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Forward

Luke 14:23 Luke 14:23

So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full.

Jesus advised people not to rush for the best places at a feast. People today are just as eager to raise their social status, whether by being with the right people, dressing for success, or driving the right car. Whom do you try to impress? Rather than aiming for prestige, look for a place where you can serve. If God wants you to serve on a wider scale, he will invite you to take a higher place.

Truly humble people compare themselves only with Christ, realize their sinfulness, and understand their limitations. On the other hand, they also recognize their gifts and strengths and are willing to use them as Christ directs. Humility is not self-degradation; it is realistic assessment and commitment to serve.

Jesus told his disciples to go everywhere preaching the gospel.

In this study, we are told how to prepare ourselves for the ministry and how our attitude, dedication and work should be considered.

Believers are sent to preach to the lost. We go with faith, expecting that God will qualify those whom he calls. With God, nothing is impossible.

All ministers, pastors, evangelists, missionaries and helpers must speak the word of God with boldness, with love and with faith to bring the required effect of reaching the lost.

It is all through the preaching of the cross through grace. Let his love abound in you as you fulfill this call to go into the highways and hedges.

Chapter 1

The Gospel must be preached

Luke 24:47-51

With my authority, take this message of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me.' You are witnesses of all these things.

"And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven."

Jesus blesses the people as he is taken into heaven.

Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.

Jesus told his disciples to go into the entire 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.

You may 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.

Jesus said that before he returns, the gospel of the kingdom (the message of salvation) would be preached throughout the world. This was the disciples' mission—and it is ours today.

Jesus talked about the end times and final judgment to show his followers the urgency of spreading the good news of salvation to everyone.

Jesus was teaching, preaching, and healing. These were the three main aspects of his ministry. **Teaching** shows Jesus' concern for understanding; **preaching** shows his concern for commitment; and **healing** shows his concern for wholeness. His miracles of healing authenticated his teaching and preaching, proving that he truly was from God.

Jesus soon developed a powerful preaching ministry and often spoke in the synagogues. Most towns that had ten or more Jewish families had a synagogue. The building served as a religious gathering place on the Sabbath and as a school during the week. The leader of the synagogue was not a preacher as much as an administrator. His job was to find and invite rabbis to teach and preach. It was customary to invite visiting rabbis like Jesus to speak.

Jesus preached the good news to everyone

Jesus preached the gospel—the Good News—to everyone who wanted to hear it. The gospel is that the kingdom of heaven has come, that God is with us, and that he cares for us. Christ can heal us, not just of physical sickness, but of spiritual sickness as well. There's no sin or problem too great or too small for him to handle. Jesus' words were good news because they offered freedom, hope, peace of heart, and eternal life with God.

God gave Jesus authority over heaven and earth. On the basis of that authority, Jesus told his disciples to make more disciples as they preached, baptized, and taught. With this same authority, Jesus still commands us to tell others the Good News and make them disciples for the kingdom.

When someone is dying or leaving us, his or her last words are very important. Jesus left the disciples with these last words of instruction: they were under his authority; they were to make more disciples; they were to baptize and teach these new disciples to obey Christ; Christ would be with them always. Whereas in previous missions Jesus had sent his disciples only to the Jews (Matthew 10:5-6), their mission from now on would be worldwide. Jesus is Lord of the earth, and he died for the sins of people from all nations.

We are to go—whether it is next door or to another country—and make disciples. It is not an option, but a command to all who call Jesus “Lord.” We are not all evangelists in the formal sense, but we have all received gifts that we can use to help fulfill the Great Commission. As we obey, we have comfort in the knowledge that Jesus is always with us.

The disciples were to baptize people because baptism unites a believer with Jesus Christ in his or her death to sin and resurrection to new life. Baptism symbolizes submission to Christ, willingness to live God’s way, and identification with God’s covenant people.

Christ is the only mediator between God and man.

Christ is the one and only mediator between God and humans. Through Christ, God sends his love and forgiveness to us; through Christ, we send our thanks to God (see 1 Tim. 2:5).

The Roman Christians, at the Western world’s political power center, were highly visible. Fortunately, their reputation was excellent; their strong faith was making itself known around the world. When people talk about your congregation or your denomination, what do they say? Are their comments accurate? Would you rather they noticed other features? What is the best way to get the public to recognize your faith?

Many Jews who looked for the Messiah refused to believe in him when he came. God offered his salvation to the Gentiles (“those who are not a nation” and “a nation that has no understanding”); thus many Gentiles who didn’t even know about a Messiah found and believed in him. Some religious people are spiritually blind, while those who have never been in a church are sometimes the most responsive to God’s message. Because appearances are deceiving, and we can’t see into people’s hearts, beware of judging beforehand who will respond to the gospel and who will not.

Signs and wonders followed those who preached the gospel.

Romans 15:19-21

I have won them over by the miracles done through me as signs from God—all by the power of God's Spirit. In this way, I have fully presented

the Good News of Christ all the way from Jerusalem clear over into Illyricum. My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else. I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says,

"Those who have never been told about him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand."

Paul had heard good news about the Roman Church, and was content to preach in other areas which people had not heard the Gospel.

Wherever Paul went, he preached the gospel—to Gentile audiences, to hostile Jewish leaders, and even to his Roman guards. Whenever people believed in the message that Paul spoke, they were changed.

God's Word is not just for our information, it is for our transformation!

Becoming a Christian means beginning a whole new relationship with God, not just turning over a new leaf or determining to do right. New believers have a changed purpose, direction, attitude, and behavior. They are no longer seeking to serve themselves, but they are bearing fruit for God.

The people of the world have had their chance to proclaim their allegiance to God, and now God's great judgment is about to begin. If you are reading this, you have already heard God's truth. You know that God's final judgment will not be put off forever. Have you joyfully received the everlasting Good News?

Have you confessed your sins and trusted in Christ to save you? If so, you have nothing to fear from God's judgment. The Judge of all the earth is your Savior! How is the gospel reaching others through your life?

Chapter 2

You are sent to preach the gospel.

John 20:21

He spoke to them again and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus again identified himself with his Father. He told the disciples by whose authority he did his work. Then he passed the job to his disciples of spreading the gospel of salvation around the world. Whatever God has asked you to do, remember: (1) your authority comes from God, and (2) Jesus has demonstrated by words and actions how to accomplish the job he has given you. As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends his followers. . . and you.

We must take God's great message of salvation to others so that they can respond to the Good News. How will your loved ones and neighbors hear it unless someone tells them? Is God calling you to take a part in making his message known in your community? Think of one person who needs to hear the Good News, and think of something you can do to help him or her hear it. Then take that step as soon as possible.

Even when rejected, Jeremiah proclaimed the truth.

People mocked Jeremiah by saying sarcastically, "What is the oracle of the LORD?" (*oracle* meaning "utterance" or "burden"). The people mocked Jeremiah and God because it seemed that Jeremiah brought nothing but God's sad news of condemnation. But this sad news was the truth. If they had accepted it, they would have had to repent and turn to God. Because they did not want to do this, they rejected Jeremiah's message.

Have you ever rejected a message or made fun of it because it would require you to change your ways? Before dismissing someone who brings sad news, look carefully at your motives.

We must pray that people will understand and accept the Gospel.

The good news of the kingdom was that the promised and long-awaited Messiah had finally come. His healing miracles were a sign that his teaching was true.

Jesus needs workers who know how to deal with people's problems. We can comfort others and show them the way to live because we have been helped with our problems by God and his laborers (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

Ezekiel also compared Israel to sheep without a shepherd (Ezekiel 34:5-6). Jesus came to be the Shepherd, the One who could show people how to avoid life's pitfalls (see John 10:14).

Jesus looked at the crowds following him and referred to them as a field ripe for harvest. Many people are ready to give their lives to Christ if someone would show them how. Jesus commands us to pray that people will respond to this need for workers. Often, when we pray for something, God answers our prayers by using *us*. Be prepared for God to use you to show another person the way to him.

Jesus gives his power to minister to the disciples.

Jesus *called* his 12 disciples. He didn't draft them, force them, or ask them to volunteer; he chose them to serve him in a special way. Christ calls us today. He doesn't twist our arms and make us do something we don't want to do. We can choose to join him or remain behind. When Christ calls you to follow him, how do you respond?

The list of Jesus' 12 disciples doesn't give us many details—probably because there weren't many impressive details to tell. Jesus called people from all walks of life—fishermen, political activists, tax collectors. He called common people and uncommon leaders; rich and poor; educated and uneducated. Today, many people think only certain people are fit to follow Christ, but this was not the attitude of the Master himself. God can use anyone, no matter how insignificant he or she appears. When you feel small and useless, remember that God uses ordinary people to do his extraordinary work.

The Gospel is given to all people

Why didn't Jesus send the disciples to the Gentiles or the Samaritans? A Gentile is anyone who is not a Jew. The Samaritans were a race that resulted from intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles after the Old Testament captivities (see 2 Kings 17:24).

Jesus asked his disciples to go only to the Jews because he came *first* to the Jews (Romans 1:16). God chose them to tell the rest of the world about him. Jewish disciples and apostles preached the gospel of the risen Christ all around the Roman empire, and soon Gentiles were pouring into the church.

The Bible clearly teaches that God's message of salvation is for *all* people, regardless of race, sex, or national origin (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 25:6; Isaiah 56:3-7; Malachi 1:11; Acts 10:34-35; Romans 3:29-30; Galatians 3:28).

Jesus expands his call to others

Far more than 12 people had been following Jesus. Here Jesus designated a group of 72 to prepare a number of towns for Jesus' later visit. These disciples were not unique in their qualifications. They were not better educated, more capable, or of higher status than other followers of Jesus.

What equipped them for this mission was their awareness of Jesus' power and their vision to reach all the people. It is important to dedicate our skills to God's kingdom, but we must also be equipped with his power and have a clear vision of what he wants us to do.

Jesus was sending 36 teams of two to reach the multitudes. These teams were not to try to do the job without help; rather, they were to ask God for more workers. Some people, as soon as they understand the gospel, want to go to work immediately contacting unsaved people. This story suggests a different approach: begin by mobilizing people to pray. And before praying for unsaved people, pray that other concerned disciples will join you in reaching out to them.

Jesus identified himself with his Father. He told the disciples by whose authority he did his work. Then he passed the job to his disciples of spreading the gospel of salvation around the world. Whatever God has asked you to do, remember: (1) your authority comes from God, and (2) Jesus has demonstrated by words and actions how to accomplish the job he has given you. As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends you.

In Christian service, there is no unemployment. God has work enough for everyone. Don't just sit back and watch others work—look for ways to help with the harvest.

You are a chosen vessel

Acts 9:15

But the Lord said, "Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.

Faith in Christ brings great blessings but often great suffering too. Paul would suffer for his faith (see 2 Cor. 11:23-27). God calls us to commitment, not to comfort. He promises to be with us *through* suffering and hardship, not to spare us from them.

Ananias found Saul, as he had been instructed, and greeted him as "Brother Saul." Ananias feared this meeting because Saul had come to Damascus to capture the believers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2).

But in obedience to the Holy Spirit, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to show love to others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless, we must follow Jesus' command (John 13:34) and Ananias's example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.

Each must operate according God's call upon them.

1 Cor. 12:28-29

Here is a list of some of the members that God has placed in the body of Christ:

First are apostles,
Second are prophets,
Third are teachers,
Then those who do miracles,
Those who have the gift of healing,
Those who can help others,
Those who can get others to work together,
Those who speak in unknown languages.

[29] Not every one is an apostle.. Is everyone a prophet? No. Are all teachers? Does everyone have the power to do miracles?

The greater gifts are those that are more beneficial to the body of Christ. Paul has already made it clear that one gift is not superior to another, but he urges the believers to discover how they can serve Christ's body with the gifts God has given them. Your spiritual gifts are not for your own self-advancement. They were given to you for serving God and enhancing the spiritual growth of the body of believers.

God considers the feet of those who carry the Gospel to be beautiful.

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!

Nahum 1:15

Look! A messenger is coming over the mountains with good news! He is bringing a message of peace. Celebrate your festivals, O people of Judah, and fulfill all your vows, for your enemies from Nineveh will never invade your land again. They have been completely destroyed!

The good news for Judah, whom Assyria afflicted, was that its conquerors and tormentors would be destroyed and would never rise to torment it again. Nineveh was so completely wiped out that its ruins were not identified until 1845.

In the Christian life we battle against rulers and authorities (the powerful evil forces of fallen angels headed by Satan, who is a vicious fighter, see 1 Peter 5:8). To withstand their attacks, we must depend on God's strength and use every piece of his armor.

The whole body of Christ needs to be armed.

Paul gives counsel to the church, the body of Christ, but to all individuals within the church. The whole body needs to be armed. As you do battle against “the powers of this dark world,” fight in the strength of the church, whose power comes from the Holy Spirit.

These who are not “flesh and blood” are demons over whom Satan has control. They are not mere fantasies—they are very real. We face a powerful army whose goal is to defeat Christ’s church. When we believe in Christ, these beings become our enemies, and they try every device to turn us away from him and back to sin.

Although we are assured of victory, we must engage in the struggle until Christ returns, because Satan is constantly battling against all who are on the Lord’s side. We need supernatural power to defeat Satan, and God has provided this by giving us his Holy Spirit within us and his armor surrounding us. If you feel discouraged, remember Jesus’ words to Peter: “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed you to minister.

Isaiah 61:1

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to announce that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.

Jesus quoted these words in Luke 4:18-19. As he read to the people in the synagogue, he stopped in the middle of Isaiah 61:2 after the words, “to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.” Rolling up the scroll, he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The next phrase in Isaiah 61:2, “and the day of vengeance of our God,” will come true when Jesus returns to earth again. We are now under God’s favor; his wrath is yet to come.

God continues to reveal his Son. Allow him to reveal his Son through you.

Chapter 3

Seek those who are lost.

Luke 15:4-7

"If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it? And then you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders.

When you arrived, you would call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you because your lost sheep was found. In the same way, heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!

It may seem foolish for the shepherd to leave 99 sheep to go search for just one. But the shepherd knew that the 99 would be safe in the sheepfold, whereas the lost sheep was in danger

Because each sheep was of high value, the shepherd knew that it was worthwhile to search diligently for the lost one. God's love for each individual is so great that he seeks each one out and rejoices when he or she is "found." Jesus associated with sinners because he wanted to bring the lost sheep—people considered beyond hope—the gospel of God's kingdom. Before you were a believer, God sought you; and his love is still seeking those who are yet lost.

We may be able to understand a God who would forgive sinners who come to him for mercy. But a God who tenderly searches for sinners and then joyfully forgives them must possess an extraordinary love! This is the kind of love that prompted Jesus to come to earth to search for lost people and save them. This is the kind of extraordinary love that God has for you. If you feel far from God, don't despair. He is searching for you.

Ezekiel 34:16

I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

God promises to take over as shepherd of his scattered flock. When our leaders fail us, we must not despair but remember that God is in control and that he promises to return and care for his flock. Thus we know that we can turn to God for help. He is still in control and can transform any tragic situation to produce good for his kingdom (see Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

Jesus came to seek and to save those that are lost.

Matthew 18:10-11 (NLT)

"Beware that you don't despise a single one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.

The ministry to children cannot be neglected. Many people who come to a salvation experience through Jesus, make that decision as a child. Neglecting the children is neglecting a vital part of the ministry.

We now have peace *with God*, which may differ from peaceful feelings such as calmness and tranquility. Peace with God means that we have been reconciled with him. There is no more hostility between us, no sin blocking our relationship with him. Peace with God is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sins through his death on the cross.

At one and the same time we have the status of kings and the duties of slaves. We feel both the presence of Christ and the pressure of sin. We enjoy the peace that comes from being made right with God, but we still face daily problems that often help us grow. If we remember these two sides of the Christian life, we will not grow discouraged as we face temptations and problems. Instead, we will learn to depend on the power available to us from Christ, who lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

Paul states that, as believers, we now stand in a place of highest privilege ("this grace in which we now stand"). Not only has God declared us not guilty; he has drawn us close to himself. Instead of being enemies, we have become his friends—in fact, his own children (John 15:15; Galatians 4:5).

As Paul states clearly in 1 Cor. 13:13, faith, hope, and love are at the heart of the Christian life. Our relationship with God begins with *faith*, which helps

us realize that we are delivered from our past by Christ's death. *Hope* grows as we learn all that God has in mind for us; it gives us the promise of the future. And God's *love* fills our lives and gives us the ability to reach out to others.

For first-century Christians, suffering was the rule rather than the exception. Paul tells us that in the future we will *become*, but until then we must *overcome*. This means we will experience difficulties that help us grow. We rejoice in suffering not because we like pain or deny its tragedy, but because we know God is using life's difficulties and Satan's attacks to build our character. The problems that we run into will develop our perseverance—which in turn will strengthen our character, deepen our trust in God, and give us greater confidence about the future. You probably find your patience tested in some way every day. Thank God for those opportunities to grow, and deal with them in his strength (see also James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7).

Christ is able to save everyone who comes to him.

Hebrews 7:25

Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save everyone who comes to God through him. He lives forever to plead with God on their behalf.

No one can add to what Jesus did to save us; our past, present, and future sins are all forgiven, and Jesus is with the Father as a sign that our sins are forgiven. If you are a Christian, remember that Christ has paid the price for your sins once and for all. (See also Hebrews 9:24-28.)

As our high priest, Christ is our advocate, the mediator between us and God. He looks after our interests and intercedes for us with God. The Old Testament high priest went before God once a year to plead for the forgiveness of the nation's sins; Christ makes perpetual intercession before God for us. Christ's continuous presence in heaven with the Father assures us that our sins have been paid for and forgiven (see Romans 8:33-34; Hebrews 2:17-18; Hebrews 4:15-16; Hebrews 9:24). This wonderful assurance frees us from guilt and from fear of failure.

The call to seek the Lord is still open. Serve him today before the closing of the door.

Chapter 4

The power of speech is in the tongue

Romans 10:9-10

For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and

It is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved.

God's salvation is right in front of us. He will come to us wherever we are. All we need to do is to respond and accept his gift of salvation. The *deep* as used here refers to the grave or Hades, the place of the dead.

Have you ever been asked, "How do I become a Christian?" These verses give you the beautiful answer—salvation is as close as your own mouth and heart. People think it must be a complicated process, but it is not. If we believe in our hearts and say with our mouths that Christ is the risen Lord, we will be saved.

This verse must be read in context. Paul is not saying Christians will never be put to shame or be disappointed. There will be times when people will let us down and when circumstances will take a turn for the worse. Paul is saying that God will keep his side of the bargain—those who call on him will be saved. God will never fail to provide righteousness to those who believe.

Anyone can claim to speak for God, and the world is full of false teachers. Paul gives us a test to help us discern whether or not a messenger is really from God: does he or she confess Christ as Lord? Don't naively accept the words of all who claim to speak for God; test their credentials by finding out what they teach about Christ.

We should have a servant's attitude, serving out of love for God and for others, not out of guilt or fear.

Jesus Christ was humble, willing to give up his rights in order to obey God and serve people. Like Christ, we should have a servant's attitude, serving out of love for God and for others, not out of guilt or fear. Remember, you can choose your attitude. You can approach life expecting to be served, or you can look for opportunities to serve others. See Mark 10:45 for more on Christ's attitude of servanthood.

The *incarnation* was the act of the preexistent Son of God voluntarily assuming a human body and human nature. Without ceasing to be God, he became a human being, the man called Jesus. He did not give up his deity to become human, but he set aside the right to his glory and power. In submission to the Father's will, Christ limited his power and knowledge. Jesus of Nazareth was subject to place, time, and many other human limitations. What made his humanity unique was his freedom from sin. In his full humanity, Jesus showed us everything about God's character that can be conveyed in human terms. The incarnation is explained further in these passages: John 1:1-14; Romans 1:2-5; 2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Tim. 3:16; Hebrews 2:14; and 1 John 1:1-3.

These verses are probably from a hymn sung by the early Christian church. The passage holds many parallels to the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. As a hymn, it was not meant to be a complete statement about the nature and work of Christ. Several key characteristics of Jesus Christ, however, are praised in this passage:

- (1) Christ has always existed with God;
- (2) Christ is equal to God because he *is* God (John 1:1ff; Col. 1:15-19);
- (3) though Christ is God, he became a man in order to fulfill God's plan of salvation for all people;
- (4) Christ did not just have the appearance of being a man—he actually became human to identify with our sins;
- (5) Christ voluntarily laid aside his divine rights and privileges out of love for his Father;
- (6) Christ died on the cross for our sins so we wouldn't have to face eternal death;
- (7) God glorified Christ because of his obedience;
- (8) God raised Christ to his original position at the Father's right hand, where he will reign forever as our Lord and Judge. How can we do anything less than praise Christ as our Lord and dedicate ourselves to his service!

Often people excuse selfishness, pride, or evil by claiming their rights. They think, “I can cheat on this test; after all, I deserve to pass this class,” or “I can spend all this money on myself—I worked hard for it,” or “I can get an abortion; I have a right to control my own body.” But as believers, we should have a different attitude, one that enables us to lay aside our rights in order to serve others. If we say we follow Christ, we must also say we want to live as he lived. We should develop his attitude of humility as we serve, even when we are not likely to get recognition for our efforts. Are you selfishly clinging to your rights, or are you willing to serve?

Death on a cross (crucifixion) was the form of capital punishment that Romans used for notorious criminals. It was excruciatingly painful and humiliating. Prisoners were nailed or tied to a cross and left to die. Death might not come for several days, and it usually came by suffocation when the weight of the weakened body made breathing more and more difficult. Jesus died as one who was cursed (Galatians 3:13). How amazing that the perfect man should die this most shameful death so that we would not have to face eternal punishment!

Jesus has authority and the right to rule

At the last judgment even those who are condemned will recognize Jesus’ authority and right to rule. People can choose to regard Jesus as Lord now as a step of willing and loving commitment, or be forced to acknowledge him as Lord when he returns. Christ may return at any moment. Are you prepared to meet him?

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as Lord when he returns. Christ may return at any moment. Are you prepared to meet him?

Peter affirms that the Old Testament prophets wrote God's messages. He puts himself and the other apostles in the same category, because they also proclaim God's truth. The Bible is not a collection of fables or human ideas about God. It is God's very words given *through* people *to* people. Peter emphasized his authority as an eyewitness as well as the God-inspired authority of Scripture to prepare the way for his harsh words against the false teachers. If these wicked men were contradicting the apostles and the Bible, their message could not be from God.

Christ is the "morning star," and when he returns, he will shine in his full glory. Until that day we have Scripture as a light and the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture for us and guide us as we seek the truth. For more on Christ as the morning star, see Luke 1:78; Ephes. 5:14; Rev. 2:28; Rev. 22:16.

"Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" means that Scripture did not come from the creative work of the prophets' own invention or interpretation. God inspired the writers, so their message is authentic and reliable. God used the talents, education, and cultural background of each writer (they were not mindless robots); and God cooperated with the writers in such a way to ensure that the message he intended was faithfully communicated in the very words they wrote.

Christ lives in those who acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

When we become Christians, we receive the Holy Spirit. God's presence in our lives is proof that we really belong to him. He also gives us the power to love (Romans 5:5; Romans 8:9; 2 Cor. 1:22). Rely on that power as you reach out to others. As you do so, you will gain confidence. See also Romans 8:16.

With God living in us through Christ, we have no reason to fear this day, because we have been saved from punishment. of a face-to-face relationship with Jesus Christ.

Chapter 5

Confess the Lord Jesus with your mouth

Romans 10:9-10

For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved.

Romans 10:13

For "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

These verses give you the beautiful answer to receiving salvation. It is as close as your own mouth and heart. People think it must be a complicated process, but it is not. If we believe in our hearts and say with our mouths that Christ is the risen Lord, we will be saved.

This verse must be read in context. Paul is not saying Christians will never be put to shame or be disappointed. There will be times when people will let us down and when circumstances will take a turn for the worse. Paul is saying that God will keep his side of the bargain—those who call on him will be saved. God will never fail to provide righteousness to those who believe.

God relates to those who are humble and contrite.

Isaiah 57:1-13 speak of pride and lust; Isaiah 57:14-21 tell how God relates to those who are humble and repentant ("contrite"). The high and holy God came down to our level to save us because it is impossible for us to go up to his level to save ourselves (see 2 Chron. 6:18; Psalm 51:1-7; Phil. 2).

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.

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.

Because of Jesus' response to the criminal on the cross who died with him, we know it is possible to be saved without being baptized (Luke 23:43). Baptism alone, without faith, does not automatically bring a person to heaven. Those who refuse to believe will be condemned, regardless of whether or not they have been baptized.

Two examples of prophets testifying about Jesus and his forgiveness of sins are Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Ezekiel 36:25-26.

Peter's brief and powerful sermon contains a concise statement of the gospel: Jesus' perfect life of servanthood; his death on the cross; his resurrection, personally witnessed and experienced by Peter; Jesus' fulfillment of the Scriptures; and the necessity of personal faith in him. A sermon or witness for Christ does not need to be long to be effective. It should be Spirit-led and should center on Christ, the way and the truth and the life.

In our society, much emphasis is placed on physical fitness, but spiritual health (godliness) is even more important. Our physical health is susceptible to disease and injury, but faith can sustain us through these tragedies. To train ourselves to be godly, we must develop our faith by using our God-given abilities in the service of the church (see 1 Tim. 4:14-16). Are you developing your spiritual muscles?

Christ is the Savior for all, but his salvation becomes effective only for those who trust him.

Chapter 6

Never be ashamed to be a witness

Romans 1:16

I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—Jews first and also Gentiles.

Paul was not ashamed because his message was the gospel of Christ, the Good News. It was a message of salvation, it had life-changing power, and it was for everyone. When you are tempted to be ashamed, remember what the Good News is all about. If you focus on God and on what God is doing in the world rather than on your own inadequacy, you won't be ashamed or embarrassed.

Why did the message go to the Jews first? They had been God's special people for more than 2,000 years, ever since God chose Abraham and promised great blessings to his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). God did not choose the Jews because they deserved to be chosen (Deut. 7:7-8; Deut. 9:4-6), but because he wanted to show his love and mercy to them, teach them, and prepare them to welcome his Messiah into the world. God chose them, not to play favorites, but so that they would tell the world about his plan of salvation.

For centuries the Jews had been learning about God by obeying his laws, keeping his feasts, and living according to his moral principles. Often they would forget God's promises and requirements; often they would have to be disciplined; but still they had a precious heritage of belief in the one true God. Of all the people on earth, the Jews should have been the most ready to welcome the Messiah and to understand his mission and message—and some of them were (see Luke 2:25, 36-38).

Of course, the disciples and the great apostle Paul were faithful Jews who recognized in Jesus God's most precious gift to the human race.

Jews and Christians alike stood against the idolatrous Roman religions, and Roman officials often confused the two groups.

This was especially easy to do since the Christian church in Rome could have been originally composed of Jewish converts who had attended the Feast of Pentecost (see Acts 2:1ff). By the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, however, many Gentiles had joined the church. The Jews and the Gentiles needed to know the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

he gospel shows us both how righteous God is in his plan for us to be saved, and also how we may be made fit for eternal life. By trusting Christ, our relationship with God is made right. "From first to last" God declares us to be righteous because of faith and faith alone.

Paul is quoting Habakkuk 2:4. Habakkuk may have understood "will live" to mean this present life only. But Paul extends this statement to include eternal life. As we trust God, we are saved; we find life both now and forever.

Preach the Gospel to the whole world.

Mark 16:15-16

And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere. [16] 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.

God's grace accepted through faith in Christ. Because of Jesus' response to the criminal on the cross who died with him, we know it is possible to be saved without being baptized (Luke 23:43).

This is the Good News of the gospel: that forgiveness of sins and freedom from guilt are available through faith in Christ to all people—including *you*. Have you received this forgiveness? Are you refreshed by it each day?

Paul stressed that just as they began their Christian lives in the power of the Spirit, so they should grow by the Spirit's power. The Galatians had taken a step backward when they had decided to insist on keeping the Jewish laws. We must realize that we grow spiritually because of God's work in us by his Spirit, not by following special rules.

Christ's sacrifice for our sins was not an afterthought, not something God decided to do when the world spun out of control. The all-knowing, eternal God set this plan in motion long before the world was created. What a comfort it must have been to Jewish believers to know that God planned Christ's coming and his work of salvation long before the world began. This assured them that the law was not being scrapped because it didn't work, but that both the law *and* the coming of Christ were part of God's eternal plan.

Quoting Isaiah 40:6-8, Peter reminds believers that everything in this life—possessions, accomplishments, people will eventually fade away and disappear. Only God's will, word, and work are permanent. We must stop grasping the temporary, and begin focusing our time, money, and energy on the permanent—the word of God and our eternal life in Christ.

Chapter 7

You will receive power to witness

Acts 1:8

But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) the Holy Spirit was made available to all who believed in Jesus. We receive the Holy Spirit (are baptized with him) when we receive Jesus Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit must be understood in the light of his total work in Christians.

- (1) The Spirit marks the beginning of the Christian experience. We cannot belong to Christ without his Spirit (Romans 8:9); we cannot be united to Christ without his Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17); we cannot be adopted as his children without his Spirit (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:6-7); we cannot be in the body of Christ except by baptism in the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).
- (2) The Spirit is the power of our new lives. He begins a lifelong process of change as we become more like Christ (Galatians 3:3; Phil. 1:6). When we receive Christ by faith, we begin an immediate personal relationship with God. The Holy Spirit works in us to help us become like Christ.
- (3) The Spirit unites the Christian community in Christ (Ephes. 2:19-22).
- (4) All can experience the Holy Spirit, and he works through all (1 Cor. 12:11; Ephes. 4:4).

Romans 10:14-15

But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? [15] And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Rather than living by faith in God, the Jews established customs and traditions (in addition to God's law) to try to make themselves acceptable in God's sight. But human effort, no matter how sincere, can never substitute for the righteousness God offers us by faith. The only way to *earn* salvation is to be perfect—and that is impossible. We can only hold out our empty hands and receive salvation as a gift.

Christ is the "end of the law" in two ways. He fulfills the purpose and goal of the law (Matthew 5:17) in that he perfectly exemplified God's desires on earth. But he is also the termination of the law because in comparison to Christ, the law is powerless to save.

Why did God give the law when he knew people couldn't keep it? According to Paul, one reason the law was given was to show people how guilty they are (Galatians 3:19). The law was a shadow of Christ—that is, the sacrificial system educated the people so that when the true sacrifice came, they would be able to understand his work (Hebrews 10:1-4). The system of ceremonial laws was to last until the coming of Christ.

We must take God's great message of salvation to others so that they can respond to the Good News. How will your loved ones and neighbors hear it unless someone tells them? Is God calling you to take a part in making his message known in your community? Think of one person who needs to hear the Good News, and think of something you can do to help him or her hear it. Then take that step as soon as possible.

The Disciples received power at Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-4

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. [2] Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. [3] Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. [4] And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

Held 50 days after Passover, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. It was one of three major annual feasts (Deut. 16:16), a festival of thanksgiving for the harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension. Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. Thus Peter's speech (Acts 2:14ff) was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers—the first converts to Christianity.

This was a fulfillment of John the Baptist's words about the Holy Spirit's baptizing with fire (Luke 3:16), and of the prophet Joel's words about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. On Mount Sinai, God confirmed the validity of the Old Testament law with fire from heaven (Exodus 19:16-18). At Pentecost, God confirmed the validity of the Holy Spirit's ministry by sending fire. At Mount Sinai, fire had come down on one place; at Pentecost, fire came down on many believers, symbolizing that God's presence is now available to all who believe in him.

God made his presence known to this group of believers in a spectacular way—violent wind, fire, and his Holy Spirit. Would you like God to reveal himself to you in such recognizable ways? He may do so, but be wary of forcing your expectations on God. In 1 Kings 19:10-13, Elijah also needed a

message from God. There was a great wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire. But God’s message came in a “gentle whisper.” God may use dramatic methods to work in your life—or he may speak in gentle whispers. Wait patiently and always listen.

These people literally spoke in other languages—a miraculous attention-getter for the international crowd gathered in town for the feast. All the nationalities represented recognized their own languages being spoken. But more than miraculous speaking drew people’s attention; they saw the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles continued to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit wherever they went.

Christianity is not limited to any race or group of people. Christ offers salvation to all people without regard to nationality. Visitors in Jerusalem were surprised to hear the apostles and other believers speaking in languages other than their own, the languages of other nationalities, but they need not have been. God works all kinds of miracles to spread the gospel, using many languages as he calls all kinds of people to become his followers. No matter what your race, color, nationality, or language, God speaks to you. Are you listening?

Micah speaks of the Spirit of the Lord as power.

Micah 3:8

But as for me, I am filled with power and the Spirit of the Lord. I am filled with justice and might, fearlessly pointing out Israel's sin and rebellion.

Micah remained true to his calling and proclaimed God’s words. In contrast, the false prophets’ messages were geared to the favors they received. Not all those who claim to have messages from God really do. Micah prophesied that one day the false prophets would be shamed by their actions.

Micah attributed the power of his ministry to the Spirit of the Lord. Our power comes from the same source. Jesus told his followers they would receive power to witness about him when the Holy Spirit came on them (Acts 1:8). You can’t witness effectively by relying on your own strength, because fear will keep you from speaking out for God. Only by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit can you live and witness for him.

Micah warned the leaders, priests, and prophets of his day to avoid bribes. Pastors today accept bribes when they allow those who contribute much to control the church. When fear of losing money or members influences pastors to remain silent when they should speak up for what is right, their churches are in danger. We should remember that Judah was finally destroyed because of the behavior of its religious leaders. A similar warning must be directed at those who have money—*never* use your resources to influence or manipulate God’s ministers—that is bribery.

MICAH’S CHARGES OF INJUSTICE

Micah charged the people with injustice of many kinds.

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Plotting evil | Micah 2:1 |
| Fraud, coveting, violence | Micah 2:2 |
| Stealing, dishonesty | Micah 2:8 |
| Driving widows from their homes | Micah 2:9 |
| Hating good, loving evil | Micah 3:1-2 |
| Despising justice, distorting what is right | Micah 3:9 |
| Murder | Micah 3:10 |
| Taking bribes | Micah 3:11 |

Micah predicted the end of the kings. This was a drastic statement to the people of Judah, who thought that their kingdom would last forever. Micah also said that Babylon would destroy the land of Judah and carry away its king, but that after a while God would help his people return to their land.

This all happened just as Micah prophesied, and these events are recorded in 2 Chron. 36:9-23 and Ezra 1-2.

When God reveals the future, his purpose goes beyond satisfying our curiosity. He wants us to change our present behavior because of what we

know about the future. Forever begins now; and a glimpse of God's plan for his followers should motivate us to serve him, no matter what the rest of the world may do.

Zechariah speaks to the people

Zech. 4:6

Then he said to me, "This is what the Lord says to Zerubbabel: It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty.

Zerubbabel was given the responsibility of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 3:2, 8; Haggai 1:1; Haggai 2:23). While the prophets Haggai and Zechariah gave the moral and spiritual encouragement to resume work on the temple, Zerubbabel saw that the task was carried out. As the work was being completed, the prophets encouraged Zerubbabel and told him of a time when spiritual apathy and foreign oppression would forever be abolished.

Many people believe that to survive in this world a person must be tough, strong, unbending, and harsh. But God says, **“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.”** The key words are **“by my Spirit.”** It is *only* through God's Spirit that anything of lasting value is accomplished.

The returned exiles were indeed weak—harassed by their enemies, tired, discouraged, and poor. But actually they had God on their side!

As you live for God, determine not to trust in your own strength or abilities. Instead, depend on God and work in the power of his Spirit! (See also Hosea 1:7.)

God has given power to tread upon serpents and scorpions.

Luke 10:19

And I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy, and you can walk among snakes and scorpions and crush them. Nothing will injure you.

The disciples had seen tremendous results as they ministered in Jesus' name and with his authority. They were elated by the victories they had witnessed, and Jesus shared their enthusiasm. He helped them get their priorities right,

however, by reminding them of their most important victory—that their names were written in heaven. This honor was more important than any of their accomplishments. As we see God’s wonders at work in and through us, we should not lose sight of the greatest wonder of all—our heavenly citizenship.

Jesus may have been looking ahead to his victory over Satan at the cross. John 12:31-32 indicates that Satan would be judged and driven out at the time of Jesus’ death. On the other hand, Jesus may have been warning his disciples against pride. Perhaps he was referring to Isaiah 14:12-17, which begins, “How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn!” Some interpreters identify this verse with Satan and explain that Satan’s pride led to all the evil we see on earth today. To Jesus’ disciples, who were thrilled with their power over evil spirits (“snakes and scorpions”), he may have been giving this stern warning: “Yours is the kind of pride that led to Satan’s downfall. Be careful!”

The Power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you.

Luke 1:35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

God’s favor does not automatically bring instant success or fame. His blessing on Mary, the honor of being the mother of the Messiah, would lead to much pain: her peers would ridicule her; her fiance would come close to leaving her; her son would be rejected and murdered. But through her son would come the worlds only hope, and this is why Mary has been praised by countless generations as the young girl who “found favor with God.” Her submission was part of God’s plan to bring about our salvation. If sorrow weighs you down and dims your hope, think of Mary and wait patiently for God to finish working out his plan.

Jesus, a Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, was a common name meaning “the LORD saves.” Just as Joshua had led Israel into the promised land (see Joshua 1:1-2), so Jesus would lead his people into eternal life.

The symbolism of his name was not lost on the people of his day, who took names seriously and saw them as a source of power. In Jesus' name people were healed, demons were banished, and sins were forgiven.

Centuries earlier, God had promised David that David's kingdom would last forever (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, a direct descendant of David, whose reign will continue throughout eternity.

The birth of Jesus to a virgin is a miracle that many people find hard to believe. These three facts can aid our faith: (1) Luke was a medical doctor, and he knew perfectly well how babies are made. It would have been just as hard for him to believe in a virgin birth as it is for us, and yet he reports it as fact. (2) Luke was a painstaking researcher who based his Gospel on eyewitness accounts. Tradition holds that he talked with Mary about the events he recorded in the first two chapters. This is Mary's story, not a fictional invention. (3) Christians and Jews, who worship God as the Creator of the universe, should believe that God has the power to create a child in a virgin's womb.

Jesus was born without the sin that entered the world through Adam. He was born holy, just as Adam was created sinless. In contrast to Adam, who disobeyed God, Jesus obeyed God and was thus able to face sin's consequences in our place and make us acceptable to God (Romans 5:14-19).

The disciples receive a witness of the resurrection

Acts 4:33

And the apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great favor was upon them all.

None of these Christians felt that what they had was their own, and so they were able to give and share, eliminating poverty among them. They would not let a brother or sister suffer when others had plenty..

The early church was able to share possessions and property as a result of the unity brought by the Holy Spirit working in and through the believers' lives. This way of living is different from communism because (1) the sharing was voluntary; (2) it didn't involve *all* private property, but only as

much as was needed; (3) it was not a membership requirement in order to be a part of the church. The spiritual unity and generosity of these early believers attracted others to them. This organizational structure is not a Biblical command, but it offers vital principles for us to follow.

The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms is a way to describe the entire Old Testament. In other words, the entire Old Testament points to the Messiah. For example, his role as prophet was foretold in Deut. 18:15-20; his sufferings were prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53; his resurrection was predicted in Psalm 16:9-11 and Isaiah 53:10-11.

Jesus opened these people's minds to understand the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit does this in our lives today when we study the Bible. Have you ever wondered how to understand a difficult Bible passage? Besides reading surrounding passages, asking other people, and consulting reference works, pray that the Holy Spirit will open your mind to understand, giving you the needed insight to put God's Word into action in your life.

Jesus leaves the ministry to the lost to his disciples.

Luke 24:50-53

Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. [51] While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. [52] They worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy. [53] And they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God.

As the disciples stood and watched, Jesus began rising into the air, and soon he disappeared into heaven. Seeing Jesus leave must have been frightening, but the disciples knew that Jesus would keep his promise to be with them through the Holy Spirit. This same Jesus, who lived with the disciples, who died and was buried, and who rose from the dead, loves us and promises to be with us always. We can get to know him better through studying the Scriptures, praying, and allowing the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus.

Jesus' physical presence left the disciples when he returned to heaven (Acts 1:9), but the Holy Spirit soon came to comfort them and empower them to spread the gospel of salvation (Acts 2:1-4).

Today Jesus' work of salvation is completed, and he is sitting at God's right hand, where he has authority over heaven and earth.

Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as the perfect example of a life lived according to God's plan—as a child living in obedience to his parents and yet amazing the religious leaders in the temple, as an adult serving God and others through preaching and healing, and finally as a condemned man suffering without complaint.

This emphasis was well suited to Luke's Greek audience, who placed high value on being an example and improving oneself, and who often discussed the meaning of perfection. The Greeks, however, had a difficult time understanding the spiritual importance of the physical world.

To them, the spiritual was always more important than the physical. To help them understand the God-man who united the spiritual and the physical, Luke emphasized that Jesus was not a phantom human but a real human being who healed people and fed them because he was concerned with their physical health as well as the state of their souls.

As believers living according to God's plan, we too should obey our Lord in every detail as we seek to restore people's bodies and souls to the health and salvation God has in store for them. If we want to know how to live a perfect life, we can look to Jesus as our example.

The Holy Spirit gives strength to endure the unreasonable hatred and evil in our world and the hostility many have toward Christ. This is especially comforting for those facing persecution.

Jesus uses two names for the Holy Spirit—Counselor and Spirit of truth.

The word Counselor conveys the helping, encouraging, and strengthening work of the Spirit. Spirit of truth points to the teaching, illuminating, and reminding work of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit ministers to both the head and the heart, and both dimensions are important.

Chapter 8

Go forth with Praise

Psalm 9:11

Sing praises to the Lord who reigns in Jerusalem.
Tell the world about his unforgettable deeds.

Psalm 9:14

Save me, so I can praise you publicly at Jerusalem's gates,
so I can rejoice that you have rescued me.

Praise is expressing to God our appreciation and understanding of his worth. It is saying “thank you” for each aspect of his divine nature. Our inward attitude becomes outward expression. When we praise God, we help ourselves by expanding our awareness of who he is. In each psalm you read, look for an attribute or characteristic of God for which you can thank him.

God upholds our just cause; he is our vindicator (one who clears us from criticism and justifies us before others). In this life, we may face many injustices: (1) we may be falsely accused and misunderstood by friends and enemies; (2) we may not be truly appreciated by others for the love we show; (3) the true value of our work and service may not be duly rewarded; (4) our ideas may be ignored.

But God is to be praised, for he sees and remembers all the good we do, and it is up to him to decide the timing and the appropriateness of our rewards. If we do not trust him to vindicate us, then we will be susceptible to hatred and self-pity. If we do trust him, we can experience God’s peace and be free from the worry of how others perceive us and treat us.

God will never forsake those who seek him. To forsake someone is to abandon that person. God’s promise does not mean that if we trust in him we will escape loss or suffering; it means that God himself will never leave us no matter what we face.

God does not live only in Zion (another name for Mount Moriah, the hill on which the temple was built); he is everywhere all the time. The focal point of Israelite worship, however, came to be Jerusalem and its beautiful temple. God was present in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:8-9) and in the temple built by Solomon (2 Chron. 7:16). From this central place of worship, the Jews were to tell the world about the one true God.

All of us want God to help us when we are in trouble, but often for different reasons. Some want God's help so that they will be successful and other people will like them. Others want God's help so that they will be comfortable and feel good about themselves. David, however, wanted help from God so that justice would be restored to Israel and so that he could show others God's power. When you call to God for help, consider your motive. Is it to save you pain and embarrassment or to bring God glory and honor?

Let the earth and it 's resources praise the Lord.

Psalm 69:34

Praise him, O heaven and earth,
the seas and all that move in them.

Psalm 96:12

Let the fields and their crops burst forth with joy!
Let the trees of the forest rustle with praise

Psalm 98:8

Let the rivers clap their hands in glee!
Let the hills sing out their songs of joy

Psalm 148:9

mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars praise the Lord.

Isaiah 14:8

Even the trees of the forest—the cypress trees and the cedars of Lebanon—sing out this joyous song: 'Your power is broken! No one will come to cut us down now!'

Isaiah 35:1

Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers.

Isaiah 35:2

Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and the plain of Sharon. There the Lord will display his glory, the splendor of our God.

Isaiah 44:23

Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done this wondrous thing. Shout, O earth! Break forth into song, O mountains and forests and every tree! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob and is glorified in Israel.

Isaiah 49:13

Sing for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on them in their sorrow.

Isaiah 51:11

Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return to Jerusalem, singing songs of everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be overcome with joy and gladness.

Isaiah 54:13

I will teach all your citizens, and their prosperity will be great.

Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

A leader who stirs us to move ahead, someone who believes we can do the task he has given and who will be with us all the way, encourages us all. God is that kind of leader.

He knows the future, and his plans for us are good and full of hope. As long as God, who knows the future, provides our agenda and goes with us as we fulfill his mission, we can have boundless hope. This does not mean that we will be spared pain, suffering, or hardship, but that God will see us through to a glorious conclusion.

Ezekiel 17:24

And all the trees will know that it is I, the Lord, who cuts down the tall tree and helps the short tree to grow tall. It is I who makes the green tree wither and gives new life to the dead tree. I, the Lord, have spoken! I will do what I have said."

Ezekiel's prophecy of judgment ends in hope. When the people put their hope in foreign alliances, they were disappointed. Only God could give them true hope. God said he would plant a tender sprig, the Messiah, whose kingdom would grow and become a shelter for all who come to him (see Isaiah 11:1-5). This prophecy was fulfilled at the coming of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 9

All things are possible to those who love God.

Matthew 19:26

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible."

The disciples were astonished. They thought that if anyone could be saved, it would be the rich, whom their culture considered especially blessed by God.

In the Bible, God gives rewards to his people according to his justice. In the Old Testament, obedience often brought reward in this life (Deut. 28), but obedience and immediate reward are not always linked. If they were, good people would always be rich, and suffering would always be a sign of sin. As believers, our true reward is God's presence and power through the Holy Spirit. Later, in eternity, we will be rewarded for our faith and service. If material rewards in this life came to us for every faithful deed, we would be tempted to boast about our achievements and act out of wrong motivations.

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Genesis 18:14

Is anything too hard for the Lord? About a year from now, just as I told you, I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

"Is anything too hard for the LORD?" The obvious answer is, "Of course not!" This question reveals much about God. Make it a habit to insert your specific needs into the question. "Is this day in my life too hard for the Lord?" "Is this habit I'm trying to break too hard for him?" "Is the communication problem I'm having too hard for him?" Asking the question this way reminds you that God is personally involved in your life and nudges you to ask for his power to help you.

1 Samuel 14:6

"Let's go across to see those pagans," Jonathan said to his armor bearer. "Perhaps the Lord will help us, for nothing can hinder the Lord. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few!"

Jonathan and his armor-bearer weren't much of a force to attack the huge Philistine army. But while everyone else was afraid, they trusted God, knowing that the size of the enemy army would not restrict God's ability to help them. God honored the faith and brave action of these two men with a tremendous victory.

Have you ever felt surrounded by the "enemy" or faced overwhelming odds? God is never intimidated by the size of the enemy or the complexity of a problem. With him, there are always enough resources to resist the pressures and win the battle. If God has called you to action, then bravely commit what resources you have to God, and rely upon him to lead you to victory.

Jonathan did not have the authority to lead all the troops into battle, but he could start a small skirmish in one corner of the enemy camp. When he did, panic broke out among the Philistines, the Hebrews who had been drafted into the Philistine army revolted, and the men who were hiding in the hills regained their courage and returned to fight.

When you are facing a difficult situation that is beyond your control, ask yourself, "What steps can I take now to work toward a solution?" Through God's guidance, a few small steps may be just what is needed to begin the chain of events leading to eventual victory.

Job believe in God's possibilities

Job 42:2

"I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you.

Throughout the book, Job's friends had asked him to admit his sin and ask for forgiveness, and eventually Job did indeed repent. Ironically, Job's repentance was not the kind called for by his friends.

He did not ask for forgiveness for committing secret sins, but for questioning God's sovereignty and justice. Job repented of his attitude and acknowledged God's great power and perfect justice. We sin when we angrily ask, "If God is in control, how could he let this happen?" Because we are locked into time, unable to see beyond today, we cannot know the reasons for everything that happens. Will you trust God with your unanswered questions?

Job was quoting the Lord's earlier questions to him (Job 38:2-3). He openly and honestly faced God and admitted that he was the one who had been foolish.

Jeremiah believes that nothing is too hard for God.

Jeremiah 32:27

"I am the Lord, the God of all the peoples of the world. Is anything too hard for me?"

Trust doesn't come easy. It wasn't easy for Jeremiah to publicly buy land already captured by the enemy. But he trusted God. It wasn't easy for David to believe that he would become king, even after he was anointed. But he trusted God (1 Samuel 16-31). It wasn't easy for Moses to believe that he and his people would escape Egypt, even after God spoke to him from a burning bush. But he trusted God (Exodus 3:1-4:20). It isn't easy for us to believe that God can fulfill his "impossible" promises either, but we must trust him. God, who worked in the lives of Biblical heroes, will work in our lives too, if we will let him.

After Jeremiah bought the field, he began to wonder if such a move was wise. He sought relief in prayer from his nagging doubts.

In this prayer, Jeremiah affirmed that God is Creator (Jeremiah 32:17), the wise Judge of all the ways of people (Jeremiah 32:19), and Redeemer (Jeremiah 32:21). God loves us and sees our situation. Whenever we doubt God's wisdom or wonder if it is practical to obey him, we can review what we already know about him. Such thoughts and prayers will quiet our doubts and calm our fears.

Matthew 19:27

Then Peter said to him, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it?"

In the Bible, God gives rewards to his people according to his justice. In the Old Testament, obedience often brought reward in this life (Deut. 28), but obedience and immediate reward are not always linked. If they were, good people would always be rich, and suffering would always be a sign of sin. As believers, our true reward is God's presence and power through the Holy Spirit. Later, in eternity, we will be rewarded for our faith and service. If material rewards in this life came to us for every faithful deed, we would be tempted to boast about our achievements and act out of wrong motivations.

Jesus assured the disciples that anyone who gives up something valuable for his sake would be repaid many times over in this life, although not necessarily in the same form. For example, his or her family may reject a person for accepting Christ, but he or she will gain the larger family of believers.

Jesus turned the world's values upside down. Consider the most powerful or well-known people in our world—how many got where they are by being humble, self-effacing, and gentle? Not many! But in the life to come, the last will be first—if they got in last place by choosing to follow Jesus. Don't forfeit eternal rewards for temporary benefits. Be willing to make sacrifices now for greater rewards later. Be willing to accept human disapproval, while knowing that you have God's approval.

Psalm 62:11

God has spoken plainly, and I have heard it many times:
Power, O God, belongs to you.

It is tempting to use honor, power, wealth, or prestige to measure people. We may even think that such people are really getting ahead in life. But on God's scales, these people are a "breath," a puff of air. What, then, can tilt the scales when God weighs us? Trusting God and working for him (Psalm 62:12). Wealth, honor, power, or prestige add nothing to our value in God's eyes, but the faithful work we do for him has eternal value.

Chapter 10

The Parable of the Great Supper

Luke 14:15-24

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, "What a privilege it would be to have a share in the Kingdom of God!"

[16] Jesus replied with this illustration: "A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. [17] When all was ready, he sent his servant around to notify the guests that it was time for them to come.

[18] But they all began making excuses. One said he had just bought a field and wanted to inspect it, so he asked to be excused. [19] Another said he had just bought five pair of oxen and wanted to try them out. [20] Another had just been married, so he said he couldn't come.

[21] "The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was angry and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the city and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.'

[22] After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' [23] So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full.

[24] For none of those I invited first will get even the smallest taste of what I had prepared for them.' "

The man sitting at the table with Jesus saw the glory of God's kingdom, but he did not yet understand how to get in. In Jesus' story, many people turned down the invitation to the banquet because the timing was inconvenient.

We too can resist or delay responding to God's invitation, and our excuses may sound reasonable—work duties, family responsibilities, financial needs, or whatever they may be. Nevertheless, God's invitation is the most important event in our lives, no matter how inconveniently it may be timed.

Are you making excuses to avoid responding to God's call? Jesus reminds us that the time will come when God will pull his invitation and offer it to others—then it will be too late to get into the banquet.

It was customary to send two invitations to a party—the first to announce the event, the second to tell the guests that everything was ready. The guests in Jesus' story insulted the host by making excuses when he issued the second invitation. In Israel's history, God's first invitation came from Moses and the prophets; the second came from his Son. The religious leaders accepted the first invitation. They believed that God had called them to be his people, but they insulted God by refusing to accept his Son. Thus, as the master in the story sent his servant into the streets to invite the needy to his banquet, so God sent his Son to the whole world of needy people to tell them that God's kingdom had arrived and was ready for them.

In this chapter we read Jesus' words against seeking status, and in favor of hard work and even suffering. Let us not lose sight of the end result of all our humility and self-sacrifice—a joyous banquet with our Lord! God never asks us to suffer for the sake of suffering. He never asks us to give up something good unless he plans to replace it with something even better. Jesus is not calling us to join him in a labor camp but in a feast—the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9), when God and his beloved church will be joined forever.

James 4:10

When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honor.

How can you come near to God? James gives five ways:

- (1) Submit to God (James 4:7). Yield to his authority and will, commit your life to him and his control, and be willing to follow him.
- (2) Resist the devil (James 4:7). Don't allow Satan to entice and tempt you.
- (3) Wash your hands. . . and purify your hearts (that is, lead a pure life) (James 4:8). Be cleansed from sin, replacing your desire to sin with your desire to experience God's purity.

(4) Grieve and mourn and wail in sincere sorrow for your sins (James 4:9).
Don't be afraid to express deep heartfelt sorrow for what you have done.

(5) Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up (James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6).

Humbling ourselves means recognizing that our worth comes from God alone. To be humble involves working with his power according to his guidance, not with our own independent effort. Although we do not deserve God's favor, he reaches out to us in love and gives dignity, despite our human shortcomings and us worth.

1 Peter 5:6

So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and in his good time he will honor you.

But Peter advises us to remember that God's recognition counts more than human praise. God is able and willing to bless us according to his timing. Humbly obey God regardless of present circumstances, and in his good time—either in this life or in the next—he will lift you up.

It is a great privilege to serve in the Kingdom of God.

Chapter 11

The Preaching of the Cross

1 Cor. 1:18-19

I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God. [19] As the Scriptures say,

"I will destroy human wisdom
and discard their most brilliant ideas."

Paul summarizes Isaiah 29:14 to emphasize a point Jesus often made: God's way of thinking is not like the world's way (normal human wisdom). And God offers eternal life, which the world can never give. We can spend a lifetime accumulating human wisdom and yet never learn how to have a personal relationship with God. We must come to the crucified and risen Christ to receive eternal life and the joy of a personal relationship with our Savior.

Acts 2:47

all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

A common misconception about the first Christians (who were Jews) was that they rejected the Jewish religion. But these believers saw Jesus' message and resurrection as the fulfillment of everything they knew and believed from the Old Testament. The Jewish believers at first did not separate from the rest of the Jewish community. They still went to the temple and synagogues for worship and instruction in the Scriptures. But their belief in Jesus created great friction with Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Thus, believing Jews were forced to meet in private homes for communion, prayer, and teaching about Christ. By the end of the first century, many of these Jewish believers were excommunicated from their synagogues.

1 Cor. 1:23

So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

Many Jews considered the Good News of Jesus Christ to be foolish, because they thought the Messiah would be a conquering king accompanied by signs and miracles. Jesus had not restored David's throne as they expected.

Besides, he was executed as a criminal, and how could a criminal be a savior? Greeks, too, considered the gospel foolish: they did not believe in a bodily resurrection; they did not see in Jesus the powerful characteristics of their mythological gods; and they thought no reputable person would be crucified. To them, death was defeat, not victory.

The Good News of Jesus Christ still sounds foolish to many. Our society worships power, influence, and wealth. Jesus came as a humble, poor servant, and he offers his kingdom to those who have faith, not to those who do all kinds of good deeds to try to earn his gifts. This looks foolish to the world, but Christ is our power, the only way we can be saved. Knowing Christ personally is the greatest wisdom anyone could have.

A Shocking message:

Jesus was scourged:

Matthew 27:26

So Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to crucify him.

Jesus was beaten

Luke 22:63-64

Now the guards in charge of Jesus began mocking and beating him. [64] They blindfolded him; then they hit him and asked, "Who hit you that time, you prophet?"

Jesus was spit upon

Matthew 27:30

And they spit on him and grabbed the stick and beat him on the head with it.

The beard of Jesus was plucked.

Isaiah 50:6

I give my back to those who beat me and my cheeks to those who pull out my beard. I do not hide from shame, for they mock me and spit in my face.

Jesus was mocked.

Matthew 27:26-29

So Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to crucify him.

[27] Some of the governor's soldiers took Jesus into their headquarters and called out the entire battalion. [28] They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him.

[29] They made a crown of long, sharp thorns and put it on his head, and they placed a stick in his right hand as a scepter. Then they knelt before him in mockery, yelling, "Hail! King of the Jews!"

Jesus was nailed to the cross for our sins.

John 20:25

They told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

Jesus was in great anguish over his approaching physical pain, separation from the Father, and death for the sins of the world. The divine course was set, but he, in his human nature, still struggled (Hebrews 5:7-9). Because of the anguish Jesus experienced, he can relate to our suffering. Jesus' strength

to obey came from his relationship with God the Father, who is also the source of our strength (John 17:11, 15-16, 21, 26).

Jesus was not rebelling against his Father's will when he asked that the cup of suffering and separation be taken away. In fact, he reaffirmed his desire to do God's will by saying, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." His prayer reveals to us his terrible suffering. His agony was worse than death because he paid for *all* sin by being separated from God. The sinless Son of God took our sins upon himself to save us from suffering and separation.

Be faithful in prayer, in obedience and in love.

Chapter 12

Let Love Abound

2 Thes. 1:3

Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other.

Regardless of the contents of Paul's letters, his style was affirming. Paul began most of his letters by stating what he most appreciated about his readers and the joy he felt because of their faith in God. We also should look for ways to encourage and build up other believers.

Col. 1:9

So we have continued praying for you ever since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom.

Sometimes we wonder how to pray for missionaries and other leaders we have never met. Paul had never met the Colossians, but he faithfully prayed for them. His prayers teach us how to pray for others, whether we know them or not. We can request that they (1) understand God's will, (2) gain spiritual wisdom, (3) please and honor God, (4) bear good fruit, (5) grow in the knowledge of God, (6) be filled with God's strength, (7) have great endurance and patience, (8) stay full of Christ's joy, and (9) give thanks always. All believers have these same basic needs. When you don't know how to pray for someone, use Paul's prayer pattern for the Colossians.

It brings great joy to a Christian to see another person come to faith in Christ and mature in that faith. Paul experienced this joy countless times. He thanked God for those who had come to know Christ and for their strong faith. He also prayed for their continued growth. If there are new Christians

who have brought you joy, thank God for them and support them as they continue to grow in the faith.

Paul wanted to return to Thessalonica. We have no record that he was able to do so; but when he was traveling through Asia on his third journey, he was joined by Aristarchus and Secundus, who were from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4-5).

“When our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” refers to the second coming of Christ when he will establish his eternal kingdom. At that time, Christ will gather all believers, those who have died and those who are alive, into one united family under his rule. All believers from all times, including these Thessalonians, will be with Christ in his kingdom.

If we are full of God’s love, it will overflow to others. It’s not enough merely to be courteous to others; we must actively and persistently show love to them. Our love should be growing continually. If your capacity to love has remained unchanged for some time, ask God to fill you again with his never-ending supply. Then look for opportunities to express his love.

1 Thes. 4:1

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to live in a way that pleases God, as we have taught you. You are doing this already, and we encourage you to do so more and more.

Without love, the Gospel of Chris is ineffective. Find your place the world’s great harvest.

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