? The grace of God and the glory of God. Paul delighted in these trials and problems because he knew he was suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 12:10). "It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than its removal," wrote P. T. Forsyth. Paul won the victory, not by substitution but by transformation. He discovered the sufficiency of the grace of God (v. 9).

Something to Ponder

How would your spiritual life be different if you focused more on converting pain than on asking God to completely remove it?

Day 52

When Hope Becomes Hopeless

Read Ecclesiastes 9:5–10

> *The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 9:5

What Solomon wrote about the dead can be reversed and applied to the living. The dead do not know what is happening on earth, but the living know and can respond to it. The dead cannot add anything to their reward or their reputation, but the living can. Solomon was emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities while we live, rather than blindly hoping for something better in the future.

"The human body experiences a powerful gravitational pull in the direction of hope," wrote journalist Norman Cousins, who survived a near-fatal illness and a massive heart attack before his death in 1990. "That is why the patient's hopes are the physician's secret weapon. They are the hidden ingredients in any prescription."

We endure because we hope, but "hope in hope" (like "faith in faith") is too often only a kind of self-hypnosis that keeps us from facing life honestly. While patients may be better off with an optimistic attitude, it is dangerous for them to follow a false hope that may keep them from preparing for death. That kind of hope is hopeless. When the end comes, the patients' outlook may be cheerful, but the outcome will be tragic.

Something to Ponder

What is your definition of hope? How does your hope keep your faith strong?

Day 53
Eli-Who?

Read Job 31—32:1

> *So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.*
>
> Job 32:1

Job was silent. He had ended his defense and given oath that he was not guilty of the sins he had been accused of by his friends. Job had challenged God either to vindicate him or pass sentence on him.

Job's three friends were silent, appalled that Job had dared to speak so boldly to God and about God.

God was silent. The silence was God's eloquent witness to the three friends that they were wrong.

However, in the crowd around the ash heap, one person was not silent. It was Elihu, a man so unknown that his full pedigree had to be given so people could identify him (Job 32:2). While Elihu said some of the same things as the other speakers, his purpose was different. He was not trying to prove that Job was a sinner but that Job's view of God was wrong. Elihu introduced a new truth into the debate: that God sends suffering, not necessarily to punish us for our sins, but to keep us from sinning (33:15–18, 19–24) and to make us better persons (36:1–15). Paul would have agreed with the first point (2 Cor. 12:7–10) and the writer of Hebrews with the second (Heb. 12:1–11).

Something to Ponder

Have you sensed God's "silence" in the midst of your own trials? How did you interpret that silence?

Day 54
Heart Problems

Read Hebrews 3:12–19

> *See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily … so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*
>
> Hebrews 3:12–13

The heart of every problem is a problem in the heart. The people of Israel erred in their hearts—their hearts wandered from God and His Word. They also had hearts of unbelief; they did not believe that God would give them victory in Canaan. They had seen God perform great signs in Egypt, yet they doubted He was adequate for the challenge of Canaan (Heb. 3:7–11, 16–19).

When a person has an erring and disbelieving heart, the result will also be a hard heart. This is a heart that is insensitive to the Word and work of God. So hard was the heart of Israel that the people even wanted to return to Egypt (Num. 14:1–4)! Imagine wanting to exchange their freedom under God for slavery in Egypt! Of course, all this history spoke to the hearts of the readers of this letter, because they were in danger of "going back" themselves.

Believers who doubt God's Word and rebel against Him do not miss heaven, but they do miss out on the blessing of their inheritance today, and they must suffer the chastening of God.

Something to Ponder

When was the last time your heart was "hardened by sin's deceitfulness"?

Day 55
Mobile Homes

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1–10

> *We are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 5:6

The people of God can be found in one of two places: either in heaven or on earth (Eph. 3:15). Believers on earth are "at home in the body" (v. 6), while believers who have died are "absent from the body" (2 Cor. 5:8 KJV). Believers on earth are "absent from the Lord" (v. 6 KJV), while believers in heaven are "present with the Lord" (v. 8 KJV).

Because he had this knowledge, Paul was not afraid of suffering and trials. He was willing to "lose his life" for the sake of Christ. Heaven was not simply a destination for Paul: It was a motivation. Like the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, he looked for the heavenly city (vv. 13–16) and governed his life by eternal values.

Paul had a valuable treasure in the earthen vessel of his body, and he wanted to share that treasure with a bankrupt world. He had a confident faith that conquered fear, and he had a future hope. No wonder Paul was more than a conqueror (Rom. 8:37)! Every believer in Jesus Christ has these same marvelous possessions and can find through them courage for the conflict.

Something to Ponder

How could heaven become more of a motivation for you, and not just a destination?

Day 56
A Relatable King

Read Isaiah 36

> *In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.*
>
> Isaiah 36:1

Except for David and Solomon, no king of Judah is given more attention or commendation in Scripture than Hezekiah. He restored the temple facilities and services of worship, destroyed the idols and the hill shrines where the people falsely worshipped Jehovah, and sought to bring the people back to vital faith in the Lord. He led the people in a nationwide celebration of Passover and invited Jews from the northern kingdom to participate.

After the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC, Judah had constant problems with Assyria. Hezekiah finally rebelled against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7); and when Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, threatened to attack, Hezekiah tried to bribe him (Isa. 36:13–16). It was a lapse of faith that God could not bless. Sennacherib accepted the treasures but broke the treaty (33:1) and invaded Judah in 701 BC. The account of God's miraculous deliverance of His people is found in Isaiah 36—37. Though the setting today may be different, the problems and temptations are still the same; for Hezekiah's history is our history, and Hezekiah's God is our God.

Something to Ponder

When you, like Hezekiah, "inherit" something that all your predecessors have made a mess of, do you do what's easy and go with the flow, or do what's hard and correct the situation?

Day 57
A Geography Lesson

Read Hebrews 4

> *Since the promise of entering [God's] rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*
>
> Hebrews 4:1

There are spiritual lessons in the geography of Israel's experiences. The nation's bondage in Egypt is an illustration of sinners' bondage in this world. Much as Israel was delivered from Egypt by the blood of lambs and the power of God, so sinners who believe on Christ are delivered from the bondage of sin.

It was God's desire that the Israelites enter their glorious inheritance in the land of Canaan. But when the Israelites got to the border of their inheritance, they delayed because they doubted the promise of God (Num. 13—14). "We are not able," wept the ten spies and the people. "We *are* able with God's help!" said Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (see Num. 13:30; 14:5–9). Because the people went backward in unbelief instead of forward by faith, they missed their inheritance and died in the wilderness.

Today, Canaan represents our spiritual inheritance in Christ. Israel had to cross the Jordan River by faith (a picture of believers as they die to self and the world). They had to step out by faith (Josh. 1:3) and claim the land for themselves, just as believers today must do.

Something to Ponder

Do you feel that you are "in bondage" in any way? How might faith help you experience real freedom?

Day 58
Confident of Answers

Read 1 John 5:6–15

> *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*
>
> 1 John 5:14

What breathing is to a physical person, prayer is to a spiritual person. If our heart is fixed on Christ and we are trying to glorify Him, we are praying even when we are not conscious of it.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous preacher, was working hard on a message but was unable to complete it. It grew late, and his wife said, "Why don't you go to bed. I'll wake you up early, and you can finish your sermon in the morning."

Spurgeon dozed off and in his sleep began to preach the sermon that was giving him so much trouble! His wife wrote down what he said, and the next morning gave her preacher-husband the notes.

"Why, that's exactly what I wanted to say!" exclaimed the surprised preacher. The message had been in his heart; it had simply needed expression. So it is with prayer: If we are abiding in Christ, the very desires of our heart are heard by God whether we voice them or not.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the "desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4) that you haven't expressed to God in a while?

Day 59
A Sure Sign

Read Isaiah 7—8

> *The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*
>
> Isaiah 7:14

These were perilous days for the nation of Judah. Assyria was growing stronger and threatening the smaller nations. Syria and Ephraim (the northern kingdom) tried to pressure Judah into an alliance against Assyria, but Ahaz, king of Judah, refused to join them. Why? Because he had secretly made a treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5–9).

If Ahaz had believed God's promise, he would have broken his alliance and called the nation to prayer and praise; but the king continued in his unbelief. Isaiah addressed the whole "house of David" and gave the prophecy concerning "Immanuel."

The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is "God with us," which is what *Immanuel* means. This "sign" also had an immediate significance to Ahaz. A woman who was then a virgin would get married, conceive, and bear a son whose name would be Immanuel. This son would be a reminder that God was with His people and would care for them. It is likely that this virgin was Isaiah's second wife and that Isaiah's second son was named both Immanuel and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (meaning "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil") (see Isa. 8:1, 3).

Something to Ponder

King Ahaz's fear of Assyria was stronger than his trust in God. Are there any situations that shake your trust in God? If so, what are they?

Day 60
A Fashion Statement

Read 1 Peter 5:5–7

> *Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*
>
> 1 Peter 5:5

Younger believers should submit to the older believers, not only out of respect for their age, but also out of respect for their spiritual maturity. Not every "senior saint" is a mature Christian of course, because quantity of years is no guarantee of quality of experience. This is not to suggest that the older church members should run the church and never listen to the younger members. Too often there is a generational war in the church, with the older people resisting change, and the younger people resisting the older people.

The solution is twofold: (1) All believers, young and old, should submit to one other; and (2) all should submit to God. "Clothe yourselves with humility" is the answer to the problem. Just as Jesus laid aside His outer garments and put on a towel to become a servant (John 13:1–17), so each of us should have a servant's attitude and minister to one other. True humility is described in Philippians 2:1–11. Humility is not demeaning ourselves and thinking poorly of ourselves. It is simply not thinking of ourselves at all!

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you clothe yourself with humility? How could you improve in this area?

Day 61
Internal Changes

Read Hebrews 9

> *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*
>
> Hebrews 9:14

The old covenant rituals could not change people's hearts. This is not to say that worshippers did not have a spiritual experience if their hearts trusted God, but it does mean that the emphasis was on the external ceremonial cleansing. So long as the worshippers obeyed the prescribed regulations, they were declared clean. It was "the purifying of the flesh" but not the cleansing of the conscience.

We learned from Hebrews 8 that the ministry of the new covenant is internal: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (v. 10). The Holy Spirit of God does this work. But the Spirit could not dwell within us if Jesus Christ had not paid for our sins. Cleansing our consciences cannot be done by some external ceremony; it demands an internal power. Because Jesus Christ is unblemished, He was able to offer the perfect sacrifice.

Something to Ponder

To what extent are you certain that internal changes have taken place in your life? Explain.

Day 62
Religion Gone Wrong

Read Isaiah 1:5—3:26

> *Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!*
>
> Isaiah 1:15–17

The disgusting thing about Isaiah's rebellious nation is that they were a religious people (Isa. 1:10–15). They attended temple services and brought a multitude of sacrifices to the Lord; but their hearts were far from God.

But before passing judgment on worshippers in a bygone era, perhaps we should confess the sins of the worshipping church today. According to researcher George Barna, 93 percent of the households in the United States contain a Bible, and more than 60 percent of the people surveyed claim to be religious. One Protestant church exists for every 550 adults in America, but does all this "religion" make much difference?

The average church allocates about 5 percent of its budget for reaching others with the gospel but 30 percent for buildings and maintenance. Where churches have life and growth, such construction may be needed; but too often the building becomes "a millstone instead of a milestone," to quote Vance Havner. At least 62 percent of the people Barna surveyed said that the church was not relevant to today's world and was losing its influence on society. Is it possible that, like the worshippers in the ancient Jewish temple, we are only going through the motions?

Something to Ponder

In what ways have you experienced going through the motions in your faith life?

Day 63
The Real Thing

Read 1 John 3:1–3

> *We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*
>
> 1 John 3:2

The United States Treasury Department has a special group of employees whose job it is to track down counterfeiters. How do they learn to identify fake bills? They study the real thing. They become so familiar with authentic bills that they can spot a counterfeit just by looking at it or, often, by feeling it.

This is the approach in 1 John 3, which warns us that in today's world there are counterfeit Christians—"children of the devil" (v. 10). But instead of listing the evil characteristics of Satan's children, the Scripture gives us a clear description of God's children. The contrast between the two is obvious.

Unsaved people (even if they profess to be Christians but are counterfeits) live a life of habitual sin. Sin—especially the sin of unbelief—is the normal thing in their lives (Eph. 2:1–3). They have no divine resources to draw upon. Their profession of faith, if any, is not real. True believers do not live in habitual sin. They may commit sin, but they will not practice sin or make a settled habit of it.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the habitual sins you have found hardest to eliminate from your life? Why do you think these are such problem areas for you?

Day 64
People Are Watching

Read 1 Peter 2:11–12

> *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:12

In the summer of 1805, a number of Indian chiefs and warriors met in council at Buffalo Creek, New York, to hear a message by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. After the sermon, Red Jacket, one of the leading chiefs, gave a response. Among other things, the chief said:

"Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, we will then consider again of what you have said."

Peter encourages us to bear witness to the lost, by word and deed, so that one day God might visit them and save them. When these people do trust Christ, they will glorify God and give thanks because we were faithful to witness even when they made life difficult for us.

Something to Ponder

Are you satisfied with the example you set for others? If not, how can you improve it?

Day 65
Shape Up or Ship Out

Read 1 Corinthians 5

> *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud!*
>
> 1 Corinthians 5:1–2

The people at Corinth were boasting of the fact that their church was so "open minded" that even fornicators could be members in good standing! A professed Christian (and church member) was living with his stepmother in a permanent alliance. This kind of sin was condemned by the Old Testament law as well as by the laws of the Gentile nations. Paul shamed the church by saying, "Even the unsaved Gentiles don't practice this kind of sin!"

While Christians are not to judge one another's motives or ministries, we are certainly expected to be honest about one another's conduct. In my own pastoral ministry, I have never enjoyed having to initiate church discipline, but since it is commanded in the Scriptures, we must obey God and set personal feelings aside.

Paul prescribed here an official church meeting at which the offender should be dealt with according to divine instructions. The sin was not to be "swept under the rug"; for, after all, it was known far and wide even among the unsaved outside the church.

Something to Ponder

If you had been a member of the assembly at Corinth, how do you think you would have been affected by the blatant sin within the church?

Day 66
Four Factors

Read Colossians 1:10–14

> *Bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power … and joyfully giving thanks to the Father.*
>
> Colossians 1:10–12

Wisdom and conduct should always be related to moral character. One of the great problems in our evangelical world today is the emphasis on spiritual knowledge and Christian service, without connecting these important matters to personal character.

For example, some teachers and preachers claim to have God's wisdom—yet they lack love and kindness and the other basic qualities that make the Christian life beautiful and distinctive. Even some "soul-winning Christians" are so busy serving God that they cannot take time to check facts, so they publish lies about other Christians. For some months, I read a certain religious publication. But when I discovered that it had no "Letters to the Editor" column (except for praise) and that it had never published a correction or apologized for an error, I stopped reading the magazine.

Knowledge, conduct, service, and character must always go together. We know God's will so that we can obey it; and, in obeying it, we serve Him and grow in Christian character. While none of us is perfectly balanced in these four factors, we ought to strive for that balance.

Something to Ponder

If you never told other people you were a Christian, how long do you think it would take them to notice? Why?

Day 67
Lighten Up

Read 1 John 2:9–11

> *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.*
>
> 1 John 2:10

A man who was walking down a dark street one night saw a pinpoint of light coming toward him in a faltering way. He thought perhaps the person carrying the light was ill or drunk, but as he drew nearer, he could see a man carrying a flashlight and a white cane.

Why would a blind man be carrying a light? the man wondered, and then he decided to ask.

The blind man smiled. “I carry my light, not so I can see, but so that others can see me. I cannot help being blind,” he said, “but I can help being a stumbling block.”

The best way to help other Christians not to stumble is to love them. Love makes us stepping-stones; hatred (or any of its “cousins,” such as envy or malice) makes us stumbling blocks. It is important that we Christians exercise love in a local church, or else there will always be problems and disunity. If we are falling over each other, instead of lifting each other higher, we will never become a truly happy spiritual family.

Something to Ponder

In what ways have you been a stumbling block for other believers? How can you avoid being a stumbling block in the future?

Day 68
Sharing the Fullness

Read Colossians 2:8–15

> *In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.*
>
> Colossians 2:9–10

When Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, He went in a human body (Acts 1:1–11). It was a glorified body, to be sure, but it was real. After His resurrection, our Lord was careful to assure His disciples that He was the same person in the same body; He was not a ghost or a spirit (John 20:19–29). There is a glorified Man in heaven! The God-man, Jesus Christ, embodies the fullness of God!

Now, the remarkable thing is this: Every believer shares that fullness! "You have been given fullness in Christ" (Col. 2:10). The tense of the Greek verb indicates that this fullness is a permanent experience. Dr. Kenneth Wuest's very literal *Expanded Translation* reads, "And you are in Him, having been completely filled full with the present result that you are in a state of fullness."

When we are born again into the family of God, we are born complete in Christ. Our spiritual growth is not by addition but by nutrition. We grow from the inside out.

Something to Ponder

Since nothing needs to be added to what you are, how can you continue to mature as a Christian?

Day 69
Weapons

Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–6

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

2 Corinthians 10:4

There are walls of resistance in the minds of people, and these walls must be pulled down (2 Cor. 10:4 KJV). What are these "mental walls"? Reasonings that are opposed to the truth of God's Word. Pride of intelligence that exalts itself. Paul was not attacking intelligence but intellectualism, the high-minded attitude that makes people think they know more than they really do.

Paul's humility was actually one of his strongest weapons, for pride plays right into the hands of Satan. The meek Son of God had far more power than Pilate (John 19:11), and He proved it. To tear down the opposition, Paul used spiritual weapons: prayer, the Word of God, love, the power of the Spirit at work in his life. He did not depend on personality, human abilities, or even the authority he had as an apostle. However, he was ready to punish the offenders, if necessary, once the congregation had submitted to the Lord (2 Cor. 10:6).

The church today is still involved in spiritual warfare, but even those who understand the seriousness of the Christian battle do not always know how to fight. They try to use human methods to defeat demonic forces, and these methods are doomed to fail.

Something to Ponder

What are some spiritual "weapons" you may not be utilizing as well as you should? How can you use them more effectively?

Day 70
Longing for Maturity

Read Galatians 4:19–31

> *My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you …*
>
> Galatians 4:19

We parents never seem to outgrow our children. The saying goes, “When they’re little, they’re a handful; but when they’re grown, they’re a heart full!” I remember hearing my mother say, “When they’re little, they step on your toes; but when they’re grown, they step on your heart.” That is what Paul was experiencing as he tried to help the Galatian believers with their confused spiritual lives. When he had first come to them with the gospel, he had travailed spiritually to see them turn to the Lord. But after all, the Lord Jesus had suffered on the cross to make possible their salvation (Isa. 53:11), and Paul’s travail was nothing in comparison.

But now the Galatian Christians were falling back into legalism and a “second childhood” experience, and Paul had to labor over them again. He longed to see Christ formed in them, just as we parents long to see our children mature in the will of God.

Something to Ponder

Are you clinging to childhood in your faith, through legalism or in other ways? If so, how can you grow out of that state?

Day 71
Reward Offered

Read 1 Peter 5:4

> *When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*
>
> 1 Peter 5:4

Christian workers may labor for many different kinds of rewards. Some work hard to build personal empires; others strive for the applause of men; still others seek promotion in their church. All of these things will fade away one day. The only reward we ought to strive for is the "Well done!" from the Savior (Matt. 25:21–23) and the unfading "crown of glory" that goes with it. What a joy it will be to place the crown at His feet (Rev. 4:10) and acknowledge that all we did was because of His grace and power (1 Cor. 15:10; 1 Peter 4:11). We will have no desire for personal glory when we see Jesus Christ face-to-face.

Everything in the local church rises or falls with leadership. No matter how large or small a fellowship may be, the leaders must be Christians, each with a vital personal relationship with Jesus, a loving concern for people, and a real desire to please God.

We lead by serving, and we serve by suffering. This is the way Jesus did it, and this is the only way that truly glorifies Him.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you lead by serving? How do you serve by suffering?

Day 72
The Love God Hates

Read 1 John 2:12–15

> *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*
>
> 1 John 2:15

John's epistle warns us that there is a wrong kind of love, a love God hates. This is love for "the world." The New Testament word *world* has at least three different meanings. It sometimes means the physical world, the earth. It also means the human world, mankind. But the warning "Do not love the world" is not about the world of nature or the world of people. This "world" named here as our enemy is an invisible spiritual system opposed to God and Christ. "The world" in the Bible is Satan's system for opposing the work of Christ on earth. It is the very opposite of what is godly (1 John 2:16) and holy and spiritual.

Believers are somewhat like scuba divers. The water is not our natural habitat, for we are not equipped for life in (or under) it. When we go underwater, we have to take special equipment with us so that we can breathe.

Likewise, were it not for the Holy Spirit's living within us and the spiritual resources we have in prayer, Christian fellowship, and the Word, we could never make it here on earth.

Something to Ponder

What are some things you have done during the past week to combat the influence of worldliness in your life?

Day 73
The Best Sex

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–20

> *Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 6:18

Having sex outside of marriage is like a man robbing a bank: He gets something, but it is not his and he will one day pay for it. Sex within marriage can be like a man putting money into a bank: There are safety and security, and he will collect dividends.

Paul referred to the creation account to explain the seriousness of sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:16–17). When a man and woman join their bodies, the entire personality is involved. Paul warned that sexual sin is the most serious sin a man can commit against his body, for it involves the whole person (v. 18).

When two people pledge their love and faithfulness to each other, they lay a strong foundation on which to build. Marriage protects sex and enables the committed couple to grow in this wonderful experience.

In my pastoral counseling, I have helped married couples whose relationship was falling apart because of the consequences of premarital sex as well as extramarital sex. The harvest of sowing to the flesh is sometimes delayed, but it is certain (Gal. 6:7–8). How sad it is to live with the consequences of *forgiven* sin.

Something to Ponder

In what ways is sex enriched through marriage?

Day 74
Overcoming Fear

Read 1 John 4:17–19

> *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*
>
> 1 John 4:18

Two brand-new words come into John's vocabulary here: *fear* and *punishment*. And this passage is written to believers! Many professed believers experience both fear and torment day after day. And the reason is that they are not growing in the love of God.

If people are afraid, it is because of something in the past that haunts them, or something in the present that upsets them, or something in the future that they feel threatens them. Or it may be a combination of all three. Believers in Jesus Christ do not have to fear the past, present, or future; for they have experienced the love of God, and this love is being perfected in them day by day.

God wants His children to live in an atmosphere of love and confidence, not fear and potential punishment. Immature Christians are tossed between fear and love; mature Christians rest in God's love. A growing confidence in the presence of God is one of the first evidences that our love for God is maturing.

Something to Ponder

What is the difference between the "fear of the Lord" and being afraid of God and what He might do to you?

Day 75

As Sure as the World

Read Ecclesiastes 1:4–8

Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

Ecclesiastes 1:4

From the human point of view, nothing seems more permanent and durable than the planet on which we live. When we say that something is as sure as the world, we are echoing Solomon's confidence in the permanence of Planet Earth. With all of its diversity, nature is uniform enough in its operation that we can discover its laws and put them to work for us. In fact, it is this dependability that is the basis for modern science.

Nature is permanent, but we are transient, mere pilgrims on earth. Our pilgrimage is a brief one, for death eventually claims all of us. At the very beginning of his book, Solomon introduced a topic frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes: the brevity of life and the certainty of death.

Individuals and families come and go, nations and empires rise and fall, but nothing changes, for the world remains the same. Thomas Carlyle called history a mighty drama enacted upon the theater of time with suns for lamps and eternity for a background. Solomon would add that the costumes and sets may occasionally change, but the actors and the script remain pretty much the same; and that is as sure as the world.

Something to Ponder

How do you try to ensure that you're making the most of your life while you have the opportunity?

Day 76
Obeying God's Will

Read James 4:15–17

You ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

James 4:15

Some people think God's will is a cold, impersonal machine. God starts it going, and it is up to them to keep it functioning smoothly. If they disobey Him, the machine grinds to a halt, and they are out of God's will.

God's will is not a cold, impersonal machine. The will of God is a living relationship between God and the believer.

I prefer to see the will of God as a warm, growing, living body. If something goes wrong with one organ, the whole body doesn't die: The other parts of the body compensate for it until that organ begins working properly again. There is pain; there is also weakness; but there is not necessarily death.

When you and I get out of God's will, it is not the end of everything. We suffer, to be sure; but when God cannot rule, He overrules. Just as the body compensates for the malfunctioning of one part, so God adjusts things to bring us back into His will.

Something to Ponder

What is one decision you are getting ready to make right now for which you first need to seek God's will?

Day 77
A Clear Proclamation

Read Colossians 4:3–4

> *Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.*
>
> Colossians 4:3

A visitor at Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London was being shown around the building by the pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "Would you like to see the powerhouse of this ministry?" Spurgeon asked, as he showed the man into a lower auditorium. "It is here that we get our power, for while I am preaching upstairs, hundreds of my people are in this room praying." Is it any wonder that God blessed Spurgeon's preaching of the Word?

You, as a church member, can assist your pastor by praying for him. Never say to your pastor, "Well, the least I can do is to pray for you." The most you can do is to pray! Pray for your pastor as he prepares the Word, studies, and meditates. Pray that the Holy Spirit will give deeper insights into the truths of the Word. Pray too that your pastor will practice the Word that he preaches so that it will be real in his own life. As he preaches the message, pray that the Spirit will give him freedom of utterance and that the Word will reach into hearts and minds in a powerful way. (And it wouldn't hurt to pray for other church leaders too.)

Something to Ponder

What are some specific ways that you can more effectively pray for your pastor?

Day 78
Closing the Distance

Read James 4:7–12

> *Submit yourselves … to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*
>
> James 4:7–8

Dr. A. W. Tozer has a profound essay in one of his books entitled “Nearness Is Likeness.” The more we are like God, the nearer we are to God. I may be sitting in my living room with my Siamese cat on my lap, and my wife may be twenty feet away in the kitchen; yet I am nearer to my wife than to the cat because the cat is unlike me.

God graciously draws near to us when we deal with the sin in our lives. He will not share us with anyone else; He must have complete control.

It is possible to submit outwardly and yet not be humbled inwardly. God hates the sin of pride. If we are proud, He will chasten us until we are humbled. We have a tendency to treat sin too lightly, even to laugh about it. But sin is serious, and one mark of true humility is facing the seriousness of sin and dealing with our disobedience.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways that you try to “come near to God”? Which ones seem to work best for you?

Day 79
All You Need

Read Colossians 1:15

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Colossians 1:15

Paul's main theme in Colossians is the preeminence of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:18 KJV). There is no need for us to worry about angelic mediators or spiritual emanations. Every person who believes in Jesus Christ is saved (John 3:36) and is a part of His body, the church, of which He is the Head (Col. 1:18).

While in an airport waiting for my plane to arrive, I was approached by a young man who wanted to sell me a book. One look at the garish cover told me the book was filled with Oriental myths and philosophies.

"I have a book here that meets all my needs," I told the young man, and I reached into my briefcase and took out my Bible.

"Oh, we aren't against the Bible!" he assured me. "It's just that we have something more, and it makes our faith even better."

"Nobody can give me more than Jesus Christ has already given me," I replied. Sad to say, there are many Christians who actually believe that some person, religious system, or discipline can add something to their spiritual experience. But they already have everything they will ever need in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Something to Ponder

What are some things you tend to let interfere with your relationship with Jesus?

Day 80
By the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:16–26

> *So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*
>
> Galatians 5:16

At the close of an important speech to congress on January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt shared his vision of the kind of world he wanted to see after the war was over. He envisioned four basic freedoms enjoyed by all people: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. But our world still needs a fifth freedom: freedom from the tyranny of our sinful nature.

The legalists thought they had the answer to the problem in laws and threats, but Paul has explained that no amount of legislation can change a person's sinful nature. We need another power within, and that power comes from the Holy Spirit of God.

When we believe in Christ, the Spirit comes to dwell within us (Gal. 3:2). It is the Holy Spirit in the heart who gives assurance of salvation, and it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to live for Christ and glorify Him. The Holy Spirit is not simply a "divine influence"; He is a divine Person, just as the Father and the Son are. What God the Father planned for you and God the Son purchased for you on the cross, God the Spirit personalizes for you and applies to your life as you yield to Him.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you live "by the Spirit"?

Day 81
Terrible Times

Read 2 Timothy 3:1–9

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.

2 Timothy 3:1

Too many Christians are like the pilot who informed his passengers, “We are lost, but we are making very good time.” “These last days” began with the ministry of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2) and will continue until He returns. They are called the “last days” because in them God is completing His purposes for His people. Because our Lord has delayed His return, some people scoff at the promise of His second coming (2 Peter 3:3ff.), but He will come as He promised. Within this period of last days there will be “times” (seasons) of different kinds, but as the times draw to a close, they will become perilous.

There is no doubt that these characteristics started to appear in Paul’s day, and now they have increased in intensity. It is not simply that we have more people in the world or better news coverage. It appears that evil is deeper and of greater intensity, and that it is being accepted and promoted by society in a bolder way. It is not that we have small pockets of rebellion here and there. All of society seems to be in ferment and rebellion. We are indeed in “terrible times” (2 Tim. 3:1).

Something to Ponder

What are some of the signs you’ve noticed that suggest we’re in the “last days”?

Day 82
Lord of All

Read Romans 14:1–12

> *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*
>
> Romans 14:4

Two of the most famous Christians in the Victorian era in England were Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker, both of them mighty preachers of the gospel. Early in their ministries they fellowshipped and even exchanged pulpits. Then they had a disagreement, and the reports even got into the newspapers. Spurgeon accused Parker of being unspiritual because he attended the theater. Interestingly enough, Spurgeon smoked cigars, a practice many believers would condemn. Who was right? Who was wrong? Perhaps both of them were wrong!

When it comes to questionable matters in the Christian life, cannot dedicated believers disagree without being disagreeable? "I have learned that God blesses people I disagree with!" a friend of mine told me one day, and I have learned the same thing. When Jesus Christ is Lord in our lives, we permit Him to deal with His own servants as He wishes.

Something to Ponder

Is it more difficult to allow Jesus to be Lord of your life or of other peoples' lives? Why?

Day 83
Spiritual Senses

Read Hebrews 5:11–14

Solid food is for the mature.

Hebrews 5:14

Just as our physical bodies have senses, without which we could not function, so our inner "spiritual man" has "spiritual senses." As we feed on the Word of God, and apply it in daily life, our inner spiritual senses get their exercise and become strong and keen. Paul called this process training ourselves to be godly (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

The ability to discern good and evil is a vital part of Christian maturity. The nation of Israel in Moses' day lacked this discernment and failed to claim its promised inheritance. The readers of this letter were in danger of making the same mistake. It is impossible to stand still in the Christian life: Either we go forward and claim God's blessing, or we go backward and wander about aimlessly.

I once heard a preacher say, "Most Christians are 'betweeners.'"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"They are between Egypt and Canaan—out of the place of danger, but not yet into the place of rest and rich inheritance," he replied. "They are between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—saved by the blood, but not yet enjoying newness of resurrection life."

Something to Ponder

In what ways, if any, are you a "betweener"? How can you remedy that?

Day 84

Leaving Slavery Behind

Read 1 Peter 1:18–21

> *You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed … but with the precious blood of Christ.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:18–19

There were probably fifty million slaves in the Roman Empire! Slaves could purchase their own freedom if they could collect sufficient funds; or their masters could sell them to someone who would pay the price and set them free. Redemption was a precious thing in that day.

We must never forget the slavery of sin. Not only did we have a life of slavery, but it was also a life of emptiness. At the time, we may have thought our lives were full and happy when they were really empty and miserable. In the same way, unsaved people today are living on substitutes.

I met a woman who told me she had been converted early in life but had drifted into a "society life" that satisfied her ego. One day, she was driving to a card party and happened to tune in a Christian radio broadcast. At that very moment, the speaker said, "Some of you women know more about cards than you do about your Bible!" God spoke to her heart, she went back home, and from that hour her life was dedicated fully to God.

Something to Ponder

What are some substitutes you've sought or tried out to fill the emptiness in your life? How did they compare to your relationship with Christ?

Day 85
A Genuine Truth

Read 1 John 2:26–29

> *Now, dear children, continue in [Christ], so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.*
>
> 1 John 2:28

A person who professes to be a Christian but does not live in obedience, love, and truth is either deceived or a deceiver. A child bears the nature of an earthly father, and a person who has been "born of God" will reveal the characteristics of the heavenly Father.

A Sunday school class seemed to be having constant problems. The pastor and the superintendent met with the teacher and officers but made no apparent progress. Then, one Sunday morning, the teacher of the class came down the aisle during the closing hymn of the service. *I suppose she wants to dedicate her life to the Lord,* the pastor thought.

"Pastor," she said, "I want to confess Christ as my Savior. All these years I thought I was saved, but I wasn't. There was always something lacking in my life. The class problems were actually my problems, but now they've been solved."

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5). Do our lives bear the marks of obedience, love, and truth? Are our Christian lives something real, genuine, authentic? Or are they counterfeit?

Something to Ponder

What would it take to make your Christian life more genuine?

Day 86
Zealous, but Wrong

Read Galatians 4:8–18

> *Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them.*
>
> Galatians 4:17

One of the marks of a false teacher is that he tries to attract other people's converts to himself and not simply to the truth of the Word or to the person of Jesus Christ. It was not the Judaizers who originally came to Galatia and led them to Christ; it was Paul. Like the cultists today, these false teachers were not winning lost sinners to Christ but were stealing converts from those who were truly serving the Lord.

Paul had proved to be their loving friend. Now they were turning away from Paul and following false shepherds. Paul told them the truth, but the Judaizers told them lies. Paul sought to glorify Christ, but the Judaizers glorified themselves and their converts. "Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them" (Gal. 4:17).

A true servant of God does not "use people" to build up himself or his work; he ministers in love to help people know Christ better and glorify Him.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever used people to build up yourself or your work? What prompted that? How might Paul have responded to your actions?

Day 87
Seeking Refuge

Read Isaiah 24—25

> *You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.*
>
> Isaiah 25:4

Isaiah paints two pictures: the buffeting of a storm and the beating down of a burning sun in the desert. Where can travelers go for refuge? They see a huge rock and find refuge in it. God is that rock, and He will be a refuge for His believing people. The victory shouts of the Enemy will disappear the way heat vanishes when a cloud covers the sea.

God cares for His own in times of trial and judgment. He kept Noah and his family alive through the flood and guarded Israel when His judgments fell on Egypt. He protected Rahab and her family when Jericho fell and preserved a faithful remnant when Judah was taken into Babylonian captivity. Throughout the centuries, God has kept His church in spite of Satan's attacks. When the day of the Lord comes, God will see to it that the Jewish remnant will be preserved. "Hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by. See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins" (Isa. 26:20–21).

Something to Ponder

What are some of the current "storms" in your life—the emotionally upsetting situations you face? In what ways is God a refuge for each of the situations you have listed?

Day 88
Sounds and Silence

Read Job 32:2—33:33

Elihu … became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God.

Job 32:2

Job had claimed that God was wrong, and the three friends couldn't prove that Job was wrong! Elihu was disgusted at the three friends' failure.

"It is easy to fly into a passion—anybody can do that," wrote Aristotle. "But to be angry with the right person to the right extent and at the right time and with the right object and in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it."

Elihu promised Job that God would radically alter his situation if only he would humble himself. If he would confess his sins and admit that God had punished him far less than he deserved (Job 33:27), Job would move out of the darkness into the light and gladly bear witness of God's redemption (v. 28).

Job 33:31–33 suggests that Elihu wanted Job's response, but at the same time Elihu wanted Job to keep quiet! Elihu didn't want to stop talking. But Job didn't reply because he was waiting for God to speak. What Elihu thought about him or said to him made little difference to Job.

Job had taken his case to a much higher court, and when Elihu finished speaking, the Judge appeared.

Something to Ponder

Do you think anger ever affects your ministry to others? In what specific ways?

Day 89
Rules of the Game

Read Philippians 3:15–16

> *All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*
>
> Philippians 3:15–16

One day each of us Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10–12). The Greek word for "judgment seat" is *bema,* the very same word used to describe the place where the Olympic judges gave out the prizes. If we have disciplined ourselves to obey the rules, we will receive a prize.

Biblical history is filled with people who began their spiritual lives with great success but failed at the end because they disregarded God's rules. They did not lose their salvation, but they did lose their rewards. It happened to Lot, Samson, Saul, and Ananias and Sapphira. And it can happen to us!

It is an exciting experience to run the race marked out for us daily, fixing our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:1–2). It will be even more exciting when we experience that "high calling" (Phil. 3:14 KJV), and Jesus returns to take us to heaven! Then we will stand before the bema to receive our rewards. It was this future prospect that motivated Paul, and it can also motivate us.

Something to Ponder

How do you feel as you think about standing at the judgment seat of Christ to receive your rewards? Why?

Day 90
Complete!

Read Colossians 1:9

> *Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*
>
> Colossians 1:9

When we are born into God's family by faith in Jesus Christ, we are born with all we need for growth and maturity. This is the theme of Colossians: "You have been given fullness in Christ" (2:10). "Do not look for something new," Paul warned the church. "Continue to grow in that which you received at the beginning" (author's paraphrase).

Each of us needs to have the "knowledge of [God's] will." The Greek word translated "knowledge" in Colossians 1:9 carries the meaning of "full knowledge." There is always more to learn about God and His will for our lives. As Christians we should never dare to say that we have arrived and need to learn nothing more. Like the college freshman who handed in a ten-page report on "The History of the Universe," we would only declare our ignorance.

God is not a distant dictator who issues orders and never explains. Because we are His friends (John 15:13–15; James 2:23), we can know what He is doing and why He is doing it. As we study His Word and pray, we discover new and exciting truths about God's will for us as His people.

Something to Ponder

What steps can you take in order to better know and understand God's will for your life?

Day 91
Enemies of the Cross

Read Philippians 3:17–19

> *As I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*
>
> Philippians 3:18

The cross of Jesus Christ is the theme of the Bible, the heart of the gospel, and the chief source of praise in heaven. The cross is the proof of God's love for sinners and God's hatred for sin. In what sense were the Judaizers the "enemies of the cross of Christ"? For one thing, the cross ended the Old Testament religion. By His death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished a "spiritual circumcision" that made ritual circumcision unnecessary (see Col. 2:10–13). Everything the Judaizers advocated had been eliminated by the death of Christ on the cross.

Furthermore, the cross condemned everything that they lived for. Jesus had broken down the wall that stood between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–18), and the Judaizers were rebuilding that wall.

True believers crucify the flesh. They also crucify the world. Yet, the Judaizers were minding "earthly things" (Phil. 3:19). It is the cross that is central in the life of believers.

Something to Ponder

How much thought have you put into the significance of the cross? In what ways do you "glory" in the cross?

Day 92
No Place for Pride

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1–13

> *It seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 4:9

Pride has no place in ministry. If a truly great leader like Paul considered himself "on display at the end of the procession," where does this leave the rest of us? Church members are wrong when they measure ministers by standards other than those God has given. They are also wrong when they boast about their favorite preachers. This is not to say that faithful servants should not be recognized and honored (1 Thess. 5:12–13), but in all things, God must be glorified.

Paul was a fool according to the standards of the world. Had he remained a Jewish rabbi, he could have attained great heights in the Jewish religion (Gal. 1:14). The Corinthians were wise in their own eyes, but they were actually fools in the sight of God. By depending on the wisdom and the standards of the world, they were acting like fools. Many times to be spiritually wise is to become foolish in the eyes of the world (1 Cor. 3:18). I often find myself quoting those words of martyred Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Something to Ponder

What are some things you "cannot keep"? What are the things you "cannot lose"?

Day 93
Isaiah's Vision

Read Isaiah 4—6

> *I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*
>
> Isaiah 6:8

Anyone reading the first few chapters of Isaiah's book might be inclined to ask, "What right does this man have to pronounce judgment?" The answer is found in chapter 6: Isaiah's account of his call to ministry. Before he announced any "woes" on others, he first confessed his own sins.

The sight of a holy God and the sound of the holy hymn of worship brought great conviction to Isaiah's heart. Isaiah cried out to be cleansed inwardly, and God met his need. If this scene had been on earth, the coals would have come from the brazen altar where the sacrificial blood had been shed, or perhaps from the censer of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:12). Isaiah's cleansing came by blood and fire, and the Word of the Lord verified it. Before we can minister to others, we must permit God to minister to us. Before we pronounce "woe" upon others, we must sincerely say, "Woe is me!" Isaiah's conviction led to confession, and confession led to cleansing (1 John 1:9).

"Go and tell" is still God's command to His people. He is waiting for us to reply, "Here am I. Send me!"

Something to Ponder

Are you willing to say, "Here am I. Send me!"? Why or why not?

Day 94
Countdown

Read James 4:13–14

> *You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*
>
> James 4:14

We count our years at each birthday, but God tells us to number our days (Ps. 90:12). After all, we live one day at a time. We cannot afford merely to "spend our lives"; and we certainly do not want to "waste our lives." We must invest our lives in those things that are eternal.

God reveals His will and His Word, and yet most people ignore the Bible. In the Bible, God gives precepts, principles, and promises that can provide guidance in every area of life. We don't have the wisdom to see the future nor the power to control the future. For us to boast is sin. How foolish it is for people to ignore the will of God. It is like going through the dark jungles without a map, or over the stormy seas without a compass.

When I visited Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, I was impressed with the maze of tunnels and the dense darkness when the lights were turned off. When we got to the "Pulpit Rock," the man in charge of the tour gave a five-word sermon from it: "Stay close to your guide." Good counsel indeed!

Something to Ponder

If you knew you had only one week to live, list all the things you would want to do during that week.

Day 95
A Legal Matter

Read Romans 4:16–25

> *[Jesus our Lord] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*
>
> Romans 4:25

Justification is the act of God whereby He declares believing sinners righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Each part of this definition is important, so we must consider it carefully.

Justification is an act, not a process. There are no degrees of justification; each of us believers has the same right standing before God. Also, justification is something done by God, not by us. We cannot justify ourselves before God. Most important, justification does not mean that God makes us righteous, but that He *declares* us righteous. Justification is a legal matter. God puts the righteousness of Christ on our records in the place of our own sinfulness. And nobody can change these records.

We must not confuse justification and sanctification. Sanctification is the process whereby God makes believers more and more like Christ. Sanctification may change from day to day. Justification never changes. When we trust Christ, God declares us righteous, and that declaration will never be repealed. God looks upon us and deals with us as though we had never sinned at all!

Something to Ponder

What does it mean to you that God has justified you? How is God’s justification revealed in your life?

Day 96
First, the Bad News

Read Job 1:6–19

> *Yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting … when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead."*
>
> Job 1:18–19

In one day, Job was stripped of his wealth, and all ten of his children were killed in a windstorm (Job 1:13–19).

Job knew what had happened, but he did not know why. Because the author allows us to visit the throne room of heaven and hear God and Satan speak, *we do* know (vv. 6–12).

Several important truths emerge from this scene, not the least of which is that God is sovereign in all things. He is on the throne of heaven, the angels do His will and report to Him, and even Satan can do nothing to God's people without God's permission. "The Almighty" is one of the key names for God in Job; it is used thirty-one times. From the outset, the writer reminds us that, no matter what happens in this world and in our lives, God is on the throne and has everything under control. We may not know until we get to heaven why God allowed certain things to happen. Meanwhile, we walk by faith and say with Job, "May the name of the LORD be praised" (v. 21).

Something to Ponder

How do these events that happened to Job make you feel about God?

Day 97

Two Good Examples

Read Hebrews 3:1–11

Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

Hebrews 3:1

Jesus Christ is not only the Apostle; He is also the High Priest. In fact, Jesus Christ has the title “great high priest” (Heb. 4:14).

As the Apostle, Jesus Christ represented God to people, and as the High Priest, He now represents people to God in heaven. Moses, of course, fulfilled similar ministries; for he taught Israel God’s truth, and he prayed for Israel when he met God on the mount (Ex. 32:30–32). Moses was primarily the prophet of the law, while Jesus Christ is the messenger of God’s grace (John 1:17). Moses helped prepare the way for the coming of the Savior to earth.

However, the writer of Hebrews notes that Moses and Jesus Christ were both faithful in the work God gave them to do. Moses was not sinless, as was Jesus Christ, but he was faithful and obeyed God’s will (Num. 12:7). This would be an encouragement to those first-century Jewish believers to remain faithful to Christ, even in the midst of the tough trials they were experiencing. Instead of going back to Moses, they should imitate Moses and be faithful in their calling.

Something to Ponder

How might your spiritual life improve if you were to imitate the faithfulness of Moses? What opportunity for faithfulness do you have?

Day 98

Mercy and Faithfulness

Read Hebrews 2:10–18

> *For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.*
>
> Hebrews 2:17

Jesus Christ is both merciful and faithful; He is merciful toward people and faithful toward God. He can never fail in His priestly ministries. He made the necessary sacrifice for our sins so that we might be reconciled to God. He did not need to make a sacrifice for Himself because He is sinless.

But what happens when we who have been saved are tempted to sin? He stands ready to help us! He was tempted when He was on earth, but no temptation conquered Him (Heb. 4:14–15). Because He has defeated every enemy, He can give us the grace we need to overcome temptation (v. 16). The word *succour* in the King James Version (or *help* in the New International Version) in Hebrews 2:18 literally means "to run to the cry of a child." It means "to bring help when it is needed." Angels are able to serve us (1:14), but they cannot help us in our times of temptation. Only Jesus Christ can do that, and He can do it because He became a man and suffered and died for us.

Something to Ponder

What are some specific ways that Jesus has been merciful to you lately?

Day 99
It’s Not about Me

Read Galatians 1:13–24

And they praised God because of me.

Galatians 1:24

If Paul had been interested in glorifying himself, he could have remained a Jewish rabbi and perhaps become Gamaliel’s successor. But it was the glory of God that motivated Paul, and this ought to motivate our lives as well.

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a young preacher, his father, Reverend John Spurgeon, suggested that Charles go to college to gain prominence. It was arranged for Charles to meet Dr. Joseph Angus, the principal of Stepney College, London. They were to meet at a Mr. Macmillan’s home in Cambridge, and Charles arrived at the appointed hour. He waited for two hours, but the learned doctor never appeared. When Charles finally inquired about the man, he discovered that Dr. Angus had been waiting in another room and because of another appointment, had already departed. Disappointed, Charles left for a preaching engagement. While he was walking along, he heard a voice clearly say to him, “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!” (Jer. 45:5 KJV). From that moment, Charles determined to do the will of God for the glory of God, and God blessed him in exceptional ways.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the ways you bring God glory?

Day 100
Motivation for Ministry

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1–6

Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

2 Corinthians 4:1

The way we look at our ministry helps to determine how we will fulfill it. If we look on serving Christ as a burden, we will be a drudge and do only what is required of us. Some people even look upon Christian service as a punishment from God. When Paul considered the fact that he was a minister of Jesus Christ, he was overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of God.

His positive attitude toward the ministry kept him from being a quitter. He confessed to the Corinthians that his trials in Asia Minor had almost brought him to despair (2 Cor. 1:8). In spite of his great gifts and vast experience, Paul was human and subject to human frailties. But how could he lose heart when he was involved in such a wonderful ministry? With the divine calling came the divine enabling; he knew that God would see him through.

A discouraged Methodist preacher wrote to the great Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte to ask his counsel. Should he leave the ministry? "Never think of giving up preaching!" Whyte wrote to him. "The angels around the throne envy you your great work!" That was the kind of reply Paul would have written, the kind of reply all of us need to ponder whenever we feel that our work is in vain.

Something to Ponder

Is your ministry something that the angels would envy? Why or why not?

Day 101
In Good Company

Read Romans 1:16–17

> *In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*
>
> Romans 1:17

On May 24, 1738, a discouraged missionary went "very unwillingly" to a religious meeting in London. There a miracle took place. "About a quarter before nine," he wrote in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

That missionary was John Wesley. The message he heard was the preface to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. The Scripture that brought Luther out of mere religion into the joy of salvation by grace, through faith, was verse 17: "The righteous will live by faith." The Protestant Reformation and the Wesleyan revival were both the fruit of this wonderful letter.

Imagine! You and I can read and study the same letter that brought life and power to Luther and Wesley! And the same Holy Spirit who taught them can teach us! You and I can experience revival in our hearts, homes, and churches if the message of this letter grips us as it gripped people of faith in centuries past.

Something to Ponder

What do you think would need to happen in order for you to experience revival of life and power in Christ?

Day 102
Lasting Contentment

Read Hebrews 13

> *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*
>
> Hebrews 13:5

A Christian couple was ministering to believers in Eastern Europe, behind the iron curtain. The couple had brought in Christian literature, blankets, and other necessary items. At the church gathering, the couple assured the believers that Christians in America were praying for believers in Eastern Europe.

"We are happy for that," one believer replied, "but we feel that Christians in America need more prayer than we do. We here in Eastern Europe are suffering, but you in America are very comfortable; and it is always harder to be a good Christian when you are comfortable."

The phrase "love of money" can be applied to a love for more of anything. Someone asked millionaire Bernard Baruch, "How much money does it take for a rich man to be satisfied?" Baruch replied, "Just a million more than he has." Covetousness is the desire for more, whether it is needed or not.

Contentment cannot come from material things, for they can never satisfy the heart. Only God can do that.

Something to Ponder

Are any signs of discontent evident in your life (such as worry, complaining, covetousness, etc.)? If so, how do you deal with them?

Day 103
A “Poor” Example

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–9

> *You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 8:9

In what ways was Jesus rich? Certainly He was rich in His person, for He is the eternal God. He was rich in His power, for He can do anything. Yet, in spite of the fact that He had these riches—and more—He became poor.

Jesus united Himself to humanity and took upon Himself a human body. He left the throne to become a servant (Phil. 2:7). He laid aside all His possessions so that He did not even have a place to lay His head (Luke 9:58). His ultimate experience of poverty was when He was made to be sin for us on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Hell is eternal poverty, and on the cross Jesus Christ became the poorest of the poor.

Why did He do it? So that we might become rich! This suggests that we were poor before we met Jesus Christ, and we were—totally bankrupt in fact. But now that we have trusted Him, we share in all of His riches. Since this is true, how can we refuse to give to others? Jesus became poor to make us rich! Can we not follow His example (1 Peter 2:21)?

Something to Ponder

How could your becoming poorer (financially) help someone else become richer (spiritually)?

Day 104

Backsliding Is Not Good Exercise

Read 1 John 3:7–10

> *Do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil.*
>
> 1 John 3:7–8

God's promise "I will cure you of backsliding" (Jer. 3:22) implies that backsliding resembles physical sickness. First is the secret invasion of the body by a disease germ. An infection follows, and there is a gradual decline: no pep, no appetite, no interest in normal activities. Then comes the collapse.

Spiritual decline works in a similar way. First, sin invades us. Instead of fighting it, we yield to it (James 1:14–15), and then infection sets in. A gradual decline follows. We lose our appetite for spiritual things, we become listless and irritable, and finally we collapse. The only remedy is to confess and forsake our sin and turn to Christ for cleansing and healing. Our "inner man" (Eph. 3:16 KJV) not only needs food and cleansing but also needs exercise: "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Tim. 4:7). People who eat but do not exercise will become overweight; people who exercise without eating will kill themselves. There must be proper balance. "Spiritual exercise" for us believers includes sharing Christ with others, doing good works in Christ's name, and helping to build up other believers.

Something to Ponder

What opportunities for spiritual exercise did you encounter during this past week?

Day 105
Faith Looks Forward

Read Hebrews 11:6–16

Without faith it is impossible to please God.

Hebrews 11:6

Faith looks to the future, for that is where the greatest rewards are found. The people named in Hebrews 11 (and those unnamed) did not receive "the things promised" (v. 13), but they had God's witness to their faith that one day they would be rewarded. One day *all* of us will share that heavenly city that true saints look for by faith (v. 16).

We today should give thanks for these saints of old, for they were faithful during difficult times, and yet we are the ones who have received the better blessing. They saw some of these blessings afar off (v. 13), but we enjoy them today through Jesus Christ. If the saints of old had not trusted God and obeyed His will, Israel would have perished, and the Messiah would not have been born.

Without faith it is impossible to please God. But this faith grows as we listen to His Word and fellowship in worship and prayer. Faith is possible to all kinds of believers in all kinds of situations. It is not a luxury for a few "elite saints." It is a necessity for all of God's people.

Lord, increase our faith (Luke 17:5)!

Something to Ponder

When is your faith the strongest? When does it seem weakest?

Day 106

No Longer the Law

Read Galatians 3:15–29

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Galatians 3:25

In many Roman and Greek households, well-educated slaves guarded the children during the day. Sometimes they would teach the children, sometimes they would protect and prohibit, and sometimes they would even discipline. This is what Paul meant by *schoolmaster* (Gal. 3:24 KJV), but please do not read into this word our modern idea of a schoolteacher. The transliteration of the Greek would give us our word *pedagogue*, which literally means "a child conductor."

By using this illustration, Paul was saying several things about the Jews and their law. First, he was saying that the Jews were not born through the law, but rather were brought up by the law. The slave was not the child's father; he was the child's guardian and disciplinarian. So, the law did not give life to Israel; it regulated life. The Judaizers taught that the law was necessary for life and righteousness, and Paul's argument shows their error. But the second thing Paul said is even more important: The work of the guardian was preparation for the child's maturity. Once the child came of age, he no longer needed the guardian. So the law was a preparation for the nation of Israel until the coming of the promised seed, Jesus Christ.

Something to Ponder

Are there any ways in which you tend to trust the law instead of faith? If so, what are they?

Day 107
Miracle Recovery

Read Isaiah 38—39

> *In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."*
>
> Isaiah 38:1

In the beautiful meditation in Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah tells us how he felt during his experience of illness and recovery.

God gave him a new appreciation of life (vv. 9–12). He also had a new appreciation of prayer (vv. 13–14). Were it not for prayer, Hezekiah could not have made it. At night, the king felt like a frail animal being attacked by a fierce lion; and in the daytime, he felt like a helpless bird. During this time of suffering, Hezekiah examined his own heart and confessed his sins, and God forgave him.

The king ended with a new appreciation of opportunities for service (vv. 15–20). There was a new humility in his walk, a deeper love for the Lord in his heart, and a new song of praise on his lips. He had a new determination to praise God all the days of his life, because now those days were very important to him.

Something to Ponder

What can you remember from this story the next time you are facing a seemingly hopeless and final situation?

Day 108

Speaking the Language

Read 1 Corinthians 2:11–16

> *This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 2:13

Each of our four children has a different vocation. We have a pastor, a nurse, an electronics designer, and a secretary in a commercial real-estate firm. Each of the children had to learn a specialized vocabulary in order to succeed.

Successful Christians learn the vocabulary of the Spirit and make use of it. They know the meaning of *justification, sanctification, adoption, propitiation, election, inspiration,* and so forth. In understanding God's vocabulary, they come to understand God's Word and God's will for their lives.

Yet I've heard church members say, "Don't preach doctrine. Just give us heartwarming sermons that will encourage us!" Sermons based on what? If they are not based on doctrine, they will accomplish nothing! "But doctrine is so dull!" people complain. Not if it is presented the way the Bible presents it. Doctrine is exciting! What a thrill to be able to study the Bible and let the Spirit teach us "the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10).

Something to Ponder

Choose one of these words, explain what it means, and tell how it is exciting in your life: *justification, sanctification, adoption, propitiation, election, inspiration.*

Day 109
Privilege

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

> *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 5:20

When I was a young pastor, it used to embarrass me somewhat to make visits and confront people with the claims of Christ. Then it came to me that I was a privileged person, an ambassador of the King of Kings! There was nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, the people I visited should have been grateful that one of Christ's ambassadors came to see them.

God has not declared war on the world; at the cross He declared peace. But one day, He will declare war; and then it will be too late for those who have rejected the Savior (2 Thess. 1:3–10). Satan is seeking to tear everything apart in this world, but Christ and His church are involved in the ministry of reconciliation, bringing things back together, and back to God.

Ministry is not easy. If we are to succeed, we must be motivated by the fear of the Lord, the love of Christ, and the commission that He has given to us. What a privilege it is to serve Him!

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you consider being an ambassador of Christ a privilege?

Day 110
Time Matters

Read 1 Peter 4:7–11

> *The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*
>
> 1 Peter 4:7

My wife and I were in Nairobi, Kenya, where I would be ministering to several hundred national pastors at an Africa Inland Mission conference. We were very excited about the conference even though we were a bit weary from the long journey. We could hardly wait to get started, and the leader of the conference detected our impatience.

"You are in Africa now," he said to me in a fatherly fashion, "and the first thing you want to do is put away your watch."

In the days that followed we learned the wisdom of his words. Unfortunately, when we returned to the States, we found ourselves caught up again in the clockwork prison of deadlines and schedules.

Peter had a great deal to say about time. Awareness of his own impending martyrdom might have had something to do with this (John 21:15–19; 2 Peter 1:12ff.). Whether Jesus comes first, or death comes first, we want to make "the rest of [our] time" (1 Peter 4:2 KJV) count for eternity. And we can!

Something to Ponder

What spiritual goals do you have that you hope to accomplish before your own death?

Day 111
Doctrine and Duty

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1–24

> *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 16:2

It is unfortunate when Christian ministries lose their testimony because they mismanage funds entrusted to them. Paul was very careful not to allow anything to happen that would give his enemies opportunity to accuse him of stealing funds (2 Cor. 8:20–21).

This explains why Paul encouraged the churches to share in the offering and to select dependable representatives to help manage it. Paul was not against individuals giving personally; in 1 Corinthians 16:10–20, he named various individuals who assisted him. This no doubt included helping him with his financial needs. But generally speaking, Christian giving is church centered. Many churches encourage their members to give designated gifts through the church treasury.

It is interesting that Paul mentioned the offering just after his discussion about the resurrection. There were no “chapter breaks” in the original manuscripts, so the readers would go right from Paul’s hymn of victory into his discussion about money. Doctrine and duty go together; so do worship and works.

Something to Ponder

What connection do you see between Jesus’ resurrection and your giving to the church?

Day 112
Act Now

Read 1 Peter 3:18–20

> *[Christ] went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:19–20

Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and the lost world needs to hear His gospel. Some people try to use this complex passage of Scripture to prove a second chance for salvation after death. But even if these "spirits" were those of unsaved people, this passage says nothing about their salvation. And why would Jesus offer salvation (if He did) only to sinners from Noah's day? And why did Peter use a different verb meaning "proclaim as a herald" instead of the usual word for "preach the gospel"?

Hebrews 9:27 makes it clear that death ends the opportunity for salvation. This is why the church needs to get concerned about evangelism and missions, because people are dying who have never even heard the good news of salvation, let alone had the opportunity to reject it. It does us no good to quibble about differing interpretations of a difficult passage of Scripture if what we do believe does not motivate us to share the gospel with others.

Peter made it clear that difficult days give us multiplied opportunities for witness.

Are we taking advantage of our opportunities?

Something to Ponder

What opportunities to witness do you have? What tempts you to skip those opportunities?

Day 113
Authority and Maturity

Read 2 Corinthians 10:7–11

> *Even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 10:8

In my many years of ministry, I have never ceased to be amazed at how some churches treat their pastors. If a man shows love and true humility, they resist his leadership and break his heart. Our Lord was treated the same way as the first pastor, so perhaps we should not be surprised.

The opponents in the church were accusing Paul of not being a true apostle; for, if he were a true apostle, he would show it by using his authority. But if Paul had thrown his weight around, they would have found fault with him for doing so. This is what happens when church members evaluate ministry from a worldly viewpoint.

How Christian leaders lead is an evidence of their spiritual maturity. Immature leaders swell as they use their authority, but mature leaders grow, and others grow with them. Wise pastors, like wise parents, know when to wait in loving patience and when to act with determined power. Mature pastors do not use authority to demand respect, but to command respect. Mature leaders suffer while they wait to act, while immature leaders act impetuously and make others suffer.

Something to Ponder

When you are in authority, do you tend to command respect or demand it? Explain.

Day 114
The Single Mind

Read Philippians 1:21–24

To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

James tells us that “a double-minded man [is] unstable in all he does” (James 1:8). Or, to use the old Latin proverb: “When the pilot does not know what port he is heading for, no wind is the right wind.” The reason many Christians are upset by circumstances is because they do not cultivate “the single mind.” Paul expressed this attitude of single-hearted devotion to Christ thus: “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Paul discussed his difficult circumstances and faced them honestly. But his circumstances could not rob him of his joy because he was not living to enjoy circumstances; he was living to serve Jesus Christ. He was a man with purpose. He did not look at Christ through his circumstances; rather, he looked at his circumstances through Christ—and this viewpoint changed everything.

When we have the single mind, our circumstances work for us and not against us.

Something to Ponder

What dominates your thoughts more than anything else? What does this tell you about your relationship with Christ?

Day 115
A Sober Reverence

Read 1 Peter 1:17

> *Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:17

God will give us many gifts and privileges as we grow in the Christian life, but He will never give us the privilege to disobey and sin. He never pampers His children or indulges them. But when His child obeys and serves Him in love, He notes that obedience and service and prepares the proper reward.

Peter reminds us that we are only sojourners on earth. Life is too short to waste in disobedience and sin (1 Peter 4:1–6). It was when Lot stopped being a sojourner and became a resident in Sodom that he lost his consecration and his testimony (Gen. 13).

In view of the fact that the Father lovingly disciplines His children today, and will judge their works in the future, we ought to cultivate an attitude of "godly fear" (Heb. 12:28 KJV). This is not the cringing fear of a slave before a master, but the loving reverence of a child before his father. It is not fear of His judgment, but a fear of disappointing Him or sinning against His love. It is a sober reverence for the Father.

Something to Ponder

Think about a sinful behavior or attitude you've given up but sometimes wish you could indulge in again. How does reverence for God help you overcome that temptation?

Day 116
The Rules

Read 2 Timothy 2:1–13

> *Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.*
>
> 2 Timothy 2:5

A person who strives as an athlete to win a game and get a crown must be careful to obey all the rules. In the ancient Greek games in particular, the judges were most careful about enforcing the rules. Each competitor had to be a citizen of his nation, with a good reputation. In his preparations for the event, he had to follow specific standards. If an athlete was found defective in any matter, he was disqualified. If, after he had competed and won, he was found to have broken some rule, he then lost his crown.

From the human point of view, Paul was a loser. There was nobody in the grandstands cheering for him: "All they which are in Asia" had turned away from him (2 Tim. 1:15 KJV). He was in prison. Yet, Paul was a winner! He had kept the rules laid down in the Word of God, and one day he would get his reward from Jesus Christ. Paul was saying to young Timothy, "The important thing is that you obey the Word of God, no matter what people may say. You are not running the race to please people or to get fame. You are running to please Jesus Christ."

Something to Ponder

What does it mean for you to "obey the rules" in regard to your faith?

Day 117
Fear as a Motivator

Read Job 18

The lamp of the wicked is snuffed out; the flame of his fire stops burning.

Job 18:5

In Bildad's second speech, his weapon was fear. However, Bildad made two mistakes when he gave this speech. To begin with, he preached it to the wrong man, because Job was already a believer (Job 1:1, 8). Second, he preached it with the wrong motive, because there was no love in his heart. Dr. R. W. Dale, the British preacher, once asked evangelist D. L. Moody if he ever used the element of terror in his preaching. Moody replied that he usually preached one sermon on heaven and one on hell in his campaigns, but that a person's heart ought to be very tender when preaching about the doom of the lost. Bildad did not have a "very tender" heart.

Though Bildad was talking to the wrong man and with the wrong motive, what he said about death should be taken seriously. Death is an enemy to be feared by all who are not prepared to die (1 Cor. 15:26; Heb. 2:14–15), and the only way to be prepared is to trust Jesus Christ (John 5:24).

However, none of the pictures Bildad used (Job 18:5–21) should be applied to those who have trusted the Lord for salvation.

Something to Ponder

Has anyone ever tried to use fear as a motivator to scare you into being a better person or a better Christian? How well did the attempt work?

Day 118
The Hope Sequence

Read Romans 5:1–21

> *We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*
>
> Romans 5:3–4

Suffering builds Christian character. The sequence is: suffering—perseverance—character—hope. Our English word *tribulation* comes from the Latin word *tribulum*. A tribulum was a heavy piece of timber with spikes in it, used for threshing the grain. The tribulum was drawn over the grain, and it separated the wheat from the chaff. As we go through tribulations and depend on God's grace, the trials only purify us and help to get rid of the chaff.

For many months I visited a young man in a hospital who had almost burned to death. I do not know how many operations and skin grafts he had during those months or how many specialists visited him. However, the thing that sustained him was not the explanations of the doctors, but the promises they gave him that he would recover. That was his hope. And the thing that sustained his hope was the love of his family and many friends as they stood by him. The love of God was channeled through them to him. He did recover and today gives glory to God.

Something to Ponder

What is one recent personal trial that helped make you a better, stronger person? How can personal trials result in your giving glory to God?

Day 119
How the Mighty Fall

Read Isaiah 13—18

> *How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!*
>
> Isaiah 14:12

Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last for only seventy years. So, the capture of Babylon by Darius the Mede would be good news to the Jews; for it would mean the end of their exile and bondage.

The picture in Isaiah 14 is that of a mighty monarch whose pride brought him to destruction. This is what happened to Belshazzar when Darius captured Babylon in 539 BC. Isaiah described the king's arrival in *sheol*, the world of the dead, where the king's wealth, glory, and power vanished. Death is the great leveler; there are no kings in the world of the dead. *Lucifer* (Isa. 14:12 KJV) is Latin for "morning star" and suggests that this king's glory did not last very long. The morning star is soon swallowed up by the light of the sun.

The name Lucifer also indicates that Satan tries to imitate Jesus Christ, who is "the bright and morning star" (Rev. 22:16 KJV). "I will be like the most High" (Isa. 14:14 KJV) reveals his basic strategy, for he is an imitator. Like the king of Babylon was, Satan will one day be humiliated and defeated.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do some people today sinfully strive to "be like the most High"?

Day 120
Playing by the Rules

Read Colossians 2:16–23

> *Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.*
>
> Colossians 2:18

The word translated “disqualify” means “to declare unworthy of a prize.” It is an athletic term: The umpire disqualifies contestants who do not obey the rules. The contestants do not cease to be citizens of the land, but they forfeit the honor of winning a prize. Christians who fail to obey God’s directions do not lose their salvation. But they do lose the approval of the Lord and the rewards He has promised to those who are faithful (1 Cor. 3:8).

It is a gracious act of God that He has promised rewards to those who serve Him. We ought to be so grateful that He has saved us from judgment that we would serve Him whether or not we received a reward. But just as there are degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 23:15), so there will be degrees of glory in heaven—even though all believers will be like Christ in their glorified bodies (1 John 3:2).

The old Puritan Thomas Watson said it perfectly: “Though every vessel of mercy shall be full [in heaven], yet one may hold more than another.”

Something to Ponder

Which one of God’s directions do you need to pay more attention to?

Day 121
Purer Gold

Read Job 23—24

> *He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.*
>
> Job 23:10

God knew where Job was—in the furnace! But it was a furnace of God's appointment, not of Job's sin. This is not the only answer to the question "Why do the righteous suffer?" but it is one of the best, and it can bring the sufferer great encouragement.

Scripture often uses the image of a furnace to describe God's purifying ministry through suffering (Deut. 4:20; Ps. 66:10; Isa. 48:10). The image of believers going through the furnace of persecution is also used in 1 Peter 1:6–7 and 4:12.

When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much they can bear. We may question why He does it to begin with or why He doesn't turn down the heat or even turn it off, but our questions are only evidences of unbelief. Job 23:10 is the answer: "He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." Gold does not fear the fire. The furnace can only make the gold purer and brighter.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you sometimes try to avoid the heat of "God's furnace"? Where does that resistance lead?

Day 122
Tell and Show

Read 1 John 4:9–11

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:11

A Salvation Army worker found a derelict woman alone on the street and invited her to come into the chapel for help, but the woman refused to move. The female worker assured her: “We love you and want to help you. God loves you. Jesus died for you.” But the woman did not budge.

As if on divine impulse, the worker leaned over and kissed the woman on the cheek, taking her into her arms. The woman began to sob and, like a child, was led into the chapel, where she ultimately trusted Christ.

“You told me that God loved me,” she said later, “but it wasn’t until you showed me that God loved me that I wanted to be saved.”

Jesus did not simply preach the love of God; He proved it by giving His life on the cross. He expects His followers to do likewise. If we abide in Christ, we will abide in His love. If we abide in His love, we must share this love with others. In other words, as Christians there is no separation between our inner life and our outer life.

Something to Ponder

Whom have you told about the love of God recently? To whom have you shown it?

Day 123
The Spark

Read James 3:1–8

> *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*
>
> James 3:6

I was visiting the used bookstores along Charing Cross Road in London, and I remarked to a clerk that there were not as many bookstores as I expected. "There's a reason for that," he replied. "One night during World War II, the incendiary bombs hit, and the fires destroyed at least a million books!"

On another occasion, a friend was taking my wife and me on a tour of the beautiful forests in California, and we came to an ugly section that was burned out. Not only was the face of nature scarred, but millions of dollars of valuable timber had been wiped out. "Somebody lit a cigarette," my friend commented as we drove past the blackened earth.

A fire can begin with just a small spark, but it can grow to destroy a city. Our words can start fires too. In some churches, there are members or officers who cannot control their tongues, and the result is destruction. But when they move out of town or are replaced in office, a beautiful spirit of harmony and love often takes over.

Something to Ponder

When was the last time you started a four-alarm verbal fire of your own? What was the issue that started it, and what were the results?

Day 124
Back to (God's) Nature

Read 1 John 4:1–8

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:8

Love is a part of the very being and nature of God. If we are united to God through faith in Christ, we share His nature. And since His nature is love, love is the test of the reality of our spiritual lives.

A navigator depends on a compass to help him determine his course. But why a compass? Because it shows him the directions. And why does the compass point north? Because it is so constituted that it responds to the magnetic field that is part of the earth's makeup. The compass is responsive to the nature of the earth.

So it is with Christian love. The nature of God is love. And a person who knows God and has been born of God will respond to God's nature. As a compass naturally points north, a believer will naturally practice love, because love is the nature of God. This love will not be a forced response; it will be a natural response. A believer's love for the brethren will be proof of his sonship and fellowship.

Something to Ponder

If God's complete love were indicated by due north on a compass, what direction would your own personal compass read? (How far off would you be from pointing north?)

Day 125
A Downward Cycle

Read Hebrews 2:1

> *We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*
>
> Hebrews 2:1

If we do not listen to God's Word and really hear it, we will start to drift. Neglect always leads to drifting, in things material and physical as well as spiritual. As we drift from the Word, we start to doubt the Word because faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). We start to get hard hearts, and this leads to spiritual sluggishness, which produces dullness toward the Word. We become "dull of hearing" (Matt. 13:15 KJV)—lazy listeners. This leads to a despiteful attitude toward the Word to the extent that we willfully disobey God, and this gradually develops into a defiant attitude—we almost dare God to do anything!

Now what does God do while this spiritual regression is going on? He keeps speaking to us, encouraging us to get back to the Word. If we fail to listen and obey, then He begins to chasten us. This chastening process is the theme of Hebrews 12, the climactic chapter in the epistle. "The Lord will judge his people" (Heb. 10:30). God does not allow His children to become spoiled brats by permitting them willfully to defy His Word. He always chastens in love (Rev. 3:19 KJV).

Something to Ponder

Have you ever experienced God's loving chastening? In what ways?

Day 126
Right Ruling

Read 1 Timothy 5:16–25

> *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*
>
> 1 Timothy 5:17

There were two kinds of elders in the church: ruling elders who supervised the work of the congregation, and teaching elders, who taught the Word of God. These elders were chosen from the congregation on the basis of God's call, the Spirit's equipping, and the witness and work of the people themselves. The local church needs both ruling and teaching. If a church is not organized, then effort, money, and opportunities will be wasted.

If spiritually minded leaders do not supervise the various ministries of the local church, there will be chaos instead of order. However, you do not manage the work of a local church in the same manner as you do a grocery store or a manufacturing plant.

While a church should follow good business principles, it is not a business. The ruthless way some church leaders have pushed people around is a disgrace to the gospel. But ruling without teaching would accomplish very little. The local church grows through the ministry of the Word of God (Eph. 4:11ff.). You cannot rule over babies! Unless the believers are fed, cleansed, and strengthened by the Word, they will be weak and useless and will only create problems.

Something to Ponder

How can you honor the elders of your church? Or if you are an elder, how can you be more worthy of honor?

Day 127
Reaching Out to Israel

Read Romans 9:1–13

> *I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.*
>
> Romans 9:3–4

Paul was considered a traitor to the Jewish nation. He ministered to Gentiles, and he taught freedom from the law of Moses. He had preached in many synagogues and caused trouble, and no doubt many of the Jewish believers in Rome had heard of his questionable reputation. In these chapters, Paul showed his love for Israel and his desire for their welfare. This was the personal reason for this discussion.

But there was a doctrinal reason. Paul had argued in Romans 8 that believers are secure in Jesus Christ and that God's election would stand. But someone might have asked, "What about the Jews? Has God failed to keep His promises to Israel?" The very character of God was at stake.

The emphasis in chapter 9 of Romans is on Israel's past election, in chapter 10 on Israel's present rejection, and in chapter 11 on Israel's future restoration. Israel is the only nation in the world with a complete history—past, present, and future.

Something to Ponder

If you had been a devout Jew during the first century, how do you think you would have felt about Paul? Why?

Day 128

Progress

Read 1 Peter 5:1–3

> *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.*
>
> 1 Peter 5:2

Pastors must walk with God and grow in their spiritual lives. Paul admonished young Timothy: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress" (1 Tim. 4:15). If the leaders of the church are not moving forward, the church will not move forward.

"We love our pastor," a fine church member said to me during a conference, "but we get tired of the same thing all the time. He repeats himself and doesn't seem to know that there are other books in the Bible besides Psalms and Revelation." That pastor needed to become a spiritual pioneer and move into new territory so that he might lead his people into new blessings and challenges.

Sometimes God permits trials to come to a church so that the people will be forced to grow and discover new truths and new opportunities. Certainly Peter grew in his spiritual experience as he suffered for Christ in the city of Jerusalem. He was not perfect by any means, but Peter was yielded to Christ and willing to learn all that God had for him.

Something to Ponder

Think of some recent trials that have helped you or your church grow spiritually. How did God use those trials for His glory?

Day 129
Deceptive Strength

Read 2 Corinthians 13:1–10

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

2 Corinthians 13:3

"Let Paul prove he is a true apostle!" said his opponents. Paul's reply was, "Like Jesus Christ, I am strong when it appears I am weak." On the cross, Jesus Christ manifested weakness; but the cross is still "the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). By the standards of the world, both Jesus and Paul were weak, but by the standards of the Lord, they were strong.

A pastor friend of mine, now in heaven, had a quiet manner of delivery in the pulpit and a similar approach in his personal ministry. After hearing him deliver a sermon, a visitor said, "I kept waiting for him to start preaching!" She was accustomed to hearing a loud preacher who generated more heat than light. But my friend built a strong church because he knew the true standards for ministry. He knew how to be weak in Christ and also how to be strong.

How do we measure the ministry today? By powerful oratory or biblical content? By Christian character or what the press releases say? Too many times we Christians follow the world's standards when we evaluate ministries; instead, we need to pay attention to God's standards.

Something to Ponder

What (if any) of your own strengths are interpreted by others as weaknesses? Why might this be so?

Day 130
Divided Loyalties

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–17

> *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 1:10

A Christian photographer friend told me about a lovely wedding that he covered. The bride and groom came out of the church, heading for the limousine, when the bride suddenly left her husband and ran to a car parked across the street! The motor was running, and a man was at the wheel; off they drove, leaving the bridegroom speechless. The driver of the "getaway car" turned out to be an old boyfriend of the bride, a man who had boasted that "he could get her any time he wanted her." Needless to say, the husband had the marriage annulled.

When a man and a woman pledge their love to one another, they are set apart for each other. Just so, Christians belong completely to Jesus Christ; they are set apart for Him and Him alone. But they are also part of a worldwide fellowship, the church, "all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). Defiled and unfaithful believers sin not only against the Lord but also their fellow Christians.

Something to Ponder

What activities do you need to give up in order to follow Jesus more completely?

Day 131
Let Peace Rule

Read Colossians 3:15

> *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.*
>
> Colossians 3:15

In the Greek games judges would reject contestants who were not qualified and would disqualify those who broke the rules. The peace of God is the "umpire" in our believing hearts. When we obey the will of God, we have His peace within; but when we step out of His will (even unintentionally), we lose His peace.

If we have peace in our hearts, we will be at peace with others in the church. We are called to one body, and our relationship in that body must be one of harmony and peace. If we are out of the will of God, we are certain to bring discord and disharmony to the church. Jonah thought he was at peace, when actually his sins created a storm (Jonah 1—4).

When we Christians lose the peace of God, we begin to go off in directions that are out of the will of God. We turn to the things of the world to compensate for our lack of peace within. But we cannot escape ourselves! It is only when we confess our sins, claim God's forgiveness, and do God's will that we experience God's peace within.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever experienced a false peace (like Jonah's)? How long did it last? What were the results?

Day 132
The Price of Salvation

Read Romans 3:21–31

> *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*
>
> Romans 3:23–24

Salvation is free, but it is not cheap.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan was trying to explain free salvation to a coal miner, but the man was unable to understand it. “I have to pay for it,” the miner kept arguing. With a flash of divine insight, Dr. Morgan asked, “How did you get down into the mine this morning?” “Why, it was easy,” the man replied. “I just got on the elevator and went down.”

Then Morgan asked, “Wasn’t that too easy? Didn’t it cost you something?”

The man laughed. “No, it didn’t cost me anything, but it must have cost the company plenty to install that elevator.” Then the man saw the truth: “It doesn’t cost me anything to be saved, but it cost God the life of His Son.”

Something to Ponder

How do you think the phrase “You get what you pay for” applies to salvation?

Day 133
A Submissive Mind

Read Philippians 2:9–11

> *Therefore God exalted him … that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow … and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*
>
> Philippians 2:9–11

When the people buried the body of Jesus, that was the last thing any human hand did to Him. From that point on, it was God who worked. Men had done their worst to the Savior, but God exalted Him and honored Him. Men gave Him names of ridicule and slander, but the Father gave Him a glorious name!

People with the submissive mind, as they live for others, must expect sacrifice and service; but in the end, it is going to lead to glory. Joseph suffered and served for thirteen years, but then God exalted him and made him the second ruler of Egypt. David was anointed king when he was but a youth. He experienced years of hardship and suffering, but at the right time, God exalted him as king of Israel.

The joy of the submissive mind comes not only from helping others and sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (3:10) but also from the knowledge that we are glorifying God. We may not see the glory today, but we will see it when Jesus comes and rewards His faithful servants.

Something to Ponder

How can you stay focused on God's promised rewards and not become disappointed when your good deeds go unrecognized?

Day 134
Chains

Read Philippians 1:12–17

> *Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*
>
> Philippians 1:14

Sometimes God has to put “chains” on His people to get them to accomplish a pioneer advance that could never happen any other way. Young parents may feel chained to the home as they care for their children, but God can use those “chains” to reach people with the message of salvation. Susannah Wesley was the mother of nineteen children, before the days of laborsaving devices and disposable diapers! Out of that large family came John and Charles Wesley, whose combined ministries shook the British Isles.

At six weeks of age, Fanny Crosby was blinded, but even as a youngster she determined not to be confined by the chains of darkness. In time, she became a mighty force for God through her hymns and gospel songs.

The secret is this: When we have the single mind, we look upon our circumstances as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the gospel, and we rejoice at what God is going to do instead of complaining about what God did not do.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways in which you feel chained? What are some ways you can overcome your chains and become a better witness for God?

Day 135
The Gospel Truth

Read Colossians 1:5–6

> *The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.*
>
> Colossians 1:5–6

Everybody has faith in something. But faith is only as good as the object in which people put their trust. Ignorant tribal pagans worshipped gods of stone; modern, educated city pagans worship money or possessions or status. In both cases, their faith is empty. True Christian believers have faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith is based on the Word of Truth. Any other kind of faith is nothing but superstition—it cannot save.

John Selden (1584–1654) was a leading historian and legal authority in England. He had a library of eight thousand volumes and was recognized for his learning. When he was dying, he said to Archbishop James Ussher: "I have surveyed most of the learning that is among the sons of men, and my study is filled with books and manuscripts on various subjects. But at present, I cannot recollect any passage out of all my books and papers whereon I can rest my soul, save this from the sacred Scriptures: 'The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men'" (Titus 2:11 KJV).

Something to Ponder

In what things do you tend to put your faith? To what extent do these things affect your faith in Christ?

Day 136
Walk On

Read 1 John 1:5–7

> *If we walk in the light, as [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*
>
> 1 John 1:7

Every form of life has its enemies. Insects have to watch out for hungry birds, and birds must keep an eye on hungry cats and dogs. Even human beings have to dodge automobiles and fight off germs. The life that is real also has an enemy, and we read about it in this section of 1 John. This enemy is sin.

John illustrates his theme by using the contrast between light and darkness: God is light; sin is darkness. The New Testament calls the Christian life a "walk." This walk begins with a step of faith when people trust Christ as their Savior. But salvation is not the end—it is only the beginning—of spiritual life. "Walking" involves progress, and Christians are supposed to advance in the spiritual life. Just as a child must learn to walk and must overcome many difficulties in doing so, a Christian must learn to "walk in the light." And the fundamental difficulty involved here is this matter of sin.

Something to Ponder

When you identify a recurring sin in your life, how do you deal with it? Can you think of any potential sin in your life right now that needs attention?

Day 137
Law and Legalism

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–18

> *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 3:17

Christians do not live under the law, but this does not mean that we are lawless. The Spirit of God writes the Word of God on our hearts, and we obey our Father because of the new life He has given us within.

The lure of legalism is still with us. False cults prey on professed Christians and church members, as did the Judaizers in Paul's day. We must learn to recognize false cults and reject their teachings. But there are also gospel-preaching churches that have legalistic tendencies and keep their members immature, guilty, and afraid. They spend a great deal of time dealing with the externals, and they neglect the cultivation of the inner life. They exalt standards and they denounce sin, but they fail to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ. Sad to say, some New Testament churches have an Old Testament ministry.

Paul said that his own ministry was triumphant (2 Cor. 2:14) and glorious (3:7–18). The two go together. When our ministry involves the glory of God, we cannot quit!

Something to Ponder

What are evidences of freedom in the Spirit that you have observed in your life?

Day 138
Wants and Needs

Read James 5:1–6

> *Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.*
>
> James 5:1

A magazine advertisement told of the shopping spree of an oil-rich sultan. He purchased nineteen Cadillacs, one for each of his wives, and paid extra to have the cars lengthened. He also bought two Porsches, six Mercedes, a $40,000 speedboat, and a truck for hauling it. Add to the list sixteen refrigerators, $47,000 worth of women's luggage, two Florida grapefruit trees, two reclining chairs, and one slot machine. His total bill was $1,500,000, and he had to pay another $194,500 to have everything delivered.

All of us are grateful for the good things of life, and we would certainly not want to return to primitive conditions. But there is a point of diminishing returns. "Tell me what thou dost need," said the Quaker to his neighbor, "and I will tell thee how to get along without it." The rich men James addressed were feeding themselves on their riches and starving to death. The Greek word describes cattle being fattened for the slaughter.

Luxury has a way of ruining character. It is a form of self-indulgence. If we match character with wealth, we can produce much good, but if we match self-indulgence with wealth, the result is sin.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you struggle with self-indulgence?

Day 139
On the Fringe

Read Job 25—26

> *These are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?*
>
> Job 26:14

It is disturbing to see how Job's friends spoke so knowingly about God when, in the end, God revealed that they really didn't know what they were talking about. Too often, those who say the most about God know the least about God.

Job first rebuked Bildad for giving him no help (Job 26:1–4). Then Job extolled the greatness of God (vv. 5–13). The three friends must have listened impatiently because they already knew the things Job was talking about, but they hadn't drawn the right conclusion. Because they saw God's handiwork in nature, they thought they knew everything about God and therefore could explain God to Job.

Job said that just the opposite was true (v. 14). What we see of God in creation is but the fringes of His ways, and what we hear is but a whisper of His power!

The fourteenth-century British spiritual writer Richard Rolle said, "He truly knows God perfectly that finds Him incomprehensible and unable to be known." The more we learn about God, the more we discover how much more there is to know.

Something to Ponder

What are some things you can do to know God more completely and better represent Him to others?

Day 140
Homeward Bound

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15

> *I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 11:12

In my travels, I have seen congregations show little or no appreciation to faithful pastors who were laboring sacrificially to see the churches grow. Some of these men were underpaid and overworked, yet the churches seemed to have no love for them.

I once heard Dr. W. A. Criswell tell about the faithful missionary couple who returned to the United States on the same ship that brought Teddy Roosevelt home from a safari. Many reporters and photographers were on the dock waiting to see Roosevelt and interview him and take pictures, but nobody was on hand to welcome home the missionaries who had spent their lives serving Christ in Africa.

That evening, in their modest hotel room, the couple reviewed their arrival in New York City, and the husband was somewhat bitter. “It isn’t fair,” he said to his wife. “Mr. Roosevelt comes home from a hunting trip, and the whole country is out to meet him. We get home after years of service, and nobody is there to greet us.”

But his wife had the right answer: “Honey, we aren’t home yet.”

Something to Ponder

In what ways are your own efforts being overlooked by others? How do you respond in such situations?

Day 141

The Same Gospel

Read Galatians 2:6–10

> *James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.*
>
> Galatians 2:9

The Jerusalem Conference began with a great possibility for division and dissension, yet it ended with cooperation and agreement. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Ps. 133:1 KJV). Perhaps we need to practice some of this same cooperation today.

We need to recognize the fact that God calls people to different ministries in different places, yet we all preach the same gospel and are seeking to work together to build His church. Among those who know and love Christ, there can be no such thing as “competition.” Peter was a great man, and perhaps the leading apostle, yet he gladly yielded to Paul—a newcomer—and permitted him to carry on his ministry as the Lord led him. Previously, Paul explained his independence from the apostles (Gal. 1); now in Galatians 2, he points out his interdependence with the apostles. He was free, and yet he was willingly in fellowship with them in the ministry of the gospel.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you interdependent with other believers? How does this affect your approach to sharing the gospel?

Day 142
A Note of Encouragement

Read Colossians 1:3–4

> *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.*
>
> Colossians 1:3–4

The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte was known as an appreciator. He loved to write postcards to people, thanking them for some kindness or blessing they had brought to his life. Those messages often brought a touch of encouragement to a heart just when it was needed most. Appreciation is great medicine for the soul.

The apostle Paul was a great encourager, and the Colossians epistle is a good example of the grace of thanksgiving. In this section he gave thanks for what Christ had done in the lives of the Colossian Christians. But he also mentioned thanksgiving in five other places in this letter. When we recall that Paul wrote this letter in prison, his attitude of thanksgiving is even more wonderful.

Like Paul, we should be grateful for what God is doing in the lives of others. As Christians, we are all members of one body (Rom. 12:5). If one member of the body is strengthened, this helps to strengthen the entire body (1 Cor. 12:12–26).

Something to Ponder

How do you tend to respond when you do something nice for someone who shows no appreciation? How can you show appreciation to someone else?

Day 143
On Trial

Read James 1:3

You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

James 1:3

The only way the Lord can develop patience and character in our lives is through trials. Endurance cannot be attained by reading a book, listening to a sermon, or even praying a prayer. We must go through the difficulties of life, trust God, and obey Him. The result will be patience and character. Knowing this truth, we can face trials joyfully. We know that the end result will bring glory to God.

This fact explains why studying the Bible helps us grow in patience (Rom. 15:4). As we read about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and even our Lord, we realize that God has a purpose in trials. God fulfills His purposes as we trust Him. There is no substitute for an understanding mind. Satan can defeat ignorant believers, but he cannot overcome Christians who know the Bible and understand the purposes of God.

Something to Ponder

Rather than complain the next time your faith is tested, what are some other options you could try?

Day 144
The Right to Serve

Read Hebrews 5:1–6

Every high priest … must be called by God.

Hebrews 5:1, 4

When I became pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, it was necessary for me to go to the city hall and be bonded. Otherwise, I would not have had the authority to perform marriages. I had to show my ordination certificate and prove that I was indeed ministering at the church.

One day I received a frantic phone call from one of our members. Some Christian friends were being married the next day by a relative from Michigan, and they discovered that he was not authorized to perform the ceremony! Could I help them? The visiting pastor could read the ceremony as well as I could, and he knew the couple better than I did; but he lacked the authority to minister.

No man could appoint himself as a priest, let alone high priest. The very existence of a priesthood and a system of sacrifices gave evidence that people were estranged from God. It was an act of grace on God's part that He instituted the whole Levitical system. Today, that system is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ. He is both the Sacrifice and the High Priest who ministers to God's people on the basis of His once-for-all offering on the cross.

Something to Ponder

What requests do you need to make of Jesus today specifically in regard to His High Priestly duties?

Day 145
Money Management

Read Ecclesiastes 2:12–23

> *I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?*
>
> Ecclesiastes 2:18–19

Solomon was born wealthy, and great wealth came to him because he was the king. But he was looking at life "under the sun" and speaking for the common people. The day would come when Solomon would die and leave everything to his successor. This reminds us of our Lord's warning in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) and Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:7–10. A Jewish proverb says, "There are no pockets in shrouds."

A writer in the *Wall Street Journal* called money an article that may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven and as a universal provider of everything except happiness.

Of course, you and I are stewards of our wealth; God is the Provider (Deut. 8:18) and the Owner, and we have the privilege of enjoying it and using it for His glory. One day we will have to give an account of what we have done with His generous gifts. While we cannot take wealth with us when we die, we can send it ahead as we use it today according to God's will (Matt. 6:19–34; 1 Tim. 6:17–19).

Something to Ponder

What does it mean to you to be a steward of your wealth?

Day 146
Living in Circles

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12–18

> *I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:17

When Adam and Eve sinned, they did get an experiential knowledge of good and evil, but since they were alienated from God, this knowledge only added to their sorrow. It has been that way ever since. Each advance in human knowledge and achievement only creates a new set of problems for society.

For some people, life may be monotonous and meaningless, but it does not have to be. For Christians, life is an open door, not a closed circle; there are daily experiences of new blessings from the Lord. True, we can't explain everything, but life is not built on explanations: It is built on promises—and we have plenty of promises in God's Word.

The scientist tells us that the world is a closed system, and nothing is changed. The historian tells us that life is a closed book, and nothing is new. The philosopher tells us that life is a deep problem, and nothing is understood.

But Jesus Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), and He has miraculously broken into history to bring new life to all who trust Him. If you are living in circles, then turn your life over to Him.

Something to Ponder

In what ways, if any, do you feel you may be living in circles?

Day 147
The Silent Lamb

Read Isaiah 53

> *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*
>
> Isaiah 53:7

In this passage, the Servant is compared to a lamb, which is one of the frequent symbols of the Savior in Scripture. A lamb died for each Jewish household at Passover, and the Servant died for His people. Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), and twenty-eight times in the book of Revelation, Jesus is referred to as "the Lamb."

Since Jesus Christ was crucified with criminals as a criminal, it was logical that His dead body would be left unburied, but God had other plans. The burial of Jesus Christ is as much a part of the gospel as is His death, for the burial is proof that He actually died. The Roman authorities would not have released the body to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus if the victim were not dead (John 19:38–39). A wealthy man like Joseph would never have carved out a tomb for himself so near to a place of execution, particularly when his home was miles away. He had prepared it for Jesus and had the spices and graveclothes ready for the burial (Matt. 27:59–60). How wonderfully God fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy!

Something to Ponder

In what ways is a lamb a good symbol for Jesus? In each case, can you make the same application to yourself?

Day 148
Sounds of Silence

Read Isaiah 52

> *So will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him.*
>
> Isaiah 52:15

The people who were astonished by the Servant's humiliation and exaltation will shut their mouths in guilt when they hear His proclamation. Paul interprets this proclamation as the preaching of the gospel to the Gentile nations (Rom. 15:20–21). "So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (3:19).

Many people have been tortured and killed in inhumane ways, but knowing about their suffering does not touch our consciences, though it might arouse our sympathy. Our Lord's sufferings and death were different, because they involved everybody in the world. The gospel message is not "Christ died." The gospel message is that "Christ died *for our sins*" (1 Cor. 15:3). You and I are as guilty of Christ's death as Annas, Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, and Pilate.

Now we see why people are astonished when they understand the message of the gospel: This Man whom they condemned has declared that they are condemned unless they turn from sin and trust Him. We cannot rejoice in the good news of salvation until first we face the bad news of condemnation. Jesus did not suffer and die because He was guilty but because *we* were guilty. This fact shuts people's mouths.

Something to Ponder

How do you feel when you dwell on the fact that Christ died for your sins?

Day 149
Winning the Saved

Read James 5:13–20

> *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*
>
> James 5:20

What are we to do when we see a fellow believer wandering from the truth? We should pray for him, to be sure, but we must also seek to help him. He needs to be turned back onto the right path.

It is important that we seek to win the lost, but it is also important to win the saved. If a brother has sinned against us, we should talk to him privately and seek to settle the matter. If he listens, then we have "won [our] brother over" (Matt. 18:15).

If we are going to help an erring brother, we must have an attitude of love, for "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). This does not mean that love "sweeps the dirt under the carpet." Where there is love, there must also be truth; and where there is truth, there is honest confession of sin and cleansing from God.

Love not only helps the offender to face his sins and deal with them, but love also assures the offender that those sins, once forgiven, are remembered no more (Heb. 8:12).

Something to Ponder

How would you confront someone about a sin without being judgmental or condescending?

Day 150
Joyful Obedience

Read 1 John 5:1–3

> *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.*
>
> 1 John 5:3

Everything in creation—except man—obeys the will of God. “Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds … do his bidding” (Ps. 148:8). In the book of Jonah, we see the winds and waves, and even the fish, obeying God’s commands, but the prophet stubbornly wanted his own way.

Disobedience to God’s will is a tragedy—but so is reluctant, grudging obedience. God does not want us to disobey Him, but neither does He want us to obey Him out of fear or necessity. What Paul wrote about giving also applies to living: “not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

What is the secret of joyful obedience? It is to recognize that obedience is a family matter. We are serving a loving Father and helping our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have been born of God; we love God, and we love God’s children. And we demonstrate this love by keeping God’s commandments.

Something to Ponder

What are some specific things you would be willing to try this week to attempt to make your obedience more joyful?

Day 151
The Road Less Traveled

Read Isaiah 34—35

> *A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way.*
>
> Isaiah 35:8

Isaiah 35:8 expresses one of Isaiah's favorite themes: the highway (11:16; 19:23; 40:3; 62:10). During the Assyrian invasion, the highways were not safe (33:8), but during the kingdom age it will be safe to travel. In ancient cities, there were often special roads that only kings and priests could use; but when the Messiah reigns, all of His people will be invited to use a special highway. Isaiah pictures God's redeemed, ransomed, and rejoicing Jewish families going up to the yearly feasts in Jerusalem to praise their Lord.

When Isaiah spoke and wrote these words, it is likely that the Assyrians had ravaged the land, destroyed the crops, and made the highways unsafe. The people were cooped up in Jerusalem, wondering what would happen next. The remnant was trusting God's promises and praying for God's help, and God answered their prayers. If God kept His promises to His people centuries ago, will He not keep His promises in the future and establish His glorious kingdom for His chosen people?

The future is our friend when Jesus Christ is our Savior.

Something to Ponder

In what way is your spiritual journey like going down a highway?

Day 152

The Grapes of Resistance

Read Isaiah 26—27

> *Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry.*
>
> Isaiah 27:2–4

In the day of the Lord, God will use suffering to purge His people and prepare them for their kingdom. Isaiah 27:9 does not suggest that personal suffering can atone for sin. God uses suffering as a discipline to bring us to submission so that we will seek Him and His holiness (Heb. 12:1–11). The Babylonian captivity cured the Jews of their idolatry.

In Isaiah's day, the vineyard was producing wild grapes, but in the future kingdom, Israel will be fruitful and flourishing. God will guard His people and give them all that they need to bring glory to His name. The nation will "bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit" (Isa. 27:6).

The Bible speaks of three vines: the people of Israel (Isa. 27:5), Christ and His church (John 15:1–17), and a godless Gentile society, "the vine of the earth" (Rev. 14:18 KJV). The vineyard of Israel was not bearing fruit, the "vine of the earth" was filling the world with poisonous fruit, and God's people had to be faithful branches in the Vine and produce fruit that glorified God's name.

Something to Ponder

Looking back, how has God worked to make you more productive for Him?

Day 153

Something Old, Something New

Read 1 John 2:7–8

> *I am not writing you a new command but an old one.… Yet I am writing you a new command.*
>
> 1 John 2:7–8

The Christian life—the life that is real—is a beautiful blending of "something old, something new." The Holy Spirit never grows old! And He is the only person on earth today who was here centuries ago when Jesus lived, taught, died, and rose again. He is the only one who can take "old truth" and make it fresh and new.

There are other exciting truths in the rest of 1 John, but if we fail to obey in the matter of love, the rest of the letter may well be "darkness" to us. Perhaps the best thing we can do right now is to search our hearts to see if we hold anything against a fellow believer or if someone has anything against us (2:9–11). The life that is real is an honest life—and it is a life of doing, not merely saying. It is a life of active love in Christ. This means forgiveness, kindness, and longsuffering. But it also means joy, peace, and victory.

The love life is the only life, because it is the life that is real!

Something to Ponder

Are you currently involved in an unresolved conflict? If so, what steps can you take to try to deal with the matter?

Day 154

You Get What You Deserve?

Read Job 15

> *All his days the wicked man suffers torment, the ruthless through all the years stored up for him.*
>
> Job 15:20

In his first speech, Eliphaz had described the blessings of the godly (Job 5:17–26), but now he describes the sufferings of the ungodly. The problem with Eliphaz's statement about the judgment of the wicked is that it is not always true in this life. Many wicked people go through life apparently happy and successful, while many godly people experience suffering and failure. It is true that ultimately the wicked suffer and the godly are blessed, but meanwhile, it often looks like the situation is reversed (Ps. 73; Jer. 12:1–4). Furthermore, God gives sunshine to the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45).

The greatest judgment God could send to the wicked in this life would be to let them have their own way, saying: "They have received their reward" (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16). The only heaven the godless will know is the enjoyment they have on earth in this life, and God is willing for them to have it. The only suffering the godly will experience is in this life, for in heaven there will be no pain or tears (Rev. 7:17; 21:4). Eliphaz and his friends had the situation all confused.

Something to Ponder

The next time you suffer unfairly, what can you remember to help you endure the situation?

Day 155
Heirs, Apparently

Read Galatians 4:1–7

> *You are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*
>
> Galatians 4:7

We do not enter God's family by adoption the way a homeless child would enter a loving family in our own society. The only way to get into God's family is by regeneration, being "born again" (John 3:3). The New Testament word for *adoption* means "to place as an adult son." It has to do with our standing in the family of God: We are not little children but adult sons with all of the privileges of sonship.

It is unfortunate that many translations of the New Testament do not make a distinction between children of God and sons of God. We are the children of God by faith in Christ, born into God's family. But every child of God is automatically placed into the family as a son, and as a son, he has all the legal rights and privileges of a son. When a sinner trusts Christ and is saved, as far as his condition is concerned, he is a spiritual babe who needs to grow (1 Peter 2:2–3), but as far as his position is concerned, he is an adult son who can exercise all the wonderful privileges of sonship.

We enter God's family by regeneration, but we enjoy God's family by adoption.

Something to Ponder

What does it mean to you that you have been adopted by God?

Day 156
The Wisdom of Fleeing

Read 1 Timothy 6:11–21

> *But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.*
>
> 1 Timothy 6:11

There are times when running away is a mark of cowardice. “Should such a man as I flee?” asked Nehemiah (Neh. 6:11 KJV). But there are other times when fleeing is a mark of wisdom and a means of victory. Joseph fled when his master’s wife tempted him (Gen. 39:12), and David fled when King Saul tried to kill him (1 Sam. 19:10).

The word *flee* that Paul used in 1 Timothy 6:11 does not refer to literal running but to Timothy’s separating himself from the sins of the false teachers. This echoes the admonition in 1 Timothy 6:5 (KJV): “From such withdraw thyself.” Not all unity is good, and not all division is bad. Sometimes a servant of God should take a stand against false doctrine and godless practices and separate himself from them. He must be sure, however, that he acts on the basis of biblical conviction and not because of a personal prejudice or a carnal party spirit.

Separation without positive growth becomes isolation. We must cultivate these graces of the Spirit in our lives, or else we will be known only for what we oppose rather than for what we propose.

Something to Ponder

When have you had to flee from false doctrines? How did you do this?

Day 157
Lifestyle Envy

Read Job 21:7–34

> *Their prosperity is not in their own hands, so I stand aloof from the counsel of the wicked.*
>
> Job 21:16

The saddest thing about the wicked is the way they leave God out of their lives and still prosper (Job 21:13–15). The wicked take credit for their wealth, but Job acknowledges that everything comes from God (1:21). How, then, can Job's three friends classify him with the wicked?

Too many professed Christians admire and envy the lifestyle of the rich and famous. In one of his books, Dr. Kenneth Chafin told about a pastor and deacon who were visiting prospects and stopped at a beautiful suburban home. The lawn looked like it was manicured, and two expensive cars sat in the driveway. The pastor and deacon could see the man of the house comfortably seated in his spacious living room, watching television. The place reeked of affluence. The deacon turned to his pastor and asked, "What kind of good news do we have for this fellow?"

I have performed many weddings and watched many young Christian couples begin their shared lives. What a joy it has been to see homes where couples resist the temptation to follow the crowd and live for material possessions. Unfortunately, some have lost their spiritual vision and succeeded in this world —without acknowledging the Lord. Alas, "they have received their reward" (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16).

Something to Ponder

How do you deal with twinges of envy for what others have?

Day 158
False Doctrine

Read 1 Timothy 1:3–11

Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk.

1 Timothy 1:6

It is tragic when professed Christians get off course because they refuse “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10). Paul also called it “the doctrine … according to godliness” (1 Tim. 6:3 KJV), “sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13 KJV), “sound doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1), “faith” (Titus 1:13; 2:2), and “sound speech” (Titus 2:8 KJV). But many prefer the “vain jangling” (1 Tim. 1:6 KJV) of those who teach novelties rather than the pure Word of God that produces holiness in lives. It is unfortunate today that we not only have “vain jangling” (KJV; “meaningless talk” in NIV) in teaching and preaching, but also in music. Far too many songs not only teach *no* doctrine, but many even teach *false* doctrines. A singer has no more right to sing a lie than a teacher has to teach a lie.

The reason for this false doctrine was a misuse of the Old Testament law. These false teachers did not understand the content or the purpose of God’s law. They were leading believers out of the liberty of grace (Gal. 5:1ff.) into the bondage of legalism. The flesh (our old nature) loves religious legalism because rules and regulations enable a person to *appear* holy without really having to change his heart.

Something to Ponder

What is some of the “vain jangling” you’ve observed in church? What is a proper biblical response when you encounter false doctrine?

Day 159
The Living Dead

Read Romans 6:1–23

> *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*
>
> Romans 6:4

The mode of baptism in the early church was immersion. It was (and is) an outward symbol of an inward experience. Their immersion was a picture of what the Holy Spirit did: He identified them with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

This means that believers have a new relationship to sin. They are "dead to sin" (Rom. 6:11). If an alcoholic dies, he can no longer be tempted by alcohol because his body is dead to all physical senses. In Jesus Christ we have died to sin so that we no longer want to "continue in sin" (v. 1 KJV). But we are not only dead to sin; we are also alive in Christ. We have been raised from the dead and now walk in the power of His resurrection. We walk in "newness of life" (v. 4 KJV) because we share His life. Like Paul, each of us can now say, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Something to Ponder

In what ways have you demonstrated that you have "died to sin"? What steps do you take to "stay dead" when tempted by old and alluring sins?

Day 160
Prepared to Pray

Read 1 Timothy 2:8–15

> *I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.*
>
> 1 Timothy 2:8

The late Peter Deyneka Sr., my good friend and founder of the Slavic Gospel Association, often reminded me, “Much prayer, much power! No prayer, no power!” Prayer was as much a part of the apostolic ministry as preaching the Word (Acts 6:4). Yet some pastors spend hours preparing their sermons, but never prepare their public prayers. Consequently, their prayers are routine, humdrum, and repetitious. I am not suggesting that a pastor write out every word and read it, but that he think through what he will pray about. This will keep “the pastoral prayer” from becoming dull and a mere repetition of what was prayed the previous week.

But the church members also need to be prepared to pray. Our hearts must be right with God and with each other. We must really want to pray, and not pray simply to please people (as did the Pharisees, Matt. 6:5), or to fulfill a religious duty. When a local church ceases to depend on prayer, God ceases to bless its ministry.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you depend on prayer at home? At work? At church?

Day 161
Body Building

Read 1 Corinthians 12

> *If one part [of the body] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 12:26

Diversity in the church body is an evidence of the wisdom of God. Each member needs the other members, and no member can afford to become independent. When a part of the human body becomes independent, there is a serious problem that could lead to sickness and even death. In a healthy human body, the various members cooperate with one another and even compensate for one another when a crisis occurs. The instant any part of the body says to any other part, “I don’t need you!” it begins to weaken and die and create problems for the whole body.

A famous preacher was speaking at a ministers’ meeting, and he took time before and after the meeting to shake hands with the pastors and chat with them. A friend asked him, “Why take time for a group of men you may never see again?” The world-renowned preacher smiled and said, “Well, I may be where I am because of them! Anyway, if I didn’t need them on the way up, I may need them on the way down!” No Christian servant can say to any other servant, “My ministry can get along without you!”

Something to Ponder

In terms of a human body, what “part” would you say you are in the church? Why?

Day 162
A Separate Peace

Read 2 Corinthians 7

> *Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 7:1

Because of God's gracious promises, we have some spiritual responsibilities. We must cleanse ourselves once and for all of anything that defiles us. It is not enough to ask God to cleanse us; we must clean up our own lives and get rid of those things that make it easy for us to sin. None of us can legislate for any other believer; each one of us knows the problems of his or her own heart and life.

Too often Christians deal with symptoms and not causes. We keep confessing the same sins because we have not gotten to the root of the trouble and "purified ourselves." Perhaps there is something that contaminates us—a filthiness of the flesh that feeds the old sinful nature (Rom. 13:14). Or it may be filthiness of the spirit, an attitude that is sinful.

But cleansing ourselves is only half of the responsibility; we must also be "perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1). This is a constant process as we grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).

Something to Ponder

What are some ways that you can consciously separate yourself from sinful things?

Day 163

In Search of Good Samaritans

Read Philippians 2:19–21

> *I have no one else like [Timothy], who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*
>
> Philippians 2:20–21

A reporter in San Bernardino, California, arranged for a man to lie in the gutter on a busy street. Hundreds of people passed the man, but not one stopped to help him or even show sympathy!

Newspapers across the country told how thirty-eight people watched a man stalk a young lady and finally attack her—and none of the spectators even picked up a phone to call the police!

A Kentucky doctor was driving down the highway to visit a patient when he saw an accident take place. He stopped and gave aid to the injured and then made his visit. One of the drivers he helped sued him!

Is it possible to be a Good Samaritan today? Must we harden our hearts in order to protect ourselves? Perhaps sacrifice and service are ancient virtues that somehow do not fit into our so-called modern civilization. It is worth noting that even in Paul's day, mutual concern was not a popular virtue. The Christians at Rome were not too interested in the problems at Philippi; Paul could not find one person among them willing to go to Philippi. Times haven't changed much.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways you've looked out for your own interests and not those of Jesus Christ?

Day 164
Nonconformity

Read Galatians 1:11–12

> *I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.*
>
> Galatians 1:11

"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," wrote Emerson. Many others agree with him. The English art critic John Ruskin said, "I fear uniformity. You cannot manufacture great men any more than you can manufacture gold." The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "We forfeit three fourths of ourselves in order to be like other people." Francis Asbury, first bishop of the Methodist Church in the United States, once prayed at a deacon ordination, "O Lord, grant that these brethren may never want to be like other people."

Of course, there is a wrong kind of individualism that destroys instead of fulfills; but in a society accustomed to interchanging parts, it is good to meet a man like Paul, who dared to be himself in the will of God. But his freedom in Christ was a threat to those who found safety in conformity. Paul's enemies pointed to his nonconformity as proof that his message and ministry were not really of God. "He claims to be an apostle," they argued, "but he does not stand in the apostolic tradition." It is this misrepresentation that Paul answered in this section of Galatians. His nonconformity was divinely deliberate. God had chosen to reveal Himself in a different way to Paul.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you a nonconformist? How does this play into the way you serve God?

Day 165
Superior Sympathy

Read Hebrews 5:7–8

> *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*
>
> Hebrews 5:7

Every Old Testament high priest had to minister to people who were "ignorant and … going astray" (Heb. 5:2). God made no provision but judgment for the high-handed sins of rebellion. But He did make provision when people sinned through ignorance or weakness. An Old Testament priest could identify with the sinners since he himself was a sinner. In fact, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer a sacrifice for himself before he could offer one for the nation (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7)!

We would think that one sinner would have compassion for another sinner, but this is not always the case. Sin can harden our hearts and make us judgmental instead of sympathetic. Remember how heartbroken innocently praying Hannah was when the high priest Eli falsely accused her of being drunk (1 Sam. 1:9–18)?

No, it is the spiritually minded person with a clean heart who sympathizes with sinners and seeks to help them. Because we are so sinful, we have a hard time helping other sinners; but because Jesus is perfect, He is able to meet our needs after we sin (Heb. 4:15–16).

Something to Ponder

What can you learn from Jesus' example of "reverent submission"? Be specific.

Day 166
Carved in Stone

Read Job 19:21–29

> *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.*
>
> Job 19:25

It is significant that Job would go from the depths of despair to the heights of faith and then back into the depths again. This is often the normal experience of people experiencing great suffering.

In spite of what some preachers say, very few people can maintain a constant high level of faith and courage in times of severe pain and trial. John Henry Jowett, at one time known as "the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world," wrote to a friend: "I wish you wouldn't think I am such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched, and everything appears most murky."[2]

Job expressed confidence that, even if he died, he would still have a Redeemer who one day would exercise judgment on the earth (Job 19:25). Furthermore, Job affirmed that he himself expected to live again and see his Redeemer (vv. 26–27)! It was an affirmation of faith in the resurrection of the human body.

Something to Ponder

What things do you so strongly believe to be true about God that they could be recorded permanently—"carved in stone," so to speak?

2 Arthur Porrit, *John Henry Jowett* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 290.

Day 167
As One Approved

Read 2 Timothy 2:14–18

> *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*
>
> 2 Timothy 2:15

Each of us as God's workman will be either approved or ashamed. The word *approved* means "one who has been tested and found acceptable." The term was used for testing and approving metals. Each trial that we go through forces us to study the Word to find God's will. As we rightly use the Word, we succeed in overcoming our trials, and God approves us. Martin Luther once said that prayer, study, and suffering make a pastor; and this is true. We cannot be approved unless we are tested.

What does it mean to be ashamed? Certainly it means that such a workman's production is below standard and cannot be accepted. It means loss of reward. In fact, in Paul's day, a builder was fined if he failed to follow the specifications. When the Lord judges our works, it will be revealed whether we as workmen have handled the Word of God honestly and carefully. Some who are now first will end up last!

Something to Ponder

In what ways have you been tested and found acceptable in your spiritual walk?

Day 168
Faith and Consequences

Read Hebrews 11:1–5

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1

True biblical faith is confident obedience to God's Word in spite of circumstances and consequences. This faith operates quite simply. God speaks, and we hear His Word. We trust His Word and act on it no matter what the circumstances are or what the consequences may be. The circumstances may be impossible and the consequences frightening and unknown, but we obey God's Word just the same and believe He will do what is right and what is best.

The unsaved world does not understand true biblical faith, probably because it sees so little faith in action in the church today. The cynical editor H. L. Mencken defined faith as "illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible." The world fails to realize that faith is only as good as its object, and the object of faith is God (Rom. 4:3, 20–22). Faith is not some feeling that we manufacture. It is our total response to what God has revealed in His Word.

The writer of Hebrews makes it clear that faith is a very practical thing (11:3), in spite of what unbelievers say. Faith enables us to understand what God does.

Something to Ponder

What is faith? What are some of the best ways to increase your faith?

Day 169

Looking Death in the Face

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1–8

> *A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 7:1

Solomon was not contrasting birth and death. He was contrasting two significant days in human experience: the day a person is given a name and the day when that name shows up in the obituary column. The life lived between those two events will determine whether that name leaves behind a lovely fragrance or a foul stench.

Solomon is advising us to look death in the face and learn from it. He is not saying that we should obsess over death. But there is a danger that we may try to avoid confrontations with the reality of death and, as a result, not take life as seriously as we should. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

The late Dr. Ernest Becker wrote in his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *The Denial of Death:* "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man."[3] King Solomon knew this truth centuries ago!

Something to Ponder

In what ways does thinking about death help you take life more seriously?

[3] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1975), ix.

Day 170
Character Matters

Read 1 Timothy 3:1–7

> *Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.*
>
> 1 Timothy 3:1

If a man's own children cannot obey and respect him, then his church is not likely to respect and obey his leadership. For Christians, the church and the home are one.

We should oversee both of them with love, truth, and discipline. The pastor cannot be one thing at home and something else in church. If he is, his children will detect it, and there will be problems. The words *rule* and *ruleth* in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 (KJV) mean "to preside over, to govern," and suggest that a pastor is the one who directs the business of the church. (Not as a dictator, of course, but as a loving shepherd, 1 Peter 5:3.)

The word translated "take care of " in 1 Timothy 3:5 (KJV) suggests a personal ministry to the needs of the church. It is used in the parable of the good Samaritan to describe the care given to the injured man (Luke 10:34–35). No pastor ever feels that he is all he ought to be, and his people need to pray for him constantly. It is not easy to serve as a pastor/elder, but it is much easier if your character is all God wants it to be.

Something to Ponder

What are you doing to develop character that is Christlike? How will this help you in any leadership roles you have?

Day 171
Larger Than Life

Read Philippians 1:18–20

> *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.*
>
> Philippians 1:20

Does Christ need to be magnified? After all, how can a mere human being ever magnify the Son of God? Well, the stars are much bigger than the telescope, and yet the telescope magnifies them and brings them closer to the viewer. The believer's body is to be a telescope that brings Jesus Christ closer to people. To the average person, Christ is a misty figure in history who lived centuries ago. But as the unsaved watch believers go through a crisis, they can see Jesus magnified.

The telescope brings distant things closer, and the microscope makes tiny things look larger. To nonbelievers, Jesus is not very big. Other people and other things are far more important. But as they watch a Christian go through a crisis experience, they ought to be able to see how big Jesus Christ really is. The believer's body is a "lens" that makes a "little Christ" look very big and brings a "distant Christ" very close.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways in which you have magnified (exalted) God?

Day 172
A Quest for Adventure

Read Ecclesiastes 11

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

Ecclesiastes 11:1

When I was a boy, I practically lived in the public library during the summer months. I loved books. One summer I read nothing but true adventure stories written by real heroes like Frank Buck and Martin Johnson. I was fascinated by *I Married Adventure*, the autobiography of Martin Johnson's wife, Osa.

Since those boyhood days, life has become a lot calmer, but I trust I haven't lost that sense of adventure. As I get older, I am asking God to keep me from getting set in my ways in a life that is routine, boring, and predictable. "I don't want my life to end in a swamp," said British expositor F. B. Meyer. I agree. When I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior, I "married adventure"; and that meant expecting the unexpected.

Solomon used two activities to illustrate his point: the merchant sending out his ships (vv. 1–2) and the farmer sowing his seed (vv. 3–6). In both activities, a great deal of faith is required. If the merchant and the farmer wait until the circumstances are ideal, they will never get anything done! Life has a certain amount of risk to it, and that's where faith comes in.

Something to Ponder

If you had a bit more faith in God, what new adventure would you like to try?

Day 173
Seize the Day

Read Ecclesiastes 7:9–12

> *Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 7:10

An Arab proverb says, "Watch your beginnings." Good beginnings will usually mean good endings. The Prodigal Son started with happiness and wealth but ended with suffering and poverty (Luke 15:11–16). Joseph began as a slave but ended as a sovereign (Gen. 37—41)! God always saves the best wine until the last (John 2:10), but Satan starts with his best and then leads the sinner into suffering and perhaps even death.

When life is difficult and we are impatient for change, it is easy to long for the good old days. But yesterday cannot be changed, and tomorrow may not come; so we must make the most of today. "Carpe diem!" wrote the Roman poet Horace. "Seize the day!" This does not mean that we should not learn from the past or prepare for the future, because both are important. It means that we must live today in the will of God and not be paralyzed by yesterday or hypnotized by tomorrow. The Victorian essayist Hilaire Belloc wrote, "While you are dreaming of the future or regretting the past, the present, which is all you have, slips from you and is gone."

Something to Ponder

What can you do right now to "seize" today?

Day 174
Without Genealogy

Read Hebrews 7:1–28

> *Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God [Melchizedek] remains a priest forever.*
>
> Hebrews 7:3

There is no record of Melchizedek's genealogy in the Old Testament. This is significant because it was important that the priests be able to prove their ancestry. Here the writer of Hebrews uses an argument from silence, but it is a valid one.

Melchizedek was not an angel or an Old Testament appearance of Jesus Christ. He was a real man, a real king, and a real priest in a real city. But as far as the record is concerned, he was not born, nor did he die. In this way, he is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though Jesus Christ did die, Calvary was not the end; for He arose from the dead. Since there is no account of Melchizedek's death, as far as the record is concerned, it seems that Melchizedek is still serving as a priest and king. This is another way in which he is like the eternal Son of God.

The application is clear: Neither Aaron nor any of his descendants could claim to be "without genealogy." They could not claim to have an eternal ministry. Nor could they claim to be both kings and priests, like Jesus Christ.

Something to Ponder

How might your life be different if you had no knowledge of your father or mother? What things might you do differently?

Day 175
Self-Deception

Read 1 John 1:8–9

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

1 John 1:8

Dishonest believers lose fellowship with God and with God's people. As a result, prayer becomes an empty form to them. Worship is a dull routine. They become critical of other Christians and start staying away from church.

A group of church members was discussing the new pastor.

"For some reason," said one man, "I really don't feel at ease with him. I believe he's a good man, all right—but something seems to stand between us."

Another member replied, "Yes, I think I know what you mean. I used to have that same problem with him, but now I don't have it anymore. The pastor and I have great fellowship."

"What did he do to make things better?" "He didn't do anything," said the friend. "I did the changing." "You did the changing?" "Yes, I decided to be open and honest about things, the way our pastor is. You see, there isn't one stain of hypocrisy in his life, and there was so much pretending in my life that we just didn't make it together. He and I both knew I was a phony. Since I've started to live an honest Christian life, everything is better."

Something to Ponder

When your own praying becomes empty and worship becomes dull, what do you do to get back "on track"?

Day 176
Whom Do You Trust?

Read Isaiah 30—31

> *Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.*
>
> Isaiah 31:8

Judah's faith was in people, not in God. Why should the Lord fear the Assyrians? God would pounce on Assyria like a lion and swoop down like an eagle, and that would be the end! In one night, the Assyrian army was wiped out (Isa. 37:36).

Think of the distress Judah would have avoided had they only rested in the Lord their God and obeyed His will. All their political negotiations were futile and their treaties worthless. They could trust the words of the Egyptians but not the word of God!

As God's church today faces enemies and challenges, it is always a temptation to turn to the world for help. But our first response must be to examine our hearts to see if there is something we need to confess and make right. Then we must turn to the Lord in faith and obedience and surrender to His will. We must trust Him to protect us and fight for us.

A friend of mine kept a card on his office desk that read: "Faith Is Living Without Scheming." That is what Isaiah was saying to Judah and Jerusalem; and that is what he is saying to us today.

Something to Ponder

What can you do to remain patient and faithful while waiting for God to act on your behalf?

Day 177
Thirst Quencher

Read Isaiah 54—56

> *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.… Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*
>
> Isaiah 55:1

In the East, water is a precious ingredient, and an abundance of water is a special blessing. Wine, milk, and bread were staples of a Middle Eastern diet. The people of Judah were living on substitutes that did not nourish them. They needed "the real thing," which only the Lord could give. In Scripture, both water and wine are pictures of the Holy Spirit (see John 7:37–39; Eph. 5:18). Jesus is the "bread of life" (John 6:32–35), and His living Word is like milk (see 1 Peter 2:2). Our Lord probably had Isaiah 55:2 in mind when He said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life" (John 6:27).

People had to work hard to dig wells, care for flocks and herds, plant seed, and tend to the vineyards. But the Lord offered to them free everything they were laboring for. If they had listened to His Word, they would have been inclined to come; for God draws sinners to Himself (John 5:24). Jesus Christ is God's covenant to the Gentiles ("peoples," 55:4), and His promises will stand as long as His Son lives, which is forever.

Something to Ponder

How does intense thirst affect your mood and productivity? How might this be true in a spiritual sense as well?

Day 178

Looking Out for Number One

Read Ecclesiastes 10:11–20

> *Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 10:20

The familiar saying “A little bird told me” probably originated from verse 20. It is easy to imagine a group of officers having a party in one of their private rooms, and instead of toasting the king, they are making light of him. Alas, somebody tells the king what was said, and this gives him reason to punish the offenders or dismiss them from their offices.

Even if we can’t respect the person, we must respect the office (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17). “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people” (Ex. 22:28 NKJV). These hirelings were certainly indiscreet when they cursed the king, for they should have known that one of their number would use this event either to intimidate his friends or to ingratiate himself with the ruler. A statesman asks, “What is best for my country?” A politician asks, “What is best for my party?” But a mere officeholder asks, “What is most profitable for me?”

Something to Ponder

Think of a leader you don’t particularly respect. What can you do to at least respect the office, if not the person?

Day 179
Appealing to a Higher Court

Read Job 12—14

> *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.*
>
> Job 13:15

Job 13:13–17 is one of the greatest declarations of faith found anywhere in Scripture, but it must be understood in context. Job is saying to his friends, “I will take my case directly to God and prove my integrity.” Later, Job will take an oath and challenge God to pass judgment (Job 27). To approach God personally was a great act of faith, but Job was so sure of his integrity that he would take his chances. After all, if he did nothing, he would die; and if he was rejected by God, he would die; but there was always the possibility that God would prove him right.

Why does Job want to meet God in court? So that God can once and for all state His “case” against Job and let Job know the sins in his life that have caused him to suffer so much. “Why should God pay so much attention to me?” asks Job. “He treats me like an enemy, but I’m just a weak leaf in the wind that is worth nothing.” Job felt the time had come to settle the matter, even if it meant losing his own life in the process.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever felt so blameless that you would invite God to “check you out” personally? Explain.

Day 180
A Hopeful Forecast

Read Isaiah 32—33

> *The LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.*
>
> Isaiah 33:22

A university professor posted a sign on his study wall that read, “The future is not what it used to be.” Since the advent of atomic energy, many people wonder if there is any future at all. Albert Einstein said that he never thought about the future because it came soon enough!

In Isaiah 32—35, the prophet invites us to look at future events to see what God has planned for His people and His world. In Isaiah 32:1, he writes about “a king”; but in 33:17, he calls him “the king.” By the time we get to verse 22, He is “our king.” It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ is “a king” or even “the King.” We must confess our faith in Him and say with assurance that He is “our King.”

In contrast to the evil rulers of Isaiah’s day, Messiah will reign in righteousness and justice. Isaiah ministered to spiritually blind, deaf, and ignorant people; but in the kingdom, all will see and hear God’s truth as well as understand and obey it.

Something to Ponder

Right this minute, what are some of your worries about the future? If you really trust God, why do you think you are still worried?

Day 181

Organism and Organization

Read 1 Timothy 2:1–7

> *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.…*
>
> 1 Timothy 2:1

"Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40 NKJV) is a basic principle for the conduct of the ministry of the church. Apparently, young Timothy was having some problems applying this principle to the assemblies in Ephesus. The public worship services were losing their order and effectiveness because both the men and the women members of the church were disobeying God's Word.

"The church is an organism," a pastor told me, "so we shouldn't put too much emphasis on organization. We should allow the Spirit to have freedom."

"But if an organism is disorganized," I quickly reminded him, "it will die. Yes, I agree that we must permit the Spirit to have freedom, but even the Holy Spirit is not free to disobey the Word of God."

Often, what we think is the "freedom of the Spirit" are the carnal ideas of some Christian who is not walking in the Spirit. Eventually this "freedom" becomes anarchy, and the Spirit grieves as a church gradually moves away from the standards of God's Word. To counteract this tendency, Paul exhorted the men and women in the church and reminded them of their spiritual responsibilities.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the ways you balance the ideas of "freedom" and structure?

Day 182
Looking Up

Read Colossians 3:1–2

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:2

How do we set our hearts on “things above”? The secret is found in a literal translation of verse 2: “Habitually set your mind—your attention—on things above, not on things on the earth.” Our feet must be on earth, but our minds must be in heaven. This is not to suggest that (as D. L. Moody used to say) we become “so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.” It means that the practical everyday affairs of life get their direction from Christ in heaven. It means further that we look at earth from heaven’s point of view.

While attending a convention in Washington, D.C., I watched a Senate committee hearing on television. I believe they were considering a new ambassador to the United Nations. The late Senator Hubert Humphrey was making a comment as I turned on the television: “You must remember that in politics, how you stand depends on where you sit.” He was referring, of course, to the political party seating arrangement in the Senate, but I immediately applied it to our position in Christ. How we stand—and walk—depends on where we sit, and we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6)!

Something to Ponder

How can you be more heavenly minded?

Day 183
Entrusted and Enabled

Read 1 Timothy 1:12–20

> *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*
>
> 1 Timothy 1:14

The grace of God turned the persecutor into a preacher, and the murderer into a minister and a missionary! So dramatic was the change in Paul's life that the Jerusalem church suspected that it was a trick, and they had a hard time accepting him (Acts 9:26–31). God gave Paul his ministry; he did not get it from Peter or the other apostles (Gal. 1:11–24). He was called and commissioned by the risen Christ in heaven.

God saw that Paul was faithful, and so He entrusted the gospel to him. Even as an unbelieving and gospel-ignorant Jewish leader, Paul had maintained a good conscience and he lived up to the light that he had. So often those who are intensely wrong as lost sinners become intensely right as Christians and are greatly used of God to win souls. God not only *entrusted* the gospel to Paul, but He also *enabled* Paul to minister that gospel (1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 4:13).

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you entrusted and enabled to minister the gospel?

Day 184
Outer Appearances

Read James 2:1–4

> *My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.*
>
> James 2:1

The religious experts in Christ's day judged Him by their human standards, and they rejected Him. He came from the wrong city. He was not a graduate of their accepted schools. He did not have the official approval of the people in power. He had no wealth. His followers included publicans and sinners. Yet he was the very glory of God.

We often make the same mistakes. When visitors come into our churches, we tend to judge them on what we see outwardly. Dress, color of skin, fashion, and other superficial things carry more weight than the fruit of the Spirit that may be manifest in their lives. We cater to the rich because we hope to get something out of them, and we avoid the poor because they embarrass us. Jesus did not engage in such discrimination, and He cannot approve of it.

How do we practice the deity of Christ in our human relationships? By looking at everyone through the eyes of Christ. If visitors are Christians, we can accept them because Christ lives in them. If they are not Christians, we can receive them because Christ died for them. It is Christ who is the link between us and others, and He is a link of love.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever been a victim of favoritism? In what ways? How can you see others through the eyes of Christ, not judging by surface qualities?

Day 185

Used to the Dark?

Read 1 Peter 4:1–3

> *Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.*
>
> 1 Peter 4:1

Our attitudes are weapons, and weak or wrong attitudes will lead us to defeat. Outlook determines outcome, and we must have the right attitudes if we are to live a right life.

A friend and I met at a restaurant to have lunch. It was one of those places where the lights are low, and people need a miner's helmet to find their table. We had been seated several minutes before we started looking at the menu, and I remarked that I was amazed how easily I could read it. "Yes," said my friend, "it doesn't take us long to get accustomed to the darkness."

There is a sermon in that sentence: It is easy for us Christians to get accustomed to sin. Instead of having a militant attitude that hates and opposes it, we gradually get used to sin, sometimes without even realizing it. The one thing that will destroy "the rest of [our] earthly life" (v. 2) is sin. A believer living in sin is a terrible weapon in the hands of Satan.

Something to Ponder

What are some "dim" areas in your own life where the light of God's truth needs to shine through more brightly?

Day 186
Servanthood

Read Philippians 2:1–8

> *But [Jesus] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*
>
> Philippians 2:7–8

Jesus did not pretend to be a servant; He actually was a servant! This was the true expression of His innermost nature. He was the God-man, deity and humanity united in one, and He came as a servant.

Have you noticed as you read the four gospels that it was Jesus who served others, not others who served Jesus? He was at the beck and call of all kinds of people—fishermen, harlots, tax collectors, the sick, the sorrowing. In the Upper Room, when His disciples apparently refused to minister, Jesus arose, laid aside His outer garments, put on the long linen towel, and washed their feet (John 13:1–17). He took the place of a menial slave! This was the submissive mind in action—and no wonder Jesus experienced such joy!

Something to Ponder

In your experience, what is the connection between serving others and receiving personal joy?

Day 187
Making Marriage Last

Read 1 Corinthians 7:25–40

> *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 7:39

It is God's will that the marriage union be permanent, a lifetime commitment. There is no place in Christian marriage for a "trial marriage," nor is there any room for the "escape-hatch" attitude: "If the marriage doesn't work, we can always get a divorce."

For this reason, marriage must be built on something sturdier than good looks, money, romantic excitement, and social acceptance. There must be Christian commitment, character, and maturity. There must be a willingness to grow, to learn from each other, to forgive and forget, to minister to one another.

Paul closed the section by telling the widows that they were free to marry, but the man they marry "must belong to the Lord" (v. 39). This means that they must not only marry believers, but marry in the will of God.

God has put "walls" around marriage, not to make it a prison, but to make it a safe fortress. When two people are lovingly and joyfully committed to each other—and to their Lord—the experience of marriage is one of enrichment and fulfillment.

Something to Ponder

What role does (or should) Christian commitment play in marriage?

Day 188
Gaining and Losing

Read Philippians 3:8–11

> *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*
>
> Philippians 3:8

Remember Jim Elliot's words: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That is what Paul experienced. He lost his religion and his reputation, but he gained far more than he lost. In fact, the gains were so thrilling that Paul considered all other things nothing but garbage in comparison!

No wonder he had joy—his life did not depend on the temporal things of the world but on the eternal values found in Christ. Paul had the spiritual mind and looked at the things of earth from heaven's point of view. People who live for things are never really happy because they must constantly protect their treasures and worry lest they lose their value. Not so believers with the spiritual mind; their treasures in Christ can never be stolen, and they never lose their value (see Matt. 6:19–21).

Perhaps now is a good time for you to become an accountant and evaluate the things that matter most to you.

Something to Ponder

List the things you value, and contrast them with the eternal values made possible by Christ. In reviewing your list, do your feelings toward your possessions tend to change? If so, in what ways?

Day 189
Willful Ignorance

Read Romans 10:1–13

> *Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*
>
> Romans 10:3

The godly Presbyterian preacher Robert Murray McCheyne was passing out tracts one day and handed one to a well-dressed lady. She gave him a haughty look and said, "Sir, you must not know who I am!"

In his kind way, McCheyne replied, "Madam, there is coming a day of judgment, and on that day it will not make any difference who you are!"

Everything about the Jewish religion pointed to the coming Messiah—their sacrifices, priesthood, temple services, religious festivals, and covenants. Their law told them they were sinners in need of a Savior. But instead of letting the law bring them to Christ (Gal. 3:24), they worshipped their law and rejected their Savior. The law cannot give righteousness; it only leads sinners to the Savior who can give righteousness.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever been too absorbed with tradition or ceremony that your relationship with Jesus has suffered? Explain.

Day 190
Aha!

Read 1 John 4:12–16

> *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.*
>
> 1 John 4:15

In order to save money, a college drama class purchased only a few scripts of a play and cut them up into the separate parts. The director gave each player his or her individual part in order and then started to rehearse the play. After an hour of missed cues and mangled sequences, the cast gave up.

At that point, the director sat all the actors on the stage and said: “Look, I’m going to read the entire play to you, so don’t any of you say a word.” He read the entire script aloud, and when he was finished, one of the actors said:

“So that’s what it was all about!”

And when the players understood the entire story, they were able to fit their parts together and have a successful rehearsal.

When we read 1 John 4:12–16, we feel like saying, “So that’s what it’s all about!” Here we discover what God had in mind when He devised His great plan of salvation.

Something to Ponder

Are there any “pieces” of your faith that you don’t fully understand? If so, whom can you talk to this week to help you see how they fit into the “entire story”?

Day 191
Satisfaction Guaranteed

Read Ecclesiastes 12

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

People may seem to get away with sin (8:11), but their sins will eventually be exposed and judged righteously (vv. 12–13). Those who have not trusted the Lord Jesus Christ will be doomed forever. “The eternity of punishment is a thought which crushes the heart,” said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. “The Lord God is slow to anger, but when He is once aroused to it, as He will be against those who finally reject His Son, He will put forth all His omnipotence to crush His enemies.”

Solomon tells us to enjoy life while we can, but at no time does he advise us to enjoy sin. The joys of the present depend on the security of the future. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, then your sins have already been judged on the cross; and “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1; John 5:24). But if you die having never trusted Christ, you will face judgment at His throne (Rev. 20:11–15).

Is life worth living? Yes, if you are truly alive through faith in Jesus Christ. Then you can be satisfied, no matter what God may permit to come to your life.

Something to Ponder

What are specific things you can do today that are likely to bring you a greater degree of satisfaction with life tomorrow?

Day 192
Low and Mighty

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

> *God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 1:27

The lost world admires birth, social status, financial success, power, and recognition. But none of these things can guarantee eternal life.

The message and miracle of God's grace in Jesus Christ utterly put to shame the high and mighty people of this world. The wise of this world cannot understand how God changes sinners into saints, and the mighty of this world are helpless to duplicate the miracle.

The annals of church history are filled with the accounts of great sinners whose lives were transformed by the power of the gospel. In my own ministry I have seen amazing things take place that the lawyers and psychologists could not understand. We have seen delinquent teenagers become successful students and useful citizens. We have seen marriages restored and homes reclaimed, much to the amazement of the courts.

And why does God reveal the foolishness and the weakness of this present world system, even with its philosophy and religion? "So that no one may boast before him" (v. 29). Salvation must be wholly of grace; otherwise, God cannot get the glory.

Something to Ponder

What is an amazing act of God you have witnessed lately that "confounds" those who are wise and/or powerful?

Day 193
An Exclusive Relationship

Read Colossians 3:12–14

> *As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*
>
> Colossians 3:12

Because we have trusted Christ, we have been "set apart" from the world, unto the Lord. That is the meaning of the word *holy*. We are not our own; we belong completely to Him (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Just as the marriage ceremony sets apart a man and a woman for each other exclusively, so salvation sets believers apart exclusively for Jesus Christ. Would it not be a horrible thing, at the end of a wedding, to see the groom run off with the maid of honor? It is just as horrible to contemplate Christians living for the world and the flesh.

When unbelievers sin, they are creatures breaking the laws of the holy Creator and Judge. But when we Christians sin, we are children of God breaking the loving heart of our heavenly Father. Love is the strongest motivating power in the world. As we grow in our love for God, we will grow in our desire to obey Him and to walk in the newness of life that is ours in Christ.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you "set apart" from the world?

Day 194
Noah Way

Read 1 Peter 3:20–22

> *In it [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:20–21

Noah was a “preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5) during a very difficult time in history. The early Christians knew that Jesus had promised that, before His return, the world would become like the “days of Noah” (Matt. 24:37–39), and they were expecting Him soon (2 Peter 3:1–13). As they saw society decay around them and persecution begin, they would think of the Lord’s words.

Noah was a man of faith who kept doing the will of God even when he seemed to be a failure. If we measured faithfulness by results, then Noah would get a very low grade. Yet God ranked him very high!

The Flood is a picture (type) of death, burial, and resurrection. The waters buried the earth in judgment, but they also lifted Noah and his family up to safety. The early church saw in the ark a picture of salvation. Noah and his family were saved by faith because they believed God and entered into the ark of safety. So sinners are saved by faith when they trust Christ and become one with Him.

Something to Ponder

If Noah were to offer you advice about being a godly example in a sinful world, what do you think he might tell you?

Day 195
Beautiful Feet

Read Romans 10:14–21

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

Romans 10:15

We must never minimize the missionary outreach of the church. While this passage relates primarily to Israel, it applies to all lost souls. They cannot be saved unless they call upon the Lord Jesus Christ. But they cannot call unless they believe. Faith comes by hearing (v. 17), so they must hear the message. How will they hear? A messenger must go to them with the message. But this means that God must call and send the messenger (vv. 14–15). What a privilege it is to be one of His messengers and have beautiful feet!

Just the other day, a businessman in our church called me to report another soul led to Christ. My caller had had serious spiritual problems a few years earlier, and I was able to help him. Since that time, he had led many to Christ. His phone call was to give me the good news that one of his work associates had led a friend to Christ, another miracle in a spiritual chain reaction.

Some of us share the news here at home, but others are sent to distant places. There are more open doors for the gospel than ever before. Do you have beautiful feet?

Something to Ponder

Who are some people you could reach with the gospel who might not hear it from anyone else?

Day 196
Sowing and Reaping

Read James 3:18

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

James 3:18

The Christian life is a life of sowing and reaping. For that matter, every life is a life of sowing and reaping, and we reap just what we sow (see Gal. 6:7–8). If we obey God's wisdom, we sow righteousness, not sin; and peace, not war. The life we live enables the Lord to bring righteousness and peace into the lives of others.

What we are is what we live, and what we live is what we sow. It is a serious thing to be a troublemaker in God's family. One of the sins that God hates is that of sowing "dissension among brothers" (see Prov. 6:16–19). Lot followed the world's wisdom and brought trouble to the camp of Abraham, but Abraham followed God's wisdom and brought peace. Abraham's decision, in the wisdom of God, led to blessings for his own household and ultimately for the whole world (see Gen. 13).

"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding" (Prov. 3:13).

Something to Ponder

Who is the best peacemaker you know? What can you learn from that person to become a better peacemaker yourself?

Day 197
The Great House

Read 2 Timothy 2:19–26

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm.

2 Timothy 2:19

In this illustration, Paul described a "great house," which is the professing church. The foundation of the house is safe and secure because God's seal is on it. Paul quoted Moses: "The LORD will show who belongs to him" (Num. 16:5). This refers to the Godward aspect of the Christian life: God chose us who trust Him as His elect (2 Tim. 2:10).

But there is also a manward aspect of the Christian life: "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19 KJV). In other words, those who are the elect of God prove it by living godly lives. We are chosen in Christ "to be holy and blameless" (Eph. 1:4).

This great house not only has a solid foundation, but it also has vessels (utensils of various kinds) for performing household functions. Paul divides the utensils into two categories: those of honor (gold and silver) and those of dishonor (wood and clay). He is making a distinction between true teachers of the Word and the false teachers he described (2 Tim. 2:16–18). A faithful pastor is like a gold or silver vessel that brings honor to Jesus Christ.

Something to Ponder

In what ways is your church like the "great house" Paul describes in this passage? What is your role in the great house?

Day 198
Gratitude

Read 2 Corinthians 6

> *We commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger … having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 6:4–5, 10

What a price Paul paid to be faithful in his ministry! Yet how little the Corinthians really appreciated all he did for them. They brought sorrow to his heart, yet he was "always rejoicing" in Jesus Christ (v. 10). He became poor that they might become rich (1 Cor. 1:5; 2 Cor. 8:9). The Greek word translated "poor" means "the complete destitution of a beggar."

Was Paul wrong in appealing for their appreciation? I don't think so. Too many churches are prone to take for granted the sacrificial ministry of pastors, missionaries, and faithful church officers. Paul was not begging for praise, but he was reminding his friends in Corinth that his ministry to them had cost him dearly.

It has well been said, "If you want to find gratitude, look in the dictionary." Are we showing gratitude to those who have ministered to us?

Something to Ponder

What are some sacrifices you have made for others lately that didn't seem to be appreciated? How did you feel?

Day 199
Glory Be

Read 1 Peter 1:3–5

> *In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:3–4

On a balmy summer day, my wife and I visited one of the world's most famous cemeteries, located at Stoke Poges, a little village not far from Windsor Castle in England. On this site Thomas Gray penned his famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a poem most of us had to read at one time or another in school.

As we stood quietly in the midst of ancient graves, one stanza of that poem came to mind:

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e're gave,
> Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Man's glory simply does not last, but God's glory is eternal, and He has deigned to share that glory with us!

Something to Ponder

When you think of sharing in God's glory, what images, thoughts, or feelings come to mind?

Day 200
Hear and Now

Read Hebrews 1

> *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*
>
> Hebrews 1:1–2

A man from Leeds, England, visited his doctor to have his hearing checked. The doctor removed the man's hearing aid, and the patient's hearing immediately improved! He had been wearing the device in the wrong ear for more than twenty years!

I once asked a pastor friend, "Do you have a deaf ministry in your church?" He replied, "There are times when I think the whole church needs a deaf ministry—they just don't seem to hear me."

There is a difference between merely listening and truly hearing. Jesus often cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" It takes more than physical ears to hear the voice of God. It also requires a receptive heart.

Many people avoid studying Hebrews. Some have avoided this book because the "warnings" in Hebrews have made them uneasy. Others have avoided this book because they think it is too difficult for the average Bible student. To be sure, there are some profound truths in Hebrews. But the general message of the book is clear, and there is no reason why you and I should not understand and profit from it.

Something to Ponder

When you are at church, are you usually "hearing" or merely "listening"? Explain.

Day 201
License and Liberty

Read James 2:5–13

> *Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!*
>
> James 2:12–13

License (doing whatever we want to do) is the worst kind of bondage. Liberty means the freedom to be all that we can be in Jesus Christ. License is confinement; liberty is fulfillment.

The Word is called "the law that gives freedom" because God sees our hearts and knows what we would do if we were free to do so. If we obey God only because of His rules, we are not really maturing as Christians. God's Word can change our hearts and give us the desire to do God's will, so that we obey from inward compulsion.

Our beliefs should control our behavior. If we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that God is gracious, His Word is true, and one day He will judge us, then our conduct will reveal our convictions. Before we attack those who do not have orthodox doctrine, we must be sure that we practice the doctrines we defend.

One of the tests of the reality of our faith is how we treat other people. Can we pass the test?

Something to Ponder

If a stranger observed your behavior for a week, do you think that person could accurately determine your beliefs? Explain.

Day 202
Discern as You Learn

Read 1 John 2:21–25

> *Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ.… No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*
>
> 1 John 2:22–23

A missionary to Native Americans was in Los Angeles with an Indian friend who was a new Christian. As they walked down the street, they passed a man on the corner who was preaching with a Bible in his hand. The missionary knew the man represented a cult, but the Indian saw only the Bible. He stopped to listen to the sermon.

I hope my friend doesn't get confused, the missionary thought, and he began to pray. In a few minutes the Indian turned away from the meeting and joined his missionary friend.

"What did you think of that preacher?" the missionary asked.

"All the time he was talking," exclaimed the Indian, "something in my heart kept saying, 'Liar! Liar!'"

That "something" in his heart was "Someone"—the Holy Spirit of God! The Spirit guides us into the truth and helps us to recognize error (John 16:13). This anointing of God is "no lie," because "the Spirit is the truth" (1 John 5:6).

Something to Ponder

Have you experienced a time when the Holy Spirit alerted you to a cleverly disguised falsehood being promoted by someone? How did the Spirit speak to you?

Day 203

Sincerely Wrong

Read 1 John 2:18–20

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

1 John 2:20

"It makes no difference what you believe, just as long as you are sincere!" That statement expresses the personal philosophy of many people today, but it is doubtful whether most of those have really thought it through. Is "sincerity" the magic ingredient that makes something true? If so, then we ought to be able to apply it to any area of life.

A nurse in a city hospital gives some medicine to a patient, and the patient becomes violently ill. The nurse is sincere, but the medicine is wrong, and the patient almost dies.

A man hears noises in the house one night and decides a burglar is at work. He shoots the "burglar," who turns out to be his daughter, who had gotten up to get a late-night snack. She becomes the victim of the father's "sincerity."

It takes more than "sincerity" to make something true. Faith in a lie will always cause serious consequences; faith in the truth is never misplaced. It does make a difference what we believe! People who are real build their lives on truth, not superstition or lies. It is impossible to live a real life by believing lies.

Something to Ponder

What connections have you discovered between faith and truth in your own life?

Day 204
A Perfect Standing

Read Hebrews 10:1–18

> *He waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*
>
> Hebrews 10:13–14

How do we know personally that we have a perfect standing before God? Because of the witness of the Holy Spirit through the Word (vv. 15–18). The witness of the Spirit is based on the work of the Son and is given through the words of Scripture. Old covenant worshippers could not say that they "no longer … felt guilty for their sins" (10:2). But new covenant believers can say that their sins are remembered no more (v. 17). There is "no longer any sacrifice for sin" (v. 18) and no more remembrance of sin!

I once shared a conference with a fine Christian psychiatrist whose lectures were very true to the Word. "The trouble with psychiatry," he told me, "is that it can only deal with symptoms. A psychiatrist can remove a patient's feelings of guilt, but he cannot remove the guilt. It's like a trucker loosening a fender on his truck so he won't hear the motor knock. A patient can end up feeling better, but have two problems instead of one!"

When sinners trust Christ, their sins are all forgiven, the guilt is gone, and the matter is completely settled forever.

Something to Ponder

In what specific ways do you feel you are being "made holy"?

Day 205
Yielded

Read Isaiah 50—51

> *Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.*
>
> Isaiah 50:7

Everything Jesus said and did was taught to Him by His Father. He prayed to the Father for guidance and meditated on the Word. What God taught the Servant, the Servant shared with those who needed encouragement and help. The Servant set a good example for all who know the importance of a daily "quiet time" with the Lord.

The Servant's will was also yielded to the Lord God. A "wakened ear" (v. 4) is one that hears and obeys the voice of the Master. The people to whom He ministered were neither "willing" nor "obedient" (1:19), but the Servant gladly did the will of the Lord God. This was not easy, for it meant yielding His body to wicked men who mocked Him, whipped Him, spat on Him, and then nailed Him to a cross.

Keep in mind that when Jesus Christ was ministering here on earth, He had to live by faith even as we must today. He did not use His divine powers selfishly for Himself but trusted God and depended on the power of the Spirit (Phil. 2:5–11).

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you need to more fully submit your mind, will, or body to God? How will you do this?

Day 206
Foolish Rulers

Read Ecclesiastes 10:1–10

I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves.

Ecclesiastes 10:7

If there is one person who needs wisdom, it is the ruler of a nation. Lyndon B. Johnson said, “A president’s hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right.”

If a ruler is proud, he may say and do foolish things that cause him to lose the respect of his associates (Eccl. 10:4). The picture here is of a proud ruler who easily becomes angry and takes out his anger on the attendants around him.

To be sure, there is a righteous anger that sometimes needs to be displayed (Eph. 4:26), but not everything we call righteous indignation is righteous. It is so easy to give vent to jealousy and malice by disguising them as holy zeal.

But if a ruler is too pliable, he is also a fool (Eccl. 10:5–7). If he lacks character and courage, he will put fools in the high offices and qualified people in the low offices. If a ruler has incompetent people advising him, he is almost certain to govern the nation unwisely.

The best rulers (and leaders) are men and women who are tough minded but tenderhearted, who put the best people on the horses and don’t apologize for it.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you too proud? Too pliable? How do you find the proper balance here?

Day 207

Discipline versus Disobedience

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14–21

The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

1 Corinthians 4:20

Pride is a terrible thing in the Christian life and in the church. The yeast of sin (5:6–8) had made the Corinthians "puffed up," even to the point of saying in essence, "Paul will not come to us! His bark is worse than his bite!" (see 2 Cor. 10:8–11).

In the past Paul had been patient with their disobedience, but in this letter he warned them that the time had come for discipline. Paul was not like the tolerant modern mother who shouted at her spoiled son, "This is the last time I'm going to tell you for the last time!" Faithful parents must discipline their children.

Paul would have preferred to come to the Corinthians with meekness and deal with their sins in a gentle manner, but their prideful attitude made this approach difficult.

The contrast in this paragraph is between speech and power, words and deeds. The arrogant Corinthians had no problem "talking big," the way children often will do, but they could not back up their talk with their "walk." Their religion was only in words. Paul was prepared to back up his "talk" with power, with deeds that would reveal their sins and God's holiness.

Something to Ponder

In what specific area(s) is it hardest to discipline yourself? How can you persevere even though it is difficult?

Day 208
Good Beginnings

Read Colossians 1:1–2

> *To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.*
>
> Colossians 1:2

Colosse probably would never have been mentioned in the New Testament had it not been for the church there. The city is never named in the book of Acts because Paul did not start the Colossian church, nor did he ever visit it. Paul had heard of their faith (Col. 1:4, 9), but he had never seen these believers personally (2:1). Here was a church of unknown people, in a small town, receiving an inspired letter from the great apostle Paul!

The Colossian church was the outgrowth of Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:17–38). So effective was the witness of the church at Ephesus that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (19:10).

There is a good lesson for us here: God does not always need an apostle, or a "full-time Christian worker," to get a ministry established. Nor does He need elaborate buildings and extensive organizations. It is God's plan that the Christians in the large urban areas, like Ephesus, reach out into the smaller towns and share the gospel. Is your church helping to evangelize "small-town" mission fields?

Something to Ponder

What is one thing you can do this week to increase your own or your church's awareness of surrounding needs?

Day 209
Patiently Plodding

Read Isaiah 40:27—44:28

> *Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*
>
> Isaiah 40:31

The word *wait* in the King James Version of Isaiah 40:31 means "to hope," to look to God for all that we need. This involves meditating on His character and His promises, praying, and seeking to glorify Him.

The word *renew* means "to exchange," as taking off old clothes and putting on new. We exchange our weakness for His power (2 Cor. 12:1–10). As we wait before Him, God enables us to soar when there is a crisis, to run when the challenges are many, and to walk faithfully in the day-by-day demands of life. It is much harder to walk in the ordinary pressures of life than to fly like the eagle in a time of crisis.

"I can plod," said William Carey, the father of modern missions. "That is my only genius. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

The greatest heroes of faith are often those who are patiently plodding. As we wait on the Lord, He enables us not only to fly higher and run faster, but also to walk longer. Blessed are the plodders, for they eventually arrive at their destination!

Something to Ponder

What do you find most difficult about waiting upon and hoping in the Lord? Why?

Day 210
The Mirror

Read James 1:23–27

> *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.*
>
> James 1:23–24

When we look into the mirror of God's Word, we see ourselves as we really are. James mentions several mistakes that we make as we look into God's mirror.

First, we don't carefully study ourselves as we read the Word. We might read a chapter of the Bible each day, but it is only a religious exercise, and we fail to profit from it personally.

The second mistake is that we forget what we see. If we were looking deeply enough into our hearts, what we would see would be unforgettable.

Mistake number three is: We fail to obey what the Word tells us to do. We think that hearing is the same as doing. It's not.

If we are to use God's mirror profitably, then we must gaze into it carefully and with serious intent. No quick glances will do. We must examine our own hearts and lives in the light of God's Word. This requires time, attention, and sincere devotion. Five minutes with God each day will never constitute a deep spiritual examination.

Something to Ponder

Carefully study yourself today in light of God's Word. What do you see?

Day 211
Needs and Greeds

Read Philippians 4:13–23

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:13

God has not promised to supply all of our “greeds.” When we are in the will of God, serving for the glory of God, then we will have every need met. Hudson Taylor often said, “When God’s work is done in God’s way for God’s glory, it will not lack for God’s supply.”

A young pastor came to a church that had been accustomed to raising its annual budget by means of suppers, bazaars, and the like. He told his officers he could not agree with their program. “Let’s pray and ask God to meet every need,” he suggested. “At the end of the month, pay all the bills and leave my salary till the last. If there isn’t enough money for my salary, then I’m the one who will suffer, and not the church. But I don’t think anybody is going to suffer!” The officers were sure that both the pastor and the church would die, but such was not the case. Each month every bill was paid, and at the end of the year there was a surplus in the treasury for the first time in many years.

Contentment comes from adequate resources. Our resources are the providence of God, the power of God, and the promises of God.

Something to Ponder

What are ways God might use you to supply someone else’s need?

Day 212
Wisdom in Action

Read James 1:5–11

> *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*
>
> James 1:5

Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. Why do we need wisdom when we are going through trials? Why not ask for strength, or grace, or even deliverance? For this reason: We need wisdom so we will not waste the opportunities God is giving us to mature. Wisdom helps us understand how to use these circumstances for our good and God's glory.

An associate of mine, a gifted secretary, was going through great trials. She had had a stroke, her husband had gone blind, and then he had to be taken to the hospital where (we were sure) he would die. I saw her in church one Sunday and assured her that I was praying for her.

"What are you asking God to do?" she asked, and her question startled me.

"I'm asking God to help you and strengthen you," I replied.

"I appreciate that," she said, "but pray about one more thing. Pray that I'll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!"

She knew the meaning of James 1:5.

Something to Ponder

What are some problems you are facing today for which you need to request God's wisdom?

Day 213
A Servant's Reward

Read Philippians 2:22–30

> *Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.*
>
> Philippians 2:22–23

Timothy knew the meaning of sacrifice and service, and God rewarded him for his faithfulness. To begin with, Timothy had the joy of helping others. To be sure, there were hardships and difficulties, but there were also victories and blessings. He had the joy of serving with the great apostle Paul and assisting him in some of his most difficult assignments.

But perhaps the greatest reward God gave to Timothy was to choose him to be Paul's replacement when the great apostle was called home. Paul himself wanted to go to Philippi, but he had to send Timothy in his place. But, what an honor! Timothy was not only Paul's "son," and Paul's servant, but he became Paul's substitute.

The submissive mind is not the product of an hour's sermon or a week's seminar or even a year's service. The submissive mind grows in us as, like Timothy, we yield to the Lord and seek to serve others.

Something to Ponder

Do you have anyone you can count on in the same way that Paul counted on Timothy? If not, how can you begin such a relationship with someone?

Day 214
Politically Correct

Read 1 Peter 2:13–25

> *Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:17

True Christians submit to authority because they are first of all submitted to Christ. They use their freedom as a tool to build with and not as a weapon to fight with. A good example of this attitude is Nehemiah, who willingly gave up his own rights that he might help his people and restore the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:1—7:3).

If we are sincerely submitted to authority "for the Lord's sake" (1 Peter 2:13), then we will show honor to all who deserve it. We may not agree with their politics or their practices, but we must respect their position (Rom. 13:1–6). We will also "love the brotherhood"—the people of God in the church. This is a recurring theme. One way we show love to the brotherhood is by submitting to the authority of the "powers that be" (v. 1 KJV), for we are bound together with one another in our Christian witness.

We "honor the king" because we "fear God." It is worth noting that the tenses of these verbs indicate that we should constantly maintain these attitudes. "Keep loving the brotherhood! Keep fearing God! Keep honoring the king!"

Something to Ponder

When you are in a position of authority, what do you do to try to earn the respect of those under your leadership?

Day 215
Awaiting Balance

Read Isaiah 29

> *Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.*
>
> Isaiah 29:19

Isaiah asked the people to consider what God had planned for them. They had turned things upside down, but God would one day turn everything around by establishing His glorious kingdom on earth. The devastated land would become a paradise. There would be no more scoffers or ruthless people practicing injustice. The founders of the nation, Abraham and Jacob, would see their descendants glorifying the Lord.

In light of this future, why should Judah turn to feeble nations like Egypt for help? God was on their side, and they could trust Him! It is tragic when a nation forgets its great spiritual heritage and turns from trusting the Lord to trusting the plans and promises of people.

At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, Benjamin Franklin said, “I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men.… I therefore beg leave to move, that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning.”

Isaiah sought that attitude in Jerusalem, but instead, he found only scoffing and unbelief.

Something to Ponder

Are you currently in any cumbersome situations that you would like to be free of? What do you think God would have you do?

Day 216
The Right Balance

Read Philippians 4:6–9

> *Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*
>
> Philippians 4:8

Paul balanced four activities: “learned” and “received” and “heard” and “seen.” It is one thing to learn a truth, but quite another to receive it inwardly and make it a part of our inner self. Facts in the head are not enough; we must also have truths in the heart. In Paul’s ministry, he not only taught the Word but also lived it so that his listeners could see the truth in his life. Paul’s experience ought to be our experience. We must learn the Word, receive it, hear it, and do it.

The peace of God is one test of whether or not we are in the will of God. If we are walking with the Lord, then the peace of God (v. 7) and the God of peace (v. 9) exercise their influence over our hearts. Whenever we disobey, we lose that peace, and we know we have done something wrong.

Right praying, right thinking, and right living—these are the conditions for having the secure mind and victory over worry.

Something to Ponder

What can you do to keep your thoughts true, pure, lovely, and so forth? How do you prevent less noble thoughts from sneaking in?

Day 217
The Slanderers of Uz

Read Job 22

Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?

Job 22:5

What should have been an encouraging discussion among friends had become an angry and painful debate. Eliphaz had assumed the office of prosecuting attorney and turned the debate into a trial. It was three against one. According to the Jewish Talmud, “The slanderous tongue kills three: the slandered, the slanderer, and him who listens to the slander.” At the ash heap in Uz, there was death all around!

Eliphaz first accused Job of the sin of pride (vv. 1–3). Job was acting as though his character and conduct were important to God and beneficial to Him in some way. Eliphaz’s theology centered on a distant God.

But Job’s character and conduct were important to God, for God was using Job to silence the Devil. Neither Job nor his three friends knew God’s hidden plan, but Job had faith to believe that God was achieving some purpose in his life. The character and behavior of God’s people are important to the Lord because His people bring Him either joy or sorrow (Gen. 6:5–6; Ps. 37:23; 1 Thess. 4:1; Heb. 11:5). He is not a passive, distant God who does not identify with His people, but a God who delights in them as they delight in Him (Ps. 18:19; Isa. 63:9; Heb. 4:14–16).

Something to Ponder

How do you tend to react when people make false accusations against you?

Day 218
Prayer at Work

Read Colossians 1:28–29

> *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*
>
> Colossians 1:28

A more literal translation of the first part of Colossians 1:29 is “For this I labor to the point of exhaustion, agonizing.” What a picture of prayer! So much of our praying is calm and comfortable, yet Paul exerted his spiritual muscles the way a Greek runner would exert himself in the Olympic Games.

This does not mean that our prayers are more effective if we exert all kinds of energy. Nor does it mean that we must “wrestle with God” before He will meet our needs. Paul described a spiritual striving: It was God’s power at work in his life.

Prayer is not trying to change God’s mind. It is learning the mind of God and asking accordingly (1 John 5:14–15). The Holy Spirit constantly intercedes for us even though we do not hear His voice (Rom. 8:26–27). He knows the Father’s will, and He helps us pray in that will.

There are times when we simply do not feel like praying—and that is when we must pray the most! The Spirit gives us divine energy for prayer, in spite of the way we feel.

Something to Ponder

In your prayer life, are you are more like an Olympic marathoner, a long-distance runner, an occasional sprinter, or a couch potato?

Day 219
Friends in High Places

Read 1 John 5:4–5

> *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*
>
> 1 John 5:5

A Civil War veteran used to wander from place to place, begging a bed and bite to eat and always talking about his friend “Mr. Lincoln.” Because of his injuries, he was unable to hold a steady job. But as long as he could keep going, he would chat about his beloved president.

“You say you knew Mr. Lincoln,” a skeptical bystander retorted one day. “I’m not so sure you did. Prove it!”

The old man replied, “Why, sure, I can prove it. In fact, I have a piece of paper here that Mr. Lincoln himself signed and gave to me.” From his old wallet, the man took out a much-folded piece of paper and showed it to the man. “I’m not much for reading,” he apologized, “but I know that’s Mr. Lincoln’s signature.”

“Man, do you know what you have here?” one of the spectators asked. “You have a generous federal pension authorized by President Lincoln. You don’t have to walk around like a poor beggar! Mr. Lincoln has made you rich!”

To paraphrase what John wrote: “You Christians do not have to walk around defeated, because Jesus Christ has made you victors! He has defeated every enemy, and you share His victory. Now, by faith, claim His victory.”

Something to Ponder

What does it mean to you that you have “overcome the world”?

Day 220

Inconsistently Consistent

Read 1 Corinthians 10

Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

1 Corinthians 10:24

Paul probably appeared inconsistent to those who did not understand his principles of Christian living. At times, he would eat what the Gentiles were eating. At other times, he would eat only "kosher" food with the Jews. But he was actually living consistently by the principles he laid down in 1 Corinthians.

A weather vane seems inconsistent, first pointing in one direction and then in another. But a weather vane is always consistent: It always points in the direction in which the wind is blowing. That is what makes it useful.

As Christians we do have freedom. This freedom was purchased for us by Jesus Christ, so it is very precious. Freedom comes from knowledge: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). However, knowledge must be balanced by love; otherwise, it will tear down instead of build up.

The way we use our freedom and relate to others indicates whether we are mature in Christ. Strong and weak Christians need to work together in love to edify one another and glorify Jesus.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways Christians misuse their freedom? How can you avoid making those mistakes?

Day 221
Responding to Evil

Read Romans 12:17—13:14

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:21

Returning evil for evil, or good for good, is the way most people live. But we Christians must return good for evil. This response requires love, because our first inclination is to fight back. It also requires faith, believing that God can work and accomplish His will in our lives and the lives of those who hurt us.

A friend of mine once heard a preacher criticize him over the radio and tell things that were not only unkind, but also untrue. My friend became angry and was planning to fight back, when a godly preacher said, “If you defend yourself, then the Lord can’t defend you. Leave it in His hands.” My friend followed that wise counsel, and the Lord vindicated him.

Anyone can return good for good and evil for evil. If we return evil for evil, we only add fuel to the fire. But if we return good for evil, even if our enemy is not converted, we still experience the love of God in our own hearts and grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18).

Something to Ponder

Is it possible to grow stronger and more mature even though you “lose” in conflicts with evil? If so, why do you think it is so rare to see people return good for evil?

Day 222

The Secret of Joy

Read Philippians 1:1–5

> *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*
>
> Philippians 1:3–5

Paul's letter to the Philippian church is a missionary thank-you letter, but it is also the sharing of Paul's secret of Christian joy.

The unusual thing about the letter is this: There appeared to be no reason for him to be rejoicing. He was a Roman prisoner, and his case was coming up shortly. He might be acquitted, or he might be beheaded! The believers at Rome (where he was being held) were divided—some were for him and some were against him. In fact, some of the Christians even wanted to make things more difficult for the apostle!

Yet, in spite of his danger and discomfort, Paul overflowed with joy. The secret of Christian joy is found in the way we believers think—our attitudes. As we think, so we are (Prov. 23:7 KJV).

Philippians, then, is a Christian psychology book, based solidly on biblical doctrine. It is a book that explains the mind we must have if we are going to experience Christian joy in a world filled with trouble.

Something to Ponder

What are some current situations that tend to keep you from experiencing joy? How can you keep from letting such situations rob you of joy?

Day 223
A Matter of Life and Death

Read Colossians 3:3–4

> *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*
>
> Colossians 3:4

Christ not only died for us (substitution), but we died with Him (identification). Christ not only died for sin, bearing its penalty; He also died unto sin, breaking its power. Because we are "in Christ" through the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), we died with Christ. This means that we can have victory over the old sin nature that wants to control us.

Someone has said, "Life is what you are alive to." A child may come alive when you talk about a baseball game or an ice-cream cone. A teenager may come alive when you mention cars or dates. Paul wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). Christ was Paul's life, and he was alive to anything that related to Christ. So should it be with every believer.

Years ago I heard a story about two sisters who enjoyed attending dances and wild parties. Then they were converted and found new life in Christ. They received an invitation to a party and sent their RSVP in these words: "We regret that we cannot attend because we recently died."

Something to Ponder

What makes you "come alive"? Do any of these things interfere with your being able to exclaim, "For to me, to live is Christ"?

Day 224
Hidden Treasure

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–18

> *We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 4:7

Sometimes God permits our vessels to be jarred so that some of the treasure will spill out and enrich others. Suffering reveals not only the weakness of man but also the glory of God. Paul presented a series of paradoxes in this paragraph: earthen vessels—power of God; the dying Jesus—the life of Jesus; death working—life working. The natural mind cannot understand this kind of spiritual truth and therefore cannot understand why Christians triumph over suffering.

Not only must we focus on the treasure and not on the vessel, but we must also focus on the Master and not on the servant. If we suffer, it is for Jesus' sake. If we die to self, it is so that the life of Christ may be revealed in us. If we go through trials, it is so that Christ may be glorified. And all of this is for the sake of others. As we serve Christ, death works in us—but life works in those to whom we minister.

Something to Ponder

When was the last time you felt "jarred" significantly—to the point of almost breaking? How did you handle the situation?

Day 225
Three Themes

Read 1 Peter 1:1–2

> *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world … Grace and peace be yours in abundance.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:1–2

The three themes of suffering, grace, and glory in 1 Peter unite to form an encouraging message for believers experiencing times of trial and persecution. These themes are summarized in 5:10, a verse we would do well to memorize.

The cynical editor and writer H. L. Mencken once defined hope as "a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible." But that definition does not agree with the New Testament meaning of the word. True Christian hope is more than "hope so." It is confident assurance of future glory and blessing.

This confident hope gives us the encouragement and empowerment we need for daily living. It does not put us in a rocking chair where we complacently await the return of Jesus Christ. Instead, it puts us in the marketplace, on the battlefield, where we keep on going when the burdens are heavy and the battles are hard. Hope is not a sedative; it is a shot of adrenaline, a blood transfusion. Like an anchor, our hope in Christ stabilizes us in the storms of life (Heb. 6:18–19), but unlike an anchor, our hope moves us forward; it does not hold us back.

Something to Ponder

Can you think of a time in the recent past when your hope was like "a shot of adrenaline"? What were the circumstances?

Day 226
Seed Power

Read Colossians 1:6–8

> *All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.*
>
> Colossians 1:6

The Word of God is seed (Luke 8:11). This means the Word has life in it. When it is planted in the heart, it can produce fruit. Near King's Cross station in London, England, there is a cemetery containing a unique grave—that of the agnostic Lady Ann Grimston. She is buried in a marble tomb, marked by a marble slab. Before she died, she said sarcastically to a friend, "I shall live again as surely as a tree will grow from my body."

An unbeliever, Lady Ann Grimston did not believe that there was life after death. However, a tree did grow from her grave! A tiny seed took root, and as it grew, it cracked the marble and even tore the metal railing out of the ground! There is life and power in a seed, and there is life and power in the Word of God.

When God's Word is planted and cultivated, it produces fruit. Faith, hope, and love are among the firstfruits in the spiritual harvest (1 Cor. 13:13). These spiritual graces are among the evidences that we have truly been born again.

Something to Ponder

What do you do to help sow the Word in the hearts of others?

Day 227
Special Sufferings

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8–24

> *In our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 1:9

In Greek language, there are ten basic words for suffering, and Paul used five of them in this letter. Some sufferings we endure simply because we are human and subject to pain, but there are other sufferings that come because we are God's people and want to serve Him.

We must never think that trouble is an accident. For believers, everything is a divine appointment. God encourages us in all our tribulations by teaching us from His Word that it is He who permits trials to come. He encourages us further by reminding us that He is in control of trials (v. 9). Paul was weighed down like a beast of burden with a load too heavy to bear. But God knew just how much Paul could take, and He kept the situation under control.

We do not know what the specific "trouble" was, but it was great enough to make Paul think he was going to die. But we do know that God controlled the circumstances and protected His servant. Paul may have despaired of life, but God did not despair of Paul.

Something to Ponder

What are some of your most pressing current trials? What can you do to ensure that you remain focused on God during these trying times?

Day 228
The Sacrifice of Fools

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

> *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 5:1

Solomon had visited the courtroom, the marketplace, the highway, and the palace. Now he paid a visit to the temple. He watched the worshippers coming and going, praising God, praying, sacrificing, and making vows. He noted that many of them were not at all sincere in their worship and that they left the sacred precincts in worse spiritual condition than when they had entered. What was their sin? They were robbing God of the reverence and honor He deserved.

Even though God's glorious presence doesn't dwell in our church buildings as it did in the temple, believers today still need to heed this warning. The worship of God is the highest ministry of the church and must come from devoted hearts and yielded wills. For God's people to participate in public worship while harboring unconfessed sin is to ask for God's rebuke and judgment.

Sacrifices are not substitutes for obedience. Offerings in the hands without obedient faith in the heart become the sacrifice of fools, because only fools think they can deceive God. Fools think they are doing good, but they are only doing evil. And God knows it.

Something to Ponder

How can you ensure that your own worship comes from a yielded will?

Day 229

Victory: Now and Later

Read 1 Corinthians 15:29–58

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57

The heavenly kingdom is not made for the kind of bodies we now have: bodies of flesh and blood. So when Jesus returns, the bodies of living believers will instantly be transformed to be like His body (vv. 50–54; 1 John 3:1–3), and the dead believers will be raised with new glorified bodies.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychiatry, wrote: “And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.” Christians have victory in death and over death! Jesus said: “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19).

We share the victory today. The literal translation of 1 Corinthians 15:57 is, “But thanks be to God, who keeps on giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We experience “the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). First Corinthians 15:58 is Paul’s hymn of praise to the Lord as well as his closing admonition to the church. Because of the assurance of Christ’s victory over death, we know that nothing we do for Him will ever be wasted or lost. We can be steadfast in our service, unmovable in suffering, abounding in ministry to others, because we know our labor is not in vain.

Something to Ponder

Do you have fears and concerns about death? If so, what are they?

Day 230
Options for Suffering

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–8

> *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:7

When God permits suffering to come into people's lives, there are several ways they can deal with it. Some become bitter and blame God. Others "give up." Still others grit their teeth and put on a brave front. While this is a courageous response, it usually drains them of the strength needed for daily living; and after a time, they may collapse.

Was Paul sinning when he prayed to be delivered from Satan's buffeting? I don't think so. It is a normal thing for a Christian to ask God for deliverance from sickness and pain. God has not obligated Himself to heal every believer, but He has encouraged us to bring our burdens to Him.

There are those who would have us believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. "If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ," they say, "then you will never be sick." It is true that God promised the Jews special blessing and protection under the Old Covenant (see Deut. 7:12ff.), but He never promised the New Testament believers freedom from sickness or suffering.

Something to Ponder

What guidelines do you use to determine when to be persistent in prayer and when to accept something as a "thorn"?

Day 231

Salvation: A United Effort

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6–10

> *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 2:9–10

Salvation involves all three persons in the Godhead. No one can be saved apart from the Father's electing grace, the Son's loving sacrifice, and the Spirit's ministry of conviction and regeneration.

This triune aspect helps us to understand better some of the mysteries of our own salvation. As far as God the Father is concerned, I was saved when He chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4 KJV), but I knew nothing about that the night I was saved! It was a hidden part of God's wonderful eternal plan. As far as God the Son is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on the cross. As far as the Spirit is concerned, I was saved on May 12, 1945, at a Youth for Christ rally where I heard Billy Graham (then a young evangelist) preach the gospel. It was then that the Holy Spirit applied the Word to my heart, I believed, and God saved me.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you observe the activity of each member of the Godhead in regard to your salvation?

Day 232

Enjoyment and Eternity

Read Ecclesiastes 3:9–22

> *That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 3:13

When the well-known British Methodist preacher William Sangster learned that he had progressive muscular atrophy and could not get well, he made four resolutions and kept them to the end: (1) I will never complain; (2) I will keep the home bright; (3) I will count my blessings; (4) I will try to turn it to gain. This is the approach to life that Solomon wants us to take.

However, we must note that Solomon is not saying, "Don't worry—be happy!" He is promoting faith in God. Faith is only as good as the object of faith, and the greatest object of faith is the Lord. He can be trusted.

Since we have trusted Jesus Christ, we are being prepared for an eternal home. The Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said, "Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise."

The proper attitude for us is fear of the Lord (v. 14 KJV), which is not the cringing of a slave before a cruel master, but the submission of an obedient child to a loving parent. If we fear God, we need not fear anything else, for He is in control.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you feel God is preparing you now for your eternal home?

Day 233
Jubilee!

Read Isaiah 60—62

> *I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.*
>
> Isaiah 61:8

Every seven years, the Jews were to observe a "sabbatical year" and allow the land to rest. After seven sabbaticals, they were to celebrate the fiftieth year as the "Year of Jubilee." During that year, all debts were to be canceled, all land returned to the original owners, the slaves were to be freed, and everybody was to be given a fresh new beginning.

If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, you are living today in a spiritual "Year of Jubilee." You have been set free from bondage; your spiritual debt to the Lord has been paid; you are living in "the acceptable year of the LORD" (Isa. 61:2 KJV; also quoted in Luke 4:19 KJV). Instead of the ashes of mourning, you have a crown on your head (Isa. 61:3); for He has made you a king (Rev. 1:6 KJV). You have been anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and you wear a garment of righteousness (Isa. 61:3).

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you demonstrate your freedom from bondage or release from spiritual debt?

Day 234
No Problem Too Big

Read Isaiah 37

> *The angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp.*
>
> Isaiah 37:36

Sennacherib boasted of his military might and his great conquests. But the king of Assyria forgot that he was only God's tool for accomplishing His purposes on the earth, and the tool must not boast against the Maker (10:5–19). God would humble Sennacherib (37:7, 29).

The Assyrian commander had joked that one Assyrian junior officer was stronger than 2,000 Jewish horsemen (36:8–9), but it took only one of God's angels to destroy 185,000 Assyrian soldiers! Isaiah had prophesied the destruction of the Assyrian army. God would mow them down like a forest (10:33–34), devastate them with a storm (30:27–30), and throw them into the fire like garbage on the city dump (vv. 31–33).

After Sennacherib left Judah a defeated man, he returned to his capital city of Nineveh. Twenty years later, as a result of a power struggle among his sons, Sennacherib was assassinated by two of his sons in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (37:7), and it happened in the temple of his god (v. 38)! The field commander had ridiculed the gods of the nations, but Sennacherib's own god could not protect him.

Something to Ponder

What can you learn from this story to apply to stressful situations you are currently facing?

Day 235
Nothing Left to Live For

Read Job 16—17

If the only home I hope for is the grave … where then is my hope?

Job 17:13, 15

People treated Job as if he were the scum of the earth (v. 6). His body was only the shadow of what it had been (v. 7), and all of his plans had been shattered (v. 11). His friends would not change their minds and come to his defense (v. 10). They would not face his situation honestly, but they kept telling him that the light would soon dawn for him (v. 12). Is it any wonder that Job saw in death the only way of escape?

God did not answer Job's plea for death because He had something far better planned for him. God looked beyond Job's depression and saw his faith. When I was a young pastor, I heard an experienced saint say, "I have lived long enough to be thankful for unanswered prayer." At the time, I was shocked by the statement, but now that I have lived a few more years myself, I know what she was talking about. In the darkness of despair and the prison of pain, we often say things that we later regret, but God understands all about it and lovingly turns a deaf ear to our words but a tender eye to our wounds.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever felt that you had little if anything to live for? If so, what were the circumstances?

Day 236

A Peace at a Time

Read 1 Peter 5:12–14

Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

1 Peter 5:14

Peter closed this epistle with a benediction of peace. He opened the letter with a greeting of peace (1 Peter 1:1–2), so the entire epistle points to God's peace from beginning to end. What a wonderful way to end a letter that announced the coming of a "fiery trial" (4:12 KJV)!

Four times in the New Testament we find the admonition about "a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; and 1 Thess. 5:26). Peter called it "a kiss of love." It was a standard form of greeting or farewell in that part of the world at that time, just as it is in many Latin countries today.

Peter has given to us a precious letter that encourages us to hope in the Lord no matter how trying the times may be. Down through the centuries, the church has experienced various "fiery trials," yet Satan has not been able to destroy it. The church today is facing a "fiery trial," and we must be prepared.

But, whatever may come, Peter is still saying to each of us—be hopeful! The glory is soon to come!

Something to Ponder

Do you have a greeting that is equivalent to "a kiss of love"? If not, what sort of similar greeting could you create that has the same meaning?

Day 237

The Greatest Attraction

Read Colossians 1:18–20

> *He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*
>
> Colossians 1:18

In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago, and more than twenty-one million people visited the exhibits. Among the features was a "World Parliament of Religions," with representatives of the world's religions meeting to share their "best points" and perhaps come up with a new religion for the world.

Evangelist D. L. Moody saw this as a great opportunity for evangelism. He used churches, rented theaters, and even rented a circus tent to present the gospel of Jesus Christ. His friends wanted Moody to attack the "Parliament of Religions," but he refused. "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive," he said, "that men will turn to Him."

The false teachers of Colosse could never give Jesus Christ His rightful place of preeminence (Col. 1:18 KJV); for, according to their philosophy, Jesus Christ was only one of the many "emanations" from God. But Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It has well been said, "If Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, He cannot be Lord at all."

Something to Ponder

What are some specific things you can do this week to try to make Jesus more attractive to others?

Day 238
God as Author

Read Job 42:7–17

> *After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before.*
>
> Job 42:10

Job ended up with twice as much as he had before. He was once again a wealthy man. But we must not misinterpret this final chapter and conclude that every trial will end with all problems solved, all hard feelings forgiven, and everybody living "happily ever after." It just doesn't always happen that way! This chapter assures us that, no matter what happens to us, God always writes the last chapter. Therefore, we don't have to be afraid. We can trust God to do what is right, no matter how painful our situation may be.

But Job's greatest blessing was knowing God better and understanding His working in a deeper way. "In the whole story of Job," wrote G. Campbell Morgan, "we see the patience of God and endurance of man. When these act in fellowship, the issue is certain. It is that of the coming forth from the fire as gold, that of receiving the crown of life."[4] No matter what God permits to come into our lives, He always has His "afterword." He writes the last chapter—and that makes it all worthwhile.

Something to Ponder

How has your perspective on suffering changed as you've considered Job's story?

[4] G. Campbell Morgan, *The Answers of Jesus to Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 117.

Day 239
In Touch with God

Read Isaiah 1:2–4

> *The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*
>
> Isaiah 1:3

Isaiah was a man in touch with God. He foresaw God's Son and revealed God's glory; he heard God's message, and sought to bring the people back to God before it was too late.

Isaiah was a patriot with a true love for his country, pleading with Judah to return to God and warning kings when their foreign policy was contrary to God's will.

He also hated sin and sham religion. His favorite name for God was "the Holy One of Israel," and he used it twenty-five times in his book. He looked at the crowded courts of the temple and cried out, "They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him" (v. 4). Isaiah called the people to repent.

Isaiah was a courageous man. Unafraid to denounce kings and priests, and unwavering when public opinion went against him, he boldly declared the Word of God.

He was skilled in communicating God's truth. Not content with merely declaring facts, Isaiah clothed those facts in striking language that would catch the attention of a people blind and deaf to spiritual truth. Like our Lord Jesus Christ, Isaiah knew how to stir the imagination of his listeners so that he might arouse their interest.

Something to Ponder

Which of the qualities that describe Isaiah also describe you?

Day 240
Disorder in the Court

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1–6

> *I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 4:2

Solomon went into a courtroom to watch a trial, and there he saw innocent people being oppressed by power-hungry officials. The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them. The oppressors had all the power, and the victims were helpless.

Alas, even the king couldn't do a great deal to solve the problem. For once Solomon started to interfere with his government and reorganize things, he would have only created new problems and revealed more corruption. This is not to suggest that we today should despair of cleaning out political corruption. As Christian citizens, we must pray for all in authority and do what we can to see that just laws are passed and fairly enforced (1 Tim. 2:1–3).

Edward Gibbon, celebrated author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, said that political corruption was "the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty." Perhaps he was right; for where there is freedom to obey, there is also freedom to disobey. Some of Solomon's officials decided they were above the law, and the innocent suffered.

Something to Ponder

How do you usually respond when you find that someone is the victim of an injustice? What do you think are some good responses to injustice?

Day 241

Maintaining Togetherness

Read Hebrews 10:24–39

> *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*
>
> Hebrews 10:25

Our fellowship with God must never become selfish. We must also fellowship with other Christians in the local assembly. Apparently, some of the wavering believers had been absenting themselves from the church fellowship. It is interesting to note that the emphasis here is not on what believers get from the assembly, but rather on what they contribute to the assembly. Faithfulness in church attendance encourages others and provokes them to love and good works.

One of the strong motives for faithfulness is the soon coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, the only other place the Greek word translated “meeting together” (v. 25) is used in the New Testament is in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, where it is translated “gathered” and deals with the coming of Christ.

The three great Christian virtues are evidenced here: faith (Heb. 10:22), hope (v. 23), and love (v. 24). They are the fruit of our fellowship with God in His heavenly sanctuary.

Something to Ponder

What are the primary benefits you receive from group worship? What do you contribute to the group?

Day 242
Pleasing Priorities

Read 1 John 4:20–21

> *Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.*
>
> 1 John 4:20

When our hearts are confident toward God, there is no need for us to pretend, either to God or to other people. If we lack confidence with God, we will also lack confidence with God's people. Part of the torment that fear generates is constant worry.

"How many members do you have in your church?" a visitor asked the pastor.

"Somewhere near a thousand," the pastor replied.

"That certainly is a lot of people to try to please!" the visitor exclaimed.

"Let me assure you, my friend, that I have never tried to please all my members or even some of them," the pastor said with a smile. "I aim to please one person—the Lord Jesus Christ. If I am right with Him, then everything should be right between me and my people."

Immature Christians who are not growing in their love for God may think they have to impress others with their "spirituality." This mistake turns them into liars! They are professing something that they are not really practicing; they are playing a role instead of living a life.

Something to Ponder

What is one act of love you could do for a person as an expression of your love for God?

Day 243

When Pleasure Is Treasured

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

When I surveyed all that my hands had done … everything was meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 2:11

Today's world is pleasure mad. Millions of people will pay almost any amount of money to buy experiences to temporarily escape the burdens of life. While there is nothing wrong with innocent fun, those who build their lives only on seeking pleasure are bound to be disappointed.

Why? For one thing, pleasure seeking usually becomes a selfish endeavor, and selfishness destroys true joy. People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want, and they end up with broken relationships as well as empty hearts. People are more important than things and thrills. We are to be channels, not reservoirs; the greatest joy comes when we share God's pleasure with others.

If people live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then they reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage. When pleasure alone is the center of life, the result will ultimately be disappointment and emptiness.

Something to Ponder

How can you enjoy life to the fullest, without having your pleasurable experiences diminish in effectiveness?

Day 244
Lost Patience

Read 1 Peter 4:4–6

> *[The pagans] think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.*
>
> 1 Peter 4:4

Unsaved people do not understand the radical change that their friends experience when they trust Christ and become children of God. They do not think it strange when people wreck their bodies, destroy their homes, and ruin their lives by running from one sin to another. But let a drunkard become sober, or an immoral person pure, and they think that individual has gone crazy!

We must be patient toward the lost, even though we do not agree with their lifestyles or participate in their sins. After all, unsaved people are blind to spiritual truth (2 Cor. 4:3–4) and dead to spiritual enjoyment (Eph. 2:1). In fact, our contact with the lost is important to them since we are the bearers of the truth that they need. When the unsaved attack us, it is our opportunity to witness to them (1 Peter 3:15).

Instead of arguing with them, we should pray for them, knowing that the final judgment is with God.

Something to Ponder

Do you know an unsaved person for whom you may be the sole contact with Christianity? What can you do to maintain that relationship?

Day 245
Short-Term Memory

Read Hebrews 8:7–12

I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

Hebrews 8:12

What does it mean that God remembers our sins no more? Does it mean that our all-knowing God can actually forget what we have done? The phrase “remember [our] sins no more” means “hold our sins against us no more.” God recalls what we have done, but He does not hold it against us (2 Cor. 5:18–19). He deals with us on the basis of grace and mercy, not law and merit. Once sin has been forgiven, it is never brought before us again. The matter is settled eternally.

As a pastor in counseling ministry, I have often heard people say, “Well, I can forgive—but I cannot forget!”

“Of course you can’t forget,” I usually reply. “The more you try to put this thing out of your mind, the more you will remember it. But that isn’t what it means to forget.” Then I go on to explain that “to forget” means “not to hold it against the person who has wronged us.” We may remember what others have done, but we treat them as though they never did it.

This is only possible because of the cross, for there God treated His Son as though He had done it! Our experience of forgiveness from God makes it possible for us to forgive others.

Something to Ponder

What steps do you take to keep from taking God’s forgiveness for granted?

Day 246
Killer Instinct

Read 1 John 3:11–15

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer.

1 John 3:15

A visitor at the zoo was chatting with the keeper of the lion house. “I have a cat at home,” said the visitor, “and your lions act just like my cat. It seems a shame that you have to put those beautiful creatures behind bars.”

“My friend,” the keeper laughed, “these may look like your cat, but there’s murder in their hearts. You’d better be glad the bars are there.”

The only reason some people have never actually murdered anyone is because of the “bars” that have been put up: the fear of arrest and shame, the penalties of the law, and the possibility of death. But we are all going to be judged by “the law of liberty” (James 2:12 KJV). The question is not so much, “What did you do?” but “What did you want to do? What would you have done if you had been at liberty to do as you pleased?” This is why Jesus equated hatred with murder (Matt. 5:21–26) and lust with adultery (vv. 27–30).

This does not mean, of course, that hatred in the heart does the same amount of damage as actual murder. Our neighbors would rather we hate them than kill them! But in God’s sight, hatred is the moral equivalent of murder.

Something to Ponder

Do you have any hidden feelings of hatred? If so, what can you do about these?

Day 247
Fruitfulness

Read Philippians 1:11

> *[I pray that you will be] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*
>
> Philippians 1:11

The difference between spiritual fruit and human religious activity is that fruit brings glory to Jesus Christ. Whenever we do anything in our own strength, we have a tendency to boast about it. True spiritual fruit is so beautiful and wonderful that no one can claim credit for it; the glory must go to God alone. This, then, is true Christian fellowship—a having-in-common that is much deeper than mere friendship.

Jerry was told that he had to go to New York City for special surgery, and he hated to go. “Why can’t I have it done at home?” he asked his doctor. “I don’t know a soul in that big, unfriendly city!” But when he and his wife arrived at the hospital, a pastor met them and invited them to stay at his home until they got settled. The operation was serious, and the wait in the hospital was long and difficult; but the fellowship of the pastor and his wife brought new joy to Jerry and his wife. They learned that circumstances need not rob us of joy if we will but permit those circumstances to strengthen the fellowship of the gospel.

Something to Ponder

In which of your relationships do you experience genuine Christian fellowship? In which do you settle for “mere friendship”?

Day 248
Submission and Attraction

Read 1 Peter 3:3–6

> *Your beauty … should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:3–4

Attitudes such as submission, understanding, love, kindness, and patience are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) that comes when couples are submitted to Christ and to one another.

One of the greatest examples of a godly wife and mother in church history is Monica, the mother of the famous St. Augustine. God used Monica's witness and prayers to win both her son and her husband to Christ, though her husband was not converted until shortly before his death. Augustine wrote, "She served him as her lord; and did her diligence to win him unto Thee, preaching Thee unto him by her conversation [behavior]; by which Thou ornamentedst her, making her reverently amiable, and admirable unto her husband."

A Christian husband must help to beautify his wife in the Lord (Eph. 5:25–30). A Christian wife must encourage her husband and help him grow strong in the Lord. If there are unsaved people in the home, they will be won to Christ more by what they see in lives and relationships than by what they hear in witness.

Something to Ponder

Think of a specific instance when you chose to be submissive to accomplish a task. How did that submissiveness impact the task's success?

Day 249
Mud Wrestling with God

Read Job 30

> *In his great power God becomes like clothing to me; he binds me like the neck of my garment.*
>
> Job 30:18–19

Job experienced sufferings similar to those of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the daytime, Job endured unbearable suffering; and at night, God wrestled with him, made his clothing like a straitjacket, and threw him in the mud. Every night, God wrestled with Job; and Job lost.

Job prayed to God. He even stood up and cried out for deliverance, but his prayers were unanswered (v. 20).

Job had faithfully helped others in their need (29:12–17), but now nobody would help him. They wouldn't weep with him or even touch him. He was treated like a leper. It just wasn't wise to get too close.

Where were the people Job had helped? Surely some of them would have wanted to encourage their benefactor in his time of need. But nobody came to his aid. Mark Twain wrote, "If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man." But according to missionary doctor Wilfred Grenfell, "The service we render for others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth."

Something to Ponder

Are you as honest about your feelings toward God as Job is in 30:18–23? Why or why not?

Day 250
Acts of Faith

Read 1 Peter 4:17–19

> *Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*
>
> 1 Peter 4:19

If we really have hope, and believe that Jesus is coming again, then we will obey His Word and start laying up treasures and glory in heaven (Matt. 6:19–20 KJV). Unsaved people have a present that is controlled by the past, but Christians have a present that is controlled by the future (Phil. 3:12–21). In our very serving, we are committing ourselves to God and making investments for the future.

There is a striking illustration of this truth in Jeremiah 32. The prophet Jeremiah had been telling the people that one day their situation would change, and they would be restored to their land. But at that time, the Babylonian army occupied the land and was about to take Jerusalem. Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel, gave Jeremiah an option to purchase the family land that was occupied at the time by enemy soldiers. The prophet had to "put his money where his mouth was." And he did it! As an act of faith, he purchased the land and became, no doubt, the laughingstock of the people of Jerusalem. But God honored his faith because Jeremiah lived according to the Word that he preached.

Something to Ponder

In what ways is your present controlled by your past? How is it controlled by your future?

Day 251
Brothers in Arms

Read Philippians 1:25–30

> *It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.*
>
> Philippians 1:29

Satan wants us to think that we are alone in the battle and that our difficulties are unique, but such is not the case. Paul reminded the Philippians that he was going through the same difficulties they were experiencing hundreds of miles from Rome! A change in geography is usually no solution to spiritual problems because human nature is the same wherever we go, and the Enemy is everywhere. Knowing that our fellow believers are also sharing in the battle should be an encouragement for us to keep going and to pray for them as we pray for ourselves.

Going through spiritual conflict is one way we have to grow in Christ. As we face the Enemy and depend on the Lord, He gives us all that we need for battle. When the Enemy sees our God-given confidence, it makes him fear.

Single-mindedness enables us to experience joy in the midst of battle because it produces in us consistency, cooperation, and confidence. We experience the joy of “spiritual teamwork” as we strive together for the faith of the gospel.

Something to Ponder

How does it make you feel during times of stress to know that others have suffered—and continue to suffer—in similar ways?

Day 252

How Firm Is Your Foundation?

Read Colossians 1:21–23

> *Now [God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*
>
> Colossians 1:22

Paul's statement to the Colossians seems to cast a shadow on the assurance of our future glory (v. 13). Is it possible for us believers to lose our salvation? No, the *if* clause in verse 23 does not suggest doubt or lay down a condition by which we "continue in [our] faith."

Paul used an architectural image in this verse—a house, firmly set on the foundation. The town of Colosse was located in a region known for earthquakes, and the Greek word translated "moved from" can mean "earthquake stricken." Paul was saying, "If you are truly saved and built on the solid foundation, Jesus Christ, then you will continue in the faith and nothing will move you. You have heard the gospel and trusted Jesus Christ, and He has saved you."

In other words, we are not saved by continuing in the faith. But we continue in the faith and thus prove that we are saved. It behooves each of us as professing Christians to test our own faith and examine our own heart to be sure we are a child of God (2 Cor. 13:5).

Something to Ponder

What are some of the "earthquakes" you have faced that threatened to shake your spiritual foundation?

Day 253
Glory

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–11

> *If what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!*
>
> 2 Corinthians 3:11

Paul wrote at a period in history when the ages were overlapping. The new covenant of grace had come in, but the nation of Israel was still living under law. In AD 70, the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed by the Romans, and that would mark the end of the Jewish religious system.

The Judaizers wanted the Corinthian believers to go back under the law, to "mix" the two covenants. "Why go back to that which is temporary and fading away?" Paul asked. "Live in the glory of the new covenant, which is getting greater and greater."

The glory of the law was fading in Paul's day, and today that glory is found only in the records in the Bible. The nation of Israel has no temple or priesthood. The law of Moses is a religion with a most glorious past, but it has no glory today. The light is gone; all that remain are the shadows (Col. 2:16–17).

But the ministry of grace is internal (2 Cor. 3:1–3); it brings life (vv. 4–6), and it involves increasing glory (vv. 7–11).

Something to Ponder

Do you tend to dwell more on the "light" of past accomplishments than in the "glory" of the here and now? Explain.

Day 254

Victory through Surrender

Read Philippians 2:12–18

> *Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.*
>
> Philippians 2:17

The world's philosophy is that joy comes from aggression: Fight everybody to get what you want, and you will get it and be happy. The example of Jesus is proof enough that the world's philosophy is wrong. He never used a sword or any other weapon; yet He won the greatest battle in history—the battle against sin and death and hell. He defeated hatred by manifesting love; He overcame lies with truth. Because He surrendered, He was victorious!

There is a twofold joy that comes to those who possess and practice the submissive mind: a joy hereafter and a joy here and now. In the day of Christ, God is going to reward those who have been faithful to Him.

But we do not have to wait for the return of Christ to start experiencing the joy of the submissive mind. That joy is a present reality, and it comes through sacrifice and service.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the here-and-now joys you experience on a regular basis? How can you increase this level of joy?

Day 255
Empowered and Enabled

Read Romans 8:1–17

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Romans 8:14

To be unsaved and not have the Spirit is the lowest level of life. But people need not stay on that level. By faith in Christ they can move to the next level. The evidence of conversion is the presence of the Holy Spirit within, witnessing that believers are children of God (v. 16). Their bodies become the very temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).

What a difference it makes when the Holy Spirit lives within us. When evangelist D. L. Moody described his conversion experience, he said: "I was in a new world. The next morning I thought the sun shone brighter, and the birds sang sweeter … the old elms waved their branches for joy, and all nature was at peace."

But there is a third level of experience for which the other two are preparation. It is not enough for us to have the Spirit; the Spirit must have us (Rom. 8:12–17)! Only then can He share with us the abundant, victorious life that can be ours in Christ. Because He is "the Spirit of life" (see v. 6), He can empower us to obey Christ, and He can enable us to be more like Christ.

Something to Ponder

How has the Holy Spirit changed your perspective on life? What are some ways you can allow God's Holy Spirit to have more control over you?

Day 256
When in Rome …

Read Romans 1:8–15

> *I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.*
>
> Romans 1:14

Rome was a proud city, and the gospel came from Jerusalem, the capital city of a little nation Rome had conquered. The Christians in that day were not among the elite; they were common people and even slaves. Rome had known many great philosophers and philosophies; why pay any attention to a fable about a Jew who arose from the dead? Christians looked upon each other as brothers and sisters, all one in Christ, which went against the grain of Roman pride and dignity.

Paul arrived in Rome a prisoner as well as a preacher. In Jerusalem he was arrested in the temple, falsely accused by the Jewish authorities, and eventually sent to Rome as the emperor's prisoner to be tried before Caesar. When Paul wrote this letter, he had no idea that he would go through imprisonment and even shipwreck before arriving in Rome! At the close of the letter (15:30–33), he asked the believers in Rome to pray for him as he contemplated this trip, and it is a good thing that they did pray!

Something to Ponder

If you knew that presenting the truth of Jesus to others would involve shipwreck, imprisonment, and other hardships, would you be at all reluctant to share the gospel? Why or why not?

Day 257
Three Friends

Read Job 2—3

> *When Job's three friends … heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.*
>
> Job 2:11

All three of Job's friends were old (Job 32:6), but we assume that Eliphaz was the oldest. Eliphaz put great faith in tradition (15:18–19), and the God he worshipped was an inflexible Lawgiver.

Bildad was a legalist. For some reason, Bildad was sure that Job's children had died because they also were sinners (8:4). The man seemed to have no feeling for his hurting friend.

Zophar was surely the most dogmatic of the three. He is merciless and tells Job that God is giving him far less than he deserves for his sins (11:6)! Interestingly enough, Zophar speaks to Job only twice. Either he decides he is unable to answer Job's arguments or feels that it is a waste of time trying to help Job. All three men said some good and true things, as well as some foolish things; but they were of no help to Job because their viewpoint was too narrow. These men perfectly illustrate Dorothy Sayers' statement, "There's nothing you can't prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited."

Something to Ponder

What can you learn about being a friend from Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar?

Day 258
No Condemnation

Read Romans 8:18–39

> *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*
>
> Romans 8:28

As believers we never need faint in times of suffering because we know that God is at work in the world, and that He has a perfect plan for us (vv. 28–29). God has two purposes in that plan: our good and His glory.

Why should we Christians ever be discouraged and frustrated when we already share the glory of God? Our suffering today only guarantees that much more glory when Jesus Christ returns!

There is no condemnation because we share the righteousness of God, and the law cannot condemn us. There is no obligation because we have the Spirit of God, who enables us to overcome the flesh and live for God. There is no frustration because we share the glory of God, the blessed hope of Christ's return. There is no separation because we experience the love of Christ (v. 35). We do not need to fear the past, the present, or the future because we are secure in "the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 39).

Something to Ponder

Can you truthfully say that you feel no condemnation from God? No frustration? No separation? Which of these areas do you feel needs the most attention?

Day 259
Response Options

Read 1 Peter 3:8–12

> *Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:9

As Christians, we can live on one of three levels. We can return evil for good, which is the satanic level. We can return good for good and evil for evil, which is the human level. Or, we can return good for evil, which is the divine level. Jesus is the perfect example of this latter approach (see 2:21–23). As God's loving children, we must not give "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" (see Matt. 5:38–48). We must operate on the basis of mercy, for that is the way God deals with us.

We must always be reminded of our calling as Christians, for this will help us love our enemies and do them good when they treat us badly (see Luke 6:27). We are called to "inherit a blessing." The persecutions we experience on earth today only add to our blessed inheritance of glory in heaven someday (Matt. 5:10–12). But we also inherit a blessing today when we treat our enemies with love and mercy. By sharing a blessing with them, we receive a blessing ourselves! Persecution can be a time of spiritual enrichment for believers.

Something to Ponder

When was the last time you returned good for evil? How did it make you feel?

Day 260

Much Upheaval; Much Comfort

Read Isaiah 40:1

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Isaiah 40:1

"Isaiah is great for two reasons," wrote William Sanford LaSor in his fascinating book *Great Personalities of the Old Testament:* "He lived in momentous days, in critical days of international upheaval, and he wrote what many consider to be the greatest book in the Old Testament."[5]

Isaiah is the prophet we need to hear today as he cries out God's message above the din of world upheaval, "Comfort, comfort my people." The English word *comfort* comes from two Latin words that together mean "with strength." When Isaiah says to us, "Be comforted!" it is not a word of pity, but of power. God's comfort does not weaken us; it strengthens us. God is not indulging us, but empowering us. "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (30:15 KJV).

Something to Ponder

Think back to a time when God's comfort gave you much strength. What did you learn from that experience?

5 William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Old Testament* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1959), 136.

Day 261

The Privilege of Suffering

Read 1 Peter 4:12–16

> *Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*
>
> 1 Peter 4:13

It is an honor and a privilege to suffer with Christ and be treated by the world the way it treated Him. “The fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” is a gift from God (see Phil. 1:29; 3:10). Not all believers grow to the point where God can trust them with this kind of experience, so we ought to rejoice when the privilege comes to us (Acts 5:41).

When the three Hebrew children were cast into the fiery furnace, they discovered they were not alone (Dan. 3:23–25). The Lord was with Paul in all of his trials, and He promises to be with us “to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

“Suffering” and “glory” are twin truths that are woven into the fabric of Peter’s letter. The world believes that the absence of suffering means glory, but as Christians our outlook is different. The trial of our faith today is the assurance of glory when Jesus returns (1 Peter 1:7–8). This was the experience of our Lord (5:1), and it will also be our experience.

Something to Ponder

Does suffering ever feel like a privilege to you? If not, how can you try to keep a positive mind-set as you suffer?

Day 262
A Final Appointment

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1–4

> *Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!*
>
> Ecclesiastes 9:4

Death is not an accident—it is an appointment (Heb. 9:27 KJV), a destiny that nobody but God can cancel or change.

Life and death are in the hand of God (Eccl. 9:1), and only He knows our future. Solomon was not suggesting that we are passive actors in a cosmic drama, following an unchangeable script. Throughout this book, Solomon emphasizes our freedom of discernment and decision. But only God knows what the future holds for us and what will happen tomorrow because of the decisions we make today.

"As it is with the good man, so with the sinner" (v. 2). "If so, why bother to live a godly life?" we may ask. "After all, whether we obey the law or disobey, bring sacrifices or neglect them, make or break promises, we will die just the same." Yes, we share a common destiny on earth—death and the grave—but we do not share a common destiny in eternity. For that reason, everybody must honestly face "the last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26) and decide how to deal with it. How we deal with the reality of death reveals itself in the way we deal with the realities of life.

Something to Ponder

Is there anything you feel you need to do before you die? If so, are you working toward getting it done?

Day 263
No Reputation

Read Hebrews 5:9–10

> *Once made perfect, [Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*
>
> Hebrews 5:9

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a young preacher in London, his successful ministry aroused the envy of some of the clergy, and they attacked him with various kinds of slander and gossip. His sermons were called “trashy,” and he was called “an actor” and “a pulpit buffoon.” Even after his ministry was established, Spurgeon was lied about in the press (including the religious press), and this was bound to discourage him.

After one particularly scurrilous report in the press, Spurgeon fell before the Lord and prayed, “O Lord Jesus, Thou didst make Thyself of no reputation for me. I willingly lay my reputation down for Thy sake.” From that time on, Spurgeon had peace in his heart. He knew that his Great High Priest understood his need and would give him the grace he needed for each hour.

Something to Ponder

Have you ever been so devoted to Jesus that others questioned your reputation or motives? If so, how did you respond?

Day 264
Stand Firm

Read Galatians 5:1–15

> *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*
>
> Galatians 5:1

It is Christ who has made us free from the bondage of the law. He freed us from the curse of the law by dying for us on the tree (Gal. 3:13). The believer is no longer under law; he is under grace (Rom. 6:14). This does not mean that we are outlaws and rebels. It simply means that we no longer need the external force of law to keep us in God's will because we have the internal leading of the Holy Spirit of God (Rom. 8:1–4). Christ died to set us free, not to make us slaves.

Sad to say, there are some people who feel very insecure with liberty. They would rather be under the tyranny of some leader. There are some believers who are frightened by the liberty they have in God's grace, so they seek out a fellowship that is legalistic and dictatorial. This is comparable to an adult climbing back into the crib. The way of Christian liberty is the way of fulfillment in Christ. No wonder Paul issues that ultimatum: "Do not be entangled again in the yoke of bondage. Take your stand for liberty."

Something to Ponder

What does it mean to you to be free? How do you take a stand for liberty in Christ?

Day 265
Good and Cheap

Read 1 John 3:16–17

> *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*
>
> 1 John 3:16

In these days of multiplied social agencies, it is easy for us Christians to forget our obligations: “Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10). This “doing good” need not be in terms of money or material supplies. It may include personal service and the giving of ourselves. There are many individuals in our churches who lack love and who would welcome our friendship.

A young mother admitted, in a testimony meeting, that she never seemed to find time for her own personal devotions. She had several little children to care for, and the hours melted away. Imagine her surprise when two of the ladies from the church appeared at her front door.

“We’ve come to take over,” they explained. “You go into the bedroom and get started on your devotions.” After several days, the young mother was able to develop her devotional life so that the daily demands on her time no longer upset her.

If we want to experience and enjoy the love of God in our own hearts, we must love others, even to the point of sacrifice.

Something to Ponder

What are some “little” ways you could help others in your church, family, or neighborhood this week?

Day 266

From Sinner to Servant

Read Job 42:1–6

> *Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things.… Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*
>
> Job 42:1–2, 6

Job knew he was beaten. Quoting God's very words (vv. 3–4), Job humbled himself before the Lord and acknowledged His power and justice in executing His plans (v. 2). Then Job admitted that his words had been wrong and that he had spoken about things he didn't understand (v. 3). Job withdrew his accusations that God was unjust and treating him unfairly. He realized that whatever God does is right and that he must accept it by faith.

Job told God, "I can't answer Your questions! All I can do is confess my pride, humble myself, and repent." Until now, Job's knowledge of God had been indirect and impersonal, but that was changed. Job had met God personally and seen himself to be but "dust and ashes."

"The door of repentance opens into the hall of joy," said Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and it was true for Job. In the climax of the book, Job the sinner became Job the servant of God. How did Job serve God? By enduring suffering and not cursing God and thereby silencing the Devil! Suffering in the will of God is a ministry God gives to a chosen few.

Something to Ponder

When you realize you are wrong about something, how quick are you to repent?

Day 267
Human Error

Read Romans 7:14–25

> *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*
>
> Romans 7:15

The law cannot give life—it can only show sinners that they are guilty and condemned. This explains why legalistic Christians and churches do not grow and bear spiritual fruit. They are living by law, and the law always kills (2 Cor. 3:6). Few things are deader than a legalistic church that is proud of its "high standards" and tries to live up to them in its own energy. Often the members of such a church start to judge and condemn one another, and the sad result is a church fight and then a church split that leaves members—or former members—angry and bitter.

As new Christians grow, they often come into contact with various philosophies of the Christian life. But no human teacher can take the place of Christ; no book can take the place of the Bible.

Human beings can give us information, but only the Spirit can give us illumination and help us understand spiritual truths. The Spirit enlightens us and enables us; no human leader can do that.

Something to Ponder

How can you benefit from the wisdom of other people without putting too much value on their advice?

Day 268
Mind Control

Read 1 Peter 1:13–16

> *Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:13

"Prepare your minds for action" (or, "Gird up the loins of your mind" KJV) simply means, "Pull your thoughts together! Have a disciplined mind!" The image is that of a robed man, tucking his skirts under his belt, so he can be free to run. When we center our thoughts on the return of Christ and live accordingly, we escape the many worldly things that would encumber our mind and hinder our spiritual progress.

Not only should we have a disciplined mind, but we should have a sober and optimistic mind as well. The result of having a spiritual mind-set is that we experience the grace of God in our life. To be sure, we will experience grace when we see Jesus Christ, but we can also experience grace today as we look for Him to return. We have been saved by grace (Eph. 2:8–9), and we depend moment by moment on God's grace. Looking for Christ to return strengthens our faith and hope in difficult days, which imparts to us more of the grace of God.

Something to Ponder

To what extent do you feel that you "experience the grace of God in your life"? What might you do to increase your awareness of His grace?

Day 269
A Word from the Unwise

Read Job 4—5

> *Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: "If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking?"*
>
> Job 4:1–2

Job's friends were silent for seven days (2:13), and Job later wished they had stayed that way (13:5). Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered Job. Did he answer the pain in Job's heart? No, he answered the words from Job's lips. A wise counselor and comforter must listen with the heart and respond to feelings as well as to words. We do not heal a broken heart with logic; we heal a broken heart with love.

Eliphaz's approach started out positive, even gentle, but it was only honey to prepare Job for the bitterness that would follow. "Don't get upset, Job!" is what he said.

We must never underestimate the power of words to encourage people. James Moffatt translates Job 4:4, "Your words have kept men on their feet." The right words spoken at the right time and with the right motive can make a tremendous difference in the lives of others. Our words can nourish those who are weak and encourage those who are defeated. But our words can also hurt those who are broken, so we must be careful what we say and how we say it.

Something to Ponder

When have you felt that you had the right words, at the right time, and with the right motive—and helped or comforted someone?

Day 270
Love and Discipline

Read Hebrews 12:7–29

> *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*
>
> Hebrews 12:11

I am sure that few children believe it when their parents say, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” But it is true. The Father does not enjoy having to discipline His children, but the benefits afterward make the chastening an evidence of His love.

What are the benefits? For one thing, there is “a harvest of righteousness.” Instead of continuing to sin, the children strive to do what is right. There is also peace instead of war. Chastening also encourages children to exercise in spiritual matters—the Word of God, prayer, meditation, witnessing, and so forth. All this leads to joy.

Of course, the important thing is how God’s children respond to His chastening. They can despise it or faint under it (v. 5 KJV), both of which are wrong. They should show reverence to the Father by submitting to His will (v. 9 KJV), using the experience to exercise themselves spiritually.

In the King James Version, verses 12 and 13 sound like a coach’s encouragement: “Lift up your hands. Strengthen those knees. Get those lazy feet on the track. On your mark, get set, go” (author’s paraphrase)!

Something to Ponder

Why do you discipline yourself in ways that may not be pleasant (dieting, exercise, and so forth)? What are the spiritual parallels of such forms of self-discipline?

Day 271
Real Life

Read 1 John 1:3

> *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*
>
> 1 John 1:3

Most people are dissatisfied today because their total personality has never been controlled by something real and meaningful. When people are born of God through faith in Christ, God's Spirit comes into their life to live there forever. As they have fellowship with God in reading and studying the Bible and in prayer, the Holy Spirit is able to control their mind, heart, and will. And what happens then?

A Spirit-controlled mind knows and understands truth. A Spirit-controlled heart feels love. A Spirit-controlled will inclines to obedience. John wants to impress this fact on us, and that is why he uses a series of contrasts in his letter: truth versus lies, love versus hatred, and obedience versus disobedience. There is no middle ground in the life that is real. We must be on one side or on the other.

This, then, is the life that is real. It was revealed in Christ; it was experienced by those who trusted in Christ; and it can be shared today by those who are in Christ.

Something to Ponder

Which of the three aspects of personality (mind, heart, or will) do you find hardest to submit to God? Why?

Day 272
Hard Truth

Read Romans 11:1–15

> *What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.*
>
> Romans 11:7

For centuries people have been puzzled by the nation of Israel. The Roman government recognized the Jewish religion, but it still called the nation *secta nefaria*—a "nefarious sect." The great historian Arnold Toynbee classified Israel as "a fossil civilization" and did not know what to do with it.

Paul devoted Romans 11 to presenting proof that Israel is still God's elect nation; He foreknew them, or chose them, and they are His. The fact that most of the nation has rejected Christ is no proof that God has finished with His people. In his day, Elijah thought that the nation had totally departed from God. He thought he was the only faithful Jew left, but he discovered that there were seven thousand more (1 Kings 19:13–18).

Paul referred to this "remnant" in Romans 9:27. At no time has the entire nation of Israel been true to the Lord. If a remnant had been saved, thus proving that God was not through with His people, then what had happened to the rest of the nation? They had been hardened. But Paul made it clear that the hardening of Israel is neither total nor final, and this fact is proof that God has a future for the nation.

Something to Ponder

What can you learn from the example set by the remnant of Israel?

Day 273
Mixed Messages

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1–5

> *I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 2:2

My wife was driving on our trip to Chicago, and I was in the copilot's seat reading another author's book a publisher had asked me to review. Occasionally I would utter a grunt and then a groan, and finally I shook my head and said, "Oh no! I can't believe it!"

"I take it you don't like the book," she said. "Something wrong with it?"

"You bet there is!" I replied. "Just about everything is wrong with it, because this man does not know what the message of the gospel really is!"

There was a time, however, when that author had been faithful to the gospel. But over the years, he had begun to take a philosophical (and, I fear, political) approach to the gospel. The result was a hybrid message that was no gospel at all.

When Paul ministered in Corinth, he obeyed our Lord's commission and preached the gospel (Mark 16:15 KJV). What had happened at Corinth after Paul's departure is happening in churches today: People are mixing philosophy (human wisdom) with the gospel (God's revealed message), and this mixture is causing confusion and division. Paul urged his readers to return to the fundamentals of the gospel message.

Something to Ponder

How can you stay focused on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" without getting bogged down in philosophy and politics?

Day 274
Accept No Substitutes

Read Romans 1:18–32

> *Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*
>
> Romans 1:21

Man knew God; this is clear. But man did not want to know God or honor Him as God. Instead of being thankful for all that God had given him, man refused to thank God or give Him the glory He deserves. Man was willing to use God's gifts, but he was not willing to worship and praise God for His gifts. The result was an empty mind and a darkened heart. Man the worshipper became man the philosopher, but his empty wisdom only revealed his foolishness.

Having held down God's truth and refusing to acknowledge God's glory, man was left without a god; and man is so constituted that he must worship something. If he will not worship the true God, he will worship a false god, even if he has to manufacture it himself! This fact about man accounts for his propensity to idolatry. Man exchanged the glory of the true God for substitute gods that he himself made. He exchanged glory for shame, incorruption for corruption, truth for lies.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the false gods that tempt you away from worshipping the one true God? How do you turn away from false gods?

Day 275
Not Enough Love?

Read 1 Corinthians 13

> *If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 13:3

It was Jonathan Swift, the satirical author of *Gulliver's Travels*, who said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." Spiritual gifts, no matter how exciting and wonderful, are useless and even destructive if they are not ministered in love. In all three of the "body" passages in Paul's letters, there is an emphasis on love. It has well been said that love is the "circulatory system" of the body of Christ.

Few chapters in the Bible have suffered more misinterpretation and misapplication than 1 Corinthians 13. Divorced from its context, it becomes "a hymn to love" or a sentimental sermon on Christian brotherhood. Many people fail to see that Paul was still dealing with the Corinthians' problems when he wrote these words: the abuse of the gift of tongues, division in the church, envy of others' gifts, selfishness (remember the lawsuits?), impatience with one another in the public meetings, and behavior that was disgracing the Lord. The only way spiritual gifts can be used creatively is when Christians are motivated by love.

Something to Ponder

Of all of your current relationships and situations, where would you say love is most needed?

Day 276
At War with Ourselves

Read James 4:1–6

> *You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*
>
> James 4:2–3

The essence of sin is selfishness. Selfish desires are dangerous things. They lead to wrong actions, and they even lead to wrong praying. When our praying is wrong, our whole Christian life is wrong. It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get our will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth.

Sometimes we use prayer as a cloak to hide our true desires. "But I prayed about it!" can be one of the biggest excuses we use. Instead of seeking God's will, we tell God what He is supposed to do, and we get angry with Him if He does not obey. This anger at God eventually spills over, and we get angry with God's people. More than one church split has been caused by saints who take out their frustrations with God on the members of the church. Many a church or family problem would be solved if people would only look into their own hearts and see the battle raging there.

Something to Ponder

Can you think of any times when you may have prayed with improper motives? What led you to eventually discover your selfish motives?

Day 277

A Helpful, but Overlooked, Ministry

Read Job 36—37

> *How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.*
>
> Job 36:26

God wants to teach us through our sufferings (36:22), and one evidence that we are learning our lessons is that we praise and thank Him, even for trials. “Glorify him for his mighty works for which he is so famous” (v. 24 TLB). “Praise changes things” just as much as “prayer changes things.”

With all his verbosity and lack of humility, Elihu did say some good things that Job needed to hear. Elihu’s use of rhetorical questions in 37:14–18 prepared Job for the series of questions Jehovah would ask him in Job 38—41. Unlike the three friends, Elihu assessed Job’s problem accurately: Job’s actions may have been right—he was not the sinner his three friends described him to be—but his attitudes were wrong. He was not the “saint” Job saw himself to be. Job was slowly moving toward a defiant, self-righteous attitude that was not at all healthy. It was this “know-it-all” attitude that God exposed and destroyed when He appeared to Job and questioned him.

So, even though God said nothing about Elihu, the man did have a helpful ministry to Job. Unfortunately, Job wouldn’t accept it.

Something to Ponder

What are some good actions you have performed lately in which your attitudes weren’t quite as good as they should have been?

Day 278
Be Not Afraid

Read 2 Timothy 1:1–7

> *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*
>
> 2 Timothy 1:7

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to serve God, and through Him we can overcome fear and weakness. The word *fear* in 2 Timothy 1:7 (KJV) means "timidity, cowardice." It is futile for us to try to serve God without the power of the Holy Spirit. Talent, training, and experience cannot take the place of the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit also gives us love. If we have love for lost souls and for the people of God, we will be able to endure suffering and accomplish the work of God. Selfishness leads to fear because, if we are selfish, we are interested only in what we will get out of serving God, and we will be afraid of losing prestige, power, or money.

True Christian love, energized by the Spirit (Rom. 5:5), enables us to sacrifice for others and not be afraid. The Spirit gives love (Gal. 5:22). He is also the One who gives self-control. "Self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7 NIV) is a better translation than "sound mind" (KJV). It describes a person who is sensibly minded and balanced, who has his life under control. The Amplified Version reads, "calm and well-balanced mind and discipline and self-control."

Something to Ponder

When have you experienced a "spirit of timidity" in your faith?

Day 279
Leading the Way

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1–7

> *Our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 1:7

Dr. George W. Truett pastored First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, for nearly fifty years. In one of his sermons, he told about an unbelieving couple whose baby died suddenly. Dr. Truett conducted the funeral and later had the joy of seeing both parents trust Jesus Christ.

Many months later, a young mother lost her baby, and Dr. Truett was called to bring her comfort. Nothing he shared seemed to help. But at the funeral service, the newly converted mother stepped to the young woman's side and said, "I passed through this, and I know what you are passing through. God called me, and through the darkness I came to Him. He has comforted me, and He will comfort you!"

Later Dr. Truett said, "The first mother did more for the second mother than I could have done; for the first young mother had traveled the road of suffering herself."

If we have experienced God's comfort, then "we can comfort those in any trouble" (v. 4).

Something to Ponder

Can you recall a time in your life or the life of a friend or family member that caused you to question God's love or doubt His power? How did you deal with your feelings?

Day 280
Remarkable Plans

Read Romans 11:16–36

> *For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.*
>
> Romans 11:32

We must remember that God chose the Jews so that the Gentiles might be saved. “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” was God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). The tragedy was that Israel failed to share the truth with the Gentiles. But God declared both Jews and Gentiles to be lost and condemned. This action meant that He could have mercy on all because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Rom. 11:28–32).

Having contemplated God’s great plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles, all Paul could do was sing a hymn of praise. Only a God as wise as our God could take the fall of Israel and turn it into salvation for the world! His plans will not be aborted, nor will His purposes lack fulfillment (Isa. 46:10). No human being can fully know the mind of the Lord (1 Cor. 2:16), and the more we study His ways, the more we offer Him praise. Are we to conclude that God does not know what He is doing? Of course not! God is too wise to make plans that will not be fulfilled. Israel did not allow Him to rule, so He overruled!

Something to Ponder

Has God ever “overruled” any of your plans? How did you feel when it happened?

Day 281
Hand in Hand

Read Hebrews 8:13

> *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*
>
> Hebrews 8:13

It is one thing to say, "We will!" and quite another to do it. However, the new covenant does not depend on people's faithfulness to God but on God's faithful promise to people. The writer of Hebrews affirms God's "I will" on behalf of those who trust Jesus Christ. In fact, God's "I will" is stated three times in Hebrews 8:10 and six times in verses 8 through 12.

God led Israel out of Egypt the way a father would take his children by the hand and lead them. God gave Israel His holy law for their own good, to separate them from the other nations and to protect them from the sinful practices of the heathens around them. But the nation failed. God's responses to Israel's disobedience were to discipline them repeatedly and finally to send them into captivity.

God did not find fault with His covenant, but with His people. The problem is not with the law, but with our sinful natures, for by ourselves we cannot keep God's law. The law "made nothing perfect" (7:19) because it could not change any human heart. Only God's grace can do that.

Something to Ponder

In what ways does God lead you as a father might lead a child?

Day 282
Proper Nutrition

Read 1 Peter 1:22—2:3

> *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:2–3

God's Word has life, gives life, and nourishes life. We should have appetites for the Word just like hungry newborn babes! We should want the pure Word, unadulterated, because it alone can help us grow. When I was a child, I did not like to drink milk (and my father worked for Borden Dairy!), so my mother used to add various syrups and powders to make my milk tastier. None of them really ever worked. It is sad when we Christians have no appetite for God's Word, but must be "fed" religious entertainment instead. As we grow, we discover that the Word is milk for babes, but also strong meat for the mature (Heb. 5:11–14; 1 Cor. 3:1–4). It is also bread (Matt. 4:4) and honey (Ps. 119:103).

Sometimes children have no appetite because they have been eating the wrong things. Peter warns us to lay aside certain wrong attitudes of heart that would hinder our appetite and spiritual growth. When we are growing in the Word, we are peacemakers, not troublemakers, and we promote the unity of the church.

Something to Ponder

In what way(s) does God's Word give you life? How does it nourish your life?

Day 283
Dual Citizenship

Read Philippians 3:20–21

> *Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*
>
> Philippians 3:20

The citizens of Philippi were privileged to be Roman citizens away from Rome. When babies were born in Philippi, it was important that their names be registered on the legal records.

Citizenship is important. When we travel to another country, it is essential that we have a passport that proves our citizenship. None of us wants to suffer the fate of Philip Nolan in the classic tale *The Man Without a Country* written by Edward Everett. Because he cursed the name of his country, Nolan was sentenced to live aboard ship and never again see his native land or even hear its name or news about its progress. For fifty-six years he was on an endless journey from ship to ship and sea to sea, and finally he was buried at sea.

As Christians our names are written in the Book of Life, and this is what determines our final entrance into the heavenly country. When we confess Christ on earth, He confesses us in heaven (Matt. 10:32 KJV). Our names are written down in heaven, and there they stand written forever.

Something to Ponder

What privileges are you entitled to as a “citizen of heaven”? What are your responsibilities as a “citizen of heaven”?

Day 284
Prophet Sharing

Read James 5:10–11

> *Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*
>
> James 5:10

The prophets encourage us by reminding us that God cares for us when we go through sufferings for His sake. Elijah announced to wicked King Ahab that there would be a drought in the land for three and one-half years, and Elijah himself had to suffer in that drought (James 5:17–18). But God cared for him, and God gave him victory over the evil priests of Baal (1 Kings 17—18).

Many of the prophets had to endure great trials and sufferings, not only at the hands of nonbelievers, but at the hands of professed believers. Jeremiah was arrested as a traitor and even thrown into an abandoned well to die. God fed Jeremiah and protected him throughout that terrible siege of Jerusalem. Both Ezekiel and Daniel had their share of hardships, but the Lord delivered them. And even those who died for the faith received that special reward for those who are true to Him.

The impact of a faithful, godly life carries much power. We need to remind ourselves that our patience in times of suffering is a testimony to others around us.

Something to Ponder

When you are in the minority, but know you are right, how do you keep from caving in to popular opinion?

Day 285
Misusing a Good Gift

Read Isaiah 28

> *Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions.*
>
> Isaiah 28:7

Isaiah saw storm clouds gathering over the city and announced that trouble was coming. He began his message announcing God's judgment on Ephraim (Isa. 28:1–6). Their arrogance was detestable to God, for they thought their fortress city of Samaria was impregnable. Samaria reigned in luxury and pleasure and had no fear of her enemies.

The Lord was also appalled by their drunkenness. To the Jews, wine was a gift from God and a source of joy. The law did not demand abstinence, but it did warn against drunkenness.

A government official in Washington, D.C., once quipped, "We have three parties in this city: the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the cocktail party." Indeed, Washington, D.C., ranks high on the list of cities noted for alcohol consumption. Many people don't realize that alcohol and nicotine, America's favorite legal drugs, do far more damage than all the illegal drugs combined. What hope is there for our affluent, pleasure-loving society that gives lip service to religion and ignores the tragic consequences of sin and the judgment that is sure to come?

Something to Ponder

Drunkenness was related to arrogance for the people of Ephraim. Do you think the two traits are still related? In what ways?

Day 286
Why Bother?

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16–33

> *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 11:27

In my limited itinerant ministry, I have had the convenience of automobiles and planes, and yet travel wears me out. How much more difficult it was for Paul! He often had to go without food, drink, and sleep, and sometimes he lacked sufficient clothing to keep himself warm.

Paul endured these hardships because of his love for Christ and the church. His greatest burden was not around him, but within him: "the care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28 KJV). Why did he care so much? Because he identified with the believers (v. 29). Whatever happened to his "children" (6:13) touched his own heart, and he could not abandon them.

Paul climaxed this narration of his sufferings by telling of his humiliating experience at Damascus, when he—the great apostle— was smuggled out of the city in a basket let over the wall (11:32–33)! Even when Paul did narrate his sufferings, he was careful that Christ was glorified, and not Paul. May we never take for granted the sacrifices that others have made so that we may enjoy the blessings of the gospel today.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways (if any) that you have suffered for the good of your church?

Day 287
Time to Move On

Read Romans 15

> *It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.*
>
> Romans 15:20

The vast area of opportunity in other parts of the empire kept Paul from visiting Rome sooner. He was not hindered from going to Rome by satanic opposition or physical obstacles but by the challenge of completing his work right where he was. He was so faithful in his evangelistic outreach that he was able to say that he had no more place to minister in those parts (Rom. 15:23). This statement did not mean that Paul had personally witnessed to every person in that area but that he had taken the gospel throughout the region and had left behind witnessing churches and Christians who would carry on the work. Paul finished one job before he started another one.

Paul's desire for many years had been to visit Rome and then move on to Spain (v. 24), but there is no record that he ever did so. Tradition says that he did go to Spain, and to Britain, after he was released from prison, but church tradition is not always to be trusted.

Something to Ponder

How do you determine when it is time to "move on" from one project or ministry to another?

Day 288
Bearing the Pain

Read 2 Timothy 1:8–18

> *Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*
>
> 2 Timothy 1:8

By nature, none of us enjoys suffering. Even our Lord prayed, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me” (Luke 22:42 KJV), and Paul prayed three times for God to remove his painful thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7–8). But suffering may well be a part of a faithful Christian life. Christians sometimes suffer because they have done right and served God. When we suffer for doing good, then we are sharing Christ’s sufferings (Phil. 3:10) and suffering on behalf of the whole church (Col. 1:24).

Years ago, I read about a Christian who was in prison because of his faith. He was to be burned at the stake, and he was certain he would never be able to endure the suffering. One night, he experimented with pain by putting his little finger into the candle flame. It hurt, and he immediately withdrew it. “I will disgrace my Lord,” he said to himself. “I cannot bear the pain.” But when the hour came for him to die, he praised God and gave a noble witness for Jesus Christ. God gave him the power when he needed it, and not before.

Something to Ponder

How have you experienced God’s power in the midst of suffering?

Day 289
God Responds

Read Job 38—41

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm.

Job 38:1

We prefer that God speak to us in the sunshine, but sometimes He must speak out of the storm. God's address to Job centered on His works in nature and consisted of seventy-seven questions interspersed with divine commentary relating to the questions. The whole purpose of this interrogation was to make Job realize his own inadequacy and inability to meet God as an equal and defend his cause.

"Summon me and I will answer," Job had challenged God, "or let me speak, and you reply" (13:22). God had now responded to Job's challenge.

Job was sure that his speeches had been filled with wisdom and knowledge, but God's first question put an end to that delusion: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (38:2). The Living Bible paraphrases it, "Why are you using your ignorance to deny my providence?" God didn't question Job's integrity or sincerity; He only questioned Job's ability to explain the ways of God in the world. Job thought he knew about God, but he didn't realize how much he didn't know about God. Knowledge of our own ignorance is the first step toward true wisdom.

Something to Ponder

If "knowledge of our own ignorance is the first step toward true wisdom," have you taken a giant step, a medium step, or a baby step? Explain.

Day 290
Hanging On to Hope

Read Hebrews 10:19–23

> *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*
>
> Hebrews 10:23

The readers of this epistle were being tempted to forsake their confession of Jesus Christ by going back to the old covenant worship. The writer did not exhort them to hold on to their salvation, because their security was in Christ and not in themselves. Rather, he invited them to hold fast to "the hope we profess" (v. 23).

We have noted in our study of Hebrews that there is an emphasis on the glorious hope of believers. God is "bringing many sons to glory" (2:10). Believers "share in the heavenly calling" (3:1) and therefore can rejoice in hope (3:6 KJV). Hope is one of the main themes of Hebrews 6. We are looking for Christ to return (9:28), and we are seeking that city that is yet to come (13:14).

When we have our hope fixed on Christ, and rely on the faithfulness of God, then we will not waver. Instead of looking back (as the Jews so often did), we should look ahead to the coming of the Lord (10:23–25).

Something to Ponder

If you knew for sure that Jesus would return two weeks from today, what would you want to do during the next two weeks? Which of these are things you should be doing anyway?

Day 291
Bright Forecast

Read James 1:12–18

> *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*
>
> James 1:17

It is impossible for God to change. He cannot change for the worse because He is holy; He cannot change for the better because He is perfect. If shadows come between the Father and us, He did not cause them. We should never question His love or doubt His goodness when difficulties come or temptations appear.

The first barrier against temptation is a negative one: the judgment of God. The second barrier is positive: the goodness of God. A fear of God is a healthy attitude, but the love of God must balance it. We can obey Him because He may chasten us; or we can obey Him because He has already been so generous to us and because we love Him for it.

The next time you are tempted, meditate on the goodness of God in your life. If you think you need something, wait for the Lord to provide it. Never toy with the Devil's bait. One reason God allows us to be tempted is to teach us patience. David was tempted twice to kill King Saul and hasten his own coronation (1 Sam. 24; 26), but he resisted the temptation and waited for God's timing.

Something to Ponder

What are some things that occasionally get between you and God and tend to form "shadows"?

Day 292
Religion Gone Wrong

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1–11

> *If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 2:10–11

One of the members of the Corinthian church caused Paul a great deal of pain. We are not sure if this is the same man Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 5 or if it was another person. Paul had made a quick visit to Corinth to deal with this problem (2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1) and had also written a painful letter to the church about the situation.

Paul could have exercised his apostolic authority and commanded the people to respect him and obey him, but he preferred to minister with patience and love. Love always considers the feelings of others and seeks to put their good ahead of everything else.

When I was a child, I didn't always appreciate the punishment that my parents gave me. But now that I look back, I can thank God that they loved me enough to discipline me. Now I understand what they really meant when they said, "This hurts us more than it hurts you."

Something to Ponder

When people offend you, are you quick to reveal a compassionate heart? If not, what is your usual course of action?

Day 293
The War Is Over

Read 1 John 3:4–6

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning.

1 John 3:6

For many months after the close of World War II, Japanese troops were discovered hidden in the caves and jungles of the Pacific Islands. Some of these stragglers were living like frightened savages; they didn't know the war was over. Once they understood that it was no longer necessary for them to fight, they surrendered.

Christians may rest in the truth that Satan is a defeated enemy. Sentence has been pronounced on him, but it will be awhile before the punishment is meted out. People who know Christ and who have been delivered from the bondage of sin through Christ's death on the cross have no desire to obey Satan and live like rebels.

Counterfeit Christians were trying to convince true believers that people could be "saved" and still practice sin. John did not deny that Christians sin, but he did deny that Christians can live in sin. People who can enjoy deliberate sin and who do not feel convicted or experience God's chastening had better examine themselves to see whether they are really born of God.

Something to Ponder

What would you tell a friend who professed to be a Christian yet claimed to enjoy indulging in a particular sin on a regular basis?

Day 294
Forgetting Love

Read Job 6—8

> *Then Bildad the Shuhite replied: "How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind."*
>
> Job 8:1–2

Job had poured out his grief and was waiting to hear a sympathetic word, but his friend said that Job's speech was just so much hot air.

Bildad was so concerned about defending the justice of God that he forgot the needs of his friend. While Bildad's theology was correct—God is just—his application of that theology was wrong. Bildad was looking at only one aspect of God's nature—His holiness and justice—and had forgotten His love, mercy, and goodness.

How are these two attributes of God reconciled? At the cross. When Jesus died for the sins of the world, the righteousness of God was vindicated, for sin was judged; but the love of God was demonstrated, for a Savior was provided. God's law said, "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:4, 20); and God obeyed His own law in the sacrificing of His Son on the cross. In Christ's resurrection, the grace of God triumphed over sin and death, and all who repent of their sins and trust Jesus Christ will be saved (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:9–10).

Something to Ponder

What steps can you take to ensure that you maintain a sense of both God's love and justice as you advise and console others?

Day 295
Times and Seasons

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

> *There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 3:1–2

Were it not for the dependability of God-ordained natural laws, both science and daily life would be chaotic, if not impossible. Not only are there times and seasons in this world, but there is also an overruling providence. From before our birth to the moment of our death, God is accomplishing His divine purposes, even though we may not always understand what He is doing.

Solomon affirmed that God is at work in our lives, seeking to accomplish His will. All of these events come from God, and they are good in their time. The inference is plain: If we cooperate with God's timing, life will not be meaningless. Everything will be beautiful, even the most difficult experiences of life.

Things like abortion, birth control, mercy killing, and surrogate parenthood make it look as though humanity is in control of birth and death, but Solomon said otherwise. Birth and death are not human accidents; they are divine appointments, for God is in control. Psalm 139:13–16 and Ephesians 2:10 agree that God has so woven us in the womb that our genetic structure is perfect for the work He has prepared for us to do.

Something to Ponder

Can you think of an instance when recognizing God's timing brought meaning to your life? In what way?

Day 296
International News

Read Isaiah 19—23

> *In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth.*
>
> Isaiah 19:24

Chapters 13 through 23 of Isaiah teach us some important lessons. First, God is in control of the nations of the world. Second, God especially hates the sin of pride (Isa. 13:11; 16:6; 23:9; see also Prov. 8:13). When nations turn from the living God to trust their wealth and their armaments, God must show them that He is the only sure refuge. Third, God judges the nations for the way they treat each other. Judah was the only nation mentioned that had God's law, yet God held the Gentile nations accountable for what they did. Finally, God always gives a word of promise and hope to His people. Babylon will fall, but God will care for Judah (Isa. 14:1–3, 32). Assyria and Egypt may be avowed enemies of Judah, but one day the three nations will together glorify God (19:23–25).

Therefore, no matter how frightening the national or international situation may become, God's children can have peace because they know that almighty God is on His throne. The nations may rage and plot against God, but when the Lord of heaven and earth is our Father, and we gladly wear Christ's yoke, we have nothing to fear.

Something to Ponder

What difference does it make in your personal life to believe that "God is in control of the nations of the world"?

Day 297
Questioning God

Read Ecclesiastes 6:10–12

No man can contend with one who is stronger than he.

Ecclesiastes 6:10

Solomon seems to say, “It just doesn’t pay to argue with God. This is the way life is, so just accept it.”

But his is a negative view of the will of God. It gives the impression that God’s will is a difficult and painful thing that should be avoided. Jesus said that God’s will was the food that nourished and satisfied Him (John 4:32–34). It was meat, not medicine.

Insisting on having our own way isn’t freedom at all; it is the worst kind of bondage. In fact, the most terrible judgment we could experience in this life would be to have God give us up and let us have our own way (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

God is free to act as He sees best. He is not a prisoner of His attributes, His creation, or His eternal purposes. You and I may not understand how God exercises His freedom, but it isn’t necessary for us to know all. Our greatest freedom comes when we are lovingly lost in the will of God. Our Father in heaven doesn’t feel threatened when we question Him, debate with Him, or even wrestle with Him, so long as we love His will and want to please Him.

Something to Ponder

Think about a time you questioned God’s will for you. What led to this questioning season? How was it resolved?

Day 298
The Rebel Within

Read Romans 7:7–13

> *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.*
>
> Romans 7:8

I was standing in Lincoln Park in Chicago, looking at the newly painted benches, and I noticed a sign on each bench: “Do Not Touch.” As I watched, I saw numbers of people deliberately reach out and touch the wet paint! Why? Because the sign told them not to! If a child is told not to go near the water, that is the very thing the little darling will do! Why? Because “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom. 8:7).

Believers who try to live by rules and regulations discover that their legalistic system only arouses more desires and creates more sin problems. The churches in Galatia were very legalistic, and they experienced all kinds of trouble. “If you keep on biting and devouring each other,” Paul warned them, “watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Gal. 5:15). Their legalism did not make them more spiritual; it made them more sinful! Why? Because the law arouses sin in human nature.

Something to Ponder

What are some forbidden things that tend to arouse your curiosity or attract your interest?

Day 299

The Beginning of Wisdom

Read Job 27—28

The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.

Job 28:28

The first step toward true wisdom is a reverent and respectful attitude toward God, which also involves a humble attitude toward ourselves.

The next step is to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and make diligent use of the means He gives us for securing His wisdom, especially knowing and doing the Word of God (Matt. 7:21–29). It is not enough merely to study; we must also obey what God tells us to do (John 7:17). As we walk by faith, we discover the wisdom of God in the everyday things of life. Spiritual wisdom is not abstract; it is personal and practical.

As we fellowship with other believers in the church and share with one another, we can learn wisdom. Reading the best books can also help us grow in wisdom and understanding. The important thing is that we focus on Christ, for He is our wisdom (1 Cor. 1:23–24), and in Him are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The better we know Christ and the more we become like Him, the more we will walk in wisdom and understand the will of the Lord.

Something to Ponder

In what ways is personal pride a potential barrier for your own accumulation of spiritual wisdom?

Day 300
Role Models

Read Hebrews 11

> *Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.… By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau.… By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons.… By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.*
>
> Hebrews 11:19–22

In Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, we have four generations of faith. These men sometimes failed, but they were devoted to God and trusted His word.

The faith of Joseph was especially remarkable. After the way his family treated him, we would think he would have abandoned his faith; but instead, it grew stronger. Even the ungodly influence of Egypt did not weaken his trust in God. Joseph did not use his family, his job, or his circumstances as an excuse for unbelief.

We have to admire the faith of the patriarchs. They did not have a complete Bible, and yet their faith was strong. They handed God's promises down from one generation to another. In spite of their failures and tests, these men and women believed God, and He bore witness to their faith. How much more faith you and I should have!

Something to Ponder

Think of one person who is a model of faith for you. What is it about that person that is evidence of faith?

Day 301
Specializing

Read Philippians 3:12–14

> *But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*
>
> Philippians 3:13–14

Before the tragedy of the Chicago fire in 1871, D. L. Moody was involved in Sunday school promotion, YMCA work, evangelistic meetings, and many other activities; but after the fire, he determined to devote himself exclusively to evangelism. “One thing I do” became a reality to him. As a result, millions of people heard the gospel.

Believers must devote themselves to doing one thing well. No athlete succeeds by doing everything; he succeeds by specializing. The winners are those who concentrate, who keep their eyes on the goal, and let nothing distract them. They are devoted entirely to their calling. Like Nehemiah the wall-building governor, they reply to the distracting invitations, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down” (Neh. 6:3).

Concentration is the secret of power. If a river is allowed to overflow its banks, the area around it becomes a swamp. But if that river is dammed and controlled, it becomes a source of power.

Something to Ponder

What does your ministry specialty look like? How well are you devoted to that work?

Day 302
Imitations

Read 1 John 1:2

> *The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.*
>
> 1 John 1:2

Counterfeit Christians—and they are common—are something like counterfeit money. Suppose you have a counterfeit bill and actually think it is genuine. You use it to pay for a tank of gas. The gas station manager uses the bill to buy supplies. The supplier uses the bill to pay the grocer. The grocer bundles the bill up with forty-nine other bills and takes it to the bank. And the teller says, “I’m sorry, but this bill is a counterfeit.”

That bill may have done a lot of good while it was in circulation, but when it arrived at the bank, it was exposed for what it really was and put out of circulation.

So it is with counterfeit Christians. They may do many good things in this life, but when they face the final judgment, they will be rejected. Each of us must ask ourselves honestly, “Am I a true child of God, or am I a counterfeit Christian? Have I truly been born of God?”

Something to Ponder

Even if your Christian commitment is genuine, what are some “counterfeit” behaviors that can affect your spiritual growth?

Day 303
A Man of Light

Read Isaiah 1:1

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.

Isaiah 1:1

Salvation (deliverance) is the key theme in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah wrote concerning five acts of deliverance God would perform: (1) the deliverance of Judah from Assyrian invasion (Isa. 36—37); (2) the deliverance of the nation from Babylonian captivity (Isa. 40); (3) the future deliverance of the Jews from worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles (Isa. 11—12); (4) the deliverance of lost sinners from judgment (Isa. 53); and (5) the final deliverance of creation from the bondage of sin when the kingdom is established (Isa. 60; 66:17).

Sir Winston Churchill was once asked to give the qualifications a person needed in order to succeed in politics, and he replied: “It is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn’t happen.”

Because God’s prophets were correct all of the time, they didn’t have to explain away their mistakes. Isaiah wrote: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (Isa. 8:20). Isaiah was a man who had God’s light, and he was not afraid to let it shine.

Something to Ponder

Isaiah’s name means “salvation of the Lord.” If you were given a name to reflect your spiritual mission, what might it be?

Day 304
One Another

Read Galatians 6:1–10

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

The story has often been told about the message the founder of the Salvation Army sent to their international convention. General William Booth was unable to attend because of ill health, so he cabled the delegates a message containing one word: "OTHERS!"

In the popular comic strip Peanuts, Lucy asks Charlie Brown, "Why are we here on earth?" He replies, "To make others happy." She ponders this for a moment and then asks, "Then why are the others here?"

"One another" is one of the key phrases in the Christian's vocabulary. "Love one another" is found at least a dozen times in the New Testament, along with "pray for each other" (James 5:16), "build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11), "honor one another" (Rom. 12:10), "offer hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:9), and many other like admonitions. In this passage, Paul adds another phrase: "Bear ye one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2 KJV). The Spirit-led Christian thinks of others and how he can minister to them.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways you bear others' burdens? How can you better minister to people in need?

Day 305
Surrender

Read Romans 12:1–6

Offer your bodies as living sacrifices.

Romans 12:1

The mind controls the body, and the will controls the mind. Many people think they can control themselves and their lives by sheer "willpower," but usually they fail. (This was Paul's experience as recorded in 7:15–25.) It is only when we yield the will to God that His power can take over and give us the willpower (and the won't power!) that we need to be victorious Christians.

We surrender our will to God through prayer. We pray, with the Lord Jesus, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We must pray about everything, and let God have His way in everything.

For many years I have tried to begin each day by surrendering my body to the Lord. Then I spend time with His Word and let Him transform my mind and prepare my thinking for that new day. Then I pray and yield the plans of the day to Him and let Him work as He sees best. I especially pray about those tasks that upset or worry me—and He always sees me through. To have a right relationship with God, we must start the day by yielding to Him our bodies, minds, and wills.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you surrender your body, mind, and will to God? How could you be more completely surrendered in each case?

Day 306
Gentile Light

Read Isaiah 49

> *I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*
>
> Isaiah 49:6

"It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus," wrote Robert Murray McCheyne. "A holy minister [servant] is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

The Jewish nation was called to be a light to the Gentiles, but they failed. This is why the Servant is called "Israel" in 49:3: He did the work that Israel was supposed to do. Today, the church is God's light in this dark world, and like Israel, we seem to be failing in our mission to take the good news to the ends of the earth. We cannot do the job very effectively when only 5 percent of the average local church budget is devoted to evangelism!

As Jesus Christ ministered on earth there were times when His work seemed in vain (see v. 4). The religious leaders opposed Him, the disciples did not always understand Him, and those He helped did not always thank Him. He lived and labored by faith, and God gave Him success.

Our Lord could not minister to the Gentiles until first He ministered to the Jews (vv. 5–6). He was despised by both Jews and Gentiles, but He did God's work and was glorified.

Something to Ponder

How can the light you have from the Lord brighten a little more gloom than usual today?

Day 307
Sing Along

Read Colossians 3:16–17

> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*
>
> Colossians 3:16

Psalms were the songs taken from the Old Testament. For centuries, the churches in the English-speaking world sang only metrical versions of the Psalms. I am glad to see today a return to the singing of Scripture, especially the Psalms. Hymns were songs of praise to God written by believers but not taken from the book of Psalms. The church today has a rich heritage of hymnody which, I fear, is being neglected. Spiritual songs were expressions of biblical truth other than in psalms and hymns. When we sing a hymn, we address the Lord; when we sing a spiritual song, we address each other.

Someone has said that a successful Christian life involves attention to three books: God's Book, the Bible; the pocketbook; and the hymnbook. I agree. I often use a hymnal in my devotional time to help express my praise to God. As we grow in our knowledge of the Word, we will want to grow in our expression of praise. We will learn to appreciate the great hymns of the church that teach spiritual truths. To sing only the elementary songs of the faith is to rob ourselves of spiritual enrichment.

Something to Ponder

How important are hymns and spiritual songs in your personal worship? Why?

Day 308
Problems Then and Now

Read Ecclesiastes 1:3

What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:3

The society that Solomon investigated a millennium before the birth of Christ was not too different from our world today. Solomon saw injustice to the poor, crooked politics, incompetent leaders, guilty people allowed to commit more crime, materialism, and a desire for the good old days.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, then this book urges you to do so without delay. Why? Because no matter how much wealth, education, or social prestige you may have, life without God is futile. You are only "chasing after the wind" if you expect to find satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the things of the world. "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" asked Jesus in Mark 8:36.

Solomon experimented with life and discovered that there was no lasting satisfaction in possessions, pleasures, power, or prestige. He had everything, yet his life was empty! There is no need for you and me to repeat these experiments. Let's accept Solomon's conclusions and avoid the heartache and pain that must be endured when we experiment in the laboratory of life.

Something to Ponder

How would you contrast the quality of your life before a relationship with Jesus with your life afterward?

Day 309
Love and Knowledge

Read 1 Corinthians 8

> *We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 8:1

It has well been said, “Knowledge without love is brutality, but love without knowledge is hypocrisy.” Paul’s great concern was that the strong saints help the weaker saints to grow and to stop being weak saints. Some people have the false notion that the strong Christians are the ones who live by rules and regulations and who get offended when others exercise their freedom in Christ, but such is not the case. It is the weak Christians who must have the security of law and who are afraid to use their freedom in Christ. It is the weak Christians who are prone to judge and criticize stronger believers and to stumble over what they do. This, of course, makes it difficult for the stronger saints to minister to their weaker brothers and sisters.

It is here that love enters the picture, for “love builds up” and puts others first. When spiritual knowledge is used in love, stronger Christians can take the hand of weaker Christians and help them to stand and walk so as to enjoy their freedom in Christ. Knowledge must be mixed with love; otherwise, the saints will end up with “big heads” instead of enlarged hearts.

Something to Ponder

How has someone used a combination of love and knowledge to make you a stronger Christian?

Day 310

Truth versus Lies

Read Isaiah 57—59

> *Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.*
>
> Isaiah 59:9

There was a great deal of injustice in the land, with the rich exploiting the poor and the rulers using their authority only to make themselves rich. The people lifted their hands to worship God, but their hands were stained with blood (Isa. 1:15, 21). God could not answer their prayers because their sins hid His face from them (59:2).

So the Lord Himself intervened and brought the Babylonians to destroy Judah and Jerusalem and to teach His people that they cannot despise His law and get away with it.

God's judgment on His people was a foreshadowing of that final day of the Lord when all the nations will be judged. When it is ended, Israel will be not only God's chosen people but God's cleansed people, and the glory of the Lord will radiate from Mount Zion.

While we are waiting and praying, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10 KJV), perhaps we should also be interceding and intervening. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13–14), and God expects us to make a difference.

Something to Ponder

In what ways are you "interceding and intervening" as you await God's kingdom?

Day 311
Everything Old Is New Again

Read Ecclesiastes 1:9–11

> *Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:10

A young man approached me at a conference and asked if he could share some new ideas for youth ministry. He was very enthusiastic as he outlined his program, but the longer I listened, the more familiar his ideas became. I encouraged him to put his ideas into practice but then told him that we had done all of those things in Youth for Christ before he was born and that YFC workers were still doing them. He was a bit stunned to discover that there was indeed "nothing new under the sun" (v. 9).

Solomon wrote, of course, about the basic principles of life and not about methods. As the familiar couplet puts it: "Methods are many, principles are few / methods always change, principles never do." The ancient thinkers knew this truth. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, "They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing more than we have seen." The only people who really think they have seen something new are those whose experience is limited or whose vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the principles you have held throughout your life that are identical to those of your parents and preceding generations?

Day 312
Wealth and Health

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8–20

> *Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 5:10

The late Joe Louis, world heavyweight boxing champion, used to say, “I don’t like money, actually, but it quiets my nerves.” But Solomon said that possessing wealth is no guarantee that our nerves will be calm and our sleep sound. According to him, the common laborer sleeps better than the rich man (v. 12). The Living Bible expresses verse 12 perfectly: “The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia.”

More than one preacher has mentioned John D. Rockefeller in his sermons as an example of a man whose life was almost ruined by wealth. At the age of fifty-three, Rockefeller was the world’s only billionaire, earning about a million dollars a week. But he was a sick man who lived on crackers and milk and could not sleep because of worry. When he started giving his money away, his health changed radically, and he lived to celebrate his ninety-eighth birthday!

Yes, it is good to have the things that money can buy, provided we don’t lose the things money can’t buy.

Something to Ponder

To what extent do you think that worrying about money is a source of other problems in your life? In what ways?

Day 313
Bible in a Bible

Read Isaiah 40:2–26

> *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*
>
> Isaiah 40:8

The book of Isaiah can be called “a Bible in miniature.” The thirty-nine chapters in the first part of Isaiah may be compared to the Old Testament books, and both focus primarily on God’s judgment of sin. The twenty-seven chapters of the second part may parallel the New Testament, and both emphasize the grace of God.

The “New Testament” section of Isaiah opens with the ministry of John the Baptist (Isa. 40:3–5; Mark 1:1–4) and closes with the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). At the heart of the “New Testament” section of Isaiah’s book is our Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for our sins (52:13–15; 53:1–12). No wonder Isaiah has been called “the evangelical prophet.”

As you study Isaiah 40—66, keep in mind that it was originally addressed to a group of discouraged Jewish refugees who faced a long journey home and a difficult task when they got there. Note how often God says to them, “Fear not!” and how frequently He assures them of His pardon and His presence. It is no surprise that God’s people for centuries have turned to these chapters to find assurance and encouragement.

Something to Ponder

In what ways do you relate with people who are discouraged and have difficult tasks?

Day 314
Now Ear This

Read Job 20:1—21:6

Listen carefully to my words; let this be the consolation you give me.

Job 21:2

Listen to Job's appeal to his friends that they try to understand how he feels. "If you really want to console me, just keep quiet and listen" (v. 2, author's paraphrase). The Greek philosopher Zeno said, "The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less." The friends thought their words would encourage Job, but he said that their silence would encourage him even more (13:13).

Job pointed out that his complaint was not against people but against God. People had not caused his afflictions, and people could not take them away. If he was impatient, it was because God had not answered him (21:3–4). The longer God waited, the worse Job's situation became. "Look at me and be astonished; clap your hand over your mouth" (v. 5).

As Job contemplated what he was about to say, it stirred him to the depths (v. 6). This was no speech from "off the top of his head," for it had to do with the basic facts of life and death. If Job's friends were in his situation, they would see things differently and say things differently.

Something to Ponder

How can you show more empathy the next time you are in a position to advise or console someone?

Day 315
Test Time

Read 2 Corinthians 10:12–18

> *It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 10:18

How does God approve our work? By testing it. The Greek word translated "approved" in verse 18 means "approved by testing." There is a future testing at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10ff.), but there is also a present testing.

Over the years, I have seen ministries tested by financial losses, false doctrine, proud leaders who want to "run the church," and the challenge of change. Some of the churches have fallen apart because their work was not spiritual. Other ministries have grown because of their trials and have become purer and stronger, and, through it all, God was glorified.

Certainly our ministries must keep records and issue reports, but we must not fall into the "snare of statistics" and think that numbers are the only measurement of ministry. Each situation is unique, and no ministry can honestly be evaluated on the basis of some other ministry. The important thing is that we are where God wants us to be, doing what He wants us to do so that He might be glorified. Motive is as much a part of God's measurement of our work as is growth.

"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17).

Something to Ponder

What are some ways that God has recently tested your work? What were the results?

Day 316

Two “News”

Read 1 John 2:8

> *I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*
>
> 1 John 2:8

The Greeks had two different words for *new*—one meant “new in time,” and the other meant “new in quality.” We would use the first word to describe the latest model of a car. But if we purchased a car that was revolutionary, we would use the second word.

The commandment to love one another is not new in time, but it is new in character. Because of Jesus Christ, the old commandment to “love one another” (John 13:34) has taken on new meaning.

Christian love is not a shallow sentimental emotion that we “work up” so we can get along with each other. It is a matter of the will—an affection for and attraction to certain persons. It is a matter of determining—of making up our mind—that we will allow God’s love to reach others through us and then of acting toward them in loving ways. We are not to act “as if we loved them,” but because we love them. This is not hypocrisy—it is obedience to God.

Perhaps the best explanation of Christian love is 1 Corinthians 13. The Christian life without love is nothing.

Something to Ponder

Have you recently experienced love you would consider “new in quality” or “fresh”? How would you describe it to a friend?

Day 317

Slow and Steady Loses the Race

Read 1 John 2:16

> *Everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.*
>
> 1 John 2:16

As Christians, the world appeals to us through "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (KJV). And once the world takes over in one of these areas, we soon realize it. We lose our enjoyment of the Father's love and our desire to do the Father's will. The Bible becomes boring and prayer a difficult chore. Even Christian fellowship may seem empty and disappointing.

It is important to note that none of us become worldly all of a sudden. Worldliness creeps up on us. Worldliness rears its ugly head in many subtle and unrecognized forms. Sometimes we idolize great athletes, musicians, TV or movie stars, or political leaders who profess to be Christians—as if these individuals were able to be of special help to almighty God. Or we cater to wealthy and "influential" persons in our local church, as if God's work would fold up without their goodwill. Many forms of worldliness do not involve reading the wrong books and indulging in carnal amusements.

Something to Ponder

What are some worldly appeals you have recently faced in each of these categories: (1) sinful cravings, (2) the lust of the eyes, and (3) pride/boasting?

Day 318
Walking and Working

Read Colossians 1:10

> *We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.*
>
> Colossians 1:10

The false teachers in Colosse attracted people through their offer of "spiritual knowledge," but they did not relate this knowledge to life. In the Christian life, knowledge and obedience go together. There is no separation between learning and living. The wisdom about which Paul prayed was not simply a head knowledge of deep spiritual truths. True spiritual wisdom must affect the daily life. Wisdom and practical intelligence must go together.

In my pastoral ministry, I have met people who have become intoxicated with "studying the deeper truths of the Bible." Usually they have been given a book or introduced to some teacher's tapes. Before long, they get so smart they become dumb! All biblical truths are practical, not theoretical. If we are growing in knowledge, we should also be growing in grace.

Three words summarize the practicality of the Christian life: wisdom, walk, and work. The sequence is important: first, wisdom; then walk; then work. We cannot work for God unless we are walking with Him, but we cannot walk with Him if we are ignorant of His will. If we spend time daily in the Word and prayer, we will know God's will and be able to walk with Him and work for Him.

Something to Ponder

What are you doing to improve your walk with God?

Day 319
Believing and Behaving

Read 1 Timothy 4:1–6

> *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*
>
> 1 Timothy 4:1

Satan works “by means of the hypocrisy of liars” (1 Tim. 4:2, literal translation). One of the marks of a true servant of God is his honesty and integrity: He practices what he preaches. This does not mean he is sinlessly perfect, but that he sincerely seeks to obey the Word of God. He tries to maintain a good conscience (1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9). The word *seared* means “cauterized.”

Just as a person’s flesh can be “branded” so that it becomes hard and without feeling, so a person’s conscience can be deadened. Whenever we affirm with our lips something that we deny with our lives (whether people know it or not), we deaden our consciences just a little more. Jesus made it clear that it is not religious talk or even performing miracles that qualifies a person for heaven, but doing God’s will in everyday life (Matt. 7:21–29). An apostate is not just wrong doctrinally; he is wrong morally. His personal life became wrong before his doctrines were changed. In fact, it is likely that he changed his teachings so that he could continue his sinful living and pacify his conscience. Believing and behaving always go together.

Something to Ponder

Are there any ways in which your behaviors and beliefs don’t line up? When they don’t, how do you deal with that?

Day 320

The Antidote to Worry

Read Philippians 4:1–5

> *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*
>
> Philippians 4:4–5

If anybody had an excuse for worrying, it was the apostle Paul. Two of his beloved Christian friends at Philippi were disagreeing with one another, and he was not there to help them. We have no idea what Euodia and Syntyche were disputing about, but whatever it was, it was bringing division into the church (Phil. 4:2–3). Along with the potential division at Philippi, Paul had to face division among the believers at Rome (1:14–17). Added to these burdens was the possibility of his own death! Yes, Paul had a good excuse to worry—but he did not! Instead, he took time to explain the secret of victory over worry.

The Old English root from which we get our word *worry* means "to strangle." In fact, worry has definite physical consequences: headaches, neck pains, ulcers, back pains. Worry affects our thinking, our digestion, and even our coordination.

The antidote to worry is the secure mind: "The peace of God … will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). With that kind of protection—why worry?

Something to Ponder

Do you think it is really possible to rejoice always? Explain.

Day 321
For Real

Read 1 John 5:16–21

> *We are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*
>
> 1 John 5:20

The world boasts of enlightenment, but Christians walk in the real light because "God is light" (1:5). The world talks about love, but it knows nothing of the real love Christians experience because "God is love" (4:8, 16). The world displays its wisdom and learning, but Christians live in truth because the Spirit is truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). God is light, love, and truth; and these together make a life that is real.

"But it makes no difference what people believe so long as they are sincere!"

This popular excuse hardly needs refutation. Does it make any difference what the pharmacist believes, or the surgeon, or the chemist? It makes all the difference in the world.

Shed a tear for Jimmy Brown; Poor Jimmy is no more. For what he thought was H2O was H2SO4. (H2O is water. H2SO4 is sulfuric acid.)

Christians have "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). Idols are dead, but Christ is the living God. Idols are false, but Christ is the true God. This is the secret of the life that is real!

John's admonition can be paraphrased, "Watch out for the imitation and the artificial and be real!"

Something to Ponder

What is some evidence from your own life that God is light? Love? Truth?

Day 322
Workers Wanted

Read 1 Timothy 1:1–2

To Timothy my true son in the faith.

1 Timothy 1:2

"Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success."

That advertisement appeared in a London newspaper, and thousands of men responded! It was signed by the noted Antarctic explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton, and that was what made the difference.

If Jesus Christ had advertised for workers, the announcement might have read something like this: "Men and women wanted for difficult task of helping to build My church. You will often be misunderstood, even by those working with you. You will face constant attack from an invisible enemy. You may not see the results of your labor, and your full reward will not come till after all your work is completed. It may cost you your home, your ambitions—even your life." This is just the advertisement that Timothy answered. And for this, Paul was thankful.

Despite the demands that He makes, Jesus Christ receives the "applications" of many who gladly give their all for Him. He is certainly the greatest Master for whom anyone could work, and the task of building His church is certainly the greatest challenge to which a believer could give his life.

Something to Ponder

How would you respond to an advertisement like that noted above? Why?

Day 323
Zophar, So Good?

Read Job 11

> *If you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear.*
>
> Job 11:14–15

Zophar makes three accusations against Job: Job is guilty of sin (vv. 1–4); Job is ignorant of God (vv. 5–12); and Job is stubborn in his refusal to repent (vv. 13–20). “There is hope!” is Zophar’s encouraging word to Job. But if Job wants these blessings, he has to get them on Zophar’s terms: Job must repent and confess his sins (vv. 13–14). Zophar is tempting Job to bargain with God so he can get out of his troubles.

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan asked (1:9). Satan accused Job of having a “commercial faith” that promised prosperity in return for obedience. If Job had followed Zophar’s advice, he would have played right into the hands of the Enemy.

Job did not have a “commercial faith” that made bargains with God. He had a confident faith that said, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (13:15). That doesn’t sound like a man looking for an easy way out of difficulties. “Job did not understand the Lord’s reasons,” said Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “but he continued to confide in His goodness.” That is faith!

Something to Ponder

How would you feel in Job’s place after hearing the accusations and advice of Zophar?

Day 324
Great Expectations

Read James 1:1–2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

James 1:2

Believers who expect the Christian life to be easy are in for a shock. Because we are God's scattered people (James 1:1) and not His sheltered people, we cannot always expect everything to go our way. Some trials come simply because we are human—sickness, accidents, disappointments, even seeming tragedies. Other trials come because we are Christians. Satan fights us, the world opposes us, and this conflict makes for a life of battle.

My wife and I once visited a world-famous weaver and watched his men and women work on the looms. I noticed that the undersides of the rugs were not very beautiful: The patterns were obscure, and the loose ends of the yarn dangled. "Don't judge the worker or the work by looking at the wrong side," our guide told us. In the same way, we are looking at the wrong side of life; only the Lord sees the finished pattern. Let's not judge Him or His work from what we see today. His work is not finished yet!

Something to Ponder

How many of your trials can you honestly say you are facing with "pure joy"? How can you glean more joy out of your less-than-desirable circumstances?

Day 325
True Preaching

Read 2 Timothy 4:1–8

> *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*
>
> 2 Timothy 4:2

It is easy to make excuses when we ought to be making opportunities. Paul himself always found an opportunity to share the Word, whether it was in the temple courts, on a stormy sea, or even in prison. “He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap” (Eccl. 11:4 KJV). Stop making excuses and get to work!

Preaching must be marked by three elements: conviction, warning, and appeal (“reprove, rebuke, exhort”). To quote an old rule of preachers, “He should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” If there is conviction but no remedy, we add to people’s burdens. And if we encourage those who ought to be rebuked, we are assisting them to sin. Biblical preaching must be balanced.

God’s speaker must be patient as he preaches the Word. He will not always see immediate results. He must be patient with those who oppose his preaching. Above all else, he must preach doctrine. He must not simply tell Bible stories, relate interesting illustrations, or read a verse and then forget it. True preaching is the explanation and application of Bible doctrine. Anything else is just religious speechmaking.

Something to Ponder

What are some examples of “true preaching” you’ve experienced? What made the preaching particularly good?

Day 326
Dying to Live

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–15

> *He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 5:15

In 1858, Frances Ridley Havergal visited Germany with her father, who was getting treatment for his afflicted eyes. While in a pastor's home, she saw a picture of the crucifixion of Jesus on the wall, with the words under it: "I did this for thee. What hast thou done for Me?" Quickly she took a piece of paper and wrote a poem based on that motto, but she was not satisfied with it, so she threw the paper into the fireplace. The paper came out unharmed! Later, her father encouraged her to publish the poem; and we sing it today to a tune composed by Philip P. Bliss.

I gave My life for thee,
My precious blood I shed,
That thou might'st ransomed be,
And quickened from the dead;
I gave, I gave My life for thee,
What hast thou giv'n for Me?

Christ died that we might live through Him and for Him, and that we might live with Him. Because of Calvary, believers are going to heaven to live with Christ forever!

Something to Ponder

Think back a year. Are you living for Christ more effectively today than you did then, less effectively, or about the same? Why?

Day 327
Take It from Peter

Read 1 Peter 5:8–11

> *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*
>
> 1 Peter 5:8

We must never get the idea that we are the only ones going through battles, because Peter has told us “your brothers throughout the world” are facing the same trials (1 Peter 5:9). We must pray for one another and encourage each other in the Lord. And we must remember that our personal victories will help others, just as their victories will help us.

Had Peter obeyed these instructions the night Jesus was arrested, he would not have gone to sleep in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46), attacked Malchus (John 18:10), or denied the Lord (Matt. 26:69–75). He did not take the Lord’s warning seriously; in fact, he argued with Him (vv. 31–35)! Nor did he recognize Satan when the adversary inflated his ego with pride, told him he did not have to “watch and pray,” and then incited him to use his sword. Had Peter listened to the Lord and resisted the Enemy, he would have escaped all those failures.

Before we can stand before Satan, we must bow before God. Peter resisted the Lord and ended up submitting to Satan!

Something to Ponder

As you look back on your own life, what do you see that you could have done differently to avoid major failures?

Day 328
The Right Book

Read 1 Timothy 3:8–16

> *Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.*
>
> 1 Timothy 3:8

A pastor friend of mine took a church that was a split from another church and constantly at war with itself. From what he told me, their business meetings were something to behold! The church constitution was revered almost as much as the Bible. The people called it “the green book.” My friend began to teach the people the Word of God, and the Spirit began to make changes in lives. But the Enemy stirred up some officers to defy their pastor in a meeting. “You aren’t following the green book!” they said. My friend lifted his Bible high and asked, “Are we going to obey the Word of God, or a green book written by men?”

This was a turning point in the church, and then God blessed it with wonderful growth and power. A deacon who does not know the Word of God cannot manage the affairs of the church of God. A deacon who does not live the Word of God but has a “defiled conscience” cannot manage the church of God. Simply because a church member is popular, successful in business, or generous in his giving does not mean he is qualified to serve as a deacon.

Something to Ponder

Have you experienced church disagreements like those noted above? How did you respond?

Day 329

Spiritual Powerhouses

Read 1 Timothy 5:1–16

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.

1 Timothy 5:3

The church could not care for all the widows in the city, but it should care for believers who are a part of the fellowship. We should "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). A widow the church helps should not be a self-indulgent person, seeking pleasure, but a godly woman who hopes in God and has a ministry of intercession and prayer. See Luke 2:36–37 for an example of a godly widow.

It has been my experience in three different pastorates that godly widows are "spiritual powerhouses" in the church. They are the backbone of the prayer meetings. They give themselves to visitation, and they swell the ranks of teachers in the Sunday school. It has also been my experience that, if a widow is not godly, she can be a great problem to the church. She will demand attention, complain about what the younger people do, and often "hang on the telephone" and gossip. (Of course, it is not really "gossip." She only wants her friends to be able to "pray more intelligently" about these matters!) Paul made it clear (1 Tim. 5:7) that church-helped widows must be "blameless"—irreproachable.

Something to Ponder

How have godly widows inspired or helped you spiritually? What other "categories" of believers have had a positive impact on your spiritual growth?

Day 330
Name Recognition

Read Colossians 4:7–13

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings.

Colossians 4:10

Aristarchus was identified as Paul's "fellow prisoner" and also as one of Paul's "fellow workers" (Philem. v. 24). Aristarchus was from Macedonia and was one of Paul's traveling companions (Acts 19:29). He was originally from Thessalonica (20:4) and had willingly risked his life in the Ephesian riot (19:28–41). He sailed with Paul to Rome (27:2), which meant that he also experienced the storm and shipwreck that Luke so graphically described in Acts 27.

Aristarchus stayed with Paul no matter what the circumstances were—a riot in Ephesus, a voyage, a storm, or even a prison. It is not likely that Aristarchus was an official Roman prisoner. "Fellow prisoner" probably means that Aristarchus shared Paul's confinement with him so that he could be a help and comfort to the apostle. He was a voluntary prisoner for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Paul could not have accomplished all that he did apart from the assistance of his friends. Aristarchus stands out as one of the greatest of Paul's helpers. He did not look for an easy task. He did not run when the going got tough. He suffered with Paul and labored with Paul.

Something to Ponder

Who are some of the people you know who serve God faithfully yet whose efforts frequently go unnoticed?

Day 331
Join the Parade

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12–17

> *Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 2:14

The picture here is that of the "Roman triumph," the special tribute that Rome gave to its conquering generals. If a commander in chief won a complete victory over the enemy on foreign soil, and if he killed at least five thousand enemy soldiers and gained new territory for the emperor, then that commander in chief was entitled to a Roman triumph. The processional would include the commander riding in a golden chariot, surrounded by his officers. The parade would also include a display of the spoils of battle, as well as the captive enemy soldiers. The Roman priests would also be in the parade, carrying burning incense to pay tribute to the victorious army.

Jesus Christ, our great commander in chief, came to foreign soil (this earth) and completely defeated the Enemy (Satan). Instead of killing five thousand persons, He gave life to more than five thousand persons—to three thousand plus at Pentecost and to another two thousand plus shortly after Pentecost (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Jesus Christ claimed the spoils of battle—lost souls who had been in bondage to sin and Satan. What a splendid victory!

Something to Ponder

What battles are you fighting on your own? How do you need God's help?

Day 332

Living versus Existing

Read Ecclesiastes 6:1–9

All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.

Ecclesiastes 6:7

Rich and poor alike labor to stay alive. But even after all this labor, the appetite of neither rich nor poor is fully satisfied.

Why do we eat? So that we can add years to our life. But what good is it for us to add years to our life if we don't add life to our years? We are like the birds that I watch in the backyard. They spend all their waking hours either looking for food or escaping from enemies. These birds are not really living; they are only existing. Yet they are fulfilling the purposes for which the Creator made them—and they even sing about it!

Solomon is not suggesting that it is wrong either to work or to eat. Many of us enjoy doing both. But if our life consists only in working and eating, then we are being controlled by our appetites, and that almost puts us on the same level as animals. As far as nature is concerned, self-preservation may be the first law of life, but we who are made in the image of God must live for something higher.

Something to Ponder

What things can you do to keep from letting routine activities (like working and eating) prevent you from enjoying what is truly important in life?

Day 333
Streams of Mercy

Read Hebrews 2:2–3

> *If the message spoken by angels was binding … how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?*
>
> Hebrews 2:2–3

The composer of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," Robert Robinson, was converted under the mighty preaching of George Whitefield. But later in life he drifted from the Lord. He had been greatly used as a pastor, but neglect of spiritual things led him astray. In an attempt to find peace he began to travel. During one of his journeys, he met a young woman who was evidently very spiritually minded.

"What do you think of this hymn I have been reading?" she asked Robinson, handing him the book. It was his own hymn! He tried to avoid her question but it was hopeless, for the Lord was speaking to him. Finally, he broke down and confessed who he was and how he had been living away from the Lord.

"But these 'streams of mercy' are still flowing," the woman assured him; and through her encouragement Robinson was restored to fellowship with the Lord.

It is easy to drift with the current, but it is difficult to return against the stream. Our salvation is a "great salvation," purchased at a great price. It brings with it great promises and blessings, and it leads to a great inheritance in glory. How can we neglect it?

Something to Ponder

In what ways are God's "streams of mercy" flowing through your life?

Day 334

No Guarantees

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11–18

> *The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 9:11

Anticipating the response of his listeners, Solomon began to discuss life. If death is unavoidable, some would argue, then the smartest thing we can do is major on our strengths and concentrate on life. When death comes, at least we will have the satisfaction of knowing we achieved success.

"Don't be too sure of that!" Solomon would reply.

Our abilities are no guarantee of success (vv. 11–12). While it is generally true that the fastest runners win the races, it is also true that these same gifted people can fail miserably because of factors out of their control. Successful people know how to make the most of time and procedure (8:5), but only the Lord can control time and chance (9:11).

Of course, Christians don't depend on luck or chance because their confidence is in the loving providence of God. Christians trust God to guide them and help them in making decisions, and they believe that His will is best. They leave time and chance in His capable hands.

Something to Ponder

How can you better leave time and chance completely in God's hands?

Day 335
An Offering of Suffering

Read Job 9—10

> *Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy.*
>
> Job 9:15

In Job 9 and 10, Job asks three questions: (1) "How can I be righteous before God?" (9:1–13); (2) "How can I meet God in court?" (vv. 14–35); and (3) "Why was I born?" (10:1–22). Job is righteous, but he has to prove it. How can a mortal man prove himself righteous before God? Can he take God to court? But if God doesn't step in and testify on Job's behalf, what is the purpose of all this suffering? Why was Job even born?

Job could not understand what God was doing, and it was important that he not understand. Had Job known that God was using him as a weapon to defeat Satan, he could have simply sat back and waited trustfully for the battle to end. But as Job surveyed himself and his situation, he asked the same question the disciples asked when Mary anointed the Lord Jesus with expensive perfume: "Why this waste?" (Mark 14:4; John 11:2). Before we criticize Job too severely, let's recall how many times we have asked that question ourselves when a baby has died or a promising young person has been killed in an accident.

Nothing that is given to Christ in faith and love is ever wasted.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the questions about life and God that you are struggling with?

Day 336
Slow to Anger

Read James 1:19–20

> *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*
>
> James 1:19–20

We should not get angry with God or His Word. "A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly" (Prov. 14:29). Many church fights are the result of short tempers and hasty words. There is a godly anger against sin, and if we love the Lord, we must hate sin. But our anger does not produce God's righteousness. In fact, anger is just the opposite of the patience God wants to produce in our lives as we mature in Christ.

I once saw a poster that read, "Temper is such a valuable thing, it is a shame to lose it!" It is temper that helps to give steel its strength. If we cannot get angry at sin, we will not have much strength to fight it. James warns us against getting angry with God's Word because His Word reveals our sins to us. Like the man who broke the mirror because he disliked the image in it, we rebel against God's Word because it tells the truth about us and our sinfulness.

Something to Ponder

Think about the last time you became really angry. How did you deal with your anger? How might the situation have been different if you'd been quicker to listen and slower to speak?

Day 337
Learning Contentment

Read Philippians 4:10–12

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Philippians 4:11

Contentment is not complacency, nor is it a false peace based on ignorance. Complacent believers are unconcerned about others, while contented Christians want to share their blessings. Contentment is not escape from the battle but rather an abiding peace and confidence in the midst of the battle. Two words in Philippians 4:11 are vitally important—"learned" and "content."

The verb *learned* means "learned by experience." Paul's spiritual contentment was not something he had immediately after he was saved. He had to go through many difficult experiences of life in order to learn how to be content.

The word *content* actually means "contained." It is a description of those whose resources are within them so that they do not have to depend on substitutes without. The Greek word means "self-sufficient" and was a favorite word of the Stoic philosophers. But as Christians we are not sufficient in ourselves; we are sufficient in Christ. Because Christ lives within us, we are adequate for the demands of life (Phil. 4:13).

Something to Ponder

What are your major sources of discontentment? What causes you to be content?

Day 338
Forsaked and Forgiven

Read 2 Timothy 4:9–22

> *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.*
>
> 2 Timothy 4:18

When Paul had been discouraged in Corinth, the Lord came to him and encouraged him (Acts 18:9–11). After he had been arrested in Jerusalem, Paul again was visited by the Lord and encouraged (Acts 23:11). During that terrible storm, when Paul was onboard the ship, the Lord had again given him strength and courage (Acts 27:22ff.). Now, in that horrible Roman prison, Paul again experienced the strengthening presence of the Lord, who had promised, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).

But note that Paul’s concern was not for his own safety or comfort. It was the preaching of the Word so that Gentiles might be saved. It was Paul’s special calling to minister to the Gentiles (Eph. 3), and he was not ashamed of the gospel, even in the great city of Rome (Rom. 1:16).

What a man! His friends forsake him, and he prays that God will forgive them. His enemies try him, and he looks for opportunities to tell them how to be saved! What a difference it makes when the Holy Spirit controls your life.

Something to Ponder

How do you usually respond when friends forsake you? How can the Holy Spirit help you develop a forgiving attitude?

Day 339
Losing Weight

Read Hebrews 12:1–6

> *Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*
>
> Hebrews 12:1

Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for events. None of the athletes would have actually participated wearing the weights because they would have slowed them down. Too much weight would have taxed their endurance.

What are the "weights" we should remove so that we might win the race? Everything that hinders our progress. They might even be "good things" in the eyes of others. Winning athletes do not choose between the good and the bad; they choose between the better and the best.

We should also get rid of "the sin that so easily entangles" (v. 1). Without naming any specific sin, the writer of Hebrews was probably referring to the sin of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept Israel out of the Promised Land (3:16–19), and it is unbelief that hinders us from entering into our spiritual inheritance in Christ. The phrase "by faith" (or "through faith") is used twenty-one times in chapter 11, indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the "weights" you are carrying—not necessarily sins—but things that may impede your spiritual growth?

Day 340

Some Things Never Change

Read Romans 4:1–15

> *What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*
>
> Romans 4:3

Dr. Harry Ironside, for eighteen years pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, told of visiting a Sunday school class while on vacation. The teacher asked, "How were people saved in Old Testament times?" One man replied, "By keeping the law." "That's right," said the teacher. But Dr. Ironside interrupted: "My Bible says that by the deeds of the law … shall no flesh be justified" (Rom. 3:20 KJV). The teacher asked, "Does somebody else have an idea?" Another student replied, "By bringing sacrifices to God." "Yes!" the teacher said. But Dr. Ironside interrupted, "My Bible says that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin" (see Heb. 10:4). By this time the teacher was sure the visitor knew more about the Bible than he did, so he said, "Well, you tell us how people were saved in the Old Testament!" Dr. Ironside explained that they were saved by faith—the same way people are saved today (Eph. 2:8–9)!

The Bible says that Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). He is the father of all who believe on Jesus Christ and are justified by faith (v. 11).

Something to Ponder

Since faith was behind the ceremonies of the Old Testament, what should faith inspire you to do today?

Day 341
Dead Faith

Read James 2:14–26

> *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*
>
> James 2:14

People with dead faith know the correct vocabulary for prayer and testimony, and can even quote the right verses from the Bible, but their walk does not measure up to their talk.

James gives a simple illustration in James 2:15–16. A poor believer comes into a fellowship without proper clothing and in need of food. The person with dead faith notices the visitor and sees his needs but does nothing to meet the needs. All he does is say a few pious words! “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed” (v. 16). But the visitor goes away just as hungry and naked as when he came in.

As believers, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of people, no matter who they may be. Jesus has said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). To help a person in need is an expression of love, and faith works by love (Gal. 5:6 KJV).

Something to Ponder

Can you think of a time recently when you might have acted to help someone, yet settled for some kind of verbal affirmation instead? How can you prevent this incident from becoming a habit?

Day 342

A Secret and a Thorn

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–6

> *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.… And I know that this man … was caught up to paradise.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:2–3

Paul kept quiet about this experience of heaven for fourteen years! During those years, he was buffeted by a "thorn in the flesh" (v. 7 KJV), and perhaps people wondered why he had such a burdensome affliction. The Judaizers may have said, "This affliction is a punishment from God." (Actually, it was a gift from God.) Some of Paul's good friends may have tried to encourage him by saying, "Cheer up, Paul. One day you'll be in heaven!" Paul could have replied, "That's why I have this thorn—because I went to heaven!"

God honored Paul by granting him visions and revelations, and by taking him to heaven, but He honored him further by permitting him to hear "inexpressible things" while he was there. He overheard the divine secrets that are shared only in that holy place.

Such an honor as this would have made most people very proud. Instead of keeping quiet for fourteen years, they would have immediately told the world. But Paul simply told the truth—it was not empty boasting—and let the facts speak for themselves. His great concern was that nobody should rob God of the glory.

Something to Ponder

How can you accept all the things God has done for you without becoming proud?

Day 343

Whose Supper Is This, Anyway?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34

> *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 11:28

From the beginning of the church, it was customary for the believers to eat together. It was an opportunity for fellowship and for sharing with those who were less privileged.

The “agape feast” (from the Greek word for “love”) was part of the worship at Corinth, but some serious abuses had crept in. For one thing, there were various cliques in the church, and people ate with their own “crowd” instead of fellowshipping with the whole church family (v. 18).

Another fault was selfishness: The rich people brought a great deal of food for themselves, while the poorer members went hungry. And some of the members were even getting drunk (vv. 20–21).

Of course, the divisions at the dinner were but evidence of the deeper problems in the church. The Corinthians thought they were advanced believers, when in reality they were but little children. Paul did not suggest that they abandon the feast, but rather that they restore its proper meaning. The “agape feast” should have been an opportunity for edification.

Something to Ponder

What would you suggest to make your church meetings more edifying for all people involved?

Day 344
Come Again

Read Isaiah 9—12

> *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*
>
> Isaiah 9:6

We know that this prophecy refers to Christ because of the way it is quoted in Matthew 4:15–16. But Isaiah looked beyond the first coming of Christ to His second coming.

Isaiah 9:6 declares both the humanity (“A child is born”) and the deity (“A son is given”) of the Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet then leaps ahead to the kingdom age when Messiah will reign in righteousness and justice from David’s throne. God had promised David that his dynasty and throne would be established forever, and this promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who will one day reign from Jerusalem.

If His name is “Wonderful,” then there is nothing dull about His reign! As “Counselor,” He has the wisdom to rule justly, and as the “Mighty God,” He has the power to execute His wise plans. “Everlasting Father” does not suggest that the Son is also the Father, for each person in the Godhead is distinct. “Father of Eternity” is a better translation. Among the Jews, the word *father* means “originator” or “source.” If we want anything eternal, we must get it from Jesus Christ; He is the “Father of Eternity.”

Something to Ponder

Of the titles given the Messiah, which gives you most encouragement? Why?

Day 345
A Better Yield

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1–24

> *The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 7:4

As in all things, the spiritual must govern the physical, for the bodies of believers are God's temples (6:19). The husband and wife may abstain from sex in order to devote their full interest to prayer and fasting (7:5), but they must not use this abstinence as an excuse for prolonged separation. Paul encouraged Christian partners to be "in tune" with each other in matters both spiritual and physical.

Not only did the Corinthian church ask Paul about celibacy (vv. 1–9), but they also asked him about divorce (vv. 10–16). He wrote that if divorce does occur, the parties should remain unmarried or seek reconciliation. It has been my experience as a pastor that when a husband and wife are yielded to the Lord and when they seek to please each other in the marriage relationship, the marriage will be so satisfying that neither partner will think of looking elsewhere for fulfillment.

Something to Ponder

For what reasons do you think married couples begin to withhold sex from each other? What are the potential consequences of doing so?

Day 346
Comfort King

Read Isaiah 63—66

> *This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.*
>
> Isaiah 66:2

Throughout his book, Isaiah presents us with alternatives: Trust the Lord and live, or rebel against the Lord and die. He explains the grace and mercy of God and offers His forgiveness. He explains the holiness and wrath of God and warns of His judgment. He promises glory for those who will believe and judgment for those who scoff.

The prophet calls the professing people of God back to spiritual reality. He warns against hypocrisy and empty worship. He pleads for faith, obedience, a heart that delights in God, and a life that glorifies God. "'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" (57:21); for in order to have peace, we must have righteousness. The only way to have righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:19–31).

Isaiah's message is, "Be comforted by the Lord!" But God cannot comfort rebels! If we are sinning against God and comfortable about it, something is radically wrong. False comfort will lead to false confidence. "Seek the LORD while he may be found" (Isa. 55:6).

"I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me" (12:1).

Something to Ponder

Do you tend to rebel against God's direction in any ways? What will it take to cure that rebellion?

Day 347
The Right Stuff

Read Romans 1:1–7

You also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:6

When we study the book of Romans, we walk into a courtroom. First, Paul called Jews and Gentiles to the stand and found both guilty before God. Then he explained God's marvelous way of salvation—justification by faith. At this point, he answered his accusers and defended God's salvation. "This plan of salvation will encourage people to sin!" they cried. "It is against the very law of God!" But Paul refuted them, and in so doing explained how Christians could experience victory, liberty, and security.

There were Jewish believers in the Roman assemblies, and they would naturally ask, "What about Israel? How does God's righteousness relate to them in this new age of the church?" In chapters 9–11 Paul gave a complete history of Israel—past, present, and future.

Then he concluded with the practical outworking of God's righteousness in the life of believers. When we sum it all up, in the book of Romans Paul is saying to us—"Be right! Be right with God, with yourself, and with others!" The righteousness of God received by faith makes it possible for us to live right lives. The Romans needed this message then, and we need it today: Be right!

Something to Ponder

What is one area of life where you need to experience more victory, liberty, or security? How does being right with God, yourself, and others help you accomplish this?

Day 348
Watch Your Diet

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1–9

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.

1 Corinthians 3:2

As I write this chapter, we are watching our grandson and our granddaughter grow up. Becky is still being nursed by her mother, but Jonathan now sits at the table and uses his little cup and (with varying degrees of success) his tableware. As children grow, they graduate from milk to meat.

What is the difference? The usual answer is that "milk" represents the easy things in the Word, while "solid food" (or "meat" KJV) represents the hard doctrines. But I disagree with that traditional explanation, and my proof is Hebrews 5:11–14. That passage seems to teach that "milk" represents what Jesus Christ did on earth, while "solid food" concerns what He is doing now in heaven. The writer of Hebrews wanted to teach his readers about the present heavenly priesthood of Jesus Christ, but his readers were so immature, he could not do it.

It is not difficult to determine believers' spiritual maturity, or immaturity, if we discover what kind of "diet" they enjoy. Immature believers know little about the present ministry of Christ in heaven. They live on Bible stories and not Bible doctrines. They have no understanding of 1 Corinthians 2:6–7.

Something to Ponder

What food(s) would you say best represent(s) your current spiritual "diet"? Why?

Day 349
Fighting the Wolves

Read Colossians 2:1–7

> *Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*
>
> Colossians 2:6–7

I recall a story about a pastor who was concerned about some unsavory businesses that had opened near a school. His protests finally led to a court case, and the defense attorney did all he could to embarrass the gospel minister.

"Are you not a pastor?" the lawyer asked. "And doesn't the word *pastor* mean 'shepherd'?" To this definition the minister agreed.

"Well, if you are a shepherd, why aren't you out taking care of the sheep?"

"Because today I'm fighting the wolves!" was the pastor's quick reply, and a good answer it was.

Knowing that there were enemies already attacking the church in Colosse, Paul offered encouragement. By heeding his admonitions, the Colossians would overcome their enemies.

In the Christian life, we never stand still: We either go forward or slip backward. "Let us … go on to maturity!" is the call we must obey (Heb. 6:1). Christians who are not making spiritual progress are an open target for the Enemy to attack and destroy (1 Peter 5:8–9).

Something to Ponder

What are some of the current "wolves" in your life?

Day 350
On Faith

Read 1 Peter 1:8–12

> *Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:8–9

An elderly lady fell and broke her leg while attending a summer Bible conference. She said to the pastor who visited her, “I know the Lord led me to the conference. But I don’t see why this had to happen! And I don’t see any good coming from it.” Wisely, the pastor replied, “Romans 8:28 doesn’t say we *see* all things working together for good. It says that we *know* it.”

Faith means surrendering all to God and obeying His Word in spite of circumstances and consequences. Love and faith go together: When we love someone, we trust that person. And faith and love together help to strengthen hope; for where we find faith and love, we will find confidence for the future.

How can we grow in faith during times of testing and suffering? The same way we grow in faith when things seem to be going well: by feeding on the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Our fellowship with Christ through God’s Word not only strengthens our faith, it also deepens our love.

Something to Ponder

What is an issue of faith you are struggling with at this time because you can’t “see” an answer? As you struggle, what is your hope?

Day 351
Crop Failure?

Read James 1:21

> *Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*
>
> James 1:21

James sees the human heart as a garden; if left to itself, the soil will produce only weeds. He urges us to “pull out the weeds” and prepare the soil for the “implanted Word of God.” He gives the picture of a garden overgrown with weeds that cannot be controlled. It is foolish to try to receive God’s Word into an unprepared heart.

How do we prepare the soil of our hearts for God’s Word? First, by confessing our sins and asking the Father to forgive us. Then, by meditating on God’s love and grace and asking Him to “plow up” any hardness in our hearts. Finally, we must have an attitude of meekness. When we receive the Word with humility, we accept it, do not argue with it, and honor it as the Word of God. We do not try to twist it to conform it to our thinking.

If we do not receive the implanted Word, then we are deceiving ourselves. If we like to argue various “points of view,” we may be only fooling ourselves. We may think that our “discussions” are promoting spiritual growth, when in reality they may only be cultivating the weeds.

Something to Ponder

What are some of the “weeds” you have eliminated from your life since becoming a Christian?

Day 352
Revealing Words

Read 1 John 1:1

> *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*
>
> 1 John 1:1

God has revealed Himself in creation (Rom. 1:20), but creation alone could never tell the whole story of God's love. God has also revealed Himself much more fully in His Word, the Bible. But God's final and most complete revelation is in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Because Jesus is God's revelation of Himself, He has a very special name: "the Word of Life" (1 John 1:1). This same title opens John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Why does Jesus Christ have this name? Because Christ is to us what our words are to others. Our words reveal to others just what we think and how we feel. Christ reveals to us the mind and heart of God. He is the living means of communication between God and us. To know Jesus Christ is to know God!

Something to Ponder

What are some things you know about God based on His creation? What do you know about Him from knowing Jesus Christ?

Day 353
Drop Anchor

Read Hebrews 6

> *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.*
>
> Hebrews 6:19–20

The anchor was a popular symbol in the early church. The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote: “One must not tie a ship to a single anchor, nor life to a single hope.” Christians have but one anchor— Jesus Christ our hope (Col. 1:5; 1 Tim. 1:1; Heb. 6:19).

However, this spiritual anchor is different from material anchors on ships. For one thing, we are anchored upward—to heaven—not downward. We are anchored, not to stand still, but to move ahead! Our anchor is “firm”—it cannot break—and “secure”—it cannot slip. No earthly anchor can give that kind of security!

The writer then clinches the argument: This Savior is our “forerunner.” The Old Testament high priest was not a forerunner because nobody could follow him into the Holy of Holies. But Jesus Christ has gone ahead to heaven so that one day we may follow!

Something to Ponder

In what ways is Jesus your anchor? What are some areas of your life that aren’t anchored as securely as you wish they were?

Day 354
Signing Off

Read Romans 16

To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Romans 16:27

The closing benediction reflects his special ministry to the Gentiles. The "mystery hidden for long ages past" that Paul writes about in verse 25 has to do with God's program of uniting believing Jews and Gentiles in the one body, the church (Eph. 3). This was Paul's special message. It was because of this message that the Judaizers persecuted Paul, because they wanted to maintain Jewish privileges. Both Jews and Gentiles in the Roman churches needed to know what God's program was. Some of this program Paul had explained in chapters 9 through 11.

Christians are established by the truth, which explains why Paul wrote this letter: to explain God's plan of salvation to Christians so they would be established, and so they would share the truth with the lost. After all, we cannot really share with others something we do not have ourselves.

Our own study of Romans should make us more stable in the faith and more excited to share Christ with others. And the result: "to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!"

Something to Ponder

If you wanted to encourage your church with a benediction of what God is able to do, what would you say to them?

Day 355

No Confidence in the Flesh

Read Philippians 3:1–3

> *It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.*
>
> Philippians 3:3

The popular religious philosophy of today is "The Lord helps those who help themselves." It was also popular in Paul's day, and it is just as wrong today as it was then. By "the flesh," Paul means the old sinful nature that we received at birth. The Bible has nothing good to say about flesh, and yet most people today depend entirely on what they themselves can do to please God. Flesh profits nothing as far as spiritual life is concerned (John 6:63 KJV).

A lady was arguing with her pastor about this matter of faith and works. "I think that getting to heaven is like rowing a boat," she said. "One oar is faith, and the other is works. If you use both, you get there. If you use only one, you go around in circles."

"There is only one thing wrong with your illustration," replied the pastor. "Nobody is going to heaven in a rowboat!"

There is only one "good work" that takes sinners to heaven: the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Something to Ponder

What are some ways that you have put confidence in the flesh? How can you put confidence in Christ instead?

Day 356

Eat, Drink, and Be Thankful

Read Ecclesiastes 2:24–26

> *A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 2:24

Solomon was not advocating "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" That is the philosophy of fatalism, not faith. Rather, he was saying, "Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God." Paul gave his approval to this attitude when he exhorted us to trust in God, "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17).

Solomon made it clear that not only were the blessings from God, but even the enjoyment of the blessings was God's gift to us (Eccl. 2:24). He considered it evil if a person had all the blessings of life from God but could not enjoy them (6:1–5). It is easy to see why the Jewish people read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, for Tabernacles is their great time of thanksgiving and rejoicing for God's abundant provision of their needs. The farmer who prayed at the table, "Thanks for good food and for good digestion," knew what Solomon was writing about.

The important thing is that we seek to please the Lord (2:26) and trust Him to meet our every need.

Something to Ponder

What are your Top Ten blessings from God?

Day 357
Maintaining Standards

Read Galatians 2:11–21

> *I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*
>
> Galatians 2:21

Many people with whom we come in contact actually believe that people are saved by faith in Christ plus doing good works or any number of other religious pluses. We may not have the same apostolic authority that Paul exercised, but we do have the Word of God to proclaim, and it is our obligation to share the truth.

The best way to defend the truth is to live the truth. My verbal defense of the gospel will accomplish very little if my life contradicts what I say.

A new employee was instructed how to measure valve parts to make sure they were ready for the final assembly. But after a few hours, his foreman was receiving complaints that the parts he was approving were faulty. “What are you doing?” the foreman asked. “I showed you how to use that micrometer. You’re sending through parts that are oversized!”

The employee replied, “Oh, most of the parts I was measuring were too large, so I opened up the micrometer a bit.”

Changing the standards will never make for success, either in manufacturing or ministry. Paul maintained the standards of “the truth of the gospel”—and so should we.

Something to Ponder

When have you been tempted to change the standards in your life? What was the result?

Day 358
Gritty Integrity

Read Job 1:1–5

> *In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.*
>
> Job 1:1

Lord Byron was on target when he wrote: “Truth is always strange; stranger than fiction.” The book of Job is not religious fiction. Job was a real person; both Ezekiel (14:14, 20) and James (5:11) attest to that fact. Because he was a real man who had real experiences, he can tell us what we need to know about life and its problems in this real world.

Job was “blameless and upright.” He was not sinless, for nobody can claim that distinction except Jesus, but he was complete and mature in character and “straight” in conduct. The Hebrew word translated “blameless” is related to “integrity,” another important word used throughout the book of Job. In the face of his friends’ accusations and God’s silence, Job maintained his integrity; and the Lord ultimately vindicated him.

The foundation for Job’s character was the fact that he “feared God and shunned evil.” To fear the Lord means to respect who He is, what He says, and what He does. “The remarkable thing about fearing God,” said Oswald Chambers, “is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.”

Something to Ponder

How can you live more fully as a person of integrity?

Day 359

Family, Stones, Priests, Citizens

Read 1 Peter 2:9–10

> *You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*
>
> 1 Peter 2:9

We belong to one family of God and share the same divine nature. We are living stones in one building and priests serving in one temple. We are citizens of the same heavenly homeland, and Jesus Christ is the source and center of this unity. If we focus our attention and affection on Him, we will walk and work together; if we focus on ourselves, we will only cause division.

Unity does not eliminate diversity. Diversity is good—it gives beauty and richness to a family or building. The absence of diversity is uniformity, and uniformity is dull. It is fine when the choir sings in unison, but it is preferable that they sing in harmony.

Christians can differ and still get along. All who cherish the "one faith" and who seek to honor the "one Lord" can walk together (Eph. 4:1–6). God may call us into different ministries, or to use different methods, but we can still love each other and seek to present a united witness to the world.

St. Augustine said it perfectly: "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

Something to Ponder

When have you observed how the diversity of individuals combined and resulted in the glory of God?

Day 360
Good for All Ages

Read 2 Timothy 3:10–17

> *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it.*
>
> 2 Timothy 3:14

Some people are prone to say, “Well, I needed the Bible when I was younger, but I can do without it now that I’m older.” How wrong they are! Adults need the guidance of the Word far more than children do, because adults face more temptations and make more decisions. Timothy’s grandmother and mother had faithfully taught him the Old Testament Scriptures. Timothy was to continue in what he had been taught. We never outgrow the Word of God.

This is a good place to admonish Christian parents to teach their children the Bible. In our home, my wife and I used Kenneth Taylor’s *Bible Stories with Pictures for Little Eyes*. What a joy it was to see our older children who had learned to read share the stories with the younger ones and help them answer the questions. Little by little, the children graduated to older Bible storybooks and then to Bibles of their own. As soon as your child is born, surround him with the Word of God and prayer. You will not have this opportunity after he grows up.

Something to Ponder

Were you taught the Bible as a child? If so, how did that shape you? If not, how did that affect your faith story?

Day 361
By Faith Alone

Read Galatians 3:1–14

> *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."*
>
> Galatians 3:11

In their conversion experience, the believers in Galatia had received the Spirit by faith and not by the works of the law. This led Paul to ask another question: "If you did not begin with the law, why bring it in anyway?" Since we were saved through faith and not law, then it is reasonable that we should continue that way.

The illustration of human birth is appropriate here. Two human parents are required for a child to be conceived and born, and two spiritual parents are required for a child to be born into God's family: the Spirit of God and the Word of God (John 3:1–8; 1 Peter 1:22–25). When a normal child is born, he has all that he needs for life; nothing need be added.

When the child of God is born into God's family, he has all that he needs spiritually; nothing need be added! All that is necessary is that the child have food, exercise, and cleansing that he might grow into maturity. "You have begun in the Spirit," wrote Paul. "Nothing need be added! Walk in the Spirit and you will grow in the Lord."

Something to Ponder

Have you added anything to the idea of "faith alone"? Why is it so tempting to add to faith?

Day 362
Fear Less

Read 1 Peter 3:13–17

> *Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.*
>
> 1 Peter 3:13–14

As Christians, we are faced with crises, and we are tempted to give in to our fears and make the wrong decisions. But if we "set apart Christ as Lord" (v. 15) in our hearts, we need never fear people or circumstances. Our enemies may hurt us, but they can never harm us. Only we can harm ourselves if we fail to trust God. Generally speaking, people do not oppose us if we do good; but even if they do, it is better to suffer for righteousness' sake than to compromise our testimony.

Instead of experiencing fear as we face the Enemy, we can experience blessing, if Jesus Christ is Lord in our hearts. When Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, each crisis becomes an opportunity for witness. We should "always be prepared to give an answer" (v. 15). As Christians we should be able to give a reasoned defense of our hope in Christ, especially in hopeless situations. A crisis creates the opportunity for witness when we behave with faith and hope, because nonbelievers will then sit up and take notice.

Something to Ponder

What is the worst you have ever suffered because of your faith?

Day 363
Salty Talk

Read Colossians 4:5–6

> *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*
>
> Colossians 4:6

Christians in general, and Christian leaders in particular, must have “a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Tim. 3:7). When members of a church are calling a new pastor, they ought to investigate his testimony among his neighbors and the businessmen who know him. Even though unsaved people are in the dark spiritually, they have a great deal of discernment when it comes to the things of this life. It is unfortunate when members of a church call a pastor who has not paid his bills and has left behind a bad witness to unsaved people.

It is not enough simply to walk wisely and carefully before unbelievers. We must also talk with them and share the gospel message with them. But we must take care that our speech is controlled by grace, so that it points to Christ and glorifies the Lord. This means we must have grace in our hearts (Col. 3:16), because it is from the heart that the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34). With grace in our hearts and on our lips, we will be faithful witnesses and not judges or prosecuting attorneys!

Something to Ponder

How do you let your speech be “seasoned with salt”?

Day 364
A Dead-End Street

Read Job 19:1–20

> *He has blocked my way so I cannot pass; he has shrouded my paths in darkness.*
>
> Job 19:8

Job saw himself as a traveler fenced in. Satan had complained that God had "walled in" Job and his family so that they were protected from trouble (1:9–12). Here Job was complaining because God had blocked his path, and he could not move. He could not see what lay ahead because God had shrouded the way with darkness.

At times God permits His children to experience darkness on a dead-end street where they don't know which way to turn. When this happens to you, wait for the Lord to give you light in His own time. Dr. Bob Jones Sr. used to say, "Never doubt in the darkness what God has taught you in the light." What God teaches us in the light will become even more meaningful in the darkness.

"Oh, the unspeakable benediction of the 'treasures of darkness'!" wrote Oswald Chambers. "It is not the days of sunshine and splendor and liberty and light that leave their lasting and indelible effect upon the soul, but those nights of the Spirit in which, shadowed by God's hand, hidden in the dark cleft of some rock in a weary land, He lets the splendors of the outskirts of Himself pass before our gaze."

Something to Ponder

How do you tend to react when God chooses not to reveal what lies ahead for you?

Day 365

Two Extremes

Read Romans 7:1–6

> *By dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*
>
> Romans 7:6

Something in human nature makes people want to go to extremes, a weakness from which Christians are not wholly immune. “Since we are saved by grace,” some argue, “we are free to live as we please,” which is the law of license.

“But we cannot ignore God’s law,” others argue. “We are saved by grace, but we must live under law if we are to please God.” This is the extreme expression of legalism (the belief that human beings can become holy and please God by obeying laws).

I have counseled many people who have suffered severe emotional and spiritual damage because they have tried to live holy lives on the basis of a high moral standard. I have seen the consequences of these attempts: Either such people become pretenders, or they suffer a complete collapse and abandon all desires for godly living. I have seen, too, that many legalists are extremely hard on other people—critical, unloving, unforgiving. Paul wanted to spare his readers this difficult and dangerous experience.

Something to Ponder

How can you remain obedient and faithful to God without falling into the snare of legalism?