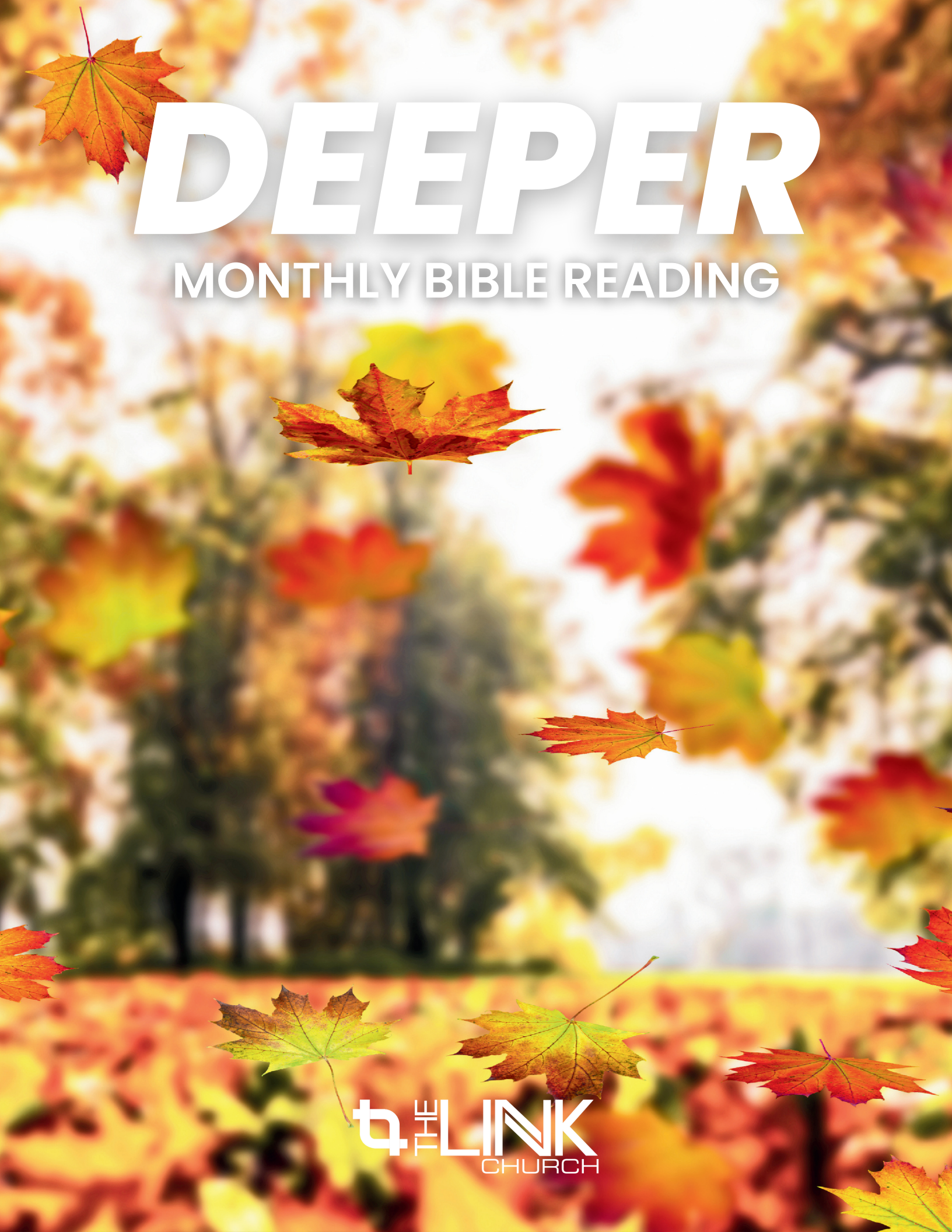




DEEPER

MONTHLY BIBLE READING

THE LINK
CHURCH

DAY 272

Zechariah 13-14 • Psalm 147 • Luke 15

Scripture Reading

Praising God is What We Need

TODAY'S FOCUS

"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is beautiful." Psalm 147:1

According to WebMD, 43% of Americans suffer adverse health effects from stress, and 75% to 90% of all visits to doctors' offices are for stress-related ailments and complaints. Stress can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, upset stomach, chest pain, and sleeping problems. It can also bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases. Life can be overwhelming. We face continual challenges, so we need to find relief and relaxation during and in between each difficulty we face. We can lighten our load and obtain peace and strength for our trials when we take time to know God by spending time with Him and singing praises to His name.

Psalm 147 is a reminder of the many reasons we should praise the Lord. The Psalmist supports his first statement, "It is pleasant and praise is beautiful," by remembering what he knows about God and what he has seen God do. As you look at the list of things the Psalmist remembers, allow it to stimulate you to recall what God has done for you and what you have seen Him do for others. Do you remember a time when you were overwhelmed, and God helped you? Have you ever sat and considered how God provides for His creation? When we reflect on the things God has done for us and all that He has done in the world around us, we can praise the Lord and experience peace.

When this peace takes over, our worry, stress, and anxiety go away. It is then we truly enjoy how pleasant it is to praise the Lord! Take time now to praise God for all He has done! Write your own psalm about the things God has done for you or what He has done around you.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your continuous love. Thank you for providing everything I need. Help me to remember all the great things you have done for me and in the world around me so that my praise to you becomes greater and louder than all my stressful situations. In Jesus' name. Amen

NOTES

DAY 273

Ezra 5-6 • Psalm 138 • Luke 16

Scripture Reading

Skylarking

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true wealth to you?”

Luke 16:11

Everyone remembers their first car. Mine was a Skylark Buick, a silver four-door sedan. It certainly was not a “MotorTrend Car of the Year”, but I didn't care. At the age of 16, it was mine! It represented freedom and independence, but most importantly it was an answer to prayer.

Growing up, my family struggled financially. Consequently, we rode around in late-model fixer-upper cars for many years. These cars were not very reliable. In fact, my sister and I got into the habit of praying silently each time my mother turned the ignition, hoping the car would start. One day my mother, fed up with the inconsistency, decided it was time to step out in faith and get a new car. She and my father prayed, and they left my sister and me at home with the promise that they would return with a new car. Miraculously, they did! We were so amazed to see this brand-new shiny car in our driveway that we cried in delight. That night we held hands together and dedicated this car to the Lord as a family. We promised to use it for His glory. A couple of months later I placed two bright yellow bumper stickers on the back window of our car. They read, “Not perfect, Just forgiven” and “Jesus Saves!” There was no going back!

Whenever someone asked us for a ride to church, we could not turn them down. I remember using the car to deliver groceries to families in need, and when I eventually inherited it as a teenager, I would drive

my fellow students to and from their homes so that they could attend our High School Bible Club and Church Youth Group. I never complained about the extra time it took, nor did I ever accept any gas money. I always remembered that this car was given to us to bless others. It had an eternal purpose. In Luke 16, Jesus commends the shrewd manager for his wise but scrupulous actions. The manager was fired for squandering wealth instead of investing it wisely. Once the manager realized he was about to be fired and his time was short, he used the rich man's wealth to prepare for his life after his job ended. Jesus says we ought to do the same with the money God gives us. Jesus tells us that the best use of worldly wealth is not to squander it on the present life, but to invest it in eternity. How intentional are you about using worldly wealth to invest in eternity? When you buy a car, a house, or even clothes, do you consider how you can use these things to make a difference in God's kingdom? Or do you only think about how it will benefit you now and increase your present happiness?

Prayer

Lord, help us to be just as shrewd (wise and intentional) about building your Kingdom as those in the world are about building their own. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 274

Esther 1-2 • Psalm 150 • Luke 17

Scripture Reading

Able, Willing, and Ready

TODAY'S FOCUS

And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. Esther 2:15

Reading Esther is like reading an exciting adventure novel. It's a story about plots against kings, an orphaned girl becoming queen, nobility, exiles and people hung on gallows! But the book of Esther is not fiction, and Esther is not a made-up heroine in a book. Through Esther's true exciting, and beautiful story, we are reminded that God has an amazing plan and purpose for everyone of us, "plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). With all the things we face and go through, it is hard to believe that God can, and wants to use us to do anything impactful.

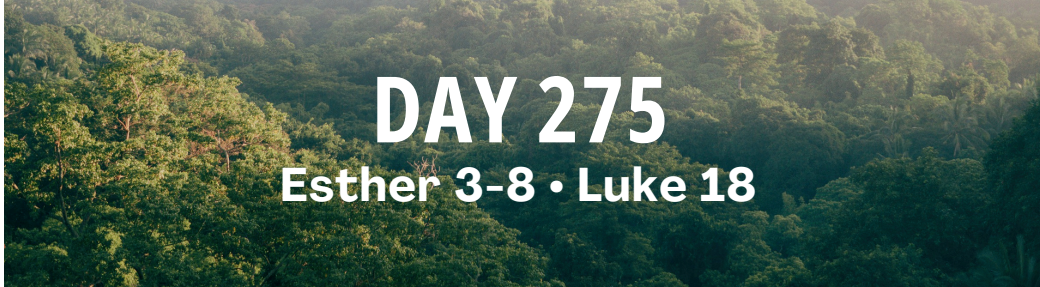
Oftentimes when we, in a season of just trying to get through our day-to-day lives, we may think God cannot do anything extraordinary through us. However, when we look at the lives of those in Scripture who faced difficult times, we see how God specializes in equipping and empowering ordinary people to do extraordinary assignments. Peter, who at times, was hotheaded and unrestrained, cut off the ear of a guard who was arresting Jesus; then he denied being His disciple, but Jesus Himself told Peter, "you are Peter (which means rock') and upon this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not stand against it" (Matt 16:18).

Esther was "ready, willing, and able." When God added His "super" to Esther's surrendered "natural", she became ABLE to do extraordinary things as the selected queen.

She was WILLING to be used by God, declaring, "If I perish, I perish," when she was called to risk it all to serve God and her people. Esther requested her people to fast with her, so she would be READY for what she was called to do. Peter and Esther were not superheroes, they were ordinary people submitted to the all-powerful God. When God adds His "super" to our submitted "natural", "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13)! The mighty, holy God, who created the universe, wants to do amazing things for us and through us. We are each custom-made. That alone should blow our minds! Do you want to be able, willing, and ready to do all that God has called you to be for His glory?

Prayer

Mighty God, we thank You for creating each of us for unique purposes. Help us to see ourselves through your lens and believe that we are whom you say we are, so we can eagerly and humbly step up and step into our "why," -Your purpose- for our lives. Amen

A wide-angle photograph of a dense, lush green forest. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect on the foliage. The trees are tall and full of leaves, with some palm trees visible on the right side. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

DAY 275

Esther 3-8 • Luke 18

For Such a Time as This

“The one who believes in Me . . . from his innermost, rivers of living water will flow.” By this He meant the Holy Spirit. John 7:38-39

As Christians, we are exiles in this world, but we have an eternal home and identity through Jesus. We are not of this world, but in it, for such a time as this!

Dear Heavenly Father, help us to live faithfully committed to you so that we may bravely submit to your will for our lives. Remind us that You have created us for a purpose. You have uniquely positioned us for such a time as this! Amen.

[illegible]

DAY 276
Esther 9-10 • Luke 19

Ritual: Real and Religious

Esther 9:20-32

**“The Jews took it on themselves to . . . observe these two days according to their appointed time annually.”
Esther 9:27**

When the Spirit of God comes into our lives, we are transformed into new people. Our new life happens because of Jesus' death and resurrection. God's law becomes part of our nature in this new life. Living by God's law is a way of showing thankfulness for salvation. In the story of Esther, we learn how God saved the Jews through the heroics of Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai. The Jews decided that such deliverance should be celebrated. They set a time each year to honor the fact that God preserved their nation so that the Messiah could be born. Since God has reordered our lives through His salvation, snatching us from Satan and writing His law on our hearts, we should celebrate as well. Isn't it time you celebrated your salvation? Christians born in the church who don't know anything else can sometimes make the Christian life seem boring. No celebrating! No fun! No joy! But Jesus said that He came to give us life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Christians should live joyfully in Jesus! Centuries have passed. The Jews still celebrate the feast of Purim. Maybe you and I should create a new custom where we celebrate our rebirth in Christ every year. Perhaps we should celebrate the day we were baptized, or the day we first declared our faith in Jesus.

What milestone in your life could you celebrate? Now is a great time to begin such a tradition of thanks to God.

Prayer

Jesus, help me to find new ways to celebrate your unending goodness to me! Help me to celebrate my celebration with joy. Amen.

NOTES

This image shows a full page of primary-ruled paper. It features ten identical sets of horizontal lines, each consisting of three parallel lines: a solid top line, a dashed middle line, and a solid bottom line. These sets are arranged vertically down the page, providing ample space for handwriting practice. The margins at the top and bottom are wide enough to accommodate a title or additional notes.

DAY 277

Ezra 7- 8 • Luke 20

Whose Portrait Are You?

TODAY'S FOCUS

The spies thought that Jesus would have to answer their question in one of two incriminating ways. Either he would have to side with not paying taxes to Caesar, in which case they could report him to the Romans as a troublemaker, or he would have to side with paying those hated taxes, which would make him unpopular with the local people. Jesus instead requested a Roman coin. "Whose portrait and inscription is on this coin?" he asked. "Caesar's," they said. "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," Jesus concluded. It probably took Jesus' opponents a few moments to realize that he had slipped from their grasp yet again. They had to recall that there is something that really has God's portrait or inscription on it...us! We bear God's image! (See Genesis 1:26-27.) In essence, Jesus' answer to the spies' tricky question was, go ahead and give to Caesar the coins that bear his image. But be sure to give to God all that bears His image which is your very self. It was a brilliant answer that satisfied both Roman and Jewish concerns, rendering the devious little trap useless. Jesus' answer also reminds us of a truth that very few of us explore deeply enough: all that we have, and all that we are, belongs to God. Are you giving it all back to Him?

***Dear God, help us to be the best stewards we can be of the houses, cars, bodies, time, and health you give us, even of our very lives, Lord. In Jesus' name, we pray.
Amen.***

[illegible]

DAY 278

Ezra 9-10 • Psalm 131 • Luke 21

Scripture Reading

The Might of the Widow

TODAY'S FOCUS

And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all contributed to the offering from their surplus; but she, from her poverty, put in all that she had to live on."

Luke 21:3-4

The story of the widow who gives her last two mites in the offering is a favorite story for many preachers during the offertory. Even though this story may be misused, there are three truths that we find in the example of the widow's mite. First, everything we own belongs to God. When we give sacrificially, we are saying, "God, you can have it all because you already own it all!" Jesus commends the widow for her sacrificial giving because she gave everything she owned. A mite equals 1/128th of a day's wages. In today's terms that is 4 cents! In comparison to the thousands of dollars the rich put into the offering that day, her offering was of little value. It was meaningless to everyone—except Jesus. He pointed out that she was the only one who gave their all. It was not the amount of the offering that Jesus celebrated, it was the cost of her sacrifice. Secondly, the heart of giving is sacrificial. The widow gave even in her poverty. Even in her need, she gave. Many times, we are so lost in our own needs we do not see the needs of those around us. Instead of holding on to what little she had, she gave her two mites in faith believing God could do more with them than she could. Thirdly, God alone can save us, not money. When we are facing unpaid medical bills, job loss, or oppressive debt the first thing to go is our tithes and offerings. We rationalize that, "God knows our hearts". We will give when we are able to give. We even barter with God,

promising that we will give even more than before if he gets us out of the predicament we are in. However, giving sacrificially demonstrates a faith in God that is beyond the bounds of reason. It defies our rationality. In times of trouble, our impulse is to save ourselves by withholding from God and other people in need. Rather than clinging to the little bit we have in hopes that it will somehow save us, when we give sacrificially it declares that we are yielding to God completely, acknowledging that He alone can save us.

Prayer

Lord may we never offer you a sacrifice that costs us nothing (2 Samuel 24:24). Cultivate a heart of sacrifice within us so that we may declare your worth by giving in our need, even if it costs us everything. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 279

Nehemiah 1-2 • Psalm 133 • Luke 22

Scripture Reading

Mourn, Fast, Pray, Action

TODAY'S FOCUS

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

Nehemiah 1:4

What do you do when you hear sad news that overwhelms you? How do you respond? In Nehemiah 1, we are introduced to Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of the Persian empire. When Nehemiah heard the wall around the city of Jerusalem was broken and the gates were burned down, he wept, fasted, and prayed. The news caused a deeply emotional, spiritual, and mental reaction in him. Jerusalem was the city where his ancestors were buried, which made the problems in the city personal. He was not indifferent to the struggles or the devastating living environment of the exiles in Jerusalem. Nehemiah did not just cry a little, he wept and mourned with a heavy heart, fasting and praying over the situation in Jerusalem. He understood that the real problem was spiritual—not just a physical problem, so he gave up food to gain insight and clarity from God. He prayed knowing two things: 1) The Jews had sinned against God, which required confession of their sins along with asking God for forgiveness; and 2) He needed God's help in fixing the problem. As a result of Nehemiah's fasting and praying, God gave King Artaxerxes an open mind, heart, and hand to help Nehemiah.

Sometimes we do not make it past, “That’s a shame!” when we hear terrible news in our town, country, or the world. We feel sorry for those in bad situations, but since our situation is not so bad, we turn away and do not have compassion. Nehemiah chose to leave his comfortable position and travel over seven hundred miles to do something to change the situation. We need to have a mind and heart like Nehemiah so we can be the hands of God to help others.

Prayer

Father, help us to be sensitive to your heart. Help us to care about those who are hurting and in great need around us, as well as, those far away. Teach us to fast, pray, and follow your example in helping those who need our help. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 280

Nehemiah 3-4 • Luke 23

Scripture Reading

Take The Baton

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests and they built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and installed its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.”

Nehemiah 3:1-2

It's so exciting when the next runner in a relay race takes the baton from their weary teammate. The challenging and exhausting work of the race is made easier by each person on the team doing their part. We see this image of teamwork vividly portrayed in Nehemiah 3. It can be tempting to quickly scan through the long list of names of those who rebuilt each part of Jerusalem's wall in Nehemiah 3. Is this random, useless information? Not at all! For, we know that ALL Scripture is God-breathed and is useful so the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3: 16-17). This includes the names of the “wall builders”. We all have different “walls” to build; work that is challenging or work that can seem impossible. When we face insurmountable challenges, we need to press on to finish the race to receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, has called us (Philippians 3:14)! And what if there is a “wall”, a task or opportunity to serve, that requires you to do something you're not an expert in?

Just read Nehemiah 3:32 again, which reminds us that, “the goldsmiths and merchants made repairs” on the wall, too. They were not bricklayers or carpenters, but they contributed their time and talents to make it happen. The people who serve in various ministries at church are not all experts in the areas in which they serve; often their expertise is willingness! Are you willing? Imagine if instead of four runners on a relay team, there are only two. Those two would be exhausted. Yet, at most churches, the tired and faithful few who serve have no one to hand the baton off to. So, let us cheerfully serve God with one another so we can humbly look back knowing we fought the good fight, finished the race, and remained faithful (2 Timothy 4:7)!

Prayer

Father God, we need to be motivated by your call and your Word to use the “tools”, the time, talents, and treasures you have given us to do your good work. Eagerly and humbly, may our response be like those in Nehemiah; “Yes, let's build a wall!” For your glory. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 281

Nehemiah 5-6 • Psalm 146 • Luke 24

Scripture Reading

Threats Inside and Outside

Nehemiah 5-6

TODAY'S FOCUS

“For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.’ But now, God, strengthen my hands.” Nehemiah 6:9

As Nehemiah was repairing the wall around Jerusalem, he had to deal with internal and external threats. There were two problems Nehemiah had to confront. Even though they were all struggling to survive, their fellow Jews were charging interest on loans for food. Borrowers who could not pay their debt either had to give away part of their land or sell their children into slavery. Secondly, Nehemiah's enemies wanted to kill him or diminish his influence by getting him to run in fear.

If we are not careful, during tough situations, we will either be tempted to give up, give in to the enemy, or flee in fear. Yet, Nehemiah refused to allow difficulty to stop him. First, he addressed the greediness of those who were charging interest on loans and stealing property from the poor. By confronting them, Nehemiah established righteousness in Jerusalem. He also refused to run from Tobiah's attempts at intimidation, Nehemiah remained a person of dignity and respect so that his people could trust him, and follow his lead. Is there something Satan is using to intimidate you to keep you from completing your God-given assignment? Are you facing a situation in which you need to stand for righteousness and not allow your fear of those in power to keep you from doing what is right? Are you intimidated by those who keep causing trouble and threatening your well-being?

God desires that we seek Him for wisdom. He will infuse us with His power to handle and make the right decision in each of our intimidating circumstances.

Prayer

***Father, help me to use your wisdom and strength to handle the intimidating situations trying to keep me from fulfilling Your will for my life.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.***

NOTES

DAY 282

Nehemiah 7-8 • Acts 1

Prayer

Praying While Waiting

TODAY'S FOCUS

“All these were continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer, along with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

Acts 1:14

Are you in a season of expectation, waiting for God to do something for you, in you, or through you? What are you doing while you are waiting on God? After Jesus' resurrection, He spent time with His twelve disciples giving them final instructions before His ascension into heaven. He instructed them to stay in Jerusalem and to wait for the Holy Spirit, who was the gift that God, the Father, had promised to give to them (John 14:15-17). The disciples understood that waiting on God meant dedicating themselves to prayer. When Jesus was with them, they saw Him praying to the Father, on several occasions. Because they asked Him to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them the model prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. In reflecting, on this model of prayer, we can gather some essential things to include in our own prayers, while we are waiting on God to fulfill His promises. It is important that we do as follows: 1) reflect on the nature and character of God, 2) surrender to the Father's will, 3) ask for our needs to be met, 4) release those who have harmed us, and 5) ask for direction.

It was during their time of seeking God in prayer that they fully surrendered their lives to God. Ultimately, their prayer time became the catalyst God used to change the world. When we become God-focused during our waiting season, we will experience God's peace, realign our priorities, and be prepared to receive His instructions. Then we will be ready for God's power and have clarity for the next step in our journey.

Father, help us to align ourselves with you through prayer while we are waiting on you to fulfill your promises. Help us to be ready to obey your will and glorify Your name. In Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 283

Nehemiah 9-10 • Acts 2

Scripture Reading

Prayer, Power, Prayer

TODAY'S FOCUS

“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.”

Acts 2:42

In Acts 2, we see God keeping His promise to send the disciples the Holy Spirit. The disciples gathered in prayer continually after Jesus’ ascension. Eagerly they waited for the Spirit’s arrival. Jesus told them in Acts 1:8 that He would send the Holy Spirit to give them the power to fulfill the great commission, which is, delivering the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). God planned His arrival on the very day Jerusalem was filled with Jews from around the world. There are two important principles we can apply from what occurred in Acts 2. First, praying with other believers is important to God. God used the disciples’ unified time of prayer to display a mighty miracle. Even after the miracle, they continued to meet and pray together because it is the Father’s will for them to be united (John 17:21). God will do great things in and through our lives as we follow the disciples’ example to prioritize our unity in praying and applying God’s word together. Secondly, God gives us the power to accomplish the assignments that He gives us. Jesus had given the disciples a big job, but He did not intend for them to accomplish it in their own strength. God used the explosion of the Holy Spirit’s entrance into their gathering to gain the attention of people from many nations.

God gave Peter the power to preach the gospel, and He enabled three thousand people speaking different languages to understand the gospel and respond in faith. Many times, God gives us big assignments. However, He never expects us to accomplish them in our own strength. He expects us to wait on Him for wisdom and power. It is tempting to get impatient while we wait on God. Eventually, we either give up, or try to do things in our own strength. As we see in Acts 2, God accomplished more in Peter’s one sermon than many preachers accomplish in a lifetime.

Prayer

Father, help me persist in prayer with other believers so the world will see Your power and glory. Please guide us and use our prayers and obedience to lead many people to faith in Jesus. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

NOTES

Nehemiah 11-12 • Psalm 1 • Acts 3

Scripture Reading

Healing in Jesus Name

ACTS 3:1-10

TODAY'S FOCUS

"I do not have silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!"

Acts 3:6

Peter and John were financially broke. They had followed Jesus for three years and had received the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but they did not have much in the way of material goods. They had no way of helping the paralyzed man with what he thought he needed most, financial independence. But, they understood what the man really needed. The paralyzed man needed both spiritual and physical wholeness. So instead of trying to give the man what he requested, which they didn't have, Jesus' disciples gave the man what he needed most and this overflowed from what they did have. In Jesus' name, they healed him both physically and spiritually. In our world today, there's a need for institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But what the world needs most is spiritual and physical salvation through the name of Jesus Christ. Can you become a powerful witness who is concerned not only about the social plight of the world but also about the spiritual bankruptcy that underlies social injustice? Let's help the poor, but as we do, let's not forget about their souls. Let us give to our neighbor the most important gift we have, salvation in Christ. Do you have the power of faith to be a bold witness for Christ through your lifestyle and testimony?

Prayer

Lord, open our eyes to the physical needs of our neighbors. And as you do, please give us insight into their spiritual needs. Help us share your good news. Amen.

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 285

Nehemiah 13 • Malachi 1-2 • Acts 4

Scripture Reading

Boldness in Christ

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”

Acts 4:13

This by far is one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible! What I love most about this passage is that the Pharisees and Sadducees could tell Peter and John had been with Jesus, not by their charisma, education, spiritual pedigree, sophistication, or eloquence. They could tell they were Christians because of the bold faith given to them by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we try to substitute the power of the Holy Spirit with religiosity. Instead of walking in the Spirit and applying the Word, we study the Bible so we can seem spiritual and impressive when we talk to others. Isn't it ironic that the Pharisees and Sadducees, men who had memorized the entire Old Testament, men who were trained in the Scriptures since they were four years old by the greatest teachers of the Law, were in awe of Peter and John—two unlearned fishermen? The Pharisees and Sadducees were known for wearing elegant and ornate robes. They prayed long prayers and waxed eloquently about complicated theological concepts. Peter and John, however, had not studied the Scriptures in fancy schools. They did not have expensive religious clothing and they were probably trained to fish by “cussing sailors”. Why were they so impressive?

The difference was they spent three years studying the Living Word, and they were trained in Truth by the Master Teacher himself. The most pronounced and impressive characteristic about Christians should be that they have spent time with Jesus. Can people tell you have been with Jesus? Has anyone ever come up to you and asked if you are a Christian? Even if you are not wearing an “OCC Fam” t-shirt or a “Drip like Jesus” shirt, you should have a godly appeal. There should be something about you that is remarkably different—you look like Christ. Many times, we do not know who is watching us. We could be at Walmart, stopped at a traffic light, or eating at a restaurant, people see us. Like the glow that illuminated Moses' face after he spent 40 days in the presence of God on Mt Sinai, may we also reflect God's image wherever we go because we spend so much time with Him.

Prayer

***May it be evident that we are Christ followers not because of our education, superior morality, or church affiliation, but because we have been with Jesus.
Amen.***

NOTES

DAY 286

Malachi 3-4 • Psalm 148 • Acts 5

Scripture Reading

Reunion With God

Malachi 4:4-6

In this last Old Testament prophetic book, God says, “I love you.” And in the New Testament, God shows how much He loves us. He sent His only Son, and He sent His Holy Spirit to bring us to Himself. This is how much God loves you!

TODAY’S FOCUS

**“Behold, I am going to send Elijah, the prophet He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers”
Malachi 4:5-6**

The closing verses of Malachi remind us what the whole book has been about. They also point ahead to the New Testament. Malachi began by stating God’s love for His children. Israel had become distant from God. But God sent Malachi (whose name means “my messenger”) to show Israel how they had wandered from God. Now God promises that Elijah (whose name means “my God is Yahweh”) will restore the relationship. The names of these prophets are important; the message from God (Malachi) results in the Lord again being the God of His people (Elijah). These words point powerfully to the New Testament and the good news of Jesus of Nazareth, who is God’s Messiah. John the Baptist proclaimed Christ’s coming, fulfilling Malachi’s prophecy about Elijah (see Matthew 11:7-15). Through John, the people turn to God in repentance, and then Jesus’ baptism recalls Malachi 4:6, “You are my Son, whom I love” (Mark 1:11). John recognizes Jesus as the Word, the very message of God, fulfilling the purpose of Malachi.

Prayer

***Creator and molder of the world,
we are like clay in your hands.
Refashion each one of us into
your likeness until we are vessels
that are useful to you. In Jesus’
name, Amen.***

NOTES

DAY 287

Job 1-2 • Acts 6-7

Scripture Reading

Fully Surrendered

TODAY'S FOCUS

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.” Acts 6:8

After the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples they increased in number and began performing many miracles signs, and wonders. One of the disciples, who was filled with the Spirit and with wisdom and fully surrendered to God was Stephen. Some Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia plotted against Stephen and persecuted him. Yet, God gave Stephen the wisdom and ability to confront them with the truth of the gospel. Starting with Abraham, then continuing through Moses, Joshua and David, he preached the truth about Jesus. Finally, the members of the Sanhedrin, filled with rage as Stephen accused them of murdering Jesus, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. They did not realize they were fulfilling Jesus' prophecy that people would think they were serving God by killing his disciples (John 16:2). In contrast to members of the Sanhedrin's enraged actions, Stephen was at peace because his focus was on God and his faith was in Jesus.

Seeing Jesus standing on the right hand of God to receive him must have been an amazing vision. However, the most amazing thing was Stephen asked God to forgive his murderers before he died. (Acts 7:59-60). What caused, who was the first recorded Christian Martyr, to have a forgiving heart while he was being painfully stoned to death? Are you renewing your mind in the Word of God so that the Holy Spirit is shaping you into the image of Christ? (Romans 8:29; 12:1-2) Are you thinking and behaving like Jesus in difficult situations? Are you praying that God will bless your enemies? (Luke 6:27-36). The real test of our faith is how we treat those who hate and mistreat us.

Prayer

Father, help me to study and to obey your Word so that I can become full of faith, grace, power, and your Holy Spirit. Help me to love, bless, pray for, and forgive my enemies. In Jesus' name. Amen

DAY 288

Job 3-4 • Acts 8-9

Scripture Reading

Depression Relief

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.”

Job 3:1

How would you feel if you lost everything you possessed in a matter of a day or two? Would you struggle with depression? After Job lost all his possessions, his children, and his health, his wife told him he should curse God and die. Job was without words for seven days, then he broke the silence by sharing the pain of his soul. Throughout Job 3, he discloses his great depression and emptiness. Job was very wealthy in every way. He had ten children and many servants, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, one thousand oxen, and five hundred donkeys. Most importantly, he was a devout man who was blameless and upright, fearing God. How could such devastation happen to him? Though Job's wife encouraged him to turn on God, Job instead turned on himself, wishing he were never born. Many people suffer from the anguish of depression for various reasons. It is so important that we admit our feelings about the devastation of our loss so we can heal. Though Job's friends were patient for seven days to sit with him in silence, they began to declare that his situation was the result of God punishing his secret sinful life. This was an assumption based on their belief that pain and loss are the results of a sinful lifestyle, which God declared was not true (Job 42:7).

If the loss of people or things is driving your depression, it is important to follow Job's example by expressing all your feelings to God, godly friends or professional Christian counselors. By talking and listening to God, Job came out of his depression knowing God even better (Job 38-42:6 and Psalm 62:8).

Prayer

Father, we pray for every person struggling with depression. Help them receive the hope, help, and healing they need. Give them the breakthrough you gave Job. In Jesus' name. Amen

NOTES

Job 5 • Psalm 100 • Acts 10-11

Scripture Reading

We Need More Antiochs

ACTS 11:19-26

TODAY'S FOCUS

“...the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Acts 11:26

God turned the trouble of persecution into a positive result by empowering His people to witness as they scattered far from Jerusalem (see Acts 7-8). The message of Jesus spread as refugees traveled trading routes and busy roads around the Mediterranean coast. Most spoke of Christ only to Jews like themselves. Then there was a breakthrough! In Antioch, some of them spoke to the Greek people, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus; a great number believed! The Antioch church became a powerhouse of evangelism and a springboard for mission. The Antioch disciples not only witnessed outside of their own group, but also were hungry for more teaching. When Barnabas and Saul (Paul) came to encourage them, they listened and learned for a whole year. Meanwhile, they kept on sharing Christ and living by his teachings. They were called Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. This may have been a nickname given by others because people saw Jesus in them. The Antioch story gets even better; the believers aided famine victims back in Jerusalem. Their church was blessed with leaders from several cultures. They also commissioned Barnabas and Saul to go and teach people in other places. As in Antioch, may people see Jesus in us, and come to call him Lord.

Prayer

Lord, may my life, speech, and ministry of my church bring people all around to the Savior. Thank you for Antioch. Thank you for the Spirit's power. In Jesus name, Amen.

NOTES

DAY 290

Job 6-8 • Acts 12

Scripture Reading

A Prayer Answered

Acts 12:1-17

TODAY'S FOCUS

“They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind!’ ... ‘It must be his angel.’ ”

Acts 12:15

The Bible encourages us to pray without ceasing. So we pray in the morning, at noon, and night. We pray and pray and pray. But sometimes, as with anything we do regularly, prayer can become a routine. Our prayers can become pious religious rites with little meaning and impact. The first community of believers was not much different from us in that way. When the local Roman ruler, Herod, put Peter in prison, the church organized a prayer vigil on his behalf. During the night, an angel of the Lord helped Peter escape, and he soon knocked at the door where the believers were praying. At first, they couldn't believe it was him. How could it be possible? God doesn't answer prayers so quickly! But, as those early believers learned, God really does do amazing things. Do we really believe that God answers prayer? Of course He does, we say. But do we pray expectantly? Or have we become so disappointed with prayer that it has become a routine, almost hopeless exercise? We need to ask whether James 4:3 applies, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives ..." Expectant prayer breaks out of the confining box of self-centered motives and desires to pursue the wide horizons of God's will.

Prayer

Lord, please teach me to pray in line with your will. Teach me to expect answers that reflect your will and to be humble enough to receive them by faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 291

Job 9-10 • Acts 13-14

Scripture Reading

Set Apart and Sent Out

TODAY'S FOCUS

“While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set Barnabas and Saul apart for Me for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.” Acts 13:2-3

The Bible cascades us with story upon story to be a missionary, but every young person who was set apart should be commissioned to use their gifts for the Lord's work. David, Samson, Daniel, Samuel, King Josiah, and Esther were all set apart by God to do the work God created just for them. In this chapter, we see Paul and Barnabas, set apart and sent out to do the work of the Lord by their church. This must have been a powerful and meaningful moment for the young and zealous apostle Paul. He finally found his purpose. He could use his sharp mind and funnel his passion into one thing, making the gospel known to the Gentiles. It saddens me that most churches do not do the same for young people today. We celebrate our young people when they receive academic scholarships or commit to play with a college or professional team; we celebrate them when they attain significant wealth or become powerful leaders in the public eye, but we do not celebrate those who have decided to use their talents and gifts for a lifetime of service to God. Is it any wonder that many of the most talented artists, gifted communicators, and leaders once started in church but now use their talents exclusively for the world? B.B. King, the great master of blues, like many exceptional musicians, had his start in the church. He began singing spirituals with his mother at the age of 4 and in his teens taught Sunday School just so he could play the guitar at church.

He even earned the nickname "church boy." B.B. King eventually played with a gospel group until he realized his talents would never be fully appreciated in the church. Finally, he left the church and never went back. One recent survey of missionaries revealed that the most significant barrier to them entering the mission field was not lack of money, insufficient training, or fear. Their greatest hindrance to devoting their life to serving Christ overseas was their Christian parents. Their parents, it seems, had better plans than God! Not every young person uses their talents for service in the Kingdom of God. We need to change that!

Prayer

Father, help us to encourage the next generation to live passionate lives for your glory. May we celebrate and commission them to this work. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 292

Job 11-12 • Acts 15-16

Scripture Reading

The Church Unified

Acts 15:1-35

Prayer

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Therefore, it is my judgment that we do not make trouble for those from the Gentiles who are turning to God,” Acts 15:19

Dear God, forgive us when we divide the body and separate from other believers. Draw us together by the grace of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit. Amen.

The stories in Acts are the stories of a church dealing with persecution from the outside and threats from within. Today's passage is about a threat from within. Believers who also held on to the law of Moses visited the church in Antioch. They believed that circumcision and following the law of Moses were needed for salvation. These additional burdens on Gentile believers led to a dispute. Paul and Barnabas entered into this conflict and returned to Jerusalem for wisdom and direction at a meeting of church leaders. Peter and the other apostles and elders were there. Even James, the brother of Jesus, was there. Peter recalled the story of Cornelius (Acts 10-11), and Paul and Barnabas shared from their travels. The Spirit of God began to move hearts. A church that could have been segregated along lines of ethnicity, Jews here, and Gentiles there, became a unified body again. This story tells us something about the people who wanted strict requirements for everyone, they were Pharisees. Faced with the unknown and the uncomfortable, the Pharisee disciples wanted to control Gentile believers by making them follow the Pharisees' laws. Acts 15 shows the radical nature of the gospel and the community that results. Gentile and Jewish believers are unified around the grace of Jesus alone.

NOTES

DAY 293

Job 13-14 • Acts 17-18

Scripture Reading

An Evangelism Master Class

TODAY'S FOCUS

**"The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love."
1 John 4:8**

In Acts 17 and 18, we are treated to a Master Class on evangelism taught by the Apostle Paul. In Chapter 17, we see how he presents the gospel to the Athenians, who were polytheists. They believed in a multiplicity of gods. Later in Chapter 18, we see him presenting the gospel in a completely different way to the Jews, who were monotheistic. In both scenarios, Paul does not compromise the gospel so that it loses its power. He contextualizes the gospel so that his audience can understand it. When the religious philosophers of Athens asked Paul to present the gospel to them on Mars Hill, a meeting place reserved for theological and philosophical discussions (Acts 17:22), Paul found a place of agreement and started there. First, he commended their belief in a creator God, "Unknown God." He then began to declare that this "Unknown God" is imminent. If God created everything, He is too great to dwell in man-made temples nor is He beholden to humans. Paul then asserts that every person has a desire to know God and seeks Him. Moreover, "God is not far from each of us." God is imminent, as well.

Paul then affirms their culture by agreeing with one of their poets who wrote, "In Him, we live and move and have our being..." Finally, he proclaims that the day is coming when the creator God will judge the world through Christ, and the proof of this is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Some of them, moved by the Holy Spirit, believed and some of them scoffed at him.

Then he demonstrated how Jesus was the Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and the long-awaited Son of God, who was resurrected from the dead. Again, some were moved by the Holy Spirit and believed, others jeered at him. When we are sharing the gospel, we should also join people where they are, start with points of agreement and then reveal how the work of Christ saves humankind and redeems the world.

Prayer

Father, thank you for entrusting us with the gospel. Help us to share it in a way that connects with each person in a way that they can understand and receive it. Amen.

DAY 294

Job 15 • Acts 19-20

Scripture Reading

Do You Know Your Identity?

Do You Know Your Identity?

ACTS 19:13-20

TODAY'S FOCUS

“But the evil spirit responded and said to them, ‘I recognize Jesus, and I know of Paul, but who are you?’ ”

Acts 19:15

The modern world teaches that demons exist only in our imaginations and fears. But the Bible teaches that demons are evil spirits that torture people who open themselves to their influence. In Paul's day, some Jewish exorcists tried to cast demons out of people by using liturgical prayers and religious paraphernalia. The seven sons of Sceva, a high priest, made their living by trying to cast out demons. Seeing that Paul was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, they wanted to experiment with this new technique. But when they tried it on one man, the demon did not go out. Instead, it asked, "Jesus I know, and I know of Paul, but who are you?" Then it gave them a beating they would never forget. If even demons know who Jesus and his followers are, then how is it that many of us don't know our own spiritual identity in Christ? Many of us live in fear and defeat because we do not know who we are in Christ. Demons acknowledged their submission to Paul because they knew that Paul identified with Christ. Do you know who you are? Are you a fearful and reclusive son or daughter of God? Do you know that as a child of God you have power over demonic forces? Let's not settle for allowing demons to know more than we do about our true identity.

Prayer

***Lord, help us to see ourselves as we really are; your children, bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Give us the strength to stand against the powers of evil each day.
Amen.***

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 295

Job 16 • Acts 21-23

Scripture Reading

What Made the Crowd Angry?

TODAY'S FOCUS

“The Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Acts 22:21

Paul has been arrested, and thus saved from being killed by an angry mob. He is about to be taken to the barracks when he asks the Roman commander to let him speak to the crowd. Receiving permission, Paul spoke in Aramaic, and the people quieten down. Why do they become quiet? Because Aramaic was the local language, and they realized that Paul was “one of their own.” Paul begins his defense along those lines. “I am a Jew, thoroughly trained under Gamaliel . . . zealous for God.” Amazingly, the crowd remains quiet even through the account of Jesus appearing to Saul on the Damascus road. And then one line of that story pushes them from quiet to murderous rage. What did Paul say? Paul said that Jesus sent him to bring the good news of salvation to the Gentiles. This is the point where the silence is broken by shouts of “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” Why was this so threatening? In some ways, the people thought God belonged to them. And Paul was saying that God sent him to reach out to the people of other nations. This truth was often mentioned in the Scriptures but ignored by the people (see Genesis 12:3; Psalm 67; Isaiah 2:1-4; 25:6-8). It showed they were being selfish about God and needed to welcome Gentiles into God’s family too.

Prayer

God of all peoples, keep us from ever thinking we could tuck you into a box for our own purposes. Keep us from the sin of trying to limit your grace. In Jesus' name, *Amen!*

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 296

Job 17 • Acts 24-26

Scripture Reading

Foolishness to the Greeks

TODAY'S FOCUS

“While Paul was stating these things in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you insane.’ ” Acts 26:24

Many of us have heard the gospel so many times that it is no longer scandalous. We have heard it preached, taught, and shared so often that it seems commonplace, even boring. Yet to those who hear it for the first time, and especially those whom Paul preached to in the first century, the gospel is absolutely absurd. Have you stopped to realize how irrational the gospel is? We believe that a poor Jewish carpenter who proclaimed to be God, was rejected by his own people, and was shamefully killed by being nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers, actually rose again and is God! This was truly unbelievable to King Festus whom the apostle Paul began to preach the gospel while he was on trial. Festus did not even let Paul finish sharing the gospel when he shouted, “You are out of your mind!” It is ironic that more than twenty-one centuries later, many have come to believe the best way to share the gospel is by articulating well-crafted evangelistic statements backed by logical apologetic proof. We somehow believe that if we are persuasive, factual, or have enough airtight arguments we can argue someone into believing the truth of the gospel. We forget that the first step to an unbeliever receiving Christ is the step God makes towards them. God initiates by opening the person’s heart so they can receive the gospel. Without the initial work of the Holy Spirit, our words are madness. Unfortunately, modernity has tamed the radical and the fantastically inconceivable nature right out of the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul writes, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” The thought of proclaiming a person who was crucified on a cross as the savior of the world was so far-fetched, so beyond the realm of rationality, that many could not bear to listen. The message was, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks” (Romans 1:23)—and is now commonplace to the Christian. How tragic! In our attempt to make the gospel believable, we have made it rational and reasonable. Ultimately, however, we believe the gospel not because it is logical and it makes perfect sense, we believe it because we are changed daily by its truth. Paul did not believe in the gospel until he encountered Christ for himself. God had to literally remove the scales from his eyes before he could see. God had to blind the persecutor of Christians on that Damascus Road for him to see the truth of the gospel. May we remember the only way someone will ever receive this scandalous gospel is when God opens the eyes of their hearts.

Prayer

Lord, remind us that the miracle of the gospel is that you made a way for us to return into your presence forever through the most unpredictable and unbelievable way. The only way that anyone can believe the gospel is that you first open their hearts. So, we pray for open hearts. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

Job 18 • Psalm 114 • Acts 27-28

Scripture Reading

Unusual Kindness

Acts 28:1-10

TODAY'S FOCUS

“The natives showed us extraordinary kindness, for they kindled a fire and took us in because of the rain that had started and because of the cold.”

Acts 28:2

Great stories often include scenes of danger and courage. This story about the apostle Paul on Malta follows a gripping account of a two-week storm at sea and a shipwreck (Acts 17). Although this story tells of a deadly snakebite and miraculous healings, it focuses at first (and at the end) on what may seem rather mundane, hospitality. Paul and his companions were shipwrecked, wet, and cold, so the natives of Malta welcomed them by making a fire. Simple hospitality can profoundly affect people caught in the storms of life. Hebrews 13:2 encourages us: "Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it." Did the Maltese people know whom they were welcoming, or what mission they were advancing, when they went out in the rain and cold to meet these strangers? Paul's ministry of spreading the good news of Jesus was often supported by the kindness of others. The Maltese people showed hospitality before they even heard Paul's teaching or saw the miracles he did in Jesus' name. Can you remember a time when others showed unusual kindness to you? Whom could you show kindness to today? Showing kindness should flow freely from a heart full of joy because of Jesus' teaching.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the unusual kindness you have shown to us. Help us to reflect your love and to welcome the people around us, so that others may know the joy of your salvation. Amen

NOTES

This image shows a full page of handwriting practice paper. It features ten identical rows of horizontal dashed lines, each row consisting of three parallel lines. The lines are evenly spaced across the entire page, providing a guide for letter height and placement. There is no text or other markings on the page.

DAY 298

Job 19 • Mark 1-2

Scripture Reading

The Gospel Story: Good News!

Mark 1:14-20

TODAY'S FOCUS

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Mark 1:15

The word we translate as “gospel” means “good news.” Good news is exciting; it normally triggers joyful responses like cheers and “high fives.” Picture soccer fans reacting to a surprise goal in the final minute of the game. Picture a cancer patient being declared cancer-free. That’s good news! But we don’t always have good news in mind when we read the Bible. Often, we read the Bible more like good advice than good news. Or it may seem more like a stern warning or an important restriction. When our reading of Scripture sounds like anything other than good news, it’s usually a sign that we’re not reading very carefully. The Bible tells us what God has done to fix a problem that we could never fix on our own. While the Bible describes what we should do in response to what God has done, the main point of the story isn’t what we need to do, but rather what God has already done. The burden of pleasing God has been taken off our shoulders and transferred to Christ’s. That’s good news for anyone who has ever felt burdened! There are really only two ways to respond to the Bible. One is to say, “I’ll try harder.” That’s how people often respond to good advice. The other is to say, “Thank you.” That’s how people often respond to good news. When you open the Bible, what do you find, good advice or good news?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the best news we could possibly hear about, the salvation in Christ Jesus! In Jesus’ name. Amen.

NOTES

DAY 299

Job 20 • Mark 3-4

Scripture Reading

Mad, Bad, or God

Mark 3:20-35

TODAY'S FOCUS

A dilemma is a situation in which a person must make a tough decision between two choices. A trilemma involves three choices.

The Christian scholar C. S. Lewis once described the trilemma that every person faces who hears about Jesus. Either Jesus is who He says He is and deserves our complete obedience, or He is an impostor and is not to be trusted, or He is out of his mind. There is no middle ground. Lewis put it this way, Jesus is either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord. He is either mad, bad, or God. We see three choices in our Scripture passage for today. Jesus' own family came, intending to take charge of Him because they thought He had lost his mind. Some of the religious leaders who were there thought something worse. They believed Jesus was an impostor and was possessed by the devil. But there were others who took another position. They listened to Jesus and believed what He said. They made Him the center of their lives and became His spiritual family. They believed he was God. Today, there are people who try to avoid all three of these choices. They hear about Jesus and shrug their shoulders, strangely indifferent to His message. That's a dangerous position to take, because not to decide about Jesus is to decide against Him.

Prayer

Lord God, help us all to see that Jesus is neither out of His mind nor a liar who serves the devil. Help us to do your will and make Jesus the center of our lives. In his name, Amen.

NOTES

[illegible]

DAY 300

Job 21 • Mark 5-6

Scripture Reading

Not Just Water

Mark 6:45-50

TODAY'S FOCUS

**“Take courage! It is I; do not be afraid.”
Matthew 14:27**

After Jesus fed the huge crowd of thousands of people (Mark 6:30-44), He sent His disciples ahead of Him in their boat to the next lakeside town. Later, in the deep of night, they were straining to make headway against a strong wind. Jesus had gone to a quiet place to pray, and then, just before dawn, He went out to them, walking on the lake. Now, to our way of thinking, it's utterly amazing that Jesus would walk on water. But there is lot more going on here. In the minds of ancient peoples, He was walking on the fearful, untamable, uncontrollable, deadly sea. So, He wasn't just walking on water; He was trampling on chaos! Seeing their great trouble in the darkest part of the night (just before dawn), and on the deepest part of the lake (the middle), Jesus goes out to His followers, and they are terrified. But look at what happens, with great care He encourages and assures them not to be afraid. He is with them. And when He gets into the boat, all is calm. I can identify with the disciples. I sometimes struggle with believing God's care and power are for me. But Jesus doesn't reject His tired, confused, and fearful disciples.

Instead, He helps them to believe! Even through the dark and from a great distance and despite our fear, Jesus comes to us and invites us to trust in Him.

Prayer

Jesus, you are Lord over all that is dark and fearful and chaotic. Help me to take courage, for you come to me in my distress. With you, I need not be afraid. Amen.

NOTES

This image shows a full page of handwriting practice paper. It contains ten identical sets of horizontal guidelines arranged vertically. Each set is composed of three lines: a solid top line, a dashed middle line, and a solid bottom line, providing a structured space for practicing letter formation and alignment.

DAY 301

Job 22 • Mark 7-8

Scripture Reading

Just Give me the Crumbs

Mark 7:27

TODAY'S FOCUS

“And He was saying to her, ‘Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ ” Mark 7:27

most troubling passages in the Bible. It is today's passage, we encounter one of the actually seems as if Jesus is insulting a woman by calling her “a dog”. In this story, the Syrophoenician woman relentlessly begs Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. But His seemingly cold reply is, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” When we read this scripture from our twenty-first-century context, we can easily miss the point. Context is everything. A few things help us understand this story correctly. First, the Syrophoenician woman, or “Canaanite woman,” was deemed to be unclean. Yet that does not deter her. Her faith in Christ was undaunted by the ethnic, gender, religious, and economic barriers before her. She would not even allow Jesus’ disciples, “the Christians,” to keep her from getting to Christ nor Jesus’ seemingly cold response. So, what do we make of Jesus’ response? Why didn’t He just heal her immediately? Jesus, the perfectly wise teacher never missed a teachable moment. For His disciples and the Pharisees and Sadducees to fully understand that the gospel is not just for their ethnic group, not just for the religious elites, and not just for men, He needed this woman to get under their skin.

Jesus ignores her and allows this scene to escalate until it becomes so uncomfortable that the disciples begin to beg Him to send her away. Finally, Jesus tells the woman what they had all been thinking in their minds, “You do not deserve to be here, and you certainly do not deserve to have your daughter healed.” Jesus says this not because He believed it to be true. On the contrary, Jesus was criticized severely for ministering to all the wrong people. Jesus said it in a sarcastic way to provoke the woman’s response which He praised. It was the perfect way for his disciples and the Pharisees to see that the Bread of Life was meant for all people, not just folk like them.

Prayer

Father, let us not construct barriers to keep out those who are different from us. Whether they are poor, of a different race, or of ill repute, may we remember that the gospel is for all people everywhere. Amen

NOTES

DAY 302

Psalm 121 • Mark 9-10

Scripture Reading If You Can

TODAY'S FOCUS

“Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief!’” Mark 9:24

At some point as a parent, we are faced with the helplessness of caring for a sick child. Having contracted RSV, as toddlers, my children are particularly susceptible to allergies and respiratory infections. They use inhalers daily. One winter, my son had to be rushed to the emergency room, because an asthma attack so severe had seized his lungs and he could barely breathe. I had never seen him this way. He was blue and his limbs were limp. It took all the strength that he had to muster one breath. It was frightening! In those moments all you can do is beg God for mercy. In Mark 9, we see a father who knows that desperate feeling. His son has an evil spirit that has afflicted him with such intense seizures that he has become mute and even has fallen into a fire and water. The father is tired of seeing his son suffer. He has tried everything. Finally, he brings his son to Jesus. However, because Jesus was not there, the father must trust his son to Jesus’ disciples who were unable to heal him. When Jesus returns from the Transfiguration, He rebukes His disciples for their lack of faith (Mark 9:19) and asks the father how long the child has been suffering. The father says that his son has been suffering since childhood and asks Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” Jesus replies sarcastically, “If you can...”

The issue was not whether Jesus had the power to heal his son, the issue was whether the father had the faith to believe in Christ for his healing. Jesus is saying, “I have the power...do you have the faith?” Immediately the father responds, “I do believe, help my unbelief!” This seems like a contradictory statement, but it best epitomizes the internal conflict that we all face in these dire circumstances. Sometimes the magnitude of the situation, the seemingly impossible odds, the dismal prognostications, and our desperateness take advantage of our human frailty. We so want to trust God but even that seems impossible. So, we have to ask God to help us overcome our own unbelief. In order for God to perform a physical miracle, He first has to perform a mental miracle. God must move two mountains, the mountain in our mind and the mountain in our way. Thank God he graciously does both! After a week in the intensive care unit, my son returned to full health. He was healed! I wish that I could say that my faith was perfect throughout this ordeal. It was not. But, I can say that my faith was perfected as God helped my unbelief.

Prayer

Father, we acknowledge that faith is a gift from you. Please increase our trust in you and we Thank You in advance. Amen.

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