

# Points to Ponder for God's Servants

*Preparation for Times of Distress*

VOLUME 1

Questions and Comments by  
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# POINTS TO PONDER FOR GOD'S SERVANTS

## *Preparation for Times of Distress*

(Volume 1)

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*"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."  
(Luke 2:19)*

*"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing  
in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."  
(Psalm 19:14)*

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Scripture quotations referenced as KJV are taken from: The Holy Bible, King James Version. First published in 1611.



## PREFACE

*“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land.... Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have not I commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:6-9)*

With these words and more, God told his servant Joshua how to prepare for the task God planned for him to do. I believe the key thought in the instructions was the command to meditate on God’s Word continually. This would lead Joshua to obedience, and to correct thinking about God: “God *said* he would always be with me; I am following God’s orders; God gave strength and courage to Moses: surely, he will help me, too.” This way of thinking would diminish fear and lift discouragement, replacing them with courage and strength. The outcome would be prosperity and success: that is, the job God had given Joshua to do would succeed and Joshua himself would flourish, as people would recognize that the Lord was with him.

God wants his servants to be thinking people. The Psalms are full of references to those who kept their minds occupied with God: *“Oh, how I love your Law! I meditate on it all day long”* (Psalm 119:97); *“On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night”* (Psalm 63:6). And this practice was carried on during stressful times as well as at times of ease. Psalm 63 is listed as a Psalm of David when he was in the desert of Judah, with people seeking to kill him! Right thinking gets us ready for the hard times that are sure to come.

While it is good to practice pondering, *what* we are thinking about also matters. Philippians 4:8 gives us a list of suggested topics for meditation: *“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”* Of course, all those adjectives apply to God and our Lord Jesus Christ! How free in spirit we would be if we would become adept at right thinking! We would know the truth – about God, ourselves and other people; situations we find ourselves in; our purpose in life; and eternity – and the truth would both set us free (John 8:32) and bring us peace (see Colossians 3:15,16).

We know that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a woman who pondered, because this fact is recorded twice in the Scriptures: Luke 2:19 and 2:51. People who ponder are often quiet and introspective, perhaps because not many people would understand the ruminations of their minds. Could Mary have talked freely about the visit from the angel Gabriel; the prophesies of Elizabeth and Zechariah; the visits from the shepherds and the wise men; the wonderful, yet fearful prophecy of Simeon in the Temple; the prophetic words of Anna; or the puzzling incident of Jesus with the priests when he was twelve? Mary’s mind must have been active all the time as she thought of these things in conjunction with the Scriptures she knew plus all the things she observed and heard daily. What a lot of sorting out she must have had to do!

And did it help her? Did it prepare her for the public work of Jesus, her son? We know she still worried about him at times (Mark 3:20-35), but we also know she had confidence in his ability to help in situations that looked impossibly bad (John 2:1-5). She had enough strength to be with Jesus when he was brutally crucified. She had been prepared all through his lifetime for that crucial moment by her pondering and her faith. Even though she must have felt a great stabbing of her soul (Luke 2:35) as she witnessed her son’s suffering, we do know that forty days later she was attending a prayer meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14) and was undoubtedly among those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and enabled to prophesy. How well prepared Mary would have been for that task!

I truly believe that the reactions we have to life's difficulties and stresses are influenced primarily by the way we think. In "Points To Ponder," I present a passage of Scripture and then a series of questions for the reader to consider. I wrote the questions mainly in the first person so that the pondering could be done in private, although I'm sure groups of people could also benefit by discussing the various points.

Limiting each topic to half a page was difficult, but I kept in mind that I only wanted to stimulate the reader's thinking and not to try to exhaust the subject. The topics I chose are those on which I have been pondering for years, so I *know* the subjects could not be exhausted anyway, no matter how much I wrote. That's the way it is with eternal things! As you read the questions and the additional points, you will be able to guess how I currently feel and think about many things (remember: I am still pondering!). But I also hope you will find some leeway in the format. Our Creator made us with varied personalities and certainly placed us in different circumstances. I do not believe that there is only one right way to think about everything, nor do I believe that simplistic formulas are fitting when it is the Eternal God we are dealing with. If you just begin considering these points, I will feel that my efforts will have been worthwhile.

A word of testimony in closing: I must say that my personal meditations through the years have led me to agree with the Apostle Paul who wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* I would wish the same for all of God's children. To God be the glory.

Verna Kwiatkowski  
October 28, 1998

## **POINTS TO PONDER**





*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.... Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (1 Peter 4:12-14,16,19)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I shocked when hard trials come, as though such things should not happen to believers? If so, where did I get this idea?
- Does thinking about the time of future glory – when all suffering will be not only be over, but rewarded – help me in the hard times?
- Is the blessing that comes from being insulted because of the name of Christ something that I would want?
- If it is possible for suffering to be part of God's will for us, as Peter says, will I stop trying to get rid of all suffering and instead say, "Not my will, but yours, be done"?

**Additional points:**

When we become believers we are considered to have participated with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection, as is pictured in baptism (see Romans 6). What a cause for rejoicing! But Peter tells us we are to rejoice when we participate in the *sufferings* of Christ! For Christ, his suffering was followed by glory, and that glory is forever, while his suffering was temporary. It is the same for us as we look to eternity. And we do not suffer alone. Our Lord is with us and he is our strength. Praise his name!

. . . . .

*Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants. I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. (Deuteronomy 32:1-4)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I, like Moses (the author of this verse), know how it feels to be so full of praise for God that I *must* speak, and I would like all of heaven and earth to listen?
- Do I want my teaching to be useful and practical for the hearers?
- Do I have only good things to say about God? Do I see God *and his works* as perfect?
- Would I be willing to go through hard experiences like Moses did, to arrive at the point of being totally centered on God?
- If I consider God as "a faithful God who does no wrong," do I have anything to complain about?

**Additional points:**

Forty years before this speech was given, Moses had argued with God that he was completely unable to speak in public. At first he needed someone to stand by and speak for him. Now listen to Moses! He just could not keep quiet and his orations were marvelous. May we also stand by and help people whose speaking gifts are in the developing stages. And no matter where we are in our own development, let us take courage from this fine example of serving God beautifully well into old age, to the very end of earthly life.

*I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:1-4)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I content to be fruitful, or do I desire to be “even more fruitful”? If I wish for the latter, what are my motives? Is it because it satisfies a personal need that I have, or for the sake of my King and his Kingdom?
- Do I fear God’s pruning? What sorts of things might he want to remove from my life so that I might be more fruitful?
- When Jesus asks me to remain in him and promises that he will then remain in me, does my heart reply, “That is exactly what I want to do – I want to live in union with you, Lord, more than anything else”?

**Additional points:**

Let us never be afraid to put ourselves into the hands of our Father, the Gardener. He knows exactly what to do to increase our fruitfulness, and will never harm us with his pruning, severe though it may seem to us. God’s servants belong to him. He knows in which direction he wants us to go. And he knows what we must go through to arrive at the place he has in mind for us. Trust him!

. . . . .

*Jesus said to (Peter), “Follow me!” Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them.... When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” (John 21:19-20,21-23)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I consider it a privilege to be one whom God has called to be his follower?
- Am I concerned about what God wants someone else to do? Do I sometimes focus on other servants to the point that I take my eyes off Jesus? Am I ever jealous of the work God has given to someone else?
- If I hear a story, do I make sure it is true rather than an unfounded rumor before I pass it on? Am I careful to understand the *whole* story accurately before I tell it to others?
- Do I realize that God does not have to give me all the information I might want? That he has the right to say to me, “Never mind about that, just follow me”?

**Additional points:**

Let us consider the fact that Jesus has called each of us by name and asked us to follow him. What a high calling! It should not matter that God has given us different abilities, gifts and responsibilities. Let us work together for him, and enjoy each other’s company as we do our assigned jobs.

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I feel that the apostle Paul is somehow in a category all by himself and that the conclusions he came to should not be expected of me? If so, why?
- Would it make my life easier if I could see things as Paul did?
- Is God’s supply of grace still sufficient for his servants today, even in hard times? If yes, do I believe that enough to draw on the supply and see what happens?
- Do I try to hide my weaknesses rather than “boasting” of them? Could “boasting” of weaknesses simply mean acknowledging that I have them?
- Will I accept my “thorns in the flesh” if it becomes clear that God means for them to remain? Can I see purpose in them?

**Additional points:**

Paul did not see himself as a “superman,” and we make a sad mistake when we put him on an unattainable pedestal. He had a clear understanding of his sinful nature and Christ’s grace. We have the same God that he had. Let us not be afraid to learn from Paul, to the point where his conclusions may also become ours.

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*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23,24)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I willing to admit that there may be some inappropriate things in my heart of which I am unaware?
- Like David, is my relationship with God so intimate that I would not want to hide anything from him? If so, would I be willing to ask God to search my heart?
- If I do this, would my purpose be that I really do want to walk in the everlasting way – that is, in God’s path?
- If God searches my heart and reveals to me that there is something there that is not pleasing to him, what would I do?
- On the other hand, if God lets me know that everything is healthy and well in my heart, would I believe it and get on with my life of service for him? Or would I continue to feel unworthy and somehow unclean, thus being unable to serve to the fullest?

**Additional points:**

God is the one who knows all the thoughts and intents of our hearts. We can hide nothing from him, so we may as well not try to do so. When God brings to our sincere minds the thought that we need to change in some way, we must listen. Confessing our hidden offenses cleanses us of our sin. Cleansed and forgiven, let us stop blaming ourselves for imagined wrongdoing and focus on serving him acceptably with all our hearts.

*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – your enemies will be the members of your own household.” Those who love their father or mother more than me are not worthy of me; those who love their son or daughter more than me are not worthy of me. Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them. (Matthew 10:34-39, paraphrased)*

**To ponder:**

- What makes me think that Jesus came to bring peace on the earth, when he clearly says just the opposite?
- Do I feel like a failure if I do not have peaceful relationships with all the members of my family? Who comes first in my life and my affections: God or my family? Does loving God preclude loving my family?
- Could the “sword” Jesus brought refer to the gospel? (See Hebrews 4:12.) If so, how much am I willing to endure to spread the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? To the extent that I would risk a breach of relationship with a family member?
- Does the thought of “finding my life” as a result of “losing it” for the sake of Jesus bring joy to my heart?

**Additional points:**

Loving God supremely does not shut out of our hearts any room for loving others. Rather, it enlarges our hearts to the extent that we can love everyone – even our enemies; even the family members who hurt us. Jesus warns us that by following him we may be opposed by members of our own family, but commands us to love one another. Be aware that cultic leaders often ask their followers to cut off all ties to their families. This is certainly not God’s way.

. . . . .

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)*

**To ponder:**

- What is my first reaction when someone treats me badly? Do I think that any revenge I might think up is worse than God’s wrath?
- If I took revenge, returning evil for evil, how would I be any better than the one who turned against me in the first place?
- In refusing to take revenge against my enemy, am I going against the current tide of thought in my culture? If so, am I willing to go against popular thought?
- Does “leaving room for God’s wrath” mean that we are allowed to wish for God to destroy our enemy, or cause bad things to happen to them? Would that be contrary to loving our enemy?
- Will I take the next step and actually do good to my enemy, overcoming evil with good?

**Additional points:**

From this passage it seems that there will always be relationship problems on this earth. It is our job as servants of God to see to it that we have done our best to restore the situation and live at peace. If we have, we must put the other person’s reaction into God’s hands.

*This is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:9-15, paraphrased)*

**To ponder:**

- Why is it that Jesus followed his instructions about how to pray with a comment about forgiveness? Might it be because that is the part of the prayer that is hardest to put into practice?
- Do I keep in mind that I sometimes sin against others and need their forgiveness? Am I happy when I receive it? How does it feel if they will not forgive me?
- Does my own need of forgiveness help me to be quick to forgive others? Am I at this moment withholding forgiveness from someone who has sinned against me? By God's grace, will I now forgive that person?
- Could a lack of forgiveness keep me from fully experiencing the joy and peace of the Lord today? Do I want these enough to forgive?

**Additional points:**

Is it the lack of forgiveness that is blocking the free flow of God's grace in our daily lives and in our churches? Is that why God sometimes seems far away? Let us hallow the name of our heavenly Father by following his instructions about forgiveness. If we truly want his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we *must* forgive our debtors.

. . . . .

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1,3-4, paraphrased)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I think of Heaven as a real country where I will live some day? Does thinking about Heaven fill me with hope and joy?
- Does the thought of our eternal state with God affect my attitudes toward life on this earth? How? Do I believe and take comfort in the fact that God loves me enough to want me to be with him forever?
- If the new order of things will contain none of the painful elements that cause us so much suffering, does it make sense that this current order of things *is* the place of suffering? If yes, am I able to accept death, mourning, crying and pain as normal events? Or am I shocked that such things should happen to me and those whom I love?

**Additional points:**

God knows how to develop in us the patience he wants us to have. We are able to endure a lot of suffering if we understand that it will end sometime, in this life or the next, and that our endurance is noticed and matters. How good of God to give us a glimpse into the future state when there will be no more suffering of any kind! May the thought of God *personally* wiping away our tears give us encouragement and strength in our current painful situations.

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? [God] sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.... Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and his mighty strength, not one of them is missing. (Isaiah 40:21,22,25,26)*

**To ponder:**

- Isn't it obvious that God wants us to ponder? The pages of the Bible have many questions ready for pondering! Do I spend time thinking about the wonders of God's creation? Do I enjoy his word pictures and even make up some of my own in my musings about God?
- In thinking about God as Creator, do I sometimes feel insignificant, like a grasshopper, in comparison to him? Is that how I am supposed to feel: like a created being that is in awe of my Creator?
- If I can trust God to keep the stars in their appointed courses, and understand that he knows the *names* of all the stars he made, what do I have to worry about? Do I trust that he knows the names of all his children, too, including my name? Will he not also see to it that I am safe in his sight and will never turn up as "missing"?

**Additional points:**

What a mighty God we serve! Let us make it a practice to look up into the sky and say, "My Father made those stars and that moon!" Let us be proud of our God and his works – and be grateful that we are his!

. . . . .

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome with trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O, Lord, save me!" The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the simple hearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.... How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. (Psalm 116:1-6, 12-14)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I spend time mulling over the moments when God rescued me in my great need? Am I willing to admit that sometimes I am a needy person? Am I able to let people know how God helped me?
- Does my love for the Lord increase as I consider his mercy toward me? Have I ever made a vow to God in gratitude for his help? Have I kept it?
- Am I willing to spread the news of God's salvation as a way of "repaying" him for his goodness to me? Will I publicly live for him?

**Additional points:**

Personal testimony benefits both the teller and the listener. It is healthy for us to ponder the various situations in which God helped us and to form the events into stories to be told, as the Psalmist did. The listener is then confronted with a powerful witness, *especially* if our story is accompanied by a changed, God-honoring life. Our testimonies are unique. Let us tell and live them for God's glory.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)*

**To ponder:**

- How did the Israelites get to be in Babylon as captives? (See 2 Kings 24:10-16.) Had they not been warned again and again by the prophets that this would happen if they did not give up their idol worship and serve God faithfully? Has God been warning me that I need to be careful lest I stray from the path he has marked out for me? Will I heed his warning?
- Is it possible that the Israelites were feeling sorry for themselves and thus had lost their joy and the ability to sing? Am I ever guilty of self-pity? Have I lost the joy of the Lord? Can this joy be restored? How?
- Is it possible to sing the songs of the Lord in a "foreign land," that is, in a place or situation where we would rather not be? If we could, what effect might this have on the hearers?
- Am I living in the past, remembering how wonderful things used to be, to the extent that I cannot enjoy the present? Is this what God would want me to do?

**Additional points:**

In a real sense, all of God's children are living in a foreign land, for our true home is Heaven, where our citizenship lies. If we want to have an impact on this world, we need to be able to sing God's praises and let the joy of the Lord motivate our actions. Let us get our harps out of the poplar trees and sing for the glory of God.

. . . . .

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:29-32)*

**To ponder:**

- Is all the talk that comes out of my mouth wholesome and helpful? Do I enjoy building others up?
- Does the very thought of grieving the Holy Spirit make me shudder? Do I think about the great work the Holy Spirit has done for me in sealing me for the day of redemption? Do I appreciate the security that comes from this sealing?
- Are bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and malice some of the things that grieve the Holy Spirit? If so, wouldn't it make sense to get rid of all these? Is it possible to live without these behaviors?
- Do I find it easy to forgive others? Does remembering that God forgave me help me to be a forgiving person? Am I gentle and sympathetic, kind and compassionate with others?

**Additional points:**

The next verse, Ephesians 5:1, says *"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* Our Father wants us to reflect his characteristics. That should be our desire as well. We can do it, by his grace and with his Spirit.

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:8-12)*

**To ponder:**

- If David, the author of this Psalm, knew God's character so well *long before* Jesus died on the cross, how well should God's people know him today?
- Are there believers who feel just the opposite of what David expressed: that God is basically an angry God who is always accusing and never pleased with us? That God gets even with us when we sin? Do I ever think that way myself? Why?
- How high are the heavens above the earth? Do I believe God loves me – and others – with an immeasurable love? How far is the east from the west? Do I realize that my sins are gone *forever*?
- How free would God's people be if each of us knew that David's words in this passage were true? How would this freedom affect our homes? Our churches? Our communities? The Kingdom of God?

**Additional points:**

How did David get to know God so well? He had a wonderful inner life, a heart for God, as exposed in the opening verses of this poem: *"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits"* (Psalm 103:1-2). Like David, let us remember that God is holy and that we owe him praise, for he is so good to us. Let us center our thoughts on God and his compassionate, gracious, loving character.

. . . . .

*This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and in depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)*

**To ponder:**

- How might the Philippian believers have felt when they read what Paul was praying for them? How would I feel if someone wrote saying they were praying this same prayer for me? Would I be encouraged to try to live up to that prayer? Would I feel that the writer saw potential in me?
- Do my prayers have a spiritual dimension to them? Or do I concentrate mainly on physical needs?
- Do I delight in seeing others grow spiritually in Christ? As much as I enjoy watching children grow physically?
- Am I concerned about the glory and praise of God, as Paul was? If so, will I live a life of maturity (righteous living) and encourage others to do the same?

**Additional points:**

Paul often told his correspondents what he was praying for them. Perhaps we would do well to follow his example. As I think of how the above prayer must have warmed the hearts of the Philippians, I can think of some of my own correspondents whose hearts need warming. Can you? Whether our prayers are original or copied from the Scriptures (because they say exactly what we would wish to say), let us encourage each other with written prayers – to the glory and praise of God.



*God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin. (1 John 1:5-7)*

**To ponder:**

- No darkness *at all*! Do I want to walk in light so incredibly bright? Might this involve change in my lifestyle? If the light of God were to show me that I am walking in ways of darkness that I must give up, would I be willing to do so? Would God help me to do so? How?
- Is it possible to walk in the light and walk in darkness at the same time? Do I really think it does not matter how I live as long as Jesus is my Savior? Where might such a thought come from?
- Do I want to be pure and clean? Am I able to confess my sins? Does the truth that the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from every sin make my heart melt with gratitude?
- Do I desire fellowship with other believers? Would walking in the light with others help to prepare me for my heavenly home? Will there be any “darkness at all” there?

**Additional points:**

Hear God’s challenge from Ephesians 5: *“You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil”* (Ephesians 5:8,10-11,15-16). Brothers and sisters, let us walk in the light! Let us enjoy fellowship with our God and one another!

. . . . .

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I take time to consider God’s great plan of salvation, as Paul did when he was writing to the Romans? If I don’t, why not? If I do, does it cause my mouth to burst forth with a paean of praise from deep inside my being?
- Am I able to be spontaneous in my times of praise and worship, as it seems Paul was in this passage?
- Do I realize that I will never be able to plumb the depths of God’s wisdom or be able to know God’s ways completely? How does that make me feel?
- Do I truly believe that God has never needed a counselor? Am I ever guilty of trying to tell God what to do?
- Do I understand that God does not owe *anything* to *anyone*? Do I ever feel that perhaps God should repay me for my good behavior or deeds?

**Additional points:**

It seems to me that thinking of God as Paul does in this doxology would put us in our proper place as his servants: bowing at his feet (at least in our grateful hearts) saying, “Here I am, at your command. Cleanse me. May your will, not mine, be done.” Let us bow down together and acknowledge his unfathomable wisdom and knowledge.

*I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.... He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals.... The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but they cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. (Psalm 135:5-8,15-17)*

**To ponder:**

- How do I feel about people who worship idols? Do I long to tell them about our God who is greater than all gods? What other kind of idols might attract our attention and praise besides graven images? Am I ever guilty of worshipping anyone or anything other than my God?
- Do I agree that the Lord does whatever pleases him? If I do, how does that make me feel? Secure? Proud of God? Does it make sense for him to do anything else besides whatever pleases him?
- Do I see God as having control over the weather? Do I notice the part the Lord has played in history – after the close of the Bible record? In our lifetime? Can I clearly see that the Lord is at work right now? Why would people still worship idols?

**Additional points:**

The Psalmist looks at God, then at idols, and concludes that there is *no* comparison! After his description of idols he says, “*Those who make then will be like them, and so will all who trust in them*” (v.18). David, the writer of many Psalms (though perhaps not this one), is proof that those who trust in the living God also become *like* him: they speak, see, hear and live spiritually! This Psalmist and David would challenge us to turn from idols and “Praise the Lord”!

. . . . .

*Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Hebrews 5:12–6:2, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Is my idea of what constitutes “milk” and “solid food” in the Christian life the same as that of the writer to the Hebrews? Do I consider the teachings about Christ and all the basic doctrine of the faith to be elementary, that is, within the grasp of all believers? Have I grasped these truths?
- What would characterize my life as a mature believer? Do I want the responsibility that goes with maturity?
- Am I able to be patient with the immature? Do I delight in seeing the growing maturity of other believers? Why? Who benefits when God’s people are mature? Who loses?

**Additional points:**

Jesus said, “*The Counselor, the Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*” (John 14:26). By the power of the Spirit, we *can* learn everything we need to know and live a life of righteousness. Let us go on to maturity!

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”.... “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:1,3-6, NIVI)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I believe God is withholding some good thing from me? Something I must have, even though God has forbidden it?
- Knowing that the devil, though crafty, is not very creative (he is *not* God!), what can I learn about his ways from this passage? Eve was tempted in at least three areas before she took the fruit. Which of these areas might tempt me the most?
- Would I really like to be “like God”? What would be involved in being “like God”? Or am I content to be God’s created being ... his sheep ... the object of his love? Does God have the “right” to limit my activities? Why? Or why not?
- Do I feel that Eve and Adam had a legitimate excuse for their disobedience? Why? Or why not?

**Additional points:**

None of us is immune from temptation, but we do not have to give in to it (see 1 Corinthians 10:13). The devil is *never* to be trusted; he is a liar! Let us take the advice of James 4:7,8: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.”

. . . . .

*During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (Hebrews 5:7) / Jesus wept. (John 11:35)*

**To ponder:**

- Who designed my tear ducts and the whole process of crying? Didn’t God say that everything he had made was very good? Would my Creator build this system into my body and then tell me not to use it?
- Do I have the idea that I should not cry? That if I do, I should be ashamed of myself? If so, where did I pick up that idea? Will I let society (or my family/friends) have so much control over me that I feel guilty for crying?
- Does it mean anything to me that Jesus cried when he was on earth? That he even cried aloud and in the presence of other people? If he had been ashamed of his tears, would he have allowed the incidents where he cried to be recorded for me to read? Is it not logical that his crying in various situations and for varied reasons gives me the freedom to do likewise?
- Knowing that Jesus allowed others to cry in his presence without embarrassment (see Luke 7:36-50), will I do the same? Would my friends benefit if I did not try to stop their tears?

**Additional points:**

Job said his eyes poured out tears to God (Job 16:20). While God challenged and corrected Job’s thinking, he did not scold him for crying. The Psalmist’s attitude seems healthy: “*put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?*” (Psalm 56:8, KJV). God sees when our tears fall, knows why we are crying and understands. Trust him!

**[Note:** The next five “Points to Ponder” come from Acts 10:1-11:18. Please read this entire passage as the context for these meditations.]

*[Cornelius] and all his family were devout and God-fearing ... One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!” ... “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” (From Acts 10:1-8)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I surprised to find God favorably noticing a family who did not yet know about Jesus Christ? Do I have in mind a specific set of requirements that I think people must fill before God would accept them? Am I content with the thought that the Lord knows who are his? And that sometimes I do not know?
- Does God have a record of my prayers and good deeds? Does God see me as devout and God-fearing? Would I immediately obey a specific request from the Lord as Cornelius did?
- Does it bring me pleasure to know that God knows where I am at all times, even if I, like Peter, am visiting someone?

**Additional points:**

In Psalm 139 David concluded that anywhere he might go, God would see him. God saw Jonah: on the ship and inside the big fish. And God knew that Peter was in Joppa visiting Simon, whose address and occupation he also knew. “*You are the God who sees me,*” Hagar said to the Lord (Genesis 16:13). God sees us and knows us: think about that.

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*[Peter] saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth ... It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles ... and birds ... Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (From Acts 10:9-23)*

**To ponder:**

- How would I feel if a long-standing practice of mine were challenged by a vision from God? Would I think, as Peter may have, that God was merely testing my devotion? Would I feel that I had the right to say “no” because my practices were “obviously” right?
- Am I able to accept change? Am I proud of my obedience to God’s commands? Do I believe God is able to get my attention any way he pleases? Would my life with God be more of an adventure if I kept my eyes and mind open to God’s directives today?
- Am I glad to be chosen by God to perform a task even if it means changing my plans? Or doing something I may not wish to do? Who is in charge of my life?

**Additional points:**

I find it significant that Peter began to discover the meaning of his unusual experience “*while he was still thinking about the vision*” (v. 19). In his contemplative frame of mind, the Holy Spirit was able to give him further instructions, which Peter followed immediately. That is the only response that makes sense. Jesus said, “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I say?*” (Luke 6:46). *That does not make sense.* May we be as quick to obey our Lord as Peter was.

*Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along ... Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius ... fell at his feet in reverence. "Stand up," [Peter] said, "I am only a man myself. You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any one impure or unclean." (From Acts 10:23-29)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I willing to take other believers with me to share in my adventure with God? Do I let people know how God is dealing with me? Or would I rather keep silent and work alone?
- Like Cornelius, do I have so much faith in God that I invite my family and friends to come and see what God is going to do?
- How would I feel if someone bowed down at my feet in reverence? Would I accept the worship or, like Peter, refuse it? Why? Is there any human being that I feel is worthy of worship?
- Am I so at ease with God that I can go on an assignment without knowing exactly what will be expected of me? Or do I want all the details worked out before I go so I can be well prepared?

**Additional points:**

The story of Peter and Cornelius is fascinating to me. We can easily enter into the excitement and suspense that both Cornelius and his gathered friends and Peter and his companions must have felt: what was going to happen?! And God's perfect timing in each part of the story is thrilling. Can you think of a situation in your life when the circumstances fit together so well that it *had* to be God who worked it all out? Why not write it down, like this story was?

. . . . .

*Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right ... You know what has happened throughout Judea ... They killed [Jesus] by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen ... All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. (From Acts 10:30-48)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I so in tune with God that I would go into anyone's house, even the house of people I do not normally associate with? Could I admit it if my previous feelings about these people had been wrong? Could I be as gracious to them as Peter was to Cornelius and his family?
- Will I risk asking God to search my heart and show me if I am harboring prejudice against any group of people? What will I do if I see that I am indeed prejudiced in some way? Can I serve God fully if I have a prejudiced heart?
- Do I rejoice when people from outside my group respond to the Gospel? Do I accept all believers into full fellowship, as shown by the water baptism of those in Cornelius's house?

**Additional points:**

What a thrill it is when a God-appointed teacher and God-appointed students get together! Both learn in such situations. Peter's borders enlarged considerably as he gave a clear Gospel presentation to a Gentile audience. In Heaven I imagine the awe and rejoicing over this particular day still goes on ... and on ...! Let us join in the rejoicing!

*The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened ... When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life." (From Acts 11:1-18)*

**To ponder:**

- How do I respond to criticism? Do I think I can follow God's will in my life and not be misunderstood or criticized by someone? Can God use these difficult situations to further his kingdom? If they can work out for good, must they be feared?
- Am I able to be gracious to my critics? Do I see the importance of communicating – of clearly explaining the reasons for my actions? Do I see the value of having co-workers who can verify what happened?
- If I am a critic, am I open to listening to explanations? If I find that I have been wrong, am I able to lay aside my prejudices and change my thinking? To the point of actually rejoicing with and becoming an ally of the one I had criticized?
- Does God's grace and strength extend to situations like these? How important is it that there be unity and peace in God's family? Why?

**Additional points:**

God's servants are always learning from him, which involves making changes in our thinking and behavior at times. We can expect that we will be watched and challenged. Let us see these times as opportunities to lift people higher through our patient, loving responses.

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*[Mordecai sent this answer to Esther]: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent ... relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" [Esther replied]: "Go gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me ... for three days. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:13-16)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I feel I should be set apart and protected from the calamities that face the rest of humanity? Is there anywhere on this earth that I can go to be completely safe from disaster?
- Do I have the faith to believe that, although my situation may not have been of my own choosing, it may be part of God's plan for me? If I refuse to do what God wants me to do, will his work still go on? Could the Lord use someone else instead of me to do the job?
- Am I able to admit my weakness and request support from others? Does courage mean absence of fear? Will I do what God wants me to do, even if I die as a result?

**Additional points:**

*"Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," Jesus said (John 15:13). I see love, as well as duty and courage, behind Esther's offer to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. What eternal benefits she is reaping now! May we, too, live sacrificial lives on earth to the glory of our Lord Jesus.*

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV) / “There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.” (Isaiah 48:22,18, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I understand that “desperately wicked” human hearts are capable of conceiving and carrying out unspeakable deeds against other people? Am I shocked when I hear of such occurrences? As if people couldn’t possibly be that evil?
- Does realizing that Jesus Christ had to die as a sacrifice for my sins help me understand the seriousness and depth of my own sinful nature? Do I appreciate the grace of God in my life? Does this keep me from joining with others in their sinful acts?
- Do I realize that this same grace is extended to the one(s) whose dreadful deeds and attitudes cause me sorrow and grief? Do I want the depraved ones to come to peace with God? Or would I rather have them stay in a state of “no peace”? Do I believe God can turn a wicked person into a righteous one?
- Does God’s sorrow over the wicked cause me to draw near to him for comfort when I sorrow for the same reason?

**Additional points:**

I hear such longing in the “if only ...” of God recorded by Isaiah. And God *knows* the depth of the wickedness involved! Many Bible stories are recorded to let us view human wickedness, beginning with Cain’s murder of his brother (Genesis 4). Of course we sorrow when we hear of atrocities, but why should we be shocked? May our peace be like a river ...

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*But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphant procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I find pleasure in thinking of myself as part of a victory parade, with God at the head showing the way, beating out the cadence? Am I content to let God be the leader? Or do I sometimes covet that position for myself?
- Is the knowledge of Christ fragrant to me? Do I breathe deeply of his glories until the aroma permeates me as well? When I am with other people, can they “smell” that I live in the presence of Christ?
- Am I aware that my Christ-likeness is pleasing to some people and offensive to others? Am I willing to have some people avoid me because they do not want to be reminded of Jesus Christ and his claims on their life?

**Additional points:**

The word picture in verse 14 reminds me of the parade of Israelites in the wilderness, with God leading the way in a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. The Israelites had no choice but to follow God’s leading; otherwise they would have died. Some of the people they met tried to kill the Israelites and others (like Rahab) pondered and decided to join with God’s people. May we allow our lives be sweet-smelling sacrifices for the glory of God and for the sake of others.

*Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:18-20)*

**To ponder:**

- Like Paul, am I able to let go of fellow believers who insist on shipwrecking their faith? Do I think that by clinging to these people I can control them, or make them change their minds after they have already made them up?
- Is it cruel to let people make their own choices? To let them exercise free will? Even if we know their choices are bad ones? Was it cruel of God to let Adam and Eve choose to disobey him?
- Am I glad I have free will? Will I freely choose to do God's will? Will I encourage others (by example and word) to live the way Paul encouraged Timothy to live?
- Does the fact that true believers belong to God forever help me to let them go? To let them suffer the consequences of their choices? Is God able to deal with his children without my help?

**Additional points:**

How marvelous their special relationship must have been for both Paul and Timothy. They were both mentor/student and "father"/"son." Fortunate is the person who has a mature servant of God looking out for their welfare! If Timothy had chosen to shipwreck his faith, I imagine Paul would have also let him go, though with great sorrow. Timothy, however, remained faithful. May we follow his example!

. . . . .

*Warn [qualified teachers] before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen ... Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:14,16-18)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I pay heed to this warning against quarreling about words? How could such quarreling ruin the listeners? Would I want to do that?
- What is godless chatter? Do I indulge in it? What is its opposite?
- Do I think about the effect my words will have on others? On myself? Would I want to indulge in *anything* that would make me more and more ungodly?
- Am I able to see the end results of my actions, so that I stay on course and do not wander away from the truth? Am I able to warn others when I see them beginning to wander? Or do I feel I should mind my own business and not risk offending people by giving them warnings?

**Additional points:**

Hymenaeus and Philetus, though believers, were dangerous people, causing much trouble in the churches. And it seems that they may have been caught up in arguing about petty points and empty, rambling talk, rather than sexual immorality or other behaviors we would quickly recognize as evil. *"Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. Believers, this should not be"* (James 3:10). Let us be careful!



*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you ... And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?... hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord ... Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast ... (From 1 Corinthians 5:1-8)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I expect a higher standard of behavior from believers than I do from unbelieving people? Why? Is this fair? Is it possible?
- How do I react when I hear of sexual immorality among believers? Would I feel differently if the sinner were a person I knew? Maybe someone from my church? Why?
- Why might the Corinthian believers have been “proud” about the situation Paul condemns?
- Could I take part in putting out of fellowship someone who is sinning sexually? Why? What would be the purpose of such action? Do I believe it possible for the sinful nature to be destroyed? Would this result be valuable enough to warrant excommunicating the immoral one?

**Additional points:**

Paul was horrified that the church did not seem to care about what was going on. How was the man to change his ways if everyone kept on welcoming him as usual? Excommunication might wake him up to his evil ways and cause him to change. *And* it would help to keep the evil behavior from spreading through and infecting the rest of the church. Withdrawing our protection and thus “handing the sinner over to Satan” may be, for all involved, the loving thing to do.

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*I have written to you ... not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I comfortable mingling with “people of this world” who are immoral, greedy, swindlers or idolaters? Can these people become believers? If so, what would happen to their behavior? How will these people hear about Jesus if we refuse to have anything to do with them?
- Will I follow Paul’s command of not associating with believers who are involved in the immoral behavior described above? What would I do if the offending person were a relative of mine? In that case, would the command “not even to eat with such a man” be rescinded?
- If excommunication on this level were carried out among the believers today, might the prospects of being shunned help keep me from falling into these same behaviors? Would it glorify God?

**Additional points:**

We are often hindered from taking action when a person is involved in immorality because we are afraid of judging others. “*Do not judge, or you, too, will be judged,*” Jesus said in Matthew 7:1. But listen to Paul: “*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?... Expel the wicked man from among you*” (1 Corinthians 5:12,13). Do we misunderstand judging?

*If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you ... The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him ... If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven ... I have forgotten in the sight of Christ ... in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (From 2 Corinthians 2:5-11)*

**To ponder:**

- How can I know if a person's repentance is sincere or not? Do I realize that, while I may not know, God does? Do I give people the benefit of the doubt? Would I want to risk driving someone to "excessive sorrow" by refusing to accept his or her repentance?
- Am I aware of Satan's schemes? Do I desire always to be on God's side in spiritual battles? Even if it means I must forgive the repentant one? Even if that person has hurt me deeply?
- Am I able to forget what I have forgiven? Or do I always connect the person with the past sin? Would I want to be looked at that way?
- Has Satan ever outwitted me? Have I learned from the incident?

**Additional points:**

Here we see that the Corinthian believers did indeed expel their sinning brother, and that the excommunication had its desired effect: the brother was repentant and wished to be restored! Another change was now required of the congregation (and change is not easy): would they forgive their brother, forget the past and receive him back? Paul said it was necessary for them to do so or Satan might yet win! This is certainly something for us to ponder.

. . . . .

*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1,2)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I clear as to the high standard our Father has for me? Does he really expect me to live a sinless life? Would there be any pleasure for me in such a life? Would God be pleased if I lived this way?
- Do I care what my Father thinks of me? Or is my only thought the comfort of knowing he will receive me in the end, no matter what I do?
- Am I grateful for my defense attorney – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One? Do I realize that this lawyer has never lost a case? Does that help me to relax and joyfully serve him rather than becoming nervously introspective concerning possible sin?
- Do I appreciate the tremendous amount of love wrapped up in these two verses? Does the warm, parental love of God for me help keep me from sinning against him? How could I hurt someone who loves me so?

**Additional points:**

How well our Father knows his children! His plan for us is that we, whom he has graciously forgiven, "*go, and sin no more*" (John 8:11, KJV). 2 Peter 1:3 shows that God has provided us with the power to carry out his plan: "*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*" May our godly behavior show how much we appreciate our Lord Jesus Christ and our loving heavenly Father.

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we shall be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in them purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)*

**To ponder:**

- What difference is there in being *called* a child of God and *being* a child of God? Do I realize that I am *now* a child of God? How does this understanding affect my daily living?
- Do I mind being misunderstood by the world? Does knowing that Jesus was similarly misunderstood help me in my situation? How?
- Am I excited like a child to know that great things are in store for me when I see Jesus? Do I think about these hidden things? Can I wait until God is ready to surprise me with the glories that lie ahead?
- Do I truly believe that Jesus will appear some day? That I will actually see him? That I will be like him? How would such a hope make me want to be pure? Do I really want to be pure? If not, why not?

**Additional points:**

I really enjoy the word “lavished”: it makes me think of splashing, of extravagance, of fun. To me it is beautifully illustrated by the fragrant sacrifice of Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8). She poured a whole pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, all over the feet of Jesus! Some thought that was wasteful, but Jesus didn’t. He knew that soon his precious blood would be poured out to express God’s lavish love for us. Was it a waste? “Surely not!” I say. What do you think?

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*Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish ... the birds ... and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1:26-28)*

**To ponder:**

- “Let us ... let them”: Am I able to let God do the things only he can do? What are some of these things? Do I also accept the fact that God has given responsibilities to people? What does God want me to do?
- Is it important for me to know that I was made in the image of God? That both males and females were so created?
- In the passage above, is there any hint that God wanted one of the humans to rule over the other? Would the equal partnership Adam and Eve were given to carry out God’s work be practical in doing the work of the Lord today? Why? Is equality among the sexes possible today?

**Additional points:**

Human beings – males and females – were God’s idea! The certainty that we *all* are made in the image of God should give us a solid basis for feelings of worth and will affect how we treat others. In this sinful, fallen world people may discredit or overlook us, but to God we – and everyone else in the world – are important: here by design. Let us let this wonderful truth permeate and stabilize our lives.

*Moses answered ... “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today ... The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still ... Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other ... so neither went near the other all night long. (From Exodus 14:10-20)*

**To ponder:**

- How important is it for the leader of God’s people to be a person of faith?
- Does my confidence in God spill over and inspire those around me? Do I have a calming effect on frightened people? Do my actions as well as my words ring true when I tell others: *“The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still”*?
- Am I able to trust God even when I am not sure just how he will fight for us? Can I let God handle the details? Do I delight in the variety of ways our creative God fights on behalf of his people?
- Do I agree with the apostle Paul: *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* (Romans 8:33). Is there any enemy I need to fear? Am I patient with believers who are still fearful?

**Additional points:**

From his past experience Moses certainly knew that God had the power to deliver his people! But there was a long period of time in his life when he had very little confidence and did not feel able to be the leader God wanted him to be. His story is so inspiring to me! I wonder if my personal story, written down, would exude faith and be an encouragement to God’s people. Would yours? May our faith increase!

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*Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the Lord. But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. (Isaiah 52:11,12)*

**To ponder:**

- What can I learn from the restrictions imposed on God’s servants in the Old Testament against touching unclean things? Have I been dabbling with or delving into practices that are not fitting for me as a servant of God? Things that do not glorify my Lord?
- Will I heed God’s warning to stop the inappropriate behaviors and leave the sin that so easily entangles (Hebrews 12:1)? Will I let God purify me? Do I realize that I am a forgiven sinner? Does that help me in God’s work? Do I extend to others the grace I myself have received?
- Am I relieved – and humbled – to know that God will lead me back onto the right paths and will also stand guard behind me?

**Additional points:**

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God ... “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters ...” Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1)*

*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteous One will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. (Isaiah 58:6-9)*

**To ponder:**

- Is this the kind of fasting in which I take part? In which I delight? Or do I, like those described in Isaiah 58:1-5 [please read], consider fasting to be mainly a sacrificial religious practice?
- Am I concerned about the issues that concern God? Do I care about people who are being treated unfairly? About those who are poor and needy? Would I like my light to break forth like the dawn? Do people see my good deeds and glorify my Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16)?
- To what extent does healing, God's guidance and glory, and his help depend on my actions and attitudes? Does God answer me?

**Additional points:**

In this passage and the previous two, God is mentioned as going before his people and also being behind them. I think of the past as being "behind us": therefore in the realm of the Rear Guard. Next time a memory from your past tries to haunt or harm you, cry out: "Lord, be my Rear Guard!" and see what happens! In my experience, God handles my churning emotions immediately and leaves me marveling and grateful.

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*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) / I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. (Romans 9:1-4)*

**To ponder:**

- Is it possible for joy and sorrow to exist in me at the same time, as seems to have been Paul's experience? If I am in anguish, can I also be sincerely thankful in my circumstances? If so, would the joy and gratitude within me make the sorrow and anguish more bearable?
- Like Paul, am I able to experience a full range of emotions? Or do I consider some emotions to be inappropriate for believers? How can I keep my emotions in balance? Why did Paul check his conscience? To see if he were really sorrowing and in anguish? Was he that stable? Am I?
- How much do I care for the unbelieving people around me? Does true concern for them have to make me a somber, joyless person?

**Additional points:**

Years ago, from pondering these two passages, I came to realize that we can experience many emotions simultaneously. I picture our emotions running horizontally within us, though they twist and turn according to our situation. Thus our sorrow and grief may be plainly showing on the surface while the deep joy, also present, may be hidden for the moment. At other times, our joy may be showing, but sorrow is there underneath. What do you think? For me this truth was life changing!

**[Note:** The next fourteen meditations are based on the emotional experiences Jesus endured during his earthly ministry and how he handled them.]

*Jesus said to the man ... “Stand up in front of everyone.” Then Jesus said to them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and [it] was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot ... how they might kill Jesus. (From Mark 3:1-6)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I brave enough to stand up for what I know to be right in God’s sight even if others disagree with me? Even if they *violently* disagree? How legalistic am I? Which comes first in my mind: strict observance of religious rules or doing good on behalf of needy people?
- Does stubbornness of heart trouble me? Am I surprised to read that Jesus was angry and deeply distressed in this incident? Are anger and deep distress ever appropriate for God’s servants today? What are some things that stir up these emotions in me? Does it help me to know that Jesus felt these emotions without sinning?

**Additional points:**

We as believers do not need to feel guilty for having and feeling emotions. God designed us the way we are and pronounced his creation “good.” What we do with our emotions is another story. *“In your anger do not sin”* (Psalm 4:4). What did Jesus do in this incident? First, he gave the Pharisees great points to ponder! Then he healed the man in front of them: he simply did the will of his Father (John 6:38)!

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*On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of robbers.’ ” (Mark 11:15-17)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I surprised at the physical action Jesus took: upending tables and benches and chasing people away? Why would such action startle me? I certainly do not think Jesus was doing wrong here, do I?
- Might I be carrying around a childhood memory of a “meek and mild” Jesus? Will I lay aside this image and search the gospels for the one who “[*was*] *tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15)? Which image of Jesus will encourage me more in my Christian life? Might I at times react physically without sinning? See Ephesians 4:26,27 for more help in dealing with anger.

**Additional points:**

Mark 11:13,14 tells us what happened prior to this temple incident: Jesus was hungry and had been disappointed by a barren fig tree where he had expected to find some breakfast. He cursed that tree: *“May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”* Besides this, he knew he was going to Jerusalem to die (Mark 10:32-34)! The desecration of the temple area was one more distressing thing. How did Jesus handle it? He rightly showed his authority and he taught the people, while giving them a very vivid object lesson! May we respond to Jesus with awe!

*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1:10,11) / Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:17,18) / From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. (John 6:66,67) / Could you not keep watch for one hour? (Mark 14:37)*

**To ponder:**

- Might Jesus have been disappointed in these instances? Why would that be? Did he have expectations for his people? Does Jesus expect certain behavior from me? Is my life bringing him pain or pleasure?
- Have I recognized Jesus for who he really is? Am I thankful for all he has done – and is doing – for me? Am I steadfast and dependable, one who intends to remain faithful to him to the end? Am I alert, ready and willing to do whatever he asks of me?
- In his times of disappointment, was Jesus able to continue carrying on his work? Does my connection with Jesus, and knowing he understands, help stabilize me in my cycle of expectations and letdowns? Am I relieved to know I need not feel guilty for feeling disappointed?

**Additional points:**

I used to say that if we have no expectations, we will have no disappointments. But how can we live with no expectations at all? Would that even be godly? The fact that we can grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30) shows that God has standards for us. Two sure things: God is able to teach us truth so we do not demand too much of others, and God is able to comfort us in our disappointments.

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*Very early in the morning ... Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Mark 1:35-39)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I, like Jesus, need to be alone at times? To have private time to commune with my Lord? How do I react when my solitude is interrupted? Am I flattered to hear that people are looking for me? That they really want me?
- Do I feel that I must give in to every demand that people make of me? Have I pondered enough the fact that in this instance Jesus said “no” to a great opportunity to serve the people? How was he able to do that? Did the clearly thought out plan that he had in mind for his life help?
- Do I know what God wants me to do? Will I resist the attempts of others, no matter how well meaning, to get me off the path of God’s will? Will I risk hurting the feelings of others to do so?

**Additional points:**

I am so glad this passage is in the Bible! First, it validates my own need to spend time alone, especially after a busy time of service. Jesus understands that! Second, it tells me I do not have to accept every ministry opportunity that is offered to me. Jesus, by his example here, gives us “permission” to say no at times! Without guilt!

[Note: Please read Matthew 23:1-36 as a basis for the next two points.]

*Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat ... But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything is done for others to see ... they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have people call them "Rabbi." (From Matthew 23:1-7)*

**To ponder:**

- Why would Jesus have said these grim things about the religious leaders? What purpose would this talk have served to the crowds? To his disciples? To the teachers of the law and the Pharisees? Would I dare to speak like that? Even if, like Jesus, all I said was true? Or would I think I was sinning if I spoke unfavorably about anyone?
- James says *"Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect"* (James 3:2). Jesus filled that description. Do I need to enlarge my thinking as to what I can say without being "at fault"?

**Additional points:**

Popular culture has a bigger hold on many of us than we may think. "If you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all," we hear. Obviously Jesus did not think or act that way and neither did the apostle Paul (see 3 John 9,10). Fear of gossiping may be what keeps us from *"speaking the truth in love"* (Ephesians 4:15). Since it is truth that sets us free, should we be bolder in warning others of unscrupulous behavior, even in religious leaders?

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*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces ... You travel over land and sea to make a single convert, and then you make that convert twice as much a child of hell as you are ... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel ... You are like whitewashed tombs ... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? (From Matthew 23:13-36)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I admire Jesus for speaking directly to the offending religious leaders, rather than just talking about them when they were not around? Will I follow his example? With the help of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 12:11,12) will I be courageous when confronting authorities?
- Is it clear to me that Jesus had been observing this group of people for a long time and was speaking truth about them? Might this truth, and the way it was presented, have shocked them into evaluating their way of life? Do I take comfort in knowing that eventually some of these leaders did become believers in Jesus (John 12:42,43; Acts 15:5)? What will I risk to bring people to Jesus?

**Additional points:**

Please notice that in all his harsh language, Jesus was not tossing out careless, empty words and certainly was not using current vulgarisms! He gave much evidence that they were indeed hypocrites. He used figures of speech appropriate for catching their attention and making them think. Blind guides cannot be trusted. Snakes and vipers are deadly. Jesus gave them much to ponder! And some did!



*Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about it, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. (Mark 7:24,25) / Because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them ... Jesus landed and saw a large crowd ... (Mark 6:31-34)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I able to schedule times of rest between times of service? Does Jesus' need for rest help me to accept tiredness as part of my human condition? How do I react to "surprises" such as Jesus got on these two occasions?
- Is it appropriate for God's servants to go on vacation? To go to a restaurant to eat? To travel quite a distance just to get away? Or do I consider this a waste of money?
- In the places where I am vacationing, do I welcome opportunities to serve the Lord, even though I may not have been particularly looking for them? Aren't I still God's servant, regardless of where I am or how I feel?

**Additional points:**

One of the reasons Jesus and his disciples went away by boat was that they were hungry. After Jesus taught the crowd, everyone had a satisfying meal. Maybe food was all the disciples needed. Then Jesus sent them away. But Jesus still wanted to be alone, and he got his chance (Mark 6:46). It is not selfish to take care of our needs!

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*Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." ... Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him ... They told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:20,21,31-35)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I have problems with family pressure such as Jesus faced here? Might this sort of thing have happened repeatedly, rather than just the one time that is recorded for our learning? Is it easy for me to resist family pressure? Why? Or why not?
- Might this situation have involved embarrassment for Jesus? Would such activity embarrass me? Do I feel that parents have the right to "take charge of" their adult children (Jesus was over thirty years old at the time!)? Do I feel that, no matter how old I am, I must obey my parents in order to please God? Does this incident free me from that bondage? Similarly, will I set my own adult children free?

**Additional points:**

We all know that God wants children to obey their parents, but when they become adults the relationship changes. Both parties may need time to adjust to the change, but for the emotional health of everyone concerned, it must be made. Sometimes, in order to do God's will, we have to go against family pressure. Jesus did *not* go home with them!

*Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” (Mark 4:13) / Jesus asked [the disciples]: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts so hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied. “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” He said to them, “Do you still not understand?” (Mark 8:17-21)*

**To ponder:**

- What was it that Jesus found so frustrating about the disciples? Was he telling them they needed to spend more time thinking about what they saw and heard? More time trying to figure things out? How well do I do in this area? Have I trained myself to understand God’s ways?
- How would I like to have my teacher talk to me as Jesus did to his disciples? Would the accusations spur me on to try to do better? Or would I give up? Or feel stupid? Or want to change teachers? As a teacher, how can I motivate my students to learn more quickly?

**Additional points:**

God’s teachers can certainly sympathize with the way Jesus felt when his students did not grasp the lessons he was trying to teach them. His frustration showed in the words he used in rebuking them, gently as they may have been spoken. In our culture today we are so careful not to damage anyone’s self-esteem that we would think it wrong to talk to our students that way. But eventually the disciples *did* catch on! The words of Jesus were effective! What about ours?

. . . . .

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Luke 13:34) / As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you ... had only known ... what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come ... when your enemies will build an embankment against you ... encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming. (Luke 19:41-44)*

**To ponder:**

- Can I sense the agony Jesus felt when considering Jerusalem, with such a vast difference between his plans for the city and what the city itself wanted? Have I ever had wonderful plans refused like this?
- How do I feel when I present the gospel (Jesus) to someone and it is rejected? Does it hurt when I think that those who reject Jesus will suffer eternal loss? Am I able to present the gospel of peace and let the results up to God, our Savior? Is he my deep inner peace?

**Additional points:**

So many emotions converge on Jesus in this story: sorrow and tears, stress, rejection, frustration, and grief at the consequences that were soon to come on the city he loved. And just prior to this the crowd had greeted Jesus with cheers: *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* (Luke 19:38a). Those words must have added to Jesus’ pain – soon he would be killed in Jerusalem! When a surge of mixed emotions crowd in on us, let us run for help to the One Who Understands!

*[Jesus said], "I have come to bring fire on earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!" (Luke 12:49,50) / They went to Gethsemane ... and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said ... "Stay here and keep watch." [Jesus] fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:32-36) / "Put away your sword! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11)*

**To ponder:**

- Jesus knew all through his earthly ministry that one day he would have to die on the cross. What effect might this have had on his life? Could it have given him purpose? Would it have limited his activities?
- How do I feel when confronted with a large, unpleasant job that I cannot avoid? Can I understand why Jesus was distressed and troubled in Gethsemane? Does the fact that he asked to be relieved of the assignment, if possible, give me the right to speak up if I would like a job change? May I be honest with God about the jobs he gives to me?
- How is it that Jesus ended up in peace after Gethsemane? Will I yield to the will of God, thus finding peace?

**Additional points:**

Job-related stress is nothing new; Jesus knows all about it! He came to the earth with a work assignment, the most difficult ever given: he was to die as a sacrifice for our sins. He referred to this as a baptism he had to undergo and a cup he had to drink. Can peace and stress co-exist? In Jesus they did, and they can in us, too.

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*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:1,27) / Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he." Jesus said. (From John 18:3-5)*

**To ponder:**

- Would Jesus have been able to offer the disciples the gift of peace if he himself did not have peace? Would the disciples have known whether or not Jesus was at peace? How? Can people tell if I am truly at peace? What is the evidence of serenity? Does it mean freedom from difficulties? Do I pass on my peace to others?
- Knowing how distressed Jesus was in Gethsemane, am I surprised at his calmness afterwards? At the way he approached the officials (and his betrayer!) and identified himself? Can accepting the finality of the will of God really cause such a rapid reversal from distress to peace? Have I ever experienced a sudden change similar to this? When?

**Additional points:**

Jesus had few earthly belongings to leave to his followers upon his death, but he had one precious item that he could share with them all: his peace! What a legacy! Unlike the peace the world offers (temporary and conditional) his was permanent, and valid under all circumstances. The offer of his peace still holds today. His peace balances the distressful emotions we experience. Have you claimed your inheritance?

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Mark 2:23,24) / The Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" (Mark 7:5) / When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw [Jesus] eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Mark 2:16)*

**To ponder:**

- Have I ever lived under regulations such as the religious leaders of Jesus' day tried to follow and impose on others? Where did their rules come from? Where did the rules come from that I tried to keep?
- How do you think the disciples felt when Jesus allowed them to set aside the man-made rules of their day? Am I living in the freedom Jesus offers? Do I enjoy it? Do I offer it to others?
- Am I willing to be criticized for my actions? Like Jesus, do I use times of criticism as opportunities to teach the truth? To let my actions cause others to think and, hopefully, choose freedom in Christ for themselves? Might the criticism then become something useful?

**Additional points:**

Sincere, devout believers sometimes say that we all sin many times a day. I do not believe that at all! By the power of the Holy Spirit we do not have to be constantly sinning and feeling guilty. I think the error comes from wrongly labeling as sin (1) the breaking of human rules, especially church rules, and (2) the feeling of our emotions. These are *not* sinful, according to Jesus. Sin is *disobeying God!*

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*A wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. (John 2:1,2) / [Zacchaeus] wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (From Luke 19:1-10) / [In Bethany] a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. (John 12:2)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I think of Jesus as one who loved to socialize? As one who truly enjoyed the company of others? As one comfortable enough to invite himself to the house of a stranger? Might Jesus have been smiling as he spoke to Zacchaeus up the tree? Do I ever think of Jesus laughing and having fun? Was he a happy man? Did he have a sense of humor?
- Does my answer to these questions have any bearing on my enjoyment of Jesus and the Christian life? Do I "allow" myself to enjoy life? Do I mingle well with all kinds of people? Is this a good way to spread the good news of Jesus and his salvation?

**Additional points:**

Despite all the heavy emotions we have looked at, I believe Jesus was a happy man. He was a real people-person, though not a people pleaser! He was comfortable being himself and allowing others to get to know him. In fact, that was his purpose for mingling. As for his humor: some of his word pictures are really funny. Find the humor in Luke 12:24-28. Imagine birds planting food! Relax and enjoy yourself!

*I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. (Malachi 3:6) / Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17) / Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)*

**To ponder:**

- Does the truth that God does not change have any personal effect on me? Have I received the Unchanging One into my life? If not, will I? Will I allow his consistency to moderate my changes, to permeate my soul? Who would benefit if I took this step?
- How accepting am I of the changes *people* go through? The changes *I* go through? Do I yearn for the way things used to be? Or do I see change as a necessary condition of time? Of growth? Do I look forward to my final change, when I will be conformed to the image of Christ forever (Romans 8:29)?
- What is my Unchanging Lord offering me? Safety? Security? Serenity? Stability? Will I gratefully receive these gifts?

**Additional points:**

As a human being, Jesus changed as he “*grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people*” (Luke 2:52). His circumstances also changed, sometimes within minutes (see, for example, Luke 4:14-30; notice how he continued calmly on, despite the change!). Therefore Jesus Christ, though truly the same yesterday and today and forever, does understand the process we go through in life. May we draw on God’s abundant grace to cushion the shock of change in our lives. And may we help others to do the same.

. . . . .

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness to their children’s children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. (Psalm 103:13-18, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Why would a father be used to illustrate the tender compassion God has for his children? Isn’t compassion, especially for children, a characteristic usually associated with mothers? Which illustration would I have used?
- Might men and women be more equal in their characteristics than I think? If compassion (or love) is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23), isn’t it available to all believers? Do I need to set aside the stereotypes our culture teaches us about gender and see people as individuals with strengths and weaknesses?
- If I were to consider how fragile humans are and how short their time on earth, as God does, would it change the way I treat people?

**Additional points:**

I once collected pictures from newspapers that illustrated fathers being compassionate to their children. Oh, the tenderness that emanated from those pictures! Let us fight the temptation to put people into gender boxes that limit their full expression of humanity. Children are fortunate who receive compassion from both males and females.

*May the Lord answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests. (Psalm 20:1-5)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I dispense blessings upon my friends, as David does in this psalm? Do I *really* wish them well, without a hint of jealousy or envy on my part? Do I “shout for joy” when I hear of their victories?
- Is the Lord so much a part of my life that I would naturally wish the same for my friends? Does the name of the Lord come readily to my lips as I speak, to my pen as I write?
- David seems to understand that sometimes his friends will be in distress and need answers, protection and help, all of which are available from God. What about me? Am I able to let my friends go through the normal ups and downs of life, leaving them in God's hands

**Additional points:**

When reading these verses, I feel as if I have stumbled upon a very personal communication from David to a dear friend. What tender concern he shows for the recipient, whom he obviously knows well! David's joy in his friend is such that one blessing after another comes pouring out in his letter. My Bible says this psalm was “for the director of music,” which to me means David doesn't mind if I read it, for in his day it may have been sung publicly. Would people benefit, I wonder, if they could read the communications I send to my friends?

. . . . .

*Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brings condemnation is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (2 Corinthians 3:7-11, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I know the story of the Old Covenant well enough to enter into the thoughts the apostle Paul is expressing here? Do I see the Old Covenant as glorious? If not, what have I overlooked? Will I go back and notice afresh the overpowering presence of God, the miracles, the colors, materials, pageantry, the fire, the embroidery, the smells, and much more, that accompanied the covenant delivered in the time of Moses?
- Do I think of the ministry of the Spirit as glorious? If not, will I ask God to open my eyes that I might see the glory that Paul saw?

**Additional points:**

The Apostle Paul, who understood the Old Covenant, certainly did appreciate the new, once Jesus Christ had transformed him. Oh, that we would share his deep joy! *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”* (2 Corinthians 3:17,18). What a glorious privilege!

*The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:7,8) / [Love] keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13:5)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I believe that the end of all things is near? Can I do this without getting caught up in date setting, considering that Peter wrote this truth nearly 2,000 years ago? Does my belief in the coming “end of all things” affect my behavior and attitudes? How?
- Would I have an easier time “covering over” the sins of others if I never kept a record of their wrongs in the first place? Is my mind clogged with mental listings of the wrongs of others? If yes, does this mean I do not love as deeply as I should? Would I want others to be holding my wrongs against me?
- What does “covering over” sins mean? Does it mean that I never confront anyone concerning his or her sins? Does it mean that I condone their sins, that sin does not matter much to me? Is it possible to love a person so deeply that their sins cannot make me stop loving them? Is that how God so loves me?

**Additional points:**

God, who *is* Love, is the one who *removes* sin, who washes us whiter than snow, who remembers our sins no more. We are asked to love deeply enough to *cover over* the sins of others. Suppose we did that. Gone would be the bickering, the pettiness, all the jealousies and the annoyances that frustrate friendships. And in its place? Why, people would know we were Christians by our warm, wonderful love for each other and Jesus Christ would be glorified! Let's do it!

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*“Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?’” (Job 38:8-11) / “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:16,17)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I see God's fixing of limits as a loving act or a frustrating one? Did God have the right to tell Adam and Eve not to eat of that one certain tree? Does God have the right to limit my actions? If some of his “thou shalt not's” irritate me, will I see this as a warning sign?
- What happens when the sea leaps over its boundaries? What happened when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree? If I keep in mind the mass destruction and havoc caused in these instances, might I be more apt to obey my God? Why would I risk harming myself and all those around me for a few moments of willful pleasure?

**Additional points:**

God, the Creator, has the right to set limits for every part of his creation, the inanimate (such as the sea) and the animate (such as people). Oh, the problems that arise when we act independently of God! How beautifully – gently, yet firmly! – God reminds us of our place in Ezekiel 34:31: *“You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the sovereign Lord.”* Let us stay within the bounds God sets out for us, for our good and the good of his kingdom.

*Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:2-4)*

**To ponder:**

- Deep down in my soul, do I *want* to escape the corruption in the world that is caused by evil desires? Does the thought of participating in the divine nature quicken my spirit and sound like it would satisfy my soul? Do I want to be holy, because the Lord my God is holy (1 Peter 1:15)? Or is the tug of the world too great for me to resist?
- What does it mean to “participate in the divine nature”? Is it clear from this passage that some believers do not have this privilege? That some also do *not* escape corruption, but instead give in to evil desires? Is there a valid excuse for living on such a low plane as a believer? What part does choice play in this matter?

**Additional points:**

When Adam and Eve were asked by God whether they had eaten from the forbidden tree, they both said, in effect: “Yes, we are guilty, *but with an explanation*” (Genesis 3:11-13). Peter says there is no excuse for a believer to be caught up in a sinful lifestyle, for God has given us everything we need for living an abundant, godly life. And how lovingly he provides for his own! Out of his own glory and goodness come his very great and precious promises, and if we draw on these, and concentrate on knowing him, we will be spared corruption!

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*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness and ... knowledge ... self-control ... perseverance ... godliness ... mutual affection and ... love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.... For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-11, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I show appreciation to God by developing the salvation he has freely given me? Is it possible to have knowledge of Jesus Christ and still be ineffective and unproductive? Would such a life satisfy me? Do I want a *rich* welcome into God’s kingdom?
- Peter says that developing godly qualities does involve effort. Is this what Paul meant when he asked that believers “*continue to work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12)? How can God’s servants encourage each other to build godly lives?

**Additional points:**

Verse 9 says, “*If any of you do not have [these qualities] you are short-sighted and blind, and you have forgotten that you have been cleansed from your past sins.*” God forbid that we should be content with being labeled as short-sighted and blind! God forbid that we should cease to be grateful to our Lord Jesus for cleansing us from our sins! Notice Peter says “*past sins.*” We are not expected to continue sinning. “*Shall we go on sinning....? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*” (Romans 6:1,2).



*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. (1 Peter 1:1,2) / Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. (1 Peter 1:17, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I feel like a stranger in this world? If so, where is my home? Where do I feel most comfortable? Who are my people? Are there certain situations that especially make me feel like a stranger here? If I do not feel out of place in this world, what is wrong? Where are my eyes and my heart focused?
- Is it possible to be a stranger somewhere and still be completely peaceful? What is "reverent fear"? Is it connected in any way with God's peace? Am I aware of God's *abundant* grace and peace in my daily life? Do I dispense these qualities to others? Would I like to?

**Additional points:**

Look at the high calling of God's people, as described by Peter: we are elect, chosen, and sanctified by our Triune God that we may be set apart for God's service and glory, sprinkled by the blood of Christ, just as priests were sprinkled by animal blood under the Old Covenant! And what is asked of us? Only obedience and a willingness to live as strangers here. Abundant grace and peace comes with the decision to live this way. Let us choose to feel out of place on this earth for the few years we are here and to feel at home in God's eternal kingdom!

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*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:11,12) / [God] rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard). (2 Peter 2:7,8) / [Lot] came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! (Genesis 19:9)*

**To ponder:**

- What kind of story do the pagans among whom I live read when they examine my life? Is it one that leads them to glorify my God? In Peter's *urging* us to keep our place as strangers and to abstain from sinful desires, do I see the importance of choice? Am I glad to be living by grace rather than by law, where I would have no choice?
- Am I ever distressed by the filthy lives of the lawless? Why? Is there anything I can do to help these people? Do I want to? Is the blood of Christ available to the lawless? Could they be cleansed from their sins, just as I have? Would I be thrilled if that happened?

**Additional points:**

The people of Sodom always considered Lot an alien, though he had lived there for years. The residents knew what he believed and deeply resented his criticism of their way of life! The sad story in Genesis 19 shows that Lot had little effect on the people in his town – *unless* there was a harvest for God on the day God visited them with judgment! Let us live for God, even if we don't see immediate results.

*[The tabernacle] remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling-place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?" (Acts 7:45-50, NIVI)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I ever think of God as living in a building? In my church, for example? Do I feel I must go to a certain place in order to meet with God? Did the tabernacle or the temple "contain" God in Old Testament times? Would I want to worship a God small enough to live in a house?
- Why does God use human imagery to refer to himself, such as living in a house; sitting on a throne; resting his feet? Have word pictures like these ever helped me grasp truths about God? Have they served as parables, making me think, leading me on to higher knowledge? Do I enjoy these simple pictures, even smiling when I think of them?
- Do I firmly believe that God *has* made "all these things"?

**Additional points:**

Years ago I tried picturing God as so huge that all of heaven was his throne, and once seated, his legs reached down through the air, his feet needing the whole earth for a footstool. What a picture! From that literal visualization, God "exploded" in my mind to being Spirit, having no size or shape at all. Perhaps that's what the imagery was supposed to do! We must not think of God as some sort of human, no matter how large. Surely he is "other" than the beings he made!

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*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings ... They were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:1-5)*  
[Please read all of Isaiah 6.]

**To ponder:**

- How would I react if I had a vision of God similar to the one Isaiah had? If all my senses were confronted, as his were, with heavenly glory? Would it burn itself into my memory in such a way that I would always remember the circumstances surrounding the event? Have I ever had a unique sense of God's presence? If so, what was the result?
- Isaiah's confession of his sin led to immediate cleansing with a live coal. Is the taking away of sin and guilt ever painful today? How? Is it worth suffering to be able to say to God, "Here I am. Send me!"? Am I eager to carry God's message to the needy for him?

**Additional points:**

Isaiah was obviously stunned by his vision and filled with awe. It also made him aware of his sin and guilt, which God then cleansed. How wonderful to be able to say with *clean* lips, "Here I am, Lord, willing to do your will." Awe of God, awareness of the human condition (including ours), and deep gratitude for our cleansing are prerequisites for serving God well. Are they evident in our lives?

*Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?... Does he who teaches human beings lack knowledge? (Psalm 94:9,10, NIV) / "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.... The angel of the Lord said to her: "You are with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery." She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me ..." (From Genesis 16:8-14)*

#### **To ponder:**

- Meditate on the questions in this Psalm: *Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? Does he who teaches us lack knowledge? What are my answers to these questions? Are they academic or do I back them up from my own experience, as Hagar did? How would I defend my answers to a skeptic?*
- Do I spend time considering the marvels of sight, hearing, and brain function? Do I marvel at the greatness of my Creator who designed and made our bodies? Would someone that powerful need actual eyes and ears in order to see and hear? Would he understand me completely?

#### **Additional points:**

Years later Hagar had another faith-strengthening experience with God. She and Ishmael were wondering in the desert when their food and water supplies ran out. *"God heard the boy crying, and ... said to her, What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid;... Lift the boy up..., for I will make of him a great nation"* (Genesis 21:17,18). Oh, yes! she would say to us. Absolutely! God does hear and see and know! Let us be *convinced* of these truths ourselves and find comfort in them.

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*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, and the hills in a balance? (Isaiah 40:12) / So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. (Isaiah 41:10,13)*

#### **To ponder:**

- How huge would God's hand be if he could hold an entire ocean in its hollow or measure the heavens with its span? How strong would it be to hold the dust of the earth in a basket or to hold the scales in which the mountains are being weighed? Would I feel safe in such a large, strong hand? Does this thought give new meaning to the words of Jesus: *"No one can snatch [my sheep] out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand"* (John 10:28,29)?
- How small would God's hand have to be to be able to hold mine? Would knowing that God is holding my hand bring me comfort and courage? Do I think about marvelous verses like these enough to make them real and practical in my life and the lives of others?

#### **Additional points:**

Of course God has no literal hand, neither large nor small, but how I love considering these wonderful word pictures! God, who is Spirit, can perform all the functions that hands perform, and he wants us to know that. Let us be childlike in our enjoyment of God's imagery.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3,4) / He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11) / The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I experience God's comfort in *all* my troubles? Is this something I had to learn to do? If so, how did I learn it? Do verses such as Isaiah 40:11 and Deuteronomy 33:27 help me understand God's tender compassion and comfort? Do I pass these thoughts on to others? Do I find pleasure in seeing people find comfort from Bible truths?
- Jesus asked Peter to feed his lambs and take care of his sheep (John 21:15ff). Do I also enjoy doing this kind of work for the Lord? Am I gentle and loving, dependable and safe with others, as God is with me? In my manner, do I display the image of Christ?

**Additional points:**

God, who knows how we are formed and how we learn, speaks of his arms in many comforting passages. Even though we may have moved beyond the need to imagine literal arms to understand his available comfort, perhaps those needy people God brings into our lives would benefit very much from these thoughts. God wants us to draw near to him. If we can help others to do this by enjoying God's figures of speech with them, so be it! We all need to be hugged, led, carried and protected at times. Let us allow God's "arms" to provide this service for us.

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*Since we have been justified through faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And let us rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but let us also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:1-5)*

**To ponder:**

- Knowing that I have been justified through faith, am I always at peace with God? Do I stand in grace in the presence of God? Or do I fight and struggle with God? Do I ever feel that he has abandoned me? Why?
- Is my life filled with hope – the kind that does not disappoint me? Or do I bounce between hope and despair, depending on my circumstances? What is the difference between the hope that disappoints and the kind that does not?
- Would I like to have a steady hope in my life? Enough to go through the series of steps Paul outlines as leading to hope? Did Paul live this sort of life? Would he be a good example for me to follow? If people copied my life, would they be at peace with God and hopeful?

**Additional points:**

If the reason for our hope is that God has given us the Holy Spirit and his great love, we will not be disappointed. But if our hope is dependant on getting our own way, of course we will find our hopes dashed at times! Let us choose the former, even if it involves suffering. Endurance, character, hope and peace: wonderful qualities for us!

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13) / Just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. (2 Corinthians 1:5) / Out of the most severe trial, [the Macedonian church's] overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (2 Corinthians 8:2) / May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. (1 Thessalonians 3:12)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I live an overflowing life, one that benefits those around me? Am I so in tune with God, so aware of his presence and all his benefits that I join the psalmist David in saying “my cup overflows” (Psalm 23)?
- Do I like to be around believers whose hope, comfort, joy and love pours out of their lives? Am I comfortable around people who are emotionally needy, who are not full enough to overflow? Are they attracted to me because I have living water to offer to their thirsty souls?
- How could the Macedonian believers be so joyful and generous while being extremely poor and going through severe trials? Can I imagine myself happy and generous in a situation like theirs?

**Additional points:**

Jesus said, “*Out of the overflow of one’s heart the mouth speaks*” (Luke 6:45). What is coming out of our mouths, our lives? Are our hearts in good condition? Colossians 2:6,7: “*Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*” A heart overflowing with gratitude is healthy!

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*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:6-8, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I comfortable with being told in general terms to give generously, willingly and cheerfully? Or would I rather be told exactly what percentage to give to God, as happened under the Old Covenant? Which method best takes into account the disparity of incomes among people?
- Under the conditions laid out by Paul, how would I know when I had given enough? Do I need to know? Isn’t God a generous, willing, cheerful giver? Could I ever outgive the Lord?
- Am I satisfied with having all that I need? Does abounding grace mean as much to me as material things? Do I abound in good works?

**Additional points:**

The parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-20) is instructive here, though its interpretation has to do with sowing the word, not with money. Jesus did not criticize the farmer, though some seed was not productive. Would he have had such a rich crop from the good soil if he had not sown generously? Perhaps in giving abundantly of our money (also time, possessions, talents) some might think it could have been better used. But God knows our hearts. He will not say to a generous, willing, cheerful giver, “*Why this waste?*” (Matthew 26:8). Keep on giving!

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob ... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God ... They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. (From Hebrews 11:1,8-10,13-16)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I as certain of the heavenly city as Abraham was? Is it as real to me as any earthly city?
- If I were going to move to a distant place on this earth, how would I prepare for the move? If dear friends or relatives were going to move far away, would I help them pack? How would I prepare myself for their leaving? Would it help if I knew that some day I would be joining them?
- Can I apply these thoughts to helping believers face death?

**Additional points:**

If I were going to move to a new area of this world, I would want to learn all I could about the place to which I was heading, much as the Israelites wanted to know all about the Promised Land (Numbers 13:17-20). I would begin to cut ties with my present city and get rid of unnecessary possessions. I can imagine that I would begin to feel like a stranger in my present location, for my mind would be occupied with my destination. Shouldn't it be the same when we think of Heaven? All of God's people are going to move there! Are you excited? I am!!

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*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms;... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:1-6)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I understand the directions Jesus gave to the place where he was going: his Father's house? Can I clearly explain to confused people like Thomas how to get there?
- What does the answer Jesus gave to Thomas do to the thought some people hold that other paths or truths lead to God and his house?
- Am I looking forward to living in that prepared place? What does the fact that Jesus wants me to be with him – that he even plans to personally escort me there! – do to my feelings of worth?

**Additional points:**

In Hebrews 11:10, Abraham is described as looking forward to the city with *foundations*. It was a real, stable place in his mind. He even knew the name of its architect and builder: it was *God*, a special friend of his! In John 14:2 Jesus talks of a *house* and *rooms*, other terms that have meaning to us. I believe all this is a way of focusing our thoughts on Heaven as a true – not imaginary – place. If Jesus is getting a place ready for us, though we cannot fathom the details, we can be sure it will be clean, pure, comfortable, *beautiful*, and fun!

*Balak asked [Balaam], "What did the Lord say?" Then he uttered his oracle: "Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor. God is not human, that he should lie, nor a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it." (Numbers 23:17-19, NIVI)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I glad that God is not a human being? That God's character is not the same as that of humans? Do I experience God as absolutely trustworthy?
- How do I feel about the picture these verses give of humans? Have I experienced humans lying, changing their minds, and breaking promises? Do I take my place with other human beings as one who has done these things myself? If not, am I seeing myself realistically? Do I desire to reflect the character of God in the areas mentioned here? Would I like to be truthful and trustworthy?
- Before I advise others, do I listen to hear what the Lord wants me to say? Do I give out the message God gives me, without changing it?

**Additional points:**

The prophet Balaam said: *"Can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth"* (Numbers 22:38). As God's servants, let us be sure we do not promise things that God himself has not promised. We can easily make that mistake if we take a promise God made to a specific individual and make it universal. For example: the apostle Paul told the Philippian jailer that he *and his household* would be saved (Acts 16:31), and they were! From that incident, may we conclude and promise that the whole household of *anyone* who believes will be saved?

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*Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame. (1 Corinthians 15:33,34) / Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servants must not quarrel. (2 Timothy 2:22,23)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I sensible about the company I keep? In order to maintain friendships, would I go so far as to join in sinful behaviors? How would I respond if a godly person confronted me as Paul did the Corinthians? Am I open to criticism and counsel?
- As God's servant, am I able to confront believers about sinful or useless practices? Do I live in such a way that people tend to listen to me if I must confront them?
- What is the difference between a good discussion and a foolish, stupid argument? Can one lead to the other? Do I avoid quarreling?
- Am I counted among those who love the Lord out of a pure heart?

**Additional points:**

David's prayer in Psalm 69:5,6 is one that I like to pray as well: *"You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you. May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel."* For the sake of those who are ignorant of God, let us purify our behavior. *"Be holy, because I am holy," says the Lord* (1 Peter 1:16).

*When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each of you is tempted when, by your own evil desire, you are dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13-15) / No temptation has seized you except what is common among people. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I ever feel that God is tempting me toward sin and evil? Do I try to avoid facing my own evil desires? Can a true believer have evil desires? Can a believer give in to those desires, even to the point of "full-grown" sin? What is the "death" that full-grown sin gives birth to? Could it mean separation from fellowship with God? What else?
- Is it a sin to be tempted? Have I experienced God's faithfulness in a time of temptation? Have I ever taken the way out that he provides? Do I counsel others to look for the way out when they are tempted?
- Of what significance is it that God cannot be tempted by evil? Has anyone ever tried to tempt God with evil? Who, when, how? With what results?

**Additional points:**

James puts the responsibility for our sinning squarely on our own shoulders. While temptation comes to everyone, at any point before we end up sinning we may stop the sequence of events. God has given us the power to do so! If we do fall, confession and repentance are available to us. God has thought of everything! Praise his name!

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*Of what value is an idol, since someone carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? ... Can it give guidance? There is no breath in it. But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. (Habakkuk 2:18-20) / The Lord said to Job: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" Then Job answered the Lord: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more." (Job 40:4,5)*

**To ponder:**

- Do people actually look to breathless idols for guidance? Have I ever done so? How can an image teach lies? In contrast to idols, what is there about God's being "in his holy temple" that would inspire my silence? Am I comfortable being silent before the Lord? Does the silence God wants involve more than not speaking words aloud?
- Like Job, am I guilty of accusing God or trying to correct him? If so, am I willing to let God confront this faulty behavior of mine? Am I willing to change? Is it possible to reach the point where I would never question God? Have I reached that point? Do I want to?

**Additional points:**

Silence before God because of awe: how magnificent! How right! At those special times of silence we are just where we are meant to be: bowing in reverence before our Maker, who knows all about us and loves us anyway! God challenged Job to think about what he had been saying. Immediately Job confessed that he had been talking nonsense, and promptly stopped speaking. What spiritual growth he experienced at that moment! Lord, teach us when and how to be silent before you.



*Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.... [They] replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:13,16-18) [Read Daniel 3.]*

**To ponder:**

- Contrast the emotional state of Nebuchadnezzar with that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, as shown in verses 13-23. Do their inner feelings have anything to do with the way they speak? Do my lips betray my inner feelings? Is my inner state such that I would want it known? Is the faith and trust in God shown by the three men possible today? Even in the face of violent, painful death?
- Why did the men choose to be silent rather than presenting a defense to the king? Do I try to defend myself when I am accused or threatened? Would I like to be at peace, as these men were? *"In quietness and trust is your strength"* (Isaiah 30:15). Is this true of me?

**Additional points:**

To me, the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is absolutely sublime! These men give us a picture of perfect peace, the peace that comes from understanding the truth of Habakkuk 2:20. The Lord was in his holy temple; why should they worry? What was there to fear? Their silence was inner: they were not raging against God at all because of their circumstances. Even their words were abbreviated. They belonged to God; he could do with them as he pleased. Silence because of complete trust in God: how desirable! Help us, Lord, to this end.

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*And [God] said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman answered, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:10-13) / Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. (Romans 3:19)*

**To ponder:**

- Consider the grace, mercy and love shown by God in his approach to Adam and Eve: why did he spare their physical lives? Would he have had cause to put them to death? Why did he approach them, rather than abandoning them after they sinned? Why did he listen to the weak excuses they attached to their confessions? Does he show as much grace, mercy and love to me? Am I grateful? Do I show it to others?
- *"Now is the time of God's favor (grace), now is the day of salvation"* (2 Corinthians 6:2). Do I realize that this "time" will end? And when it does, mouths will be silenced: no more excuses?

**Additional points:**

In contrast to these days, when people offer all sorts of excuses for their sin (if they acknowledge sin at all) there will come a time when unbelievers will be confronted by the Almighty God and find themselves totally silenced. What a dreadful thought! On that judgment day it will be too late for the people to repent and turn to God for the forgiveness of their sin. As God's servants, let us call people to repentance while we can. Oh, that every mouth would praise the Lord!

*Finally two [false witnesses] came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ” Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to Jesus, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. (Matthew 26:60-64a) [Please read through verse 68.]*

#### **To ponder:**

- “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be silent and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,7). Why didn’t Jesus answer the charges brought by the false witnesses? Do I admire him for being silent at that time? Or do I feel he should have refuted or explained their charges? What would I do in a similar situation? Do I ever think of silence as a strong, positive characteristic? Or do I see silence as weakness of character?
- Why did Jesus answer the high priest’s question about his deity? Why did he add information that the priest had not asked for (verse 64b)? Would I speak up with a clear testimony if it might lead to abuse or death? How can I know when to speak and when to keep quiet?

#### **Additional points:**

It is good for us as God’s servants to know that we are not always required to speak. Isaiah prophesied that there would be times when Jesus would remain silent (see Isaiah 53:7). Jesus told his disciples that they were free to leave a town if the people there were not willing to receive their message (Luke 9:5). How freeing for us! The Holy Spirit will let us know when silence is to be our plan of action.

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*If I say, “I will not mention [God] or speak anymore in his name,” his word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9) / When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16) / Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15)*

#### **To ponder:**

- Can I identify with Jeremiah’s passion? Have I ever had to hold in God’s word for any reason? How did it feel? Would God fill my heart with his word and then ask me to keep it within? Who would be happy if we would not mention God or speak anymore in his name?
- Why does Paul feel that he could not boast about his preaching? Have I ever felt compelled by God to preach or to teach his word? What does Paul’s “woe to me” statement mean? Have I felt guided by God as to what to say, either in public speaking or private testimony? If God is directing me, may I enjoy the message he gives through me? Or would that be “boasting” or pride? Warning: Satan’s lies can silence us!

#### **Additional points:**

Just as there is a time to be silent, so there is a time to speak: a time when we *cannot* be silent; when it would be wrong to do so. If *God* is telling us to speak, then that is what we must do, even if *people* are trying to keep us quiet. I’m thinking of those who use the scriptures to try to silence whole categories of people, such as women or the young. We must obey God rather than others (see Acts 4:19,20). Let us use our speaking gifts to the fullest, all for the glory of God.

*You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3) / Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:2,3) / Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)*

**To ponder:**

- What is a steadfast mind? How is it connected with peace? How is it connected with trust in God? What is my responsibility in this sequence? What is God's part? What is *perfect* peace? Do I have it?
- Would I characterize my mind as "steadfast"? What are "things above"? What is the main subject of my thoughts? Have I practiced setting my mind on things above? Or do earthly things take precedence in my mind, my intellect? What are "earthly things"?
- How would grasping the fact that I have died, that my life is now hidden with Christ in God, help me to set my mind on things above? Do I find many true, noble, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy subjects to ponder? Is my answer at least a partial clue to the sort of person I am? To whether people are attracted to me or not?

**Additional points:**

I believe it is possible to have God at the core of our minds, so that everything we see, experience and think about is somehow linked with him. This takes practice, to be sure, but it is well worth the effort! Another version of the Bible uses the phrase "stayed on Thee" in place of "steadfast" in Isaiah 26:3. Let us focus our thoughts – stay our minds – on our Lord. Trust and peace will surely follow!

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*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1) / How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (1 John 3:1,16)*

**To ponder:**

- "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart...*," Jesus said (Matthew 22:37). What place does God have in my affections? Have I truly been raised with Christ? What does that mean? What is there about this resurrection truth that would set my heart on the Lord?
- Do I spend time pondering the marvelous love of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ? Does my meditation draw out a deep responsive chord of love for God from within my heart? Does this love spill over, affecting the way I treat the people around me? Should it?
- How much love does my Father have if he can *lavish* it on me (splash it all over me!) and still have a full supply for everyone else? Why is it a *loving* thing for God to call me his child? Do I appreciate it?

**Additional points:**

How easy it should be for us to set our affections on our Lord! Think of all he has done for us! Besides being our beautiful Savior, surely he is the dearest friend we will ever have! The psalmist Asaph knew this: "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*" (Psalm 73:25,26). May our hearts say Yes! to Asaph's great expression of love for the Lord our God.

*Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Corinthians 7:8-10)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I identify with the mixed emotions expressed by Paul in this passage? What do I do when I feel compelled by God to do something – such as write a letter – that I know may hurt the recipient? What is the difference between hurting and harming someone?
- Why did the letter hurt the Corinthians “only for a little while”? What part might their relationship with Paul have played in their reaction to the letter? What brought about their repentance, their change of mind? What is godly sorrow? What is worldly sorrow?
- Have I experienced godly sorrow that brought repentance? Did it leave me with no regrets? How do I feel about the person who confronted me? How can I help alleviate the messenger’s possible regret?

**Additional points:**

To me, Peter and Judas illustrate godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Peter, after his sinful denial, was confronted by a look from Jesus himself, and it broke Peter’s heart. His sorrow led to bitter tears, but the outcome was repentance and renewal. Perhaps Judas, the betrayer, was confronted by his conscience. He could not shake his bitter regret and sorrow, and soon died. Let us be sure God leads our confronting, and then leave all the results to him. May God help us!

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*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to his town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a baby. (Luke 2:1,3-5) / But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me a ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from days of eternity. (Micah 5:2)*

**To ponder:**

- Am I able to enter into and enjoy the drama of what is happening in this story? Am I thrilled to think that a plan in place from days of eternity was about to unfold on the earth? Do I see that God can use anyone – even Caesar Augustus – to implement his plan?
- How might the news of the census have affected Mary and Joseph? What are some things that may have helped them to cheerfully pack and start out on the trip South? What might have made the trip difficult?
- Have I ever caught sight of a larger drama in the events of my own life? How do I face disruptions? Does this Bible story help me to understand that God is in charge of the universe, and of me?

**Additional points:**

In this story Caesar Augustus, Joseph, Mary, David, and the prophet Micah all had roles in the play being staged by God. The latter two, though dead, were still influential; surely Caesar Augustus had no idea he was playing a key role in God’s eternal drama. Let us enjoy the thought that we, too, fit into God’s plan as it continues to unfold!

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6,7) / When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4:4,5) / She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:12)*

**To ponder:**

- Deep down, am I truly aware that Jesus was a real human baby, born like any other human baby? Can I picture Mary in labor, because “the time” had fully come? And then relieved because the baby had been born? Do I see her washing his body and then gently dressing him in strips of cloth? Do I hear the baby cry? Or have I been fooled by the popular Christmas carol into thinking that this child did not cry?
- How significant is it that Jesus had to be *placed* in the manger: that is, he could not get into it himself? How long would he have to be carried before he would learn to walk? Do such thoughts increase my appreciation for my Savior? Do they increase my awe of God?

**Additional points:**

What a climactic moment, when the Eternal One was born into time, with all its limitations! It is shocking and *awesome* to think of the mighty Creator being held, washed, dressed and nursed by one of his created beings! And how touching it is to know that he came into the world for our sakes! Really we are the helpless ones, for we cannot redeem ourselves. What a Savior we have! And how beautiful his name: Jesus! Let us bow before him with reverence and awe.

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*There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:8-12) [Please read through verse 20.]*

**To ponder:**

- Do happy parents announce the birth of their children? Whose Son was this child, besides Mary’s? How did God announce the birth of his Son? How was the news received? Is the birth of Jesus good news to me?
- Do I see the significance of the strips of cloth and the manger: that they were really signs to help the shepherds find the right baby? Might some small details in my life be important in God’s plan for me? How would thinking along these lines affect my attitude toward life?
- The appearance of the angels terrified the shepherds. Is this a picture of the fear of the Lord, of awe? Has my life been changed by a glimpse of God as the lives of the shepherds were?

**Additional points:**

God’s players in this drama have already included the living and the dead (David and Micah), the godly (Joseph and Mary), and earthly rulers. Now he adds heavenly beings (angels) and working people (the shepherds). The shepherds spread the word to others, and down through the years, the news reached us! Let us consider ourselves to be onlookers with the shepherds at the manger, and find our faith renewed.

*To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31,32,36) / Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. (Psalm 25:4,5)*

**To ponder:**

- Is it possible to be a believer in Jesus and not be his disciple? What is involved in being a disciple? Am I holding on to the teachings of Jesus? How do I do that? Do I find truth to be freeing?
- Are there some truths that I would rather not face? If so, why? Might I be in bondage in these areas of my life? Would I like to be "free indeed"? Will I let Jesus set me free?
- Am I willing to pray David's prayer along with him: *"Guide me in your truth and teach me"*? Do I have a teachable spirit, as expressed by David? Is this part of being a disciple?
- What reasons did David give for wanting to follow the ways of the Lord? What are my reasons?

**Additional points:**

Jesus, as the Truth (John 14:6), sets us free from condemnation. But believers can still be in bondage in many ways, all of which can be helped, I believe, by facing truth. I've practiced thinking of my head as completely filled with a filter called Truth. When a thought or accusation comes into my head, it circulates through this filter. If it is true, I must consider what to do about it. If it is false, I toss it out so it causes me no harm. The filter, of course, is the Spirit of truth (John 15:26) and the truth *is* freeing!

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*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the king ... or to governors ... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free persons, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect for everyone: Love the brothers and sisters, fear God, honor the king. (1 Peter 2:13-17)*

**To ponder:**

- What comes to my mind when I hear the word "submit"? Am I able to do for the Lord's sake things I would find it hard to do otherwise? Does practicing this kind of submission to the Lord ever change my attitude so that God's will also becomes my pleasure?
- Name some examples of properly submitting to human authorities. Am I obeying the Lord in this clear expression of his will for me? How would doing good silence the ignorant talk of foolish people?
- How can I live as a free person and at the same time live as a servant of God? What would happen to both of these if I used my freedom as a cover-up for evil? Would it be worth the risk?
- Do I properly respect *everyone*? Does "proper respect" involve my inward attitude as well as my outward behavior? Should it?

**Additional points:**

It is amazing that God would go through so much – including the crucifixion – to provide a way for us to have a personal, eternal relationship with him and then ask us not to use our freedom as a cover-up for evil! God chooses to relate to us through grace rather than law. Our Father trusts us to live a life honoring to him. How could we possibly violate his *amazing* grace? Perish the thought!

*The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery ... Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Deuteronomy 7:7,8; 9:6)*

**To ponder:**

- Why does God deflate any feelings of self-importance that the Israelites may have had as they prepared to enter the Promised Land? If I had been part of the group, how might I have reacted to God's words? Would I have recognized truth in what God said? Is this the sort of truth that is freeing? How?
- Do I see unconditional love expressed by God to the Israelites? In the back of my mind, do I still feel that I must somehow earn or deserve God's love? Could I ever gain enough righteousness of my own to satisfy God? Am I glad God's love is unconditional?
- What adjectives does the term "stiff-necked" bring to mind? What are some antonyms for the term? Am I stiff-necked?

**Additional points:**

To be reminded that God's love for us is unconditional – not because we are good – certainly does put us in our place! We need that sometimes, especially when God is using and blessing us. All glory belongs to God! Israel's forefathers, to whom God had made promises, are spiritually ours as well. May the knowledge of their stories inspire our trust in God, who is always faithful to his word!

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*Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?... For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Corinthians 4:7; 15:9,10)*

**To ponder:**

- Do I sometimes feel that I am different from others? If yes, in what way(s)? What does Paul mean when he says we are no different from anyone else? Is everyone exactly the same? What is the commonality referred to in this passage? Do I agree with it?
- Do I enjoy hearing people boast? What did Paul consider to be the source of his achievements? How seriously flawed would my past have to be before I would realize, as Paul did, that I have nothing to boast about, that I do not deserve honors and praise?
- How does the grace of God work in my life? Is it my testimony that "I am what I am ... by the grace of God"?

**Additional points:**

This passage can be deflating to people who look to their achievements and abilities for self-importance. We need to realize the truth that we are equal in God's eyes and none of us has anything to boast about. If we can attain this level we will not only be freed from the pressure to be note-worthy, but we can also go higher: "*In humility consider others better than yourselves*" (Philippians 2:3). How beautiful our human relationships would be if we all grasped this concept!

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18) / Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)*

**To ponder:**

- When I consider the relationship between our present sufferings and the glory that will be revealed in us, what is *my* conclusion? If it differs from Paul's, why? Is future glory real to me? Real enough to affect my life and attitudes on this earth?
- Am I one who does not lose heart? What might cause me to waste away outwardly? Could the list include illness and aging? What else? How do I feel about this kind of change? What causes inward renewal? Is daily inward renewal my experience? Does it help me accept outward change?
- If I were going through the troubles that Paul had, would I describe them as light? Do I consider my own troubles to be light?

**Additional points:**

Paul had his eyes so fixed on the eternal that he could describe his troubles as "momentary." It is obvious that for him eternity took precedence over time. No wonder he could endure so much! His outlook made all trials seem short, even though some lasted for years. Moreover, Paul knew that his problems were working out for his good, adding up to an eternal weight of glory. Therefore he was not resentful about anything that was happening to him. Oh, to have such an outlook!

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*Some (people) told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-5)*

**To ponder:**

- What was the unspoken question behind the report the people brought to Jesus? Do people today ever think that victims of crime or of natural disasters somehow deserved their fate? Do I think that way?
- On the other hand, do I feel that God protected those who escaped the tragedy – especially if they were believers? If I marvel at "God's goodness" in the lives of those who were spared, what am I implying about God's working in the lives of those who perished?
- Does the answer Jesus gave free me from the "need" to figure out *why* certain people died in tragedies? How did Jesus move from current events involving physical death to the topic of eternal death?

**Additional points:**

Just as [God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:45), so calamities fall upon believers and unbelievers. I think we need to be careful not to promise a special protection to God's people *on this earth*. Our safety comes from knowing we will never "perish," never find ourselves in hell, separated from God! What a wonderful assurance that is!



*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth; their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)*

**To ponder:**

- How do the heavens – the skies – declare the glory of God? What is the glory of God? Like David, am I continually amazed (“day after day,” “night after night”) at God’s heavens? Do the skies draw out my heart in praise of my God, the Creator?
- How do the skies “pour forth speech”? What do they say? How do they “display knowledge”? What do the skies teach me? Might the dependability and usefulness of the sun, moon and stars, for example, encourage me to *let [my] light shine before others that they may see [my] good deeds and praise [my] Father in heaven* (Matthew 5:16)? What else?
- What can I learn from the fact that everyone in the whole world has access to this same source of “speech” and knowledge? Do I feel connected with all people everywhere through my Creator and his creation? Does God want everyone to know about him? Do I?

**Additional points:**

An alternate reading of Psalm 19:3 says: *“They have no speech, there are no words; no sound is heard from them.”* Whether audibly (as in thunderclaps and wind) or silently (as in orbiting and the beauty of clouds, sunrises and sunsets) the skies certainly do speak in a way that catches everyone’s attention at some point or another. Let us follow Isaiah’s directive: *“Lift your eyes and look to the heavens”* (Isaiah 40:26) and then join the skies in bringing glory to God.

. . . . .

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)*

**To ponder:**

- How do godless, wicked deeds suppress the truth? How do I feel about God’s revealing his wrath against wickedness? Would I rather have him be indifferent to evil deeds? Have I come to terms with God’s being wrathful, as well as loving and merciful?
- Do I believe people can discover God from considering what God has made? How would knowing God’s invisible qualities remove the excuse for wicked deeds? How does an understanding of “what has been made” demonstrate God’s eternal power? How does it show his divine nature?

**Additional points:**

Imagine a group of rational, intelligent people living in a primitive place where God is not known (there is no Bible). I suppose they, like we, would wonder where they came from and how the world was made. As a person of faith myself, I cannot help but think they would conclude that a rational being *other than human* – a very powerful being! – was behind the formation of the earth and everything in it. Surely this Mighty One, who could not be seen, would be fearful and deserving of respect, including worship. Would God accept such acknowledgement and consider these people to be his? What do you think?

*In the same way, you who are younger, be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:5-7) / Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)*

**To ponder:**

- If I am one who is “younger,” do I practice being submissive to those who are older? Even if I know more than they do? Why would God ask for this kind of submission? If I am one who is “older,” am I gracious to the younger ones, whether or not they submit to me? Does my attitude toward those who are younger encourage them in the faith?
- Is there ever a time for the older to submit to the younger (Ephesians 5:1)? Give examples of situations where this reverse submission may be appropriate. What does awaiting God’s “due time” teach me?
- Is there a connection between humility and submission? Between pride and lack of submission? Does trying to do the right thing in this area sometimes make me anxious? Will I give this anxiety to my Lord, grateful that he cares for me even when I make mistakes?

**Additional points:**

It is so easy for younger and older people to become impatient with each other. Out of reverence for Christ, let us all go to our spiritual closets, take out the garments labeled “Humility,” and clothe ourselves with them – every day! By practicing a humble submissiveness, we will reflect our Lord Jesus, who *“humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:8)!

. . . . .

*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:8-11)*

**To ponder:**

- Does Peter’s speaking from experience add weight to his warning of the danger the devil poses? Have I had personal encounters with the enemy? Do I warn others of this danger? How can I be sure that I will not be devoured by the devil?
- How does it help for me to know that believers all over the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings? What are these sufferings?
- Have I, like Peter, experienced the restorative powers of Christ? Does my focus on the *eternal* glory to which I am called in Christ make my sufferings, too, seem very *temporary* – only “for a little while”?

**Additional points:**

Many people enjoy the challenge, even the danger, of pitting their wits against wild animals. How cautious they must be in their quest! Like it or not, God’s servants are in a similar situation, for we have an animal-like enemy who would love to rip us to pieces! Fortunately, we also have a Guide: the God of all grace, who is experienced in fighting the enemy. Let us enjoy the adventure of going through this life under God’s direction, and share our stories for his glory. Amen!

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