

PRACTICING THE MEANS OF GRACE

Ron Christian, Compiler

“Growing A Godly Life” - Devotional Series

Book 2 - “Means Of Grace”

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‘GROWING A GODLY LIFE’ - Series (13 Books)

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**SUMMARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS ON
'PERSEVERANCE OF BELIEVERS'**

**LIST OF WRITERS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE CONTRIBUTED
DEVOTIONALS.**

BOOK TWO

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INTRODUCTION TO BOOK TWO

**By
Ron Christian**

It is not difficult for one to become a Christian. It does not take very much time for an individual sincerely to pray the “sinner’s prayer” to become a believer. But, after one becomes a Christian, it takes much effort and considerable time for that Christian to become strong and mature in the “Christian Way.” Fortunately, God has graciously given several “means” or “channels” by which a God-follower can become a maturing believer. Just as there are several “means” by which a small child grows to maturity (such as the intake of nutritious food and plenty of fresh water and a good “dose” of vigorous physical exercise, etc.), so there are several “means” by which both younger and older believers can become more mature in the “Christian Faith.”

What are some of those “means” by which a sincere believer can “grow into maturity”? Regular church attendance, warm fellowship with fellow believers, daily and personal “Quiet Times”, earnest prayer, regular Bible reading and study, meditation, reverent worship (both private and corporate), participation in Holy Communion and Water Baptism, involvement as a member of a small “Christian Growth Group”, fasting. Any ‘spiritual activity’ (private or public) which helps ‘connect’ you with the resources of God’s power and wisdom could be called a “Means of Grace”.

One of the most important (and sometimes neglected) “Means of Grace” is Church Attendance. The Bible says, *“Let us not neglect our Church meetings, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming BACK AGAIN IS DRAWING NEAR.”* (Hebrews 10:25, Living Bible) The Christian should desire to be with those who are like himself. In the natural world animals of like kind group together. Birds flock together, fish swim together, bees swarm together, cattle herd together, beavers work together, and ants travel together. Why should not God’s highest creatures worship together? God has made us to fellowship, and what better place is there for us to fellowship than at God’s House periodically?

In a secular newspaper appeared the following:

“Dear Member:

Don’t wait until the hearse hauls you to Church. If you do, you will go, regardless of the weather. There will be beautiful flowers there, but you won’t enjoy them. The priest may say some good things about you, but you won’t be able to hear them. There will be beautiful music, but you won’t enjoy it. There will be heartfelt prayers, but they will not touch your heart. There will be friends and relatives there, but you will not worship with them. You will go, no matter how many hypocrites are there. You will go, no matter how

much you are needed at home. You won’t be concerned about whether to attend Church or not. You’ll never get another chance. Aren’t you glad to be alive and well and have the choice of whether or not to go to Church?”

Notes C.S. Lewis, “Enemy-occupied territory - that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say, landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to Church, you are really listening into the secret wireless from our friends. That is why this enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going. He does it by playing on our conceit and laziness and intellectual snobbery.”

LOOKING AT PEOPLE’S FLIMSY EXCUSES!

Eve professing Christians, who should know better, sometimes swallow Satan’s excuses! Do any of the following excuses sound familiar to you?

- (1). “I need to relax on Sunday mornings and therefore I don’t have time to attend Church services.” Remember, one of the characteristics of the perilous times during the last days of history is a pleasure-obsessed society where people are *“Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God”*. (II Timothy 3: 4)**
- (2). “I need to be with my family and relatives on Sunday. If I am enjoying my family rather than attending Church services, God will surely understand.” Said Jesus, *If you love your father and mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worth of being mine.*” (Matthew 10: 37)**
- (3). “I need to work and therefore I can’t come to services on Sunday.” Most who work on sundays don’t need to work on Sundays. Most employers would be glad to arrange a schedule in such a way that sincere Christian employees could periodically, if not regularly, be off on sundays.**
- (4). “I need a vacation occasionally and don’t have time to worship God in Church on sundays.” It is always appropriate to take a vacation away from our regular jobs, but it is never appropriate to take a vacation away from God! Prayer and worship have been proven to be the most recreating activities known to man, for through prayer and worship a new spiritual energy and vitality are gained which transfers to the physical and mental realm, raising all of life to a higher level of vitality!**

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- (5) “I am ill and therefore I can’t go to Church.” This is sometimes a valid reason rather than a flimsy excuse, but I am convinced that many illnesses have a psychological or spiritual basis and that many illnesses could be treated best (and perhaps even healed) within the atmosphere of a caring fellowship of Christians in Church.**
- (6) “I have business pursuits that I am involved in which take me out of town on weekends. Therefore, I can’t come to Church.” Let every businessman know that there is no business as important as God’s business. God’s business is inseparably connected with the Church, so attending Church regularly is doing God’s business! When occasionally it is necessary for a businessman to be out of town on a weekend, he should always be in God’s House worshipping - somewhere!**
- (7) “I don’t understand what is being said at Church, so I simply study my Bible at Home.” Although there are many different levels of maturity represented within a typical congregation, all of which the minister must take into consideration when he preaches, nevertheless the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of truth and is able to apply truth to each person - regardless of the level of maturity, assuming that each believer is open and honest!**
- (8) “I am discouraged because of my circumstances and therefore I don’t feel like going to Church.” The discouraged can find encouragement, the despairing can find hope, the sorrowing can find comfort - at God’s House with God’s people on Sunday morning and Sunday evening! The last place a discouraged person should stay away from is the sanctuary of the Lord on Sunday! Church services are never a substitute for daily healing which can be found in the daily quiet times if they are not receiving healing at the regular worship services! Don’t wait until you ‘feel’ like going to Church. Action precedes feelings! Act in faith by going to Church and you will soon feel the comfort and encouragement which obedience brings the Church is a center for encouragement! Read Hebrews 10: 25.**
- (9) “I am ‘trying out’ several churches before I settle on attending one Church regularly.” These are the legitimate words of a few people whose presence in a new community and whose sincere desire to be in God’s will, allow them to search out a ‘Church home’. People who use this excuse don’t want to be ‘tied down’ to any one Church; they don’t want to be obviously visible in any one fellowship and they reject ecclesiastical authority and personal accountability for their faithfulness in Church attendance. To be in non one’s flock gives them**

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a sense of ‘freedom’, but this feeling of freedom is seldom blatantly admitted by professing Christians who resort to the following oft-repeated excuse: “I am trying to find a Church where I feel comfortable and where I can be fed.”

Those who resort to such excuses seldom ‘land’ and ‘stay’ in any one Church for very long. (I know personally of one family who has been in at least seven different churches during the last few years! No Church quite suits them! They leave one Church only to go to another one that is ‘better’ and ‘more spiritual’!

People who are waiting to find a ‘perfect’ Church will never find it! The sincere Christian who is coming new into a community does not take long to find a good Church Home, and when he finds it (after a legitimate amount of time involved in ‘Church Shopping’) he ‘sticks with’ the Church of his choice. He stays with it, through ‘thick and thin’!

There can be no deep loyalty to God without deep loyalty to God’s Church - visibly and locally identifiable! In the nearly twenty seven years I pastored (working with hundreds of people), I knew few, if any, couples who were successful in their Christian lives who were sporadic in Church attendance!

Rev. Sidney Laing of Dublin, Ireland, got tired of listening to the same old excuses from people who don’t attend Church. At the end of his tether, he wrote the following item, titled “Ten Reasons Why I Never Wash,” for his Church bulletin:

- (1) I was made to wash as a child.**
- (2) People who wash are hypocrites. They reckon they are cleaner than other people.**
- (3) There are so many different kinds of soap, I could never decide which one was right.**
- (4) I used to wash, but it got boring so I stopped.**
- (5) I still wash on special occasions, like Easter and Christmas.**
- (6) None of my friends wash.**
- (7) I’m still young. When I’m older and have got a bit dirtier I might start washing.**
- (8) I really don’t have time.**
- (9) the bathroom is never warm enough.**
- (10) people who make soap are only after your money.**

(Quoted in “Holy Humor Inspirational Wit and Cartoons” by Cal and Rose Samra; p. 58)

Why should Christians meet regularly in a building and have a local organization called the Church? Because God (through Christ) established the local Church as one of the most important “Means of Grace” by which believers grow and become mature in the “Christian Faith” (i.e., by which believers develop a more intimate relationship with Almighty God). Hebrews 10: 25 makes it very clear that one way by which you help another believer to grow in his personal faith in Christ is by your faithful (habitual) attendance at a local Church. Jesus Himself regularly (weekly) attended the Jewish Synagogue. *“And he (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and as his custom (habit) was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read.”* (Luke 4: 16)

Notes Clark Pennock, “One can view the Church from several angles. On the one hand it is an institution. The Church is an organization. It has an address, it is a place where people can be welcomed and introduced to Christ through many activities. The Church as institution involves buildings, ceremonies, officers, and rituals. It is set up to facilitate in personal relationships in the context of the praise of God. What makes it special is its goal to be a structure that mediates the grace of God to people. It does so in all sorts of ways, through sermons, by baptisms, in the Eucharist, in fellowship, singing, Christian education, and through group prayer. All of these activities are means of grace that can transmit life-giving reality to those who come into contact with it. The Church as an institution is likely the chief way in which people are confronted with Christ and come to participate in the renewing work of the Spirit.

“But the Church is a community as well as an institution. It would be in trouble if it were not. It is also an organism in which people are built up and gifted by the Spirit. This is in fact the goal of the Church as an institution, to bring people into a saving relationship with Christ and involve them in the renewing work of the Spirit. The institution is a means of creating a community, which is the body of Christ, that can grow and develop.

“Finally, the Church is also a bridge that stretches out its arms to the world, which God wants to reconcile as well. It is not meant to be the circle of the saved but rather the first fruits of the new creation, which portends the harvest of all nations. It is the light meant to lighten the world. This ought to be a major orientation, to reach the nations with the gospel and to disciple the peoples of the world. The Church exercises a priestly mediation between Christ and a lost world. If the goal of the Church as an institution is to create community, then the goal of the Church as a community is to gather inn the nations. As God’s servant people, the Church exists for the sake of the world. It is a function of God’s mission ion the world. By being new community in the midst of the world, the Church impacts the old order as salt and light and by reaching out in word and deed, through prophecy and prayer fulfills its own calling to be apostolic.

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“The Church is not always what it ought to be. It often exists as mere institution with very little life or mission. It is frequently not all God means for it to be. Therefore, it needs to be revitalized, to become alive and vital as in the beginning. It needs to receive afresh the gift of Pentecost in order to become experientially vital again; to be filled with praise and joy, mediating the kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit; for the grace of God again to become a personal possession; not for its own sake but for the sake of the world. As the Psalmist prayed, ‘*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power upon all nations*’ (67: 1-2, RSV).” (Theological Crossfire; Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown; pg. 199, 200)

It is doubtful that a vital relationship with God can long be maintained without regular attendance at the public worship services. I noticed, after working with many scores of young believers for more than 20 years (as a local pastor), that those young believers who became committed to regular Church attendance were the same ones who generally grew into spiritual maturity. The opposite was also true: those young believers (or, for that matter, older believers) who ‘dropped out’ of Church attendance also ‘dropped out’ of vital relationship with God. Such persons became lukewarm Christians and sometimes back slid completely. Church attendance (as a “Means of Grace”) alone is not sufficient to maintain a vital relationship with God, but it is almost impossible to enjoy a relationship with God without commitment to consistent Church attendance. I have never yet met a mature Christian who does not habitually attend public Church services.

We are living at a time in history when we need to reaffirm our confidence in and declare our love for the local Church! The Church is most precious to Christ! The Church is the Bride of Christ! Christ loved the Church so much that He died for the Church (Ephesians 5: 25-27). The Early Church followed the example of Jesus: “*After Jesus returned to heaven, they (the disciples of Jesus) returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and spent all their time in the temple praising God.*” (Luke 24: 52, 53, New English Bible) Is it any wonder why the believers in the first century of the Christian Church grew so fast and were so effective in their witness? They availed themselves of the God-given “Means of Grace”! “Growing a Godly Life” today still depends upon a Christian’s conscientious involvement in those “Means”!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As compiler of this series, I wish to express my deep appreciation to Shirley Ruiz, who dedicated her great skills, abounding energy, and many hours of her time in typing the entire manuscripts of this devotional series. I feel certain that her committed hands will be a great blessing to many persons.

LOVE FOR ZION

**I love thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.**

**I love thy Church, O God!
Her walls before thee stand,
Dear as the apple of thine eye,
And graven on thy hand.**

**For her my tears shall fall:
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given.
Till toils and cares shall end.**

**Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heavenly ways;
Her sweet Communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise.**

**Sure as thy truth shall last,
To Zion shall be given
The brightest glories earth can yield,
And brighter bliss of heaven.**

T. Dwight

CHAPTER ONE
EXPERIENCE CORPORATE FELLOWSHIP

Acts 2: 41-47

DEVOTED TO THE FELLOWSHIP

Luke paints a somewhat ideal picture of the early Church in the book of Acts. It is majestically better than Paul’s description of the Church in 1 Corinthians, for instance. But he describes what the Church looked like and ought to be doing in order for it to be healthy and vibrant. My uncle is a gifted professional photographer. He is able to tell what is good and bad about a picture, and what separates a good picture from a great picture. They usually are little things that the average person cannot put their finger on, although they might sense that a particular picture is good or is somehow lacking. Luke is doing for us what my uncle does for photographs. He is pointing out particular aspects of what makes a great Church as opposed to just a mediocre assembly. One of these qualities of a healthy Church is fellowship. God works in us as we are part of a community of faith, as we walk in the light and “*have fellowship with one another.*” (1 John 1: 7)

The term “fellowship” in and of itself is not exclusively a Christian word. But as we apply it to the Body of Christ, it gathers a distinct meaning separate from its secular use. It comes from the Greek word, “Koinonia” which means “to share something, to have in common, to give a part, or to participate.” It is both a verb and a noun, but the essential quality is something we have in common and experience in community. In our culture we pride ourselves on our individualism. We have the maverick attitude that we are self-made and control our own destinies. Freedom has displaced faith, hope, and love as the cardinal virtue for living. And ultimately we define freedom individualistically and privately. Perhaps you have heard the phrase, or even said it, “What I do in the privacy of my own home is my business.” While there is a helpful way of appropriating that statement legally and for the protection of the individual, it is neither a healthy nor a biblical way of framing the whole of the Christian life.

One of the primary aspects of Christian faith is that we devote ourselves to the fellowship of others; they are responsible for us and we are responsible for them. We participate together in this community of those who follow Jesus and we are called to hold each other accountable. We spur one another on toward love and good deeds. We encourage each other.

If we have understood a major aspect of our Christian commitment, we know that our lives are not our own because Jesus is now our Lord. In a similar way, since we become

part of the Body, we live not just for ourselves or for God, but for each other. It is more biblical to say: “We have personal lives, not private ones.” We are individuals who live in community, in fellowship. It is also true that we cannot be part of “the” family of God, unless we are part of “a” family of God. God, in his grace, called us into fellowship with Him and with one another. That is a blessing and a means that God uses to form us in His image.

“Father in heaven, I thank you that you call us into relationship with you. Thank you for my family of believers who encourages me and challenges me to serve you.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace, I will participate positively and meaningfully for the good of my brothers and sisters in Christ in my local Church.

- Martin Adamson -

NOTES:

Hebrews 10: 25; Luke 4: 16

I CHOOSE TO ATTEND CHURCH REGULARLY

Perhaps you have heard people say, “I believe in God but I don’t have to go to Church.” I go to Church because I believe in God. It has become a habit with our family, a lifestyle. When a family activity was being planned, I commented that I could not attend on Sunday because I had to go to Church. My sister corrected me and said “You don’t have to go to Church, you choose to go to Church.” The more I thought about it, the more I knew she was right. Regular Church attendance is a choice.

It was not always easy to feed and dress six children and arrive at Church on time. I remember one Sunday morning when we could not find the baby’s shoes. We turned the house topsy-turvy. Needless to say, we were all flustered when we finally arrived at the van where Dad had been sitting, honking the horn. We climbed aboard and I started putting the baby’s shoes on him. My husband got out of the van and went into the house. After several minutes, I became concerned and went into the house looking for him. He was sitting in the rocking chair, slowly moving back and forth, drinking a cup of coffee.

“What are you doing?” He started singing. “Hallelujah, it’s quiet, hallelujah, amen. Hallelujah, it’s quiet, it won’t be again.” Thereafter it became a tradition at our house to line up everyone’s shoes against the wall on Saturday night so “Dad could polish them.”

I choose to attend a Bible - believing Church because, since I became a Christian at the age of ten, I have hungered to know God’s Word. For my eleventh birthday, my sister picked berries and bought my first Bible. Since then, I have worn out several Bibles. The more I study, the more I want to learn.

After Sunday School, a friend commented, “I really enjoy your comments in class discussions. Did you attend Seminary with your husband?” Although I typed his papers and listened to his discussion of subjects he took, I actually learned the Bible mainly by faithfully attending Sunday School and Church down through the years.

I attend Church because I need the fellowship of believers. The “popcorn” testimonies were always enjoyed in the evening service when young and old alike shared what God had done for them. Some people shared a favorite Bible verse. After we moved to Iowa, my husband and I took our young children with us to the State Association Meetings.

My four-year-old son whispered something to me that I really did not hear, but I said, “Yes,” as mothers sometimes do to placate their children. Immediately he stood up and said, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel.” Of course, I was embarrassed and reached for him, but the moderator thanked the young man and continued discussing whether or not to consider financing certain missionaries.

I attend Church to worship together with other believers. Church is a place of praising God in song, exhortation from God’s Word, and prayer. Hebrews 10 exhorts us, “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.*”

“Thank you Father, for the fellowship of believers. Thank you for a God-fearing pastor who studies and preaches the truth from your Word, the Bible.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Attending Church is a wonderful channel that God has given us to help us become more Christlike.

- Laura Drewler -

NOTES:

Hebrews 10: 19-25

ARE YOU REGULARLY AT THE ‘FAMILY TABLE’?

When we become a child of God, we become a member of God’s family. We are blessed with many privileges. One of those is that of growing up in the loving, caring atmosphere of the “family’ (Church). As a child, raised on a Nebraska ranch, the most special time in our day, after a big day of working in the field, was meal time. Our meals were served at regular times, the food was delicious, and the fellowship was great! We were all expected to pull up our chair to the table to be together at meal time. As a Christian, the special time with my ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’ is at ‘meal time’. It is at this time that I am strengthened by the Bread of Life and encouraged by the joy of the fellowship, in order that I will be a better worker in the Harvest Field. In our local ‘Family of God’ the meal is served regularly, several times during the week. Around the Family Table is a chair bearing the name of each of our family members. A meal is served at Sunday Morning Worship, Sunday School, Sunday Evening Celebration, Christian Growth Group, etc. When we fail to ‘pull up our chair’ when the meal is served, we most likely will become weak spiritually and will eventually become ill. Not only do we suffer, but also do our family members. No one can fill our chair but us. When we are not present at the ‘meal’, we are missed because we are loved. I think I understand more clearly now, having experienced the sorrow of some family members’ chairs not being filled regularly, why my father insisted that we all be present at meal time. Our presence was a sign of health and made the family complete. We needed each other after a long, hard day of work. The laughter and the joy over the meal were so satisfying and drew us even closer together. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need the nourishment served at ‘meal time’, and we need each other. When we are not present at ‘meal time’, we become weak, our chair is vacant, and other family members are concerned because they love us.

As one who wants to be present at each meal served to our Church Family, I have noticed that one of the first signs of spiritual illness, is the lack of ‘pulling up’ to the table when the meals are served. Often we feel tired and weak after a day of working in the heat, battling the obstacles of life. The enemy of our souls, the author of spiritual illness, delights in seeing our absence at the table. Sometimes I would tell my mother ‘I’m too tired to eat’! She would respond with ‘Come and join us, you’ll feel better’. And I did! When you feel weak and tired, I urge you as a family member, to ‘pull up your chair’ to the table. You’ll feel better. Some day we will be invited to the table where the meal of meals will be served (Revelation 19: 9). What a thrill to pull up our chair to the

grandest meal of all with Christ and the Family of God! I believe our response to the regular meals with our Family here on earth will influence whether or not we will be blessed to receive that grand invitation to the Meal of Meals.

“Father in heaven, give me a ‘hearty appetite’ for the Bread of Life. Help me to realize both my responsibility and my privilege to ‘pull up my chair’ to the Family Table.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I resolve regularly to take my place at the Family Table!

- Venita Christian -

NOTES:

Revelations 3: 7-13

A CHURCH OF THE RANK AND FILE

The landscape of England is dotted with Saxon Churches that date from the first millennium. One such Church is Holy Trinity in Bosham on the English Channel. The tides from the channel floods part of the village twice a day.

At Holy Trinity, an invitation to pause and pray is posted on the Church door: “Will you join in the eternal stream of prayer and praise which is still offered here by the people of this parish?” As we entered, I noticed crosses etched like graffiti on the stone door jams. An explanation was posted which informed visitors that the crosses were imprinted by knights returning from the Crusades. They would rededicate themselves to peace by blunting the points of their swords before entering the Church. If you closed your eyes and listened, you could almost hear the clinking of armor and the scratching of metal on stone.

The east end of the nave was flanked by two stone coffins. The one on the left contained the bones of a strong man. The one on the right contained the remains of the eight-year-old daughter of King Canaute. To one side in the rear of the Church, light streamed through a window illuminating a portable cork bulletin board. On it was a collage of photographs showing the local teenagers enjoying the activities of the Church. It was refreshing to realize that this ancient Church was not a museum but an active Church which had been proclaiming the love of God to young and old, weak and strong for more than a thousand years.

I had expected to be awed and inspired by the great cathedrals of England. I did not expect to be so profoundly moved by the simple and quiet dignity of those little out-of-the-way places that have been faithfully teaching and preaching the Word of God for so many centuries.

Time tests all things. The glitz and glamour of the mega-Churches that have mushroomed at the close of the 20th century cannot hold a candle to the heritage of the “little brown Church in the vale.”

“Heavenly Faith, thank you for the rich and deep heritage which we have as disciples of Jesus.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Each little Church in each little town will warm my heart by its witness.

- William Jenkins -

Psalms 72, 90, 100

COMMUNION WITH GOD THROUGH HYMNS

His name was Isaac Watts. A precocious child, he could have attended Oxford University, but instead learned Latin, Greek, French and Hebrew as an elementary school student. He could have attended Oxford University, but instead of this great university, he studied “philosophy, etc.,” in a nonconformist academy at Stoke Newington near London. His father was a notorious Dissenter, opposing the State Church to the degree that he spent three terms in jail and then was compelled to leave his home and hide himself.

As a child, Isaac’s precocity manifested itself in versifying. He constantly spoke in rhyme, until his father, in exasperation, once started to whip him, and he cried out in tears: Oh father, do some pity take, And I will no more verses make”.

His schooling had prepared him for Christian ministry, so at age 26, he received appointment to his first Church, Mark Lane Independent Chapel in London.

The Rev. M. Isaac Watts was afflicted, however, with chronic poor health, so that an assistant was hired to do most of the parish work. For the next 22 years he continued, as he was able, in this ministry, the only Church he ever served.

A leading layman in that Church, Sir Thomas Abbey, thought highly of his sickly pastor, and invited him to spend a week at his estate. Isaac Watts accepted, and stayed thirty-six years, until he died.

We might think he would be little known in these circumstances, but such is by far not the case! His ability to put deep thought into verse was his God-given gift.

He wrote original hymns and, more, he ‘Christianized and modernized’ the Psalms to be sung in worship. Hundreds of songs poured from his pen in his lifetime.

Some of his more familiar hymns that are still in use:

**When I Survey The Wondrous Cross
Jesus Shall Reign Where’er The Sun (Ps. 72)
O God, Our Help in Ages Past (Ps. 90)**

**Joy To The World, The Lord Is Come
Am I A Soldier Of The Cross?
Come, Ye That Love The Lord.**

In the hymnal I have used for over 40 years, I find Isaac Watts second only to Charles Wesley in the number of hymns attributed to him, 20 in the 1951 edition of the Hymns Of The Living Faith.

His songs are still blessing the body of Christ.

“O Lord, let my heart sing, as Watts taught us, ‘the glories of our God and King.’”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will let the great hymns minister to me, helping me to understand better God’s love for me.

- Eugene Stewart -

NOTES:

John 2: 12-16

REVERENCE IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

To speak of the anger of Jesus seems like an oxymoron. The one who said “*suffer the children to come unto me*”, who saved the adulteress from stoning by saying “*Let him who is without sin cast the first stone*”, who took the taunts of his persecutors and reviled not, of whom it was prophesied “a bruised reed he will not break” – if he was anything he was gentleness personified. Yet at the Temple during Passover his anger flares and we must ask ourselves why.

First, He was obviously angry because His Father’s House had become a place of merchandise, a “den of thieves”. Worshipers were expected to pay a yearly temple tax equal to two days’ wages. Those paying the tax using foreign currency had to pay another day’s wages in conversion fees. The oxen, sheep and doves used for sacrifice had to be bought from temple flocks at inflated prices. All of this was taking place in one of the sacred temple courts.

The subject of reverence in the place of worship is an important one. When my wife and I were missionaries in Japan, the Japanese taught us much about reverence in worship. After the last Amen is said following a prayer, their heads remain bowed a few moments longer as though savoring the wonder that we have just had an audience with the Almighty Creator of the universe.

We spent a year in the mountains of central Japan for language study. Some Sundays we worshiped at a village Church. One morning I was sitting beside a young bachelor farmer dressed in blue work pants. He had received Christ while living and studying on an American farm owned by a Christian family. As we began to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy”, the young farmer began to quiver. Thinking he must be ill I moved slightly away from him. Finally I realized this man was simply overcome by the awesome presence of God in the house of worship. Since then I can never sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” the same again.

How do we sing the hymns? Is it only mouthing the familiar words without thinking? Or is it using the hymn as a vehicle for encountering and praising the Living God?

How de we sit in the Lord’s House? As one slouched before the television masticating a wad of gum? Or as one who is in the presence of a King – the King of Kings?

What we defend as “spontaneity” and “freedom of the Spirit” may violate the boundaries of reverence in worship. For example, I think of the use of touring singing groups in the services of worship. It can lend itself well to the spirit of celebration and praise. But such groups may lack spiritual sensitivity and sometime seems more appropriate for an old vaudeville show than worship of the Almighty. A warm greeting to friends and visitors before the worship service is appropriate but continuance of conversation during the worship service destroys the spirit of worship.

A.W. Tozer once wrote: “The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him --- and her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place.”

“Dear Jesus, in light of your cleansing the Temple of insincere and irreverent persons, I repent of the times I have entered the place of worship detached and unaware of your Glory. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: A true understanding of the holiness of God is the beginning of all worship.

- Dale Bidwell -

NOTES:

Acts 2: 41-47

CIRCLE THE WAGONS

In the earlier days of the American frontier, pioneers traveled westward in wagon trains. They went to settle in the new lands and begin new lives. They went in search of new opportunities and new adventures. Most importantly, they followed their dreams. It wasn't always easy to follow dreams; as a matter of fact, it was almost always hard.

There were many dangers along the trail of the wagon trains. Often, Indians would attack the trains, determined to stop the expansion westward. When this happened, a cry went throughout the wagon train, “Circle the Wagons! Circle the Wagons!” This maneuver provided protection from the present danger. After the danger was past, the wagons continued on their journey.

In the life of the Church, there are those times when we need to “Circle the Wagons!” By this I mean the necessity of facing obstacles and gaining victories through united efforts.

We need to Circle the Wagons for Prayer: Everyone praying for each one and each one praying for everyone. Prayer provides energy for the journey.

We need to Circle the Wagons for Worship: Coming together as the body of Christ, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves for the worship of God. In these times we are reminded that we are not alone. Worship provides inspiration for the journey.

We need to Circle the Wagons in Giving: Honoring God with His tithes and our offerings; letting go of what is not rightfully ours to keep. Giving provides the necessary supplies for the journey.

We need to Circle the Wagons for Service: Making available such talents, resources, and abilities as are ours for the strengthening of the Church. Doing what we can when and where we can. Service provides leadership for the journey.

We need to Circle the Wagons for Witnessing: Sharing your faith in God; telling the story of your spiritual journey; inviting people to Church and encouraging them to know Jesus. Witnessing provides more wagons for the journey.

I have noticed that one or two wagons do not make a circle. Three wagons make a triangle. Four makes a square. Many wagons are needed to make a circle. This means that each of us is important in strengthening the Church and advancing its progress. Let’s defend ourselves against the enemies of apathy, discouragement, lethargy, weakness and whatever else might attempt to hinder us.

It is time to “Circle the Wagons!” And recommit ourselves to prayer, worship, giving, service, and witnessing.

“Dear God, give me that wisdom which refuses to break away from ‘The Wagon Train.’”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: My habits will be the holy habits of Jesus.

- William Jenkins -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think that there is a general ‘maverick’ attitude in our American society that suggests that we are self-made persons who can control our own destinies? Why is such an independent attitude a “violation” of the Biblical concept of “Freedom”? Should believers be “free to do their own thing”, or “free to serve others unselfishly”? Are you personally (and presently) living in a “responsible” and “accountable” relationship with fellow Christians within the context of a local Church? What does it mean to you (as a believer) to “live for others”, instead of independently for only yourself? Is it possible for a committed follower of Christ to be a part of “the” family of God (i.e., the “Invisible” Church) if he is not a part of “a” family of God (i.e., a local “Visible” Church)? Why or why not?**
- 2. List reasons why you choose to attend the worship and educational services of a local Church? What specific benefits do you derive from regular attendance of Church services?**
- 3. Share your personal response or reaction to the following statement (found in the article entitled “A Church of the Rank and File”): “The glitz and glamor of the mega-Churches that have mushroomed at the close of the 20th century cannot hold a candle to the heritage of the little brown Church in the vale.”**
- 4. Share how your use of the Hymns (in either singing or reciting them) has enhanced your own spiritual growth. Do you own a Hymn book, and (if so) do you regularly use it during your daily “Quiet Times”?**
- 5. What can you personally do to “heighten” the awareness of the Divine Presence, during your participation in corporate worship services? What can you do to rid your local Church of those “distractions” which violate a “spirit of reverence” during its worship services?**
- 6. What “activities” can you personally participate in which would help the fellow members of your local Church to overcome spiritual obstacles, in order to gain personal and corporate “victories”? Spiritually speaking, what does it mean for you to be a participant with fellow believers to “Circle the Wagon”?**

7. Match the following “activities” with the corresponding “Benefits” (as understood within the corporate setting of a local Church):

_____ **A. Giving**

_____ **B. Prayer**

_____ **C. Worship**

_____ **D. Service**

_____ **E. Witnessing**

1. Provides energy for the journey.

2. Provides inspiration for the journey.

3. Provides the necessary supplies for the journey.

4. Provides more wagons for the journey.

5. Provides leadership for the journey.

CHAPTER TWO
EXPLORE BIBLICAL TRUTHS

I Corinthians 3: 2; Hebrews 5: 12-14;

I Peter 2: 1-3

CRAVE SPIRITUAL MILK

Not all memories of being a soldier are fond ones. While I was stationed in Korea, the only eggs and milk I and my fellow soldiers had were powdered. Later, in Japan, we had fresh eggs and milk. I remember, as we disembarked, we were told that milk was available. It was 1:00 a.m., and we waited in a line that was at least a city block long, to enjoy a small glass of milk. These luxuries lasted only two months, before returning to Korea, where we were again served powdered eggs and milk.

Peter admonished Christians to desire the ‘sincere milk of the Word’. There are 13 words for ‘desire’ in the Greek language (the original language of the New Testament). The one which God inspired Peter to use was ‘to desire earnestly’, or ‘to long for’. David wrote in Psalm 42: 1, “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.*” (NIV)

Spiritual nourishment comes from God’s Word. The Apostle Paul wrote, “*Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.*” (Romans 10: 17) If we are to grow spiritually, we must be in God’s Word. This requires a deep desire for the Bible. God’s Word is pure and free from all evil admixture. We receive a spiritual life from Christian literature and music, but our best nourishment comes from God’s Word (Bible).

How would you answer the following questions?

- 1. Would you stand in a long line at 1:00 a.m. to be able to read God’s Word (i.e., to enjoy the ‘milk of the Word’)?**
- 2. Would you be satisfied with ‘spiritual powdered milk’, if you had tasted that God’s Word is good?**

A new believer needs the ‘pure milk of the Word’. But if a person, who has been a Christian for a long time, continues to consume only the ‘milk’ of the Word (and little or no ‘meat’ of the Word) he simply manifests that he is still a ‘*baby Christian*’! (Hebrews 5: 12-13, Living Bible)

“Heavenly Father, bring a thirst to my soul for the sincere ‘milk of the Word’, and help me to grow quickly in the Christian life so that soon I can enjoy the ‘meat of the Word’.

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: With God’s help, I will read the Bible faithfully, with an open heart and mind to the Holy Spirit. I will make every effort to obey the Word of God!

- Lowell Weller -

Hebrews 5: 12-14; Jeremiah 15: 16

CRAVE STRONG MEAT

“Fast-food drive-through’s” are popular in our society today. Years ago they didn’t exist. Food took time to prepare and to cook, even in restaurants. Many Church-goers want ‘spiritual fast-food’ also. It is easier to sip milk than to chew food. In many churches more time is spent singing than in preaching. While singing is uplifting and an important part of the Sunday morning or Sunday evening service, the preaching of God’s Word is of vital importance. The Word causes us to see truth. The read and the preached Word give direction in our lives. The ‘meat of the Word’ is both convicting and reassuring. The Greek language gives seven words in the New Testament for ‘meat’. The one used in Hebrews 5 means nourishment and sustenance. While candy and ice cream taste good, it is meat and potatoes and vegetables which sustain us.

Recently I watched an evangelist on video. Only a part of a Bible verse was used in his sermon. The rest of his message consisted of personal experiences and humorous stories. Although his humor was well received, his ‘message’ lacked the ‘meat of the Word’! It is true that newborn babes in Christ need the ‘milk of the Word’. However, if we are to grow into mature Christians, we need the ‘strong meat of the Word’. God’s desire is for us to Grow Up - to become disciplined and insightful and discerning and mature followers of Christ! I Corinthians 13: 11 and 14: 20 tell us that, as believers, we are to “put away childish things” and that we are to become mature believers.

Here are a few suggestions that will guide you as you ‘SEARCH the Scriptures’.

S--seriously (“The people of Berea gladly listened to the message, and they searched the Scriptures day by day to check up on Paul and Silas’ statements to see if they were really so.” - Acts 17: 11; see also 2 Timothy 2: 15)

E--earnestly (“I have thought much about your words, and stored them in my heart so that they would hold me back from sin.” - Psalm 119: 11; see also Joshua 1: 8)

A--anxiously (“How can a young man stay pure? By reading your Word and following its rules.” - Psalm 119: 9; see also John 20: 31)

R--regularly (“They - believers - delight in doing everything God wants them to, and day and night are always meditating on his laws and thinking about ways to follow him more closely.” - Psalm 1: 2; see also Acts 17: 11)

C—carefully (“Then Jesus quoted them passage after passage from the writings of the prophets, beginning with the book of Genesis and going right on through the Scriptures, explaining what the passages meant and what they said about himself.” - Luke 24: 27; see also 2 Timothy 3: 16)

H—humbly (“And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. So don’t fool yourselves.” - James 1: 22)

“Lord Jesus, my parents were faithful to aid my physical growth. I invite You to aid my spiritual growth.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God being my helper, I resolve to activate my desire for the ‘strong meat of God’s Word’!

- Lowell Weller -

NOTES:

Acts 2: 41-47

DEVOTED TO...THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

The sponge is a wonderful and amazing creature, and is quite useful after its life is over. The sponge can be glad it is not alive to fulfill its role in a common household, however, especially my household. Our one-year-old child creates some pretty ugly, disgusting messes. But it is nothing that a little water, soap, and sponge cannot clean up. Our trusty sponge soaks up all the milk-sopped toast, the spaghetti sauce and mashed bean combination, and of course, the potato salad watered down with apple juice. Sponges work wonders. They perform their jobs well by soaking up whatever juicy fluid comes their way.

People are like sponges in many ways. We soak up things that come our way. Sometimes those things are good, but unfortunately, sometimes those things are bad. The things that our world offers in many aspects are not good for us. On the big scale, it presents us with a world view that is often at odds with God's way of thinking and acting. On the small scale, there are all kinds of worldly activities that tempt our spirits and seduce our bodies which are detrimental for a healthy life in the Spirit.

God desires us to soak up good things. He wants to bless us by pouring out his grace upon us so that we can live lives that please him. This is not easy because of at least two factors. 1) The world has such a powerful influence. After all, we live in the world. But Jesus told us we are *“not of this world”* (John 15: 19) and a little later he told us of his ability to limit the power of the world, *“Fear not, I have overcome the world.”* (John 15: 33). 2) The world shapes our way of thinking subtly. We do not even notice that we are beginning to think and act less like we are subjects in the kingdom of God, and more like we are rulers in the world.

Luke tells us in Acts 2 of several practices of the 1st century Christians which God used to grace them with his way of thinking and doing, His way of holiness and love. Perhaps one of the most important ways was being devoted to the Apostles' teaching.

Attentiveness to God's way of thinking is necessary to overcome the world's power and to even notice it when it begins to influence us in an unrighteous way.

This requires spending time with God's Word and soaking it up like a sponge. Being devoted to the Apostle's teaching means ordering one's life around the Word of God,

sitting under its authority, letting it ask questions of us, make demands on us, shape the way we think and act, taking it into our heart and head. We, metaphorically - speaking, must let it soak through the skin into every muscle tissue, vein, artery, capillary, bone and marrow. We need a thorough saturation of the Word of God in our lives. This kind of devotion occurs when we hear the Word taught and preached on Sundays, when we read the Bible each day, when we memorize and meditate on particular verses, and when we spend some time each week deliberately and slowly reflecting on a meaningful passage of the Apostles’ Teaching in Scripture.

“I thank you for your Word, O Lord, which grounds me in what is true and good and allows me to see things your way and not my own foolish ways.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I am blessed as I delight in the Law of the Lord and as I meditate on it day and night.

- Martin Adamson -

NOTES:

II Peter 1: 12-21

WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE?

The Bible has long been the best seller, most homes have at least one. We sing, “The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that’s the book for me.” But how many people know what is in it? I don’t mean a lock of the baby’s hair, a pressed flower from Aunt Matilda’s wedding, or a bookmark crocheted by grandma when she was a girl. The Bible is a book; it was meant to be read.

Get acquainted with the Bible. Nearly any kind of story you want, you will find within the sixty-six books which comprise the Old and New Testaments.

A family came to visit us on the Olympic Peninsula. Just before they left, the mother put pajamas on the three boys because she knew they would fall asleep on the trip through the woods and over the water. Then the father asked them what Bible story they wanted to hear. Immediately, one boy stated he wanted a story about frogs. His father recalled and told the story of the frogs: hundreds of frogs, thousands of frogs, millions and millions and millions of frogs, here a frog, there a frog, everywhere a frog, from the book of Exodus. God had sent Moses to go down to Egypt-land and tell old Pharaoh, “*Let my people go!*” It’s an exciting story and it contains worst things than frogs. You ought to read it.

You want to read a story about an orphan girl who became Queen? Read the book of Esther, but beware, her uncle’s message to her might smack you between the eyes: “*How do you know but that you were sent to the kingdom for such an hour as this?*” Esther risked her life to save her people, the Jews. Talk about women’s liberation? Read about Queen Vashti in the same story who stood up for what she believed and all the king’s men were afraid of what their own wives might do if they heard of it.

Do you want to know where we came from? Read Genesis. But you might think you are reading today’s newspaper. Do you want to know what is going to happen in the future? Read Revelation. But don’t become discouraged; read the last chapter!

The Bible is more than a storybook. It is the Word of God. It tells us that God Almighty, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, loved us while we were still in our sin. It tells the story of redemption from sin. God sent His only Son to earth to pay the penalty for sin by dying on the cross for us. The Bible tells of the resurrection and

Jesus’ victory over sin, death and the grave.

Do you want to know how to live your life, pleasing God daily? Read Paul’s Epistles. The Epistles are not the apostle’s wives; they are letters written to the churches.

Read the Gospels to learn about Jesus, his life, his teaching, and his miracles. The miracles really happened and God still cares about each individual who comes to Him and cries out for help. Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me.*” That is why Jesus came; to show us the way to heaven. The Bible is our guidebook; we should read it and obey it.

“Father, I thank you for the Bible and how reading it can change my life and give me hope.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The Bible is God’s love story to me. Its message never ceases to move me.

- Laura Drewler -

NOTES:

Psalm 119: 105; John 1: 1-18

THE BIBLE IS GOD’S BLUEPRINT FOR OUR LIVES

When God created Adam and Eve in the beautiful Garden of Eden, they were innocent. God came down and walked and talked with them. God told them they could eat from all the trees in the garden except from the tree that was in the middle of the garden. Adam and Eve were happy as long as they communed with God.

Then they made a mistake; they got in communion with the serpent. The serpent questioned what God had said and planted doubt in Eve’s mind. She listened to him and desired what he promised. She and Adam both ate of the fruit of the tree that God had explicitly told them not to eat of.

Psalms 1 warns us today about communicating with the wrong people. First a person just walks along listening to the wicked, then he stands still considering his suggestions, finally he sits down and gets involved.

God gave us the Bible to reveal Himself to us, to communicate His will to us and to teach us how to live.

The first sentence of Genesis says, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” When our schools teach otherwise, students have no foundation to build their education on. When they are told that the mighty majestic mountains, the microscopic desert flowers and the multitude of stars and planets probably appeared after an explosion, they are left with unanswered questions. Reading the Bible reveals that God is the creator and sustained of every perfect detail in heaven and on earth. The Bible explains that God made man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life. He is our Heavenly Father who loves us, disciplines us, and gives us an abundant life of joy and peace.

John 1: 24 states that the glory of God was revealed when God’s Son became a man. God’s love and compassion for mankind was demonstrated through the teachings, the miracles, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus promised that he would return and take his loved ones to live forever with Him.

Jesus taught what God’s will is for all men as he sat on the mountain, as he walked in the way, and as he ate with the disciples. We are to be stewards of God’s creation. We

are to live in favor with God and man. We are to live as Jesus lived: full of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. God’s will is that all men should come to believe that Jesus died to pay their penalty for sin, that he rose to have victory over sin and the grave, and that he will return as he promised. God’s will is for his followers to share his story as they go into the world and make disciples.

We have the Bible. God’s Word which is quick, powerful and sharper than a two edged sword. It judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is not enough to just hear or read, but we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to God. (Colossians 3)

“Thank you, Father, for your Word that reveals your love for us through Jesus and shows us how to live according to your will.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will continually read, study and obey your Word that I might not sin against you.

- William Drewer -

NOTES:

Psalm 119: 89-105

INCREASING YOUR LOVE FOR GOD’S WORD

“Oh, how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97)

It would take several pages to express my feelings about the Bar Mitzvah service I just attended. According to Jewish tradition, my best friend’s son became a man today and has earned the right to publicly read and interpret God’s law. The ceremony itself was awesome and inspiring. As I watched this young man speak and sing Hebrew, I could envision Jesus at that age, standing in the Temple before teachers, rabbis, friends and family, participating in the same ritual which has been passed on for centuries, yet only recorded for the last eighteen hundred years.

The experience of sitting in the Temple, which was shaped like a tent to represent the tents in which the Hebrew people lived during their journey to the Promised land, was deeply touching. I never could have imagined the joy which filled that sanctuary. Watching the “ark of the covenant” opened and the scrolls containing the Torah (laws of God) lifted and held as one cuddles a baby, pulled a sting attached to my heart. As this young man paraded around the sanctuary holding the Torah, the congregation would lean over to touch the Torah with their prayer books and quickly kiss the book. To hear him speak on the Scripture chosen for that day filled me with pride and wonder.

The most striking feeling I had was found in observing how these beautiful people love God’s Word! I could see it in the smiles on their faces. I could sense it as they excitedly reached out to touch the Torah. I could hear it as they spoke God’s Word in the ancient language of Hebrew.

This humbled me. This made me realize how much I have taken God’s Word for granted. I was forced to ask myself how much I really loved God’s law. Yes, I do love God’s Word. His Word is power. His Word brings salvation. But do I love His Word with the same passion I witnessed today? Do I caress my Bible with the awe struck delight of knowing this book contains God’s Holy Word?

Perhaps I could not respond in as affirming way as I would have hoped, but I do know one thing is now certain. From this moment on, I will have a new attitude toward God’s Word. I long to have that joy in my heart which I witnessed today. *“Oh, how I love your law!”*

Sabbat Shalom!

“As the Psalmist, O Lord, let me love Your Word. Let me taste the sweetness of its truth and discover the beauty of its wisdom. In loving Your Word, I will grow ever-increasingly in my love for You. Let Your Word be my delight, my salvation and hope. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will hunger for the Word of God, for it satisfies the deepest cravings of my soul.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

Hebrews 10: 10-39

GOD’S KEEPING POWER THROUGH HIS WORD

Waking before dawn is not unusual for me. It is not a preference, but lying awake in the dark hours of the morning occurs quite often. As I lay in bed this morning, a phrase came into my head. I am not going to say I heard the voice of God, but I have no doubt that God gave me these words and the following image.

“Hold on to the Word of God.” Nothing more was said, just these simple words. Immediately I knew that the expression had a double meaning. The Word of God is Jesus. The Gospel according to John states, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh (Jesus) and dwelt among us”* John 1: 1, 14. The second meaning is in reference to the Bible being the Word of God.

Upon perceiving these words, I saw an image of a man falling from a ledge. I presumed that the man was me. As I was falling, I noticed I was holding a rope in my left hand. It is human instinct, when falling, to release any objects in our hands in order to catch ourselves. But I reminded myself as I was falling, to “hold on to the Word of God.” Still holding the rope, I fell into a pit of black mire. Sinking into the pit of dark, thick liquid, I continued to hold onto the rope with my left hand. After a few moments of being unable to move, I suddenly felt a tug on the rope which prompted me to grip it with both hands. In another moment I was being pulled back up to safety.

That rope clearly represented the Word of God. Had I not been holding onto the “rope,” I would have plunged into the pit and drowned. Although I am thankful that I could hold on to the “rope,” I am even more grateful for the greater truth of this early morning experience. God is on the other side of the rope. We can trust Jesus and God’s Holy Word because God is on the other side of His Word.

May I pass on this bit of encouragement to you? Hold on to the Word of God. Cling to Jesus. Hold fast to the truth of His written Word. There may come a time when all there is between you and a life altering experience is His Word. He will uphold you. He will securely pull you to Him. Although we cannot see the other end of the rope, we can hold on to what we do have: His Word. Hold on to the Word of God.

“Heavenly Father, You have given me Your Word and I thank You. I recognize that Satan and the world would try to pull me away from you, but as long as I hold on to that

which You have given me, I shall prevail. Do not let me be distracted from Your glory and power, that I may trust You all the days of my life. Jesus, I hold on to You! Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God will never let me down...He will always lift me up.

- Thomas Duckworth -

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Tell why you think far too many Christians do not have an apparent intense “hunger” for knowledge of God’s Word, as revealed by their sporadic reading and study of the Bible?**
- 2. In terms of Biblical content, how would you distinguish between the “Milk” of the Word and the “Meat” of the Word?**
- 3. Tell with what degree of conviction you agree (or disagree) with the following statement: “Attentiveness to God’s way of thinking is necessary to overcome the world’s power and to even notice it when it begins to influence us in an unrighteous way.” What specifically can you do to become more “attentive” to God’s way of thinking? Do you regularly spend time with God’s Word and “soaking it up like a sponge”?**
- 4. Why do you think so many people throughout the world want to own a copy of the Bible, more than any other book? Why do so many people find the Bible to be such an interesting book to read? In “essence”, what is the “central message” of the Bible?**
- 5. In seeking to share God’s “Good News” with people throughout the world who have seldom or never read the Bible, how would you “outline” God’s “Plan of Salvation”? What “basic information” would you choose to share with an “unenlightened” person regarding the following Christian “concepts” (doctrines)? (a) God’s creation of mankind; (b) Man’s fall into sin; (c) God’s giving of the Old Testament Laws, and the purpose of these Laws (i.e., the ceremonial laws and the moral laws); (d) the Incarnation (i.e., the embodiment of God in human form for 33 years on the earth); (e) the purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus; (f) the meaning of repentance and ‘saving’ faith; (g) God’s power to transform human nature; (h) the conditions which God requires of a believer to maintain a “vital” Christian life and an “up-to-date” relationship with God.**
- 6. Put a “check” by the following statements which best describe your attitude towards the Bible:**
 - _____ a. A “Holy Book” which should be venerated and placed in a visible and prominent location in my home.**

- _____ b. **An interesting book which contains accounts of ancient history, Jewish poetry, and moral precepts, worthy of being read occasionally.**
 - _____ c. **A Book which should be taken “very literally”, worthy of being “hallowed” and “worshiped”.**
 - _____ d. **A Book which is the result of both divine inspiration and human insights, that must be interpreted carefully because of the nature of “progressive revelation” which makes this Book distinctive from all other books.**
- 7. Share a “dark experience” (a “pit”) in your life when you found that the “precious promises of God’s Word” brought relief and enlightenment and comfort and encouragement to your troubled heart and mind.**

CHAPTER THREE
ENJOY HOLY COMMUNION

Acts 2: 41-47

COMMUNION WITH GOD THROUGH PRAYER

Going to the library and browsing through the periodicals can be an enriching experience, depending on what magazines one spends the most time in. A magazine can keep us current with the trends of the world, inform us of new developments in science, the arts, and humanities, and expose us to ideas which have the potential to enrich our lives. But we must read discerningly. Not too long ago, I went to the library and picked up a popular psychological journal. It caught my eye because inside was an article on spirituality. What was odd about the article was that, although it confessed that prayer and meditation are good for spiritual health, it only referred to God three times in six pages. Prayer had little to do with communion and communication with God, and more to do with getting in touch with the inner self and becoming self - aware. They had diminished prayer into a practice which was conveniently vague with the primary purpose of forming a healthy self-image. This is far removed from any Christian concept of prayer. It seems that much of the popular talk of spirituality has little connection with any Biblical or Christian experience with God.

On the one hand, prayer is for our good. It is ultimately healthy for our minds, hearts, and bodies. God uses prayer to develop us and form us into his image. He pours out his grace to us through times of prayer. And we are strengthened by it. So prayer does the body and mind good. But it is only good insofar as it is informed by truth and practiced rightly. It is only good when it is a conversation, not within us, but between the Almighty God and us. Prayer, at its essence, is Communion with God. We are communicating not with ourselves, but with the Creator of the heavens and the earth. We speak and listen to the God who dwells on high, complete and separate and outside of us; he made us and makes authentic prayer possible.

But our prayers are directed to one who is a Father. Abba, Father. We have a personal relationship with this mighty God and so we are privileged to come into his presence. We pray as individuals but also together saying, “Our Father.” This is at the heart of Christian prayer. Not self-enlightenment. Not with the goal of physical or even mental well-being. Prayer is to deepen our intimacy with our Heavenly Father. So our prayers are addressed to the Most High God who is our Father. It is this conversation which ultimately enlightens us because through prayer we are opening ourselves to God and he is letting us get to know him. The result of this submission to God and exposure to his holy love is nothing less than becoming more like him. That is a goal worthy of our

aspirations. One can see why it was so important to Jesus and the Early Church. It is still a fundamental way God directs his people to become holy and loving as he is.

“Heavenly Father, I open my heart and mind to you for you to speak to me. I want to know you better today than I did yesterday, and more intimately tomorrow than I do today.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: How wonderful that I can carry on a conversation with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords as my Heavenly Father!

- Martin Adamson -

NOTES:

Matthew 26: 26-30

SACRAMENTAL MOMENTS

Sacraments are means of grace to draw us closer to the Lord and to remind us of spiritual imperatives. Like the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and the Apostles’ Creed, the familiarity with sacraments may have the effect of hindering our ability to receive grace from them.

Last Fall I was reading from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. The Bible I was using is the Discovery Bible, which has certain aids to assist in interpretation. The verb tense Jesus used in presenting the elements of the sacrament to the apostles is significant. In verses 26, 27, of Matthew chapter 26, after blessing the bread, Jesus said, “*You take and you eat it!*” After giving thanks over the cup He said, *You drink this!*” The verbs “take”, “eat”, and “drink” identify action that is urgent and immediate, calling for a specific and definite decision at a given point in time each time the decision is presented.

The verb tense guides us as we approach and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. The invitation to receive the bread and the cup is more than a request but less than a command. It is a call to decide to participate in the life and death of Jesus. To refuse to take, eat, and drink would be to refuse the Host. To accept the sacrament is to announce, “From this point in time, I choose to live for Jesus”.

The verb tense also provides an opportunity for a rededication of one’s life to Jesus, as it compels us to make a choice each time the choice is presented. It is a new choice each time, not the reconstruction of an old choice. To choose to accept the sacrament is to say, “I rededicate myself as a disciple of Jesus from this point onward.”

All of this helps me to understand the troubling verse of I Corinthians 11: 27. There Paul cautions against taking of the sacrament in an unworthy manner. The unworthy manner has little to do with our moral or spiritual perfection. Who of us would ever qualify if that were the case? An unworthy manner would be to receive the sacrament with no intention of participating in the life and death of Jesus or of living as His disciple. Luke is the only Gospel writer to add Jesus’ words, “*Do this in remembrance of me*”. The verb tense here is a command to commit to a long-term way of doing something. With the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are given means of remembering Jesus with practical opportunities to recommit our lives to

Him.

These insights are given with a prayer that they will assist you at the next occasion you are called to decide to be a follower of Jesus.

“Blessed Lord, who gives me grace with nail-scarred hands, receive my gift of devotion just now.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: As I receive the various means of grace, I will remember that I am a work in progress.

- William Jenkins -

NOTES:

I Corinthians 11: 23-28

COMMUNION UNIFIES CHRISTIANS

Communion is celebrated throughout the world in churches, commemorating Jesus’ death.

What does it really mean to Christians today?

In many churches, sadly, it has become a ritual, something that people participate in because it is done by the Church. Ask the individual what it means to them, and an explanation may be rather shallow.

Jesus instituted what we now call the Lord’s Supper and told his disciples to do it until he returns. Jesus also said, *“As often as you do it, do it in remembrance of me.”*

In May, we celebrate Memorial Day and return to the family plot in the graveyard. We decorate the graves of loved ones with flowers, sometimes talking to the departed one or praying. It is a time of remembering the person, what he or she meant to each individual. We reflect on specific acts of kindness done by our loved one and spoken words of wisdom which are still cherished.

Jesus’ disciples and his followers had first hand experiences with Him as He lived among them, teaching them and ministering to people in need. Therefore, it was not difficult to remember him as they gathered to participate in Communion. They knew about his agonizing death on the cross. They saw his blood spilled out on that cross. Although they probably did not understand the breadth of the substitutionary atonement for all people for all time, they knew it was for them personally.

Today, as we gather around the table, we remember what we have learned from scriptures about God’s great holiness and Jesus’ obedience to humble Himself, become a man, and die on the cross to pay that penalty: *“The wages of sin is death.”* However, for true believers, we also remember a time when we accepted God’s free gift of salvation. Life was changed; we became new creatures. Nothing we could ever do for ourselves would ever merit God’s attention. Nothing we could ever do for mankind in the form of good works could ever balance the scales.

The knowledge of God’s free gift to undeserving sinners can only bring us to humility,

love, and thankfulness. When Christians gather to participate in Communion, they are coming together to identify in a brotherhood that is closer than a natural family.

When I hear the words, “Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you,” I put the wafer in my mouth and crush it with my teeth. It is broken and ready to become part of my body. I remember how Jesus was beaten and a spear was stuck into his side. He was broken, for me. I should have been the one on the cross. Jesus took my place. He purchased my freedom.

When I hear the words, “This is my blood, shed for you; all of you drink of it,” I experience unity with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I remember words of a great old hymn: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

We are brought together by this common experience that Jesus left us to practice until He returns. We remember and we give thanks. It is a spiritual experience.

“Father, thank you for the experience of taking the Lord’s Supper with other Christians. Thank you for loving us so much that you paid our debt and gave us the free gift of salvation.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: A common experience produces unity. Communion engages our memories and causes that experience to live.

- Laura Drewer -

NOTES:

Luke 22: 7-20

COMMUNION MUST BE A PERSONAL ‘KOINONIA’ EXPERIENCE

Whenever the Church gathers together and partakes in the ordinance of Communion, we need to be careful that it does not become so commonplace that it is nothing more than a ritual. We need to realize that Communion is a symbolic experience, a ‘koinonia’ group experience and a personal spiritual experience.

Each year the Jews gathered together to celebrate the Passover. They remembered their release from the bonds of Egypt. As they ate each item in the meal they remembered the lamb that was slain and the blood that they spread on the doorposts of their homes so the death angel would pass over. They remembered the obedience of their ancestors, the miracle of being protected from death and the gift of life they were given. It was there in the upper room with His disciples, after they ate the Passover meal together, that Jesus instituted what is now known as Communion. When Jesus said, *“This bread is my body, broken for you,”* they knew that a lamb had to be slain for the sins of the people. Jesus became the final sacrificial lamb. The wages of sin is death and when Jesus died, He became sin for us.

When Jesus said, *“This wine is my blood, poured out for you,”* the disciples knew the significance of the blood of the lamb poured out before God. While on the cross, a spear was thrust into Jesus’ side and his blood poured out. Since that moment, God looks on repentant sinners through the blood of Christ. They have chosen to apply Jesus’ blood to the doorposts of their hearts.

Communion is a group experience. The Church as His body, is a ‘koinonia’; coming together to remember and partake of the elements of the bread and the wine. Communion cannot be experienced alone; it must be a group experience. It must not become a churchly performance, a ritual we do because the Church does it. That would be an empty participation without significance. The word ‘koinonia’ means common, the fellowship of coming together to partake of the supper; this produces Communion because we have the same experience. We come together before God as a group, a unity, a bonding. It becomes a testimony of what we believe and stand for because we are united.

Communion is a personal spiritual experience. It points back to a time when there was a significant change in my life as a result of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It

is the realization that Jesus died for me so I might have eternal life. He willingly laid down His life for me; His blood was poured out for me. Jesus forgave me of my sin and I became a new creation. I no longer desire to walk in sin. Jesus accepted me as his child; I was adopted and I became a part of His family, a Christian.

Communion must also be a continual personal walk with Christ. We are instructed to examine ourselves and then to eat of the bread and drink the wine. I cannot just appear and say, “Hi, God, here I am,” without acknowledging and repenting of sin in my life. It is a time of reestablishing a relationship.

“Thank you, Father, for Communion which reminds me of the sacrificial atonement Jesus provided when He gave His body, broken for me, and poured out His blood, poured out for me. Thank you that I am a new creature and I can walk in newness of life.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The ‘koinonia’ experience is the expression of the knowledge that the group has been changed because of their unified experience in Christ.

- William Drewer -

NOTES:

Acts 2: 41-47

DEVOTED TO...THE BREAKING OF BREAD

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of being part of a 20 year anniversary celebration for a nearby Church in town. I was invited to say a few words because when that Church first started meeting, before they had a building, our Church had let them use our facility for a midweek Bible study and prayer meeting. I was excited to be a part of the evening. It was a wonderful celebration of God’s goodness over the years. Exuberant singing, clapping, arm waving, swaying, and shouting “Praise the Lord!” and “Amen!” characterized the celebration. At one point in the service, a deacon read a history of the Church marking some of the major moments. After each event he noted that they shared a potluck meal together. After awhile, people began to laugh and joke that all they did when they got together was eat! When it came my turn to speak, I thanked them for letting me celebrate with them even though they used our building long before I became the pastor. And then I said “Although our Church is different in many ways than yours as far as worship and culture and geography, we have one thing in common....We like to eat too!”

This is not a new practice for Christians. Jesus had supper together with his disciples shortly before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. And remember how he often reclined at people’s houses for a meal, how he fed the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish, and how he said that the kingdom of God was like a great feast where everyone was invited to come and eat their fill. Shortly after Jesus’ resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, two disciples recognized Jesus only after he broke bread. Throughout Acts, Luke records the practice as a very important part of the health and vitality of the early Church. In I Corinthians, Paul gives them instructions for properly practicing the Eucharist, which at that time was often celebrated with a full meal, or “love feast”!

It seems it can be said honestly that as Christians, we like to eat! And shouldn’t we? What is there not to like about it? Eating is pleasurable and gives us the nourishment that our bodies need to survive and thrive. Breaking bread as a Communion ritual is no less important for our spiritual health. In order to live abundant lives, as Christ desires for us, we need to regularly partake of his body and blood. Through Communion, we are reminded that we need Jesus to live life, abundant and eternal. This is cause for celebration.

We anticipate being part of that great heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the

Lamb, the wedding feast of the Bride and Bridegroom, the union of the Church and her Lord. That we feed on the “bread of life” is a wonderful appetizer of the blessing of God’s grace to strengthen us as we make our way to the great feast in Heaven!

“O Lord, give me spiritual nourishment for my life. Help me feed upon you in my heart so that I can live life to the full as I serve you.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will approach the Lord’s Supper not only with thanksgiving for Jesus’ death, but also celebration in anticipation of his return.

- Martin Adamson -

Matthew 28: 19-20

BAPTISM IS A PUBLIC STATEMENT

What is important about baptism to one who would accept Jesus as Savior and become a part of His Body, the Church? I know a man who told me, “I am a Christian, but I do not attend Church because I think all those people are hypocrites.” That, of course, is a judgment he has no right to pass, because he has not seen how they lived before and how they are living since they have accepted Christ as their Savior. He is also saying, “I can be a Christian without being a part of Christ.”

Baptism is the way one who is coming out of the world through faith in Jesus declares his stepping away from the world and stepping into the Body of Christ. St. Paul tells us that if we are in Christ, we are all a part of one Body and that Body is the Church. There are no “lone wolf Christians.”

Therefore, if I would be a Christian, which is much more than acceptance of a moral philosophy, I must do it the way Jesus, Himself, instructed. It is a picture of burial and resurrection. I must die to sin and be raised to walk a new life. Baptism is the means Jesus gave to make this individual declaration to the public.

In the New Testament, baptism was done in a public place, usually in a river. Although it is usually done behind Church doors today, baptism was meant to be a declaration for all the world to see. It means that unbelievers, as well as believers, might view it.

In many countries, being baptized is a death sentence. Anyone who chooses to follow Christ also chooses to reject his former religion. That means that the people in the former religion will also reject him, refusing him work and persecuting him and his family. The Christian Church he joins must protect him, provide for him, and help him find a new life. They must become his extended family if he is to survive. So a person must be serious about such a declaration. The door of baptism opens only one way. It opens in. It is a declaration made that forbids any going back. Faith is the door to justification and sanctification, but baptism is the door to fellowship in Christ’s Body, which is the Church.

Baptism says, “I believe that God loved me so much that He sent his only Son, Jesus, to be my Savior. I believe Jesus died on the cross for me, paying my penalty for sin. I believe Jesus rose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of the Father, making

intercession for me. I believe one day Jesus will return and take all believers to heaven where we will always be with Him. I have accepted Jesus as my Savior and I want to participate in a group of people which also practices these same beliefs.”

“Father, I thank you for the means of baptism that declares publicly that decision that I made privately to accept Jesus as my personal Savior. Thank you that I am now part of the Church. Together, as believers, may we always live as Jesus taught us, that His Body may be strong and its message may be clear.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will live every day in such a way that the world may see that what I declared in baptism is true in my life. Old things have passed away. I am a new creation in Christ!

- William Drewer -

NOTES:

Psalm 100

COOKING FROM THE LORD’S RECIPE

The Bible has “recipes” that teach us how to put together the “ingredients” of life to produce tasty, nourishing results. Consider the recipe of Psalm 100.

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name. For the Lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations.”

This psalm says, first who the Lord is: God who has made us. He is Creator, with unlimited power and intelligence. Second, it says we are being created by God. Our intelligence and power are so limited that, compared to God, we are just sheep in a pasture - *His* pasture. We don’t own anything: we get to use some things for a while, but we are dependent upon Him. Is that bad or risky? No, being a sheep in God’s pasture is good because, third: God faithfully loves his people forever. We are protected, we are safe, we are fed...we receive benefits from His love.

What do we do with these facts? We are to recognize and acclaim him for who he is. This has three parts that occur at the same time, just as ingredients are mixed together for cookie dough. Let’s examine this “mix”:

1. *Believer.* “Know that the Lord is God,” this psalm says. Belief is a foundation of Christianity. We join the family of God by belief. (Mark 1: 15, John 20: 31, Acts 13: 39)
2. *Choose joy.* The psalm begins with high emotion: Shout for joy! If we couldn’t choose to do this, God wouldn’t ask us to. Choosing God’s way is rewarding because “the Lord is good and his love endures forever.”
3. *Do.* The book of James tells us to go beyond just mental exercises of knowing and believing, and to act (e.g., James 2:14). Doing is essential. Thinking about the recipe won’t bake the cake. Sports fans know the phrase,

“That’s why they play the game.” As important as beliefs and choices are, even the best intentions accomplish nothing unless we choose to act.

A shoe company says, “Just do it!” Nice thought, but there are many t things we can’t do. I won’t slam dunk a basketball no matter what shoes I wear, but I can do some more important things. No shoes are required for me to believe God’s righteousness and authority, and praise him with joyful song. So, even on days when I do not feel joy, if I choose to offer God a joyful son, joy will come.

Use this recipe to cook up a yummy day: (1) In prayer, reaffirm what you believe doubt who God is. Thank him for his greatness, for his personal interest in knowing and loving you. (2) Choose joy. (3) Serve him with gladness. Express praise. Five times today sing “Amazing Grace” (if the situation permits, sing aloud) as worship in thanks for his faithful care. Just do it!

“Dear Heavenly Father, your incredible power and authority are so great I cannot imagine them. Yet, you choose to love me and think me worthy. I accept your love with thankfulness so great I can express it only by saying, Thank you, thank you, blessed be the name of the Lord! Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Lord, you will always love me. Thankful, I praise your name!

- Richard Walters -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What “elements” in a “Christian Prayer” makes it distinctive and separate from all other so-called forms of “Prayer”? Is it proper and “right” for a Christian to expect to receive personal “benefits” from prayer? Why or why not? If the primary purpose of prayer is to worship God and to deepen one’s intimacy with the Heavenly Father, is it wrong for a believer to “use” prayer as a “means” of gaining “self-enlightenment” or “physical and mental well-being”?**
- 2. When you receive the Holy Communion with proper Biblical enlightenment (understanding), what are you declaring to the Lord, and what are you testifying to fellow participants at the “Lord’s Table”?**
- 3. Tell with what degree of conviction you agree (or disagree) with the following statement: “When Christians gather to participate in Communion (Lord’s Supper), they are coming together to identify in a brotherhood that is closer than a natural family.”**
- 4. What “facts” of spiritual reality, regarding the Grace of God, are effectively and symbolically declared when you participate in Holy Communion (the Lord’s Supper)?**
- 5. In what ways is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (instituted by Christ) an “outgrowth” or “fulfillment” of the ancient (Old Testament) celebration of the Jewish Passover (instituted by God during the time of Moses)?**
- 6. Why is a believer’s participation in Holy Communion (Lord’s Supper) an opportunity for a believer to experience spiritual renewal?**
- 7. Why should one’s participation in Holy Communion (Lord’s Supper) be an occasion, not only of humble contrition and confession , but also of joyful celebration?**
- 8. Share in detail (with your group) your understanding of the significance of “Christian Baptism”.**

- 9. From your own personal experience, can you “testify” to the truthfulness of the following statement? - “Even on days when I do not feel joy, if I choose to offer God a joyful song, joy will come.”**

CHAPTER FOUR
PRACTICE PERSONAL DISCIPLINES

Luke 10: 38-42

TURN OFF THE NOISE!

Near our house is a donut shop which offers all kinds of most deliciously ‘sinful’ donuts any dieter might be tempted with. And if their regular sugar coated delicacies are not enough to tempt you, they have a sign outside which lights up when their donuts are hot, fresh out of the oil. The other day as my son and I were running errands, lo and behold I was knocked off my horse by that light from above. Responding to the beguiling illumination, I succumbed and entered the establishment. We each got a donut and sat down to eat. After about 30 seconds into our donuts, suddenly the power went out and the place was plunged into darkness and silence. The radio in the kitchen, the squeaks from the automated donut fryer, the steady sound of wind from air blowing through the central heating ducts, and a mysterious steady thumping coming from some unknown source deep within the store all stopped immediately.

After a few moments of this unnatural silence, people began to wonder out loud at what had happened. One worker commented, “Wow, I have never heard it this quiet in here before.” It actually was a very pleasant, and since we were by a window, we had plenty of light to finish our donuts in peace. How refreshing it can be to experience a time of quiet in our noisy world. For those of us who live in the cities, we get used to it and it does not seem to affect us. One of my friends who lives out in the sticks, the Sand Hills of north central Nebraska, told me once how he notices the noise of the big city when he comes to visit in Omaha. Cars and machines run 24 hours a day creating a noisy place. And Omaha is nothing like L.A. or NYC! Sometimes it is good to get out away from the noise to experience “quiet”.

This is true in a physical way, but even more so in our spiritual lives. We fill up our lives with so much. We become so busy; our DayTimers are full and we rush to this or that project. If we are not careful, the noise of our lives constantly breaks the silence we need in order to hear the voice of God. Rarely will the Lord shout to be heard. We must create times of silence to hear his voice, times for refreshing, strength, and peace. In the story of Mary and Martha, Mary created a time for “quiet.” She knew that to be silent and listen when Jesus was talking was very important. What Martha did was important also, and we all must keep doing those things which are the necessary everyday aspects of living. But in order to have peace amid the noise of a full life, we need regular, daily times where we turn off the noise and listen to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that “We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and

we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God. Silence is nothing else but waiting for God’s Word and coming from God’s Word with a blessing.” The best way to do this is to designate a certain amount of time, 5 or 10 minutes to do nothing but sit in silence and not feel guilty about not “doing” something, because you are! You are listening for God.

“Heavenly Father, help me create a space and time in my schedule to simply sit in silence before your Word. ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The Lord desires to speak to me as a friend speaks to a friend, to give me counsel for living a peaceful life.

- Martin Adamson -

NOTES:

Habakkuk 2: 18-20

IMPORTANCE OF DAILY ‘QUIET TIME’

“Be still and know that I am God.” A phrase such as this is heard throughout a lifetime. Only occasionally does it become a reality. In the first place, being still is not really an option for our generation. We are moving and progressing far more rapidly than anyone ever imagined. We drive ourselves harder and harder, chasing after goals and dreams which only seem to become farther from the reality. In the first place, being still is not really an option for our generation. We are moving and progressing far more rapidly than anyone ever imagined. We drive ourselves harder and harder, chasing after goals and dreams which only seem to become farther from the reality of our reach. There is no time to just stop and “be still.”

In the second place, having such a little time available to us only leads us down a lane of deprivation. We are deprived of knowing God with first-hand knowledge. If we dare to discipline ourselves, we may squeeze God in sometime between morning coffee and a shave.

This simple text from Psalm forty-six is one of those we like to say, love to hear, but fail to obey. Did you notice that it is a command and not a suggestion? The two halves of verse ten are inseparable. Being still and knowing God are twins. You cannot have one without the other.

The goodness (and the sad news) is found in the truth that if we are *not* going to find time to be with God, He is going to make the time to be with us. For many it takes the event of a heart attack or the loss of a job before we will sit silently before our Maker. For others, God has a way of penetrating into our lives until we stop and take notice. If given a choice, I will take the latter, which is precisely what my Lord did for me this week. In my daily routine of doing those things which really are not all that important, God moved upon me as if He were saying, *“Excuse Me, but I was here first!”* That knocked me on my butt! Then I had time to sit and ponder the meaning of my existence in relationship to Jesus. Honestly, that did not take much of my precious time, nor were my conclusions very pleasant. When God sets you in your place, you really do know where your place is! The tingly feeling I experience while contemplating God was not from knowing that I am a child of God, but from knowing He expects certain things from me as a child of God. One is my obedience and the other is my attention.

When David wrote this Psalm, I think it was soon after he too was bowled over by a God who will not allow the trivial pursuits of life to replace Him. If I were David, I think I would have heard it a little differently. *“Sit down. Shut up! I am God! You are not!”*

“Lord, for this moment I am not going to pray for anything...I simply want to listen to You. Speak to me, O God.” (Now listen).

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Satan shouts. God whispers. When God speaks, Satan trembles.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

John 15

WHO SPILLED SUNSHINE ON MY FLOOR?

A day without spending quiet time with God is like a day without sunshine. Unfortunately, we live in a world of distractions. Too many times we fill our days with other less important activities because of society’s dizzying pace and come to the end of the day physically drained, mentally depressed, and spiritually shriveled.

I learned early in my married life that I would have to fight for moments alone with God. Four preschool children made unrelenting demands on me, and most of the time it was easier to give up than to persevere. I wanted to be attached to “The Vine” (John 15), but my devotional life seemed always to fly off center and disintegrate in a maze of constant chores and noisy voices.

One day I was standing at a sink of dishes watching my small charges as they played happily on the swing set outside the window. My attitude was frayed by sleep deprivation and lack of peace. Anger billowed behind my emotions, and I looked down and saw what seemed to be spilled flour on my kitchen floor. Teary-eyed I reached for the vacuum and swept the spot repeatedly, but it wouldn’t budge. It seemed an odd circumstance, so I followed the source of the spill to a ray of sunshine coming in the window. Instantly my sour attitude changed and a smile broke across my face as a question formed on my lips: “Who spilled sunshine on my flour?” The finger of light pointed upward to God.

That’s how it is most days. God is trying to sprinkle sunshine on our schedules. Too often we close the curtain and shut Him out. Prayer is a precious time. It’s a time to invite God in and shut the world out. It doesn’t have to be done in a closet. It doesn’t even have to be done in isolation. As long as I lived at 7762 Greendowns, my altar was at the kitchen sink. It was there that I connected with God daily as I watched my children play happily outside the window. What had once been drudgery became my favorite time of day.

From that time on, everywhere we moved I set up an altar. There was the noisy den in one home, the yellow living room in another, the pink sitting room, and now the red and green bedroom. I require only two elements in my holy places; God and sunshine. God wants our fellowship and we need His.

“Dear God, keep me walking in fellowship with you every new day.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God’s presence brings sunshine into all the dark corners of my life.

- Loretta Jenkins -

NOTES:

Romans 12: 1-21

ARE YOU A “CHRISTIAN IN THE MAKING?”

“Missing last week’s session was like missing a meal.” With these words, Sue expressed her regret for being unable to enjoy the benefits of her small sharing group. She is among the many who are finding new meaning through these dynamic groups.

When something ranks as high as a meal, it is important and anticipated. Personal schedules are arranged to accommodate it.

Sue’s group is called a Christian growth group. Members search for God’s direction and help through two means. One is study of the Bible or a Christian book. The other is prayer. Members share through two means. One is exchanging insights and understandings. The other is bringing new people to experience the group. Sue sensed that others in the group cared for her. She knew she was loved and respected. She belonged!

Members learned spiritual truths from studying the group’s assigned readings. Application of these truths were made to Sue’s life and to the lives of others in the group. Thus biblical principles became real. They were no longer just statements to be identified from the Scriptures. They meant something. This enabled her to better live the Christian life.

The group taught Sue to assume responsibility for others. She moved from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. This concern extended beyond the sessions. It became an attitude of love. Then it became love in action, love that is expressed in response to personal need. People need the concern and caring for one another which Sue experienced it comprises the special fellowship of Christianity. Fellowship is three sided: the individual, others, God. In a Christian growth group it is experienced in a setting where the meeting of human needs is stressed.

Sue and her associates are free to be who they are. They are free to examine what they believe. As they discover new insights they can test them against others. Through searching and sharing they find greater meaning in their lives. They see a clear picture of what being God’s person in their situation is like. Then they cooperate with God in developing their lives to conform with that view. As expressed by W. Stanley Jones, each is a “Christian in the making.”

“O God, I sense a deep desire within me to become a transformed person through the renewing of my mind (Romans 12: 1-2). Empower me with the needed discipline to change my life patterns to please you. Amen”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The best that I can say about myself is that I am only a “Christian in the making.” I determine to enjoy the lifelong process of increasingly becoming more like my loving Master, Jesus Christ!

- Dorsey Brause -

NOTES:

Galatians 6: 1-3, James 5: 16

BENEFITS OF A “CHRISTIAN GROWTH GROUP”

We are commanded to “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*”. (Galatians 6: 2). Sue’s Christian growth group is a structure that accomplishes this. It opens members to intimacy -relationships in which persons, free of distrust and hidden motives, meet at the center of their lives, not only at the fringes. From this a freedom emerges which overcomes suspicions and fears. People become close and share. And this is extraordinarily beautiful. Everyone needs regularly to unburden themselves in the presence of other caring Christians (James 5:16)

Whenever eight to twelve people are interested, a Christian growth group may be formed. The group may meet at Church, in a home, or any place providing privacy. Inform interested persons of expected outcomes and activities. Determine a mutually acceptable time and place for meeting. Decide upon a resource for studying.

It is not necessary for a minister to lead all groups. Leaders usually can be prepared by the Church’s pastor or director of adult ministries through several explanatory sessions. In some groups, leadership may rotate. The pastor or director of adult ministries should meet regularly with group leaders to provide coordination and direction. A group may study the Bible or thought-provoking Christian book.

Christian growth groups do not replace the need and value of worship services. Just the opposite occurs. They enrich and give new meaning to Sunday services. And these services can give new meaning to small group experiences. The worship service is for public proclamation and exposition of the gospel. Attendance at these services prevents small groups from becoming introverted, overly personal, and out of touch with the totality of God’s message to the world.

Small group experiences, on the other hand, prevent larger worship services from becoming overly formal, ritualized, impersonal, and sterile. Congregational worship services and Christian growth group experiences complement each other. Each provides what the other lacks. Both should be provided. Our Sues (and Joe’s) must not miss their meals.

“My loving Heavenly Father, give me courage to meet other struggling believers at the center of their lives, and not always at the mere fringes of their lives. Help me to lay down my personal fears and defenses and suspicions of others, that I might experience

the joyous freedom of being an honest and authentic person who communicates openly and intimately within the context of a small and caring group of earnest believers. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will no longer remain aloof in lonely isolation from other believers, but I now commit myself to become a faithful participant in a small Christian Growth Group, either by joining one or by starting one!

- Dorsey Brause -

NOTES:

Isaiah 58: 6-9

FASTING FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

I decided to go on a fast. I had not fasted for years, even though all Free Methodist Pastors are encouraged by the Book of Discipline (the official ‘Guidebook’ for the Denomination) to regularly fast. The second day of my fast, as I was driving to work, I was listening to a song by Michael W. Smith, when God broke through to my Spirit and I began to weep. A deep inner work of God moved my Spirit.

Why would one want to fast? It seems crazy in this age where we get impatient waiting in line at McDonalds. Perhaps that is the very reason we should fast. In this consumer age in which we are living, fasting and prayer are our strongest Spiritual disciplines to counteract the gluttonous influence of our culture.

Every time we say “yes” to our earthly desires, our desires say “more”. Self-discipline gives way to habit. Our habit of indulgence makes the soil of our spirit like concrete. Fasting is a powerful sledgehammer, which can break up habits and soften our souls. Th rough fasting and prayer, the habit of indulgence through saying “yes” and “more” is chipped away through a continual process of saying “no” and “less”.

The habits of life, such as watching TV, eating junk food, and the striving for recognition, pollute our minds, bodies, and spirits. A periodic cleansing is needed. The water or juice that we drink during a fast has a cleansing effect upon the body, just as the prayer and confession have a cleansing effect upon the soul. A fast that involves physical denial and Spiritual filling through prayer brings us back to balance.

How long should we fast? Fast until the last piece of concrete is broken, revealing the soft soil beneath, soil in which the seeds of the Gospel sprout and grow the fruit of the Spirit. Fast until one’s desire and cravings for material things such as food and pleasure, and emotional things such as recognition and pride, have completely disappeared and turned into an intense hunger for the Spiritual.

How should we fast? Fast with a humble and broken spirit, seeing yourself as nothing but what God has made you. Fast by continually yielding your body, mind, and spirit to God.

“Lord, is it your will for me to fast? If I were to fast, would my motives be right in your sight? What can I do to allow you to soften my Spirit, to break my hurtful habits, and enable You to exercise greater control of my life? Lord, I yield to you. I continually yield to you. I want to be soft in which your Spirit can grow.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will fast in a way that offers every ache of my stomach as a prayer to my God!

- Brock Hoyer-

NOTES:

Mark 4:26-29

SPIRITUAL GROWTH ACCORDING TO JESUS

Better than anyone else, Jesus understood the principles for dynamic spiritual growth.

“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain - first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” Mark 4: 26-29

My new lawn was a lush green color. Neighbors said it was the nicest lawn in the new subdivision where I lived. When hot weather came, at first I watered it. When I got my water bill, I remembered what someone had said to me about lawns being able to go dormant: “You have two choices, water your lawn every three days, or let your lawn go dormant. If you don’t water it and let it go dormant, it will come back again in the fall and spring.” I decided to save some money on water and let my lawn go dormant.

My lawn turned yellow, and then after two weeks of no rain, patches of it started to turn white. I realized that I had been given bad advice, or at least incomplete advice. I watered my lawn again. The patches that were yellow came back a lush green color. The white spaces stayed white.

I learned something about plants. If they are not growing, they are not healthy. The moment they stop growing, they begin to die. A mature plant can go without water longer than a young sprout because they have deeper roots (Jeremiah 17: 8). However, when a mature plant goes without water long enough, the root dies, no amount of water will bring it back.

It is no coincidence that Jesus used the plant more often than any other metaphor to describe the kingdom of God. What is about a plant that is similar to the Spiritual?

There are five Spiritual principles which come out of Jesus’ plant metaphors: the sowing principle, the germination principle, the soil principle, the growth principle, and the fruit (or harvest) principle.

These five principles describe an individual’s Spiritual growth process. The sowing principle states that God is continually sowing His Word, the Good News, everywhere. The germination principle states that faith may lie dormant, and then suddenly spring to life with incredible power. The soil principle states that we are the soil and must be

yielded to God for germination and growth to occur. The growth principle states that it does not matter how small faith begins; what matters is that it is continually growing. The fruit principle indicates that there will be Spiritual fruit (love, joy, peace, gentleness, patience etc.) In our lives and a harvest or multiplication of Christians as a result of the growth of God’s Spirit in us.

“Lord, thank you for sowing your good news everywhere I look. Help me to be more aware of your Spirit. Germinate your Spirit in me in power. Grow in me. I yield my life continually to you. Grow in me the Spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace and patience. May my faith be seed which you can use to sow upon my relatives, friends and neighbors. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today I will carefully water the lawn of my heart, to guarantee the continuing lush growth of spiritual life and vitality!

- Brock Hoyer-

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think that it is necessary for a following of Christ to develop the habit of personal involvement in a private “Daily Quiet Time”?**
- 2. Share ways in which you have personally enhanced your “Daily Quiet Time”, in terms of logistics and content and variety. Share some of the significant benefits which you have derived from your faithful observance of a personal “Daily Quiet Time.”**
- 3. Tell if you “identify” with the following statements: “We become so busy; our ‘DayTimers’ are full and we rush to this Old Testament that project. If we are not careful, the noise of our lives constantly breaks the silence we need in order to hear the voice of God. We must create times of silence to hear HIS voice, times for refreshing, strength, and peace.”**
- 4. From your own personal experience and from your study of God’s Word (Bible), have you found it to be true that, if you fail to take time to be with God (in solitude and in earnest prayer), God “makes time” to be with you (perhaps by “getting your attention” through an unexpected change of circumstances)? Why is it so difficult in our modern society for persons (believers) to obey God’s command: “*Be still and know that I am God*”? (Psalm 46)? Is it possible for one to “know God” without being “still”? Are you (as a child of God) learning daily to “take time to be holy, to speak often with your Lord, to abide in Him always whatever betide”?**
- 5. As you “go about your daily tasks”, have you discovered the joy of making an “altar of prayer” at the kitchen sink or at your carpenter’s bench or at your conference business table (or at a thousand other places)?**
- 6. Shall some specific “benefits” which you have enjoyed as a result of your faithful (weekly) participation in a “Christian Growth Group”.**
- 7. Should “Christian Growth Groups” replace the larger Church worship services, or simply be a supplement to them?**
- 8. Tell to what extent you agree (or disagree with the following statements: “Attendance at public worship services prevents small groups from becoming introverted, overly personal, and out of touch with the totality of God’s message to the world. Small group experiences, on the other hand, prevent larger worship services from becoming overly formal, ritualized, impersonal, and sterile.”**

- 9. What “benefits” can you personally derive from an occasional or regular practice of Fasting (going without food for a particular time and for a spiritual purpose)?**

- 10. From a study of a physical plant, what five principles can be learned which describe an individual’s spiritual growth process.**