

Christian Challenge

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Forward

God's Challenge

For the Lord is merciful.
He has made known his mercy.
So the people may know his ways.
According to his will for their lives.

His challenge to you is to know his mercy.
His challenge to you is to know his love.
He softly comes with deep revelation.
To reveal, to restore and to maintain his ways.

Jesus intentionally challenged his listeners to test him. He welcomed those who wanted to question his claims and character as long as they were willing to follow through on what they discovered.

Jesus' challenge clarifies the two most frequent reasons that people miss when encountering him:

They never accept his challenge to test him, or

They tested him but are not willing to believe what they discover.

Throughout this study, you will be faced with opportunities to face and understand scriptures enabling you to face life's challenges.

Chapter 1



Let God help you with life's challenges.

Joshua 1:5

There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

Joshua succeeded Moses as Israel's leader. What qualifications did he have to become the leader of a nation?

- (1) God appointed him. (Numbers 27:18-23).
- (2) He was one of only two living eyewitnesses to the Egyptian plagues and the exodus from Egypt.
- (3) He was Moses' personal aide for 40 years.
- (4) Of the 12 spies, only he and Caleb showed complete confidence that God would help them conquer the land.

Joshua's new job consisted of leading more than two million people into a strange new land and conquering it. What a challenge—even for a man of Joshua's caliber!

Every new job is a challenge. Without God it can be frightening. With God it can be a great adventure.

Just as God was with Joshua, he is with us as we face our new challenges. We may not conquer nations, but every day we face tough situations, difficult people, and temptations. However, God promises that he will never abandon us or fail to help us.

By asking God to direct us we can conquer many of life's challenges.

Challenge others with your vision.

Neh. 2:17-18

Then said I unto them, ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.

Spiritual renewal often begins with one person's vision. Nehemiah had a vision, and he shared it with enthusiasm, inspiring Jerusalem's leaders to rebuild the walls.

We frequently underestimate people and don't challenge them with our dreams for God's work in the world.

When God plants an idea in your mind to accomplish something for him, share it with others and trust the Holy Spirit to impress them with similar thoughts.

Don't regard yourself as the only one through whom God is working. Often God uses one person to express the vision and others to turn it into reality. When you encourage and inspire others, you put teamwork into action to accomplish God's goals.

Jesus' challenge to test him

John 8:46-47

Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? Anyone whose Father is God listens gladly to the words of God. Since you don't, it proves you aren't God's children."

No one could accuse Jesus of a single sin. People who hated him and wanted him dead scrutinized his behavior but could find nothing wrong.

Jesus proved he was God in the flesh by his sinless life. He is the only perfect example for us to follow.

In a number of places Jesus intentionally challenged his listeners to test him. He welcomed those who wanted to question his claims and character as long as they were willing to follow through on what they discovered.

Jesus' challenge clarifies the two most frequent reasons that people miss when encountering him:

(1) They never accept his challenge to test him, or

(2) They test him but are not willing to believe what they discover. Have you made either of those mistakes?

The world will challenge your faith.

2 Peter 3:8

But you must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day.

Chapter 2



Count it all joy when you face a new challenge

James 1:2-4

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.

For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.

We can't really know the depth of our character until we see how we react under pressure. It is easy to be kind to others when everything is going well, but can we still be kind when others are treating us unfairly?

God wants to make us mature and complete, not to keep us from all pain. Instead of complaining about our struggles, we should see them as opportunities for growth.

Thank God for promising to be with you in rough times. Ask him to help you solve your problems or to give you the strength to endure them. Then be patient. God will not leave you alone with your problems; he will stay close and help you grow.

Be thankful to God, even in diversity

Philippians 4:6

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

Imagine never being “anxious about anything”! It seems like an impossibility. We all have worries on the job, in our homes, at school. But Paul’s advice is to turn our worries into prayers.

Do you want to worry less? Then pray more! Whenever you start to worry, stop and pray.

Hebrews 13:5

Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never forsake you."

How can we learn to be content? Strive to live with less rather than desiring more; give away out of your abundance rather than accumulating more; relish what you have rather than resent what you’re missing.

See God’s love expressed in what he has provided, and remember that money and possessions will all pass away.

We become content when we realize God’s sufficiency for our needs. Christians who become materialistic are saying by their actions that God can’t take care of them—or at least that he won’t take care of them the way they want.

Insecurity can lead to the love of money, whether we are rich or poor. The only antidote is to trust God to meet all our needs.

All Temptations are common to man

1 Cor. 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

Paul criticized the false teachers who were trying to prove their goodness by comparing themselves with others rather than with God's standards.

When we compare ourselves with others, we may feel pride because we think we're better. But when we measure ourselves against God's standards, it becomes obvious that we have no basis for pride.

Don't worry about other people's accomplishments. Instead, continually ask: How does my life measure up to what God wants? How does my life compare to Jesus Christ?

1 John 4:18

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear hath torment. He that fears is not made perfect in love.

If we ever are afraid of the future, eternity, or God's judgment, we can remind ourselves of God's love. We know that he loves us perfectly (Romans 8:38-39).

We can resolve our fears first by focusing on his immeasurable love for us, and then by allowing him to love others through us. His love will quiet your fears and give you confidence.

God give strength for every challenge

Philippians 4:13

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

The power we receive in union with Christ is sufficient to do his will and to face the challenges that arise from our commitment to doing it.

He does not grant us superhuman ability to accomplish anything we can imagine without regard to his interests. As we contend for the faith we will face troubles, pressures, and trials. As they come, ask Christ to strengthen you.

Jesus came into the world to save not condemn the world.

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

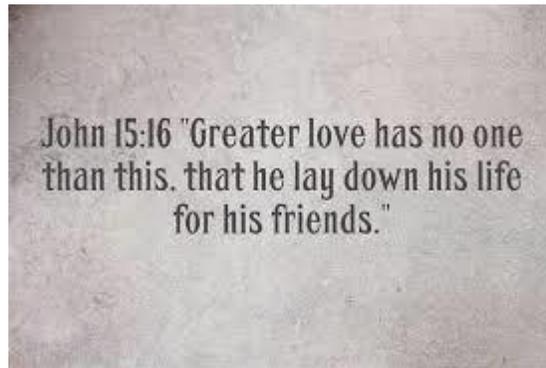
Not guilty; let him go free”—what would those words mean to you if you were on death row? The fact is that the whole human race *is* on death row, justly condemned for repeatedly breaking God’s holy law.

Without Jesus we would have no hope at all. But thank God! He has declared us not guilty and has offered us freedom from sin and power to do his will.

Some Christians believe it is their ministry to condemn the world.
This is not of God.

Since Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, why
should we condemn the world?

Chapter 3



A challenge to love

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The entire gospel comes to a focus in this verse. God’s love is not static or self-centered; it reaches out and draws others in.

Here God sets the pattern of true love, the basis for all love relationships—when you love someone dearly, you are willing to give freely to the point of self-sacrifice.

God paid dearly with the life of his Son, the highest price he could pay. Jesus accepted our punishment, paid the price for our sins, and then offered us the new life that he had bought for us.

When we share the gospel with others, our love must be like Jesus’—willingly giving up our own comfort and security so that others might join us in receiving God’s love.

In eternal life there is no death, sickness, enemy, evil, or sin. When we don't know Christ, we make choices as though this life is all we have. In reality, this life is just the introduction to eternity.

Receive this new life by faith and begin to evaluate all that happens from an eternal perspective.

To “believe” is more than intellectual agreement that Jesus is God. It means to put our trust and confidence in him that he alone can save us. It is to put Christ in charge of our present plans and eternal destiny.

Believing is both trusting his words as reliable, and relying on him for the power to change. If you have never trusted Christ, let this promise of everlasting life be yours—and believe.

Mark 12:30

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind and with all your strength.’

God's laws are not burdensome. They can be reduced to two simple principles: love God and love others.

These commands are from the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). When you love God completely and care for others as you care for yourself, then you have fulfilled the intent of the Ten Commandments and the other Old Testament laws.

According to Jesus, these two commandments summarize all God's laws. Let them rule your thoughts, decisions, and actions.

When you are uncertain about what to do, ask yourself which course of action best demonstrates love for God and love for others.

The Shepherd's challenge

Psalm 23:1-6

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ...

In describing the Lord as a shepherd, David wrote out of his own experience because he had spent his early years caring for sheep (1 Samuel 16:10-11).

Sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd for provision, guidance, and protection. The New Testament calls Jesus the good shepherd (John 10:11); the great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20); and the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

As the Lord is the good shepherd, so we are his sheep—not frightened, passive animals, but obedient followers, wise enough to follow one who will lead us in the right places and in right ways. This psalm does not focus on the animal-like qualities of sheep, but on the discipleship qualities of those who follow. When you recognize the good shepherd, follow him!

When we allow God our shepherd to guide us, we have contentment. When we choose to sin, however, we go our own way and cannot blame God for the environment we create for ourselves.

Our shepherd knows the “green pastures” and “quiet waters” that will restore us. We will reach these places only by following him obediently. Rebelling against the shepherd’s leading is actually rebelling against our own best interests.

We must remember this the next time we are tempted to go our own way rather than the shepherd’s way.

Death casts a frightening shadow over us because we are entirely helpless in its presence. We can struggle with other enemies—pain, suffering, disease, injury—but strength and courage cannot overcome death.

Death has the final word. Only one person can walk with us through death’s dark valley and bring us safely to the other side—the God of life, our shepherd. Because life is uncertain, we should follow this shepherd who offers us eternal comfort.

In ancient Near Eastern culture, at a banquet it was customary to anoint a person with fragrant oil as a lotion. Hosts were also expected to protect their guests at all costs. God offers the protection of a host even when enemies surround us. In the final scene of this psalm, we see that believers will dwell with God. God, the perfect shepherd and host, promises to guide and protect us through life to bring us into his house forever.

Meeting the challenge shows the excellences of Christ

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Christians sometimes speak of “the priesthood of all believers.” In Old Testament times, people did not approach God directly. A priest acted as intermediary between God and sinful human beings. With Christ’s victory on the cross, that pattern changed. Now we can come directly into God’s presence without fear (Hebrews 4:16), and we are given the responsibility of bringing others to him also (2 Cor. 5:18-21). When we are united with Christ as members of his body, we join in his priestly work of reconciling God and man.

People often base their self-concept on their accomplishments. But our relationship with Christ is far more important than our jobs, successes, wealth, or knowledge.

We have been chosen by God as his very own, and we have been called to represent him to others. Remember that your value comes from being one of God’s children, not from what you can achieve. You have worth because of what *God does*, not because of what you do.

Chapter 4



The challenge of blessings

Matthew 5:1-7:29

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ...

This is called the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus gave it on a hillside near Capernaum. This “sermon” probably covered several days of preaching. In it,

Jesus proclaimed his attitude toward the law. Position, authority, and money are not important in his kingdom—what matters is faithful obedience from the heart.

The Sermon on the Mount challenged the proud and legalistic religious leaders of the day. It called them back to the messages of the Old Testament prophets who, like Jesus, taught that heartfelt obedience is more important than legalistic observance.

Enormous crowds were following Jesus—he was the talk of the town, and everyone wanted to see him. The disciples, who were the closest

associates of this popular man, were certainly tempted to feel important, proud, and possessive.

Being with Jesus gave them not only prestige, but also opportunity for receiving money and power.

The crowds were gathering once again. But before speaking to them, Jesus pulled his disciples aside and warned them about the temptations they would face as his associates.

Don't expect fame and fortune, Jesus was saying, but mourning, hunger, and persecution. Nevertheless, Jesus assured his disciples, they would be rewarded—but perhaps not in this life. There may be times when following Jesus will bring us great popularity.

There are at least four ways to understand the Beatitudes.

(1) They are a code of ethics for the disciples and a standard of conduct for all believers.

(2) They contrast kingdom values (what is eternal) with worldly values (what is temporary).

(3) They contrast the superficial “faith” of the Pharisees with the real faith Christ wants.

(4) They show how the Old Testament expectations will be fulfilled in the new kingdom.

These beatitudes are not multiple choice—pick what you like and leave the rest. They must be taken as a whole. They describe what we should be like as Christ's followers.

Each beatitude tells how to be *blessed*. “Blessed” means more than happiness. It implies the fortunate or enviable state of those who are in God’s kingdom.

The Beatitudes don’t promise laughter, pleasure, or earthly prosperity.

To Jesus, “blessed” means the experience of hope and joy, independent of outward circumstances. To find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

With Jesus’ announcement that the kingdom was near (Matthew 4:17), people were naturally asking, “How do I qualify to be in God’s kingdom?” Jesus said that God’s kingdom is organized differently from worldly kingdoms.

In the kingdom of heaven, wealth and power and authority are unimportant. Kingdom people seek different blessings and benefits, and they have different attitudes. Are your attitudes a carbon copy of the world’s selfishness, pride, and lust for power, or do they reflect the humility and self-sacrifice of Jesus, your King?

Jesus said to rejoice when we’re persecuted. Persecution can be good because

- (1) It takes our eyes off earthly rewards,
- (2) It strips away superficial belief,
- (3) It strengthens the faith of those who endure, and
- (4) Our attitude through it serves as an example to others who follow.

We can be comforted to know that God’s greatest prophets were persecuted (Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel).

The fact that we are being persecuted proves that we have been faithful; faithless people would be unnoticed. In the future God will reward the faithful by receiving them into his eternal kingdom where there is no more persecution.

Christ, will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

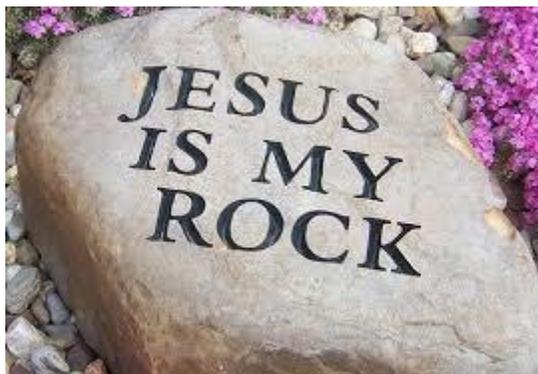
1 Peter 5:10

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

When we are suffering, we often feel as though our pain will never end. Peter gave these faithful Christians the wider perspective. In comparison with eternity, their suffering would last only “a little while.” Some of Peter’s readers would be strengthened and delivered in their own lifetimes.

Others would be released from their suffering through death. All of God’s faithful followers are assured of an eternal life with Christ where there will be no suffering (Rev. 21:4).

Chapter 5



A challenge to drink from the spiritual rock

1 Corinthians 10:1-33

For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Paul used himself as an example of a mature Christian who disciplines himself to better serve God.

In 1 Cor. 10, he uses Israel as an example of spiritual immaturity, shown in their overconfidence and lack of self-discipline.

The cloud and the sea mentioned here refer to Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt when God led them by a cloud and brought them safely through the Red Sea (Exodus 14).

The spiritual food and drink are the miraculous provisions God gave as they traveled through the desert (Exodus 15-16).

“Baptized into Moses” means that just as we are united in Christ by baptism, so the Israelites were united under Moses’ leadership in the events of the exodus.

Today’s pressures make it easy to ignore or forget the lessons of the past. But Paul cautions us to remember the lessons the Israelites learned about God so we can avoid repeating their errors. The key to remembering is to study the Bible regularly so that these lessons remind us of how God wants us to live. We need not repeat their mistakes!

A challenge to help the needy

Luke 12:33

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

Seeking the kingdom of God means making Jesus the Lord and King of your life. He must control every area—your work, play, plans, relationships. Is the kingdom only one of your many concerns, or is it central to all you do?

As Lord and Creator, he wants to help provide what you need as well as guide how you use what he provides.

Money seen as an end in itself quickly traps us and cuts us off from both God and the needy.

The key to using money wisely is to see how much we can use for God's purposes, not how much we can accumulate for ourselves. .

When you concentrate your money in your business, your thoughts will center on making the business profitable. If you direct it toward other people, you will become concerned with their welfare.

Allow Christ to fight your battles for you

2 Chronicles 20:17

You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you."

As the enemy bore down on Judah, God spoke through Jahaziel: "Do not be afraid or discouraged. . . . For the battle is not yours, but God's."

We may not fight an enemy army, but every day we battle temptation, pressure, and "rulers. . . of this dark world" (Ephes. 6:12) who want us to rebel against God. Remember, as believers, we have God's Spirit in us. If we ask for God's help when we face struggles, God will fight for us. And God always triumphs.

How do we let God fight for us?

(1) By realizing the battle is not ours, but God's;

(2) By recognizing human limitations and allowing God's strength to work through our fears and weaknesses;

(3) By making sure we are pursuing God's interests and not just our own selfish desires;

(4) By asking God for help in our daily battles.

Meet the challenge with Holy Spirit anointing

Luke 4:17-20

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to

Proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and

Recovering of sight to the blind,

To set at liberty those who are oppressed,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Chapter 6



Challenge to Comfort God's people

Isaiah 40:1-31

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ...

Isaiah now speaks of events that will occur after the captivity. This includes the decree by Cyrus to release the remnant captives and allow them to return to Jerusalem after he conquered Babylon.

But Isaiah also foretells the coming of the suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, and describes his life and death with incredible detail.

Isaiah also speaks about the coming of the new heavens and earth, when God's people will be completely restored. Because all believers will participate in this new world to come, we can have confident hope in the future.

Jesus was tempted in all points, even as we are too tempted, but Jesus overcomes every temptation, and he makes a way for believers to also escape.

Your challenge is to overcome, even a Jesus overcame.

Man's challenge to obedience

Genesis 2:16-17

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Why would God place a tree in the garden and then forbid Adam to eat from it? God wanted Adam to obey, but God gave Adam the freedom to choose.

Without choice, Adam would have been like a prisoner, and his obedience would have been hollow.

The two trees provided an exercise in choice, with rewards for choosing to obey and sad consequences for choosing to disobey. When you are faced with the choice, always choose to obey God.

The challenge to place Christ first

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, most people still believe that money brings happiness.

Rich people craving greater riches can be caught in an endless cycle that only ends in ruin and destruction.

How can you keep away from the love of money? Paul gives us some guidelines:

- (1) Realize that one day riches will all be gone (1 Tim. 6:7, 17);
- (2) Be content with what you have (1 Tim. 6:8);
- (3) Monitor what you are willing to do to get more money (1 Tim. 6:9-10);
- (4) Love people more than money (1 Tim. 6:11);
- (5) Love God's work more than money (1 Tim. 6:11);
- (6) Freely share what you have with others (1 Tim. 6:18).

It is often helpful to distinguish between *needs* and *wants*. We may have all we need to live but let ourselves become anxious and discontented over what we merely want.

Like Paul, we can choose to be content without having all that we want. The only alternative is to be a slave to our desires.

Greed leads to all kinds of evil: marriage problems, robbery, blowups in partnerships.

To master greed, you must control it at its root. Get rid of the desire to be rich.

The challenge to follow the commandment

Jeremiah 12:5

“If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?”

Life was extremely difficult for Jeremiah despite his love for and obedience to God.

When he called to God for relief, God’s reply in effect was, “If you think this is bad, how are you going to cope when it gets really tough?”

Not all of God’s answers to prayer are nice or easy to handle. Any Christian who has experienced war, bereavement, or a serious illness knows this.

But we are to be committed to God even when the going gets tough and when his answers to our prayers don't bring immediate relief.

God's challenge to move forward

Amos 7:7-15

Then he showed me another vision. I saw the Lord standing beside a wall that had been built using a plumb line. He was checking it with a plumb line to see if it was straight. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?"

I answered, "A plumb line."

And the Lord replied, "I will test my people with this plumb line. I will no longer ignore all their sins. The pagan shrines of your ancestors and the temples of Israel will be destroyed, and I will bring the dynasty of King Jeroboam to a sudden end."

But when Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, heard what Amos was saying, he rushed a message to King Jeroboam: "Amos is hatching a plot against you right here on your very doorstep! What he is saying is intolerable. It will lead to rebellion all across the land.

He is saying, 'Jeroboam will soon be killed and the people of Israel will be sent away into exile.' "

Then Amiyah sent orders to Amos: "Get out of here, you seer! Go on back to the land of Judah and do your preaching there!"

Don't bother us here in Bethel with your prophecies, especially not here where the royal sanctuary is!"

But Amos replied, "I'm not one of your professional prophets. I certainly never trained to be one. I'm just a shepherd, and I take care of fig trees.

But the Lord called me away from my flock and told me, 'Go and prophesy to my people in Israel.'

A plumb line is a device used to ensure the straightness of a wall. A wall that is not straight will eventually collapse. God wants people to be right with him; he wants the sin that makes us crooked removed immediately. God's Word is the plumb line that helps us be aware of our sin. How do you measure up to God's plumb line?

Prophets like Amos were often seen as traitors and conspirators because they spoke out against the king and his advisers, questioning their authority and exposing their sin.

The kings often saw the prophets as enemies rather than as God's spokesmen who were really trying to help them and the nation.

Without any special preparation, education, or upbringing, Amos obeyed God's call to "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." Obedience is the test of a faithful servant of God. Are you obeying God's call to you?

Paul moved forward

Philip. 3:13-14

No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,

I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.

Paul had reason to forget what was behind—he had held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:57-58, Paul is called Saul here).

We have all done things for which we are ashamed, and we live in the tension of what we have been and what we want to be. Because our hope is in Christ, however, we can let go of past guilt and look forward to what God will help us become.

Don't dwell on your past. Instead, grow in the knowledge of God by concentrating on your relationship with him *now*. Realize that you are forgiven, and then move on to a life of faith and obedience. Look forward to a fuller and more meaningful life because of your hope in Christ.

A challenge to make a difference

Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see.

Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

If a seasoning has no flavor, it has no value. If Christians make no effort to affect the world around them, they are of little value to God. If we are too much like the world, we are worthless.

Christians should not blend in with everyone else. Instead, we should affect others positively, just as seasoning brings out the best flavor in food.

1 Peter 2:9

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people.

You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, and his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

Christians sometimes speak of “the priesthood of all believers.” In Old Testament times, people did not approach God directly. A priest acted as intermediary between God and sinful human beings. With Christ’s victory on the cross, that pattern changed.

Now we can come directly into God’s presence without fear (Hebrews 4:16), and we are given the responsibility of bringing others to him also (2 Cor. 5:18-21). When we are united with Christ as members of his body, we join in his priestly work of reconciling God and man.

People often base their self-concept on their accomplishments. But our relationship with Christ is far more important than our jobs, successes, wealth, or knowledge. We have been chosen by God as his very own, and we have been called to represent him to others. Remember that your value comes from being one of God’s children, not from what you can achieve. You have worth because of what *God does*, not because of what you do.

A challenge to evangelize

Mark 16:15-16

And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere. Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.

Jesus told his disciples to go into all the world, telling everyone that he had paid the penalty for sin and that those who believe in him can be forgiven and live eternally with God. Christian disciples today in all parts of the world are preaching this gospel to people who haven't heard about Christ.

The driving power that carries missionaries around the world and sets Christ's church in motion is the faith that comes from the resurrection.

Do you ever feel as though you don't have the skill or determination to be a witness for Christ? You must personally realize that Jesus rose from the dead and lives for you today. As you grow in your relationship with Christ, he will give you both the opportunities and the inner strength to tell his message.

References:

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Additional comments and charts are taken from:

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