

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 September 2016

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. Hebrews 1, verses 1-2.

Rebooting again here, folks. You see, earlier this summer I took a hiatus from doing these blog posts. My wife and I were moving and I needed time to do moving-related tasks. When I began to re-engage with the blog, I wanted to explore a different way of doing them, yet I found I wasn't yet truly interested in writing that way. Rather than focusing all on myself – writing is actually a selfish pastime – I dropped back again and asked God what He wanted me to do in pursuing said pastime. His response? "Get back in the game, kid. It isn't about you." Over weeks, I've felt the pull to go back to the future and resume these verse by verse commentaries. Perhaps my efforts are best used this way at this moment. Knowing that, we're back here together and I'm thankful for your company. We'll share some Bible verses, some thoughts, some NIV references, and some of the time God gives us. Perhaps the best summation of this exercise is "praise to Him" and "thanks for your patience."

Yet another comment is how the book of Hebrews begins. Years ago, the first formal / informal Bible study in which I participated was on the book of Hebrews. It speaks to me in ways the other books don't. When that happens, I honestly believe it is God's Spirit – the Spirit of God the Father and God the Son, Jesus – speaking, imparting meaning into my heart. Folks more learned than myself in these things might call it "divine inspiration" (though I'm sure there's a proper ecclesiastical term for it...someone from a seminary please chime in). In reading Hebrews 1 today, I noted that God speaks in various ways; the verse says as much. Perhaps He is speaking through our time together to motivate the movement in our hearts; movements that inspire us to follow His will in action and in words.

This same Jesus who uses His Spirit to inspire us was given by His Father to be the inheritor of all that is. You and I are temporary custodians of the property and the lives we're given. In reality, we report to Jesus, the ultimate higher authority, who is over us and all that we know. That's not some passing concept. It's the design of things from before our fall in Eden.

Think about it. In ancient days, God spoke directly to men. When we messed that up through our sins, He spoke through prophets: pastors and spiritual leaders appointed to translate God's word through authority. And when we didn't get the message that way, He came here to Earth, fully God and fully man all at once, and spoke with us face to face. He wasn't present just in a burning bush, a whispering wind, or a third-person relation: He was Jesus, in the flesh, speaking, doing, and living among us.

What's more, this same Jesus is the same Jesus who (as the Apostle John said) 'was with God, was God, and was with God in the beginning.' Nothing you and I see or touch, nothing of which we know, was made without Him making it. The universe and everything in it, from the boiling hot stars to the sleeping baby in a crib, was made by God's loving hand as Jesus. Aslan the lion sang Narnia into existence. Jesus the Lord and Savior of all Creation spoke and everything was.

And man, His greatest creation, was "very good." Sad and funny how that one turned out. That's for discussion as we move along.

For now, let's noodle the thought that, when God speaks to us now, it's through His Son Jesus' Spirit in His Word. Read the book of Hebrews – indeed any book in the Bible – and when you draw meaning, it's not just your knoggin at work: it's the Lord speaking to you. He's teaching you, addressing you, comforting you, preparing you for what He wants you to do with that knowledge. For me, part of it is writing about it. For you, I hope part of it is to read.

Thanks for your patience either way!

For more reading: John 1:1, John 9:29, Acts 2:30, and Hebrews 1: 1-14.

Lord Jesus, thank You so much for speaking to me through Your Word. Thank You for being the master of creation, the creator of all I know, and the Savior I need every day.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 September 2016

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Hebrews 1, verse 3.

Where do you start with that? How about at the beginning, especially since that dovetails on the 'beginning' theme from the last blog entry?

First off, we don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews. Some old Bibles list Paul as the author, but more recent scholarship has disproven that. According to my Concordia NIV translation, the author might have been Paul's companion, Barnabas. Or it might also have been Apollos (Paul's contemporary) or Bartholomew, one of the other disciples. In truth, we just don't know and it doesn't really matter.

Piecing together the 'news' from Hebrews and comparing it to the other New Testament books shows that the book was written to Jewish converts who were familiar with both the Pentateuch and the Talmud; this too is from Concordia. The new believers were also familiar with the events of First Century Judea (in the rise of the Christian faith). The writer apparently penned the book to encourage & teach believers in the new churches that grew in the Mediterranean region.

Finally, Concordia also says that the book is a practical guide to practical faith. As we walk through Hebrews, you'll probably notice that the author talks about what faith means, tying it to events and people throughout Biblical history. This was practical knowledge that the Jewish converts in the early church could use. If you read it, you'll probably find the same thing.

What does all this have to do with verse 3? When you consider that all of Scripture is God's word – God's very thoughts and words transcribed by men who were divinely inspired by Him – you get to remember that these words are things God Himself is saying. They are thoughts that come from Jesus' heart. When you read them, you're getting a communication directly from God through Jesus' Spirit.

Hold onto that thought, then merge it with the knowledge that those words truly represent who God is. In absorbing them, you take part in His goodness. You see how He is above, over, around, and through all things. This universe He created (just by speaking) is something He created as an expression of His love, of His nature. What's more, He created it all, then hand-made humans like you and I to take part in it. To oversee and tend to it; to help it grow and flourish. God is still over all creation, keeping it alive and in place through His powerful love, but He made human beings to be his partners in tending to it. He's the source of life...we are His keepers of it.

This isn't some esoteric theory; it's not a speculation with millions of years of holes between transition points. This is God's fact, the very essence of nature. In the days of the Bible, people would have been more open to this concept even as other pagan beliefs about the origin of the world would have been present (just as evolution is in our day). God plainly stated in Genesis "this is what happened. This is how it all went down." He spoke plainly so people could understand plainly how God still held things together in Himself even in their day. He hadn't deserted His people. If anything, He took their Creator-creation relationship to a new level.

The writer of Hebrews uses that fact to transition us through the idea that this same God, this same Jesus who is God and was present in creation, is the same Jesus who had just recently walked the earth. Who showed His divine nature and died for all sins. Who rose to heaven on His human death and is there now, fully present and fully alive, at the same time His Spirit is fully here, fully then and now, fully present and fully alive. Fully inspiring all we think, do and say in the same way He did for the Hebrews of first century Judea. Indeed, for all people of all times. That's practical knowledge we can use to live.

Where do you start with that? Perhaps the better question would be “how would it end?” Soon we get to see that there is no ending to it, and that’s the biggest miracle blessing of all

For more reading: John 14, Colossians 1:17, Titus 2:14, Mark 16:19.

Lord, You are the magnificent Creator of all that I know. I believe in You, that You are present now and forever, that You’re over and through nature, and that You made this place to be an expression of Your beautiful being. Thank You for all these blessings!

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 September 2016

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Hebrews 1, verse 3.

Before moving off verse 3, let's talk about that "purification for sins" part.

This was the whole purpose of Christ's life. His life wasn't just a great morality lesson. He didn't come here to be just a teacher, wise man, prophet, or all around good guy (like George of the Jungle). Jesus of Nazareth came here and died to provide the purification for sins. As a result, everything changed.

On a Tuesday after a holiday weekend, does that blow your mind?

Dictionary.com defines "purification" as "to make pure; free from anything that debases, pollutes, adulterates, or contaminates; to free from foreign, extraneous, or objectionable elements; to free from guilt or evil; to clear or purge (usually followed by of or from); to make clean for ceremonial or ritual use."

You and I: we're impure. Mother Theresa: impure. Pope Francis and Billy (or Franklin) Graham: impure. The Dalai Lama, Orthodox patriarchs, your saintly grandmother, a newborn baby not five minutes old, the best person you can think of: all impure. All of us, every human ever born of man, are impure. We're thick with sin, tainted irrevocably with it. And what is sin? Going back to dictionary.com, sin is "transgression of divine law; any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful or deliberate violation of some religious or moral principle; any reprehensible or regrettable action, behavior, lapse, etc.; great fault or offense."

Whether it is by a single thought of selfishness or the murder of a hundred people, we have sinned against God, against Jesus. We have transgressed against Him by willful and deliberate violation of His principles. We're guilty of great fault and offense against the pure love that is Him. Every time we choose anything but God or what is of Him, we sin. We become guilty and impure whether it's in thought, action, or both. There's no getting away from that fact. It's part of who we are as people.

God didn't make us to be sinful; our ancestors chose it and tainted us. We each choose it willfully whether we're children or adults. Don't agree? Have you ever had a "no" argument with a toddler? How about any kind of argument with anyone else? Ever wondered lustily what your neighbor looks like in the shower? Knowingly fudged your taxes or driven over the speed limit? Ever told a white lie? No matter the human consequences, these and so many more are sins against God. They're unholy impurities in us that are an affront to the pure, just love that only He offers.

God tells us to be Holy but we don't listen; in truth, we can't on our own. He tells us to be holy because He is holy and He created us to be in union with Him. We can't be in full union with Him as long as we're unholy. Our sins make us unholy because each one of them is a subtle (or loud) rebellion against Him. It's a chasm we can't bridge on our own.

Enter Jesus. Enter Jesus the one and only Savior who came here to bridge the chasm and purify us from our sins. He willingly lived and died an agonizing death bearing the spiritual consequences of every sin humanity ever undertook. Fully God and fully man, He who could not die willingly died a hero's death on that cross so that He could restore balance to creation. He did it while still preserving our ability to be made holy and to live in free will, choosing to love Him rather than being compelled to. He takes away the eternal damnation consequence of those sins. He makes it possible for us to be in union with God again by clothing us in His righteousness and imputing it to us as our own. In doing that, He makes it possible for the holy Majesty who is God the just Father to not see the millions of sins I've done in my life. Instead, He sees only Jesus' pure perfection. My impurities no longer keep distance between us.

Buddha didn't do that. The Dalai Lama can't do that. Neither Billy Graham nor your pastor can do it. No imam, holy man, or shaman can do it. Nothing any of us can think, say or do can do that. But Jesus did.

Now does that blow your mind?

For more reading: John 14, Colossians 1:17, Titus 2:14, Mark 16:19.

Lord, I'm in awe of Your purifying, righteous love. Thank You for doing for me what I didn't deserve and could not do. Thank You for purifying me of my guilt and restoring Your true love to my life.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 September 2016

So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. Hebrews 1, verse 4.

There are folks who say they don't believe in Jesus or God because they don't believe in things that are supernatural. I've met them; you probably have as well. One friend told me he didn't believe in God because he rejected the idea that some supernatural being would hold us accountable for original sin. When I asked him about feeling the consequences of things done before him, he went off on a line of argument I no longer remember because I quickly tuned him out.

But what about you? Do you believe in the supernatural? Do you believe in angels? Years ago, my toddler son and I were in our two story house, at home cleaning (actually, I was cleaning and he was playing). He was upstairs in his room and I ran downstairs to get something. A few seconds later I heard the stereo start blaring and I immediately thought "what has he done now?" I assumed he had climbed the shelves to jack up the volume. So I angrily ran upstairs to find him still sitting at the other end of the room, where he had accidentally taken a bottle of bleach and sprayed it in his eyes. There was no physical way he could have toddled to the stereo cabinet, climbed the shelves, gotten down and toddled back to where he was and sprayed the bleach. Something else happened. A coincidental power surge? Maybe...or maybe not. I prefer to think the supernatural reached into our natural world.

People of Jesus' day believed in the supernatural. They lived in the century during the waning years following the fall of the Greek empire: the same Greece who spread her devotion to democracy, philosophy and reason throughout the world she conquered as well as the assumption that the supernatural was just as real as that new humanist thinking. People back then believed that angels were real, and that they regularly participated in human existence as agents of the supernatural Almighty. Angels were beings with mighty powers, able to do superhuman tasks that regular people couldn't do.

Have we become so 'advanced' as to think the supernatural possibilities no longer exist in a natural world we don't fully understand?

No matter, the author of Hebrews states that Jesus the God-man is superior to the angels. He, the Almighty deity who chose to immaculately conceive of Himself in humble origins, is superior to the angels created to be supermen. Jesus, the obscure carpenter and wayward prophet who was executed as a heinous criminal is superior to Michael, Gabriel and all the other supernatural beings – even Lucifer – created to serve God's purposes.

Jesus is the bigger man...because He's God. Consider all this is being said in a letter to encourage new Jewish converts familiar skeptical of these ideas. Remember that this verse comes immediately after verses establishing how Jesus exactly is and represents God the Father in every way God ordains. When we see Jesus, we're seeing God. You and I, we're sinful, impure human beings; I'm the father who immediately assumed his son was misbehaving instead of assuming he could be in danger. Without Jesus making things right, we have no way to stand in front of the just and holy God and not be vanquished for eternity.

What's more, consider the name. First century Jews understood that a name represented much about a person. Their character, their mission in life, attributes about them: all these things were summed up in one's name. In the Hebrew language, Jesus means "God saves." In Hebrew and ancient tradition, as well, angels could not have or be sons. But Jesus was given the name "God saves" and He was a son: a human adopted son to Joseph and the begotten Son of God. The name Jesus would have held great importance to the early believers of the church. Kind of makes you give pause when selecting baby names today.

Yes, Jesus did make things right; He restored harmony to God's plan by bringing the means for salvation. He did it because He is all-powerful, because He's greater and above the things we think of as powerful. He did it because He and He alone could supernaturally reach into our world and set things back in order. An angel couldn't do that. Lucifer doesn't want that done. But Jesus did it. He still does it today.

In the coming verses we'll see how the author uses Old Testament Scripture (with which the Hebrew converts would have been familiar) to prove Jesus' divinity. And in the years since that day when I was cleaning the house, I'm thankful some angel paid us a visit to convince a distracted young father that his infant son was in danger.

For more reading: Ephesians 1:21, Philippians 2: 9-10.

Lord, I'm thankful that You and only You are above all beings and above all names.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 8 September 2016

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Hebrews 1, verses 5-6

There is comfort in knowing some of the intricacies of faith that contribute to its rich history.

These first two verses do some heavy hitting in the early church. The Gospels tie Jesus and His lineage to the Jewish Patriarchs (Luke takes it all the way back to God Himself through Adam), but these verses in Hebrews tie Jesus directly to God the Father through the Psalms. That matters.

According to the NIV, Psalm 2 is heavily messianic; I encourage you to read it. In it, the Lord speaks to His people in song saying both "you are my Son" and "you are my son in the line of King David." Remember that Jewish men were instructed in the synagogues on the Torah and the Psalms. The Psalms were hymns they sung, poetic verses they memorized and carried all their lives. Psalm 2 is traditionally credited to King David as the writer. Thus, a tie to Psalm 2 is one that early churchgoers would have easily understood and absorbed, especially since the author then ties it to (what were at the time) contemporary eyewitness accounts from Matthew and John, as well as the (then) contemporary writings of Paul to the church in Colosse.

As if that wasn't enough, the reference from 2 Samuel (which is the story of King David), then also ties Jesus directly to King David. Of David, the book said "you will be my son" who would be punished on behalf of the people for wrongdoings. As Jesus was a direct descendant from David – something that may not have been fully understood at the time Hebrews was written – the author is, thus, tying the Son of God to the revered royal lineage of Israel's most famous warrior king.

Pretty heavy indeed. Here's a bit more heaviness for you: so what?

I mean, so what? What does this matter to us today? Jesus and David have been dead for thousands of years, many centuries. Why does that matter?

Really.

It's been over 200 years yet people are still quoting Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson. It has been decades and we're still quoting John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Ronald Reagan. If for only historic reasons, it matters that, centuries ago, ancient writers used (already) ancient texts to tie Jesus of Nazareth – someone of their own time and day – to Jewish tradition and royal lineage. Doing so helps us today understand the religious, social and even political impacts that the new Christian faith was having on the world at the time. That helps us to better understand how things came to be.

Yet move beyond that to matters of your own heart in the here and now. Your faith is a supernatural thing. Having faith in this Jesus is highly illogical, something that the world dismisses because it requires putting trust in something you can neither see nor feel. Yet you can sense it. You can sense the very real peace and clarity that come from expressing faith in Jesus Christ. You can't touch it, but you can know it's real.

Even though this is so, you and I still experience moments of questioning. It's natural; it isn't abnormal; it isn't even condemned by Jesus, who restored Thomas' faith after logical doubts threatened to cloud his continued belief. Having occasional questions or doubt doesn't make you un-Christian: it makes you a normal person. It is growing that doubt into dereliction of faith, rejecting God, that is a sin, not occasionally questioning or doubting His purpose or movement in our lives. Even Jesus doubted, screaming "My God why have You forsaken me" as He was dying on the cross. In moments

of question and doubt, it helps to know there are corroborating proofs, independent evidence, supporting what you believe. It helps to know there were other people who did the same, men like King David and the author of Hebrews, who sang both praises and mourning through the Psalms, as expressions of the faith they had in God.

For more reading: Psalm 2:7, Matthew 3:17, 2 Samuel 7:14, John 3:16, Colossians 1:18, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 97:7.

My God, thank You for weaving these intricate histories into my faith in You. Thank You for the deep proofs, then subtle meanings, that come with believing in You as my only Savior.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 September 2016. Today's topic: over the angels, too

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Hebrews 1, verses 5-6

Another quick dive into these verses; today we'll talk more about the angels.

"Let all God's angels worship him." My Concordia NIV study Bible says this verse is a continuation of Psalm 97:7 which says "worship him all you Gods!" That Psalm talks about both angels and pagan gods, stating how the Lord is over them all. Really consider that last part. Take it to heart and remember it because it's the wide umbrella that covers our entire existence even when we don't fully understand it.

Over the weekend, I had an online discussion with an atheist friend of mine. He and I have known each other for decades, and he's a pretty rabid un-believer. He posted a video of a young girl being slapped, and insisted that, because God didn't intervene to stop it, God obviously doesn't exist. We spent most of a day going back and forth trying to convince each other of our respective points (his that there is no God, mine that there is). In the end, I said my peace and walked away from it. Neither of us was convinced of much. Last night, I shared the account with a life group my wife and I attend. All I or anyone can really do is hope that my friend realizes the overture God is making to him through putting these matters on his heart.

Then I come here and re-read the verses and realize that the argument we had is moot. It's moot because, argument or no, intervention or no, God is still over all of this. He was two thousand years ago and He still is today. One way I know this is because I believe in angels and this verse says even the angels worship God. I've shared my story about how I believe an angel intervened with my son and me. This verse says that even that supernatural creature, whoever he was, is lesser than God and that even he worships the Lord Jesus.

How amazing is it, then, to consider that God's angels are more powerful than we are, that even they (like us) are under God's dominion and love, and that even they worship Him despite their awe-inspiring power and ability. But Jesus didn't come here to die for angels. Angels aren't saved by Jesus' resurrection and forgiveness. God didn't sacrifice Himself for the angels. Indeed, He cast out of paradise those angels who rebelled against Him. There's no salvation awaiting Lucifer and the angels who rebelled with him: for them, it is only the abyss. God gave angels the choice to love Him or leave Him and many left, and for them there's no repentance and forgiveness of sins. But there is for us.

So consider, again, my friend the atheist. In this world, real problems really hurt, and whether we like it or not, there's nothing in Scripture and nothing in Jesus' words that says "believe in Me and I'll make it all go away." If you're looking for that, you won't find it in the Bible. After our day-long wordfest, I think that was part of his point. It wasn't just to spout his belief in unbelieving: it was to point out how there are terrible things in this world that still happen. That's true; undeniable in fact. Yet these verses give me a little respite from that all too terrible fact. God is over those terrible things as much as He's over the good things. He doesn't always intervene in ways we want or even understand, and sometimes He doesn't intervene at all. Yet He could if He chose to, and He could send His powerful angels to do His bidding any place, any time. In doing so, they're subject to Him. Yet He loves us more than even them. He loves us all, believer and atheist alike whether we choose Him or not. What consequence will there be to our choice?

For more reading: Psalm 2:7, Matthew 3:17, 2 Samuel 7:14, John 3:16, Colossians 1:18, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 97:7.

Lord, thank You for loving me differently from how You love and provide for the angels. Thank You for the salvation You give, for sending beings I don't understand to help here, and for being over all of it.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 September 2016

In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire." Hebrews 1, verse 7.

One more about the angels. And nature.

The NIV study Bible I use to assist me with these writings says "Psalm 104:4 speaks of the storm wind and the lightening as agents of God's purposes." Specifically, that Psalm says "He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire from his servants."

Do you know the story of Elijah and God in the breath of the wind? It's from 1 Kings, chapter 19. Elijah the prophet has been zealously "propheting" for God. He's bringing it, giving his all, and what has he gotten for it? Queen Jezebel is trying to have him killed. He's depressed to the point of desperation and needs some encouragement. God tells him to go outside to witness divine power. Then God sends a huge wind (maybe a tornado), and earthquake and firestorm but God isn't in any of those. When God does show up, He's in a breath of wind, and Elijah is refreshed to resume his duties as prophet.

The connection between Hebrews and 1Kings? The power is God, not angels or elements. There's one I don't consider often enough.

Now, I'm not going to opine on global warming, man-made climate change, or any of that. Suffice it to say that there are those of us who believe in that and those of us who don't. Mankind is pretty powerful; we have the means to literally move mountains. Don't believe me? Go to the Black Hills in South Dakota. Or visit NORAD at Cheyenne Mountain, which is literally a series of buildings inside a mountain. We've made nuclear weapons (and safe nuclear power), explored deep space, cured diseases, built the entire nation of Dubai, and we can talk instantly all across the planet. But those aren't supernatural. They're fantastic (and wonderful) but they aren't supernatural. They aren't 'something from nothing.' They aren't speaking creation into existence, or two 'men' destroying two immoral cities all by themselves. They aren't parting a sea, stopping a river midstream (or the sun in the sky), turning water into wine, walking on water, or any of those things. The greatest feats humanity can offer are uses or manipulations of created nature, not creating nature out of nothing.

Only God can do that. We can't. The angels can't. Benny Hinn (or Benny Hill) can't. Only God can do that.

And only God can use nature to send His messages. Sometimes I think that, when we humans recognize beauty, we're seeing the world through heaven's eyes. God touches and refreshes us using His nature. A vista of the Grand Canyon, Maroon Bells in the fall, the view from the Matterhorn, a sunset from your own front porch: beautiful and refreshing. And I believe they may just be messages from God. "Look at the beauty of my creation. See a reflection of Me and know I'm even more beautiful."

Then consider hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, tornados; devastation. These things are part of nature, part of the fallen world. They would be out of place if this were still Eden; they'll be out of place in the world Jesus remakes after the end of time. Until then, we're stuck with them. Nature itself is frustrated by sin, and while people and their sins today don't bring on these natural events, our world still suffers from mankind's original rebellion. Those terrible storms happen because a frustrated nature still rails against its own not-frustrated nature. The elements themselves react in ways they weren't created to.

Yet through it God is still over all. He works miracles in the aftermath. Perhaps His angels are at work exercising protection; we may never know. The stories of rescue; comforting grieving families. Resolute will to rebuild, the ability to put forgiveness into perspective: these are expressions of God's Spirit at work in the wake of sin's results. In them, they

are God using such forces of nature for His own purposes. In them, He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire.

For more reading: Psalm 104:4, Daniel 7:10, Hebrews 1:14, Zechariah 6:5, 1Kings 19, Genesis 18 and 19.

Lord God, You are mighty over all the world. You are over nature, more powerful than any force, and ruler of all we know. Thank You for being the Lord of all creation, and for all the ways You minister to us.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 September 2016

But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." Hebrews 1, verses 8-9.

These verses are more verses that affirm Jesus' royal right to the throne of his ancestor, King David. Why should this matter?

Face it: we like pedigrees. We Americans pride ourselves on being independent and republican (little r), because we favor representative democracy as our form of government. Yet we are still a celebrity, pedigree-driven culture. Generations ago, the Kennedys self-anointed themselves as American royalty. Before them, there were the Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Rockefellers; today we have Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk (oh and that Trump guy). Anyone remember the Travie McCoy "Billionaire" song from a few years ago? The PG version of the lyrics sang, "I wanna be a billionaire so frickin bad...smiling next to Oprah and the Queen." Kardashians, Hiltons, Britney, Lindsey, whoever (and still those Kennedys): we set up celebrities, athletes, politicians, and wealthy people as a sort of royalty. We adore them.

And have you run up against the job market lately? It can be tough to get a job if you don't have a college degree. And even if you have a degree, you can get into the hiring process and find it difficult to get a job if your degree isn't from a certain school. Don't believe me? Since 1988, every president has had a degree from an Ivy League school (the current election will continue the trend). Drop down a few rungs on the vocational ladder and you'll find most job postings require X, Y and Z qualifications. To get those qualifications, you need to acquire experience, certifications, skills, or specific training. If you don't meet those qualifications, you don't make the cut.

We may pride ourselves on being an egalitarian people but in practice, we like pedigrees and royalty and status. They help us to affirm our belief that the one in whom we put our trust is reliable and true.

So consider this: Jesus has the pedigree for our benefit, not His.

Jesus doesn't need a pedigree. He doesn't need a certificate, or a degree, or lineage. He's God; He simply is, the Great I AM. The Bible points this out over and over in both Old and New Testaments. God Himself is all the proof we need of Him and STILL He gives us proof of Himself through revelations in His Word.

But we're sinful, and that isn't enough for us. We want our Savior to be a 'somebody.' We want our king to be someone who's 'been there,' who's down for the streets, who can relate to us but still be better than us; someone who has the proof that they have arrived. God knows this, so practically from the very start of time, He gave us prophecies of how He would deliver us through a Savior. As time marched on, He then gave us the pedigree for that Savior, stating how He would fulfill promises made to the Patriarchs, how He would sit on the throne of King David, and how that throne would then last forever. There are hundreds of such prophecies in the Old Testament and it is nearly statistically impossible for any other person in all of recorded history to have satisfied them the way Jesus of Nazareth did. One website I saw listed a 1 in 10¹⁵⁷ probability that one man could fulfill just 48 of those prophecies (<http://www.biblebelievers.org.au/radio034.htm>). Jesus fulfilled all 456 of them.

That's quite an affirmation, quite a pedigree.

God gives us a pedigree for our King, and then He sets Him aside as that one true King. We look to our ruler to rule us with justice and to be upright. Jesus lived the life and died the death to prove just that, to establish His Kingdom with those two qualities as its bedrock. His entire ministry here as both man and Son of God was a ministry of just teaching,

establishing His word as reliable and true; it has lasted over 2000 years. He did this because He knows we need it, because nobody else ever could.

For more reading: Luke 1:33, Philippians 2:9, Isaiah 61: 1-3, Psalm 45: 6-7, Genesis 3:14-15.

Lord Jesus, You and only You are Lord, Savior and the one true King. Thank You for all the proofs you give to satisfy my human craving to know You more.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 16 September 2016

He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. Hebrews 1, verse 10.

If a pitch for creationism turns you off, then ignore today's message. I'm going to make a shameless one. Actually, I'm just siding with God and billions of other people. God makes the pitch on His own.

Zechariah 12:1 says "The Lord, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person." Psalm 8:6 says, "You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet." And chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis give God's account of how He created everything. Today's verse from Hebrews reiterates that account and affirms the statements from Zechariah and the Psalm. Indeed, verse 10 affirms every statement in the Bible mentioning how God created the heavens and the earth. In fact, http://www.studybibleforum.com/htm_php.php3 says that the word "create" is mentioned 49 times in the Bible. The same reference says "heavens" is mentioned 179 times, and it says "earth" is mentioned 861 times.

That's a lot of mutually exclusive self-proof. I've often debated atheist friends in the creation-vs-evolution harangue and I remind them that you can't use creation to disprove evolution (nor can you use evolution to disprove creation). Both concepts are replete with scientific holes and are directly competing for the same airspace. To prove one you need both belief in it (also called "faith") and corroborating evidence from the same concept/theory. When you look at the concepts in this way, evolution is still full of scientific holes (millions of years of them in fact) while creation is quite unified, sequential, and holistic.

Don't take it from me. Like I said, to believe in one 'theory' or the other requires faith. You have to accept what it says and accept there are things about it that don't line up with your understanding. Fair enough, so investigate it on your own. If you're intellectually honest about the whole pursuit, you're going to end up back here with what I just said: evolution doesn't add up while creation adds up quite nicely.

None of us fully knows why the author of Hebrews included this mention in the book. Most likely, he was giving a praise to God that would be commonly understood and acceptable to the target audience of believers. But isn't it interesting that, coming on the heels of verses 8 and 9, which talk about God proving Himself to us and his royal pedigree, the author includes a praise that proves how that shouldn't surprise us because God is the ultimate creator. All that we think, sense, and live among comes from the brilliance of His soul. He thought of all this, then He spoke and it came into being.

Try doing that sometime and let me know how it turns out.

Frankly, I don't understand it. I count myself as highly educated, thank you very much, with educational, vocational, and bibliographical pedigrees to back that up; yes I have a lot of books. Big freaking deal. At the end of all that smarty pants talk, I still don't understand how God made life. How He made babies, bumble bees, birds, and birch trees that all live as part of nature, are all genetically and atomically diverse, yet all are replete with that same mysterious force called "life." I don't understand how gravity works and why every other force in the universe is affected by it. I sometimes don't understand why some healthy species or organisms die out while others succeed; this became especially apparent as I farmed pumpkins all summer long. When you strip away the college degrees, there's more to this world that I don't understand than I do.

Are you in the same boat? Einstein was; so was Issac Newton and they're much smarter than me, and maybe you, too.

What's missing is faith.

Faith explains to me how everything was made by God to serve and grow His glory. My faith is re-affirmed when I am blessed to absorb a little of the beauty of nature. My faith is grown when I read the words of verse 10 and the other Bible verses that support it, reading how greater men than me had the good sense enough to praise God for the obvious wonder of His creation. They didn't understand how He did it all any more than Einstein, Newton or Charles Darwin did. I don't understand it either. But I believe in it, and I'm thankful that God did it, and that I get to be a part of it today.

For more reading: Psalm 8:6, Zechariah 12:1, Genesis 1-2.

Lord, I praise You for Your creation!

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 September 2016

They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end. Hebrews 1, verses 11-12.

A few days ago I shared that I believe creation is how the universe was created, how any reasonable discussion about the facts of evolution and creation will logically lead an intellectually honest person back to creation as that only logical explanation.

Now, in our best “Meatballs” moment, let’s all say this together: “it just doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t matter because what was created will be destroyed. All that was created will be un-created by the same God who created it, all in His own time and by His design. We don’t have control over that: He does. When He gives the word, it’ll happen. You and I can rail against that, insisting that we, the created, should have a say in how He gains His glory, but the fact is we don’t have a say in it. Only He does. And when it’s said and done, He’ll still be and we can be with Him there.

Isaiah prophesied: “All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.” Psalm 102, written years before Isaiah, says also “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”

So, say it with me again: it just doesn’t matter. There. We’re sounding more like Bill Murray every time.

Now remind yourself of a few things. Consider that Isaiah’s words were a promise. They were God-inspired and bound to happen. Remember that the Psalm is a hymn of praise as well as a statement of obvious fact. But most of all, remember that this section of Hebrews establishes praise for Jesus because of His supremacy over all creation. The author of the book has already tied Jesus back to creation and Eden themselves. Now he’s saying that Jesus will oversee the end of all He created yet, after that end, Jesus will remain. Therein is the hope of the world.

Huh? The world that we’re talking about dissolving, perishing, destroying, changing has hope after all that has happened? You betcha. Not only hope, but the PROMISE, the guarantee, of eternal life. Hope isn’t just some wishing well or some David Copperfield trick. It’s a promise, the expectation of a fulfilled agreement. God gave us the hope that He would endure past all that we know and trust and that, because of this, we can be sure of living forever. He who is eternal assures us that, because He who is all love and purity endures past time and matter, we who put our trust in Him will live with Him when time and matter cease to be.

And cease they will. Quote me on this (even tell my atheist friend): sometimes I think the story of creation’s beginning and end is a giant head game. I mean, God simply IS and He’s over everything because He created and can control everything. The ending has already been determined and advertised. It’s a foregone conclusion that, in the end, evil will be destroyed, Satan will be destroyed, everything that was corrupted by sin will be destroyed. When that’s done, God will reshape it into something new, perhaps something like the world of Adam and Eve. This will all again be a paradise where Jesus will once again commune with us, face to face and God-man to man. There won’t be the taint of sin; there won’t be any anger, violence, or separation from Him. Those things will have ended and what will remain will be only what God has ordained: Himself (and His perfect love) and those who have loved Him. We’ll endure not because of anything we’ve done, but because He made it possible.

Whatever worldly things we trust now just won’t matter anymore. Things won’t matter. Parties and plans won’t matter. Long trips, schedules, project plans, bills, DVR shows, Bill Murray movies, weather forecasts, blogs, iPhones, and steak &

shrimp on the menu just won't matter. What will matter will be Jesus and holding His hand there in love throughout all eternity.

For more reading: Isaiah 34:4, Psalm 102: 25-27.

Lord Jesus, only You matter. Thanks for Your promise of living forever in the world You'll make new.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 September 2016

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? Hebrews 1, verses 13-14.

Another comment on angels. Recall from verses 6 and 7 how the author remarks that God's angels were created to worship Him, that they were imbued with divine power and supernatural ability. Now notice how, just a few words later, the author brings us back to the subject of angels, and how Jesus didn't come to live and die for their salvation.

Wow. If this is a fact you're considering for the first time, then stop and ponder it. Those supernatural, spiritually powerful, defying-space-and-time angels aren't saved by Jesus. You are. They aren't. Don't get lost in that thought, but certainly don't overlook it.

If you're an angel, and you're not one of those who rebelled and fell, then you live your eternal life directly in front of God. You get to look on Him without being destroyed by simply beholding Him. You know His holiness and His beauty and His love first-hand, and you see every second how He is all He says He is. His power, His justice, His perfection, His love, His mercy: You see all those without the filter of sin or the flaw of humanity.

And you don't need Him to die for you. In fact, He didn't die for you. You haven't sinned against Him, but He also didn't die in the promise to redeem you if ever you do. There were thousands, maybe millions of your fellow angels who once rebelled with Lucifer and were expelled from heaven accordingly. You know the Scriptures, so you know that doom and eternal punishment await those rebels at the end of history. And it isn't your history: it's history for the humans, for the people who God loved differently from you and your peers. The universe, the earth, the seasons: they weren't created for the benefit of the angels. They were created for man.

If you're an angel, you know Jesus, know His side as fully God and fully man, and you know Him in ways that human beings don't, can't. You get to see how He is working in eternity for the benefit of men, how He has mercy on people who, like those fallen ones, constantly rebel against Him. How He intercedes for us so that the Father's holy justice doesn't punish us for the terrible things we do. An angel living there in heaven sees all this up close and personal.

And an angel knows it isn't for him. God never promised that angels would be redeemed. God never prophesied for the salvation of the angels. God never promised to stand against all who would stand against His people. God privileged the angels with the work of ministering to men, of protecting and advancing and assisting men even in ways that men don't understand. Yet God didn't beget His only Son to live, teach and die for the angels. He only did this for men. Heaven isn't opened up for the angels. They're already there, in the presence of God, for the purpose of serving His glory however He sees best. That includes ministering to people here when we are in danger of the fires of hell.

In fact, hell was created for the angels. The author of Hebrews notes that creation and history were created for men and will come to an end. When it ends, those angels we call demons will be judged and consigned to hell where there will be eternal separation from God and eternal punishment. Fire, pain, anger, hurt, loneliness, desperation: whatever you conceive hell to be, it will be worse and it was designed for those who rejected God. Hell's first citizens will be Lucifer and the angels whose free will drew them away from God.

It will be so because Jesus Christ didn't die for the angels. Jesus doesn't vow to do battle, real and spiritual, for the angels. Jesus doesn't promise that angels will be in communion with Him. Scripture doesn't say that angels were made in God's image, but man was. God never called the angels "very good" the way He did with man. Angels won't inherit salvation; they can't. But we can.

What say you?

For more reading: Isaiah 34:4, Psalm 102: 25-27.

Lord Jesus, I praise You for Your glory and thank You for the angels You made to serve You and help me. I don't deserve Your forgiveness but I'm so grateful for it and thankful for those You give to sustain us here.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 23 September 2016

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. Hebrews 2, verse 1.

There are folks who don't like that some folks (like me) dissect Scripture verse by verse and comment on it in the same way. There's danger, some say, in taking verses out of context and mis-applying them or misconstruing their meaning. That's true. And there's danger, others say, in missing a larger meaning or story being told if all we talk about is one verse at a time. That, also, is true. I'm sure there are other gripes with doing this, and that's ok. It's a free country, a free internet, and a free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ that we talk about. If I get close to the line of propriety in any of these commentaries, I ask for your help in vectoring us back to God's Word. Over the years we've been doing this, I've received many emails and calls doing just that, and they're all helpful, of great value

They're of great value because of Hebrews 2, verse 1. Writing these proverbials is one way I pay the most careful attention to God's word. He put it on my heart to heal and grow me, then as a way to help encourage others. In this old world, perhaps that's most important because it's easy to drift away from His path. It doesn't take radical temptation: it takes simply living through each day. If I can help someone cling better to God's Word by reading them one by one, then perhaps that can be a good thing.

Mind you, I'm neither pastor nor professor. I'm just a guy occasionally wading into exegetical work. Theopedia.com defines "exegesis" as "a systematic process by which a person arrives at a reasonable and coherent sense of the meaning and message of a biblical passage. Ideally, an understanding of the original texts (Greek and Hebrew) is required. In the process of exegesis, a passage must be viewed in its historical and grammatical context with its time/purpose of writing taken into account. This is often accommodated by asking who wrote the text, and who is the intended readership, what is the context of the text, i.e. how does it fit in the author's larger thought process, purpose, or argument in the chapter and book where it resides, what is the choice of words, wording, or word order significant in this particular passage, why was the text written (e.g. to correct, encourage, or explain, etc.), and when was the text written?"

You betcha!

Theopedia.com also later defines "hermeneutics" as "the science of interpreting what an author has written. In Christian theology, hermeneutics focuses specifically on constructing and discovering the appropriate rules for interpreting the Bible. These methods and principles, however, are often drawn from outside of scripture in historical, literary or other fields. It inevitably involves exegesis, which is the act of interpreting or explaining the meaning of scripture. The goal in applying the principles of hermeneutics is to "rightly handle the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), striving to accurately discern the meaning of the text."

Welcome to seminary...except this isn't seminary, and I'm not a seminary student nor do I intend to be one any time soon. Again, I'm just a guy who's trying to figure out what God is telling him, verse by verse and day by day. The reason for that goes back, again to today's verse. I take it to heart (and hope you do, too) that what God says to me in His Word is important. It's important to understand what the Spirit is saying. It's important to be able to hear God when He calls (because He calls all the time in many different ways). It's important to listen closely and read closely to make sure we're following what He wants us to know and to do.

Some folks do that by studying at college to be a professionally trained minister; God bless them. Some folks do that simply by living out their faith, and God bless them too for being such a blessing to others. And some folks do what you and I are doing here: breaking down His Words a few at a time to glean out what they mean as we live in this moment. I don't know if it's exegesis, hermeneutics, or just another blog among thousands. Long as it serves God's purposes, then all glory to Him.

For more reading: Romans 11:22.

Lord, I praise You for inspiring these words. Thank You for Your gift of sharing and for letting us spend some time together. Help me to always stay true to Your purposes.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 September 2016

For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. Hebrews 2, verses 2 and 3.

What does that mean? It sort of seems like two different thoughts 'smushed' together.

My NIV concordance says that "the message spoken through angels" references God giving the Commandments to Moses at Sinai. Some reading from Deuteronomy tells that "myriads of angels" accompanied God in giving Him praise when He revealed His law to Moses (who then shared it with the world). A little online research corroborates that opinion. What about the rest of the verses?

Yesterday at church the theme was "good enough." Pastor Mark talked about how we, as people, constantly strive to prove we're good enough. Every religion on earth is a choice between following Jesus or not. If you aren't following Jesus, then you're doing something, anything, to prove you're good enough. Good enough for Allah, good enough to reach nirvana, good enough to prove your worth, good enough to make up for things you've done, just good enough: that's the point of all faiths other than following Jesus. You're either a following Christian or you aren't.

I don't say this to denigrate other faiths. It's just a fact. If your faith isn't put in Jesus, you aren't putting your faith in the only one who can save you from your sins. You're striving to do something, most likely to prove you're good enough to rise above the wrongs you've done. And be real: everyone does something wrong. Wrong equals sin. We all sin; we're all thick with sin. There's nothing we can do to undo the consequences of those sins, both against other people and, as believers, against the righteous justice of God. If you aren't following Jesus, you're doing something to overcome those sins. THAT point segues directly into verse 3, where the verse talks about salvation.

Only Jesus has atoned for your sins. Only Jesus can save me, you, or anyone from the eternal consequences of our sins. God is perfect and just and righteous and all love. He made us to love us and for us to live in perfect harmony with that love for all time. Yet, to maintain that just, righteous, perfect love, God can't tolerate our sins. He gave us the free will to follow completely or sin. Being a loving parent, He allows us to choose what we do, including the consequences. But to maintain His perfection He can't allow our constant imperfections to taint Him. If He did, He wouldn't be perfect, He wouldn't be God. That can't be allowed, and let's keep it real: we wouldn't really want it.

I am not perfect and I'm not just or righteous on my own. I can't atone for myself. I can make some amends for the wrongs I've done to God and other people, but in truth I can't atone for everything. As an absolute, if I can't atone for everything then I really can't atone for everything. I'm not God. Neither are you. We can't save ourselves from the punishment we deserve: damnation and separation from God.

Jesus did.

He did and He did it as fully man and fully God all at the same time. It's a mystery, THE mystery of the ages, how Jesus lived, died, and atoned for all sins. He took on Himself the eternal damnation that even the least of my sins deserves and He made it right. He made unclean man right and righteous again so that we can again live in the harmony with God that God originally intended. The truly good news of all history is how He saved us from the eternal consequences our sins deserve. All of Scripture is God testifying through men how He did this. Those twelve men who Jesus taught during His ministry here inspired dozens, then hundreds, then millions of others to share this good news with others. The Bible does this. Pastors, ministries, whole lifetimes do this. Even our words here together do this. It's all because of what Jesus did those thousands of years ago. On my own, I'm not good enough. Jesus is and with Him, He made me good enough.

What do two verses really mean? As it turns out, quite a lot.

For more reading: Deuteronomy 33:2, Romans 11:22.

Lord Jesus, I follow You. Thank You for saving me, for forgiving me, for doing what I can't. Help me to live in ways to share this message with the world.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 27 September 2016

... how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? Hebrews 2, verse 3.

Let's talk about choosing and free will. A few weeks ago, I shared some thoughts about a conversation I had with an atheist friend. One thing that conversation had in common with others like it is that we talked about free will.

Free will is a concept I'm not sure unbelievers really grasp.

It's not that unbelievers don't understand what free will is. Indeed, in my experience, atheists and unbelievers stridently guard the territory of free will and free choice. They jealously guard their right to refuse to believe in God, Jesus, or anything resembling the Christian faith. That's their right as Americans. As a believer, I look at my unbelieving friends and sometimes think they're only a small step away from actually embracing Christian faith. After all, it's easier for someone who says "I don't know" or "I don't understand" to come to faith than it is someone who says "I reject that." The mind (and heart) is more open to alternatives they might not have otherwise considered.

Yet even knowing that, I'm still left at the point of seeing how free will isn't really, fully grasped by unbelievers. They don't fully see that free will is itself a gift from God and even a fruit of God's Spirit. What they purport to reject is the blessed source of their cherished right.

A follower of Jesus sees that it is a blessing that God allows us to choose whether or not to believe in Him, to love Him. Compulsion isn't love. He wants us and He wants us to want Him. If God were Allah and looking for us to do things to please Him, we'd find we never really can please Him. Allah would be perfect and we imperfect: there's no way for him, or us, to bridge the imperfection gap. But God did make a bridge: Himself, in Jesus Christ. All He asks is that we believe in Him. We don't have to 'do' anything to please or placate or satisfy Him: all that needed to be done to satisfy God and His holy requirement for justice was done by Jesus on the Cross.

To believe in Him, God gives us free will. We can choose to believe in Him or we can choose to not believe in Him. It's as simple as that. He doesn't ask us to come to Him because we HAVE TO. He asks us to come to Him because we want to. And He helps us see that coming to Him is good in itself. By willingly going to God, we get to share in His love, justice, peace, contentment and sharing heart. He gives us hints at it in providing for us in every way possible. God air in your lungs? It's because of God. Got 24 hours in a day? Because of God. Got food, friends and folks who love you, a beautiful sunset, anything else? God. We can freely choose to believe these are gifts of God or we can freely choose to believe they aren't. God allows us either way. What's more, He provides for us whether we believe in Him or not.

It's just that the eventual penalty for rejecting His gift of saving love will be permanent. The hell God created as the final repository for rebellious angels can be ours for the choosing as well. Let's not even discuss how rejecting God and ensuing bad choices can lead to disaster here on the Third Rock. No, let's keep our eyes focused on the fact that, after our time here is over, if we've spent our choices rejecting God, He'll let us reap the consequence of it. That means hell. Party over, oops, out of time, as Prince might have sung. I'd rather avoid that. It's ok if all that is frightening because there's a better way.

Mind you, this isn't judgmental. I believe in Jesus but I'm no better than anyone else. My life is made better by believing in Him, following Him, but it doesn't make me 'better than' anyone else. If I come off as "judgy," feel free to upbraid me because I deserve it. These are simply facts and opinions about something that's really incontrovertible. We can't change that God gives us the free will to do as we please. We can't change God and we can't stop Him. God does as He pleases and, because He's God and all good, what He pleases to do is right even if we don't see it as right.

I'm not sure unbelievers understand the great gift that is free will. Indeed, I haven't even done it justice in these few words. How must it feel for God to see people He loves rejecting Him? Or for Him to see us say we believe yet keep on

sinning (which is still rejection of Him)? You could spend whole books talking about nothing more than the blessing of being able to choose God's life and love instead of being compelled to endure it. What say you?

For more reading: Hebrews 10:29, Hebrews 12:25, Hebrews 1:2, Luke 1:2.

Lord God, thank You for the blessing of free will, for letting me love You instead of having to love you. Please continue to bless others and use me as an instrument to help others come to You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 September 2016

God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. Hebrews 2, verse 4.

Segueing off an earlier post, Jesus doesn't need the signs, wonders, and various miracles...but we do. John 4:48 records Jesus saying, "unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." Indeed, while wandering in the desert before Sinai, the Israelites repeatedly asked for reassuring miracles. It seems they, like we, too easily forgot the wonder of how God delivered them out of slavery while ignoring the daily miracles that accompany just living. Wonders with the staff, ten plagues, the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna and quail: what miracles? Never mind the birth of a new baby, the miracle of healing from sickness, and so many other things that happened so often they simply didn't notice them. Yet that didn't make them any less miraculous.

Those things weren't enough for the Israelites to remember that God was always with them and always all-powerful. No, they always wanted more. So do we. We're always looking for proof, more razzle dazzle. We say it's because we're skeptical but maybe it's just old fashioned idolatry. "I know better than you, Lord. You'll have to prove it to me again." What does God do? "Ok, Mr. Texas Hold 'Em. Call." God brings it, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small ones. You can explain it away to nature or chance how just the right amount of money sometimes shows up right when you need it. Or a storm de-intensifies when it wasn't supposed to. Or how your friend seemed to get better and the doctors can't explain it. Maybe nature, or maybe it's God testifying by signs, wonders, and various miracles.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, too, that we all have different gifts (1 Cor 12). Some people actually can use the power of God to work what we could consider to be miracles. According to this verse in Hebrews (and referencing the one in Ephesians 1), this is according to God's Spirit. It is God who gives us the power (talent, inspiration, ability) to perform such miracles as microsurgery, a green thumb, empathy for strangers, mathematical brilliance, or even multi-tasking. Some folks may think that these are just the results of preparation or blind luck. We know differently.

We know that God works through us in ways we don't always see. I've come to disagree with those who say God is disinterested in our lives, that He simply created the world then walked away to watch it spin on its axis. That doesn't account for the miracle of life, or the changes in nature every season, or a thousand other ways we could list if we only stopped to notice. Indeed, a look out of my office door at the woods where my house lies shows an intricate, vastly complex and beautiful nature unfolding in infinite ways every single morning. And that's just on a few acres here in North Texas. It's a miracle to behold nature; it's a miracle to contemplate life.

And it's all a gift from God, a gift that testifies to His nature and His goodness. He shares with us the talents best suited to us. Perhaps these are abilities that He has that He knows we would enjoy and be able to use to help others. I can't perform neurosurgery but I do know how to bake sugar cookies. I can't explain how a tree grows but I do know how to plant and nurture one. I don't understand why catfish and codfish taste different (and great) but I do know how to catch and fry them. God didn't give to me the talents He gave to you, but I do believe He gave each of us some way we can use to live in better service to His Kingdom. Everyone has something valuable to contribute, some more than others and some less. All of them are valuable.

And, again, it's all a gift from Him. He doesn't need us to do anything to make Him more God. But He does continually want to share with us and give to us because that's a part of His loving nature. Think about it long enough and I bet you'll see how that's the greatest miracle of all.

For more reading: Mark 16:20, John 4:48, 1 Corinthians 12:4, Ephesians 1:5.

Lord I praise You for the miracles You share, the ways in which You give to us to build us up and enrich our lives. Help me to use the talents You give me in service to You and others.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 29 September 2016

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. Hebrews 2, verse 5.

What is “the world to come” that’s identified here?

The concordance I use says that this verse is an exposition of Psalm 8. Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise, exclaiming “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” A few verses later, the psalter says “you have made them (mankind) a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

We as men are a little lower than the angels. Angels are supernatural beings; on the surface, we aren’t. Angels can move between time and dimension; as far as we’ve learned, we don’t. Angels have abilities to manipulate matter that we don’t (or don’t understand); we might not. Perhaps the biggest difference between men and angels is that the angels in heaven are without sin. In all the millennia of human history, no angel standing in God’s presence has ever sinned or even thought a rebellious thought against God. Who knows how long they were around before the earth was created? We, as men, are chock full of sin. As the psalter says, we’re a little lower than the angels.

And the angels aren’t saved. I’ve mentioned this before: angels who haven’t fallen don’t need to be saved. They still live in perfect obedience to God’s will, in His presence, enjoying His blessings. And, as we’ve talked about before, Jesus didn’t die to save fallen angels, but He did die and rise to save fallen mankind.

How beautiful, then, is the mystery of how and why God Himself died and resurrected to give us entrance to the world to come. Some may say the verse is talking about the earthly world after Eden. If you think about it, that makes sense. Angels were present at creation and likely witnessed man’s fall. They certainly witnessed its aftermath. Some might say the verse is talking about heaven now. Some might posit that the verse is also talking about the post-judgement heaven, where God will reunite His glory with a remade heaven and earth so that He might cherish us to live with Him forever. And the NIV says, also, that the verse could be an argument for Jews of the 1st Century, some of whom were tempted to return to Judaism, which teaches extensively on the roles angels play in the world.

I’ll be honest: I don’t know. I’ll be even more honest: it doesn’t matter to me.

This verse is in a section where the author makes arguments to convince the believer that Jesus is superior to anything or anyone else. He’s higher than men, higher than angels, higher than anything else created. All that we know and sense is from Him, and He is and will always be supreme over even the strongest evil. The world to come, whether the world we’re in now or the world after this life, is still under God’s hand. It’s good to know that He made men like you and I a little lower than the angels. And it’s good to be reminded that angels are ministering beings who live without sin. But what matters more to me is knowing that God is sovereign over all of it, angels and men alike.

If we consider that, then it really doesn’t matter what or where the ‘world to come’ is.

For more reading: Psalm 8

Lord God, I praise You for the worlds You have made. Thank You for blessing me to live here, and for making me lower than the angels but uniquely saved by You.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 October 2016

But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet." In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. Hebrews 2, verses 6-8.

Last Friday was my 50th birthday. My family threw a not-so-surprise birthday party for me over the weekend and I was blessed to have some of my closest friends and family around me for a few hours to celebrate, share food and wine, and just enjoy each other's company. Many people have been wishing me "happy birthday" all weekend, and I'm grateful for them as well.

The best is yet to come. Verse 8 here confirms that.

To tell you the truth, fifty years went by fast. I suppose that makes me officially 'old' to even say that; next I'll be saying "back in the day;" not hardly. Anyway, it went by so quickly and I have only occasionally stopped to really noodle where I fit in the overall plan of what's called "life." Whatever plan God has in my life He's playing it out. As that happens, I live it. There's too much going on, too much to see, too many good things to do to spend too much time navel-gazing and wondering what it all means.

Then I bounce up against verse 6 which reminds me that, in every generation, people do and should remind themselves that they are indeed part of God's plan. That while we're part of the plan, we aren't God. That we're so much lower than He is yet He continually lowers Himself to meet me where I am. Physically God provides for everything I know and everything I have. Spiritually He encourages me, chastises me, supports me, loves me. Emotionally He comforts me and confronts me both. Who am I that God should even think of me? Who am I, Dave the fifty year old sinner, who has done some pretty rotten things, that the God of all time, space and dimension should even give me breath? Who am I that You are mindful of me?

I'm His special creation. That's who I am. That's who you are. That's who He sees us to be.

God sees us as so special that He put us in this world that contains everything we could ever need to not just survive but thrive. Love, salvation, thrill, imagination, creativity, ingenuity, logic, reason, justice, dreaming, desire, spirit, tenacity: God gives us these things that bring meaning to the blessing of the life He begins in us. Air, food, water, materials, sky, nature, invention, vocation: God also gives us all tools that we need to build a life. Jesus granted we, mankind, as the keepers and masters of His creation, entrusting us with the privilege of making the most that we can out of the place in which He made us.

In everything that God gives me, I get to see that He has blessed me. Sure, some things don't seem like blessings at the time. Sickness, bills, problems, conflicts, even evil: I don't want these things any more than anyone else yet my life is affected by them. Somehow, they're a part of what God is doing here and I accept them even as I work to overcome them. In this way, I get to see how He brings good out of the bad and how He turns everything for the good of those who love Him. I get to see that, because He has been with me through my first fifty years, I know He will guide every second of these next fifty. Only He knows what will fill each of those seconds; I get to find out as we build them. Yet I know deep inside that He'll use them for His good and that means they'll be for my good as well.

This weekend, I read a meme that said (to the effect) "don't spend time mourning what has happened. Spend time preparing for what's yet to come." That's a good thought with which to begin this new half century.

For more reading: Psalm 8

Lord Almighty, thank You for this life you've given me. Thank You for blessing me with so much love, family, and plenty.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 October 2016

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. Hebrews 2, verse 9.

Verse 9 continues the amplification of Psalm 8. If you haven't already read the psalm, go back and give it a read. In it, King David praises God, talking about how God is majestic over all creation and how man is God's most honored creation over the earth. David didn't know he was prophesying about his Savior and his descendant, Jesus, but he was. And King David also didn't know that, a thousand years later, the author of Hebrews would transform his words about praising God into words that perfectly describe Jesus and His perfect death for all.

Jesus was fully God. King David said, "You have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor." In this, He was talking about men in general, about how God had given men dominion over the earth. Yet Jesus is later born in fulfillment of every Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. He is born as God Immanuel, "God with us." No ordinary man could do the miracles Jesus did; no other man is still being talked about the way Jesus is two thousand years after His life here was done. Jesus lived His life here using both natural and supernatural means to give meaning to His ministry. Over and over, the Gospels describe how He proved His nature as fully God.

Yet Jesus was fully man. You or I couldn't die a death for everyone. If I died today, people would grieve me, but in a few short years, I'd be forgotten. I'm sorry to say but it's the same for you. Not so Jesus. He lived as a man, fully as a man, breathing, eating, sleeping, hurting, experiencing all the emotions and feelings you and I experience. The difference? He never sinned. He was all man in every way but this one. He inherited his mother's sinful nature yet He never succumbed to it. Jesus was fully man in every other way...

...including that He died. He who is fully God and eternal put off His eternal nature and died a physical death. Not only, but He died the death of a criminal. He was tortured and murdered and nailed to the shame of the cross. In dying, He experienced agony that no innocent man should know. Worse, He experienced His eternal soul being separated from His eternal being. It's the mystery of the ages, how God the Father could be with Jesus yet turned from Jesus all at the same time, how Jesus could put off His inherent divine nature to die a human death, how Their Spirit could surrender to the degradation of death and sin's sentence into hell. Yet He did it. Jesus died a human death.

And then He wasn't dead. As the Creed says, "He descended into hell." Jesus in Spirit descended into the place of the dead to announce to those there that He had conquered sin once for all. In doing so, He proved that living in faith in Him, then dying in faith in Him, is the pathway to paradise. He did this so that anyone, Jew or non-Jew, could gain paradise forever. For us, one hundred generations later, it means we have hope in this life: hope that the screw-ups and wrongs we do here won't merit us eternal punishment afterwards.

And knowing about it all goes back to King David. Jesus came from humble origins and so did His ancestor, David. David had been just a commoner's son, the youngest son of a simple man. He was a shepherd and a 'nobody.' Yet David had unswerving faith in his God and for this God made him king. Even more, God blessed David by promising to 'be with us, Immanuel,' through David's own family. If God said that to me, I hope I'd fall in praise the way David did.

For more reading: Acts 3:13, Philippians 2: 7-9, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:2, Psalm 8

Lord, thank You for the words of King David, for the life of my Savior, and for how You made heaven possible for all of us.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 5 October 2016

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Hebrews 2, verse 10.

One of my favorite hymns is "How Deep the Father's Love for Us." In it, the lyrics paraphrase Hebrews 2 with the poetic lines "How great the pain of searing loss, The Father turns His face away as wounds which mar the chosen One bring many sons to glory."

Magnificent.

Indeed, isn't it true how so many verses in Scripture are memorable because they are poetic? This one especially sticks with me. "Bringing many sons and daughters to glory" inspires in me thoughts of mission, and brotherhood, and mercy.

The thought has an almost Gaelic feel to it, as if there are thousands of mournful believers moving through the fog towards a dim light in the distance. The closer you get to the light, you see Jesus is the light, and that His arms are open, His heart of love on display, His presence evaporating the fog of sin and unbelief.

For years now, I've thought of my Christian walk as an active thing, a living, ongoing event. It has seemed like a movement. I've learned that we're in a spiritual war, one in which battles are fought on a personal basis every day. The battle manifests itself in resisting temptations, professing faith, encouraging others in the face of sin and despair. On one side stands Satan, general of the armies of the fallen. He uses evil to manifest itself in every dark emotion with which we can be plagued. Lies, pain, and anguish are the carnage he leaves on the battlefield of human souls.

Yet on the other side is Jesus, meek and mild yet overwhelmingly powerful. He is humble yet strong, quiet yet unfathomably deep, all peace yet all martial in protecting the peace, justice and love that stream from His very presence. He only tolerates Satan because Satan allows that peace, justice and love to shine in ways that build up His cherished creation, humanity. With a thought He could vanquish evil forever. With depth we cannot fully understand this side of heaven, He gave Himself up as payment for all the evil we embraced and, in doing so, brought many sons and daughters to glory.

I also love that phrase "pioneer of their salvation." In my walk of faith, my daily war against the spirits of evil, I get to follow Jesus as a pioneer. Your life and mine are unwritten; thank you Natasha Bedingfield. Today isn't fore-ordained and tomorrow isn't here yet. We're writing our lives as we live them. What we do in our lives today pioneers the ground on which we build our lives. We get to use the free choice God gave to each of us to do with what we will. It's God's hope that we'll look to Him, to Jesus, first and always, as the pioneer who blazed a trail for us. It wasn't a wagon train trail through the prairie or a lonely ride across uncharted ocean. It was living a life without sin, loving all others as He loved His Father, and then dying the death of just, noble sacrifice so that others might live forever. Jesus and only Jesus blazed that path to God for us. Buddha didn't; Mohammed didn't; L. Ron Hubbard didn't; our ancestors didn't. We don't today. Only Jesus.

Only He, who fulfilled ancient prophecy and was incarnate a little lower than the angels, pioneered the path into paradise and, in doing so, poetically brought mankind into that glory. He did it how? Through suffering. The physical torture, the spiritual agony, the abyss of separation from God: only Jesus did those things and only He persevered in true character through them to guarantee us the promise of hope that is His salvation. You and I can't imagine the suffering He endured. Not even the horrors of concentration camps or the monstrosities of ISIS in our world today can compare to the terror, agony, and pain Jesus endured for our benefit. It's simply beyond our compare. Yet endure them He did and, in doing so, brought many sons and daughters to glory forever.

For more reading: Romans 11:36, Luke 24:26, Hebrews 5:8, Hebrews 7:28, Romans 5: 3-5.

Lord, I thank You and praise You for bringing us to glory, for pioneering the way into eternity.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 October 2016

Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. Hebrews 2, verse 11.

Think about this one. I mean really, truly, slowly contemplate the idea being stated by this Bible verse.

You're like Jesus.

Jesus is like you.

You and Jesus, the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-everything creator of the universe, are family. You're in His.

You aren't part of Allah's family. In fact, nothing you can do could ever get you close to Allah; you'll never be good enough. You aren't on the same level as the Buddha. He reached nirvana first and, well, we just aren't that cool. Your ancestors did it better than you. The earth and Mother Gaia are so much bigger than you. Name one other faith on this planet and, chances are, you and I just don't measure up. This isn't Rag On Other Religions Day: it's simply the way things are.

Not so with Jesus. With Jesus, you're family. We're family. You and I, we are adopted children. It's as if He showed up at court and did everything necessary to fully, freely, finally adopt us as His own children. Even more, He doesn't just think of us as children: He looks at us as brothers and sisters. Equals, peers, siblings, friends: we aren't just family. We're on the same level.

Now, let's keep it real. Us, we aren't God. We aren't supernatural and we aren't the Triune God the way Jesus is. But He asks us to put off thinking like that and reminds us that He came here as Himself, as fully man while being fully God. We don't have to understand that mystery. In fact, we don't get to. It's simply a fact we get to accept. Yet fact it is. We can't do what He does in the supernatural realm and we never will. We are the created, not the Creator.

But as men, we get to relate to Jesus man to man because that's how He relates to us. He reminds us that He lived a full life among us. He ate, drank, slept, laughed, cried. Jesus did the same things you and I do except sin. He lived the kind of life we were designed to live to teach us that it could be done. He lived the life we could live, that, post-death, we will one day get to live. And He did it out of love to set things right.

Buddha didn't do that. Allah can't do that. Neither can the Hindus, the Mormons, the atheists, or any other followers of any other faith. But Jesus did it.

He did it because He sees us as people, as men and women. He meets us where we are and asks that we meet Him there in return. He wants to meet us on a human level because He knows that's what we can understand. He knows that He can appeal to our understanding, our hearts and minds, because He is the foundation of all understanding. Faith in God is the beginning of human reason. Jesus knows this and wants us to know it too so that we can live our lives here in purpose and love with Him as our guide.

Jesus sees you as His brother or sister because He wants you to see Him as your brother. He wants to be the person with whom you can confide, and trust, and rely on. Jesus wants us to know Him as family because family sticks together. Because family is a bond that matters. Because a family is the primary unit in every society, and because mankind was designed to live in families.

Seriously think about that. Seriously contemplate that thought. Jesus brings many sons to glory because He sees those sons, you and I, as brothers whom He loves and adores. That's the best news you'.

For more reading: Hebrews 13:12, Ephesians 5:26, Matthew 28:10.

Lord Jesus, my brother and my Lord, thank You for loving me as your sibling!

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 11 October 2016

He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." Hebrews 2, verse 12.

Men's retreats and death: in them, we do what verse 12, Psalm 22 and Psalm 68 all say we should do. Verse 12 is a re-telling of these particular psalms, and I find them timely.

This past weekend I went to a Christian men's retreat here in East Texas. One of my favorite writers, a man named Chad Bird, was speaking on "life in the blood." 50-60 of us Lutherans gathered at a lakeshore retreat center to spend a day with Chad learning about how God uses blood to atone for us and our myriad sins. He described how the ancient Israelites worshipped God through the tabernacle, then tied that to the animal sacrifices there, then went into depth on why the blood of those sacrifices was the most important part of worship for the Israelites; how Israel was forbidden from consuming blood because life is contained in blood (see Leviticus 17: 10-12). Finally, he tied this to the radical concept of Jesus instituting Holy Communion at the Last Supper and how this turned all he'd previously described upside down.

In all this, my friend and my fellow retreat friends were declaring God's name to our brothers and singing His praises in our assembly.

Then came yesterday. My wife and I attended a funeral. It was a funeral for a man who died unexpectedly last week. I barely knew him, but he was the husband of a friend for whom I'd worked during much of these last four years. The man who died was retired and spent most of his time learning Hebrew so that he could learn to read the Torah in the original language. That's something even many seminary students don't do, yet here was this improbable man spending much of his time doing exactly that. Just so he could know God better. His funeral service was at a small Episcopal church in south Houston. I had never been to an Episcopal funeral and they used an Easter liturgy, proclaiming the Resurrection as the method for bidding farewell and committing a soul to God. There were between 30 and 40 people present, and we all declared God's name to each other while singing His praises at this assembly to bid farewell to a family member and friend.

Verse 12 paraphrases Psalms 22 and 68. Psalm 22:22 says "I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you." It was written by King David while he was still a fugitive from King Saul's jealousy. It is a prayer of an anguished man, a man unjustly pursued and threatened with death for wrongs he never did. Yet in his state of terror, David praises God instead of wallowing in fear.

Then, in Psalm 68, David sings "Praise God in the great congregation; praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel." This psalm is a hymn, a processional of nine stanzas meant to be sung in masse by worshippers processing to God's holy presence. He wrote it as King David, as a hymn for his subjects to sing as they gathered in praise of their Lord. It's a far cry from David crying out in pain. If Psalm 22 is the men's retreat setting then Psalm 68 took place in the Episcopal church where I sat yesterday.

In both verses, the commonality is praising God. The ancient Israelites praised God according to His specific instructions which (as they never truly learned) were for their benefit and not His. King David praised God in the midst of being threatened with death. He later praised Him as king and the leader of God's people. Centuries later, the author of Hebrews reiterates these ancient praises by stating how they praise and reflect Jesus, the true altar sacrifice, who gave his life's blood for our redemption. Who was pursued yet never turned from God. Who praised in assembly the glories of His Father in heaven. The same Jesus who was present at our retreat this weekend and who welcomed my friend home.

For more reading: Leviticus 17:10-12, Psalm 22:22, Psalm 68:26.

Lord Jesus, I praise You in the quiet and I praise You in the presence of others.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 October 2016

And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me." Hebrews 2, verse 13.

In this verse, the author of Hebrews quotes (nearly verbatim) the book of Isaiah. In quoting Isaiah 8:18, he also references Jesus who said, referring to His followers, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." We can marvel at how Jesus quotes, nearly to the letter, the exact words of a hundreds-year-old prophet while imbuing them with new meaning. Or we can marvel at how those words from the prophet (and the Savior) are still relevant today.

Maybe we should marvel at that trust. God trusts you and I completely, implicitly, despite all that we do to prove we don't trust Him in return. Because of that, God protects us and counts us as His own. Nothing can ever take that away.

Now, I don't know about you, but from time to time it feels like things get me down. Bills show up that eat up all my disposable income. The drought this summer killed off most of my pumpkin crop and, along with it, my money tree. Folks who say they're going to come out for a visit never show, leaving you lonely and with a refrigerator full of food. We get sick but still have busy lives to live. Wife is irritated. Kids are irritated. I'm irritated. Despite that, God loves me anyway. I'm special to Him because I've been claimed by Him, redeemed by Him, cherished by Him. He trusts me. Nothing can ever take that away. Nothing the devil or the world does can ever make that change.

Or there's this election. This damned, frustrating election. No matter who you're voting for, the other 'guy' is the 'bad guy.' Whatever you're for, someone else is against. And in our social-media-driven world, you can't simply disagree: you must be vanquished. Don't go thinking I feel all targeted here: I've done my fair share of targeting, too. I can't seem to shut up while there are folks out in Facebookland who disagree with me. I can't wait for this stupid election to be over so all this rancor can die down...except it won't die down. It'll double-down. If "the other guy" wins, there's going to be hell to pay. If my "guy" wins, the same thing happens.

Despite that, God loves me anyway. I'm special to Him in spite of all the crazy stupid things I do to push Him away. He claims me, redeemed me, loves me, holds me close. No social media posts or unjust investigations can ever take that away. Jesus trusts me. Nothing the devil, Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, or any other sinner politician does can ever make that change.

The same Jesus who cherishes us in life and death is the same Jesus who spoke the words about His followers. He's the same Jesus who inspired Isaiah to write his words of prophecy. He's the same Jesus who appeals to each of us, each of the 7 billion humans here on the Third Rock, to get to know Him and put our faith in Him. When we put our faith in Him, we put our trust in Him. Just this morning, my wife and I were talking over our daily devotion. Its subject was rebuilding trust after sins. With Jesus, I'm building my trust in Him who has never sinned against me. It's me who's done the sinning. I'm the one who let Him down. And I'm the one who has to learn how to let go of my control and trust in Him.

When I do, I get to see that He holds me close because He trusts me first. I'm one of His special sheep, one of the people in whom He's most pleased. So are you. When I put my trust in Him, I see that He's trusted me all along with the precious gift of life. He gives me something beyond value: life, that mysterious force which defines and separates us from all other matter. He knows me by name, by heart, by every cell in the body He gave me. And despite all the ways I've rebelled, Jesus trusts me. He trusts me and I trust Him. Jesus trusts me to use the life He gave me to trust Him in return. Isaiah knew this about Jesus and Jesus said it about Himself. What say you?

For more reading: Isaiah 8:17-18, John 10:29.

Lord, I thank You so much that You know me and love me. Thank You for holding me close, for sharing Yourself, your life, with me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 October 2016

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Hebrews 2, verses 14-15.

How does the devil hold the power of death over you?

Another observation of the men's retreat I attended last weekend. The speaker, Chad Bird, made a point I had never considered before: man's sin went from zero to sixty in a moment. Think about it. The first sin recorded for us was disobedience. Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They made idols out of themselves and failed to trust God (who had proven His trustworthiness at all times to them). Then they blamed each other, then they blamed God. To us, that seems pretty innocuous. Yet, to God, it spoke of a chasm in the human heart.

But if disobedience seems simple, the next sin recorded in Genesis wasn't. If you aren't familiar with the story, Adam and Eve sin, so God provides for them but expels them from the paradise on earth that was Eden. After awhile, they make love and have a child in the usual way; that child is Cain. Later, they have Abel. Remember that, just after the fall of man, God promises Adam and Eve that He will send a deliverer to them. Since Cain was the first person given to them, isn't it possible that they thought Cain might be that deliverer? He was the first born child (indeed, the first child born in all humanity), and while first born children sometimes get the hardest treatment, they're also the first born. In the ancient world especially, that carried connotations of birthright, favored treatment, and being set apart as special.

If you consider all that, then isn't it likely that Cain was brought up knowing it? Maybe he was a little spoiled? It isn't a logical stretch to understand that Cain had a problem with ego, and that ego problem manifested itself in pride. Cain and his brother became farmers, and when both of them decided to bring fruits of their labor to God, Cain's pride burned into resentment. His brother, Abel, selected the best of his sheep herd, then slaughtered it in sacrifice to God. Cain, on the other hand, simply selected some nice crops and said "good enough" for his sacrifice. Result: God looked with favor on Abel's offering and with scorn on Cain's. It wasn't the produce: it was the heart.

Result from that: chasm and chaos. Cain murdered his brother. Sin 1: disobedience. Sin 2: murder. Zero to sixty in the space of a few verses.

Flash forward to our so called modern day. Your flesh and mine aren't any different from Cain's (or Adam's or Eve's). We suffer the same emotions and temptations they did. While they never had the internet or indoor plumbing or supermarkets like we do, we have never enjoyed face to face relations with the Almighty the way they did (nor the simplicity of life lived at its most basic level). Satan isn't very original. Jesus said he is the father of liars, that he has been a liar from the time of creation. Lies and deception are still Satan's primary weapons against us...because they're effective! They drove wedges between Adam & Eve & Cain & Abel and their God; they drive wedges into our relationships today. All our sins today start with the casual idolatry of Satan's lies and how we choose to believe them. Disobedience, murder, cheating, adultery, stealing; pick your pet sin: they're all based on simple tricks that Satan has used for centuries. We're tempted and we fall time and time again. As a result, we die to God with every disobedience. Die enough and it'll become permanent.

Yet the same Jesus who allows us to live in a world where we are tempted by Satan all day is the same Jesus who asks us to put our trust in Him alone because all blessings flow from Him: the same way they did in the days of Cain and Abel. He overcame death on Calvary, rendering spiritual death meaningless for those who would use their lives here to trust Him. He took away the power of Satan's cunning lies and offered mankind the better way. Jesus made right what Adam, Eve, and Cain had taken wrong when they first trusted Satan's deceptions.

We don't know what happened to Cain. He wasn't the promised deliverer, though in reality God delivered him. Cain absorbed the consequences of his actions, first focusing on his own selfishness but then, perhaps, later on something

more. God put a mark on him so that other people wouldn't kill him, and that mark was really a kind of blessing because it gave Cain the opportunity to reflect and turn back to God. Genesis tells of him building cities, and fathering other people (some good, some not). At some point, he (obviously) died; we don't know when. His death meant that Satan's power of sin resulted in punishment, namely that death. Yet it also meant God delivered Cain and each of us from further influence by Satan. He has no power over the dead; only God does.

For more reading: 1 Corinthians 15:50, Ephesians 6:12, John 1:14, Genesis 3:15, 1 Corinthians 15: 54-57, 2 Timothy 1:10, 1 John 3:8.

Lord, help me to resist the power of the devil in my life today. When I am tempted, help me to choose You and Your path of peace instead of Satan's lies and death.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 October 2016

And free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. Hebrews 2, verse 15.

Does anyone remember the movie “Moonstruck?” In it, Olympia Dukakis’ husband was cheating on her. Throughout the movie, she kept asking everyone “why do men cheat?” All kinds of answers ensued until she asked her prospective son-in-law. His answer? “Because they fear death.”

He couldn’t have been more correct. Indeed, Hebrews 2, verse 15 says exactly that. We sin because we are held captive by sin. And we are held in captivity by our sins because we fear death.

All kinds of things result from this. More sin is probably the one with which we’re most familiar. God never does things that lead us to sin as our only option; you need a gut check if you’re in a set of choices where the best ones involve some kind of wrongdoing. That’s because sin begets sin; wrong creates wrong. While good can indeed result out of our wrongdoings – and thank God for grace – generally the only thing that results from bad choices is bad consequences.

Yet if you’re like me you’ve found yourself wrapped up in your sins and you feel you don’t know the way out. You don’t see any easy way out because, whether you’ll admit it or not, you’re afraid of the ultimate punishment. What if you died now? You’d be dead in your sin. What if someone finds out? You actually might be dead meat! What if the punishment is more than I can stand? You may wish you were dead.

Most of all, what if I’m not good enough for God? Ah, there is the most deceptive sin of all: the subtle idolatry of assuming you have to do something to please God, to make yourself good enough so He will accept you. To make yourself worthy of avoiding death.

Now would be a good time to re-read verse 15. Key in on those first three words “and free those.” You can’t do anything to make yourself pleasing to God. There is absolutely nothing on this planet that you can do that will earn your way into heaven. There is absolutely nothing you can do to make yourself worthy enough for God to love you. What’s more, death is a consequence of sin; it was promised to us by God, face to face with our ancestors Adam and Eve. Whether we fear it or not, death will happen as a natural response to our sinful nature. Cue the worried moonstruck face. If you’re an actor or a modern college snowflake, are you frightened yet? Run for your safe space!

Is that bleak? Not at all. Indeed, re-read those words again – “and free those” – and remember that Jesus freed you. He loved, lived, died, and rose to free you from the grip that sin held over you. Whether you remember it or not, whether you choose to put aside your guilt or not, whether you want to admit it or not Jesus and only Jesus did everything necessary for God to love you, forgive you, and welcome you into paradise. Indeed, Jesus did everything necessary for you to let go of the self-imposed slavery to sin that you keep carrying around.

Guilt? Let it go because it’s only you hurting yourself. Shame? Time to end it and move forward. Dread of consequences? You may indeed endure consequences but know that Jesus will be with you and will give you every bit of strength and courage to endure them in a Godly way. Fear of death? You don’t need it anymore because Jesus’ perfect sacrifice made it so that, when your physical life ends, you’ll enter Paradise and, with Him there, stand in front of God the Father blameless. God won’t see your sins or your guilt or your fear. Instead, He’ll see you through the blood of Jesus, which will clothe you perfectly and render you holy again.

For too long, we let the devil hold us in slavery to our sins. He shrouds us in guilt, shame, anger and fear, telling us “yeah but what about X.” He plants deceit and doubt in our hearts and tries to cloud over the bright light that is Jesus. When you choose to believe in Jesus, all those clouds begin to evaporate. Instead of the foggy darkness of fear we get to feel the warm liberation of love. Talk about being genuinely moonstruck and this ain’t no movie.

For more reading: 1 Corinthians 15:50, Ephesians 6:12, John 1:14, Genesis 3:15, 1 Corinthians 15: 54-57, 2 Timothy 1:10, 1 John 3:8.

Lord Jesus, thank You for your liberating love, for freeing me from the fear of death. Stand with me today to ward off the darkness when it tries to creep in from the boundaries of my life.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 October 2016

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews 2, verses 16-17.

There's so much to unpack here. Let's start with an overview of it.

Paraphrasing Chad Bird again, much of the book of Hebrews is a history lesson. It is written to former Jews who were new to the Christian faith. Their entire history had been lived in obedience to God as He revealed Himself through the Torah (what we know as The Old Testament). The author of Hebrews spends considerable time poetically tying the history of the Jews to the divinity and life of Jesus, drawing parallels and showing how the Old Testament was made complete in Jesus, who was revealed in the New Testament.

So consider this: Abraham's descendants are everyone and everywhere. Abraham was the first Jew. The word "Semitic" is derived from the name Shem, who was one of Noah's son's. Indeed, Genesis 9 reveals how Noah sinned and it was Shem and his brother, Japheth, who helped Noah in his time of need. If you read from Genesis 9 through 11, you find the account of mankind from Noah to Abram, who later became Abraham. In those words, you see that Abraham was the first man since Shem who followed God and obeyed Him. He became the first true Semite. Because Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."), even if you aren't Jewish, you can count Abraham as, at least, your spiritual ancestor.

What's more, Jesus was made like men and made like angels and made like Abraham's descendants and even Abraham. He didn't live, die, and rise for the salvation of angels. No, Jesus did those things to save men. He did them because, while fully God, He became fully man to do for us what we couldn't do ourselves. Think about it: You and I wouldn't accept it if someone who wasn't like us did something for us. In the short run, perhaps. But in the long run – and a human life here followed by eternity is the ultimate long run – we simply wouldn't go for it. Jesus had to be a man to save men.

And He did it to sacrifice blood. Abraham's first spiritual descendant was Issac, whom he willingly brought to sacrifice. Men had begun to "call on the Name of the Lord" (meaning worship) God as early as the life of Adam and Eve, but Abraham is the first man recorded since Noah who offered a life to God as an act of worship. He did it because Abraham understood that life was in blood, that God expected our deepest motivations to be focused on Him because He is all life.

We're held captive by our fear of death and, thus, by our sins. Only life could atone for those sins and release that fear. Indeed, generations after Abraham, God instituted priestly sacrifice as a way to make atonement for sins. Just last week, Jews around the world celebrated Yom Kippur, which is the day Jews celebrate the Day of Atonement. In ancient times, this is the day when the Jewish priest would enter the temple, enter into the Most Holy Place, and sprinkle blood on the Ark of the Covenant. In this way, by God's command, the priest could signify (for the people) God forgiving their sins. Our first picture of that is of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his son, Issac.

Finally, Abraham, then later Jesus, is the picture of the merciful high priest. He is the one who, on behalf of all the people, can walk into God's presence and make that atonement by blood. He does this according to God's own commands and the process He gave to us. God gave us (through Moses) specific instructions on how and who to sanctify and what to do to make atonement for all the guilty sins of the people. For over a thousand years Jews did this, first in the tabernacle in the deserts, then in the Temple in Jerusalem. Later, when Jesus died, God nullified the need for further animal sacrifice because He alone had made the perfect sacrifice. Jesus took on himself the role of high priest in ways no other human could.

We'll talk more about these things in the days to come.

For more reading: Genesis 9 – 12, Luke 3:8, Philippians 2:7, Hebrews 5:2, 3:1, 4:15, 5:5,10, 7:27, Romans 3:25.

Lord Jesus, You alone are all the wonderful things described in these verses. Bless You and thank You for Your sacrifice, Your priesthood, and Your love as both man and God.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 18 October 2016

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews 2, verses 16-17.

Let's start with the last part of these verses: "that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." One of my friends, Wayne Vogt, wrote an entire comprehensive Bible study designed to train new believers in the fundamentals of Christianity. His contention is that, if you're going to start teaching people about the Christian faith, start with Jesus. Don't teach the Bible starting at Genesis. Don't go in chronological order. That causes people to lose interest quickly. Instead, start with Jesus because Jesus is the fulfillment of the Bible. Then, later, teach the rest of it.

The reason for the life, death, and life of Jesus of Nazareth is for Him and Him alone to make atonement for the sins of the people. If you don't want to study anything else about Christianity, just memorize that sentence. EVERYTHING about the faith and the Bible culminates in Jesus and what He did as God's perfect sacrifice for humanity.

The ONLY way to atone for sins is by blood; that is one of the primary lessons that all of God's law teaches us. God Himself made this clear in the Old Testament, specifically in the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus, God outlines to Moses how and when to consecrate priests who were to make offerings and sacrifices to God to atone for the sins of the Israelites. In those ancient days, God commanded his people to sacrifice animals as reminders of how He delivers people from slavery to sin. He commanded the sacrifices so that people could offer blood as a representation of their sins. God didn't NEED for people to sacrifice animals He created. But they did; we do. So God directed people to do it so they would learn the lesson that He is God. They would learn this lesson by offering up the very thing that preserved life as a way to know that God Himself would ultimately forgive them of their wrongdoings.

Once per year, the high priest of the faith would consecrate himself according to detailed instructions that God gave to Moses. He would then take blood and carefully, reverently enter the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle (later the Temple in Jerusalem). There, the priest would sprinkle blood on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (which wasn't just the prop for an Indiana Jones movie). This mattered because the cover was called the Mercy Seat and it was the very spot on Earth where God's presence made physical contact with humanity. This all took place on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. By doing these things in obedience to Him, God promised the people He would forgive their sins.

Yet it was only the picture of things to come. Created animals couldn't atone for man's sins because the animal itself didn't commit those sins. Even a human sacrifice Wouldn't suffice because, in our very nature, humans are sinful. God wanted us to know that He provides everything and He and He alone would have the authority to forgive sins and make man clean from them. Only God could offer up a perfect sacrifice, so He gave Himself to us as Jesus, who lived a life without committing even one sin. When the time was just right – in other words, when God had revealed all He knew we needed to know – He offered Himself as that sacrifice, letting sinful men accuse and convict Him to death of crimes He didn't commit (just like the rest of our sins). In doing so, God Himself made all things right again. God Himself superseded the need for those animal sacrifices. God Himself created a bridge for sinful men to be forgiven of our sins and come to Him blameless and clean.

He did it with His own blood.

Which is why I agree with my friend, Wayne, that the first, best way to teach people about the Christian faith is to start with Jesus. Once someone understands why Jesus matters and what He did for us, then can branch into history, doctrine, prophecy, and the rest of the Bible. Once someone understands needing Jesus, they begin to understand how we're saved, as the hymn says, by nothing but the blood of Jesus.

For more reading: Leviticus 16.

Lord Jesus, I praise You for Your giving Your holy blood to atone for my sins and the sins of all mankind.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 October 2016

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews 2, verses 16-17.

Diving deeper into these two verses, let's talk briefly about Jesus becoming "a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God." We'll only spend a brief time here because, when we get to chapters four through eight we'll dive into greater detail. The easy answer to "who is that merciful high priest" is, as you'd expect, Jesus; duh! But what about his representatives? In this day and age, is your pastor a merciful and faithful high priest?

Way back in the book of Exodus God established a particular tribe to be His priests. Moses' brother, Aaron, was selected to be God's high priest, and the tribe (or clan) from which Aaron was descended was that of Jacob's son, Levi. The men of the tribe of Levi were to be set aside as special for God, serving as His priests. That seems like kind of an extreme thing by our standards, taking a whole clan of people and saying "they're mine" but that's what God did. What's more, all Levite men were to serve God and some were to serve Him as ordained priests, offering sacrifices to God in the Tabernacle (and later in the Temple). Not all Levites were priests but all priests were Levites. Indeed, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan describes how a priest and a Levite (different men) walked by the man who had been robbed. Only a strange foreigner – a pagan and outsider of Jewish law – stopped to show the man God's love. It shows that even God's special people make mistakes.

Just like our pastors today. I'm friends with more than a few pastors. More than just a handful read this blog. More than a handful of them sometimes message me and give me their thoughts on the thoughts I share here. I take it as a great compliment that men and women of the cloth would take time to try to make sure I'm doing good credit to their calling. Some of them – most of them actually – send me great feedback that helps me understand perspectives I hadn't considered, things I haven't learned. Some of them send me things with which I disagree; in fact, they piss me off. And some of them have made mistakes, said things that turned out to be self-serving and selfish. Some pastors are jerks.

Just like the Levites of yesteryear. Just like you and me.

When I was growing up, my view of clergymen in general was jaded by the tele-evangelist scandals of the 1970s and 1980s. Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Robert Schuller: they were all disgraced in one way or another by their sins. Sins of adultery, sins of deceit, sins of greed: they were the undoing of great, self-made men who led huge flocks of believers. The public and their parishoners held them to a high standard, and these men didn't make it. They sinned and, in some cases, rightfully paid dearly. I mean, they were ministers. They were supposed to know and be better!

At the same time, I learned from listening to great pastors I personally knew in church. Guy Newland, Ann Haw, Reuben and Paul Youngdahl: these were people I knew and learned from, people I listened to and admired. They were devout, honest, and real. You've probably never heard of them, though if you're Lutheran you might know about the Youngdahl's, especially if you're from Minnesota. They were sinners, too, but their sins were their own, I'm sure, and not exposed for trial in the court of public opinion.

Just like most of the Levites and just like most of our pastors today.

And yet none of them are Jesus. None of these good, flawed, even admirable yet sinful priests could serve as a minister of God the way Jesus could. None of the priests in the Temple of Jesus' day could stand blameless in the Holy of Holies to atone for peoples' sins the way Jesus could. None of them could offer their blood as the real atonement. No pastor or preacher today could ask for or grant forgiveness the way Jesus does. No teacher of God's Word could teach the way the perfect rabbi from Nazareth did. They know it: it's a hard blessing with which to live in your calling.

Yet we need them. We need men and women to minister to us. We need people who are called, impassioned, and entrusted with the knowledge of God's Word to translate it for us. They aren't Jesus and neither are we. Yet we need their talents to help teach us things we might not otherwise learn because theirs is the calling to be God's merciful and high priests. More than ever, pastors and priests have more resources than at any time in history to fulfill their good calling. And, again, more than ever before, perhaps more since any time since AD70 (when Rome destroyed the Jewish priesthood), our world is hostile to their work. ISIS, atheism, the antagonism of leftism, socialism and communism once again on the rise, an unfriendly media and popular culture, official antipathy: next time you talk to your pastor or priest, thank them for what they do. Maybe give them a fist bump instead of a rhetorical fist to the jaw. Not just anyone can be a merciful, faithful high priest of Jesus. I can't; Could you?

For more reading: Hebrews chapters 4-8, Genesis 14: 18-20, Luke 10:31-32.

Lord Jesus, You and only You are the perfect high priest but thank You for your representatives of the cloth here in our world today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 October 2016

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Hebrews 2, verse 18.

Consider Jesus' last night on earth, before He was even crucified. There He was, in the Garden of Gethsemene, and He was tempted. He was hurting, He was afraid, He was dreading what He knew had to happen, and He was tempted to put it all aside. Jesus had the benefit of being fully God and fully man at the same time and He KNEW what was in store for Him. He already knew how it felt to be rejected by God Himself. He already knew what the nails felt like, how it felt like burning agony to have your body up on your nailed feet just to take a breath. He already knew what was going to happen when His soul was ripped apart from His body. A fully man Jesus knew, understood and FELT the temptation to simply wave it away; to plant the thought in someone's head "I won't do this."

A fully man Jesus thought about the fact that He could do it.

And then He didn't do it. He remained sinless.

You see, being tempted isn't a sin. Repeat that to yourself: being tempted isn't a sin. Don't let some slick preacher, overeager elder, or controlling spouse tell you that it is because they're wrong. Their motivation might even be a sin itself. Giving into temptation is a sin, but simply being tempted to sin isn't a sin itself. If being tempted is a sin, then Jesus was sinful because Jesus was tempted. He was tempted at various times throughout His life, not just on that last day. Remember when the devil himself personally tempted Jesus at least three times. Jesus was at His lowest physical and even spiritual energy levels. That was when Satan, coward that he is, tried to move Him over to the dark side. He stood up to it but He endured it.

Consider that Jesus walked among men for over 30 years, watching men take pleasure in things He didn't, wouldn't do. Sex, comfort, wealth, luxury: all these and more can be had for just the slightest of indiscretions. Jesus walked with humans, saw what humans do, and He was tempted to do the same. Have you ever seriously contemplated the unfathomable resolve that it took for Him to just say "no" all those thousands of times?

It caused Him to suffer. Have you ever wanted something or wanted to do something so bad that it hurt? Or have you done something, even something small, and then felt tremendous regret after? Regret can be real suffering but so, too, can be the righteous abstention from sin. Guys in a locker room might joke about how it feels to get blocked when you really want to have sex, but consider that Jesus never did. He never even allowed Himself to think the lustful thoughts that we can have without anyone else even knowing. Containing your road rage can build up into unreleased feelings that vent themselves in other ways. Jesus never even allowed Himself to entertain that kind of unrighteous anger. The suffering was real; it wasn't some Facebook meme. It was real, it really hurt Him, it truly happened. You get the picture.

Yet for Jesus to be the merciful, faithful high priest who could stand in His Father's presence, full of Their Holy Spirit, and offer Himself as atonement for all those sins He never did, well, there was simply no other way. He had to live a sinless life; He had to willfully abstain from even thinking about the small sins that we would overlook. Jesus couldn't cross the line even once or there would have been no perfect sacrifice to satisfy our perfect God's righteous will. When you truly consider what Jesus did for sinful folks like you and I, the depth of the love you find there is immeasurable.

For more reading: Hebrews 4:15, 2 Corinthians 5:21, John 18, Luke 22-23, Mark 14:34-38, Matthew 26:36-46, Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13.

Lord Jesus, too often I've sinned, failed You, failed others, and failed to keep Your holy commands. Forgive me for my sins. Thank You for living the sinless life I haven't.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 October 2016

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. Hebrews 3, verse 1.

My mom died two years ago today. Two years ago this morning, my mom, Grace Terry, exited the temporal plane of this life and entered the eternal plane of heaven. For her and my dad, who preceded her by 17 years, time no longer has meaning. Days, years, aging, disease, seasons, changes: these mileposts by which we measure our lives here don't mean anything anymore to either of them. Or to the millions of believers there with them. Today is every moment for those in heaven because every moment is spent with Jesus. I know it has been two years since Mom died but I'm thinking she doesn't. For her, it's "Amazing Grace" (and not just because that's her name). You know the line: "when we've been there ten thousand years...we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."

My parents were both believers and college graduates. I learned from them the intellectual exercise of how I walk my faith walk. I learned how skepticism, questioning, and even academic rigor can be tools with which you can learn around the edges about the richness of our Lord and Savior. As long as you don't make those tools your idols, they can be helpful, even Godly, gifts. In concluding his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul said "Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good." He was giving instructions to the church on how to deal with the physical and spiritual persecution they were undergoing. As you've read, part of those instructions was to use Godly skepticism in questioning matters of faith. God would never lead them wrong so they (and we) should use healthy questioning to determine God's will in tough choices.

Yet, a better, deeper way to learn about Jesus is to move beyond that, to fix that intellect on Him. The author of Hebrews says that if the Hebrew believers (and us, and the Thessalonians) would fix our thoughts on Jesus then it would be much easier to employ that healthy questioning when the times come for us to do so. When we don't know what path to take, ask Jesus. When we are troubled by things happening our lives, think about Jesus. When we make mistakes, turn to Jesus. Celebrations, happiness, and good times? Focus on Jesus and thank Him, involve Him. And when temptation, or falling, or hurt come into our lives as they regularly do, then focusing on Jesus makes it much, much easier to then ask "Lord, what should I do now?" "Is this a good choice?" "What do You want me to do?"

God will answer in His own way in His own time, but answer He will. I'm betting it'll be much sooner than later and usually in an overflow of some blessing.

Like my mom dying two years ago today. I have a confession to make: I haven't cried over her. Really haven't. I loved my mom, and I'm ashamed to say I spent a good part of the last year of her life busy and angry over choices she made that impacted me. When she was gone, I was still in the thick of having to deal with her estate that I simply put all my feelings in a box and stored them away. I'd deal with them later. Two years on, I still haven't, and I know some day that box will be opened and there they'll be, fresh for dealing. Her death snuck up on me. She went into the hospital healthy – but quietly dying – on a Wednesday night and was gone on Friday morning. That's less than 36 hours, and I think, now, that it was actually a blessing. God gave us a gift in that, for a brief hour or two, she regained consciousness and grasped what was happening, and instantly made peace with it. All of us in the family got a chance to talk with her and say goodbye. But it happened much sooner than I ever thought it would. If I had known she would die so quickly, perhaps I might have let go of that anger and spent time more wisely.

Yet now I see we did use that time well. In the last years and months we all had here, we had good visits, and we talked for hours, and we forgave and shared faith. It wasn't all rosy but it was all good because, through it all, in our own ways, we fixed our minds on Jesus and understood that He would somehow make everything alright. And He did.

For more reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, Hebrews 2:11, Romans 8:28, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Corinthians 9:13.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 October 2016

He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Hebrews 3, verse 2.

Moses was God's servant. When Moses was a tiny baby, floating in the reed ark in the Nile, Jesus knew him. When Moses murdered the Egyptian and fled in hypocritical fear, Jesus knew him. When Moses stood in front of God's presence and doubted himself and this God, Jesus knew him. When Moses was an old man dying on top of Mount Nebo and looking into the Promised Land he was told he would never enter, Jesus knew him. And when Moses, along with Elijah, appeared to Jesus, Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration, Jesus knew him.

You get the picture. Jesus knew Moses.

And Moses, try as he did otherwise, knew Jesus. He may not have known Jesus as the man incarnate, yet Moses knew Him as the three in one. As Moses spoke in Deuteronomy 6 in the great Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Moses saw the Three in One personally, as God, as three persons in One. He knew Jesus was God's person abiding with Israel as it struggled with its newfound identity. He knew Jesus as his deliverer and mediator when he stood in God's presence and pleaded for his rebellious people. He knew Jesus when He spoke comfort into Moses' doubting heart. And, after death, He knew Jesus as Lord, friend, man, and brother, talking with Him on that mountain in the desert where Jesus revealed a taste of His glory to a hungry world.

Through it all, Moses was God's servant. Just as Jesus was God's servant. Just as you and I are God's servants. Noodle that thought for a minute. You and I have things in common with Moses and Jesus, the two greatest figures of antiquity, the deliverers of millions, the founders of Western civilization, and one of whom is God Immanuel the Savior of all mankind. It isn't just similarities, chance behaviors or traits we have in common with figures in history; you could say that about anyone. No, we have a brotherhood, a familial bond with Jesus and Moses that goes beyond our shared humanity. By God's grace, He considers us to be His servants, doing His good and loving will in a world that needs to know Him.

I don't know about you but I'll admit that my independent American nature doesn't like being told the best I can be is a servant. I'm no slave...and yet I am one. God forgive, then, my stupid head and ignorant heart.

Just this morning at the gym, I spent 10 minutes alone in the sauna. I often do this at the end of my workout, and today I spent my time praying. Going in, I decided I would only pray thanks to God for things that crossed my mind. That and I wouldn't pray for the same thing twice; it would only be new things that came to me during the prayers. 10 minutes doesn't seem like that long of a time, but in reality it was. Yet the longer I prayed, the harder – and easier – it became to pray for things. By the end of it, I was praying for even simple things I'd taken for granted, things like dry floors and warm showers and clean clothes and even the air I breathed.

When I was done, I was left full. I felt both satisfied and tired; can you imagine the thrilling exhaustion of praying for days-straight the way Nehemiah did before rebuilding the Jerusalem walls? As I was walking out, I prayed again: where would You have me serve today, Lord? The God who appointed Moses to lead Israel out of slavery and into a new birth of liberty is the same God who sent His Son to deliver all of humanity out of slavery to sin and into the true birth of real liberty. He is the same God who was with them in their most glorious and most trying moments. And He is the same God who lives in the fires of the sun, the renewal of springtime, and the simple miracle of a newborn child. God speaks to us in many ways, but in all those ways He calls to us to serve Him by using our lives and our talents in His purposes here on the Third Rock. When we do this, we're channeling our brothers Moses and Jesus, who were also God's faithful servants: servants we can know here and now.

For more reading: Hebrews 3:5, Numbers 12:7, Deuteronomy 34:5-7, Joshua 1:1-2, Psalm 105:26, Deuteronomy 6:4.

Lord God, I am Your servant today. Thank You for blessing me this way. Uphold me to do Your bidding as we will today, in service to You and Your good Kingdom.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 October 2016

Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Hebrews 3, verse 3-4.

Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence. But if you want to be truly accurate, Jefferson wrote the draft (borrowing heavily from the philosophy of Locke and Montesquieu) and it was a committee of four people (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston) who edited the draft and produced the document that the original Founding Fathers all signed. Yet we give the credit to Jefferson.

“Barack Obama wrote the Affordable Care Act.” Actually, that’s factually wrong. He signed it into law, but the law was crafted, with his input, by numerous other members of the Democrat Party. But we give the credit – and the blame – to President Obama.

Gutzon Borglum carved Mount Rushmore...but it was actually a whole crew of carvers and construction engineers over several years. Donald Trump built, well, every hotel, casino and building with his name on them...but it was actually thousands of construction workers, designers, managers, and planners all working together (with better hair). I built a house in Falcon, Colorado in 2002...but actually I did nothing more than purchase a nearly-complete home that someone else had built.

The builder gets more credit than the building itself. Or those who actually construct the structure. It’s natural, very typical, that we do this. You can read for yourself that this goes all the way back to the author of Hebrews. Practically speaking, it almost assuredly goes back further than that. It’s natural that we remember Hannibal but don’t know the names of the soldiers, officers, and even other generals who campaigned with him. It’s natural that we remember the names of famous actors from the silent movie period but the names of lesser actors and extras are lost in obscurity. The builder has greater honor than the house itself.

My early life experience is military. I was in the Air Force for 13 years (eleven active, two reserve). In the military I learned to operate within and be assured by the chain of command. God is the ultimate commander, living at the top of that chain. From the lowest protozoa to the complex ‘colonel’ of man, everyone has a place in the chain (whether command or food). When great battles are fought or lost, history remembers the name of the commander because the commander is responsible for all those below him and all that they do. That’s another example of the builder being greater than the house itself. Notice, too, the subtle way the verses confirm that Jesus is God. Verse 3 says that Jesus is greater than Moses, and then verse 4 equates Jesus with God. Because He is God.

What’s the purpose? Even today in the most liberal Jewish practices, Moses is revered as the greatest Jew who ever lived. Scripture refers to Moses in much the same way. Three verses from Deuteronomy give Moses’ epitaph: “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.” Moses led millions out of oppression. Moses recorded God’s laws, which are the basis for all western law and civilization. Moses served as the commander of an army of millions. Moses stood in front of God personally.

And Jesus is more powerful than Moses. Jesus is more powerful, more worthy of honor, power, recognition, and glory than the greatest hero of Jewish antiquity. We remember Moses but not the names of most of the Israelites who lived in his day. How much more so should we and do we remember Jesus, who is greater than Moses, who built ‘the house’ in which Moses and the rest of the world lived?

For more reading: Deuteronomy 34:10-12.

Lord, You are worthy of all praise, glory, love, and adoration. You are over everything.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 October 2016

Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory. Hebrews 3, verses 5-6

Concerning these verses, the Concordia study bible I use as a writing guide says, "The superiority of Christ over Moses is shown in two comparisons: (1) Moses was a servant whereas Christ is a son, and (2) Moses was in God's house, i.e. a part of it, whereas Christ is over God's house."

Translate: Jesus is over you.

So the other day I was talking with my atheist friend again. We spent 70-80 Facebook posts debating the existence of God. At the end of our discussion, after he shot in a few pretty vulgar expletives concerning his opinion of the Almighty, he said he thought I had been trolling him, playing him for a chump in the conversation. Nothing could have been further from the truth as I reiterated to him several times "Jesus loves you just the way you are. Just the way you are: atheist, hostile to God, full of rage, full of angst. He wants you, as you are, to get to know Him so He can replace anything that hurts you with Himself. THAT is the start of real freedom and peace. And it's free; costs you nothing. He believed in you so much He died for you so that you don't have to be separated from His ultimate love, peace and holiness."

I said that because Jesus is over him. Whether someone believes in Him or not, Jesus is over him. Jesus is over everything. It couldn't be any other way because, if Jesus weren't over everything, He couldn't have redeemed everyone. His sacrifice would have been incomplete, and that simply cannot be.

Now, my atheist friend and I share a distrust of our government. We believe our government has grown too powerful, too corrupt. While we differ on what should be done, who should be in power and other points, we share this common distrust about that expanding and seemingly unchecked growing power-cancer.

Here's where we would disagree again: Jesus is over the government. In fact, nothing the government does, not the most corrupt politician or the worst unindicted crime occurs without Jesus seeing it and factoring how He will work the outcome for the good of His Kingdom. In this contentious election season, that matters greatly because, no matter what some imperfect human candidate may do, Jesus will still be in ultimate control. No matter how Mr. Trump or Mrs. Clinton further tangle the spaghetti-tangle of the Federal government, none of it will happen without Jesus' oversight. And no matter whether our economy succeeds or fails, whether we're in war or peace, or whatever comes down the pike, Jesus will still be King.

He will be King over our house. And here's the kicker: our house isn't just our home, our building, or our country. We are His house. We are God's house. The church isn't some building: WE are the church. God has built us up as His permanent movement, the structure through which He will reach those, like my friend, who don't know Him or who have willfully turned away from Him. We are the foundation for that and, as the old hymn says, 'the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.' We are Jesus' church here on planet Earth. Jesus is over this church because He is over us. He's even over my atheist friend.

For more reading: Exodus 14:31, Numbers 12:7, Hebrews 1:2, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Timothy 3:15, Romans 11:22.

Lord, You and only You are Lord and master of my life. I'm Your house here. Let me be Your shelter, Your home, Your provision, Your fortress for Your church of my brothers and sisters wherever I am.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 31 October 2016

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did. Hebrews 3, verses 7-9.

Jesus is over you and me and everything we know. Simple, right? Why do we resist that truth?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Those are some of the most eloquent, meaningful words ever written. They're from the Declaration of Independence, and while they specifically talked about the most cherished beliefs of Americans, in reality they speak for all humanity. All your rights are yours because God gave them to you. Government doesn't give you rights. Presidents and Congresses don't give you rights. Most of the media doesn't know what it's talking about. Your rights are yours because God created you and gave them to you and no government can take them away from you as long as you live in peace with your fellow man. Yet the trend in the last 100 years has been to cede rights to authority, to have the government control more and more, giving we people less and less room to exercise our true rights from God.

Through it all, Jesus is over you and me and the government and our rights and He personally guarantees us that He is the ultimate freedom in the world. So why do we turn away from this so often?

Last night, I was watching a Seth Rogen movie; "This is the End." I was channel hopping between the Dallas Cowboys game, Food Network, Game 5 of the World Series, and this Seth Rogen flick. The movie was a drug-induced parody of the end times, where Seth Rogen and his Hollywood pot crowd survive the Rapture and await their ultimate end. It was mostly tasteless and, to be honest, not very funny (like most of Seth Rogen's movies), but it was actually interesting from the point of view of writing this blog entry. It was all about the consequences of rebelling against God. These self-indulgent movie stars poke fun at their self-indulgent ways and then try to "earn" their way into eternal salvation (which happens to include the Backstreet Boys in one final eternal boy-band boogie). The characters in the movie hold up in a house while post-apocalyptic Los Angeles is gradually transformed into hell on earth. In the end, they are either consigned to hell or jet-ported into the light of heaven (where they smoke marijuana forever dancing to Nick Lachey). What's the point?

We turn away from God in so many ways. Like the people of Moses' day did. Like the folks watching the Cowboys win at AT&T Stadium did. Like the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence did. Like the first readers of Hebrews did (even before it was called "the book of Hebrews"). You and I, we jealously guard our rights to things we cherish as Americans or simply as people, yet in doing so we sometimes rebel against God.

For forty years, the Israelites wandered in the Arabian desert of Sinai, rebelling against God. He gave them His laws and they immediately started to lawyer Him. They tested Him. They flaunted His laws. They thought themselves better judges of their hearts than Him. And so they paid the penalty for doing this in that those who mocked God died there in the deserts and are lost to time and history. Their children and grandchildren became the ones who inherited Canaan. And still we turn away. We have examples from the past and still we refuse to learn from them.

I don't know how many people were murdered in Chicago this weekend but, if trends continued, World Series or not, there were probably a dozen or more. Murder is outside of God's design. And I don't know how many children starved to death in Africa yesterday; I'm sure it was hundreds, maybe thousands, and starvation is outside of God's design. I would bet that, just since last Sunday, worldwide there were a million or more thefts or stealing incidents. And at the end of every sin, Jesus is still there, over all of us and imploring us to not harden our hearts yet again. To turn back to Him and let Him soften what we, in choosing our sins, have turned to stone.

For more reading: Acts 7:36, Acts 28:25, Hebrews 9:8, Numbers 14:33, Deuteronomy 1:3, Psalm 95:7-11

Lord, soften the heart for You that I've hardened. Please forgive me of my sins, and teach me Your better way.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 November 2016

That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' Hebrews 3, verses 10-11

This morning my daily online devotion was from Jeremiah 7:28. "Therefore say to them, 'This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.'" I'm NOT getting into politics here. And yet, any assessment of our current political situation, especially this 2016 presidential election, brings to mind Hebrews 3, verses 10-11 AND that verse from Jeremiah. Indeed, it's more than our politics. At the risk of saying "back in the day" or "in the good old days," I'll say both and sum up what seems to be a common complaint here in the U S of A: things aren't what they used to be. And God is watching.

You know why: sin. To paraphrase Si Robertson, we don't have just any problem. We have a Jesus problem. Our problem comes from our not focusing on Jesus, following Jesus, obeying Jesus, loving like Jesus, learning from Jesus, living more like Jesus and like He asked (and commanded) us to do. The root of that is sin.

Have I tired you out yet?

Sorry, friend, but the truth is the truth. I'm not a fire and brimstone kind of guy. I've always thought the hellfire-is-coming-so-get-right-with-God approach isn't for me. I don't like other sinners, especially hypocritical pastors, harping to me about my sins. I know my sins and they bother me greatly; get off my back already! I mean, Luke 4:23 and Matthew 7:5, please! I don't need that kind of aggravation in my life...I get it!

And did you catch how many times the letter "I" was used to talk about me in that last paragraph? Yes, there's a reason. It's part of the problem. Perhaps the problem starts with me, with the man in the mirror as Michael Jackson would have said. Perhaps the good old days became the bad day today because people like me and you screwed up. I have spent so much time in my life ignoring what Jesus says to me and running after everything else that I've done my share to define deviancy down for all of us.

Defining deviancy down: that's a Daniel P. Moynihan term. He coined it to describe how society changes its definition of 'deviancy' to accept widespread behavior that previous generations would have condemned so as to avoid, shall we say, rocking the boat. Yet in today's verses (and those just prior to it), the author of Hebrews reminds us that defining deviancy down is a fool's game because God holds us accountable when we stray from His path. He is just and He is interested in our lives. He's paying attention, and still we choose the sins over the Son. Our ancestors did it, specifically the Israelites of antiquity.

And we're doing the same thing today.

God had delivered the Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt and still, on a few months removed from that deliverance, the Israelites started back to ways that would have made the Egyptians pious. Idolatry, greed, hatred and malice and anger, sexual sins of all kinds, stealing: you name it, they did it.

Welcome to America 2016.

God has provided for His people – ALL His people – every day of their/our lives. If you woke this morning and are reading this now, God has provided for you. If you have food, air, water, a job, friends, a place to live, and even just a heartbeat, God has provided for you. Sure, some days seem worse than others; got skin, got sin. Yet they're worse to us NOT because God hasn't provided more but almost always because of human choices.

Welcome back to America 2016.

Most of all, Jesus – God Himself- came here and gave every one of us a free path to eternal life, to living forever in redeemed peace, unending grace, and beautiful lives of perfect worship. We get to live in harmony with our maker, get renewed perfect bodies, and we get to live as mankind was intended to live. Even more, before any of that wonderful life even commences we get to let go of our hurt and guilt here and now, and we get to live lives in peace, learning to make amends where we've done wrong and learning to live in peace with people just like us. All we have to do is believe and He does the rest. And yet we all do everything we can to reject that, to turn from it, embracing the definition of deviancy down while rejecting the divine call of Jesus.

This is America 2016.

Be advised: is it any wonder that, eventually, God would wash His hands of us? He's done it before. With a heavy heart, I'm betting He would do it again.

For more reading: Jeremiah 7:28, Hebrews 4:3-5, Deuteronomy 1:34-35, Psalm 95:7-11, Luke 4:23, Matthew 7:5.

Lord, I believe in You. I'm truly sorry for my sins, for the times I've embraced the things of the world instead of You and Your love. Forgive me, I pray, and renew me to do better, to follow You and You alone.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 November 2016

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. Hebrews 3, verse 12.

We choose to believe. Our choice to follow God is an act of will, of human willpower. We select it. We consciously decide on it. We act in ways that we believe are faithful to Him and this choice we've made. The longer we choose to live like this, the more we see that this choice isn't about us: it's about how God Himself chose us and lives for us. He chose us when He didn't have to, and He chose us because eternity – being a part of forever with Him – matters more than anything else here on the Third Rock from the Sun.

You can choose today to not have a sinful, unbelieving heart. It's one of the reasons why I keep arguing with my atheist friend. Faith is an active, living thing that we choose to feed. Atheists can choose to believe in Jesus. Skeptics can choose to allow His reasoning to penetrate their intellect. Agnostics can choose to turn from the no man's land of ignoring pure evidence of Jesus. And those of us who live in hurt can choose to live in peace, choosing to put off the hurt and guilt and shame and the past and live now in each moment, thankful and glad for what Jesus does in us now.

Or we can choose to not do this. We have free will. Each of us has the free will to freely choose whatever spiritual belief we want. That includes rejecting Jesus Christ, rejecting all that He offers through His free salvation. You're free to choose to believe or not believe whatever faith you want, especially if you live in the West. I understand the physical and political ramifications of going against ISIS, militant Islam, and the peer pressure of keeping mum when other faiths dominate the local culture; that's all valid. Yet the fact still remains, people are free to believe in Jesus or not to.

And when we turn away from Jesus, when we reject Him, we have sinful, unbelieving hearts. That turning away, that choosing not to be a follower of Jesus, is a conscious choice that becomes an attitude of the heart. In the aspect of choosing to do it or not do it, dis-believing in Jesus is as much a conscious choice as deciding on a menu item at a restaurant or deciding whether or not to 'do the deed' with that hot married person you see every day at work. We choose those things. We have other choices available, other paths we can take, but even if those other choices are difficult or objectionable, we always have the choice of whether or not to choose sin.

Per the verses, not choosing Jesus is a sin. In fact, it's the original sin. It's the same thing that Adam and Eve chose before they ate that forbidden fruit. They chose something other than God to put first in their hearts. When we choose to not believe in Jesus, we're doing the same thing. It's wrong. It's a sin. Just two verses before these, the author implores us to follow God because the consequences of not doing so are dire. Here, he reiterates that, reminding us that not only are we morally bankrupt if we reject God, but that it's a sin, a behavior accountable to God if we choose to disbelieve.

Choose wisely, my friend. And choose not because of fear, or because of angst, compulsion or pressure. Instead, choose Jesus because He has proven Himself trustworthy and true throughout the Gospels. He proves Himself God over and over through His revelations and the nature He created. He proves Himself worthy of your choice because He is all love; what is the opposite of that? And, Jesus proves Himself to be the only logical choice because, to paraphrase CS Lewis, He's either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. But most of all, choose Jesus because He chose YOU to live, love, die and live again for.

For more reading: Matthew 16:16.

Lord Jesus, I choose You and You alone.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 November 2016

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Hebrews 3, verse 13.

When is Today?

Ok, let's not get TOO metaphysical here, but if you think about it, life is lived in one-second increments. Sure, we can dissect time into even smaller increments. But for the sake of discussion, let's agree that one second is as small as we'll go. Knowing that, one second ago you were born, and in one second you'll die. In fact, one second ago, Adam and Eve were standing buck naked in the Garden admiring a piece of fruit. And one second from now Jesus will be coming back on the clouds.

There are 60 seconds in one minute, 3,600 seconds in one hour, and there are 86,400 seconds on one day. Today there will be 86,400 seconds from midnight to midnight, just like there were yesterday and, God-willing, just like there will be tomorrow. Yet today is all we know, all we have, and we have it one second at a time. Every person on this planet has that same increment of time, even Donald and Hillary. Right here, right now is all we know, so that's live it up! Yet at risk of being vulgar, let's do so within a few rules of discretion.

First off, let's take the advice of the verse and encourage one another. A friend of mine pastors a church in Carlsbad, CA. Years ago, he told me that Barnabas, Paul's companion, was one of his role models because Barnabas focused his ministry on encouraging others. That's a wonderful thing. If you think about it, it's one of the best of all things. When we encourage each other, we show faith in each other. We empathize, we love, we share, we support. We get to be Jesus for someone who needs Him there and then. Right now, today, this very second.

Then let's focus on just now. Yes, it's a good thing to mourn and let go of things that mattered to us. And, yes, it's a good thing to plan for tomorrow. But let's keep our eyes on the fact that it's this very second today when we're living. The people in our lives now are in them for reasons, sometimes transient, sometimes permanent. But whether it's the folks beside us in the checkout line, the annoying person in the cube beside you, that spouse who thrives on quality time, or just the face you see in the mirror, focus on living life fully with, for, and about the people God has in our lives right now. They're there for a reason. They need our encouragement, our attention, and each second of our time. It's what Jesus would do. Today.

Finally, let's do these things being mindful that sin is deceitful. Sin's WHOLE purpose is deceit. From that time, one second ago in Eden, sin has always sought to deceive us by lying to us. Every sin we choose is a combination of that lie, idolatry, and something else. That whatever else we're doing only compounds the deceit. In a world hardened by the harshness of that deceit, let's be mindful that whenever we choose deceit we're choosing to harden ourselves just a little bit more. Choosing to accept anything other than Jesus puts a shell on the softness of our hearts. Accepting the lie that something other than Jesus is just as good as Him puts layers on that shell. And then whatever other action we're doing in our sins just deepens it. Right now there's a better way.

Let's live life by turning from one sin at a time. Let's replace the sin with hearts and eyes on Jesus, focusing on where we are now by seeing through His eyes. One second at a time today. Not just yesterday, maybe not tomorrow, but definitely in the here and now of today. Today is now.

For more reading: Hebrews 10:24-25, Jeremiah 17:9, Ephesians 4:22.

Lord God, I praise You for today and thank You for another day here on Planet Earth. Guide and bless me through it.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 November 2016

We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. Hebrews 3, verse 14.

“Original conviction” is believing in Jesus.

Just last week, my wife and I were talking again about feeling faith in God. I remarked that I’ve never “felt” that God feels I’m special; I believe I’ve shared that here before. The whole experience & feeling of ‘being saved:’ never had it, never felt it. The overwhelming feeling of God’s presence that crowds out everything else: I haven’t yet felt it even as I know in my heart I have experienced it. Later I learned I’m not alone in this. On Saturday morning I attended a men’s Bible breakfast here in Paris. Several of us were talking about this same thing – that feeling of being saved – and I remarked the same thing I’d said to my wife. One of the other men said that he and his wife had felt a pulling, a calling, to come back to the church in Paris (Calvary Chapel), and that they’d had that same surety of feeling when they bought their house. It was as if God was telling them “this is where I want you.” That’s something with which I can relate. If I’ve never felt ‘saved’ or had that big God-moment when I felt His overwhelming presence, I can also say that on many, many occasions throughout my life I’ve felt that same “this is where I want you” feeling. If God hasn’t spoken to me one way, He’s made it abundantly clear He’s speaking in others.

When we realize that, it becomes one of the ways we can share Him. It’s an affirmation of our original conviction, our determination and need to believe in Jesus. I’ve been a believer all my life, was brought up going to church most every Sunday. Even when I fell away for a few years, when my wife and I took our family back to church it always felt like it was the right place to be. It was as if God was telling us “I want you to get to know Me here” and He made our lives worthwhile. We joined with others who believed the same things, and we were constantly fueled by God through His church, energized and empowered to do the things He’s prepared us to do.

It’s because of Him. It’s because of believing in Him. I used to think that people like me (now) were corny, sometimes faking our faith for appearances, sometimes saying we believe almost to convince ourselves that it’s really true. Sometimes I wonder if I’m not saying I believe in Jesus out of fear of Him. Not just the respecting, awe-struck fear, but the terror-in-the-night kind of fear, knowing that I’m just a man out of billions, somewhat small in this world. He’s God. He’s the creator of everything, the omnipresent and omniscient God of Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Dave Terry. Those are some big shoes to fill; I don’t feel qualified to walk in them. Who am I to believe in this awe-striking God? Who am I that He would believe in me?

And then I remember that He talks with me. He lets me know from time to time that He is with me, that He wants me to do A, B or C by those feelings from deep in my heart. His Spirit speaks to my conscience, letting me know when I should shy away from some things and approach others. This never happens when I’m on the edges of sin (or knee-deep in it); God’s choices aren’t designed to lead us deeper into wrongdoing. No, sometimes He speaks to me by a verse hitting me just right, or seeing light rays through a cloud bank, or the satisfaction of being around people I love. Even sometimes through the realization of a job well done.

Ephesians 3:12 says, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” That means here and now, today, you and I can approach God fully knowing that Jesus did everything possible and everything necessary to make it so that we could. We still fear and respect and love God Almighty but we get to approach Him fully and freely knowing that He won’t see us as sinful or worthy of destruction. He sees us clothed and wrapped in Jesus, made righteous because we believed that Jesus is our one and only Savior. It’s a convicting belief of determined conviction. When we fully realize the meaning of that concept, perhaps we also realize that God is speaking to us loud and clear. Feeling or no feeling, it’s more than enough.

For more reading: Ephesians 3:12.

Lord, I believe in You.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 8 November 2016

As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Hebrews 3, verses 15-19.

Today is Election Day. Today we, as Americans, will elect either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton as president. We're voting for the president, for members of Congress, state legislators and governors, local officials, judges and a host of ballot or state constitutional issues. If you've followed politics this year, you may agree: this election has divided the United States unlike any other in our lifetimes. Thankfully, it'll be over today (or soon after if it's contested) and then the real work of governing and reconciliation will begin.

As we begin that work, perhaps a question, paraphrased from Hebrews, is appropriate: are our hearts so hard that we cannot enter rest? Have we become so divided that we can't come back together and live in peace? Or at least live in peace disagreeing? The United States is culturally, economically, politically, ethnically, even racially more divided than at any time since 1860. That year, the division led to civil war. Are we that far gone?

I'm reminded of Matthew 19:26. Jesus has been talking with a rich young man who wanted to puff himself up by chest-bumping the Son of Man. Instead, Jesus reaches into the man's heart and levels with him. "Give up the world and follow me." When the young man walks away disillusioned, Jesus remarks, "With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible."

With God as our first focus, all things are possible. By going first to God in prayer, we can avoid hardening our hearts as we did in our rebellion, in entrenching these divisions. God held the ancient Israelites accountable for their rebellion against Him. They wandered in the desert in sight of the Promised Land until those who believed in the rebellion instead of God were dead and buried. Redemption was possible but so was chastisement.

Centuries before that, God confounded the language of men when men became too arrogant and rebellions at Babel. It was the first major human endeavor after Noah's family left the ark. Rather than building a city in humility and thanksgiving, mankind build a skyscraper to 'make a name for ourselves.' Translation: "(blank) you, God. We don't need you anymore." Division followed. God gob-smacked people with dozens of new languages, confusing their ability to communicate and live together (and finish that audacious tower). What seemed like chastisement was, in reality, a step towards the people's redemption. With God all things are possible.

We, as a people, aren't much different and we shouldn't expect any different treatment. This isn't some consolation if your candidate loses; this isn't some pabulum to reassure you that things will be ok if you have a bitter pill to swallow. This is hard, aggressive truth. ALL things are possible with God. All through the history of the Bible people sought God, glorified Him, fell away from Him, and felt His wrath until they sought Him again. All through the history of America we have sought God, glorified him, fallen away from Him, and felt His wrath until we have sought Him again. All through our history, as we have built and succeeded, we've walked away from God. If you don't see how we, as a people, have walked away from God for decades now, and now we're suffering accordingly, then you need to open your eyes. It's all good times until the good times run out and then we're left with the bad ones.

And, at the end of those times, we sought God again. The First and Second Great Awakenings (of the 1600s and 1800s, respectively) were evidence of this cycle. Some think our nation is on the edge of a third Great Awakening while others think we're at the start of the end times. I think nobody knows. But I also think – and deeply believe – that days like this contentious Election Day are good days to hold onto our original conviction, our faith in Jesus. It's a good day to remember that quote from Matthew 19. It's a good day to do our civic duty, then remember that, no matter the outcome, with God all things are possible.

For more reading: Genesis 11, Psalm 95, Numbers 14:2, Numbers 14:29, Psalm 106:26, 1 Corinthians 10:5, Deuteronomy 1:34-25, Psalm 78:22, John 3:36, Matthew 19:26.

Lord God, I believe that You are over all things, that with You all things are possible. Bless our divided nation, bless our new leaders, and thank You for the privilege of living here.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 November 2016

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Hebrews 4, verses 1-2.

This is going to sound simple, maybe even goofy, but walk with me on it. When you hear something, when does it become of value to you? Let's say you hear a juicy piece of news. Does your mind immediately begin to process it, figuring out possible meanings and implications? Of course it does. And if you learn something new – if your light bulb lights up – do you start to think of ways that new information means something to you, perhaps connecting the dots between it and other things? And can your mind or your heart continue to process words long after you've learned them, long after their first meaning took hold? You know the answer.

You now understand Hebrews 4, verses 1 and 2. God's word goes to work on us as soon as we hear it. What's more, it can work in different ways at different times in our lives.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 reiterates what Hebrews 4 says: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe." Unpack that verse and you'll find it means a few things. One (obviously) is that Scripture is the word of God. Two, it isn't only a human translation (though men are scribes and interpreters of it). Three, the word of God can do work, and four, that work happens in those who believe.

But above all, it means that the word of God you heard was something you accepted, as it is, immediately and that it started working on you immediately. The second you're baptized you're identified as one of God's chosen people. The second you say your marriage vows you're married. So it is with the second you accept and believe God's Word, whatever part of that Word you hear. It begins to work on you that very moment, like bleach on a stained cloth, like alcohol scouring out a wound.

Tell me: if you hear something positive and it begins to work on you immediately, do you think that negative things can do the same? Of course they can. This morning, folks like me (who went to bed before election results were final) woke to find out Mr. Trump was the President-Elect. It takes time to soak in but, whether it's soaked in or not, the moment his opponent officially conceded, Mr. Trump was indeed the President-Elect. For many folks, that's the worst news possible. It's incredibly negative, incredibly dangerous to their ideas of self and country. Yet no matter whether they like it or not, it's fact and it's at work. Be careful that it does not ruin you.

Through it all, whether the news is positive or negative, the meaning is effective now. God saved You IMMEDIATELY from the moment you professed your faith in Him. You did nothing to earn it, make it happen, fashion it, make it so. All that had to be done was done by God and God alone. All you did was believe yet the instant you did so you gained the benefit of it. This sets you apart from those who don't believe, who choose to not believe in Jesus. Don't go off thinking that faith in Jesus makes you better than anyone else because it doesn't. Faith, like college, makes one a better person but not better than other people. Indeed, God wants all people to come to the faith in which you believe, especially those who reject Him in word or deed.

So let's be thankful that God saved us, that He did all that was necessary to save us even when we were living in unbelief. Let's hold fast to that faith, insisting that it's real here and now, today. Let's cling to it when things get tough because brother things do get tough! And let's live our lives, say our words, do everything that we do right now as a reflection of those words "we believe."

For more reading: Hebrews 12:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

Lord Jesus, I believe in You! Thank You for saving me, for giving me the promise of hope in You in whom I can believe.



Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 10 November 2016

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. Hebrews 4, verse 3.

What does it mean "and yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world?" My Concordia reference Bible says "God rested from his work on the seventh day of creation and thus his rest is already a reality. The rest God calls us to enter is not our rest but his rest, which he invites us to share."

Yes, the Genesis account of creation is involved, specifically the account of how God rested on the seventh day after creating everything. That was work. If you don't think so, try creating an avocado out of thin air. Or a tree, an elephant, or even a grain of sand. You can't; science hasn't (and can't). God created everything and He did it with words, perhaps the ultimate physical miracle in all of history.

"Give me a break: speaking is work?" Be serious. I work part-time in a call-center. Talk purposely for hours on end and you're exhausted. Can you imagine how it must have felt to talk for six days straight creating matter out of nothingness?

But let's now move beyond Genesis and look for something more. Isn't the verse talking more about God's peace than God's accomplishments? Sure, the second half mentions "since the creation of the world." That's not what the verse is truly speaking about. The meaning is about God's real rest: Himself. There is nothing else in all of His creation that can equal the spiritual, emotional and physical peace that comes from being in communion with God Almighty. We get that peace by first believing in Jesus, then by following Him in our actions, our words, our lives.

It's not just a Sabbath day: it's a Sabbath life. "Peace out, girl scout" as my son might say. God's rest is His presence, His peace, Him. Relax: if you're a believer in Jesus, you're already receiving that peace even if you sometimes don't feel it. Shouldn't we use our lives to help grow His peace with those who don't know it?

That's a tall order these days. Right now, our armed forces are involved in more military actions than they were 8 years ago (when we were still fighting 2 wars). Right now, malcontented rioters are violently protesting in large American cities because they didn't get their way. Right now, we are a divided people living out human ambitions instead of those given to us by God.

Right now, then, is the time to turn back to God. To uphold the law but forswear illegal violence against it. Right now is the time to let Jesus look through our eyes and work through our hands. Yes, celebrate and implement real change by re-invigorating our principles but let's do so with strength, grace, and mercy. Live Jesus without compromising on His principles that guide you. He never did. The Jesus of peace is the same Jesus who stridently drove out the moneychangers. Lead with God's peace but hold firm in God's strength, then think, speak and act with those vital tools. The behavior that results will be indwelt with God's overwhelming peace. In that we will find rest from our division, labor and strife. Since the creation of the world, it's what He created us to do.

For more reading: Psalm 95:11, Deuteronomy 1:34-35, Hebrews 3:11, Genesis 2:1-3.

Lord God, grant us Your peace. Help us to hold fast to You and Your strength, yet let us use that strength to heal our divided land in peace and with Your ideals.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 November 2016

For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest." Hebrews 4, verses 4-5.

I like how the author of Hebrews says "for somewhere he has spoken." I think this is a GREAT Christian witness and a huge statement about our faith.

We don't have to have all the answers.

You've read the context. The author is (still) talking about how God rested on the seventh day, comparing this rest to God's peace that is our ultimate rest (both here and in the afterlife). Until we're buried in the dirt, we don't have to have all the answers.

We don't know who wrote Hebrews. Some people think it was Barnabas, Bartholomew, or one of the other lesser followers of Jesus. For centuries, scholars thought it was Paul, but forensic textual analysis reveals this probably isn't so. When you boil that down to the end, it doesn't really matter who wrote it (any more than it matters who wrote Job or Judges, for which we also don't truly know the authorship). Not knowing is just another evidence that we don't have all the answers.

What matters is what Job and Judges say. What matters is that we know that God rested from His works. What matters is knowing that those who believe in Jesus will enter His rest. We're sure of this because the Bible is Jesus Himself talking with us, telling us what we need to know in life. What matters is listening to God. You get the picture.

But what about the fact that the author cites three books as if they are one (seemingly mixing the words of Genesis, Exodus, and Psalm 95)? Surely that must mean they aren't cohesive and written by one person (God)! Again, not so much. Have you read any kind of non-fiction book? The bibliography for any book will usually show dozens, maybe hundreds, of individual sources that, when compiled, paint a clear picture of points the author is making. That the author would mix multiple books, therefore, seems sort of irrelevant. Indeed, if we assume that the person who wrote the book was (probably) only moderately educated in the Scriptures – not a rabbi or a dedicated Torah scholar of his day – then perhaps it's all the more amazing that a somewhat uneducated person would make the intellectual point of combining these disparate sources to draw common meaning.

Again, these are smaller points that just don't matter when compared to the fact that Scripture is God Himself talking with us. We don't have all the answers; neither do scientists. We can't predict everything; neither can the government. The men who recorded the Bible were terribly flawed people; so are we. We know these things are true and we know that God is reliable because He proves Himself to be. We don't know why all things happen but we do know that all things happen to serve God's purpose. If we don't have all the answers we think we must know, morning and evening still occur. The world still keeps on turning and will do so until God decides to stop it. It's ok to not know all the answers. This side of the dirt, we aren't supposed to.

For more reading: Exodus 20:11 Genesis 2:1-3, Psalm 95:11.

Lord God, You and only You have all the answers. Thank You for giving me all I need to know at the moment. Thank You for that day, some day, when more will be revealed to me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 15 November 2016

Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. Hebrews 4, verses 6-8

We've talked about "today," about how God's word is active in us right now, the moment we receive it, often whether we receive it or not. Let's keep it real: whether you believe in God or not, God provides life and everything for you anyway and He works His purposes in the lives of all people regardless of what they believe. And we've talked about how God doesn't expect us to know all the answers to all the questions about Him and His world. We're simply supposed to trust that He knows what He's doing, and He does; proves it again and again. Yet consider this point: God still promises us deliverance and rest regardless of what He promised and did before.

Joshua 22 is set in the time after the Israelites have conquered the Promised Land and driven out or killed all the unbelievers and idolaters who lived there. Joshua summoned the leaders of some of the tribes together and told them that it was time for them to go home, to go to the places God promised them. Those who fell in conquest were already with God but those who inherited the land for which they struggled would now receive God's blessings in it. As leader of the people, Joshua had the political power to do as he pleased. Yet as God's instrument and prophet, he realized that he lacked the spiritual authority to grant his brothers and sisters real peace. They could live in physical peace with themselves and their neighbors, but Joshua realized that only God could grant and preserve real peace from within.

We have our Joshua's today. Military generals throughout history have won battles and some have even ruled justly afterwards. Political leaders win elections and then have the opportunity to govern with morality, faith, and justice. Corporate titans of business build successful companies providing goods and services that better us all. Most important of all, leaders in our families and churches provide the experience, advice and guidance to lead all of us in living with our peers, subordinates and children. If you don't see a Joshua around you, leading with moral authority and Godly qualities, then be Joshua yourself and watch all the people who follow your lead.

In doing so, consider you or your Joshua as the forebearer of Jesus in more than just name. As you'll recall, Hebrews 3 details how Jesus was greater than Moses (and Joshua) both politically and spiritually. While Moses and Joshua held the physical (and even moral) authority to carry out God's commands, they couldn't originate those commands because they weren't God. But Jesus was, and is. Only Jesus could promise to deliver His people from the sins, guilt, and anguish that plagued them whether or not they lived in Canaan. If Joshua led the armies to win the peace, then only Jesus could lead the people to preserve the peace.

And it's the same peace that He offers us today. My pastor-friend, Mark, said just this past Sunday that one of the blessings of persecution (and a Christian life) is scattering the word of Jesus. When we move about, we get to take Jesus with us. When we follow today's Joshua, we get to live out Jesus for those around us, many of whom don't know Him. What we get to share isn't Pollyanna platitudes: it's the sure-hope promise that God will deliver us NOW from the shame and guilt of our wrongdoings; that in our believing, Jesus makes us citizens of heaven here and now so that, when our work here is done, we get to join Him in paradise beyond.

You and I can live our lives in non-violence and friendship towards each other, and we should. That's a common-sense thing to do as well as a fruit of God's Spirit. Yet that physical peace between us doesn't amount to much if we can't expand our understanding of it to accept how God's truest intentions for our lives is to share in His Gospel rest both today and later.

For more reading: Psalm 95:7-8, Hebrews 3, Joshua 22:4.

Lord God, I need Your peace in my life. I want to live in harmony with my brothers and sisters, yet I truly crave the resting presence of You and Your peace.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 16 November 2016

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. Hebrews 4, verses 9-11.

Please forgive the indulgence of talking about myself for the next few minutes.

I recently started working a second job. Money has been tight for most of the summer so, to help add income to our family's bank account, I got a night job at a local call center. It's been 22 years since I did something like this; the last time I had a night job I was in my late twenties. Suffice it to say that it's been an interesting adjustment. My typical day now starts at 0500 hrs at the gym. I'm at my consultant day job, working from home, between 7:00 and 8:00 AM and I work at this until about 4:30 or 5:00 PM. Then, I'm sitting in my desk at the call center, ready to make sales calls at 6:00 PM, and I work here until 10:00 or so until the shift leader tells us to go home. Add up all those hours and it makes for a 14-15 hour day, every day for five days per week.

I've been doing this for less than 2 weeks and I'm already physically tired. I can't imagine how folks who do it for years must feel. Twenty-eight year old Dave could hack this but fifty year old Dave is finding it to be a physical challenge. Yet, emotionally and even spiritually, I'm excited. I've been given the chance to do something I've never done before, and a chance to meet people and be a representative for Jesus. I get to do this with my co-workers, most of whom are from backgrounds drastically different from my own. And I get to do this, subtly, with my customers on the phone, simply being helpful, kind, and engaging.

I get to share Sabbath rest with other people. My day job is frustrating to me right now, so I have been given the gift of a night job to give me some emotional rest from my day labors. All of it happening when it did, the way it did, seems like evidence to me of God's hand in these matters. And I'm even getting paid for it!

Leviticus 23 says "There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the Lord." That's a direct command: get some rest one day a week. Put down your burdens and let go, rejuvenate, regroup. God is saying that we aren't built for 24/7 work. We aren't robots and we shouldn't try to be. Following up on that thought, Revelation 14 says "Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." In this life, we are to trust the Lamb, to trust in the Lord fully so that, when we die in this world of work, we might live yet again as His blessed followers.

Yet it's so important to remember that the rest God is talking about isn't just physical rest: it's spiritual rest. He isn't telling us just to mark our calendars to have one day off in seven. He's telling us to constantly seek our rest in Him, to put all of our labors, burdens, and stresses on Him and seek our rest in Him on our good days and bad ones. God promises each of us that, today, here and now, when we seek Him we will find true peace and rest. In a fallen world there will be sin and it will make life difficult, including in our work. There are some days when Satan will attack us this way. Yet Jesus is with us to give us the peace, strength, and rest through it all to not only get over the hard times but grow into success because of them. We get to do that by exhibiting our faith in Him, by following His lead, conducting ourselves in His way, and representing Him faithfully, even when the going gets tough. THIS is our real second job, maybe even our primary one.

Good words to remember when the days are long and Satan tries to attack through exhaustion.

For more reading: Leviticus 23:3, Revelation 14:13.

Lord Jesus, abide with me, I pray. I'm working hard here at the tasks You've given me. I trust You, so please strengthen and encourage me through them. Help me to be Your faithful representative and brother.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 18 November 2016

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4, verse 12.

Read the verses listed below, then wrestle with God at what He's telling you through them. He's dividing your soul from your sins.

I'll never forget the look on the face of the CIO when she fired me. I was the temporary IT director at a small HMO in Montana. A few months before, I had taken the job up there in Kalispell to make a big change after a year of sin, frustration, shame and distraction had nearly wrecked my family. Montana would be a fresh beginning, a place to start from scratch and move forward. Nearly from the start, I knew I couldn't fix all that was wrong in the department there yet I kept trying, doing my best to bail water out of a sinking boat. Profession dysfunctions, inadequate systems, incompetent consultants, poor configuration, no processes: it was an IT director's challenge and my job to clean up someone else's messes. To do that, I worked with the company board to hire a new CIO and we found one with all the qualifications we needed. She was really good. Now she was letting me go. I had trained her in all the issues we were facing and what was being done to address them and there I was, called in out of the blue on a Tuesday afternoon and she was letting me go. "This just isn't working out," she said, and without them giving me another reason I was out of a job.

"Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" That's from Jeremiah 23. I felt crushed. In the parable of the sower, Jesus tells the story of how God's word is like good seed that farmers sow in various kinds of ground. Some grows to produce a harvest; sometimes it withers and dies. What seed had I become? And in Acts 12 there's this simple truth: "But the word of God continued to increase and spread" despite the faithful being scattered, torture and murders of the saints, and all the structural impediments that the Jews and their collaborative Roman friends could build against it. Fine words to hear but I had people depending on me!

Ephesians 6 talks about us being clothed in the armor of God to carry that word of God boldly into battle against real forces of sin and dark magic. Paul's sometime friend Peter then says that this word is imperishable, living, enduring. John is the one who said it is a double edged sword, one he saw in a vision coming out of the mouth of Jesus. And as you've read, that analogy was also used here in Hebrews, stating how God's word cuts us to the core, slicing away soul from sin so that our sins might be laid bare for the terrible choices they are.

Tell all this to the guy who lost his job. Here in the real world, tell all this to the man who's terrified of how he's going to support his family, pay his bills, overcome the shame of unemployment, talk to the people who thought he was making a fresh start up there in the north woods. Or in the woods of east Texas. Or perhaps in the woods where you and I wander today. Tell all this to that guy, and to you, and to me, and all who will listen. Speak it loud and clear because, brother, we need it.

Even in what we think must be the worst times, Jesus is still in everything and the Word He gives is that sharp sword. It is both the weapon to use against temptations and guilt, and the scalpel that excises cancer from the spirit. It has been years since that day in northwest Montana when Dory fired me for reasons I still don't understand. Once again I find myself in a job that seems to be slipping away, and once again I find myself faced with the fears of supporting my family, paying those bills and the frustration of not understanding where things went wrong. Yet once again I also find myself standing here, sometimes terrorized in the dark until I realize that I'm standing here, not alone, but with Jesus. He used that door He slammed shut to walk me through others He would open. He's doing it again now and, in doing so, He speaks to my heart to cleanse my thoughts and my attitude. The bills will get paid, we'll get through the tough times, and that second job is there to help. What matters is staying close to His side. He reassures me in the days when the world seems harsh that I should take heart because He has overcome the world.

For more reading: Isaiah 55:11, Jeremiah 23:29, Mark 4:14, Luke 5:1, John 10:35, John 16:33, Acts 7:38, Acts 12:24, 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, Ephesians 6:17, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 2:9, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 2:14, Revelation 1:2, 16

Lord Jesus, I find myself scared and worried about all kinds of things. Comfort me with Your presence, and equip me to boldly share You where I am today. May Your piercing Word be active in my life today and in the lives of those I reach.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 November 2016

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4, verse 13.

This is a season of struggling. The holidays shouldn't be that way, I know, but I find myself emotionally struggling this year. Job stress, money woes, heavy schedule, health worries, family busy-ness, personal issues: I feel tapped out, like I could use a really good cry. I know I'm not the only one. Just this morning I talked with someone else who's feeling pressured and struggling as well. Yeah, it's a symptom of sin; got skin got sin got problems. All true, but let's not pig-pile more onto the situation; there'll be time to have that talk later. For now, I'll say that I'm struggling. You might be as well.

God knows all of it. Nothing about it is hidden from Him. He understands that I'm depressed and hurting inside and that I feel like the world is beating me up right now. He understands that you're juggling so many things and sometimes feel like the walls are closing in on you. God knows all of what you're feeling because, like verse 13 says, nothing in creation is hidden from God's sight. He sees into our thoughts the same way He sees every leaf fall from every tree.

You can't run away from your problems and you can't run away from God. When God told Jonah to go preach repentance in Ninevah, Jonah got scared and tried to run. That only delayed facing the problem Jonah needed to face. But he found he couldn't run away from God. Wherever Jonah went, whether in the port, on the boat, in the fish, or finally in Ninevah, Jonah learned that God was with him.

Thinking about that, perhaps the problem that Jonah had to address wasn't the sinful people of Ninevah. Maybe it was a little closer to home. After all, the author of Hebrews would one day comment on the obvious: everything is uncovered and laid bare before God. We and we alone are responsible for the things we think, say, and do. Sure, we can find ourselves swept up in things beyond our control. Or sometimes others seem to force us to do things we might not otherwise do. Or sometimes bad things happen around us. Yet there's just no denying that, whatever your pet sin might be, you and I alone are responsible for stepping over the line and into something that displeases God. We own our sins, and God can see all of them. He insists we be responsible for them, that we answer for them when He says "what do you have to say about all that." That question will come at the end of every human life. How will you answer?

You can answer "I believe in Your Light, Lord." The light will shine on you then because He shines on you now. Don't forget the verse from Daniel, where it is said that God "reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him." Yes, God sees and knows everything and, yes, He sees our hidden sins, our buried guilt, and our not-so-buried worries and cares. Yes He does and will demand we, as mature adults, accept accountability for our wrongdoings. Yet He doesn't see things to lord them over us. He sees to REVEAL, to KNOW, and for His LIGHT. God came to us in Jesus to shine light into the darkness of the things that plague us. He came to see our sins, then to remove the consequences of them. He shines light on the black mold that rots us from within and begins to scour it away with the healing purity of His light and love. When you are called on by your Creator to answer for the millions of sins you'll commit in your life, your Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace will shine on you in grace and mercy, covering over the darkness of sin and erasing it with the warm love of light.

He does it even now. Yes, I am emotionally struggling this season, perhaps more so than at any other holiday time in my life. Right now it seems even harder than when my parents died (and they each died during the fall-times leading up to Christmas). Yet I know it's true that Jesus is still with me, still guiding me even when I feel like my emotions are overtaking me. Sometimes "Lord help me" is enough to remind me that He actually is helping. He's with me, shining His light on me even when I'm too focused on the dark struggles to see it.

For more reading: Psalm 33:13-15, Proverbs 5:21, Jeremiah 16:17, Daniel 2:22, Jonah 1:3.

Father God and Son and Spirit, I pray for Your help in these days. Shine Your love-light on me and let me be a lens through which You can shine it into others as well.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 November 2016

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. Hebrews 4, verse 14.

Here's where things get tough. As John Wayne might have said, 'this is where we get down to the rat killin.' Ok, maybe not so much, but, man, this is where things get really, really tough.

Hold. On. Wilson Phillips sang that in a really corny song; "hold on for one more day." ELO sang it too: "hold on tight to your dream." Corny but it's true. And it's critical. Just hold on when things get tough. If your dream is heaven, hold on tight because this is a rough old world that is going to try to pry your dream out of your fingers. If you have faith in Jesus, hold on tight to it because everything else in the world is going to work to unravel your faith and make you believe life is hopeless. If you love someone, set them free? Maybe, but hold on tight to that love because love is antithetical to this place we call the Third Rock, where death awaits every life and every day in-between day one and last day can be a struggle.

Pretty bleak, eh? It can be, if you let it happen. Yesterday in church, a guest speaker from Jeremy Camp's organization talked about the joy of God, how it is theological, positional and situational to us. God's joy is 24/7; along with His love, grace, mercy, and peace, His joy is available to us whether we accept it or not. God's joy doesn't depend on us doing anything to make it more or make it less: it simply is because He's God and He's eternal and joy is one of His eternal qualities. Yet that joy is pretty tough to see sometimes. In my part-time job, I hear many responses on the phone that say "I'd love to buy it but money is really tight right now." Not much joy in chronically tight finances during a near-depression. Death isn't joyful; grieving is real and a necessary part of the human condition, necessary, that is, to emotionally come to terms with the cruel finality of death. Divorce, marital heartbreak, loneliness, hurt, resentment: no joy in those.

If you let it, the world will break you. It tries. Don't let it happen. Resolve to not let it happen. Hold on tight.

Faith is an act of willpower. It is impossible to believe in Jesus without Jesus' Spirit first reaching out to us to plant the seed of belief. Yet holding on to that growing seed of believing faith takes willpower. It can take effort, work, and determination. God chooses us before we choose to believe in Him, yet holding on to that choice takes resolute effort because the fallen world will keep working to pry us away from that faith. We can do it because He in whom we put that faith has overcome the fallen world. He allowed it to fall, came here to reconcile it to His perfection, did all that was necessary to make that happen, and returned into eternity where He supernaturally encourages us today.

The world thinks that's all BS. Resolve to think differently. He did. He held tight to faith in His Father even when things got tough.

Jesus was part of the struggle and because He lives in you He is part of your struggle today. When you hurt, He feels it. When you're anxious, Jesus feels it with you. He came to proclaim God's Kingdom here and now, to make us part of it here and now so that, one day, we can physically join Him as part of His eternity. Fine talk for Sunday morning, right; lot of good all that heaven talk does me when I'm in the middle of my troubles now. Brother, it does you more good than you'll imagine if you simply hold on tight to the truth of it. In the middle of a world where living minute to minute can be really tough, God's joy is still present, still real, still tangible to the heart. It's available for you this very minute, but first you have to want to believe in it. Hold on tight to that faith, to the dream of hope for a better now and a beautiful forever. Hold on tight and never let go.

For more reading: Hebrews 2:17, Matthew 4:2, Hebrews 3:1, Hebrews 6:20, Hebrews 8:1.

Lord Jesus, I believe in You. Sometimes it's tough, though, and sometimes I fail and I hurt. Comfort me through this and let me experience Your wonderful joy again.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 29 November 2016

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Hebrews 4, verse 15.

One of the qualities I love most about my Savior is that He's like me. He has been tempted in every way and yet He overcame those temptations. I haven't; I've fallen; I've been tempted and I have given in over and over and over again. Yet I'm like Him and He's like me. He had real flesh, real skin, real blood, real pain, real joy. Jesus spent most of His life working as a carpenter's son (or some kind of tradesman) in Nazareth. Do you think He ever whacked His thumb with a hammer? I'm betting He did and I'm betting it hurt just as much as when you or I do it. It isn't a sin to yell "ow!" when something hurts you. When Jesus saw a pretty woman, I'm betting He said to Himself "she's beautiful" and He meant it. When Jesus was sad, say when Joseph died or something bad happened to someone He knew, He was genuinely sad. Sure, He knew that person's fate and He understood the real differences between the temporal pleasure of life here and the eternal peace of living forever in heaven. Yet He also really, truly grieved when people endured things like suffering, death and sorrow. And have you ever considered that Jesus probably laughed at jokes, too?

These are all things with which you and I can identify. They mean Jesus is like us in every way as a human being. How amazing is it that He put off His God qualities to experience life the same way we do. He creates life, then comes to live one just like ours in every way save one: He never sinned. The small and big things we think, say and do that trip us up in front of His Spirit and His Father: Jesus never once did them. Over and over throughout history He had commanded humanity to "be perfect." Have you ever considered how this actually means we could be? Yes, that perfection eludes us because of sin and our sinful nature, yet Jesus Himself commanded us to be perfect. He commanded us to do something He knows we can do...yet we don't. We don't because we choose not to. We choose sin, even when it doesn't seem very fair. And yet He still put off that eternal God quality of His and chose to come here to live as one of us anyway. I like to think that there's a mountaintop someplace where I could sit and comprehend that very idea for the rest of my life here.

Yet all that navel-gazing can't walk away from a very simple, stark fact that (literally) makes all of the difference in the world. Part of that "He's like me" quality is what is mentioned in 2 Corinthians. In being fully man and fully tempted, God Almighty took all those sins that Jesus resisted and put them on Him anyway. Think about it: the man spent His entire life resisting even the smallest temptation and yet God stuck Him with the sins anyway. Jesus didn't deserve it. He kept the Divine command perfectly and yet the Divine punished Him anyway. Why? You know why: because it had to happen if humanity would have any hope, any eternal promise, of standing blameless in front of its Creator. Astounding.

Much of the book of Hebrews – including today's verse – is also spent describing Jesus as a great high priest. The priests of antiquity weren't any better than the priests or pastors of today. They're flawed sinful men just like anyone else, yet they're chosen to minister to God's people. It must be hard to be a pastor; I am friends with many priests and pastors and I admire their tenacity in trying so hard to live more moral lives than average guys like me. They do it to uphold the highest standard of representing God. Yet they're still just men. They fail and fall like anyone else. Pastors and priests need a savior too.

And they have one: the truest high priest of all. Jesus came to not just lead His church but to actively minister to it. To care for it, to build it up, to rebuke it when necessary and to spread His love through it to people who desperately search for real love and real meaning. That truest priest of all was fully God and fully man all at the same time in a mystery we can only slightly comprehend. Yet, way back when, He was down in the dirt with people who couldn't pull themselves out of it. Majestic, holy and Lord of all today, He still is. Our Savior high priest is still right here with us, in the toughest of struggles and the highest of highs.

For more reading: Hebrews 2:17-18, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Lord Jesus, all praise be to You for being our Savior, for being man and God, and for all the love You spread in Your ministry here and from eternity.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 November 2016

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4, verse 16.

Let's talk about Fidel Castro. We'll even cut to the chase about the conversation: Jesus died to save Fidel Castro.

Since Fidel assumed room temperature last week, I've been posting online about what a monster he was. Fidel was a cold blooded murderer. I know people in Miami whose family was destroyed because of Castro's rampage in 1950s and 60s Cuba. He murdered thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of the countrymen he led because he considered them a threat to his grip on power. He exported his communist cult of death all over the planet and, at least once, nearly caused a nuclear war. Fidel lived to prove he hated God. Fidel Castro was a hate-filled relic of the past and a timely reminder of Satan's hold on so much of our fellow brothers and sisters. He's in the same league as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Charles Taylor, Mao Tse-tung and every other tyrant who willfully, gleefully murdered to gain temporal power.

And Jesus died to save him. As much as I despise what Fidel did in this life and as unforgiveable as his sins may seem to humanity, it is my sincere prayer that, at some time in these last few years, Fidel repented and accepted Jesus. It is my sincere desire to see him in heaven one day. Let's keep it real: it's unlikely that Fidel did that. It's unlikely that he bent his dictator knee and confessed that he needed Jesus, that Jesus was more than he was. It's unlikely...but I hope it happened. I truly do. If he didn't, then the moment Fidel died, a moment of sadness crossed the face of Jesus because one of His beloved people finally refused His greatest gift. Jesus died for Fidel...just like He did for Billy Graham and Pope Francis...just like he did for Hitler, Mao and the rest...just like He did for you and me.

If we, as followers of Jesus, can't bring ourselves to say that then we, as followers of Jesus, are hypocrites. If we can't say that, then we don't have the confidence to approach God's throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. For people like Fidel, me, and you, our time of need is every minute of every day. You and I can't deny that Fidel's sins were bigger and much more public than our own, but in God's eyes, ours are just as big, bad, and bold. A sin is a sin is a sin, even as some have bigger human consequences than others. All of them are unholy rebellion against Jesus' holy love.

Jesus lived and died so that we, as sinners just like Fidel, could approach God's throne of grace with confidence. So that we could lay aside the spiritual death of our sins and embrace the free gift of life that is confessing how we believe in hope that Jesus died for us. Our Savior, who became one of us and is fully man like us, lived, died, and lives again to prove that He overcame the penalty of our sins: the natural consequence of death. Our Savior and great High Priest enters His Holy of Holies because He atoned with His blood for my sins and Fidel's. He sat down at the right hand of the Father to intercede now for us in our moments of need. As we've seen, every moment is one in need.

Castro was a brutal monster. More people on this planet suffered because of his life than benefited from it. The things he did were crimes against liberty and crimes against God's justice. I wish that, during his life, Fidel had been subject to human justice for the terrors he brought on others. Part of me wishes he could have tasted the pain and anguish he caused in others. That never happened and still the communist dictator died the same lonely death as a pope in Rome. Yet even communist pagan Fidel Castro was the object of God's mercy. Jesus loved Fidel and Jesus died for Fidel the same way He did for Dave Terry and you, friend reader. It's my sincere prayer that Fidel received that mercy.

For more reading: Hebrews 7:19, Ephesians 3:12.

Lord, I pray, have mercy on us sinners. Forgive us the terrible things we do and grant us Your mercy and peace.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 December 2016

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. Hebrews 5, verses 1-3.

In discussing these verses, let's explore the meaning of a few words contained in them.

"Selected:" every high priest is selected. If you're a pastor, you've become a pastor because you heard God calling your heart into that vocation. God selected you to become a pastor or priest because He sees your talents as uniquely useful to His Kingdom. You are just like other men, but your personal talents are suited to working as God's representatives here. Some guys drive trucks; some give speeches; some work in gymnasiums; some work in colleges or farms or in fundraising. Some guys do all those things AND serve as pastors. They do these things to do their part as God's servants. Here's a kicker about it: you don't need the collar or the degree to minister. If you're faithful to Jesus and sharing that in some way, you're ministering. God works through you, too. It's undeniable that some folks receive pastoral calling that others don't. They're selected by God Himself.

Appointed: we choose, appoint, install, ordain, and otherwise publicly embrace priests and pastors as our spiritual leaders. It matters to us, as a people, that we have good men and women in spiritual leadership positions. Most ministers are highly educated, completing years of study and academic rigor in order to carry out the simple task of loving God's people. We put stringent requirements on serving the Kingdom and then we go through complicated processes to make sure we select the best candidates. We appoint those God has already appointed.

"Deal gently:" we go through these machinations because we want our selected and appointed ministers to deal gently with us sinners. In a time when I had personally compromised many things that mattered most, two of my pastor friends dealt firmly and gently with me. One said that he loved me like a brother while despising what I had done. Another listened uncomfortably and reminded me that, no matter how rough my sins had made things, Jesus was in the thick of it with me. Another pastor friend of mine sometimes reminds me when my words go off the straight and narrow by pointing out his own shortcomings. And one reason I so firmly believe in Jesus as my Lord is thanks to the visit a pastor made to my home the night my father died. He reminded me that, even in death, we are more than conquerors thanks to Him who fought for us. We want our pastors to deal gently with us so we select and appoint them carefully.

Why? Because we're "ignorant people." We're sinners, from the white lying pre-schooler to the dictators oppressing Cuba, we are all sinners. Ignorant people sin. People who ignore God's commands, God's promises, God's forgiveness, God's mercy routinely commit reckless sins. Look in the mirror and tell yourself you're blameless and you'll prove this very point. We're uneducated about the depth of Jesus' commitment to us; we're callously stupid in how we misuse His precious gifts of life. We need ministers to deal gently with us because sometimes we're as ignorant and dumb as a bag of hammers.

"He is subject to weakness:" don't go thinking that your pastor has all the answers. She or he doesn't. Earning a theological degree doesn't necessarily impart wisdom or even character. And just because he or she is educated in the Bible doesn't mean they have special talents in living it out. I know pastors who made grievous mistakes and lost their ministries because of them. I know pastors who are so damn self-righteous and holier-than-thou that I'd really like to sock them in the eye. I know pastors who are struggling with deep issues that would have long ago crushed even strong-willed me. Pastors and priests are sinners too. They make mistakes like anyone else. They need our support and prayers and our one-on-one friendship. Pastors need the Jesus they proclaim as much as do their congregants.

Today is the start of December. This month will see Christmas and the end of the year. It will see birth and death, sorrow and happiness. This month, in the middle of all the festivities, the reflection, and the hoped-for happiness, take time to thank a priest or a pastor. Shake their hand and say "thanks for all you do." Pastors and priests aren't better

than anyone else, but they do live out a blessed calling unfamiliar to the rest of us. That deserves occasional recognition and reverence because they are our upright generals on the front lines in a very real spiritual war.

For more reading: Hebrews 7:19, Ephesians 3:12, Romans 8: 31-39.

Lord Jesus, thank You for calling men and women to serve as your pastoral representatives here. Thank You for their talents, their service, their friendship and teaching, and their leadership.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 5 December 2016

And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. Hebrews 5, verse 4.

So, I'm officially looking for another job. Last Friday, my manager, a VP in Michigan, officially dropped the axe on my neck. Effective 1 January I'm gone from the company. Reason is that I'm just not a fit for the work they have now. It's not being fired but it's not being saved either; I guess "let go" is the current colloquialism for "don't go away mad but just go away." The company was kind enough to pay me through the remainder of the month, something they didn't have to do and most companies don't. And my active work is mostly done so it's like having freely paid job hunting time. I refuse to surrender to negative thinking or pessimism in this because I sense deep in my soul that God is at work. He's calling me to do something else.

I'll put it to rest now, though: no, I'm not going into the ministry. I'm already in a ministry of sorts called "daily life." In it, I get to talk with people, share Jesus in how I conduct myself, and pray actively and diligently. I'm not paid to do this and, to be honest, feel no particular pull in the direction of full-time ministry of 'the cloth.' This'll sound weird but I'm hoping that never happens because I believe I'm making a difference doing what I'm doing now. I enjoy spending these times with you, and I enjoy doing my best to live out my faith in wherever each day carries me. Full-time ministry would change that somehow, maybe for the better and maybe not. For now, let's just say "we may never know."

And yet I know deep in my heart that God is calling me to do something with my life. It SUCKS to lose your job, even if it isn't unexpected. In the middle of an economic depression, joining the ranks of the unemployed is a terrifying, daunting thing. Yet I know that God has His hand in it. He's been preparing me and my family for this for several months now in building up our faith, in providing a second job for me and a new job for my wife. He's been encouraging us to become bolder live-in representatives for Jesus in all we think, say, and do. At some point in the future, I'll secure another job. It will happen because God has closed one door and asked me to walk through another one He opened. In-between now and then, God will provide. He doesn't promise it'll be easy; it might indeed be tough. But He will be with us throughout. He's constantly providing us with all we need to get through each day.

Some people get to have this same kind of faith and live it out as called servants of Christ. Just like Aaron – Moses' brother and the original ordained priest and pastor – pastors and priests have sensed the call God put on their hearts. They moved in the direction of full-time ministry, walking through doors God opened so that they might arrive in that ministry. And they do it with more training than Aaron had. Aaron's only ecclesiastical training was in the mud pits of Goshen, hoping for decades that God would send His deliverer so that slaves like himself might be freed. Aaron didn't need training in Hebrew, Greek, hermeneutics, and adiaphora. God put all that was needed on His heart and Aaron moved along accordingly. Indeed, God chose Aaron long before Aaron realized that God had chosen him. What's more, God stuck by Aaron after Aaron had committed a grave and all-too public sin. If the root of every sin is idolatry, Aaron's sin in building the Golden Calf for the delivered Israelites to worship is idolatry on steroids. And God stuck with Him anyway. God provided for Aaron. God used Aaron to institute the practices and tradition of being a called servant. God used Aaron to live as an example for others to follow in working and living as selected, appointed, called servants of Christ to carry His Word to all ends of the earth.

Different from how He uses you and me, but God has called us into our lives all the same. What will we do with that call?

If you're reading this blog either at WordPress or on an email, you're one of thousands to whom it's delivered every day. God has been using me to share these simple words for six years now. That much I pray to continue even as I look for new ways to pay the bills. No matter what happens, I feel God's calling through all of it.

For more reading: Hebrews 7:19, Ephesians 3:12, Romans 8: 31-39.

Lord God, I pray use my life and all I have so that I might preach You in all I think, say, and do. Thank You for blessing me and providing for me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 December 2016

In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 5, verses 5-6.

First let's discuss the Son and Father: there is nobody else in all of human history who can hold that title other than Jesus Christ. Christ is the only Son of God the Father while still being one with the Father. He could have taken on the glory of accepting God's calling to be an ordained high priest of the Jewish faith, but He didn't. He could have assumed God's glory for Himself, but He didn't. If He had done these things, He wouldn't have been the perfect Christ who satisfied the hundreds of Old Testament Biblical prophecies about the Christ. And yet Jesus did become the ultimate priest, the ultimate pastor and Good Shepherd of God's flock that is the church. It is only Jesus who intercedes for us with the glorious Father, who demands perfection to satisfy His just holiness. It is only Jesus who sacrificed Himself so that something could be done that had never been done before and couldn't have been done since. Only Jesus could atone for all of humanity's wrongdoings; nobody before or since has so satisfied all the requirements of being the penultimate and perfect Passover lamb.

And then there's Melchizedek. Verse 6 quotes Psalm 110, which says "you are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Perhaps ancient Jewish discussions focused a lot on Melchizedek, who is a minor, almost obscure figure in the early part of Genesis. But he was important. Melchizedek is the "king of Salem" who came out to meet Abraham and to whom Abraham gave a tenth of all he owned (providing precedence for our practice of ten percent tithing). Historically, almost nothing else is known of him though it's interesting to note that "king of Salem" likely means that Melchizedek was the ruler or high priest of Salem. That location was, according to some scholars, what became Jerusalem. How fascinating is it, then, in knowing this considering the later importance of Jerusalem to the stories of King David, King Jesus, and even in our world today.

Some Bible scholars say that Melchizedek may have been a pre-incarnate Jesus, come to reside for a short time with His people but, as the author of Hebrews notes, "a priest forever" (and the only priest forever). Other Bible scholars think Melchizedek may actually have been Shem, the son of Noah. Shem had been on the Ark with Noah and the rest of their family, and is regarded as the father of the line of Semites ("Semite" being derived from the name Shem). Shem was the son whom Noah blessed after Noah's post-Flood sin of drunkenness. He lived an extraordinarily long life both before and after the flood; after the flood he and so many others bore many children to repopulate a lonely and empty earth. If you flow out the timeline, you find that there is a short period of overlap in the lives of Shem and Abraham, so the theory becomes possible, maybe even plausible. That about exhausts my non-internet-researched knowledge of the topic; if more is to be known, we'll have to consult Google, Bible scholars, or both.

In a few chapters we'll talk more about Melchizedek; much of Chapter 7 is about him. Whether he was the pre-incarnate Jesus or Shem or someone else altogether, if we navel-gaze about who he was we miss the point of what he represents in this verse (and in Psalm 110). Melchizedek was the example of an ultimate high priest, one who would be able to intercede for man on man's behalf. Pastors do this. They are men of character who both minister to us in ways we need, and pray to God on our behalf, which we also very much need. The priesthood was and is a necessary function to human existence even when we don't hold it in regard. Pastors and priests, other than Joel Osteen, don't make much money. We hold them in high esteem yet we insist that the most effective of them live in near poverty. Like God Himself, when times are good most of us don't seem to want our pastors around, but when we fall on hard times we want them there immediately. Whether he was Jesus, Shem or someone else, this is the kind of person Melchizedek must have been. He must have been a deeply spiritual man who sought God's will and God's wisdom. He must have been a man of impeccable character. Melchizedek is a man from whom we can learn much even if we actually know very little about him. Hold on to these thoughts...we'll need them in a little while.

For more reading: Genesis 14:18, Hebrews 6:20, Hebrews 7:1-22, Psalm 110:4.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the life of Melchizedek, and for the example He set in how You want Your priests and pastors to live here. Indeed, Lord, for how You desire all of us to live.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 8 December 2016

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Hebrews 5, verse 7.

The verses around this one talk about Jesus being the Son of God, about Jesus being like Melchizedek, and later about Jesus being a man, doing things other men do. Don't lose sight of that because context matters and we can't take things out of it without losing some of the intended meaning. Now, repeat after me: Jesus was heard because of His reverent submission. If you want to be heard, submit.

So you know I'm looking for a job. While doing so, I'm also working a night job at an outbound call center. One thing I'm learning quickly is that, to sell something (like the radio product we're selling at the call center) you need to be submissive. Sales agents need to learn the blended skill of being assumptive and assertive while still being calmly and genuinely submissive. One doesn't need to be obsequious, but one needs to learn the art of assuaging the comfort of the person on the other end of the phone while pressing them to purchase something they might not otherwise have purchased. It isn't the job I thought I would ever work in but it is where God has me at the moment and I'm learning a few things. Through them, God is molding me for other tasks. I get to pray for strangers, which I sometimes do silently when names come up on my screen. I get to work as "the old guy" in a crew full of mostly kids and other adults younger than me. I get to see perspectives that I haven't considered in a long time. And I get to work outside of my comfort zone, learning that blend of assumptive submissiveness that is necessary to sell a product.

Did you get the "get to" aspect of these things? I don't have to do these things: I'm blessed to get to.

Today, when life throws a curve at you, how about you step back for a few seconds and remind yourself that there is much you get to do' in life? Sure, there are things you must do because of responsibilities and such, but most of what we do we don't have to do: we get to do them. Dig deep enough and I'm betting you'll realize that you get to do the really good things when you're reverently submissive.

It's the attitude; it's the heart. God heard Jesus whether Jesus did something or not. God hears you and I whether we talk with Him or not. He's God and we aren't, and He's omniscient and omnipresent whether we acknowledge Him or not. Long before we think, speak, or act, God knows what we're going to think, speak or act. What He's most interested in is the heart we bring into our thoughts, words and actions. Today's verse is talking mostly about Jesus' last night, there in Gethsemane, when Jesus wept and prayed so earnestly that He bled His prayers out. Yet God already knew, God already felt, what Jesus was feeling deep inside. God sensed Jesus' attitude, His dread of the coming tearing separation, His dread of the pain, His anguish at the rejection, His loneliness as He contemplated the next few hours. Jesus' attitude, even then, was still reverent submission.

Jesus didn't have to choose the cross: Jesus got to. And everything changed. God heard Him where He was, and God treated Jesus the man with all the love and justice He could muster while putting on Him, Jesus the Son of God, all the righteous wrath that the sins of mankind deserve. God the Father didn't want to do this but He got to. God the Son didn't have to do this but He got to. God the Spirit didn't need to do all this but He got to. And it was out of submissive love, the three persons of the Triune Godhead submitting in love and trust to each other so their very good creation, man, could live forever in communion with them. Jesus was God and man all at once, and, in submission, He satisfied God's requirement for perfect justice. He got to do that.

As for me, I get to look for a job now; as soon as I post this blog I'll resume doing just that. Unemployment these days is a scary prospect, but I'm not yet fully there. It doesn't seem quite fair to me to have to go through all this when I thought I was doing the best I could for my company. But that is just the way it is; fair is a dumb word to consider. It's where I am because it's where God has me now. And the reality of the situation is that I don't have to go through it at all: I get to. In that, I know deep inside that everything will turn out fine.

For more reading: Genesis 14:18, Hebrews 6:20, Hebrews 7:1-22, Psalm 110:4.

Lord Jesus, thank You for sacrificing Yourself for me, and for being with me as I go through these trials in life. We get to do them together; thank You for that as well.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 December 2016

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. Hebrews 5, verse 8.

Suffering teaches you obedience. When you lose your job, you immediately look for ways to both gain new employment and reduce expenses until you do. When you are in physical pain, you surrender your abilities to do certain things until that pain is relieved. When you lose something, make a bad choice, are in danger, commit a secret wrong, or do any other kind of thing that produces suffering, you immediately know it. You react to the thing that causes you to suffer. In short, you obey whatever is made necessary to alleviate the suffering.

Suffering is one of God's means of grace. Huh? God imparts His grace through suffering? You bet He does. Consider Romans 5: "not only so but we 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." God uses our suffering as a way to both tear us down and build us up. He teaches us lessons that, in a non-suffering state, we might not absorb in meaningful ways. In doing this, He teaches us to endure the bad for the outcome that can be good. In that endurance, we receive character and hope. I'd submit, as well, that the hope of which Romans 5 speaks isn't a wish, either. It's a sure promise of God's blessing.

And when you're suffering, it's ok to cry out. It's ok to cry, scream, hurt, vent, anguish. Jesus did. He vented righteous anger against wrongdoing in His ministry. And, in true agony on the cross, He cried and screamed in pain. We have all heard how people who are depressed or suicidal will find ways to cry out for help. The message from Scripture is "you should!" It's a healthy thing to let the world know you're in pain. Maybe the world will help.

Or maybe not. In Jesus' case, you know the scoop. We've already seen how Jesus 'got to' do the things He did, how He is a priest forever like the legendary Melchizedek. Wrapped up in that is the fact that Jesus 'got to' die on the cross. He genuinely suffered a torturous death that you and I can only imagine. He who was fully man and fully God at the same time got to endure the physical mutilation of scourging and crucifixion as well as the emotional torture of rejection. And as if that wasn't enough (and it wasn't), in a mystery we don't fully understand, He who was fully man and fully God at all times got to endure the spiritual abandonment of the Father while at the same time remaining fully part of Him. He did it alone, and together, and because we couldn't.

Whether we like it or not, we also 'get to' endure our suffering, allowing that which could defeat us to, instead, transform us by stripping away some traits while replacing them with others. Yet God doesn't abandon us even when we find it hard to see Him. You know this deep inside. Don't let suffering rob you of that knowledge.

So what was it that Jesus was obeying? You know the answer to that as well. He obeyed God's will. In reality, doesn't everything (at least indirectly) obey God's will? If God uses all the world's sins in ways that result in good for His kingdom, doesn't this mean that everything is subject to God's will? Of course everything is subject to God's will, His patient and perfect will. Believe it or not, God doesn't will for us to suffer needlessly. Read the verses below and understand that Jesus' suffering as well as that of the believer can build others up while giving us the courage that's needed to see the thing through.

Neither you nor I wants to suffer. We hate hurting and we hate it when others around us, especially loved ones, hurt. We weren't made for hurting and suffering, but those are two consequences of sin in our world. How good it is to know that God is with us through all of it.

For more reading: Romans 5:3-5, Luke 22: 41-44, Matthew 27: 46-50, Luke 23:46, Psalm 22:24, Mark 14:36.

Lord God, transform my suffering into perseverance and let it bring glory to You and lessons for myself and others. Help me to reject hurt and bitterness.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 December 2016

...and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. Hebrews 5, verse 9.

What does “made perfect” mean? Is it referring to Jesus being immaculate of His Father’s Spirit and the woman Mary? Is it the work-filled nature of His ministry here? Is it how he endured temptations and trials here to make a perfectly-lived human life? Does this refer to how He endured the terrible suffering of crucifixion without falling into any kind of sin, even the seemingly irresistible sins of thought?

Answer: yes. See, that was easy!

Make no mistake: Jesus the Christ is eternal. He has always been and always will be. Though born of a human here, He was not created before that. Being God, He simply is, and was, and is to come. Jesus wasn’t ‘made’ whether it’s made perfect or made anything else. Yet, for our understanding, we need to consider how He lived that perfect life here and, in doing so, made something that had never been made before. That perfect life He lived here: that’s indeed one thing that the author is referring to.

What’s more, that perfect life was made for something else that mattered even more: perfect salvation. God used Jesus’ perfect existence as the only way to reconcile a rebellious humanity to Himself. He required perfection; He required blood of atonement; He required willing sacrifice of everything to His perfect will. No ‘very good’ person ever had or ever has since; only Jesus could do it. In willingly submitting to God’s will to atone for all sins, Jesus made perfect salvation for all mankind.

Think about that. Perfection done for you. It’s for eternity. It is for you and me and everyone we know and everyone who has lived. That perfect salvation was all that’s required for all of us to spend forever with Jesus in communion with Him. We get to share in His graceful blessing of joy, peace, happiness, and even work all because He did all the work that was necessary in living, in making, a perfectly lived life. We get to do this here and now, then for eternity later. Only Jesus could offer Himself perfectly as the exactly perfect sacrifice necessary to do away with the consequence of sin that is eternal death. Only Jesus did it; only Jesus offers the path to eternity today. Mohammed doesn’t; Buddha doesn’t; Shintoism doesn’t; the Kardashians don’t. Neither does Donald Trump, a brand new pickup truck, the Democrat or Republican Party, or Chunky Monkey ice cream. Only Jesus.

Have you ever made something that is so good that you’re busting your buttons that you’re so pleased with it? Have you ever felt proud of things you’ve done, or said, or written, or even thought? Have you ever felt joy at times in your life, or maybe joy with family and friends? I imagine that’s how God must feel all the time when He considers all Jesus did. I imagine it’s how He must feel when He welcomes a believer into eternity and sees that redeemed believer through the prism of Jesus.

Jesus was born and ‘made’ human in an unusual way that neither compromised His divinity nor took on human sin. He spent a life working with His hands, and His heart, building a life that could be used ultimately in service to God. All through that life, He perfectly resisted the temptations that ensnare the rest of us, knowing that even a tiny thought of sin would ruin God’s plan for perfect atonement. And He willingly went to die in our place, knowing that, when He had finished the painful trials of agony and torture, God’s wrath would be satisfied and mankind could be at peace with Him. All of that means “made perfect.” All we have to do is obey...and believe.

For more reading: Hebrews 2:10.

Glory to You, my Lord and Savior, for Your perfection, the perfect life You made, and for the perfect love who is You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 December 2016

...and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 5, verse 10.

Still holding off a few more days in talking fully about Melchizedek, although, as you know, we've already said a few things about him. Yet consider the context of why the author of Hebrews says this phrase again, mentioning this (today) obscure figure from Biblical history. In doing so, I think you might reach a particular conclusion. The reason why he keeps mentioning Melchizedek is because being that high priest was Jesus' primary mission here. Duh.

But think about it. Yes, Jesus came to save us from ourselves, to forgive all of our sins so as to restore the relationship He intended for mankind. Yes, Jesus was the only person in all of human history who could do that very thing. Yes, Jesus taught many things that are brilliant life lessons for us here even today. It's because He was our real high priest.

Priests are intermediaries between people and God. They're called servants whose calling and vocation is to be God's heralds in the world. Pastors and priests proclaim Jesus' good news by the lives they lead, the words they speak, the actions they take. They are Jesus' representatives here; a special elect who intercede for people with God. Pastors carry out church justice, minister to souls, interpret all things Biblical and Godly for those not uniquely called or religiously trained. Again, duh.

But their primary role is that intercession role. In this way, priests and pastors are not unlike lawyers, equipped and educated to take matters to and from God on our behalf. It's not that they have a special relationship with God that others can't have. But it is that priests and pastors have that calling, equipped with ecclesiastical education, that prepares them to interpret God's word to and for us, and to minister, rebuke, praise, and correct as we all walk along our sinful paths through life.

They learned it from Jesus. It's what Jesus does for us now, sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven, interceding for us. God the Father demands holiness from us. It was how He created us to be, and He loves us enough to respect our choices even when we've chosen paths that take us away from Him. Every time a contemplation of the justice we deserve crosses the mind of the Father, there's Jesus right beside Him, in union with Him, whispering, "have mercy once again, Abba. They made a mistake." God's Spirit moves our hearts to repent; God's Spirit communicates the love of the Father and Son to us, reminding us to repent, and remembering our sins no more. Sounds like what a priest does.

The Apostle Peter was a burly, brusque man, used to hard manual labor and worldly ways. And yet Simon Peter was the man who Jesus chose to lead the church after Jesus ascended back home. Peter wasn't formally trained for the job, though he had learned everything He would need to know about the faith directly from the face of the Savior. But it probably wasn't the life Peter imagined for himself during those long days and nights spent fishing in the years before he met the Christ. Our pastors and priests today have university degrees, often learning to speak Latin, Hebrew, and Greek so that they might study original versions of Scriptures. Even back in Biblical days, the priests in the temples and synagogues were rabbinically trained, spending years under the tutelage of senior rabbis. None of that was available to Peter. He had to learn things as he went. Peter didn't envision founding what became the Roman Catholic church – and Christianity – but that's what he and his compatriots did. Doing so eventually cost him everything.

Yet Peter did it willingly. He and the other Apostles founded practices and bases that we still use in worship today. Peter was the first pope, the fisherman and fisher-of-men in whose traditional shoes every pope, priest and pastor have since walked their call. And Peter modeled his behavior on that of his Savior, brother, and friend, Jesus. He did so because he understood that Jesus was our true high priest.

For more reading: Hebrews 2:17.

Lord Jesus, thank You for being the true priest and pastor. Thank You for interceding for me, for ministering to me, for Your mercy and Your grace, and for all You do.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 December 2016

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. Hebrews 5, verse 11.

My friend, you may not like hearing this but you're slow to learn. Dim, dull, impaired, sluggish, ignorant: guilty, my friend, both you and I. We are slow to learn matters of God's heart. You've heard the Biblical account that King David was a man after God's own heart. I think that, perhaps, David was just a man, albeit an extraordinarily talented man but that his real advantage – his only real advantage – in life was that he wasn't slow to learn what matters most to God. He paid attention to God, and sought Him out even when David made mistakes. What would King David, or his wiser son Solomon, say about us?

Last night was a tough night at the call center. Our mission is to call, call, and call, attempting to sell satellite radio programming to people who recently completed promotional offers. In an average four hour shift, I usually call about 150 people, and I might make 4 sales out of all those calls. That works out to a 3% sales rate for all the calls, and I'm at the top of my group. Last night, I made 280 calls in a five hour shift and made zero sales. It was discouraging but had to be done. The most memorable calls were with some severely disgruntled customers who decided I would be a verbal punching bag. I really don't know why some folks seem to enjoy being nasty but two customers last night seemed to be enjoying it with gusto. Profanity, yelling, humiliation, insults; try packing uber-portions of those things into an unplanned telemarketing call with a sales agent who can't respond in kind and can only apologize on behalf of his employer. That's what these guys from New York and Washington did. At the end of the calls, I honestly but reluctantly said a couple of quick prayers for these irate people, but it didn't feel too soothing.

And then there's Black Friday. I don't like the idea of it. Me, I'm an ardent capitalist, and in theory, enabling stores to sell what they want when they want to is a great thing. The combination of Judeo-Christian ethics, free market capitalism, and representative democracy has given rise to the greatest system for improving humanity that humanity has ever devised. Yet I'm repulsed by Black Friday. I'm repulsed by stores being open on a day set aside to thank God. I'm sickened at the thought of hordes of people camping out to save pennies on meaningless stuff. I'm revolted by the pictures of crowds fighting in Walmart and Best Buy for loss leader worthless widgets ridiculously discounted. It's their right; I don't dispute that. I am simply disgusted by it on Thanksgiving...and this year I participated, taking my grandson shopping while others ventured out to do same. That not only disgusts me more: it makes me a hypocrite.

What about the election? In our lifetimes, has there ever been a more vitriolic, bad-tempered election than the one of 2016? Both sides are guilty, and the losing side has shown nothing but sour grapes ever since the results came in. If you pay attention to the media, it doesn't promise to get better any time soon. I'm with those who predict that every issue will be battled mercilessly and endlessly every day going forward. It's even more repulsive than Black Friday shoppers fighting over NES game systems.

Wanna know the reason why all these things happen? It's because we're slow to learn. Our sin choices make us ignorant and immature. The author of Hebrews has spent five chapters explaining things about Jesus' role in our lives. Here in chapter 5, he's explaining why Jesus is so similar to the ancient priest, Melchizedek. And before he goes any further, he says that he wants to explain more but his readers wouldn't understand it. First century Judea didn't have Walmart or Hillary Clinton, but I'm betting the marketplaces, synagogues, and common streets were full of the same kind of invective and discord that plagues our world today.

The author's Hebrew readers were slow to learn what mattered to God, and they weren't much different from their ancestors in King David's time a millennium before. They weren't stupid; you and I aren't stupid either. They were stubborn; so are we. They were experienced yet immature in following Jesus, and many had been educated in the Torah and the ways of the synagogue for decades before that. Yet they were slow, sluggish in their faith. They were not much different from Black Friday electors who could be unkind to strangers on the telephone.

They're the people Jesus came to save. They're us.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:6, 5:12-14.

Lord Jesus, thank You for being so much better than me. Thank You for not being slow, and for being wise, full of grace, and patient. Help me to model these parts of Your character.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 December 2016

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, 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. Hebrews 5, verses 11-14.

Yesterday we discussed how we, as people, are slow to learn. Today, let's put that in context of the Hebrews author's warnings against falling away. And about Jedi Knights.

In 1 Corinthians 3:2, the Apostle Paul uses an analogy similar to that above, talking about how he 'fed' the 'children' under his tutelage milk and not solid food. He did this because they were not ready for solid food as their faith and understanding of it had not yet matured. That analogy is quite similar to today's verses. You can see why, for many years, people thought Hebrews had also been written by Paul, though contemporary opinions today now differ. If nothing else, we can surmise that the author of Hebrews was familiar with Paul's letter to the Corinthians or, at least, familiar with what could have been a popular saying. What does all this have to do with falling away from the faith?

Think about it: resisting temptation is a difficult thing. It is a characteristic of maturity, of being able to discern the consequences of choosing right over wrong. A child, one still developing and able to only digest simple ideas, doesn't fully know how to do this because they haven't yet fully acquired those skills. Time, training, experience, and a 'diet' designed to foster those things are the only ways to acquire the wisdom that comes with age. If man does not live by bread alone, then the 'bread' food on which we are fed by God corresponds to our level of maturity. Thinking that way, then it's easy to understand how those new to the faith are fed on milk while solid food comes with time. Thinking further, things like resisting the temptation to sin, fully repenting of our sins, and fully submitting to God's active will in our lives can more easily be seen as matters into which we grow mature.

So much for the judgy analysis. Let's tone it down a little. Just this morning, I was watching a Star Wars movie; *Revenge of the Sith*, one of the pre-quel movies that sci-fi purists constantly pan. If you think about it, all seven of the Star Wars movies are morality plays. The interwoven storylines about Jedi, Sith, galactic warfare tactics, and the rise, fall, and rise of empires revolve around some pretty basic ideas. Choose good over evil and good prevails. Choose evil over good and the opposite occurs. In the movies, the Jedi are trained over many years to embrace the patient ways of good, to learn how to channel the Force for use in serving the greater good. They start on milk and graduate to steak and potatoes.

Me thinks that Anakin Skywalker, for all his Darth Vaderness, never progressed beyond spiritual milk. Neither has George Lucas, for what it matters.

Over time, when we're immature, we become impatient. Impatience can be a natural reaction to negative stress, yet when we focus on it beyond a moment, it can become a choice, a way of reacting. Impatient people are generally immature in some way. They become intolerant of the pace of things and determine to change that pace. Not unlike the believers of Hebrews times, we who are impatient today reject the deliberate life of righteousness and choose the impatient impetuosity of unrighteousness. It takes time to be still and learn about God. It takes time to learn the ways of righteousness, submission, and faith. When we are impatient, we fall away from those ways and the choices of evil can become alluring.

Me thinks, too, that these are the ways of the Force. Note to Star Wars fans: don't navel-gaze too long at this idea but also don't miss these overtones in the movies. The way of God is the way of righteousness, and the way of righteousness takes patience and time. Sort of like learning to be a Jedi.

For further reading: Matthew 4:4, Hebrews 6:1, 1 Corinthians 2:6, 1 Corinthians 3:2, 1 Corinthians 14:20, 1 Peter 2:2, Isaiah 7:15, Psalm 46:10

Lord Jesus, I pray You to feed me the food I need. Feed me milk in my impatient times, and I pray for more substance when You see I am ready for it. Thy will be done, Lord.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 23 December 2016

But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Hebrews 5, verse 14.

One more set of thoughts about solid food...and Christmas. We gain strength from solid food. Our bodies – our spirits – gain strength and maturity from consuming things that build us up. Today is the day before the day before Christmas. If you're a "Friends" fan, it's Christmas Eve Eve. Have you considered that now is the time you should be hungry? Contrary to the popular Christian idea, I actually think that now is the time you SHOULD want more for Christmas. You SHOULD want the whole big Griswold Family Christmas.

Make sense? Probably not; let me explain. It's because of Hebrews 5, verse 14.

We're sinful fallen human beings. Like it or not, our ancestors took onto themselves something they've passed down to us through our genes: sinful nature. You have one. So do I. Sinful nature is how we can take a beautiful thing like undeserved grace and make it into a consumer-driven mega-holiday we call "Christmas." Sinful nature is how we can want more and more stuff and still not be satisfied with it. If you don't believe me, name for me the big gifts you received each of these last 10 years. Chances are, if you're like me (and I believe you are), you can't. We think we can gorge on solid food but we don't realize that if we eat too much steak when we can only tolerate milk, we're going to end up gripping the spiritual toilet, barfing up what we can't handle.

Yet we SHOULD want more, we SHOULD want all the love, peace, joy, and happiness that Christmas represents. Why? You know the answer: they're love, peace, joy and happiness! Don't make it tougher than it should be! And here's the kicker: love, peace, joy, and happiness are food for the mature. They're food for a weary soul. They're the simplest, most child-like things we can imagine and yet it takes a mature heart to grasp them. More important, it takes a mature spirit to share them, to give them away. Best of all, it takes a mature soul to give them unselfishly, as undeserved grace, to people who don't deserve it.

Make no mistake: people don't deserve it. We spend all year treating each other like crap and yet, at Christmas-time, we say we want to make amends and share that love, peace, joy, and happiness. We say we want to do those things because we want them ourselves. Yes, we actually are pretty slow, dull and dim, and yet even the slowest, dullest, dimmest of us want that love, peace, joy and happiness. News flash, friend reader: it's a good thing to want them. It's a good thing to look through all the bad things in the world and focus on what's right and good, especially at the time of the year we set aside to celebrate them.

They're some of the best of the fruit of God's Spirit. Love, peace, joy, happiness: apart from God, you can't find them. Apart from the Savior in the Manger, you only get stuff, you only get a facsimile of love, peace, joy, and happiness. Real love, honest peace, true joy, and lasting happiness can only be found at the feet of Jesus. When you, crushed sinner, bow at His feet and humble yourself in repentance, He takes your hand and you get to look into His eyes. There you see only love, peace, joy, and happiness.

You should want that. It's the best Christmas gift of all.

In our house, Christmas season starts, oh, probably around May. It's the consequence of marrying an Elf. My wife is happiest when she's doing things for others, and I know of nobody better who demonstrates the love, peace, joy and happiness that are knowing Jesus through Christmas than the woman who was crazy enough to marry me. She plans all

year long for Christmas, making lists, arranging finances, solidifying plans, and spreading honest cheer. The season kicks into full gear around October; these last two years it has been exacerbated by this thing called “the Hallmark Channel.” She’s been on the floor organizing presents all afternoon, and in a few minutes we’ll go out to give cookies and candies to our neighbors. It’s her thing; it’s a huge part of who she is and I wouldn’t have her any other way. My Hunnie knows a lot about love, peace, joy, and happiness. In a world set against them, she’s chosen to learn about them from following Jesus.

He’s the same Jesus who, God Almighty, decided the best way to meet His greatest creation, humanity, was by coming as a defenseless baby in poverty, then growing up to teach the world about love, peace, joy, and real happiness. Christmas comes this weekend. It’s a herald for the truly beautiful holiday a few months down the road at Easter. Merry Christmas my friends. Wishing you love, peace, joy, and happiness...and some cookies and Hallmark movies as well. Feast heartily on them because they are the best food for a maturing spirit.

For further reading: Matthew 4:4, Hebrews 6:1, 1 Corinthians 2:6, 1 Corinthians 3:2, 1 Corinthians 14:20, 1 Peter 2:2, Isaiah 7:15, Psalm 46:10

Lord Jesus, thank You for Christmas, for coming here to live with us, for being our Savior in the manger.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 27 December 2016

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so. Hebrews 6, verses 1-3.

Just after Christmas, these are hard verses to understand. I mean, here we are, fresh off celebrating a time of hope, family, peace on earth and goodwill towards men, and we're talking as if these things are second-best. Moreover, the verses seem to pour cold water on 'the fundamentals' of what one does when one is new to the faith. Repenting, faith, instruction, prayer, resurrection, understanding judgment: is the author of Hebrews saying these are meaningless things, or things we can forget?

Not hardly. Indeed, I'd submit that the author is saying "you already know these things. Let's take them to another level."

My NIV concordance says we should pay attention to six truths that these verses highlight: repentance, faith in God, instruction, laying on of hands, resurrection, eternal judgment. How surprising it is that these are the same things that the author seems to be deriding...except he isn't. Reading through the verses in the context of those before them (where the author talks about how the Hebrews need solid instruction in 'the basics;' they need milk, not solid food), then it seems that the author is building a bridge between identifying how his readers have only begun to grasp simple truths about Jesus while working to actually become more mature believers. The way to do that is by going back to the basics and applying them to where you are now.

Think about it. When you're struggling in anything, it's good advice to remember first principles. My friend, Alan Louie, has always said that. When analyzing any problem, issue, or challenge at work, the first step in troubleshooting should be to remember and evaluate first principles: what's the why behind the what. Why was something done in the first place? What are you trying to accomplish? What's the purpose, mission, or reason for doing something? Chances are, whatever solution is decided upon must satisfy those first principles if it is to be effective in addressing the situation at hand.

Or think of athletics, football in particular. When a quarterback wants to improve, he practices simple repetitive motions and plays. Practicing with a receiver, pass routes, mastering the snap, effectiveness in the pocket: the way to improve on all those complex skills is to practice the most basic skills. Excellent quarterbacks like Tom Brady and Peyton Manning know this and constantly remind themselves of it.

It's no different with our faith. When we struggle in our walk with Jesus, or when we are trying to grow, when we want to get to the root of the struggle, we should focus on the basics of faith. Is there something of which we need to repent? Do we feel adrift in our faith? Are we struggling with finding meaning in our lives? Does our prayer life need an injection of 'oomph?' Name your issue and the resolution to the problem begins with addressing first principles.

And those are? Jesus died for you because He loves you. Jesus rose from death to gain for you life eternal. Jesus is the only way, truth, and life into that life. There's nothing we do, say, think, or anything else that makes us worthy of those things, or earns our way into them, or makes Him love us more. He has done it all already, and He loves us perfectly despite all the miseries and shortcomings in our fallen lives. More Jesus, less me, and things will start to work out.

Yet it is the last seven words – And God permitting, we will do so – that are, perhaps, the most imperative ones of all. As mentioned, it's just a few days after Christmas and I hope yours was as good as mine. To take Christmas to the next level, now is a good time to want more of the Christmas spirit, of the things that draw us together as family and friends. It's a good thing to want more of the baby in the manger in our lives. It's a good thing to begin to understand the agape love that brought Him here and caused both wise men and shepherds to worship Him together. God permitting, we will

do so. If God ends our time here today, then glory be and all praise to Him. Yet if He permits us both today and tomorrow, then let's use these times to brush up on the basics and learn by using those fundamentals. God-permitting, we will continue to do so.

For further reading: Luke 2:14, Philippians 3:12-14, Hebrews 5:12, Hebrews 9:14, John 3:25, Acts 6:6, Acts 2:24, Acts 17:24, Acts 18:21.

Lord Jesus, I praise You for the fundamentals, for the basics of my faith in You. Put them always in front of me, I pray, and help me to cling to them as tools to help live this wonderful gift of a life You have shared with me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 December 2016

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Hebrews 6, verses 4-6.

More REALLY tough verses to understand. The keys are in the previous verses, specifically where the author mentions the basics of the faith and the grace of God to continue to live them out.

Repeat after me: you cannot lose your salvation. You can't undo what Jesus did for you. He still died and rose. He is still God, and is still alive and interceding for you, and He is still the only Savior and the only way to heaven. There's nothing you can do to undo any of that. But you can recant it.

My NIV concordance says that there are two common interpretations of these verses. One talks about Christians who recant and the other talks about immature Christians who are in danger of apostasy. I prefer door number two, Monty. We CAN recant and renounce our belief in Jesus. Indeed, the community of atheists is rife with people who have done just that. I suspect most of them have been hurt somehow and choose to blame that hurt on God. Still, it is a conscious choice to un-believe and to state your un-belief. God gives us the free will to do that and He respects our choices at all times because He wants to be the God we choose instead of the one we feel we are forced to believe in.

Yet I don't think this is what the verses are talking about. Instead, I think the verses are talking about those who are in danger or recanting. It's a subtle difference, based in having made the choice to desert the faith and contemplating making that choice. But it matters. I think the author is writing to dissuade vulnerable believers from recanting and turning away from the nascent Christian faith they experienced.

After reading the verses and those related to it, I think, more and more, that the author is saying how convincing, compelling, and impactful is being part of God. Once you truly experience God, you won't want to be pulled away from him or willingly give Him up. When a person is filled, even for a brief time, with the presence of God, the choice to not believe in Him becomes illogical and inconceivable. We may never experience such a moving experience ever again, yet even a brief time in the presence of Christ can be more than enough to change us forever. Everything in life that comes after that moment pales, and many people spend the rest of their lives moving in positive directions made possible by their encounter with Jesus.

We can't undo that moment. We can't lessen Jesus even when we try our hardest. We can't do, say, or think anything that will make Him less perfect, less God, less of a Savior. The only thing we can do that can affect our relationship with Him is reject Him and break off the relationship. Even doing that doesn't stop Him from trying to reach us again and again. Even rejecting Him doesn't stop Him from providing for our needs, showering us with blessings, or being less than He is. Only at the moment of death, when it's too late to turn back, could we experience the spiritual consequences of rejecting Him.

I wonder if the author was writing to people in the Hebrew community who were being pulled in different directions. I wonder if he was writing to show them that nothing else they have heard or could experience could ever equal the presence of Jesus Christ that comes with believing in Him. This side of heaven we may never know; this side of heaven, more learned people will debate these verses, and we'll likely find disagreement over the fine points. Yet it's undeniable that holding fast to the faith is an act of choice and a mature one at that. It takes adult talent and experience to cling to God when the world tells us to reject Him. People back in Bible times fought the same spiritual struggles that we fight today. It only makes sense the author of Hebrews would address that.

For further reading: Luke 2:14, Philippians 3:12-14, Hebrews 5:12, Hebrews 9:14, John 3:25, Acts 6:6, Acts 2:24, Acts 17:24, Acts 18:21.

Lord Jesus, I'll admit: living in this world makes it tough to cling to You. It shouldn't be this way, but it is. Thank You for clinging to me, for always proving Yourself as my Savior, and for saving me from myself.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 29 December 2016

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Hebrews 6, verses 4-6.

Something else that needs to be said, and this is going to be harsh.

“To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” We do it every day. It’s why He chose the cross; it’s why, every day, He chooses it again and again when you and I, selfish bastards that we are, keep stabbing him with those Roman nails. We do it with our sins, small and large, even the ones we don’t think amount to much. Have you begun to realize all the effects of your God-damned sins? Yes, I said that. Your sins and mine: they’re cause for God to damn us to eternal punishment. Personally, I think that punishment starts here and now and only gets worse as we go. God damn us for all of our sins.

Enough of the profanity. I hope you don’t mind it too much...it’s for effect and I’m hoping that it makes you think, maybe even a little angry. You should be righteously angry at sin; angry enough to do something about it. Jesus did. And yet we keep taking up that hammer and ramming those nails back into His hands and feet.

Every single time you and I fail we nail Jesus back to that cross. He suffered mortal agony the first time around, and then He suffered spiritual agony being ripped apart from His Divine being (so as to suffer and redeem us) while still being inevitably matched to Him as well. Then He rose three days later, making death and suffering moot forever. And yet every minute since, whenever someone has done, said or thought anything contrary to Him, it’s like we have nailed Him back onto that cross.

Here in the first-world, we persecute those who believe in Jesus. You’ve done it; so have I. Huh? You bet you have. Ever been afraid to speak up and say you’re a believer? Ever been ashamed of your faith because the ‘cool kids’ didn’t seem to be ashamed of themselves? Ever felt even the slightest bit sanctimonious when you did speak up, not realizing your proud sanctimony is a disgrace to Him who loves us unselfishly? Every single time we do things like these, even the tiniest thing, we are disgracing Jesus again. We are joining in with the crowd along the Via Dolorosa who spit on Him, screamed at Him, hated Him. You and I already know it’s un-cool to be a believer in Hollywood or even on social media. That’s persecution my friend, even if it’s soft-boiled.

And REAL persecution? You know, the kind that gets you killed for being a believer? It’s happening in every Muslim country on the planet. It’s happening on steroids in places controlled by ISIS and Boko Haram. It’s still happening in communist strongholds like Cuba, and China, and North Korea. Don’t fool yourself: when you and I sin, we’re joining in the execution squads in Iran who torture you, then stand you up against the wall simply for saying “I believe in Jesus and not Mohammed.”

Like I said, God damn us for our sins. He can, He will, He doesn’t want to, but He must if we don’t repent of them. God is holy and must be holy. Our very lives depend on it. If He isn’t, even for an iota of a second, then this whole universe comes apart. The places where the spiritual and physical intertwine would become explosion points of sin if there is no holy and just Lord God Almighty to bind them together.

Thank God that He is the cure for the common damnation. The cure for damnation is Jesus. Every time we do the difficult, mature thing and turn from our sins, it’s like witnessing Jesus rise from death again. We’re the women at the garden tomb, clinging fast to our risen Lord. We’re the blind man who can see again because He healed us. We’re Peter, restored to faith after denying Him three times. If our sins nail Him to that cross every time, then our repentance and re-acceptance of His gift of true salvation is being restored into His resurrection. Damnation becomes simply a road we didn’t follow when we step back onto the path of following Jesus. Then and only then do we grasp how He was ready

for us all along. The salvation wasn't undone by our rebellion even as our rebellion renounced our acceptance of His salvation.

For further reading: Luke 2:14, Philippians 3:12-14, Hebrews 5:12, Hebrews 9:14, John 3:25, Acts 6:6, Acts 2:24, Acts 17:24, Acts 18:21.

Lord Jesus, I praise You for all You did in saving us. I'm truly sorry for the sins I've done that nailed You to the cross. I'm truly sorry that I've kept on doing them. Live in me and strengthen me to turn from my awful sins and to follow only You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 December 2016

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Hebrews 6, verses 7-8.

In verses 4-6, the author of Hebrews warns us that, while God doesn't undo our salvation, we can undo our acceptance of it to our own peril. Here he talks about what peril can await us if we turn from Him.

At the end of a growing season, fire can be your friend. I've spent several days this week raking leaves on my land. I purposefully waited until all the trees had shed their leaves so that I wouldn't have to do this task twice. Now I'm seeing that choice has resulted (literally) in a mountain of work. It takes hard work and time to rake 2 acres of leaves, then to pile them and burn them. But it's good for the soil because, once all the ash has cooled, I'll make several trips with a wheelbarrow and dump that rich ash on my pumpkin patch. Hold that thought.

Leaves are a useful crop. They give food to the trees, then die off and enrich the soil on which they fall. It's almost shocking how the volume of leaves you rake can condense into such a small portion of ash but that's what happens. God's nature is a miraculous thing. Part of burning up the leaves includes burning up weeds. When I dump all that ash on my pumpkin patch, I'm also going to burn off this year's weeds. It'll kill off those plants so that they don't grow back again, and it will enrich the soil anew. Weeds are plants you don't want, and they can be a nuisance when you're farming crops you do want. They don't last but they can come back if you don't tend to them. Make no mistake: this year, they'll be burned.

Imagine if I was a weed. In a way, maybe I am. Today is my last day with the company for which I've worked for six years. They're letting me go and not replacing me (at least that's what was told to me). I'm not being fired for cause; I haven't done anything improper or wrong. After six years, in their words "I'm just not a fit." Thanks, guys, and at the holidays even! What I didn't do was grow the project on which I was the manager, and I refused to make certain concessions to a client that I did indeed think were wrong. For most of the past six months, I've been on the bench and not really fitting in the minor tasks they've assigned to me. For that, I'm losing my job.

It happens. In corporate America, it happens a lot. It's a scary thing to be over fifty and on the unemployment line, though I'm not truly unemployed (I'm working part-time in a call center). To make it scarier, I feel like a worthless weed that has been cursed and is ready for the fire. I KNOW that God is active in this, and that He's clearing a path for something new. Whether that's big or not, I don't know. I simply know He's at work, closing and opening doors and moving me in a direction for which He's preparing me now. Yet it hurts. I've gone round and round in my head about 'what did I do wrong?' I can't honestly tell you that I consciously did, but if you don't do what your employer wants, in a way you're doing wrong. You get whatever consequences they assign to you. That's where I find myself. I'm in a burn pile from one job and while I'm confident God will see me through, I'm anxious about going through. I haven't rejected God in any way. What's happening isn't His fault; it's mine. But fire hurts. Right now it doesn't seem like my friend.

Here's the kicker: good things can come out of the fire.

Another job will happen. When it does, and I believe and hope that will be soon, it will be worthwhile and present a whole new set of good challenges. The prospect of that energizes me. When my manager dismissed me, in addition to protesting my innocence, I also said "I forgive you." I meant it, and those three words have kept me from being bitter. They've allowed me to quickly see God's hand in this, and to both turn the other cheek while still standing up to something that I think is a wrong. The door that's closed is behind me. Others just ahead will be opening and it's all because of God.

Fire can refine gold. Fire can burn away impurities and hazards. Fire wipes the landscape clean. And fire produces ash, like that ash I'll dump on my pumpkin patch. That builds up the soil and prepares it for good things to grow next

season. That's evidence of God at work, producing useful crops from what's left of last season's burn. Fire can hurt, and fire can kill. Getting fired can hurt your job prospects, but in the end, God always has something better in store.

For further reading: Genesis 3:17-18, Isaiah 5:6, Isaiah 27:4.

My Lord and Savior, I see Your beautiful hand at work in this anxious season. I ask for Your comfort, and the cleansing of Your perfect fire in my life. Burn away useless weeds from my life, and prepare me to grow a good crop afterwards.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 January 2017

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. Hebrews 6, verse 9.

Happy new year, friend reader, and welcome 2017. Good things are going to happen this year! Wake up, Dave, and get back to work. Better yet, get a job! Today, however, I get to say that part of my job includes sharing these words with you. My job is sharing Jesus no matter what I do. It's your job too. Better yet, it's our pleasure.

Now, if you read the verse again, you find it really is a good new year's verse. 2016 ended on a harsh note for many people. More police, soldiers, and innocent people died last year than celebrities but we and the media focus on the deaths of high-profile people, and there were many. Half of the US is disgruntled over yet another election. ISIS is still moving uninhibited all across the globe, and our leaders are feckless in trying to stop them. Our leadership seems determined to pick a fight with Russia without presenting their evidence as to why they should. On my home front, today marks the second day in this decade I'm without a full-time job, and while there are prospects, at the moment I'm fishing a warm lake at high noon. My wife can't shake this really nasty head-cold. Right now, it's raining cats and dogs and there might just be a bad leak in the roof over my guest room closet.

Boo hoo and good riddance to 2016. Mixed in with the bad was more good than I can cite in this tiny blog. Today is day two of a new year and that's a fresh opportunity. Sure, that's a pat answer, a typical stereotype. People always say that they like New Year's because it's a chance for a new beginning. I wonder how often we consider that January 1 is actually an arbitrary day selected by our ancestors. We could make any day the first of the year. Our calendar was drawn up to roughly correspond with regular cycles of the moon. Any day could be New Year's Day; pick one and call it your own.

Except that misses the point. The point isn't the day on the calendar or even the position of the moon. The point is Jesus. Any day should be a reason to celebrate because any day is another day to enjoy salvation. To live a life freed of the guilt and consequence of bad things we did in the past. To live in thankful celebration of that fact, and to be able to look forward to something truly new and wonderful beyond our comprehension when this corporeal life comes to an end. Yesterday was New Year's Day. Today is a new year day as well, the only one of its kind that we'll live this entire year, indeed in our entire lifetime. You might live through another January 2, but you'll never live through another January 2, 2017. Celebrate that gift of a new day because Jesus gave us life to celebrate, not to ruminate or complicate or any other 'ate' that doesn't focus on Him.

A pastor friend of mine said that the quick answer to all catechism questions is "Jesus." Even when he asks more pointed questions, very often students will simply respond with "Jesus" to mask whether or not they have actually addressed said question. I guess that Jesus is the catch-all answer when we don't know what else to say, especially when we're in eighth grade and wish we were out doing cooler things than catechism.

Truth? Yep. It's the truth. We search for more complex answers to questions that vex us when, all along, the answers may actually be pretty straightforward. There is nothing we can do that can undo the salvation that only Jesus won for us. He did everything necessary to make us righteous again and bring our relationship with God back into harmony. You and I can reject that, and we get what we get when we do. So why reject it? Accept the simple truth of Jesus and watch life improve. To paraphrase my friend, Chad Bird, why lock the door to hell from the inside? Open the door and walk out, then celebrate the fact that Jesus is waiting there as always.

There's a new full-time job just ahead. In-between now and then, there's the full-time gift of celebrating that the Son of Man made it possible for us to live forever. Rain waters the ground and fills up my shrinking pond, and fixing a leak isn't difficult. Celebrities and commoners die but if they believed in Jesus they aren't really dead; they've just moved on. More good than bad will come from this brand new year. Time to begin again live gladly because of that...because of Him.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:14.

Lord Jesus, thank You for each new day. Bless this one and this new year by teaching, guiding, rebuking, loving, and living with me as I inch through it.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 January 2017

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. Hebrews 6, verse 9.

Something else needs to be said about this verse, something that will offend my inner (and outer) Lutheran but has to be said all the same. It has to be said right now for the here and now.

Salvation isn't just for the after-life: salvation is for now. Eternal life is for NOW, as part of eternity, not just when you're dead to this world. In fact, if all you do with the salvation Jesus won for you is bank on it for the after-life, you're spitting on His gift. Channel your inner James and do something with it. Your salvation doesn't depend on you doing something with it, but if someone else doesn't know Jesus, theirs just might.

I think of "The Color Purple," one of my favorite movies. You remember, the Alice Walker novel made into a poignant Steven Spielberg movie. The main character, Celie (played by Whoopi Goldberg), lives a squalid life, devoid of real hope. She believes in Jesus and endures her horrible life in hopes that this life won't last forever, that she'll be rewarded in heaven for her suffering here. Into that life marches Sofia (Oprah Winfrey), who insists that salvation is wonderful but, by God, you need to stand up for yourself as well. Where Celie is 'say,' Sofia is 'do.'

Amen.

I think about my pastor friend, Mark Schaefer, who is constantly reminding our congregation that we're part of eternity right now, not just when we die. He's one of the more mission-focused people I know, venturing out a half-dozen or more times per year to lead youth groups on mission trips across the country (in fact, he's on one such trip today). He does it because he firmly believes that we benefit from being part of heaven right here, right now, and it's our pleasure as followers of Jesus to share that understanding with others. We do that by the way we live, including the times when we step out of our comfort zones and go places to tell about it. You never know who you'll meet on those trips and how their lives might be aching for some Jesus time as well. So you go when you can, where you can, and share a little love with strangers in hopes they'll learn, live, and do the same. After all, eternity matters most.

Amen, again.

I think about wasted days and wasted nights (and Freddy Fender). How many opportunities in my life have I stayed in my seat because I was afraid to speak up for Jesus? How many times, too, have I sat there because I was afraid to speak up even for myself? Part of believing in Jesus is knowing that He's done everything necessary to win for us heaven. We can live forever standing blameless in God's holy presence because Jesus has washed us clean of all our self-induced sins. How many of us neglect to talk about that really good news – what Jesus Himself called it – because of whatever hang-up we're embracing at the time? Every time I willfully fail to share Him in how I speak, act, or just by being myself, I'm wasting an opportunity He put in front of me.

This, too, is surely true. So what's the bottom line?

The bottom line is that you were saved for now. Every moment of our lives is 'right now,' and you were saved to share every right now moment for the rest of your right now life sharing something about Jesus right now. It's not just to get you to heaven, though that's part of why Jesus did what He did. No, it's more than that. Jesus saved you and me so that we might connect others to Him; so that they, too, might learn how He saved them as well. If ever there was an example of 'the more the merrier,' then heaven will be it. It will be all that and more if we keep doing our part right now and sharing some piece of Jesus Christ with people who need Him right now more than ever.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:14.

Right now, Lord Jesus, I thank You for saving me. Right now, I pray that You show me how to share You with others in what I say and what I do. Let right now be to only Your glory, Lord.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 January 2017

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. Hebrews 6, verse 10.

Dovetailing off yesterday's talk comes today's verse that confirms how God has a long memory. As you'll remember, the gist of yesterday's talk was 'do something about your faith right now' so this is good advice for people who may be on the fence about how to live out their faith.

The other night I talked with one of the nastiest people with whom I've ever spoken. At the call center, a number appears on a computer screen and we are required to dial it. We don't see the history of calls dialed to the person's number, and we aren't given any information about them, how many people have spoken with them, or anything of a personal nature. When the man answered the phone, he began to berate and yell at me, demanding that I stop calling him. I followed procedure and asked him to verify his telephone number so I could place him on a do-not-call list. That only caused him to get angrier, and he continued berating, insulting, and even threatening me for about 10 minutes. Eventually, he hung up before I could complete the call procedure, but I put him on the do-not-call list anyway. We aren't supposed to do that; it can cause auditors to give an 'auto-fail' to an agent. But I did it anyway because I figured that both the customer and the company would be better off by not antagonizing him any further. If I'm assigned an auto-fail for it, so be it.

The best way to recover from something like this is to pray for the person. I'll admit: I did this, but it was difficult. In fact, I let his negativity ruin the rest of my night. But the next morning, my wife and I prayed for him during our morning devotion. I sincerely hope he's well (and I hope he both calms down and hasn't received any more telemarketing calls).

I also sincerely hope God remembers it because I know He will. My hope for the irate customer is more like a wish; I wish for him some peace and maybe that he'd lighten up a little. My hope where God's memory is concerned is remembering a sure promise. God WILL remember the good things we do, not as good works to earn His favor but, instead, as examples of how we live out the faith we have in Him. It matters when we do things for each other in a caring manner. It matters when we act in ways that demonstrate faith in God. It matters when we do things to truly foster peace by helping others instead of choosing another way.

These things matter because they are evidence of how our thinking, then our actions, change when Jesus takes over in our lives. We get to do good works and act kindly towards others because that's what Jesus wants us to do. He acted lovingly towards us, even when He was harsh. He wants us to do the same in how we act towards each other.

Both Proverbs 25 and Romans 12 (which quotes Proverbs 25) say "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." That may seem mean, but it really isn't. If your motivation is to help, then these actions are discipline. They are tough love, dishing out justice for justice's sake because justice should be righteous. They're only mean if you intend them to be mean. And God remembers our intentions. God deals in the why, not just the what.

God remembers what we do here and now, and right now is when we're living. If our motivation is to live in ways that please God, then we'll want to be kind, helpful, just, and honest whenever we're dealing with others in any way. Be nice to each other, especially to strangers, even telemarketers. If you're in a troubled marriage, be kind. If you're working with difficult people, be generous. If someone talks too much, actively listen. If someone is angry, be respectful. If someone hurts you or is irate with you, respond as Jesus would and, in doing so, you'll heap burning coals on their head. Then, stand back and hope that they realize how unpleasant it can be to have your head on fire. With God's hope in mind, they, too, will choose to act differently.

For further reading: Matthew 10: 40-42, Proverbs 25: 21-22, Romans 12:20.

Lord Jesus, forgive me when I fail to act as You do. Help me to show love and caring for my brothers and sisters in everything I do.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 5 January 2017

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. Hebrews 6, verses 11-12.

Repeat after me: I don't earn my salvation. There. That's enough. But it can take a LOT of work to hold onto it.

I'm getting old. One of the apps I use on my iPhone listed a number of songs that, as of this year, are now twenty years old. "Mmmbop" by Hanson; "Tubthumping" by Chumbawumba; "Walking on the Sun" by Smash Mouth; "I Want You" by Savage Garden. Most of my musical tastes maxed out about 1987 but these 90s hits are really great. The one by Hanson is a verifiable earworm. Listening to these songs takes me back to when my kids were young, when I was in a job I loved, and when things seemed simpler (even as I know they really weren't). Realizing that, I think a few more grey hairs just popped out in my beard.

And so I work in the call center at night where they play Sirius XM radio music all night long. Most of my co-workers are in their teens and twenties, so we listen to stations like The Heat (which plays contemporary R&B and hip hop) and Pop2K (which plays popular music from this century...wow! I just said "this century"...out pop more grey hairs). Yes, there are some good songs on those stations, but I'll confess that most of them aren't to my liking. That just affirms, once again, that I'm aging. In fact, I'll be eligible for Medicare in less than twelve years. Mmmbop indeed...or have I been Chumbawumba'd?

Holding on to youth is a fool's game. We age every day we're alive. You could be pessimistic and say that life is a one-way death trip. Even a newborn baby is one-day closer to its death with every new midnight it passes. God gave us life to live right now, here where we are, regardless of how old we are. And how we live our lives does matter. The more we grow in our walk with Jesus, the more we get to see that there's real pleasure in seeking Him during every phase.

When we do that, we reject the things that lead us to self-disinherit our salvation. You can't undo anything that Jesus did to save you, but you can reject it. When we walk closer to Him, we walk away from those things that can try to pry us away from Him. It can take real effort to practice what you preach. Christianity isn't for lightweights. It can be deadly serious when we need it to be. Yet Jesus gives us the fruits of His Spirit to help us navigate the serious times the same as we navigate the lighter ones. Love, patience, listening, kindness, understanding, justice, gentleness: when we treat others with these 'tools' we share a little bit of Jesus with people who need Him. Living them out teaches us perseverance and builds up our spiritual endurance. We find we can better endure the rough times when we celebrate Jesus with others through any times. It's almost as if those words are lyrics in the soundtrack of our journey along the path where Jesus leads us.

So I'm getting older. I still like the song by Chumbawumba even if it is just a one-hit wonder. In fact, I like all those songs I listed and more; many more. They remind me of good times while I'm living through good times today. I haven't done anything to earn Jesus saving me and holding on to me, but I know that living kindly is something He wants me to do for Him and for others, so it brings me pleasure to do my best in doing so. That makes the aging less important. Just like Carly Simon once sang, "these are the good old days." That's how God designed them. Hold fast to that knowledge and keep walking forward no matter how many grey hairs you see. Be more than just a one-hit wonder.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:6, Hebrews 13:7, 2 Thessalonians 1:4, James 1:3, Revelation 13:10, Revelation 14:12, Hebrews 10:36.

Lord Jesus, I celebrate You today! Build up in me perseverance, endurance, and the qualities You want me to live out as Your ambassador here and now.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 January 2017

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Hebrews 6, verses 13-15.

God takes His own time to keep His promises. Yet all through history He has kept EVERY promise He's made. He's proven Himself to be reliable. Do you find it as tough to wait on Him as I do? It took DECADES for Abraham to see how God was keeping His promise. It took DECADES for Moses to answer God's call fully and see how God had delivered the Israelites. It took CENTURIES, even MILLENIA, for people to see how God had kept His promise to send a Savior to deliver mankind from sin. Why do I get so pissed off when I feel God hasn't answered me immediately? Is the problem with God or me? You know the answer.

Now, this isn't to cop out and let God off the hook. Have you ever considered that God didn't respond or answer in the way you wanted because He knew you couldn't handle the response? That becomes an act of mercy, not of withholding.

Case in point: job hunting. It's thrillingly maddening. It's frightening, exhilarating, motivating, depressing, and completely necessary when your full-time position ceases to exist. Concerning my predicament, my comment must be "all glory to God. So far so good." Things are moving along well, and years of preparation and accumulating skills are paying off. Yet behind all that, making it go forward (even making it go sideways every now and then) is the prepared, skilled hand of God. I've felt His pull in everything that has happened, and because I know He's involved, I know things will turn out just fine.

Yet they don't turn out on my timeline. I want the new job now. I want to feel secure again, to not have to get up every day and beat the reeds for some new lead. I want to know that I'll be able to provide for my family, and pay our bills, and do the great things we have planned for this year. To be honest, I'm scared to death every day of being a middle-aged statistic and becoming one of the millions who can't find work; one of the millions who can't find 'something to eat' in the middle of a field of plenty.

Gut-check time: It's not about me. Get off the "I" train, Dave, and check your six. God's there. He's the one covering me and what I do in this life is about Him. It's about serving Him in whatever capacity He's placed me. It's about serving His kingdom using that preparation and those skills, and that means sometimes doing it in unconventional ways. And it means trusting God no matter what, even when I don't understand why He's moving me the way He is. Now is the time to be thankful some doors are closed. Behind them could be things that aren't meant for me, or that could somehow make things worse.

Abraham waited a generation before seeing how God kept his promise. He was a very old man, in his 80s, when he answered God's call to up and leave everything he'd ever known. Then he waited another 20 years or so before fathering Issac: the promised child through whom God would eventually redeem mankind. Issac waited decades before marrying the woman he loved, then waited longer before setting in motion the plan God intended all along. Jacob did the same. So did his son Joseph, then Moses, then David and Solomon. Humanity waited centuries before their descendant, Jesus, arrived to make all things new. And it has been two thousand years since Jesus promised to come back and then left. All along, God has been active, planning to do great things through His very good creation, man. All along, God has been working to reach all people, not just the prepared ones, so that all people might come to know Him and be saved.

Do you seriously think He doesn't know what He's doing? Do you truly think He'll let us fall without being there to build us back up again?

So I keep looking for the new job. And I'm interviewing. And I'm doing what I can, when I should, to do my part in gaining new full-time employment. Like I said, so far so good. It's all a gift from God. In God's good time, a wonderful opportunity will present itself. Until then, it's not about me, so I get to keep the faith and move forward.

For further reading: Genesis 22:16-17, Luke 1:73, Genesis 21:5.

Lord, I believe in You. Thank You for sustaining me, for preparing me, and shepherding me through scary, cold days. All glory to You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 January 2017

People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Hebrews 6, verse 16.

Oaths. This idea of an oath, of swearing by someone, was brought up in verse 13. Let's a few minutes discussing oaths. Next week, on January 20, Donald Trump will take the same presidential oath as every other president before him did and he will officially be the President of the United States. That oath is spelled out explicitly in the Constitution; it's the only oath in the USA that is. It will be the power of that Constitution that vests into Mr. Trump all responsibility and authority to be the one and only president. It is the will of the people as expressed through their votes. Folks in our country can disagree on that fact, but it's still a fact even when the outcome of the election isn't what some wanted. The oath is a symbol of the power vested in the person. It's a recitation of a legal, binding contract between the individual and the group offering said oath and its associated benefit. In this case, that group is the constituents of the United States, the government we empower, and the benefit is the elected individual's empowerment with the office to which he was elected. Mr. Trump can be held accountable by his constituents and by the Congress for any abuses he may undertake that violate that oath and the Constitution behind it. Yet when he takes the oath, he and only he will be the actual and only president. Not Mr. Obama; not Mrs. Clinton; not anyone named Bush; nobody in the Congress or the media or in the public peanut gallery. Oaths mean something.

Consider wedding vows. They're oaths. Like the oath of office, they're a legal, binding commitment between two people, swearing to uphold the boundaries of their marriage so that they might, in fact, be married. We value marriage as the ultimate expression of devotion and commitment to each other. In the vows we exchange – the oaths through which we swear – we promise to love, honor, cherish and other things that reflect our belief in that binding contract of matrimony. The vows reflect the gravity that we believe exists in marriage, and state things we believe are important, qualities and actions we respect regarding the people we hold dearest.

As Rush Limbaugh often says, "words mean things." They aren't light, and we shouldn't make light of them. Celebrity marriages are the butt of many jokes because it seems celebrities don't take those oaths very seriously. Donald Trump continues to be the butt of many jokes even though he won his office in the same way every other elected president has. Both married people and presidents (as well as every other office-holder in the country) understand the gravity of the oaths they undertake. Candidates undergo the electoral process specifically for the opportunity to take that oath. Engaged couples plan, anticipate, and modify their lives specifically for the opportunity to take that oath and make those vows. It's because words mean things.

Words mean things because that's how God gave them to us. He gives us the ability to use words in unique ways that add significance and special meaning. If you swear you'll do something, you're making a blanket promise to do something. It becomes a matter of record that you're affirming you'll do that thing...so make sure you do it. If you 'swear on your mother's grave,' you're affirming your word against the actual or eventual death of the woman who gave birth to you. As one who has lost his mom, I'll say that means something. If you "swear to God" that X is so, then you're strongly affirming that X is actually so against the word and existence of the Great I AM. Better not mess that up.

In fact, we'd better not mess these things up at all. God takes our words seriously because He considers them to be expressions of what we think and feel. He gives Himself to us through His Word, which both shares and describes Him. To Abraham, God made an oath and, because He wanted Abraham to know it was important, He swore by Himself that the promise would be kept. And it was. God gives us language so that we can share Him in His world, and so that we can express ourselves with others. When we want to or need to ensure something is regarded with special gravity, we are given the gift of being able to affirm it with an oath. Yet we should regard all of our words as important. We shouldn't use them unwisely, or lightly, or be flippant with them. Our guide should be Jesus' advice in Matthew 5: "Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no." Mean what you say when you say it. Stick with honesty, and wisdom, and a held tongue. Words mean things. Let's remember that, especially in being 'married to' this new administration.

For further reading: Exodus 22:11, Matthew 4:37

Lord, thank You for oaths. Thank You for Your teaching on using them, and on how we should speak and act.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 10 January 2017

When God gave Abraham his promise, he swore by himself since he couldn't swear by anyone greater. He said, I will certainly bless you and multiply your descendants. So Abraham obtained the promise by showing patience. People pledge by something greater than themselves. A solemn pledge guarantees what they say and shuts down any argument. When God wanted to further demonstrate to the heirs of the promise that his purpose doesn't change, he guaranteed it with a solemn pledge. Hebrews 6, verses 13-17.

Never doubt God. When He promises something to you, He will deliver. God always keeps every promise.

"I'm through with standing in line to clubs I'll never get in. It's like the bottom of the ninth and I'm never gonna win. This life hasn't turned out quite the way I want it to be." That's Nickelback; "Rockstar:" probably one of the more ear-wormish songs of the current century. It's in a playlist of songs I listen to when I'm exercising. I wonder, though: how did the writer think his life would turn out? How does the typical rock star celebrity think life should be? Should it be the journey of hedonism he spells out in the lyrics or should it be something different? What does God promise us that life will be?

When you figure that out, write a book. You'll be a millionaire. You might even become a rock star. You might also miss the point...and the promise.

God only promises Himself. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" is what Jesus said as He was ascending back to heaven. God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit promises to be with us in everything we do our entire lives. If you noodle that enough you find that is enough. God is all we need in this life.

Ok, that's a really nice catechism answer but it doesn't help me much when I'm jobless, or when I lose a parent, or when I'm scared of the consequences of my sins. When kids bully, bosses yell, spouses abuse, and children are sick, we seem to need 'real' help, not some ethereal promise of God's invisible presence. We need assistance, not words.

Or do we?

The Bible is God's Word, His revelation of Himself to His people. It's the primary way He's shared Himself with us since He went home to heaven. In the Bible we have all we need to know in order that we might know how God promises to be with us every minute in every thing we live. If the solution to every problem is found by first addressing first principles, then the first of those first principles is that God is with us. We know this because He said so. If we get over ourselves, we get to see that His promised presence makes the difference between common failure and uncommon success. Even then, we get to see how that uncommon success is all too common when we put Jesus first in our focus. If all God promises us is that He will be our full portion in life then we have all we need in this life. The rest of life simply becomes other parts of the story whose central theme is Him.

How do we know this? Because God solemnly pledged it. He solemnly pledged it to Adam, and to Noah, and to Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, a hundred prophets, and a thousand characters in His revealed word. He promises it to you every time you feel Him touch your heart. He promises it every time we read His words again and learn something new. God's solemn pledges are backed by His guarantee of Himself.

How do we know when God touches us? I wish there were an easy answer but there isn't. For some it's a call to the heart. For others it's a perceived message or a known feeling. God's promises are always just and upright; they don't involve a call to sin. It's a recognition of beauty; it's the feeling of capture when you hear a certain tune. It's the peace of a sleeping newborn, the feeling of completeness after a meal. God promised by Himself, the divine and omniscient creator. That's enough of a guarantee for us; there can be no greater guarantee of any promise.

God never promised He'd make me a rockstar. Or that he'd ensure thousands of people would read this blog (though they do). He never promised a job or a house, a relationship, success, or wealth, or fame, or even good health. What He promised me (and you) in His word is that He would always be with us. He is; I can sense Him. I can sometimes feel His presence, and I know He wants the best for me even when what I want diverges from what He's working on through me. When I realize that, I realize that I have much more in Him than all those things I listed. No human oath needs to guarantee it because God's oath already has. If you think about it, that sorta makes me like a rock star.

For further reading: Exodus 22:11, Matthew 5:37, Genesis 22:16, Luke 1:74, Genesis 21:5, Psalm 110:4, Romans 4:16, Hebrews 11:9, Matthew 28:20.

Lord, I am humbled that You promised to stay with me always. I thank You for that. I praise You for it. I ask You to help me to share that promise with others.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 11 January 2017

God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. Hebrews 6, verse 18.

Today's verse is for Emma Marie, my grand-daughter, who will come into the world tomorrow.

The oath and the promise: they're the two unchangeable things mentioned in verse 18. We need those things every day of our lives to remind us that God is more powerful than the world in which we live. God isn't the author of evil for evil is the absence of God. Wherever we reject God and choose sin, we push God out and evil moves in. The constant struggle of every creature since the Fall has been to embrace God again in a world where we have rejected Him. He's been here all along, working and struggling with us. He provides for us daily in His grace, even when we reject Him. We who have fled Him constantly need to be reminded that He's still here, that He's still God, and that He still loves us and desires for us to be with Him.

I'm hoping baby Emma knows this from the minute she's born tomorrow.

Just this morning my wife and I were discussing a medical bill we're appealing. Our daughter, Emma's mom, went to a doctor 7 months ago. Samantha had medical issues long before Emma was conceived and it was long thought she would never be able to have children. Early on in the pregnancy, (understandably) she had much pain and difficulty. The doctor she saw at the time insisted the child wouldn't be viable and that Sammie must have an abortion. Not accepting this, Sam sought out another doctor who pronounced the first to be a quack and set her on course to have a typical pregnancy. To date, Emma has survived to full term and, by every indication, should be born normal and healthy tomorrow.

It wouldn't have been possible if God had not promised to be with her every minute of every day. The world wanted the baby to be murdered; God said there was another path. A stretch of logic? Perhaps, but the proof is in the life, how light and life turns back darkness and death every time. It always has and always will because God promised it to be so.

God didn't have to promise Abraham that He would make a great nation of his family. God didn't have to promise Abraham that, through his family, all mankind would be redeemed. God didn't have to save the men He'd created because He'd already wiped out mankind once in a great flood. But He did. It was love that made God promise these things because God is all love. He is all love, peace, justice, knowledge, and truth. God wanted to share these with people He created to be in harmony with Himself, so He divined the way to make things right again. That way, that path, traveled through Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus of Nazareth all the way to Calvary. God didn't have to promise these things, but He did, and He made an oath to see them through. And then He did that as well.

Ever since that first Easter Sunday, God has reminded us of His promise with each new sunrise. Sure, in a world where evil happens, it is sometimes tough to remember that God is still in control here. He's still at work, still active, still in love with we crazy people with a crazy love we can only imitate at best. Yet He's still here and the promise is both fulfilled and still in effect. Every day when we awaken we are already knee-deep in God's grace, having lived through a night and risen to the light of a fresh opportunity. Every day we are given another chance to use our God-given talents in whatever ways we will. Every day we get to love, and to share love, and to realize that love is what holds the universe together. Every day we get to see, once again, how all these things are from God, and of God, and about God, and that we, His people, are beneficiaries – and benefactors – of them. God loves us because He's God. He's always God, always here, always involved in our lives, and always waiting for our last day, when we get to go home to be with Him.

I pray Emma Marie Tolliver learns these things. My wife and I, and our family, will do our part to teach her. We're thankful that we get to do this, and thankful to be part of our new little girl's life that begins in just a few short hours.

For further reading: Numbers 23:19, Titus 1:2, Hebrews 3:6.

Lord, thank You for Your promise and Your oath. Bless this new child and all new children. Love her, let her birth be healthy, and help us to love, teach, and guide her all the days of her life. May it all be to Your glory.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 January 2017

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6, verses 19-20.

Yesterday was Martin Luther King Day. I didn't watch much TV, and I didn't even listen to the radio as much as I usually do, so I didn't see whether or not there was much coverage or celebration. It seems that, the farther we get from 1968, the more challenging it can be to remember why we commemorate such a great man. I was only a little boy when King was killed and I don't remember it. I do remember that my second grade teacher, Mrs. Kennon, taught me about him. Dr. King was one of her heroes; I believe she may have marched with him or met him at one point. Mrs. Kennon was a highly educated black woman hired as an elementary teacher in a predominantly white Episcopal school in the early 1970s. Forty five years later, she remains one of my favorite teachers. Dr. King had already been dead five years when I was first introduced to Mrs. Kennon, but she brought him to life for our class, telling how he lived out his faith in fighting to gain rights that had been won for people in the Civil War over a hundred years before. She taught us how Dr. King stuck to his principles and protested peacefully against bigots who confronted him in violence. She taught us that Martin Luther King believed in Jesus.

Next year, Dr. King will have been dead for 50 years. In the 30+ years since the start of his national holiday, legend has started to overtake history in describing him. To some, King is practically a civil rights Jedi knight. To others, he was just a great but flawed man who said and did the right things that needed to be said and done. He has almost become an untouchable idol to our society. I suspect the real Martin King was somewhere in the middle of all that. He was a fighter for justice. He was a preacher schooled in Scripture, Ghandi, and non-violence. He was a husband and father. He was a sinner who had multiple extramarital affairs. He was a Nobel laureate. He was martyred by people hung up on hatred. He was a man who simply did the best he could. MLK wanted the best for all of us, and he died living out that best desire.

Yet before anything else in his life, Martin Luther King wanted folks to have an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. It was his sworn duty as a minister of God's word. It was the truest reflection of why he fought and died for equal rights for black people. It was the best expression of everything he held dear in life. Dr. King unswervingly believed that the real hope of mankind was in Jesus, that only by firm and secure faith in Jesus that lives deep in the human soul. MLK fought for equal rights as an American because he already knew that he had equal rights before God as a human being. He fought for what was guaranteed to all people, and that included civil rights.

That's worth dying for.

It's worth dying for because Dr. King understood that Jesus was our ultimate judge and ultimate intermediary. A minister of the cloth himself, King understood how Jesus was our true minister, the only priest who could enter into God's presence on our behalf and plead for our souls. Jesus pleads for us in God's presence because we are His intimate brothers and sisters. We are His friends and His followers. Jesus was willing to give up His life for we the people who He loved so dearly. He did it so that we could have a personal, intimate, just relationship with Him and His Father. Martin Luther King understood these things and lived the life he did working so that others could understand them as well on an equal footing with all our peers.

Mrs. Kennon understood them as well. I Googled her and found that she retired from the school in 2013 and has been a very active citizen all her life. I have no idea where she is now, but I do know I'm one of thousands she touched in years serving at Breck School. I learned about Dr. King from her, and that Dr. King lived as he did because he followed Jesus before anything else.

For further reading: Leviticus 16:2, Hebrews 9:2-7, Hebrews 4:14.

Lord Jesus, thank You for heroes of the faith like Dr. King. Thank You for being our true priest, our Savior, our friend, and our teacher.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 18 January 2017

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. Hebrews 7, verses 1-3.

Let's talk about Melchizedek. He's been mentioned several times throughout Hebrews, and we've chatted about him a little bit already. In the Genesis account of Abram's life (before God renamed him Abraham), Melchizedek suddenly appears out of nowhere while Abram is journeying from Mesopotamia (likely in today's Syria or southern Turkey) to Canaan (today's Israel). We know little about him other than he's a revered man, a holy man, a priest. He was king of Salem – the predecessor settlement to Jerusalem – and was God's high priest there. Not a pagan like the other inhabitants of Canaan, Melchizedek knew the true God and strengthened Abram's faith.

Wikipedia reinforces much of this narrative. It also discusses corroborating evidence about Melchizedek from early Hebrew Torah commentaries, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and even some Greek documents. Even the pagan Quran, written centuries later, references Melchizedek. At the end of all this ancient evidence, we're still left not knowing exactly who Melchizedek was. All that we can really know is that He was important to members of both the Jewish and early Christian faiths. Indeed, if you read these verses closely it's easy to see why many folks believe Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate Jesus (a “Christophany”). It's more than possible. It's also more than possible that (as we've discussed before) Melchizedek was actually Shem, the son of Noah, who had survived the flood and was the forefather of the Semites, Abram's historic lineage. It seems likely that Melchizedek was the vocational ancestor of all who would be ordained as either royalty or ministers. But to tell you the truth, I don't know; nobody does. And to get wrapped around the axle about exactly who he was misses the main point about him.

Melchizedek represents unquestioning devotion to God.

Melchizedek is 'king of peace,' 'king of righteousness.' Melchizedek has no historical beginning or end since we don't know where he was born or where he died. He simply existed to give praise and meaning to God, encouraging the chosen man of God's will at a time when Abram needed it. Abram had traveled many miles from home for many years, living a nomadic life in obedience to a promise God made to him. God had been faithful to His promise to bless all peoples through Abram, but hadn't shown Abram just how He would do that. Enter Melchizedek, who gives selflessly and provides an example for Abram to do the same. In doing so, Abram's faith was strengthened and his devotion sustained. So much so, in fact, that Abram gave Melchizedek a portion of all he owned. Some translations of Scripture (including the NIV I use) say it was a tenth of all he owned, perhaps instituting the precedent for the ten percent tithe many believers donate to God even today. After Abram has won a battle against local pagan kings, Melchizedek visits Abram and bestows on him God's blessings. Then he disappears. Melchizedek plays an important part in God's historic family and then, like so many other believers, is simply gone, lost to history with his part in the play having acted out.

Again, in all these things, it doesn't matter who he was but very much matters what he did and believed. Melchizedek represents that unquestioning faith in God. He followed God. He lived a life devoted to God. He was an example of and a precursor to Jesus, who became the inheritor of Melchizedek's temporal priesthood. Melchizedek did in act what Jesus would later do in both act and Spirit.

That's a lot to understand from someone who is mentioned by name in only three places in the Bible (in Genesis 14, Psalm 110, and in the book of Hebrews). If you consider it, however, that's more than most people are documented anywhere in history. Maybe God is trying to tell us something we need to remember. Maybe God is trying to say “don't worry about who he was. Remember who he believed in.” Many thousands of years after he lived, that makes Melchizedek timely and relevant to us.

For further reading: Genesis 14:18-20, Psalm 76:2, Psalm 110:4, , Matthew 4:3, Hebrews 2:17, Hebrews 5:6.

Lord, thank You for teaching about Melchizedek. Thank You for his ancient example of faith in You that can still encourage me today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 January 2017

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. Hebrews 7, verses 4-10.

These verses contain some pretty detailed theology. Let's sum it all up: give to God. Give to Him generously.

My home church, Water's Edge Frisco, espouses an idea: live 90. Like any church we want to encourage tithing and giving. It's a big way to give something meaningful to God from our hearts. We also need to pay the bills, as does any organization. Our leaders have found that the most Biblically centered way to build up giving attitudes is to stick to the Bible. That means encouraging, not mandating, a ten percent tithe. The church likes catchy phrases, so along comes "live 90." Live on 90% of your income and give the first ten percent to God. That's ten percent of the gross in your earnings, your possessions, and even yourself. Tithe to God and then watch Him bless you in ways you might not have imagined.

It isn't a gimmick; God isn't a Pavlov reactor or a divine wish factory. God doesn't care whether or not we give anything from our incomes or our talents. God DOES care very much about the heart behind that giving. He wants us to give selflessly. He wants us to want to give to Him "just because." Just because we can. Just because we want to share with Him some of what He's shared with us. God wants us to live for Him in an attitude similar to how we live for other people we cherish. God wants us to express that attitude with things that mean something to us, knowing that other believers will use those things we give – like money and possessions – in ways to further His Kingdom.

As you can see, it stems from this passage about Abraham and Melchizedek. Abraham had just won a large battle against pagan Canannite kings and had, accordingly, won great plunder of gold, property, and livestock. Along comes Melchizedek to bless Abraham. God had promised that all people would be blessed through Abraham, and Melchizedek reinforces that blessing. What's Abraham's response? He gives generously to Melchizedek. He gives ten percent or more of his boodle to a stranger.

Later, as an expression of the blessing, God institutes the formal priesthood through Abraham's descendant, Levi. Levi was one of Jacob's twelve sons (meaning he was Abraham's great-grandson). Levi's family formed one of the twelve tribes of Israel, his tribe being the priesthood. It would be the pleasure and the purpose of Levi's descendants to share God's message – His promises and His promised blessings – with people forever. That calling reflects the royal priesthood of this stranger, Melchizedek. We've already discussed how Melchizedek's true identity remains unknown; he might have been a Christophany (a pre-incarnate Jesus), or he might have been Shem, or he might have been someone else altogether. Whoever he was, he worshipped and praised the true God and did so in ways that would demonstrate the ministry God wanted instituted among His people. To honor this, Abraham tithed to Melchizedek.

What did Melchizedek do with that enormous plunder, with that selfless tithe given to him by Abraham? We don't know; it doesn't matter. We can all decry, sometimes rightfully, the excesses that some of today's ministers flaunt with tithes from God's people. Huge churches, lavish lifestyles, rock-star followings: was that what Melchizedek, Abraham and Levi had in mind? Probably not. Yet consider 1 Kings, chapters 2-11, especially chapter 10. In these, King Solomon's splendor is described. Solomon, a descendant of Abraham, was extraordinarily blessed by God with wisdom, wealth, and success. It wasn't because of anything Solomon did: it was because of God's grace, God's generosity. Solomon started life asking for wisdom and was blessed with it and so much more. Though his life ended in him wandering away in pagan beliefs, God still blessed him.

All that splendor was paid for with tithes from the people. The people gave of their hearts to God's purposes, and God chose to bless both them and their leaders in extraordinary ways. He still does so today. And it goes back to the precedent set by Abraham and Melchizedek.

So the next time you do your budget, before you pay your bills, say a prayer of thanks to God and then write a check to Him. Consider giving things to others, giving things that are meaningful and that others may need. Give of yourself and your time and give generously without expectation of anything in return. Live happily on ninety percent of what you're blessed to earn. Give that other ten percent to God's purposes. Through churches, charities, and ministry activities, God will use this to bless others in extraordinary ways. When you do this, you're siding with Melchizedek, Abraham, Levi, and Jesus.

For further reading: Genesis 14:18-20, 1 Kings 2-11, Psalm 76:2, Psalm 110:4, , Matthew 4:3, Hebrews 2:17, Hebrews 5:6.

My blessed Lord, thank You for blessing me. Thank You for Abraham and Melchizedek and the practice they began. Thank You for opportunities to still give in those ways today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 23 January 2017

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? Hebrews 7, verse 11.

Ah, a question for the ages. If God gave us what He said we needed, why did He have to give us something else? If God said the original priests could atone for sins, why Jesus? You know the answer. I'm betting you simply don't want to admit it.

It's not you: it's me. It's not me: it's you. It's us. It's in us. It's something that controls us. It's our sins. Chucka, chucka, chucka. Big deal; we already know that, right? Actually, it is sort of a big deal, and that really stinks yet it's the first of all first principles.

Your pastor is a sinful man. All pastors are sinful men. MLK Day was one week ago and most Americans regard Martin Luther King as having been a great man, an upright and moral man who said and did great things that needed to be said and done. Obscured in history is the fact that he was also a sinner. Time has revealed that he had at least one extramarital affair during his ministry; he may have had many. Being familiar with that particular sin myself, perhaps the best I should say is "good men sometimes do bad things, too." Remember Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker? Good men who brought many people to real faith but who also lived double lives of hypocrisy like MLK and me and you.

Next time you see your pastor, remember that he's a sinner too. He or she doesn't have a special dispensation for sin, pope or no pope (and neither does the pope). Pastors don't have some special divine exemption from their sins. They struggle with them just like everyone else. Some struggle with them while they're in active ministry for the Lord. Indeed, in today's ministry, you'll meet men and women of the cloth who are right now dealing personally with their adultery, homosexuality, alcoholism, theft, dishonesty and even murder. Just like you and me. Just like Jimmy and MLK. Just like the author of Hebrews.

And just like all those priests of Levi. God Himself chose Levi's, then Aaron's, descendants to be His personal representatives. Before Levi even knew his children and grandchildren, God knew them and had already chosen them to carry His Good News to people who needed it. God knew they would be sinful, that some would resent their calling, that all of them would do some things (maybe many things) in their lives that were abhorrent to Him...and He chose them anyway. He chose them anyway because He needed human messengers to share news about Him until He could finish making all things right.

He could only finish that work with someone who was without sin. When the time was just right, God gave us Jesus to finish the job once and for all. Only one person has ever lived who was without sin. That's just and only Jesus. Only Jesus lived a perfect life, one not tainted with the stink of sin. Only Jesus has ever lived that life, then heroically, willingly given it up to God's holy purposes, in order that other people might live forever. MLK didn't do that; no pope has ever done that. No televangelist could do that, and neither could you or I. But Jesus did.

Why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? Because of sin. Because sin is blood-red serious. I'm stained scarlet with it. So are you. So is your pastor, and your friends, and your newborn children and grandchildren. Billy and Franklin Graham are sinners. So was MLK, and Jimmy Swaggart, and so were Aaron and Levi and even Melchizedek if he was a descendant of Adam and Eve. And all of us can be cleaned white as pure snow because of the scarlet sinless blood of Jesus of Nazareth.

For further reading: Hebrews 8:7, Hebrews 10:1, Hebrews 5:6

Lord, thank You for the holy sacrifice of Your Son, the one true priest forever.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 January 2017

For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. Hebrews 7, verse 12.

Oh my God...literally. Noodle this verse for awhile then consider the universe-altering implications of it. It's a rhetorical argument, one that posits our tendencies as people.

Four days have passed since Mr. Trump was inaugurated as president of the US. In those four days, there have been four sunrises and three sunsets; another sunset should occur later today. No mere president can change that. Eight years have passed since Mr. Obama was inaugurated, sixteen since the second Mr. Bush, and twenty-four since Mr. Clinton. In all those times, whether we agreed with the political positions or not of those men, the world has kept on turning. Good and bad have taken place, and all four men have, in my humble opinion, done the best they could to deal with each.

You could say that same thing about each of us. Neither you nor I are the president, and we probably don't make deals or even make decisions that have global impact. World leaders don't await the next muttering from Dave Perry; God help them if I'm wrong about that. What anyone could say, world leader or not, is that I've usually tried to do my best. You and I, we generally try to do our best, make the best decisions we can with the information we have. We find ourselves in situations, we assess our available options, and we make the best decision we can based on what we know at the time. Sometimes it works out for the best, and we generally work to make sure this is so as much as we possibly can. Sometimes it doesn't. Nearly all the time, if we honestly step back and look at ourselves, even though we're sinners, we usually do the best we can.

Imagine if we didn't. Imagine if, every time we made a decision, everything changed because of it. Some folks would say that's what happens when a new president moves into the White House but it simply isn't true. There are too many systemic and traditional checks on him to prevent any president from ruling like a king. When you get a new CEO, a few things change in the company, but generally she or he uses what's at their disposal to move a company in a direction with the consent of the board. New pastors do the same thing in their congregations. New parents do the same thing with their young families. Sometimes that's healthy in that new leadership can re-focus on morals or the common good after a group has strayed from it. Sometimes it's just change for change's sake, and that's rarely good. Leaders usually do the best they can with what's available to them at the time.

What happens when people don't? If you get paid and spend all your money on marijuana and munchies, what do you do to pay your bills (or buy food other than Doritos)? If you base all your decisions on emotions, what do you do when your emotions quickly change (as they often do)? If you refuse to abide by the law, what happens when you're caught? You know the answer to these things. We own the consequences. We get what's coming to us. If we willingly decide to not give it our best, we get what we're given accordingly. That's no surprise.

Put on your clergy cap for a second and then consider your pastors. They're sinners like anyone else. If they didn't have the gospel of Jesus to guide them, all they'd be doing is preaching a bunch of worthless feel-good nonsense. On our own, every time a new pastor comes to the church – or a new father, CEO or president – the entire focus needs to change. Pastors are sinners too. They're imperfect; they struggle. Without the forgiveness of Jesus, they're just as damned as one who willingly turns his back on the Savior. If all your pastor does is float with the wind and minister based on what feels good, fire them.

With Jesus as their primary guide, none of that needs to happen. The political or corporate leader grounded in God and solid ethics will much better serve his constituents, and the president swears to uphold a Constitution written by moral, Godly founders. The parent who walks the Godly walk will serve as a better long-term example for their kids. The pastor who preaches the risen Christ has all he or she needs to build a God-centered church. Everything flows from Him and only Him. Anything less is, well, less. Are you satisfied with 'less?' If so, maybe you should ask yourself why.

Voters fire politicians who don't perform. Companies fire CEOs who don't perform. Parents who don't perform as parents for their kids don't get fired but trouble usually ensues at some point. All of it comes back to sin and how we deal with it. The way to deal with it is to first and always focus on Jesus and where you are in relation to Him at every moment. He hasn't moved; He hasn't changed. With Him, there is no need to throw out the old in favor of something new. He's the reason for the priesthood because He is the ultimate priest of all time.

For further reading: Hebrews 7: 11-28

Lord Jesus, that You for being the center of everything. Thank You for being unchanging, for being our true priest and pastor, for being the only Savior.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 January 2017

He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. Hebrews 7, verses 13-14.

Background matters here on the Third Rock. It's not the Harvard diploma that gets you the job, but the Harvard name can get you in the door. It's not the brand name Velveeta that you buy: it's that big block of cheesy love that makes great queso. It isn't the car brand that matters as much as it is the smooth ride. Yet background still can matter to us: you get a better ride from a Mercedes than you do a used Kia. And you get a better queso from Velveeta than you do from store brands. And you get more resume inquiries if you have an Ivy League pedigree than you do if you only graduated from high school. But background isn't everything, and background will only carry you so far. If you want quality, you have to dig deeper. You need to get past the superficial things that live in front of the background.

The verses since verse 11 have talked about how Jesus is like Melchizedek, the faceless, background-less king of Salem and high priest of God who met Abram in the Canaan wilderness. The author illustrates how, if human qualifications were enough, we wouldn't have needed Jesus. Melchizedek had a pedigree; he may have even been Jesus Himself. But we needed more reminders, so God gave us strict rules through Moses about who should be priests. Moses and his brother, Aaron, were descendants of Levi; they were Levites. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain all kinds of codes for Israelite priests. What to do, how to act, what to wear, when to offer sacrifices and how; it was detailed for a reason: God's reason. Priests weren't allowed to change the rules; only God could do that.

Becoming a priest in ancient days wasn't for just anyone...literally. To be a Jewish priest, you had to be a Levite, descended from Jacob's son, Levi (one of Abraham's great grandsons). It was to the Levites and only the Levites that God had given the priestly calling. Exclusionary and discriminatory? Only if you're shallow. Look beyond those twenty-first century words and you see the reason from antiquity was two-fold. One, God wanted His people to understand that His calling was set apart and unique. And, two, that His calling would matter, that it would teach people about His glory if they adhered to certain processes. God gave us these rules for our benefit, not His, so He used groups and symbols that we could understand.

Yet Jesus wasn't a Levite. He was descended, both on His father's and mother's sides, from Judah (another of Abraham's great grandsons). The referenced verses from Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, and Revelation talk about Jesus' lineage from the tribe of Judah. And when He wanted to institute a priesthood that would supersede anything earthly, God reminded us that He is the ultimate rule maker, that He is over those rules and not subject to them. He sent His Son to live by every earthly rule, even those of the priesthood to which He wasn't subject, yet was not bound by the restriction of being a Levite. Indeed, Jesus' human restriction was that He was descended from Levi's father, Jacob, and grandfather, Abraham, and ultimate Father Himself, God Almighty. In fact, word, and deed, Jesus ministered as a man in ways to both fulfill God's priestly requirements and to demonstrate that, as God, He would supersede them for all people.

And Jesus' background was meager. He didn't have a rabbinical background. He wasn't a trained Levite or priest. He didn't go to all the right schools, and He didn't have any upbringing to set Him apart from anyone in particular. Jesus was a simple carpenter's son, from royal but undisclosed heritage, who hailed from a poor, simple town in Judea. No Harvard degree; no Velveeta branding; no sweet ride for the streets of Nazareth. When all will be said and done, Jesus matters more than the background.

For further reading: Hebrews 7:11, Isaiah 11:1, Matthew 1:2-6, Luke 3:33, Revelation 5:5.

Lord Jesus, thank You for signs and things that matter here in this world. Let them all be to Your glory and be ways that help me to point to You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 January 2017

And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 7, verses 15-17.

It's another verse affirming the supremacy of Jesus. We've already established that a pedigree matters to people. It doesn't matter to God, but we need to know that our leaders are 'legit.' Here's more proof of that. Those words "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" are directly quoted from Psalm 110 and from the earlier Hebrews verses. This means that, in first century Judea, when Hebrews was written, the psalm was already hundreds of years old, dating back centuries to the time of King David. The original readers of Hebrews would have recognized this already ancient verse and ascribed power and meaning to it. How much more so should we.

We've already spoken about how Jesus wasn't a Levite, so for Him to be the 'priest forever' meant that He would have to have been declared so by God. Jesus fulfilled all the priestly requirements, including the ones in line with the example of Melchizedek. Going back to our first century timeline, up to that point, who else had appeared who was like Jesus? Did John the Baptist do the things Jesus did? No. Did the Maccabeans? Nope. The Jewish Sanhedrin? Nope again. In fact, in all of antiquity, who else could lay claim to even being able to preach the words, perform the miracles, die the cruel death after living a sinless life, and demonstrate the Father's true character the way Jesus did? You know the answer. In the twenty centuries since the life of Christ, has anyone else done these things? Again, you know the answer.

So who else but Jesus would appear? Are you looking for someone else? Do you seriously expect someone else to appear who would do what Jesus did? Even discounting Christ's divinity, do you seriously, truly expect another person will appear in all of history who will be able to satisfy the requirements of a go-between with God and man the way Jesus did? Over three hundred Biblical prophecies were completed in Jesus Christ. The odds of anyone else being able to do that are astronomical, physically impossible. Could anyone else do what Jesus did?

Buddha didn't. Mohammed didn't and never could. Martin Luther King and Billy Graham (or Billy Sunday) didn't. Neither did any of the old Communist dictators (including the still above room temperature Raul Castro and the boy-tyrant Kim Jong Un), Martin Luther, Pope John Paul II, the Apostle Peter, Torquemada, any US president including George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, Timothy Leary, Elon Musk, or Buddy Holly even before the day the music died.

The fact is there is no other man who has or might appear who has become a priest like Melchizedek. There is no other priest whose lineage is eternal, and to whom a great stranger would tithe a tenth of his possessions. There is nobody else throughout all of time who could have said, done, and lived the way the man from Nazareth did. There is only Jesus. In all of human history, only Jesus of Nazareth satisfies all the things that the author of Hebrews says about a true intermediary between God and man. Science, logic, history, and faith prove there simply is no other way.

For further reading: Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 5:6.

Lord, only You. Only You could be the Savior of mankind. I believe in only You.

May

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 February 2017

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. Hebrews 7, verses 18-19.

You can read it as easily as I can: these verses are talking about law (and, in context, about the divinity of Jesus, our true priest forever in the order of Melchizedek). Let me draw another parallel for you, though. I'm struggling to not hate right now. If you've read these words for awhile, you know that my (now) former company laid me off at the end of December. They didn't need me anymore, and I hadn't done anything wrong or illegal or immoral. They simply didn't need me anymore and I wasn't a fit in the company culture; they didn't want me, so they let me go. Since then, I've been working part time in a call center. There, I recently switched to a new account because the previous one also scaled back. Along with two of my co-workers, I'm learning how this company uses a system I've known for over fifteen years. It should be a good fit for me, especially as a part-time gig, yet I feel more discouraged than I have in months. I've interviewed for a number of full-time positions but none has come open yet, at least not for me. It's discouraging to be out of work, and my wife and I are scaling back our spending drastically, contacting creditors, and trying our best to keep afloat. I'm worried, and scared, and I feel ashamed to be out of work when I would so much rather be moving forward in success.

As a result, I find myself struggling to stay away from the selfish spiraling of blaming my former employer, of succumbing to hatred. If you hate the people who hate you, they win, and that would simply make another wrong. I thought I was doing the right thing in the way I led the projects they had me working on, but the culture there had become mistake-free. I made mistakes, didn't do what they wanted me to do even as some of what they wanted me to do was wrong. I find myself fighting off the urge to truly hate the men who put me on the street, to wish on them pain and hurt like they've inflicted on me. It's a real struggle; it's a real fight, like two parties are warring for my soul. I'm so angry and feel so hurt, and I'm really trying to not feel sorry for myself. There are so many other people struggling worse than we are. Yet I find myself wanting to scream at those men, to meet them in an airport someplace and punch one of them in the eye, or worse. It was unfair, it was cruel, it was just plain wrong what they did to me, and I feel an empty burning anger inside of me because of it.

Now is the time to re-read the verses and address what God is saying in them. In all I'm going through, God isn't indifferent. What was behind me is behind me. God bless the folks still working for those wretched men and I honestly hope they do well. As for me, God has me out of there for a reason. In that, God is teaching me things, first and foremost reminding me to rely on Him. My God is bigger than some job. It isn't Pollyanna-ish to say again and again that something good is coming. I don't know how soon it'll happen, but it will happen. Until then, in good and in bad, God is still with us and is providing what He knows we need. He has me doing what I can to move forward along a new path. What is now in the past is rightfully in the past, relegated there because God is growing me beyond it. It's no longer needed for the path He has me on.

This whole job-searching process then becomes an exercise in trust, in trusting God. He prepared me in the past for things I need to know now. All that He's going to use to put me in some new place has already been set in motion, even if I can't yet see how it all fits together. It's frustrating, it's anger-inducing, it has my emotions on edge and under stress. It did the same to Job, and to King David, and to Elijah, and to Jesus in Gethsemane. God is active in where He has my wife and I, and He's building us up for work He's readying for us in the days to come. God is drawing my wife and I nearer to Him. Imperfect as we are, we're close as one and closer to God than we have been in a long time. That will bear only good fruit. What it bears will be washed in Jesus' hope.

I still want to sock my old manager in the eye, though. But instead of that, I'll pray the "Fiddler on the Roof prayer," the one the villagers asked of their rabbi concerning the tsar. "May the good Lord bless and keep him...far away from us." God's active in their lives even when they were (I feel) unjust to me. In a way, I hope He's active for their best as well.

For further reading: Romans 8:3, Romans 3:20, Galatians 3:20, Hebrews 3:6, James 4:8.

Lord Jesus, thank You for saving me when I so don't deserve it. Bless those who persecute us, and lead me to the new place You have in store.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 February 2017

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. Hebrews 7, verses 20-22.

Zero in on that last sentence. "Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant." God swore an oath on Himself. There is no higher guarantee possible. Nowhere in the universe can you find a surer promise than one God makes and swears by Himself. It WILL happen. Nothing can deny it, nothing can stop it, nothing can change it. When God says He loves you, He loves you unquestionably. When God says He will provide for you, He will ALWAYS provide for you. When God says He forgives you, He completely and fully forgives you in every way He promises. When God guarantees the better covenant of His salvation, it is permanently guaranteed.

Just last week He proved it again to me. He didn't need to prove it, but He did. You'll recall in the last proverbial how I confessed my bitterness against my former employer. I've been out of a full-time job, and I've felt deep anger over it. I was working part-time in a new job but it wasn't getting us by. It seemed like a waste of their time and mine, and I was beginning to feel despondent. Through all of my sin, God still promised "I love you, I will provide for you, I forgive you, trust Me and Me alone." I never doubted that, but I also never fully surrendered to it either...until I did.

You can't make this stuff up. That was Thursday. Friday morning I went back to my part-time job which had been challenging me all week. And Friday morning I was supposed to have heard news from a recruiter, news about a new position; I didn't. By noon, still nothing. It was deeply disappointing, and I didn't want to stay with the call center. I sat there thinking of anything I could do to change the situation, but there was nothing...nothing except God. About 1:30 or so I finally made peace with Him. More appropriately, I surrendered to His will. I silently prayed "if this is where you want me, Lord, I'll give it my all. I'll give it my best. I'll do whatever You want me to do here." It wasn't what I wanted, but it was what God wanted. He had me where He had me for a reason and He would never let me down even when He provided what I didn't expect. Not five minutes later, I got the call about the new job and accepted it.

Stop right here for a gut check. This isn't some prosperity gospel; this isn't some "God will be good to if you only do X, Y or Z." That kind of thing is a lie. God isn't a wishing well. God isn't some Pavlov trainer where if you give him a prayer He gives you a treat. God chose to bless me by answering a prayer on HIS schedule, HIS way, not mine. He could just as well have not given me what I wanted. He could keep me there; He could send me where He wanted to. I don't start the new job for a week or more, and it could indeed turn out that the new job is a bust, or a harder challenge, or a path to more unemployment. That doesn't matter. What does matter is that a man surrendered his will to his God, and His God always kept His promises. God had kept His promise even before I realized it. He always had. God had been providing for me all along. God had loved me all along. God had blessed me where He had me even before the job search started. All that is because God swore by Himself that He would always be God. He then proved it by sending the God-man, His son Jesus, as our only Savior and as the true priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. I don't deserve it; neither do you. We've never done anything to earn it or deserve it or make it happen...but God did. He did it because He's God. We aren't.

Sure, you can pooh-pooh all this. You can say that my Indeed.com application was processed and that my new employer and I negotiated an arrangement. You can insist it was all started as coincidental, and that we engineered the outcome we desired. You can say those things and I'll even listen to them, perhaps even find a few grains of truth in them. Then I'll tell you that my God is bigger than all those explanations. He's bigger than a job, or a website, or some process, or anything you or I could engineer here on the Third Rock. God is bigger than us, or our emotions, or our plans, or anything we can conceive. And He's pure love. His pure love is guaranteed by the better covenant that He Himself engineered on our behalf.

For further reading: Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, Malachi 3:6, Romans 11:29, Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 5:6, Luke 22:20.

My Lord and my God, You alone are God. You alone are good, and You alone saved me. Thank You forever for that, and for providing for me, and for giving me what I don't deserve.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 February 2017

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7, verses 23-25.

We need consistency. Frankly, consistency is one of the best things about faith in Jesus. He's always the same, He is always fair, He is always just, He is always there; hey, that rhymes! He is consistent, constant, and always present when you need Him (or even when you think you don't). As Hebrews 13 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Amen to that. Yet consider this: Jesus doesn't need to be consistent. He doesn't need that constancy, or fairness, or sameness. We do.

It has always baffled me why folks reject faith in Jesus. Why would a decent, upright soul not want to follow Jesus? Reject Christianity, religion, Protestantism all the live-long day (or Catholicism, maybe even Orthodoxy as well); I may even join you. Far as I'm concerned, we can sell every church building in the country and use the proceeds to BE the church instead of meeting in one. Practice of the Christian religion by Christians has given Christianity a really bad name. If you're stuck on your liturgy or hymnals, your 'infallible' doctrines, your rock band performances (or the cherubic choir), the beautiful sanctuary with the comfy cozy pews, or even your motivated pastor, maybe you need a gut check. Jesus is about relationship, about discipling, about serving, about love. None of those other things are really about love, are they? If your 'church' is about the worship service and not worshipping Jesus in service, try walking out one Sunday and trying something different.

All that ragging aside, if anything about your church or practicing your faith is encouraged by the things I've derided, then all glory to Jesus and keep on keeping on with them. They should (and perhaps do) point to Jesus because He's consistent and constant. Like a solid reference, we as humans need Him to be unchanging. Everything not of Him is sin or is, at least, tainted by the possibility of sin. The more you look at things not of Jesus, too, the more you find they're inconsistent, transient. All things aside from Christ are temporary. They don't last. Pyramids? Slowly decaying. Scientology? Please. Money? Never enough. All your possessions? Nice but when you die they aren't yours anymore. Even the land: please, again; just another possession, and that deed you and I always work for will only be ours for a short time before it passes to someone else.

Standing beside all those other things is Jesus, who remains just as He was and is and is to come. He's the same as He was with Peter, James and John. He's the same as He was with Adam. He's the same Jesus to Billy Graham that He is to you, me, and the strangers we pass in the street. That matters even more when you then remember that Jesus' mission is to save souls. He lived, died, and lives again to reach souls who need Him even when they don't realize it. Even when they/we do things to reject Him, He still intercedes with the Father to say "remember, Dad, we love him/her." He provides for us because of those intercessions, because He wants with all His being for us to be one with Him and He'll do anything He needs to in order to give us the maximum chances to be in communion with Him. Every breath we take in rebellion against Christ is also another opportunity to lay down our arms. Every new morning He grants is a fresh start to make something new with the life He gives us.

Why not make the most of it? Jesus is. We need Him to. Thanks be that He does.

For further reading: Romans 11:4, Romans 8:34, Hebrews 13:8.

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your consistency, for interceding for me, for always providing for me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 February 2017

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7, verses 23-25.

“Save completely.” Those are some BOLD words. Before we move off these verses, let's explore them a little.

Do you remember “Titanic?” You know, Kate and Leo in post-pubescent ardor aboard the ocean liner doomed to kiss an iceberg. Near the end, Kate promises to never let go of Leo (and then she immediately lets go of his frozen dead body). Then, years later, the older Kate recollects that “he saved me in every way a person can be saved.” Later that night, she throws the Heart of the Ocean down to the sunken ship and then passes away herself. Kate thought Leo (actually it was Rose thought Jack) had saved her beyond simply keeping her out of the cold water. But she was wrong. Her heart shouldn't have been in the ocean, or in some cheeky necklace.

And since today is Valentine's Day, I wonder how many of us look to our significant others to save us when we can't save ourselves? A pastor friend of mine today lamented the increasing use of the word “partner” to supplant “spouse, wife or husband” as the dominant word used to describe committed relationships. I agree with his lament: “partner” isn't “spouse, wife or husband.” “Partner” is a poor substitute for the person ordained by God for you in a covenant relationship with them.

News flash, however: your partner, or whatever you call them (please don't say “bae”) can't save you. For that matter, neither can your wife or husband, or my pastor friend, or me. In fact, you can't save yourself, even, except for one tiny action that makes all the difference in the world.

You can say “I believe in Jesus.” Sure, add on the rest of the religious language if it makes you happy but you really don't have to do anything beyond giving your confession. Jesus has already saved you. He has already done EVERYTHING needed to save you from the eternal penalty for the things you've done to rebel against Him. He and only He has done this because nobody else could or can. And He and only He can do it completely. Jesus doesn't just pull you out of the freezing North Atlantic after your ship goes down. Jesus doesn't just promise to love, honor and cherish you even when you're ugly crying. Jesus doesn't just do whatever you can think up to prove to you that He loves you more than just on February 14th. Once and literally for all, He made saving us whole, finished, containing all that was needed to make salvation a done deal. He did it through His heroic death at Calvary.

Jesus completely saves us. He makes it physically and spiritually impossible for the devil to un-save us. Sure, said devil can hurt and harm us, but there is nothing he can do to undo what Jesus has already done. Nothing. Wrap your noodle around that on this Hallmark holiday. Your Valentine can't save you from eternal separation from God because Jesus already did. A warm fire, great meal, wine and chocolate, flowers and a fancy card are all great things but they don't do diddly squat in determining who really loves you because Jesus already did that. There is nothing you need to do and nothing you, me, or anyone else could even do to make that more complete, or more 'saved', or more yours because Jesus already did everything that was necessary.

I'll take that over the Titanic any day.

For further reading: Romans 11:4, Romans 8:34, Hebrews 13:8.

Lord Jesus, thank You for completely saving me, for loving me so fully that there is nothing I want to or could do to make it any fuller.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 February 2017

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Hebrews 7, verse 26.

You NEED a holy high priest to intercede for you whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not. You need it just like you need air, water, food and shelter. Here endeth the sermon.

Now for the example. A friend of mine has recently lost both of her parents. I completely empathize with her because both of my parents are gone as well. Her mom got sick and quickly died late last year. Not long after, I talked with her and she said that she didn't think her dad, who was also in failing health, would last long. Her parents' marriage had been close, Godly, and long, and my friend simply didn't see how her dad would want to live long without his wife. Turns out she was right as her dad died just this week. Did he will himself to die or did the maladies of old age simply overtake him? Perhaps it was a little bit of both. The culprit in his passing really doesn't matter, though, because the man and woman are both home with the Lord now, off on a new adventure that will last all eternity. They'll get to spend it with each other, with Jesus, and with millions of others who believed and were saved.

Here's the kicker: my friend doesn't believe any of this. She's not an atheist: she's an unbeliever, one who doesn't know but is apprehensive of taking the step that says "I believe." She and I have talked many times about this very thing, and several times I've held out hope – as I do especially now – that she would be brought to faith. I see God's Holy Spirit at work in her life, calling out to her to give up her pride and just embrace Him, yet she doesn't. If good can come out of grieving (and it usually does), then I hope and pray this good comes out of hers. Heaven would be a much better place with my friend in it.

My friend doesn't realize that she needs Jesus. She needs Him as a holy high priest, one who is blameless, pure, set apart from we sinners, and exalted from the heaven where her parents now thrive. A "need" is a necessity arising from circumstances. My friend (and me, and you, and everyone here on the Third Rock) needs Jesus to be her personal high priest because the circumstances of her life include rebelling against His holy command to be perfect. She hasn't loved fully. She's done things that are wrong. She's willfully and sometimes gleefully dived deep into dark sins to which none of us should aspire. Those things weigh her down, making temporal existence seem overpoweringly dreadful when it need not be so. When we don't realize our physical and spiritual need for Jesus, our lives are empty. Life without Jesus is merely existence.

News flash, friend reader: I could have just described you. I DID just describe me, as well as my mourning friend. Every single one of us sets ourselves apart from Jesus every time we sin against Him. And every thought or deed that is not of Him is sin. How can we abide by His command to be perfect? It's not that tough. It starts by submitting to Him, believing in Him, giving ourselves over to Him, damn the world and the cost. Yes, in giving ourselves over to Jesus, we damn, we condemn, our actions to be taken away from us. We're taken out of this world and begin to set foot, here and now, in a new world, a new existence where those things we condemn are separated away from us. They're taken away from us because Jesus Himself took them away. I've described you, friend sinner, and I've described me, a sinner like you.

Like my friend. Please keep her and her family in your prayers. Pray that she would come to faith in the Savior who aches now to ease her pain, take away her burdens, and prepare her, too, to one day join her parents with Him in that new world of which they're now forever citizens.

Lord Jesus, be with my friend and her family as they grieve. Reach out, use me to reach out, to help her by being a friend and Your ambassador. Touch her life and I pray she and all like her would come to You in faith.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 February 2017

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. Hebrews 7, verse 27.

This is a comforting thought. On days like yesterday, I'm overwhelmed. I realize that my version of 'overwhelmed' right now is pretty first-world. I'm not starving to death; I haven't recently lost loved ones; I have a home, food, clothing, a job (which is why I feel overwhelmed), and so much more to be thankful for than anything about which I could complain. Yet the weather outside is gloomy and rainy, and my senses are overwhelmed, mainly because of the job I mentioned. I'm blessed to announce that I've started in a new full-time position just yesterday, so now I find myself struggling to get up to speed quickly. God has provided as He always does, and I feel like I'm trying to drink from a fire hose. I can't remember which sites to go to for which items, the new laptop doesn't log into the customer Citrix portal, I don't yet know who to go to when I need help, I don't want to mess up, and there is so much more that I don't know about this new position than what I do know.

Boo freakin hoo, Dave, and waaaah. I'm 50, employed, and living in America. Snap out of it, boy, and get with the program; it's only been one day and it takes time to get up to that speed. Except that, even though I'm a 50 year old employed American, I still feel overwhelmed. Yes, in time I'll catch up and learn how things are done on the new job. But for today it has me sort of bowled over. There is so much to take in and I feel inferior until I do. Even a little gun-shy having been released from my last position. Yet in the middle of all this, there's something important to remember: I can do this. I can do it because Jesus is on my six.

Did Jesus ever feel overwhelmed? I'm betting He did, yet He didn't spiral downward in some pity party. He stayed true without sin. Jesus experienced every non-sinful emotion that you or I experience. He was fully man yet fully God. Think about it: He lived fully as a man without succumbing to the temptation to feel sorry for himself, or to let the world push Him in a direction that would drag him past temptation. He was tempted, but He resisted it by keeping His eyes on the Father. He proved a man could fully live without diving into transgression. It can be done, even if I've never done it. I'll never be sinless, but I don't have to be mired down by sins going forward. That means we can overcome, we can get up to speed.

When I'm overwhelmed by things I'm learning, tasks to get done, and all the stuff that goes with starting a new job, I find it comforting that the man who saved me from my eternity of death was never tainted by sin. His work was done the way our work was designed to be done. We were designed to do perfect works for Him – even managing projects! – yet every one of our works since Adam has been radically imperfect. Enter Jesus, who made right the crooked path, who lived a sinless life so that He could restore balance to what man and sin unbalanced. He didn't have to earn His bread, but He did. He doesn't need to offer up substitute sacrifices to atone for things He did wrong because He never did anything wrong yet, when the chips were down, offered Himself up as the real, not substitute sacrifice, for bonehead things that I've done. Or you. Or the pope...feel free to go down the list.

Because of Jesus, I can do this.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:1-3.

My Lord, abide with me. Guide me, steady me, counsel me, and teach me to be patient and to give it my all.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 February 2017

For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. Hebrews 7, verse 28.

Supremacy: we all want to be top dog. Your pastor, your boss, your competitive bestie, you siblings, your peers: each of them – and you and I – has an innate desire to be the big cheese. One of the most competitive, almost ruthless, people I've ever known was the first girl I ever loved. She was the smartest person I had met until then as well as one of the poorest, lacking self-esteem while harboring huge insecurities. She had long before rejected faith and had embraced some worldly ways that she said brought her clarity. Her insecurities and cheap gospel of the goddess drove her to push herself academically and personally, in some ways obsessively. When I knew her, she was driven to be the top student in her class (and she almost made it, graduating salutatorian in front of a class of her peers who looked down on her because she wasn't rich and cool). I don't know what ever happened to her; she's probably a top dog someplace.

I wonder if she feels hollow.

We feel hollow because we who want to be the big cheese are actually weak and small people. The verses referenced (below) from Hebrews talk about the weaknesses of the men who are priests. Your pastor, your leaders, and your humble servant proverbialist are imperfect people. We use bad language; we occasionally suffer from road rage (or at least some transgression against the traffic laws); we can be arrogant; we are plagued by lust and insecurity and judgmental tendencies and impatience. We could rattle off any number of sins and imperfections and chances are your name could be attached to one or more of them. Ditto Billy Graham, Pope Francis, and the saintly little old lady you call "Grandma."

Hollow imperfection.

Years ago, a therapist friend recommended that I read a book called "The Search for Significance" (by Robert McGee). Great book, full of keen insights on the spiritual tendencies of man. One of the author's main points is that, aside from Christ, our significance is elusive. The highest significance that we can attain in this life is to realize we are loved fully and perfectly by Jesus Christ. Everything else is less; everything else is insignificant (in the long run) compared to being found worthy by the Lamb of God.

I think that is because, in Jesus, we don't have to prove we're top dog. We don't have to drive ourselves to do or say things so as to gain advantage. In Jesus, we don't have a weak peer of a pastor or priest, someone plagued by sin just like us. In Jesus, we have a perfect priest, a perfect intermediary between where I am and God the Father. In Jesus, we can find true significance instead of fleeting fame or fortune. When I'm overwhelmed, Jesus the priest is perfect. When I'm warm and snug in my bed, Jesus the priest is perfect. When I'm typing these words, slogging through a meeting, cleaning out the garage, or picking up my in-laws at the airport, Jesus the priest is perfect. In Him, I always have someone who will give me the straight scoop I need while doing so in ways to build me up and make me aspire to be better.

In Jesus and only in Jesus, I'm significant. So, friend reader, are you.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:2, Hebrews 1:2, Hebrews 2:10.

Lord Jesus, it's cheesy to say, but You're the real 'top dog' (though You sure aren't a dog). Thank You for making me significant, for being the perfect priest I desperately need, for always being here where I am.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 27 February 2017

Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. Hebrews 8, verse 1-2

This is the main point of everything, not just a few verses in the Bible. You may not want to hear it, but the high priest of heaven – Jesus of Nazareth – is the main point of everything in your life.

We went to two different church services yesterday. My wife and I attended our home church in Frisco to help set up communion and then to attend worship. Later, (along with our daughters, their families, and my in-laws) we also attended a church in Prosper where we sat in on a telecast with David Jeremiah, well-known Christian author and minister. Dr. Jeremiah's sermon topic was the gospel and how our society is diluting it. Our society is constantly trying to water down the powerful message that God redeemed us so we could live and love with Him forever. We of the world constantly try to shift away from that because that message takes away from the focus on us. We aren't the creator: we're the created. We aren't the center of all things: God is.

In other words, he talked about how Jesus was the main point of everything.

Then, last night, I didn't watch the Oscars. I usually don't, so this year was no exception. Chances are you've already heard about the major errors that happened when Warren Beatty presented the Best Picture award. Perhaps Clyde Barrow actually grabbed the envelope and stormed onstage, or maybe someone rushed the action, or perhaps there was some kind of mix-up we'll never know about; internet conspiracy theorists are already going wild about it. But no matter what happened, someone actually did hand that envelope to Jack Reed. Can you imagine how it must feel to be the person who handed Beatty the wrong envelope? They probably want to drop off the planet today.

That person needs to know that Jesus is the main point of everything. Jesus is bigger than the Academy Awards.

Or there is someone my pastor friend, Patrick, is following on Twitter. @SarahTaras tweeted just today "If Jesus' end game had been moralism, no one would have wanted him dead. The gospel is not a safe message. Not then. Not now." Powerful statement there, don't you think? I completely agree with her point, though. The gospel is a radically unsafe message. It directly challenges all the wisdom of this world in full frontal assault. That makes it unsafe, threatening, dangerous to the world. If you believe in the gospel, then you, too, are unsafe, dangerous and threatening.

All that is so because Jesus is the main point of the gospel. Jesus is the main point of everything. He is the center of the good news of salvation. He is the center of real peace after a comedy of errors broadcast live across the globe. He is the main point of all Christian ministry. We each rebel and struggle with that idea because the sin in us spurs us on to want to be supreme. We each want to be the top dog, all the while not realizing that Jesus is the main point of all creation. He gives life because He is life. He gives love because He is love. God has provided everything that we have, think, or know of, and has put His Son Jesus over all of it. That puts Him smack dab in the middle.

And He's there whether we believe in Him or not, whether we forget or focus on Him. He was at both Water's Edge and Prestonwood yesterday. He was on stage with Warren Beatty when old Warren announced the wrong film. He's with my friend and the woman on Twitter. He's reading these words through your eyes. We each easily forget that Jesus is the center of all things but that only makes it even more urgent for us to regroup and remember who's in charge.

Lord Jesus, You are the middle of everything. You are God, You are love, You are the focus of my life. Abide with me and forgive me, I pray, when I mess up.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 February 2017

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. Hebrews 8, verse 3.

Think about that first statement: every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. I've never been part of a committee to hire a pastor, but I know a little bit about the process. The pastoral calling is a calling, to be sure. But it's also a job. Like other jobs, you're vetted by potential congregational employers. You network with other pastors and peers. You can move around from place to place, moving up, down, and around the pastoral chain of command. And you can be fired or promoted. You're called by God into the ministry, but you're hired by people to do the job. You're appointed. You're appointed specifically to perform pastoral duties that other leaders in other careers don't perform.

Except Jesus. Jesus wasn't a Levite; we've talked about this before. Jesus wasn't part of the political structure in the synagogues or at the Temple. Jesus was taught and trained by rabbis as a younger man (so much that He was frequently called "rabbi" (or "teacher") by His followers), but he wasn't an ordained priest. He didn't serve in the rotation to offer sacrifices at the Temple. No, Jesus was the high priest simply by virtue of Him being Himself. It wasn't that the rules didn't apply to Him: it was that He kept them so perfectly that they no longer mattered.

So if Jesus isn't an appointed priest, why does He need to have something to offer? You know the answer: He doesn't, at least not by virtue of His being divine. No, Jesus offers His personal sacrifice not for His sins, which were none, but for yours and mine, which are legion. The priests of Jewish antiquity would slay animal sacrifices, then sprinkle the blood on altars and on the people as a way to remind them that their sins were paid in full. Once a year, he would even sprinkle blood on the Ark of the Covenant to fulfill God's command and serve as yet another reminder of that salvation. Jesus sprinkled His own blood on the sins of all mankind so that all men might benefit once. Those animal sacrifices would no longer be necessary.

If you're an unbeliever, this is the part where you're saying "so what, big deal." Fair enough; yes, actually, fair enough. Your lack of belief in the need for all this would be understandable. Yet Jesus still offered it for you as well. And what else He offers is something that wouldn't have been available any other way except by the shedding of His own blood: access. Jesus offers access. You reject that access if you choose to dis-believe, but He offers it too you anyway.

Jesus offers access to real peace, tranquility while living out the rest of our lives here on the Third Rock. Jesus offers access to understanding of how belief in Him is the foundation of intellect and the purpose of reason. Jesus offers access to the communion of saints, participation in a millennia-old following of the greatest people in history. Jesus offers access to freedom, freedom from guilt and shame and all the negative things that can bog a man down. And Jesus offers access to Himself, an opportunity for you to have a personal relationship with Him, one on one, so that you might share in His love and glory while giving those things to Him as His due: all by loving other people as an expression of loving Him. He created everything in love. You get personal access to Him, our creator, because He offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for things He didn't do.

Make no mistake about it: Jesus Christ is the central figure in all of human history. It isn't Marx; it isn't Confucius; it isn't Mohammed; it isn't the Buddha. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who stands at the center of all human history, human endeavor, human thought, and human potential. He appointed Himself to supersede and make complete the need for and history of ritual sacrifices. And in doing so, while at the center of all that is, He offers true access to what only He can offer. Tell me, good friend: why would you resist that?

For further reading: Hebrews 2:17, 5:1, 9:9, 9:14.

My Lord and my God, I praise You for offering Yourself as the only atoning sacrifice for my wrongs. I praise You and thank You for giving me access to You and, through You, to an eternity of love.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 March 2017

If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. Hebrews 8, verse 4.

Does it matter more that Jesus is a priest, a savior, or a man? Especially in light of the fact that today is Ash Wednesday?

“The Shack” will be released in theaters tomorrow and I’m excited to see it. My wife and I already have tickets reserved. If you haven’t read the book, it’s a story of forgiveness, redemption, and a personal relationship with God that heals the deepest wounds. The first time my wife and I each read the book, we were struggling with an affair, separation, and our marriage breaking down in many ways. The book really helped us because it portrayed the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in ways we hadn’t ever thought of Them. Jesus especially was portrayed as a man with whom you could relate, someone with whom you’d want to be friends but who was, undoubtedly, still very much fully God while being fully man. After all, if Jesus were here on earth, He would just be a man. He was once before; He has promised to return here as a man again. He was the God-man on earth two thousand years ago; He will be the God-man on earth when He returns. I suspect that, like the Jesus in “The Shack,” the Jesus I’ll know then will be that fully God/fully man He is and was and will also be someone I’d really like to personally know. There’s a lot I’d like to talk over with Him.

To be fair, it’s tough to take verses out of context from the verses around them. We shouldn’t draw all our conclusions about this verse (or any verse in the Bible) simply by looking at it and it alone. Accordingly, verses 1-6 of Hebrews 8 say the following: “Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises”

Again, fair enough. What I hope you get out of reading that whole section in total is that Jesus serves as a priest so as to encourage our spirits. We are part of God’s heaven now. We are in God’s presence now. We are fully forgiven, fully saved, fully redeemed, fully ready right now to die and go into eternity to spend eternity in our God’s presence forever. All that is true – amen indeed – because of what Jesus did. His death and resurrection permanently crushed death in our lives. Believe in Him and there’s nothing you ever have to do to earn, improve on, or deserve that gift of life. Today, if you go to an Ash Wednesday service, it’s good to remember these things as believers all across the planet prepare themselves for a few weeks of contemplation, repentance, and celebration of what Jesus means to them.

Yet don’t get wrapped around the axle about it, especially when a minister smears a few palm ashes on your head. Don’t forget that this majestic Jesus is indeed truly majestic, glorious, and all-powerful, all-beautiful. He’s the only man in all of history who could fulfill the priestly role to be an intermediary between God the Father and sinful you (and me). He’s the only person to perfectly fulfill all Scripture and all the prophecies contained in it. Yet He’s also very much the Jesus in “The Shack”. As much as He’s the glorious Jesus from eternity, He’s also the barefoot guy in jeans and a shirt who likes to spend time by the lake, just talking and sharing Himself with you as a friend. I’ll gladly and thankfully worship my Risen Savior. Even more gladly and thankfully, I look forward to sharing a beer and a burger with Him some day.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:1, 9:9

My Lord and my friend, thank You for being the wonderful man You are. Thank You for relating to me and for being my friend as well as so much more.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 March 2017

They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." Hebrews 8, verse 5.

So, as I mentioned, we went to see "The Shack" last night. I don't usually endorse things here, but I'll endorse this movie. Go see it. It's mostly true to the book and will spur you to think about your relationship with God. It'll spur you on to think about how you perceive Him, and where He is in your life.

One of the things I liked most about it is how God comes to the main character, Mack, in a ramshackle old shack that was the scene of Mack's worst nightmare. If you think about it, that's what God does. He comes to us where we are and wants to live with us there. And when He does it, you quickly realize that anywhere you worship God becomes His tabernacle.

Now, "tabernacle", as my friends Chad Bird and Will Kemp say, is actually a verb. To 'tabernacle' with someone means to dwell with them, to reside with them in this transient life. God gave Moses the plans to build His tabernacle tent here on earth as a representation of what His temple in heaven would look like. There are many reasons why God did this; let's talk about them another time. For today's talk, let's zero in on just one.

God gave us His tabernacle to dwell with us. In our day, where we do that is almost moot. God wants to dwell with us, to tabernacle with us, everywhere. In your camping tent in the mountains (or in a Bedouin tent in Turkmenistan), in your church, fishing by a lake on Sunday morning, in your car driving the kids to practice: God wants to dwell with us wherever we are. In ancient days, pre-Christ (or BCE if you want to go all PC), God insisted Moses and the Israelites erect the tabernacle exactly according to specifications He provided. He did this for the Israelites' benefit, not His own. He wanted them to focus on Him dwelling there in a way they could understand. That makes even more sense when you consider how most people in ancient Mesopotamia lived. Later, He specified a similar layout for His temple and for the same purpose: it wasn't about the building. It was about God with us in the building.

Then came Jesus Christ, Immanuel (a name which means, quite literally, "God with us"). In Jesus, God was fully present and fully incarnate in every way. When the Disciples walked with Jesus, they walked with God in full. When you pray to Jesus, you pray to God in full. When Jesus comes again, He will be coming as completely God in every way. Once Jesus had accomplished His mission, He sent His Spirit to live within each one who believes. In this way, you and I became the tabernacle. God Almighty would dwell with us by dwelling within us. The Holy Trinity would be directly approachable and as close as your own thoughts. He did this so that we could willingly come to Him, not to compel or enslave us. It's probably the most amazing thing in all of history.

And it's one of the things I liked most about "The Shack." They depicted the shack as a peaceful cabin by a lake. It was a place where Mack could relax, be himself, and let God heal him. Mack was stuck in the shack: he couldn't get past the hurt and guilt that he found there. So God came to him, healed him, and promised to stay with him wherever he went. That's not some movie plot: that's the promise God makes to each one of us.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:1, 9:9

My Lord, I praise You for dwelling with me. My home is Your home; my life is Yours. Abide with me, thrive with me, strive with me, be alive in me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 March 2017

But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. Hebrews 8, verse 6.

Super. It's Monday and that's just super; uber rah rah already.

Let's talk supersessionism. Up until this morning, I hadn't even heard of that word, but some online research about this verse brought it up. In a nutshell, it's the concept of the new covenant superseding the old covenant. Islam has a similar tenet, namely in how Islam says it supersedes every other faith (sort of like arguing with a kid and they say "no, you are" over and over until they finally say "no you are infinity"). But the long and short of it is that, when you come to faith in Jesus, you begin to understand how Jesus superseded any and all prior covenants with His redemption of mankind. That doesn't invalidate those earlier covenants; God still promises unconditionally. But, legally speaking, all the conditions of them are complete with the resurrection of Christ.

So, another thing that happened this morning was that, yet again, I was grouching about church hymns. I like all kinds of music but am turning into a curmudgeon about hymns. Yesterday, as is the wont of many music leaders, the leader at our church in Paris changed the words to a beloved hymn. He isn't the only one to do this; Chris Tomlin and other Christian musicians frequently do this in their new music, altering the lyrics to beloved songs. The bottom line is that it irritates me. It annoys me, especially if said altered song is one dear to me (as this one was. We sang it at my dad's funeral).

Let's be clear about this: this is a first world problem. Compared to North Korean missiles, hunger in Africa, and non-existent anthropogenic climate change, this is a problem that only a spoiled first worlder such as myself could air. Yet air it I did and found that, not surprisingly, some agreed with me and some didn't. A pastor friend of mine reminded me that pastors will sometimes do this to reinforce the message they're communicating that week; that's true. And, quite honestly, if it gives constructive praise to God – which it did – then even if a few feathers are ruffled it can be a good thing; that's true as well.

What's the point? Do newly doctored songs replace the old ones (I hope not). No, the point is that we're free to debate this. We can talk, agree to disagree, and still be in unity as believers & friends. That freedom is ONLY possible because Jesus superseded all previous covenants that His Father had made with men. The covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David were loving efforts by God to bring man into unity with Him. Not surprisingly, mankind messed them up. We NEED a covenant from Jesus, the God-man, to restore full balance between ourselves and our God. We need Him to redeem us; we need Him to make us righteous in front of a Father who can tolerate only righteousness; we need Him to make us clean again and take away the consequences of our sins. Just like we need air and water, we need Jesus.

That need could only be satisfied by Jesus making us truly free. In fact, the more you study Scripture, the more you begin to see that faith in Jesus is the only foundation for true liberty. Our Founders knew this, even as not all of them were practicing Christians. Freedom through legalism isn't freedom at all. No government or contract really makes you free. If anything, governments and legal contracts are supposed to protect one's freedom even as they more frequently limit it. Being bound by the constraints of a human contract limits your ability to say or do what you do. Thus, when people implemented the old covenants, the result was legalism. When you do that, you get the Pharisees (or American academia).

Enter Jesus who, as the verse reminds us, mediates a new covenant between ourselves and our God. The former covenants, misunderstood by we humans, had been twisted to be constraining. Jesus makes a new covenant that removes those constraints by simply asking us to believe He is God, and He takes care of everything else. Life? Done; it's yours. Provisions for living? Done; they're yours. Forgiveness of all your sins and the guilt that dog-piles on with them? Done; yours again. All we do is believe. From there, Jesus takes the load and leads us now in His better way. The goal of life isn't to toe the line: the goal of life becomes loving others to help them with their burdens in life.

All because Jesus' covenant of life superseded all those before it in the ultimate act of supersessionism. That includes curmudgeon grouching about church music. Pretty super after all.

For further reading: Luke 22:20, Galatians 3:20.

My Lord, I praise You for superseding the old covenants that blessed all my ancestors (and even me). Thank You for making it possible to walk and talk with you and my brothers and sisters.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 March 2017

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. Hebrews 8, verses 7-12.

It's like God was saying "folks, you just don't get it. In fact, that is what He was saying, and doing, and is why He kept instituting new covenants to benefit mankind until, finally, one could be instituted that would be eternally complete. Keep this thought at hand: this was for our benefit, not His. This was to prepare us, NOT because God had to practice to get it right. All throughout human history, since the fall in Eden, God has been reaching out, preparing us for the ways and the time when He would restore a clear path to Himself again. In Eden, Adam and Eve were without sin. They lived in full harmony with God, seeing Him face to face, talking with Him one on one. It's how God designed people to live.

Enter sin. Enter the serpent. Enter falling into temptation. Enter the divide. Millenia later, we're still in that divide. Many thousands of years after Adam, 4500 years after Abraham, 4000 years after Moses and even 2000 years after Jesus, mankind is still in the divide between himself and his God Almighty. You and I can disagree with that, and we can rail against the fact of it. We don't like it when people confront us with ugly truths, but they're still truths. We're full of sin and unable on our own to walk with God. It's true for you. It's true for me. It's true for your saintly mom, Billy (and Franklin) Graham, Pope Francis (and Pope Benedict), the heroes fighting for freedom in Afghanistan, and even my minister friend, Raymond, in Africa who does practical Godly ministry better than anyone else I know.

Enter Jesus.

Jesus built the bridge. Jesus serves as the path between sinful men and our perfect God. Jesus forgives all our sins and teaches us how to turn from them. And He clothes us in Himself so that, when the perfect Father sees us, He sees us through the prism of His perfect Son. Without Jesus, God (who sees everything) sees an unholy person who can't be in His presence because His holy presence requires holiness. Without Jesus, sins aren't forgiven. Without Jesus, the old covenants of Moses and David still hammer us with unachievable law, requirements that we still misunderstand and can never fully comply with. Without Jesus, there is no path to God. Mohammed can't get you there. Buddha and years of navel-gazing can't get you there. Paiute, chanting to Mother Gaia, praying to your ancestors, and a thousand Hindu gods can't get you to God. Only Jesus.

This is true because God instituted the new covenant that He promised in the verses above (much of which are quoted from the prophet Jeremiah). What men couldn't make right through our insufficient means and petty pagan religions God made right through the selfless sacrifice of Himself in His Son. We didn't 'get that' when it happened. Far too many of us still don't today.

For further reading: Jeremiah 31: 31-34, Exodus 19:4, 5, 20: 1-17, Romans 11:27, 2 Corinthians 3:3, Ezekiel 11:20, Zechariah 8:8, Isaiah 54:13, John 6:45, Luke 22:20.

Lord God, I praise You for making things right, for Your selfless sacrifice that purchased salvation for all of us. Thank You more than I can say.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 8 March 2017

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. Hebrews 9, verses 1-5.

Here is more information on the ancient tabernacle. It's nice to know; it's good to know; it's great to know since it is a representation of the place in which God approached man. It's valid history that can increase your understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus; thank you Chad Bird for that bit of teaching. Understanding the tabernacle and what was done there can greatly increase your perception of the beauty of God. It's also irrelevant.

Yes, irrelevant. There's nothing today that requires you to build your worship life around the kind of worship that the ancient Israelites conducted in the desert 4000 years ago. YOU are God's tabernacle now. Believe in Jesus and you are the place where God Himself comes to dwell with men. You, me, and millions like us. He built His church on our hearts. He lives, works, breathes, sees, feels actively through you. God will not be bound by the confines of a tent, temple, or sanctuary. Instead, He constructs His temple in you and lives as His church through you. You're the successor to God's tabernacle.

Now, that's not to say that tradition is a bad thing; it isn't. If you think about it, many modern churches are still set up in a similar, though not identical, pattern. Medieval cathedrals were, for the most part, built to reflect the shape of a cross. Most of today's churches have a place for the masses to sit or stand, an area down front with an altar that is segregated from where the congregation, well, congregates. That isn't much different from the tabernacle, which was segregated into sections for man's protection and man's benefit.

In truth, this side of heaven, we won't fully understand all the implications of just why God determined that His tabernacle must have the dimensions it did. Or how He fully occupies our hearts with His presence. It's a vision of heaven given for our understanding even as we don't fully see what it will look like there. Here on the Third Rock, it's our lot to simply accept it as just the way it is. If you think about it, that's the foundation of faith. "Put your trust in me," says God. "I've told you all you need to know. Some of it you won't understand, just trust me anyway." Religion teaches us to be skeptical of this, but that doesn't change the basic fact and premise of it: trust God anyway. Trust God because He came to you, entered your life, became not just your Savior, but your partner, your friend, your guide, your observer. When you choose to do what He asks, you benefit. When you choose otherwise, He is there to remind you that He is there and working to turn things around for you. Whatever you choose, God is with you. Immanuel 'immanuing' with you as an active participant in your life.

THAT was the central point of the ancient tabernacle. It wasn't given to Israel as a way for a vain god to steal glory. It was given to them as a way to see how God had come to them and would always work for them, working to turn things around for them. In my daily devotions, I'm reading through 2 Kings (having already gone through 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings). Ancient Israel was brutal. It was divided and lived under the thumb of many more evil tyrants than good leaders. The time of 2 Kings was long past the years of the tabernacle in the desert. God had long ago kept His promise to make Israel a great nation, yet Israel missed the intention of God's promise. He would make them great not because of political power or wealth. No, they would be great because God would be with them. He would live through them, work through them, demonstrate His beautiful love through them. He gave them the tabernacle, then the Temple, then the synagogues, to reach them where they were. Their reaction? "Who are you, God, to talk to me?" Isn't it amazing how little things have changed?

For further reading: Exodus 25, 26 and 30; Leviticus 24:5-8, Numbers 17:10.

Lord, I thank You for Your tabernacle, for coming to us through this place. Help me to ponder it, to study it, to understand more of You through understanding it. And help me to always sense how You are always with me and in me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 March 2017

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. Hebrews 9, verses 6-9.

Think about that statement: “never without blood.” I’m borrowing more from Chad Bird’s teaching on this; also some Patrick Miller and Bill Brimer, so thank them for the background.

Believing in God is a bloody deal. Not British slang “bloody” as in “that bloody thing.” That’s almost cute in a cheeky way. No, this talk of blood is carnage. It’s war. It’s deadly serious because it demands from you that very thing that carries life throughout your body. It’s scarlet, red, coating, oozing and sticky, just like your sins. Bleeding to death can kill you and it can hurt. A few years ago, there was a violent, disturbing movie called “There Will Be Blood” with Daniel Day Lewis. That’s an appropriate byline for following Jesus.

If you say you believe in Jesus, you’re signing up to that. Your life may not end in bleeding out but that’s the devotion Jesus asks from you. He wants everything and He wants it no matter the cost...because He already paid that cost in ways you can’t. Sure, we can sing “nothing but the blood of Jesus” and talk about how Jesus washes us white in His blood. I’m not disparaging any of that; it’s all true. But I’m quoting the verse above that talks about “never without blood.” Whenever the high priest entered the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, he did so wearing the sticky, steaming blood of a sacrifice.

Noodle that thought. Here’s this pious, upright, Godly man who has performed all the rites God demanded and he puts blood on his body, on his hands. He literally has blood on his hands from a death (albeit the death of an animal). He goes into the Most Holy Place and sprinkles that blood on the veil covering it. He sprinkles/throws blood on the altar of God. He literally covers God in blood. This after performing ritual sacrifices that spilled GALLONS OF BLOOD in front of the tabernacle to ‘forgive’ the sins of the people.

You know where this goes. When Jesus died, He shed His own blood with every scourge of the Roman whip, with each of the nails driven through His hands and feet, and with every heave of His slowly dying body just to get a breath. That blood, there and then, replaced the need for those animal sacrifices. There would no longer be a need for a disconnected high priest to perform representative sacrifices. The true high priest of the universe had performed the only necessary sacrifice that was done once for all to give them forever.

And it was done with blood. Lots of blood. Gallons, rivers, torrents of blood. You don’t think it was like a slaughterhouse there in front of the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God? It was. It was like a trench along the Western Front. It was a Civil War hospital with screaming men and bleeding, shell-shredded limbs. It was as bloody, gory, and disquieting as any meat-house you can think of today. Frightened animals screaming and writhing in pain, warm and sticky blood shooting all over the priest and his acolytes, pools of it gathering on the ground. It was starkly gory, gruesomely upsetting to those who didn’t understand it.

Just like that day on Calvary. It was torture and there was blood.

It was what God wanted. This was how He wanted His people to worship Him, right? Let’s put it another way and cut through some 21st century fiction we call ‘sensibility.’ Is God a gory old man? Maybe. Feel free to ask Him someday. It’s not my place to judge whether He is or not. I’m simply stating a really cold hard truth to you. Blood carries life all throughout the body. You can’t live without blood. Indeed, if you lose only a little bit (compared to all that is in your veins), you’ll fade and quickly die. God DEMANDS that blood. He always has; He always will. He wants you to give it all to Him.

Everything you cherish, everything you love, everything you know was bought in a tortured, gruesome, horrifying way by an innocent carpenter from Judea who just happened to be God in the flesh. He demanded it. He knew that only He could do it. He volunteered to do it. He volunteered to do it for you...with His own blood. What's more, in your accepting His covering blood over you, He calls you do to the exact same thing. You can't offer atonement sacrifice for anything, but Jesus calls you right here, right now, to willingly, even enthusiastically bleed out every drop of your own blood if that's where His ministry takes you. He asks for one hundred percent of your life. "Nothing but the blood of Jesus" isn't just some catchy hymn that's been re-mastered for Christian pop radio. It's a war cry. How will you respond?

For further reading: Numbers 28:3, Leviticus 16, Hebrews 5:2-3, Hebrews 7:19, Hebrews 10:1, Hebrews 5:1, Hebrews 8:3, John 14:6.

My Lord, Your covering blood saves me. Thank You for this sacrifice, the key event in all of history. Thank You for saving me, for saving all of us.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 March 2017

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. Hebrews 9, verses 9-10.

It's just blood; it's just water; it's just wine and bread; they're just words. They are...and they aren't. That's a mystery of the Christian faith, that the elements of our sacraments are both what the secular world says they are while also, at the same time, being exactly what God determines they are for their set-aside uses. When you figure it out, please notify theologians all across the globe. Differences about these things seem to be at the root of many, maybe most, of the ecclesiastical rubs throughout history. In my mom's town in southeast Oklahoma, there (literally) are First, Second, and Third Baptist Churches in the same small town (as well as dozens of other churches) that all began as a larger, single church many years ago. The reason for the split? Differences in what people believe about holy communion and the shape of the sanctuary (yes, I said the shape of the building).

Stupid. Words mean things, and yet they don't. It's the heart behind the words – the intended meaning – that gives words power. It's that heart with which God is most concerned, even as He also has His eye on us when we misuse the gift of language. Perhaps the best guide we could each use in watching our words is to think with the heart, thinking while trying to use God's perspective. When we do that, we realize something: we don't have to be right. Yesterday, Will Kemp, my pastor friend, brought up that very point. We don't have to be right; we don't have to have the last word. We can and should listen. We can and should watch our words with caring intent to build each other up.

I stink on ice at this concept. It's one of my weak areas, one of the devil's favorite attack points in my life. Pride, arrogance, insecurity, bullying, whatever: every pet sin of the moment causes me to want the last word, and I fall to it regularly. It's hard for me to remember that words mean things even as I write thousands of them daily. As a result, I'm a hypocrite. I say one thing and do another far more than I wish I had to admit, but it's true. This isn't an excuse, just a statement of the way things are.

I suppose it's something of a stretch to bind these Hebrews verses to the idea of pride, yet there is this related tie. Our words from don't carry the gravity, the life, that they could if only we spoke them through Jesus. Food and drink are only food and drink if we eat them apart from communion. Words in a blog, email, or letter are just words unless we use them to edify others and increase God's glory. Some words can be ordinary but important, and some others can immediately and always carry great weight. All of them should be used to the glory of God. Some meals are just fuel for the body but others mean something much more. You get the idea. Whatever we say or do, say or do it with God in the lead.

What's more, the other important tie to remember is that the new covenant has replaced the old ones. My words, though uttered, are a thing of the past. I don't have let my past rule me. It's done with, and whatever is happening now, or could happen tomorrow, is where my focus needs to be. That's where Jesus is focused: right now so that tomorrow can be better. The meal of holy communion was instituted as part of the traditional meal of the seder. We celebrate both in today's world, and both are for the glory of God, yet only one carries the true body and blood of Jesus. But whether it's bread and wine, steak and shrimp, or \$1000 Beluga on those fishy little crisps of toast, do it to the glory of God. Remember, it's just a meal when it isn't.

And wish Pastor Will a happy birthday today; it's his birthday. In doing so, thank him for the reminder that we don't always have to be right.

For further reading: Hebrews 10:1, Leviticus 11:2-23, Numbers 6:3, Colossians 2:16, Leviticus 1:1, Hebrews 7:16

Lord, thank You for the new covenant that supersedes the old covenants. Thank You for using things I can understand to teach about Your higher meanings.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 March 2017

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. Hebrews 9, verse 11.

We want superheroes. Yes, I'm going there.

Today I saw a trailer for the new "Justice League" movie. I'll admit it: I'm sick of super hero movies. I wish Hollywood would make movies about non-super hero characters. I know that they do, and that there are dozens of Indie features released every month. But I live in a town where those features are rarely circulated. We only get major releases here. Besides, so many of those Indie movies center on themes that seem objectionable to me. I don't want to patronize them. That, and the 'eye candy' popcorn movies are all big-budget, special effects extravaganzas about improbable people doing extraordinary things (hold that thought). So, like millions of others, I go to the superhero movies and watch them and I'm entertained for a few hours before I'm left hungry, waiting for the next big thing. Think about it. The biggest movies (and movie busts) of the last 20 years are movies about Batman, Spiderman, the Avengers, Superman, Iron Man, Thor and the like.

Enter Jesus. Here's how Hollywood might write about Him if He were a fictional character. Boy from small farm town grows up and starts worldwide movement that overturns empires, changes people from within, and performs miracles. Hundreds of miracles, supernatural feats of every bent. Seas parting, storms calmed, thousands fed on crumbs, people brought back from death. At the moment of ultimate victory, the hero is slain only to return three days later bigger and better than ever. If Jesus were a superhero, what kind of cape would He wear? Yes, enter Jesus the superhero. Enter the King, the one who can literally move mountains with a glance.

Except that He can. He did; He does. He does it better than Superman or Thor. He is the true Avenger; His is the only real justice in any league. He is the ultimate fighter, the muscular warrior in the trenches turning back legions of demons with only His words. He foretells the future, then executes ultimate justice. He leads battalions of angels against armies of Satan's warriors of hate. And He does it while, in the very next scene, sitting side by side with young kids who simply want a friend. The life and death and life again of Jesus? Heroic. Super-heroic, in fact.

I wonder if Hollywood would make a movie like that. Actually, they have, but epics about the Bible seem to be passé. They don't do great box office anymore. Besides, purist believers might poo-poo the idea of portraying Jesus as ready-for-Wrestlemania and able to defeat both Lex Luthor and the Joker without breaking a sweat. If they dump on "The Shack" for portraying God the Father as a black woman, imagine what they'd say about Jesus all muscled out and buff.

Yet that's the kind of superhero people seem to want. We LOVE stories about men (and women) who can do extraordinary things, the kinds of things Jesus can do. We'll pay big bucks to watch supernatural-type special effects about AWESOME things. And we'll cheer like cheerleaders when the good guys show up to clean up the mess and mete out hard justice.

Isn't that what Jesus does every day? Jesus is the improbable Savior doing extraordinary things. Let's go a step further: when YOU believe in Jesus, you become an ordinary person living an extraordinary life. You make the world a better place by living your ordinary life in extraordinary ways because of the extraordinary superhero named Jesus who's leading you.

To get to here, Jesus went through heaven. He rendered complete over three hundred ancient prophecies. He fulfilled every expectation and prediction of the Messiah who would save men from themselves. Jesus satisfied the need for the earthly tabernacle, the earthly dwelling place of God. He superseded it by in-dwelling Himself into the hearts of people who followed Him, making THEM His tabernacle, making them His eyes, voices, arms and legs. He did this for man's benefit but only by God's design. Heaven isn't some Norse fiction called Asgard: heaven is a real place, more

spectacular than Stan Lee could ever dream. We want our heroes to be bigger than life, to save us when nobody else can. The awesome thing is that, in our Savior, we have Him exactly.

But I'll still go see "Justice League."

For further reading: Hebrews 2:17, Hebrews 10:1, John 2:19.

Lord, You're my superhero. I praise You for Your heroic life, Your superhero heart, Your divine power, Your larger than life persona, Your humble bearing.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 15 March 2017

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. Hebrews 9, verse 12.

Blood again. This verse continues the ones from earlier in chapter 9, the ones that talk about how blood is needed for the sacrifice. How do I put this? I don't understand why all this happened. Logically speaking, I don't understand the connection between Jesus' blood and eternal salvation. I really don't. He who could not die died. He who could not sin took on all sin. He who could do no wrong became wrong incarnate, through and through. He who was completely innocent became completely guilty. Why was blood required to make all that happened? Yes, I know the history of it, the ties to animal sacrifices, the ancient Hebrew rituals commanded by God. I understand the symbolism, and the physiological connection of blood and life. I get all that. I simply don't understand WHY. It's lost on me.

That's ok. Love is illogical. Love defies reason, logic, and process. It's simply the divine gift and there may be no fully explaining it in ways we'd understand this side of eternity. The way out of this self-manufactured conundrum is to understand that I don't need to understand it completely. You don't need to understand it completely. It's just fine that the finer points of ecclesiastical doctrine and Divine intention remain unknown when you get down to brass tacks.

Hint: they were unknown to the high priest. He could tell you, second by second, how to do everything he was doing and the history of it going all the way back to the first priest to enter the Most Holy Place. I assume that would be Aaron, somewhere in the desert of Sinai, walking gingerly into God's dwelling among men. But the why? Why did God require blood? Why blood alone would make atonement? I'm betting it was lost on him too. I imagine that, if you had a long discussion with Aaron, his bottom line response would end up being "because God said so." That's the ticket! That's the reason. It's reason enough.

It's reason enough to know that God commanded it. If you truly submit to God, you don't need reason beyond that. What's more, it's enough to know that God made it so for Jesus' blood to be the only true sacrifice that would ever be needed to gain eternal salvation of mankind. He who didn't need to shed His own blood gave all of it up willingly, from the heart, from His soul. He who was without sin and didn't deserve to die, who hadn't earned the death penalty for sin, willingly died for people who wouldn't be willing to die for Him. Why? Because God said so.

Because God said so and predicted the need for it going all the way back to the fall of man. Before He even spoke to Eve or Adam about their sin, He cursed Satan the tempter and laid out the penalty that Satan would pay. "Cursed are you...He will crush your head and you will strike his heel." Sin would be separate from God, intolerable and cursed. There would be blood – and there weren't even animal sacrifices yet; there wouldn't be for hundreds of years – and it would forever vanquish sin. It would then forever re-establish communion between men and their creator. But it would require blood, first to represent and teach, then to actually do all that was necessary.

Why? Because even way back in Eden, just before God expelled men from that paradise, God said so. And then, because God shed His own blood to restore that communion between His favored beings and Himself, He, Jesus His Son, was fully able to re-enter heaven and present full atonement for all of mankind's sin. From Eve and Adam all the way down to Dave Terry, you, and everyone else here on Earth, Jesus entered the Most Holy Place of the presence of God and presented Himself in our place. Nothing more is required; nothing more is necessary. Indeed, nothing more could ever make it better or more complete. Indeed, pursuing more would itself be an act of vain sin. Best to turn away from that. We don't need to understand God's motivation beyond knowing that He did it and that He loves us. When all reason and logic fail, these will endure. When you consider God's 'why' in that light, 'because He said so' isn't some response to a petulant child. In that light, it's the greatest gift He could ever give.

For further reading: Leviticus 16:6, Hebrews 10:4, Hebrews 10:24-28, Genesis 3:14-15.

Lord, thank You for Your sacrifice of Your blood, for how You love us that much.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 March 2017

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. Hebrews 9, verse 13.

We shouldn't kid ourselves and assume that, because we live in a modern world, we are intellectually superior to people from the past. After all, if you lived in 1917, you lived in the most modern time ever known to man. Ditto 1817, 1717, 1617 and all the way back in time. The time in which you live now is the culmination of all the technology and learning that took place before you. Some day, if we live long enough, we'll see that, indeed, that time will become the culmination of all the technology and learning before it. The timeline of man mostly shows gradually increasing mastery of knowledge and technology over time. Yes, that includes the massive losses of knowledge and technology that came with the declines of the ancient Egyptian and Mayan cultures as well as the descent into the Dark Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire. Generally speaking, as time goes on, our knowledge increases along with our ability to capitalize on that knowledge by improving our technology to accompany it. We may not know how the Great Pyramid was stacked together (or why) but we have split the atom, cured polio, and sent humanity's knowledge far beyond the edge of our solar system and all that in just the last 80 years. We're pretty darn modern!

So how come so many people in our world haven't gotten beyond the ancient concept of animal sacrifice? It was superseded at Calvary by a one-time-only human sacrifice of the only divine being ever born here. The idea of sacrificing animals to atone for man's sins seems primitive. Don't the Jews get it? No, they don't sacrifice bulls, sheep or doves anymore either, though there is a serious movement abroad to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and resume animal sacrifice after a 2000 year hiatus. Don't they understand that isn't necessary anymore? Don't the Muslims understand that their religion is pagan and primitive even if it doesn't require animal sacrifice?

Don't they indeed. And don't you or I get 'the big head' about our faith, assuming we are better than people who don't follow Jesus. We aren't. God sees through us and our self-righteousness. And He sees that all of us, blood or ashes or none, are outwardly unclean. Sure, we can clean up pretty but that stink on the outside only sinks deeper through the skin. It's what comes out of a man's heart that makes him unclean. Sure, animal sacrifice is a primitive thing. It's brutal, nasty, and violent. So, too, is your average Snoop Dogg concert...or maybe even Jimmy Buffett. But even Calvin Broadus, Jr and Mr. Buffett need saving. Jesus died for them as much as He died for you or me. He died for intellectuals, too. All of whom are still unclean, just like self-righteous me. I'm as self-righteous as you can find, and I'm ashamed of it. Every time I try to get in the last word (as recent as this morning online), I'm ashamed again of how badly I fail at this. Yet I'm supposed to be educated, enlightened, and a follower of Jesus.

In ancient days, God gave His chosen people commands on how they should worship Him. He did this to allow them to worship Him in ways they could understand based on the world in which they lived. By our standards, it was crude, barbaric, and primitive. How much more civilized, then, are we to periodically partake of bread and wine in sanitary little cups? It's praise to that same God, accepting Jesus' admonition that "this is my body" and "this is my blood." That isn't a little bit strange? Whether you look at communion as the exact presence of Christ or a representation of Him, don't go away thinking that, by modern standards, this ancient ritual isn't a veiled celebration of a barbaric sacrifice...

...a barbaric sacrifice that made mankind whole again. It made man sanctified, justified, and made righteous again, clothed and bathed in the holy blood. I said it just the other day: I don't fully understand the connection. We don't have to. Instead, we GET TO see that, however He did it, God purified us from the inside out by the holiness of that sacrifice. Blood and heifer ashes aren't needed anymore. Quite honestly, more blood isn't needed, either. There's nothing you have to do to make it better, and nothing you could do. We might have quicker technology than our ancestors, but we need Jesus to save us just as much as they did. We may look clean on the outside, but deep down inside, without Jesus, we're modern filthy dirty.

For further reading: Hebrews 10:4, Numbers 19:9 and 17-18, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Matthew 15:19.

Lord, Your sacrifice was once for all. It was brutal and I can't imagine how You even went through with it. Thank You.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 March 2017

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!. Hebrews 9, verse 14.

You know what I'm looking forward to most in heaven? A clean conscience. In heaven, there won't be guilt, or tears, or angst, or sorrow over things we've done, said or thought. There simply won't be a place or time for them when living eternally in the presence of the Triune God. Knowing Him fully will crowd all that out. Until then, there's faith.

Ah faith. Please understand, I'm not bad-mouthing faith because it's faith in Jesus that imparts into us His salvation. Yet I must confess I find it tedious and a cop-out for Christians (like me) to constantly use "well, in heaven..." as our fall-back position. I'm thankful Jesus secured eternity for me, but what about now? I desperately need His help now to get through every day here. Temptation lurks in every minute, and my conscience bothers me about things I've done here on the Third Rock. Perhaps my faith is weaker than I know because, all too often, my conscience zings me about sins long ago forgiven, even forgotten. My judgmentalism; my impatience; my adulteries; my foul language; my lying; my hatred; my idolatry; you name a pet sin: I haven't done some of these in years yet the fact that I did them, or even that things were done to me, still greatly bothers me. Occasionally, the burden wells up from my soul and I feel real despair.

It's a taste of what Jesus must have felt hanging there on the cross. For the first time in His life, His eternal life, He set aside the dignity and self-control He lived and allowed sin to overwhelm Him. Things He hadn't done: Jesus allowed all that guilt, angst, loathing, and insecurity to flood Him and take Him. Indeed, only a few hours before, He had been on His knees in the garden, sweating rivulets of blood so great was his overwhelming sorrow at the knowledge of what He must do. Now that sorrow truly overwhelmed Him as He not only felt my guilt but took on Himself the penalty for it. He who could not die was killed by it, killed for us. I don't deserve that. I've never done anything in my life to deserve such a thing from anyone, let alone my Creator and Savior. My whole history has been one of sin, from my first cry on that day in 1966 until just now. I'm guilty as hell for all of it and I should be.

...Except that I shouldn't be. Not any more. Dealing in "should" is a chancy proposition because "should" is so subjective. Here's one instance where should is actually quite sure. I shouldn't be guilty anymore because, in Jesus, I'm not guilty. I'm not guilty by reason of substitutionary sacrifice. I'm made not guilty by Jesus hanging there on the cross and taking my guilt on Himself. I'm made not guilty by Him saying "I've got this. Go and sin no more." And I'm made not guilty by the very last words He offered us while He was here: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." That's hope for right now. Right now, in whatever I am going through, Jesus is with me, in me, seeing through me, acting through me. He's down for my struggle right now, and it's His Spirit that gives me the courage to turn back temptation and turn away from causing myself more hurt.

Every time my conscience bothers me, I get to remind myself that Jesus offered Himself as a living sacrifice so that my conscience is cleansed from acts that lead to spiritual death. My judgmentalism: judged not guilty any more. My impatience: forgiven by God's patience. My adulteries: made innocent again by the intimate soul of my Savior and true friend. My foul language: cleaned up and turned for a better purpose. His purpose. His mission. I get to live the rest of my life as a worker in His fields, using the talents He gave me for the mission He has me on to meet, greet, and welcome others with the Gospel. And when it get's tough, the Jesus living through me is a whole lot tougher.

Yesterday, the pastor at church here in Paris shared a quote. To paraphrase, it isn't faith in Jesus that unites us as believers. It isn't church, or what we do, or even following the Bible. The Gospel of Jesus is what unites us as believers. It is the good news of His salvation that unites us and forgives us and gives us the promise of real hope. Without the gospel, there is no good news or redemption. With it, there are only unlimited possibilities for God's real good here and always. That's hope for here and now to use throughout the rest of our lives. And it's hope to live past our numbered days here to start a life forever that will have no number or end. On that our hearts and our conscience can always be clear.

For further reading: 1 Peter 3:18, Ephesians 5:2, Psalm 51:2, Psalm 65:3, Jeremiah 33:8, Zechariah 13:1, Hebrews, 10:2.

My Lord and my God, all praise and thanks to You for cleaning my conscience, for forgiving my sins when I don't deserve it, for loving me when I've been unlovable.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 March 2017

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. Hebrews 9, verse 15.

Part of having your conscience cleaned up is remembering that the things you once did held you hostage until you were set free. You and I don't need to be held as slaves by the memories of those things, but it's fitting and proper that we remember how we were kept as slaves to sin. As people who were held hostage by terrorists. As bystanders who are victimized by criminals.

Think about it. That little white lie, that exaggeration, that deliberate falsehood, that cover-up: all of those things come from that little white lie. It's just as serious as the cover-up that destroys everyone around it. That little white lie holds power over you...if you let it. That tiny indiscretion holds you in its grip, until you see there's a better way. Without a way out, you can't escape. That tiny act of rebellion holds a gun to your head and threatens you with death.

The tempter knew this. He reveled in it, looking for victims to use in his struggle against God. He found them in Adam and Eve. He found them in you and I. Those tiny moments of pitting ourselves against God are moments when we align ourselves with Satan and deny God's better plans for us. "I know better" becomes the deceptive cry of alleged independence. In reality, those words are just a vow of slavery. C.S. Lewis said "the gates of hell are locked from the inside." Bravo, Jack: when we embrace our sins, we volunteer to walk into hell and lock the door behind us. The tempter knows this, knowing the laws of God, the covenants of the Old Testament and how they convict us over and over again. Twisting those words is one of his favorite ways of continuously working to keep us focused on our sins.

Step back and take a breath now. This is said NOT to brutalize you, to hurt you or guilt you. There is hope, but you can't do it on your own. Good doesn't result from some holier-than-thou Jesus-follower talking down to sinners like himself. All alone you and I know what feels bad, and how things that feel good at first very often go sour afterwards. We don't need people hammering us over and over all the time. All alone you and I can't turn from our sins. Brow-beating us with them doesn't help, doesn't make the situation better, doesn't prove Jesus' love.

Jesus proves Jesus' love. The way to turn from sins and for good to result from bad situations is by constantly reminding people that Jesus died for them. That Jesus fully and completely forgives ALL our sins. That Jesus fully and completely restored our relationship with the Holy God Almighty. That Jesus took on all of our guilt and punished Himself with it so that holy justice wouldn't have to punish us. The Gospel was Jesus' aim in living, dying, and living again. THAT is what we need to remind ourselves with when the sins of yesterday bubble back up and threaten "I'm still here." No, they aren't. They're gone and powerless forever. Those memories can only hurt if we empower them. Jesus gives us what we need to make that not happen.

When you realize that Jesus' Gospel frees you from your sins, your conscience can become clean. He cleans it up for you. The guilt and tempting and re-tempting and hurt that you carried around don't hold you hostage anymore. Jesus holds your hand and you walk up to that locked door in hell, and He unlocks it for you, then leads you out. He tells you that you're forgiven. He tells you that you are fully restored with God. He tells you that He will be with you in all ways always, even up to the last second of your life. He tells you that He has plans for you, that He wants to work new things in you and through you. He tells you that, with Him, you have everything you need to stand and resist the tempting and persevere. Those things you thought, said and did in the past may have held you hostage in the past. But they don't anymore.

For further reading: Galatians 3:20, Luke 22:20, Romans 8:28, Hebrews 6:15, Acts 20:32.

Lord, thank You for setting me free, for making me clean, for forgiving me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 March 2017

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. Hebrews 9, verse 16-18.

Perhaps this is the answer I was looking for a few days ago. I'll admit: I'm still iffy on the actual transaction, but these verses seem to shed a little light – and some blood – on just why God requires blood to atone for our sins. Our inheritance couldn't be bought as long as the sacrifice was alive. Purchasing that inheritance requires a death, because God had decreed way back in Eden that the penalty for sin would be death. More, He had decreed that the penalty for unrepentant sin would be eternal death, eternal separation from Him and His beautiful design for our eternity.

Only He who could not die could take sin onto Himself and make that sacrifice. Only one who is eternal and infinite could restore balance to creation by dying the temporal and finite death for all. His blood would have to flow; His blood would have to go cold.

How does that miracle occur? Answer: don't ask me! I'm still in the dark on that one! Yet even in my intellectual darkness there is the saving light of shining faith. It makes that darkness flee with the simple explanation of "don't worry, baby. Everything will turn out alright." Thank you both Jesus on the cross and Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys.

Don't sweat it. The death has been died. The blood has been shed. The eternity has been restored to us. The deed is truly done. "Don't worry, baby. Everything will turn out alright." That's comforting in a world where death threatens every day. Every day, terrible things happen to good people and we're left wondering why. Just this week, I found out that a friend of mine has inoperable cancer. He's in treatment and is hopefully responsive. I haven't seen this man in years, and we've only kept in touch remotely, occasionally, yet I found myself floored by it because it was so out of the blue and was happening to someone I know and admire. To be honest, his prognosis sounds dire but I have no idea what his doctors are telling him other than to continue treatment.

Yet in the face of a disease that's trying to kill my friend there are dozens, hundreds of people praying for him. If you don't believe in Jesus, that means "so what" to you. If you believe, however, you realize that hundreds of people are involving the Lord's infinite power – and then themselves – in my friend's fight. We're part of it, imploring God for healing, whatever form that healing takes. We're rooting for him, volunteering to help in what way we can. The cancer may win, but if my friend comes to faith then cancer's win is moot. Or God may bestow physical healing and death will be turned back to lurk on a later day. Either way, death is challenging and real people are really fighting back by backing off for God to do the fighting.

That fight has real power, real medicine, because Jesus' covenant of salvation was put into effect by the shedding of His blood. As a result, the power of the Almighty is involved in guiding our lives towards inheriting an eternity He willed and won for us. As a result, when you surrender to Jesus, you become a part of eternity now. You can let go of the guilt over sins that bothered you. You can go directly to your Creator Savior and tell Him everything that's on your heart. You can receive His caring forgiveness – as well as His occasional rebuke when you stray – every day and feel real peace in your conscience. You can live in ways that reflect His Spirit working in your life, acting out of kindness, patience, caring, and hope. When cancer comes for you – and it will come for one of two men and one of three women in America at some point in their lives – you can fight it back knowing you've already won no matter how the battle turns out. Don't worry. Everything will turn out alright.

For further reading: Exodus 24:6-8.

Lord, thank You for Your comfort, Your saving medicine. Heal those who are sick, help those who are hurting, love those in need.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 April 2017

When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Hebrews 9, verses 19-22.

The author of Hebrews is walking us through some subtle but powerful lessons. All throughout the book he has drawn parallels between the Old and New Testament laws. He has also outlined comparisons between Jesus and Melchizedek and how Jesus' role supersedes that of the old priests. Finally, here he is describing how blood was used to transmit forgiveness. In the verses immediately previous to these, the author tells about how only blood could atone for sins. In other words, blood was the only payment God would recognize to make amends for all the ways we go wrong. Here, the author goes beyond atonement and ties blood to forgiveness. It's not just making amends that God does through His own blood: it is completely forgiving all the guilt and consequences of the things He amended. I know: this is actually basic Christianity. If you've been in the faith very long, this isn't new. This is pretty basic stuff, and from folks who are steeped like tea in the Bible, I'm hearing a collective "duh" all over the electronic fruited plain. "Jesus forgives all sins...I get it."

News flash, fellow believers: most of the people in this world don't understand this basic stuff. Out of the 7 billion people breathing oxygen here, more than 6 billion either have never heard all these basic truths or have rejected them. While we're flashing that news bulletin, here's another one. Those are our brothers and sisters. Those strangers in Uzbekistan, Canada, Ecuador, and the MS-13 filled ghettos around Washington DC are people handmade by the everlasting God to be His special creations. He wants every single one of them to live with Him forever in the same way He wants you and I to live with Him forever. If they don't know that Jesus' blood has made full atonement for their sins, and that Jesus' blood has made His forgiveness of all their sins and guilt, then they're damned. Eternally cut off from God forever, both now and in eternity. You and I have been given the good news of this atoning forgiveness to share with all people, not just the ones who look like us or make us feel comfortable. We aren't supposed to be jerks about it, and we aren't supposed to compromise our own faith in Him to get the job done, but other than that we are commanded to get that job done.

We're supposed to live out faith in Jesus in everything we think, say, and do. That means living out the blessings of His Spirit. We are supposed to live our lives – every word, action, and second – in loving ways so that people will see Jesus through us. It isn't our place to do what the Old Testament priests did with the blood of animals. It is our place to live our lives and be ready to talk with anyone around us about what the ultimate high priest, Jesus, did for us with His own blood. Most of the people in this world don't know this, have never understood it, and are maybe even hostile to this truth. You and I probably don't know all the intricacies and subtleties of Old Testament history and why it's still relevant today. That's ok. Neither do those 6 billion strangers. That's common ground. What will you say to them?

I'm not here to accuse you. I'm guilty as hell for failing in so many ways to carry out Jesus' simple instructions. If the author of Hebrews were here today, or perhaps the Apostle Paul, well, I wouldn't want to stand in front of them. The tongue lashing I'd deserve for all my ugly sins would be blistering. A few years back, I heard an interviewer ask Billy Graham what he would love to hear from Jesus when he died. To paraphrase his response, Rev Graham said, "I'd love to hear Him say 'well done good and faithful servant.'" But I don't think He will. I don't deserve it." Tell me, do you? You and I NEVER have to doubt that Jesus sprinkled His scarlet blood over our thousands of scarlet sins and washed them away forever. We can never do anything to earn that, or make ourselves worthy of that. But we can live our lives to reflect it so that others might want to know more about this Jesus who died on a cross. When a stranger or a friend asks you, what will you say?

For further reading: Hebrews 1:1, Exodus 24:6-8, Matthew 26:28, Exodus 29:21, Leviticus 8:15, Leviticus 17:11, Romans 12:9-21, 1 Corinthians 13.

Lord Jesus, speak through me and put the words in my mouth so that I might be Your witness to people who don't know You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 April 2017

When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Hebrews 9, verses 19-22.

Yesterday, I posed a question to you, asking "what will you say" to someone who doesn't know about Jesus (or someone who has rejected Him or is hostile to Him)? Today, let me take a burden off you by reminding you of something better than my question:

Don't worry about it.

When you don't know what to say about Jesus, or when you're anxious, scared, embarrassed, hesitant, or apprehensive saying anything about Jesus, don't worry about it. Don't worry about a thing. Be yourself. Be real. Give up trying to game the conversation and sound all holy and righteous and just be yourself. Surrender your control over the conversation and let what you really believe come out. When you do, you'll find that it is Jesus speaking through you. Indeed, Matthew 10:20 says that, when we don't know what to say, we shouldn't worry and speak confidently anyway "for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

People today still need to know that Jesus died for them to atone for their sins and know that they are forgiven of them forever. People still need to know that Jesus fulfilled every Old Testament prophecy about the world's Messiah. People still need to know today about the Old Testament rituals and how they paint pictures of heaven, worship, and Jesus Christ Himself. People who need to know these things are the same people we meet every day. Yet most of us feel hesitant to talk about Jesus. It isn't cool; it isn't hip. Someone might make fun of us. People might be turned off, even repulsed, by hearing what we believe. Where's the fun in self-denying yourself the pleasures to be had while living? Besides, Jesus Himself said that we would be persecuted, even killed, for professing our belief in Him: who would want that? Would you want to be part of some right wing, wacko cult following a two thousand year old guy who died who said something that completely defies logic and reason?

I have a hunch that the ancient Hebrews didn't feel so different. They had been God's special people and they seemed to think He hated them. Over and over again they received God's mercy in how He delivered them from enemies, gave them victories, and blessed their lives. Yet over and over again they turned away from Him, turning to idol worship and the pagan practices of their Canaanite neighbors. Even when God instituted the practices described here in Hebrews, the Israelites must have felt the old self-loathing temptation of pressure. It was a feeling as old as Adam and Eve, and they fell for it every time...even when the priest was sprinkling them with blood. Is it any wonder that things haven't changed? We aren't any different.

Here's the point where it's good to circle back to remembering that Jesus lived, died, and lived again to make the blood sacrifice to make things right between ourselves and our God. Here's a good time to remember that, even when we feel nervous in talking about Him, if we simply trust Him, He will do the talking. That feeling of friendship, that bond with a stranger, that simple caring or love: they're ways Jesus' Spirit communicates to us and through us. If we simply give up worrying what we'll say and let Him do the talking, then everything will turn out fine in the long run. When you share Jesus simply and honestly, only good things can result from it and often in ways we can't ever foresee. What will you say? Don't worry about it. Just trust in Him and start talking.

For further reading: Hebrews 1:1, Exodus 24:6-8, Matthew 26:28, Exodus 29:21, Leviticus 8:15, Leviticus 17:11, Romans 12:9-21, 1 Corinthians 13, Matthew 10:20.

My Lord and Savior, I trust You. Speak through my words and actions so that others may learn about You and You might have greater glory.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 5 April 2017

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. Hebrews 9, verse 23.

My wife and I have taken to attending Tuesday night Bible studies at a church in Paris. We haven't joined the church but we attend 2-3 times per month, and have started taking part in activities like these studies, dinners, small groups, and the like. It's a great way to worship with fellow believers as well as a way to meet like-minded folks here in a new place. Without kids living at home, that can be a difficult thing to do.

During last night's study, a thought hit me particularly hard: this is for our benefit. No, Calvary Paris isn't sponsoring weekly men's Bible studies just for Dave Terry. No, the world really doesn't revolve around me. But all this here on the Third Rock was done by God for us. Creation, redemption, salvation, even discipline and correction and rebuke, are all done for our benefit. They're gifts of love from a loving God who loves us fully all the time. He didn't need to do them, but He wanted to do them, give them, for us so that we might be closer to Him.

Take the earthly tabernacle, which we've discussed before. God directed Moses to have the Israelites build His tabernacle according to specific directions. He didn't do it because He was OCD or a neat freak: God directed it for our benefit. He, being holy, wanted to tabernacle – to dwell – with His people in a way they could understand and appreciate. He wanted to share with them – and us – a glimpse of heaven, a representation of it while we were still bound here by the limits of our earthly existence. God wanted to give His people a way they could worship Him so that they would be built up through Him and would grow His love in the world. Building the tabernacle would represent what God's temple in heaven looks like. It would give His people an ordered place in which to conduct that worship and a way to know that they were special in His eyes.

It wasn't for Him: it was for them. It was for the people to better know their God. It was a way for God to bless them and now us. Four thousand years later, it is still for us. That description of the tabernacle is for our benefit. That Sunday worship, your time in the Bible, that time you spend holding the door for strangers and listening to friends: they're for our benefit. They bring praise and glory to Jesus in ways pleasing to Him and He inspires us to do them because they're for our benefit. It's more selfless love from Him.

And it just keeps going. Have you ever considered that beauty is a glimpse of heaven? Or when you look at someone in real love, say when you see a baby sleeping, that's a glimpse of heaven, looking at a terrestrial something through heaven's eyes? Have you ever thought that the times when we do good works for Jesus' glory – which really should be every time – we're sharing a glimpse of heaven with others? A walk in the forest, a sunset on the beach, an hour of conversation with a good friend, working a job well done, the majesty of the mountains, doing things for other people: those things are for our benefit. They're ways God dwells His love and His loving feelings within our terrestrial boundaries.

The focus of last night's Bible study was on ways men can better manage their lives in praise of God. We discussed Godly roles for men as fathers, husbands, leaders, and more. And then we broke into smaller groups to continue the discussion and continue to get to know each other better. Yet that thought stayed with me: this is for our benefit. It's for our benefit that God first directed His people to build a dwelling place for Him in their midst. It's for our benefit, still, that He continues to do the same thing here and now.

For further reading: Hebrews 8:5.

My Lord, dwell in me. Live out Your life through mine. Act through me, speak through me, work through me, and let it all be to Your glory.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 April 2017

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Hebrews 9, verse 24.

There is a line from "The Shack" that I continue to ponder. When Mack (the protagonist) is talking with "Papa" (the Father character), they talk about Jesus and how He died on the cross. Mack says he doesn't understand how the Father could abandon the Son. Papa reveals to Mack that he (Mack) truly doesn't understand, but not how he thinks. "I was with him there all along," says Papa. On its face, that statement seems to be contrary to much Christian doctrine which states that Jesus died a full and human death and that God the Father turned His holy face from His Son. Who knows if the statement is true, either that the Father abandoned the Son, or that the Father was with the Son even through death. Only they know, and we are only left to believe.

But think about that for a second, then consider verse 24. When Jesus died, He did something that nobody else could do; this you know. Jesus, being fully God and holy and having lived a life without sin, took ALL sin on Himself and wiped it out. He erased the consequences of it from ever touching sinners who believe in Him. When He did that, He took on that sin yet remained holy and perfect. It's a mystery, perhaps the greatest mystery of all time. How could God actually do this? When you figure that out, call me. Better yet, call me, Franklin Graham, the Pope, and the Dalai Lama. Come to Paris and I'll buy you all dinner. Invite Bill Young, the author of "The Shack," too.

Yet there's something undeniable about it all. Jesus died the death we deserve and then entered God's holy presence again. He who had given up being in His Father's presence for a time re-entered it fully, righteously, and having made all things new again. He didn't need to go to the Temple and offer a sacrifice for sins: He had been the sacrifice. That Temple, and before it the desert tabernacle, had been made to represent the Holy Temple in heaven where God resides in person. Now came back Jesus to the original Temple – the presence of God – and He had been made all sin yet made all pure on our behalf to stand in His Father's presence again and proclaim "Abba, we did it!"

I don't know if the Father abandoned the Son during the time He forsook Him. I don't know (and neither does your pastor) whether or not the Father was there in Spirit or in person, and I don't know exactly how the miracle was fully completed. Like the transaction of actually requiring blood, I don't fully understand the mystery. In the end, I also don't know if that really even matters. To me, it seems like a fine point of theology ripe for navel gazing.

Bill Young is on to something, namely that it doesn't matter how God accomplished our redemption. Yes, I said that. It doesn't matter how God did it, but it does matter THAT He did it. It isn't for us to fully understand the mechanism through which God made right what we could not. It doesn't matter whether the Father was present throughout the Son's passion or whether He turned His holy face away. What matters is that, however it happened, God accomplished our salvation. We know it required blood – meaning it required submitting life to God – and we know that it required the full submission of a sacrifice. And we know that Jesus gave both of those, taking all our filth onto His pristine Spirit to make us righteous again. He did this for our benefit, and He then ascended back into heaven to regain His place at the Father's side.

When He did that, Jesus re-entered the heaven to which we aspire. It was the same place He had left years before when He became incarnate here on the Third Rock...and yet it wasn't. Something had changed. It wasn't less perfect; it wasn't even more perfect, as if that were possible. Instead, the fact of man's condition had changed because of what He Himself had done. When that happened, the representation of heaven was no longer needed because He who would live through each of us could fully reside once again in the true heaven where perfection remained perfect. And He did it for us, to intercede for us when we couldn't.

For further reading: Hebrews 8:2, Hebrews 4:14, Romans 8:34.

Lord, You are magnificent, worthy of all praise, and fully perfect in every way. Thank You for all You have done!

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 10 April 2017

Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Hebrews 9, verses 25-26.

Once for all. That matters. My friend, Anthony, wrote a song with that title. "Once for all our debt is paid." It isn't a time and time again thing: it was once. That's almost antithetical to us as 'modern' people. We constantly go back and forth and have to do and then re-do whenever we mess up. It's that way with home improvements. It's that way with relationships. It's that way with our sins. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has relapsed into an addictive behavior.

Yet Jesus 'went there' once and once was enough. If anything, that ought to be proof enough for us of His divine nature. The ancient priests had to offer sacrifices every day, then once a year on the Day of Atonement in the Most Holy Place. Again and again they went back to repeat the same actions over and over in hopes of eliciting better behavior after. Didn't Albert Einstein call that 'insanity' (repeating the same behavior again and again hoping for a different outcome)?

Insanity: that's a good word for sin. Sin makes no sense. Sin is illogical. Sin is randomly destructive, often hurting others in unintended ways beyond just the hurt we inflict on ourselves. Sin is a mental illness. Yep: sin is insanity.

And once for all, the cure for the common sin of insanity was a single visit by Jesus to the cross. Once for all our debt was paid; thanks for the jingle, Anthony.

Yet there's another great thought in these verses that segues off that 'once for all' theme: "culmination of the ages." ALL of human history since the fall had led up to the cross. Everything about the story of man found its climax, its high water mark, its highest height in the moment when Jesus walked out of His tomb. The highest point of all human history isn't the inauguration of Barack Obama, man standing on the moon, exploding an atomic bomb, Lincoln freeing the slaves, or Columbus discovering the New World. No, the culmination of all human history, before and after, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One time and one time only did God incarnate live, die, then live again to defeat the power of death and restore the power of living love to humanity. Once for all, Christ died to atone perfectly for all our sins, and once for all Christ rose to live perfectly for all eternity so that we might have the promise of doing the same.

As people, we like our pride. We get the big head and like to think more of ourselves than we should. Our achievements are the best, and our way of thinking is superior to all who thought before us. I'm guilty of it; so are you.

Yet none of that matters. None of our best achievements as individuals or society can compare to the simple perfection of Jesus of Nazareth redeeming us from our sins. If God had chosen to achieve that redemption in another way, then that way would be what we talk about, and it would be the culmination of history. That simply isn't the case. Once for all our debt was paid. It was paid with blood through the mystery of how God did it. He defeated death. He defeated Satan. He defeated hopelessness. He defeated sin. Once for all and for always.

For further reading: Hebrews 10:19, Hebrews 4:3, 1 John 3:5, Hebrews 7:27.

Lord, I praise You for living, dying, and living again, once for all.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 11 April 2017

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9, verses 27-28.

More mumbo jumbo if you don't believe it's real. Human sacrifice, fairy tales, pipe dreams, unkept promises from 2000 years ago: if you don't believe in Jesus then these are logical things to you. They're all that Christianity is (oh and don't forget that part about the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition...radical Islamists have a lot of fun with those two).

Yet the essence of faith is belief. Believing is the only thing that's asked of people who follow Jesus. Yes, He asks us to keep His commands, but we can't perfectly do so even if we live our lives dedicated to doing good works for Him. Yes, He asks us to love God above all else but we can only mimic the kind of grace that God bestows on us without our even asking. Yes, believing in Him stretches our concept of logic because, according to the world, it isn't logical to believe that someone can live again after they've died. All these things and more Jesus asks of us who believe in Him, but ALL of them are impossible without faith. Only by believing do those other good fruits begin to bear in our lives.

Without faith, there's no need to believe He will appear a second time. For all you know, that may be just another myth from antiquity. Without faith, waiting for Jesus becomes a useless exercise in self-delusion. Without faith, there will be no judgment of our sins.

Can you see, then, that without faith in Jesus, there are no limits on human behavior? At first glance, that seems like sweet freedom; the uninhibited ability to do whatever we want. Carry that a bit further and that uninhibited freedom becomes unstoppable anarchy. Imagine the chaos and complete lawlessness if all 7 billion of us here on the Third Rock did everything we wanted all the time with no consequences. The depravity you and I can imagine would quickly become a reality of horror without end. Faith in Jesus is the first backstop against that. Only with faith does hope become more than just a wish. Only with faith does just law become a constructive boundary to protect that freedom.

And the longer you believe, the more you learn that it is impossible to have faith apart from Jesus. Indeed, it's His Spirit that first touches us when we even think of accepting that Jesus died once for all to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. You and I can't even form the desire for that thought without God first touching us saying "I'm here." Everything that is good comes from God, and when we even enjoy that goodness, we're reflecting feelings of satisfaction towards God even when we don't intend to. That's the start of faith and it's no accident or spurious emotion. Enjoy a Big Mac? Thank God. Enjoy your favorite TV show? Thank God. Enjoy music, the company of friends, having the door held for you, a rainy night in Georgia? You know what to do: thank God.

You can't even thank God without having faith in Him. That faith starts with Him first coming to you, touching your heart, inspiring your soul, engendering good feelings in you. It's love because God is all love. It started because Jesus ho loves us first sacrificed Himself once for all so that our eternal debt could be paid once and for all. When you believe, that mumbo jumbo the rest of society rejects begins to become the only real truth on which you can build a wholesome life.

For further reading: Genesis 3:19, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Hebrews 7:27, Matthew 16:27, 1 Peter 2:24, Hebrews 5:9, 1 Corinthians 1:7.

Lord, You are magnificent. Thank You for touching my heart, for planting the seed of hope to grow into the living organism of faiths.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 April 2017

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Hebrews 10, verse 1.

Mamma Mia: poke out my eyeballs, please. My wife and I have a running thing about the movie “Mamma Mia.” Me, being (I believe to be) the typical American male would like to never see this time-sucking waste of celluloid expense ever again. My wife, on the other hand, loves the movie and gets peeved with me when I say that (she might get peeved after reading this today). I suppose it’s because I don’t care for Meryl Streep, or because I have testosterone in my system, or because, well, the movie just isn’t my cup of tea (or, since it takes place in Greece, Ouzo). But the movie was on HBO this morning while I was writing this. After watching a few minutes of Pierce Brosnan trying to sing, I drew a parallel between the badly acted ABBA movie and Hebrews 10, verse 1.

Bad things here don’t last because there’s so much more good that’s on the way. Bad things are illusions even when they are actual events or things. Those things don’t define us unless we let them because we are part of the promise of greater things to come.

In “Mamma Mia”, Meryl (in her best Merylish fashion) is a single mom forced to face the consequences of her past. Her daughter is getting married and the three men who might be said daughter’s dad all show up for the wedding. She feels bound and imprisoned by her past choices, defined by them, committed today to a course of action determined only by them. In reading Hebrews 10, however, I saw that this is simply foolish. It’s also just a movie plot.

But movies are supposed to reflect real life. How many of us are stuck on our past? I can’t tell you how many times my own mistakes have come back to haunt me. Even when those days are long gone, sometimes it still hurts, and sometimes I let it hurt. I forget that Christ redeemed me once and forever. Those things that I’ve done that were so wrong don’t matter anymore. Even when they still play out as consequences in my life, I don’t need to bear the guilt of them anymore.

Does this ever happen to you? I bet I know the answer. When it does, here’s another movie song: channel some pitch perfect Anna Kendrick and be “Bulletproof” to your past. It doesn’t define you. It may have defined you before but it doesn’t have to now. The laws of God that convict us are designed to point us to our need for God, our crucial dependence on Him. The tabernacle and the churches in which we worship today (which are derivatives in structure from those in ancient times) were given to us as representations of greater glory in heaven. Christ sealed the promise of that glory for us, ensuring once and for all that those who believe in Him share in that promise.

You can believe this whole Christianity story is just mumbo jumbo. You can hold that it’s myth and that it’s preposterous for one man to be either sinless or to die for everyone. You can even insist that the archaic laws of long ago no longer matter (even if all western civilization stems from those Judeo-Christian laws and values). In the end, those things are all just shadows, illusions that can either distract us from our journey with God or point us ahead in living life for Him. What will you choose?

Someday I’ll regale you with the story of how my wife forcibly dragged me off an airplane and immediately took me to a movie theater to watch Mamma Mia; good times, good times. But, like the movie, everything really does have a happy ending...especially our one-way death trip here on the Third Rock. Mamma Mia: next time it’s on, please pass the salt shaker so I can salt my eyeballs instead of watching it. But before pouring the salt, next time I’ll also remember that, mamma mia: good things are coming indeed.

For further reading: Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 8:5, Hebrews 9:11, Hebrews 9:23.

Lord, thank You for the things of this life that You give us which point us to You. And bless Meryl Streep, too.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 April 2017, Maundy Thursday

Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Hebrews 10, verses 2-4.

Today is Maundy Thursday 2017. Today is the reason why animal sacrifices became unnecessary. Today we commemorate God giving Himself up so that they would no longer be necessary. That sacrifice we commemorate tomorrow, on Good Friday. But for now, today is a sad day of celebratory mourning, a time when we remember Jesus instituting the miracle of communion and forgiveness while facing the spiritual torment of Gethsemane, then Golgotha tomorrow.

As part of my own remembrance, yesterday I watched "The Passion of the Christ." I try to do this every year during Holy Week because it keeps my faith edgy. The movie is so graphic and rightfully so since it portrays the most graphic murder ever perpetrated on a man. I kept it on the TV in my office while I worked, and glanced over at it throughout the afternoon. The more I watch the movie, though, the more I reach the same conclusion. I feel sorry for Judas.

I've written this before but I feel sorry for Judas Iscariot. He brought his woes on himself. Nobody forced Him to betray the Son of Man but Judas did it willingly, even enthusiastically. I know: he was a greedy, selfish, sinful, detestable bastard. Conniving, evil, deceitful; sounds like many of my friends and fellow sinners, actually. No, I'm not equivocating because I've never sold out the Son of God for 30 pieces of silver. My sins are my own and they have denied Jesus as surely as did Judas, Peter, or any of His other best friends who abandoned Him in His most desperate hours.

Yet I feel sorry for Judas because he is pathetic.

When Judas absorbed the guilt of his sins, he forgot all about Jesus. Maybe it was that he couldn't bring himself to even think about Jesus or what he had done to his friend and savior. Perhaps the guilt was too crushing and he simply gave in to the worst temptation. It's possible that Judas didn't understand the new covenant that Jesus had just explained to him in that Passover supper that first Maundy Thursday evening. Or how it would supersede those sacrifices that dated back to the days of Noah or before.

Whatever happened, Judas snapped and killed himself. He was cold and dead before Jesus was even nailed to the cross that Good Friday. I feel sorry for him, have pity on him, and I honestly hope something in him turned back before the life snuffed out of his body. It isn't up to me, but I hope there's a place in heaven for Judas. If there isn't a place for people who do things as supremely reprehensible as what Judas did, then there isn't a place for any of us. The key is belief. Judas lost his belief, his faith, in Jesus if he ever really had it in the first place.

He lived in a time when people still fully believed that animal sacrifices atoned for human sins. The whole purpose of the Jewish temple was to worship Yahweh, the almighty I AM. Integral to that worship was the Mosaic sacrificial system where doves, lambs, and bulls were slaughtered and brought to the altar. There was even an annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, which is still commemorated by Jews today) in which the high priest took that animal blood and sprinkled it on the articles in the Most Holy Place. By the time of Jesus and Judas, the Ark of the Covenant (God's mercy seat) was long gone from the temple, having disappeared hundreds of years before. Yet the Temple still contained a Most Holy Place – a Holy of Holies – where worshippers thought God was still present. Once a year, the priest went into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled animal blood.

And it did nothing. Yes, I said that. It did nothing. Even from the start of sacrifices it was only faith in God that would bring atonement. Only God could fully atone for man's sins because imperfect man could not. The sacrifices were an expression of that faith, not the actual atonement. Thus, when Jesus died, He and only He fully atoned as a true sacrifice for the terrible sins of His most cherished creation, man.

This was the world in which Judas lived and from which he committed suicide. Even as a disciple closely walking with the incarnate God for years, he never made the connection between Jesus and sacrifice. I feel sorry for him. "The Passion of the Christ" shows him to be mentally anguished up to the end, tortured by demons, tortured by his sins. The Bible doesn't insist that people who commit suicide are damned, though it does paint suicide as a sin. If Judas felt such terrible anguish that he couldn't go on, I sincerely hope that, in his final seconds here, he found comfort in repentance and a place in paradise beyond. That isn't up to us: it's up to God. Someday, hopefully many years from now, we'll learn what happened.

For further reading: Hebrews 9:9.

Lord, I praise You in mourning and celebration for the sacrifice You gave of Yourself. Have mercy on Judas and others, and .

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 April 2017

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.'" Hebrews 10, verses 5-7

A happy day after Easter to you. Here in east Texas, it's pouring rain. I'm thankful that the rain held off until today because yesterday it would have drowned out everyone's Easter plans. On the homestead north of Paris, after church my wife cooked a great dinner while I went outside to do some overdue yard work. I cut down some nuisance bushes and thinned out plants all around the property, and it gave me time to think about a thought God had put on my brain during church.

Think about Easter Saturday. Maundy Thursday we understand. Good Friday we understand. Easter Sunday: we get it, and even the days between Easter and Pentecost, when we observe God imparting His Spirit to us so that we can live life as Jesus' eyes and ears. Historically we know what happened on those days. Ecclesiastically we comprehend the meaning of their events. What about that in-between day? Who ever thinks about Easter Saturday?

Have you ever really noodled the idea that God provided everything on Easter Saturday? On Friday, we humans, His 'very good' creation, publicly and desperately murdered God who lived among us as a man. We didn't just murder Him: we brutalized Him physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally in the worst ways possible. If you haven't watched "The Passion of the Christ," I urge you to do so because it is as close as you'll get to actually watching Jesus being crucified. Me thinks the real thing was even worse.

He who bore that torture had only come to do His Father's will. The man Jesus lived perfectly to do that perfect will, then died perfectly on a gruesome torture tree to do that same holy will. He came to atone for all the things He never did wrong because we, as a people, simply didn't 'get it.' Animal sacrifices, burnt grain offerings, good works, even clean living didn't atone for sins. They still don't and never will. Yet people clung/cling to them as if doing so will please God and bring us closer to Him. Perhaps it's just another way we try to be God instead of living our lives to reflect Him. Jesus understood all that and yet He still chose the nails so we wouldn't have to take them.

And still, on the day when Jesus' body lay cold and dead in the Arimathean's tomb, God again provided. Air, water, food, shelter, love, friendship, vocation: for everyone living on planet Earth that day God still showed up. Just as He had every single day since He spoke life into being, God provided all that people needed to get through the time between midnights. The Roman soldiers who flogged Jesus then nailed Him to that cross? Alive and thriving. The Sanhedrin that had cajoled a death sentence? Alive and kicking with hot food in their bellies. The crowds who cheered and cried as Jesus agonized along the Via Dolorosa? Alive, breathing, going on about their business. God. Still. Provided, and He provided to those who deserved it least. Can we even begin to comprehend that kind of love? In the whole story of Easter and the miracle God provided through it, perhaps that's the most overlooked miracle of all. God showed up when we least deserved it.

Like He's showing up now in the miracle of rain pouring down outside my office door. It's filling up my pond, the same pond I wasn't sure would ever fill again. Nature really is a miracle, you know. Watching trees bud and bring forth leaves. Fish swimming in the pond and young chicks just hatched growing feathers in just a few short weeks. The sun that warms us and brings weather to nourish and rejuvenate the planet. These are all daily miracles we see. They're all ways God still provides. If you try to count all the ways God provides for you in just one day, you won't get anything else done. That's a miracle, too. In the days when we deserve it least, God still provides everything we need. And after living, dying, and then rising on that day we commemorated just yesterday, He still lives on in our hearts, minds and hands, still saying "here I am" as both identification and proclamation. That's the biggest miracle of all.

For further reading: Hebrews 1:6, Hebrews 2:14, 1 Peter 2:24, Ezra 6:2, Jeremiah 36:2, Psalm 40:6-8, Matthew 26:39, .

My risen Lord, thank You for providing for me when I've so not deserved it. Thank you for life, air, food, shelter, and love. Thank You for dying for me, then living for me. Teach me ways to live for You today and every day.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 April 2017

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. Hebrews 10, verses 11-14.

Do you feel like you've been made holy?

"HOLY" is a song on country radio now. Florida Georgia Line sings it, and HOLY stands for "High On Loving You." You may or may not like country music; you may or may not like Florida Georgia Line (not my favorite). But the song uses a word with which many country music fans might typically be familiar. Holy. Invoking a stereotype, it's commonly accepted that country listeners have more exposure to gospel music and gospel themes than some other genres. Thus, it seems reasonable to surmise that folks who listen to the song are familiar with the idea of holiness. This particular ditty may be a young man's paean to love (or something like it...that's a Kenny Rogers song), but it made me think of the theme from verse 14.

You and I have been made holy.

My Concordia makes the point that this section of scripture contrasts sitting with the actions of Jewish priests, who stood in the tabernacle and the temple. They never sat down while on duty. They didn't 'rest' in front of God. Instead, they stood, walked, or performed all their duties while in the standing position. Not so Jesus, who conducted His ministry as He did. Then, after His ascension, "sat down at the right hand of God." That isn't rhetoric or allegory: it's a point.

The point of it is that Jesus makes us holy.

The point of the verses is that Jesus was both divine and complete. He completed His tasks because, in Him, life found full completion. In and through Jesus, redemption and forgiveness are complete, and we have been made holy by Him. No further sacrifice is necessary. No further effort is required. Where Jesus is, He is done. Indeed, the Gospel of John says that some of Jesus' last words were "it is finished." It is finished. Everything that needed to be done was done. He did everything necessary to make you holy. Jesus, sitting at the right hand of God, lives and reigns today, resting but interceding with the Father through their Spirit on our behalf. They do that because everything Jesus did was to make you holy. Where Jesus is, He's high on loving you. Florida Georgia Line aint got nothing on that.

So I'll admit that, sometimes, I don't feel holy. In fact, most of the time I don't feel holy. I can't 'feel' it at all; I can't seem to sense it. I realize that this is a problem with me, not with God. He's already done His part and nothing more needs to happen. It doesn't matter whether I feel it or not: God has still done everything that needed to be done to make me holy, to make me blameless in His sight. Because I believe in Jesus, when God sees me, He doesn't see my sins. He sees me through the prism of His perfect Son. What I don't feel through emotion now is still reality in fact forever. All I have to do is believe. Yet I'll admit: sometimes this is a challenge.

It's also moot. Even when I don't feel holy, Jesus looks at me as holy and bids me to turn from the temptations that lure me or the guilt that plagues me. He reminds me that I'm loved perfectly, made clean perfectly, and that He sits at the right hand of His Father to tell him "consider our child and friend, Dave. I've made him holy for You again." Florida Georgia Line can't do that and it's no less of a fact even when I don't feel it.

For further reading: Hebrews 5:1, Mark 16:19, Joshua 10:24, Hebrews 1:13, Ephesians 5:26, John 19:30.

My Lord, I praise You for making me holy. For loving me so unconditionally, cleansing me from my sins, giving me the courage to live here again for You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 April 2017

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. Hebrews 10, verses 15-18.

There is so much to unpack here. These verses quote Jeremiah 31, and if you haven't read the words of that lamenting prophet, next time you are in a place of need, read Jeremiah. He, too, knew desperate soul-crushing hurt yet clung to God no matter what befell him (and he lived in terrible times).

Perhaps the best thing that Jeremiah recorded was that quote: "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." In remembering our lawless acts no more, God blots out the consequences of our sins and sees us perfectly through Jesus. When Jeremiah was alive, men did not know of a man named Jesus; it was hundreds of years before Christ. Instead, the time after Jesus is what Jeremiah was talking about in chapter 31, specifically the time when Jesus was no longer physically present as a man yet would always be omnipresent as Spirit. He would live in our souls and reason with us through our intellects.

You and I are living in that time now. When you say you believe in Jesus, you're lining up with Jeremiah. You're choosing sides, and you're acknowledging that you desire for Jesus Christ to live in your soul, reason with your mind, and work through your hands. When you choose sides and choose Jesus, you're acknowledging that all your wrongs have been forgiven. Everything that you've ever done in sin is forgiven, washed away. No longer do you need some stranger priest to sacrifice an animal in your stead so that you might make atonement for what you've done. Most of all, you aren't guilty any more. You've been declared 'not guilty' and you are permanently not guilty. Jesus took ALL of your guilt and negated the need for you to carry it around. This is perhaps my toughest sin; it's the one I all too frequently commit. Years ago I laid the guilt of my sins at the cross, yet I seem to constantly walk back there every now and then and pick up the writhing, nasty sack that contains that guilt. I throw it over my shoulder and walk away. With each step it feels heavier, smells worse, threatens more. All the while, it feels like Jesus is looking at me from His cross, staring down at me, imploring me to put the bag down again and walk away from it. It's like He's saying to me "I'm forgiving all that. It doesn't define you any more. I define you now. You can put it down."

Years of faith, years of study, years of therapy, years of prayer confirm this truth to me, that Jesus fully, freely declares me not guilty of even the worst things I've ever done. Yet I still commit the sin of trying to carry around that guilt again and again, long after he's forgiven it. It lures me back, welling up feelings of remorse, inadequacy, hurt. The harsh truth is that it is a sin to keep picking it up. It's a form of idolatry, and it's like saying to Jesus "I don't believe You really can do this."

He forgives that sin too. That's the point where my head is blown. I'm completely befuddled at how He does that, how He forgives me when I mess up the first time, then how He reminds me that He's forgiven those later sins too. It's because of His sacrifice that He reminds me of how He loves me, how He's forgiven me, how He's written that love on my heart and in my mind. How that divine love defines me now.

We're living in the time when that is the norm. It has been the norm for over two thousand years since the days when Jesus walked the earth. These days, He still walks it, but does so through the feet of a billion believing souls. We are living in the time Jeremiah prophesied, and before the time when Jesus will return to walk again on His own feet. The same feet the Romans nailed to the cross...the same cross where we daily lay down our sins and work to walk away from them knowing all the work we really need has already been completed. Somewhere in my head I hear that song from "Frozen," trilling me to 'let it go.' How I wish it felt that easy.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:7m, Jeremiah 31:33-34, Hebrews 8:10.

Lord Jesus, forgive me when I constantly relive, re-carry the guilt of all the sins You've forgiven. You did it completely, fully. Help my unbelief.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 May 2017

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Hebrews 10, verses 15-16.

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. That thought blows my mind. Does it apply to everyone?

Do you think Kim Jong Un has a conscience? This is the man who tortures nearly 300,000 of his countrymen simply for the act of thinking for themselves. He just ordered the assassination of his half-brother in Malaysia. He seems bent on provoking war with the West, provoking a resumption of the vicious civil war his grandfather began nearly 70 years ago. Do you think he has a conscience? Do you think that his conscience is inured? He was educated in Switzerland, so it's reasonable to assume he was exposed to Christianity at some point in his life. Do you think he rejected it?

Or there was Sayyid Qtub. You might never have heard of him. He, too, was educated in the West, and he, too, was exposed to Christianity during his time in America (several years, in fact). Sayyid Qtub was the original Islamist fundamentalist, a man who grew to hate all that the West stands for and who began to challenge the Arab governments in Egypt in the 1960s. He founded the anti-American Muslim Brotherhood and was executed by the Egyptians in 1966. One of his acolytes was a man named Zawahiri, who later worked with a man named Bin Laden to form Al Qaeda. Do you think they had consciences?

Do you think God wrote His laws on their hearts and wrote them on their minds? Has He written them on yours?

You know the answer, and it'll make you uncomfortable to admit that, yes, these people did (or do) know God. God loved Sayyid Qtub, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Osama Bin Laden enough that He sent His only son to die for them. He does it for everyone, even those who commit great sins. Just yesterday, I was at a gymnastics facility here in Paris, talking with a woman there (while waiting for my grandson to complete his gym lesson). We were talking about the man in Dallas who had just shot the paramedic (and who was later found dead, a suicide, in a nearby home). The woman's young daughter quipped into our conversation that "Mommy, Jesus died for that man, too." She's right. He did. Jesus died for that lunatic who murdered an innocent first responder and then murdered himself.

Just like He died for You. You whose sins may be relatively tame compared to Kim Jong Un, Osama Bin Laden, or a crazed killer. Re-read verses 15 and 16 and tell me if they say "only white people" or "The Holy Spirit testifies to Southern Baptists about this." It doesn't say "This pertains only to the Catholics" or "AME Methodists know this better than anyone else." No, those verses say that Jesus' Holy Spirit testifies to US, all of us, each of us, you and me. They say that God wrote His holy laws into our hearts and minds. They are natural law, beyond human education and not caused or inspired by human thought. They are God bequeathed into us, innately part of us. They are branded onto our very existence.

So do I think those horrible people, whoever they are, whoever WE are, know about God without being taught about Him? Yes, yes I do. I believe that God writes Himself into our DNA, whoever we are, and that our deepest yearnings in whatever culture from which we emanate are to know God more. To learn about Him, to seek Him, to build on what He put into us and to find meaning in this life through Him. Some reject this; let's be honest: most people reject this. Yet it doesn't make the truth less true that God loved us first and wants us first to love Him before we know or love anything else. His Spirit speaks to us through the conscience, and we each have a conscience even if we dull it. He loved us enough to die for us no matter what terrible things we do to each other in our lives. He wants everyone to know this so that everyone might turn from our evil ways to embrace His Way. Even Sayyid Qtub, the Dallas killer, and Kim Jong Un.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:7, Jeremiah 31:33-34, Hebrews 8:10.

Lord Jesus, thank You for being bigger than me, more patient than me, more loving than me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 May 2017

Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." Hebrews 10, verse 17.

Jesus is talking about wiping the slate clean. That's a concept we, in our so-called modern world, desperately want.

I've been depressed lately. Really, truly, deeply depressed. It's likely a delayed reaction to too many big things happening in my life too quickly. Job loss, new job; anger over losing the old job, frustration with learning the new one; 2 new grandkids in four months; 2 kids living at home in the same six month period; financial woes; running into the city almost every weekend; missing my old travel job and the control I thought I had over my life; an ever-growing list of chores here on the farm. Guilt over past sins that just doesn't seem to go away; feeling inadequate in everything I do, that no matter what I do it's never enough or never good enough for my wife or my family or my team. Feeling overwhelmed even by small things.

That's all been me over the last few months, actually more like the last year since I went on the bench in my previous job. I feel so frustrated over so many things, and I feel powerless to actually do anything substantial to change them. Yes, it's a lie because God gives us the power to make changes where we are now. He is always with me; He is always actively involved even when it seems like Satan's attacks are making progress in bringing me down. I know all that is true: I simply still feel so down over all of it and more.

Some of what bothers me isn't my fault; I'm innocent of much, maybe even most of it. Yet if I'm going to be truly honest, all of the things that plague me stem from some kind of sin, either mine or someone else's. All dysfunction and strife in the world stems from some kind of sin, either now or in the distant past, even sins that aren't our own. The Bible says that all creation is frustrated by man's sin. Taking that thought to its logical end, when Adam and Eve first fell, their sin set into motion violence, disease, weather patterns, disasters, and other 'natural' phenomena that affect us today. If you think that's possible, then perhaps it's possible for the sins of 7 billion souls alive now affect this planet still.

I know, wacky stuff. It's kind of a stretch; it's kind of crazy to think about it...even if it's true. The goodness of God with us in Eden kept sin away, but man's embrace of sin unleashed these terrors into a place never intended to know them.

Here's some good news, then. Jesus will remember our sins no more. When Jesus moved His Spirit into my heart, He ended the residency of sin. He drove it out and away. He wiped the slate clean and in His mind's eye, they don't even exist anymore. He did that in me here and now. Later, when Jesus returns to renew this corrupted planet, He will remember our sins and lawless acts no more. He will remake nature; He will wipe out crime; He will change everything we know about living in this place. And in doing so, He will make it so that the things that plague us will never plague us again. It will be as if they had never happened.

When I get down, I cling to remembering this. Sure, I do the things to try to beat back the darkness. I make realistic lists of things to do and work to get them done, then pat myself on the back for doing so. I remind myself that I'm doing my best. I remember that the past no longer exists, and the future hasn't yet happened. But most of all, I remember that Christ is in my heart and hurts when I hurt. That He hurt more than I could know for pains like I feel these days. That He died to make my hurt a thing of the past, and that His death means my sins and lawless acts are remembered no more.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:7, Jeremiah 31:33-34, Hebrews 8:10.

My Lord, abide with me when I get depressed. Help me through the dark days, and comfort me with knowing You don't hold my sins and acts against me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 May 2017

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10, verses 19-22.

Here's the medicine for when we get down. Yesterday, I mentioned that I've been down a lot lately. Today's verses talk about how, as renewed believers in Jesus, we can stand in front of God Himself and be guiltless, clean, sinless. Sometimes, in really dark moments, it's hard to see past that darkness and realize that there is real light shining on you, trying to break through. The darkness tries to overcome the light but it can't. It can't because it was Jesus' mission in coming here to live, die, and live again to make it possible for us to stand before God the Father and be blameless. When we clothe ourselves in Jesus' righteousness, we are washed clean from our guilty conscience bothering us and our sins impurifying our souls. Sometimes it's hard to grasp that concept, but we have to keep reminding ourselves of it. Even when we're being clouded by the darkness, it's true. It's God's grace and it's something critical to know.

On a wholly different level, these are also words I want my granddaughter to know. My first granddaughter, Emma Marie, was born back in January. Today, May 4, on "Star Wars Day," comes my second granddaughter, Kaleigh Grace, who will be born later this morning. By all indications, she's a healthy girl, and my prayer is that she and her mom both continue in good health.

Yet the stark truth of birth is that this beautiful little girl is being born into a world of death. She is being born into a world corrupted by the sins of her parents, her family, and billions of strangers both now and in the past. Crime is real. Death is real. Hate is real. War, plagues, famine, genocide, pain and suffering on unimaginable scales are all real. This is the world into which we bring another precious soul today. That can get you down...if you let it.

And you do indeed let it get you down if you forget that God's grace is the reason for hope. Jesus Christ has cleansed our guilty consciences and washed our bodies clean with pure water. No matter what things, good and bad, that Kaleigh Grace does in this world, she will always have a beautiful Savior who loves her, lived and died for her, and rose from death for her. He will always see her as His very good creation, and His beloved bride.

I want my new granddaughter to know these truths. It can be a hard, tough world. I hope and pray that the life which begins today is long and happy. I pray she knows she's loved right from her first moment. Yet there will be hard days, awful times, things that happen around her and even to her that will work to bring her down. In those times, I pray she knows the real truth. That tough times never last. That even in the tough times, a Savior who loves her is right there with her to give her guidance and comfort. That He loves her because of what He did and that she doesn't ever have to do anything to prove herself to Him or try to make Him love her more. That believing in Him now matters both now and forever. And that she's part of eternity, of forever, now because that matters most.

Kaleigh Grace will be named, in part, for my mom, Grace Terry. Mom died a few years ago but lives on with her Savior forever because of His grace...that grace in which a new little girl will be born. Even when the world gets her down, God's grace will always be present.

For further reading: Ephesians 3:12, Leviticus 16:2, Ephesians 2:18, Hebrews 9:8.

Lord Jesus, bless Kaleigh as she begins her journey with You today. I thank You for making her, loving her, providing for her, and guiding her all through her life.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 11 May 2017

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10, verses 19-22.

Before moving on, let's talk about "a sincere heart." It's mentioned there in the verses above and it bears some extra pondering. The verse talks about being active, about doing something: drawing near to God...but under two conditions. One, that we have a sincere heart and, two, that we are blessed with the full assurance (of forgiveness) that faith brings.

There's an old country song, a Clint Black song, "Something That We Do." It's a love song, of course; a sonnet from Black to his wife. One lyric stands out to me: "love isn't something that we have, it's something that we do." I like sappy old songs, so naturally I like this one. Yet let's apply that lyric to these verses.

Love isn't just something that we have it's something that we do. We have to DO something to demonstrate love to God. It's not something that He requires us to do, or needs us to do to satisfy a command. It isn't even something that He asks of us. Let's keep it real: God doesn't NEED us to do anything for Him. He's God and we aren't. Instead, if we are to be near God, and if we are to be blessed by His presence, then we have to 'draw near.' We have to do the physical action of reading His word, praying with Him, confessing to Him, talking with Him. Those are things we do that we're motivated to do because of His love. That love is both what He does and what He is. It's very much a 'both/and' kind of thing.

And with what do we draw near? You know: that sincere heart. According to dictionary.com, the most common meanings for 'sincere' are "free of deceit, hypocrisy, or falseness; earnest, genuine; real; pure; unmixed; unadulterated." We GET TO have a sincere heart because of the love that is something He does. He makes us new. He makes us righteous. He takes away our sins, our guilt, our shame, our anxiety and, in return, He makes our hearts sincere. He does that because that's genuine and real. God operates exclusively in the realm of genuine and real. There is nothing disingenuous or unreal about Him. Accordingly, He makes us whole to draw near to Him so that He can be earnest, pure, free of deceit, and unadulterated with us. And when God does that, He is blessing us beyond measure, giving us the full assurance of His forgiveness and His constant presence in our lives.

He does it from the inside out. It's the heart that God remakes. It's what's dearest inside of us, closest to what we really believe and really feel, where God moves. God operates on us to make our hearts blameless and sincere again, like they were before we clouded them up with the insincerity of sin. Like a little baby's heart; like my little granddaughter, Kaleigh Grace's heart. She seems so uncompromised by sin, so pure starting out. Yet deep inside even that precious little girl lies the nature of rebellion. You hear it in desperate crying and a refusal to be comforted easily. Already, even at only four days old, she desperately needs the love of a sincere God to be something that He does. That's much better than an old country song.

For further reading: Ephesians 3:12, Leviticus 16:2, Ephesians 2:18, Hebrews 9:8.

My Lord, thank You for blessing me by being in my life. Thank You for loving me in a way that I couldn't do myself.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 16 May 2017

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. Hebrews 10, verse 23.

If you've read this blog for awhile, you know that I recently started a new job. My previous company laid me off in December. Now, I'm 50 and have been working in one capacity or another since I was 16. This wasn't the first time I'd been rolled off an account or even laid off a job. Yet this has been the first time that my confidence has been rattled to the core. I started a new job 3 months ago and, by all measures, it's going very well (I'm leading a great team of really talented people). Yet I've become ultra-sensitive to perfectionism, working to try to get things just right even as I know that isn't a sustainable goal. For the first time in my life, I've encountered anxiety, even panic attacks. Couple that with some pretty heavy depression, a bunch of other stressors, and it's a tough combination to live with. I've come to dread every time someone from my new job calls or e-mails, wondering if this is the message where the ax falls on my neck again. 50 is a tough time in life to be having to start over.

It's as if I have forgotten how to hold unswervingly to the hope I profess in Christ. Except that my faith is still solid. All through this, I've known deep inside that God was still real. I've almost instinctively known that Jesus is with me, and that whatever I'm feeling, He's beside me to help me. That's proof of Hebrews 10, verse 23. And yet I've still been hurting.

Earlier, I was talking with my atheist friend who, once again, chided me for believing in "space fairies." I replied to him that it'd be better if he got to know the One he calls "space fairy" now, in thanks and admiration, instead of later in fear and dread because he will come to know Him whether he calls Him names or not. Again, this is something I know inside of me because I believe what God has said through His Word and through His nature & history. Yet in a world of doubt, anger, and hurt, is it any wonder that people like atheists would reject faith they can't see, even if the One they reject is faithful and bears real hope?

Perhaps it's natural to occasionally question one's faith, even as the God in whom we have faith doesn't question us. He is always present, always the same, always diligent, always loving. He's God; He can't be any other way. We aren't God; we can't be God and shouldn't try (after all, there really are no true atheists...). I can only speak for myself in saying that I truly believe in all God says He is and that I don't doubt that He's saved me. Yet I still question where He is and His purposes when things like this job loss come to me. I didn't deserve it, but it happened. It has wreaked a lot of changes, some good and many not, in my family's life, and I question "why".

Perhaps the best answer is still the one God gave to Job, namely that He's God and I'm not and I should just be comforted by knowing that. Way back in the book of Job – probably the oldest book in the Bible – God upheld the hope of His faithful servant who, like me, questioned when bad things happened without rejecting his belief in his Maker. It's ok to be sincere about saying "Lord, this really sucks right now." It's ok to be sincere about feeling bad when things make you feel bad. It's ok to be sincere in saying "I don't want this." Vent those feelings and share those thoughts; that's good, even Godly. And then let them go and come back into His fold, remembering that He gives real hope for here and now, not just forever. He who promised it is faithful in all things and at all times.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:1, 1 Cor 1:9.

Lord, it's been really tough lately and I've been hurting, questioning why these things have happened. I believe in You, though, and I know in my heart that You are with me. Uphold me now and continue to give me the courage to face each new day. Thanks for what You do and who You are.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 May 2017

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Hebrews 10, verse 24

I'm a project manager. I manage a team of people working on a project to remove Social Security numbers from older peoples' Medicare ID cards. Because I work remotely, I've never physically met most of the people on my team (though I do know some from previous jobs). It's tough to get to know people you don't see face to face, and that makes. even more sense because I'm the new kid on the block. On a work team, you're drawn together by the commonality of your tasks and the fact that you're employed for the same reason by the same people. Yet in a virtual work environment, you never see your co-workers or team members in person. Unless you know your co-workers from previous interaction, you don't have common ground. That makes motivating a team difficult.

So Hebrews 10, verse 24 is perhaps some of the best project management advice ever written, especially for virtual teams.

"Let us consider" is a call to friendly action. Notice that it doesn't say "do this" or "you will." It isn't directive in nature and yet it places the reader in a position as if they had been directed. "Let us consider" are three words that are swung as a velvet hammer. They don't force you to do anything yet place the burden of inaction squarely on you and you alone. They ask you to do something without commanding you to do something. They appeal to your reason and your sense of belonging. That shouldn't be surprising because that's usually how Jesus operates.

"Spur" (according to dictionary.com) means "anything that goads, impels, or urges, as to action, speed, or achievement." The King James version of Hebrews uses the word "provoke" but no matter what version is used to translate the word, the intention is clearly to convince others to move. A manager spends most of his time doing just this. A good manager will do it in such a way as to inspire you to act on your own to do your part in a larger mission. As managers, we spend most of our time spurring people forward to support the tasks we oversee. As followers of Jesus, we should be spending most of our time doing the same thing, and the task with which we're charged is sharing the Gospel.

And we are to spur one another TOWARD love and good deeds. Sure, we are to comport ourselves in love and righteousness. Jesus gave us both of those things and we're to use them in living our lives. Yet when we manage and lead others, we are to inspire them in the direction of love and good deeds. We aren't supposed to do other peoples' love and good deeds for them. Helicopter parents beware: you aren't responsible for living your kids' lives. Your job is to inspire them by parenting them, teaching them, preparing them.

Helicopter managers beware as well: you're responsible for the efforts of your team, but it isn't your job to do their work for them. It's your job to spur them toward doing it. It's our job to serve a greater good by helping those around us serve it as well. May I suggest that, whether you have Jesus followers on your team or not, some practical advice on why, even how, to do that is found first and foremost in the Bible (and not in the PM Body of Knowledge)?

Best of all, we get to do these things while relying on the foundation of faith in Jesus' true good news. Love and good deeds are both the reason and the by-product of living in Jesus' presence where love and good deeds become standard operating procedure. In working with them we find it's the journey and not the destination that matters most.

I don't know whether my team-members are believers or not. In today's super-sensitive work climate, it's almost taboo to discuss matters of faith. Yet whether they're believers or not, more often than not I find myself asking "what should I do" of my Savior when I have even the slightest question about work. I'm learning to entreat Him into my routines, involving my faith more and more as a practical tool for managing my work team. There is no downside to that.

For further reading: Titus 2:14.

Lord, be involved in my work. Lead me and teach me so I may lead and inspire others.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 18 May 2017

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10, verses 24-25.

I'm building a collection of rocks around the base of the cross we built by my pond. At our old house, I had built a similar collection of stones from all around the world. California, Florida, China, Uganda: wherever I went, I picked up a rock. They were put in a special planter built for just that purpose, but when we moved I left the rocks there. Now, I'm building a new collection and it already has rocks from Walt Disney World, the Gulf Coast, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and places all over Texas. I even have an old chunk of amethyst my Mom had acquired (I believe) at a rock quarry in Arkansas way back when I was a kid.

Somehow it seems neat to me to gather stones from all over the world to place them there at the foot of the cross. That cross was almost the first project we did when we moved into this house last year. The day after we took possession, my son, son-in-law, and I cut down a tree in our woods, fashioned it into a cross, bolted and roped it together, and then installed it in concrete. A few months later, I wrapped it in solar lights so that it lights up at night. When you drive by our house at night, you can see the cross, reflected off the pond. It's our own kind of witness to our friends and neighbors.

What does this have to do with verses 24 and 25? To be honest, I'm not sure it has anything to do with it. Then again..

...Then again, maybe it has everything to do with it. My rock collection is like a collection of people, coming together to worship and make the cross of the Lord look better. The longer we live here, the more it matters to give glory to God. There are rocks of different shapes, different composition, different colors. All together, they're a mosaic. They're a strong base that gives the structure both foundation and beauty.

They're like a church. We started going to our home church, Waters Edge Frisco, in 2006, when it was still worshipping in a school. Eleven years, several pastors, a discordant split, and hundreds of members later, I hardly recognize the place for all the new faces and new directions in which it's moving. That's a good thing. The people of God are the church, not some building or even some congregation. We're supposed to move in the world, yet we're also called to come together to give glory to God. When we do, it's a refreshing thing to see a fresh, new mosaic of people calling that place home while others from the past have gone on to color their new homes with the purpose and freshness then once brought to ours. That, too, is a good thing, for the body of God is alive.

We go to church to be the church, and the more I grow in faith, the more I value my time with my fellow believers. We're like those stones around the cross, bringing purpose, beauty, and strength to worship our God. The more I grow in my faith, though, the more I see that the worship isn't about our purpose, beauty or strength. We get those things from God Himself. They aren't ours alone. They aren't even ours to give. They're qualities given to people to share in God's greater mission. All the more as we see the days of the end approaching, it's a good thing to come together as groups and gather around the cross to simply worship He who was once nailed to it. In doing so, we encourage each other and build each other up.

When we give glory to Jesus, He shines that glory out over us like the Sun warming the land.

It's my hope to one day build that rock collection so big that it overtakes the cross. I'll have to expand around it at that point. It's my hope that friends, family and, better yet, strangers, will look at the collection and ask how it came to be, and what it means. It's my hope that, in a pile of rocks, they'll see a unique glimpse of the Savior.

For further reading: Titus 2:14, Acts 2:43, Hebrews 3:13, 1 Corinthians 3:13.

Lord, may I be Your rock in a wonderful collection of other stones.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 May 2017

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Hebrews 10, verses 26-27.

This verse occurs right after exhorting believers to spur others on to love and good deeds and to continue worshiping. The context is to persevere in the faith. You can't persevere or succeed in anything if you only give half your heart to it. You also can't persevere if you aren't aware of boundaries, of white lines in which to stay between. So when you consider that the book of Hebrews encourages believers to persevere, then reminds us that the consequences for being a half-hearted believer can be dire, then you see that God is interested in a whole person. You can see that God's grace is boundless while any absence of it would be a hard boundary indeed. If we only give half of ourselves to Him, we shouldn't expect He'll be happy. Indeed, as these verses say, half-hearted believers should expect punishment. That doesn't mean God will punish us; He is a God of love, mercy, and grace, which He shows abundantly. Instead, we should not take for granted or expect the love, mercy and grace, but expect their opposites in a world focused on them.

Yesterday's sermon topic was "de-cluttering." Pastor Mark talked about ways to de-clutter our spiritual lives so as to remove impediments that block our focus on God. We put that clutter in the way, and clutter isn't even always bad. Family time, hard work, supporting others, church work, even a daily Christian blog can all be great things and great expressions of faith. They can also clutter up one's life and make it difficult to focus on what's most important. Without knowing how it happens, Mary can easily go all Martha (in fact, in another place in Scripture, apart from that famous dinner, she did).

How many things have I put on my plate because they're the right thing to do? Too many to list here. Worse, how many pet sins have I held onto that make it difficult to even focus on those right things? I know deep inside that I shouldn't do this. I was saved long ago, even before the time I can remember, and yet I still keep on choosing the wrong over the right. Slip of a tongue, moments of anger, being judgmental, looks and thought of selfish lust: pick a sin and paint me guilty. I'll return the favor because, chances are, you're guilty too.

Better yet, let's change our behavior. Part of repenting is turning away from the wrongdoing, so let's do that here and now. What I just said, about painting you guilty? I'm putting down the paint brush. I'll confess my sins to Jesus and leave them with Him. His Word (in these verses) says there are BAAAAAD consequences for folks who choose the sins over Him. I don't want to be one of those people because there's a better way. Giving half my heart to God and half my heart to the world is wearying and unproductive for either. My are just clutter waiting to be swept away. Time to get out the broom and start sweeping. Your sins are your own too; I'm hoping you'll want to sweep them away, too. I can't do that for you but Jesus can, and He will. What I can do is be your friend and your brother. I'll help you through what you're going through and help you stay between the lines with me. Together, we'll each do our part to persevere in the faith.

For further reading: Exodus 21:14, Numbers 15:30, Hebrews 5:2, 2 Peter 2:20, 1 Timothy 2:4, Isaiah 26:11, 2 Thessalonians 1:7, Hebrews 9:27, Luke 10:38-42.

Lord, help my unbelief. I need Your help to persevere, to succeed in whatever You have me do. I can't do anything without You.

May

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 May 2017

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10, verses 28-29.

Skipping ahead few verses we find this quote: It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Perhaps that one verse better sums up the idea behind these two.

Just this morning, a Facebook friend posted a list of things God can't do. They're things like "God can't stop loving you" and "God can't break a promise." All of them are accurately referenced to Bible verses, so they're true. It seems crazy to think that there are things God can't do, and I suppose you could argue whether the meme should say "won't" versus "can't." I'm not partial to one term or the other, so either works for me.

One of them says "God can't be unholy" from Isaiah 6:3. God is holy; the whole earth is full of His holiness, reflecting that holiness and His eternal glory. A holy God can't tolerate un-holiness in His presence. In order for God to remain holy, He won't tolerate un-reconciled un-holiness to be near Him in any way. When Satan strolled into heaven (in Job), God had already provided remedy for Satan's wrongdoing (way back in Genesis). When you and I stand in front of God as believers in Jesus, Jesus has already done everything possible and necessary to reconcile our status with the Holy God. God can't and won't tolerate our un-holiness, and He can't and won't be made unholy or tarnished with our un-holiness. And because God will see us through the filter of His Son's perfection (His own), He won't see us as unholy sinners. God will see us as made holy by His own blood sacrifice.

Put yourself in the shoes of the person who spends their entire life rejecting Jesus. Put yourself in the shoes of the person who believes in Jesus, then recants. Put yourself in the shoes of the person who is completely apathetic, even agnostic, about Jesus. If you know God doesn't tolerate un-holiness, even if you don't believe there is a God, do you want to be the person who stands against Him when you find out He's real?

Mind you, these verses aren't a guarantee of God's vengeance. They aren't hellfire and brimstone for the damn dirty sinners who turn Him away (which is each of us and some time or other). God is guaranteed to be just because holiness is just, and justice (real justice) is based in holiness, and God is holy. Yet God, who is both just and holy, doesn't guarantee harsh treatment for those who reject him. Our holy God is also a God of beautiful mercy.

Instead, the point of these verses is to point out the fact that this holy, just God is all-powerful. It points out that a holy, just God has the power to smite those who oppose him. Unless you have some sick death wish, why would you want to pit yourself against Him?

In olden days (or in 'modern' Islamic nations), legal justice is meted out by ecclesiastical authorities. In the days of Moses, legal justice (as an extension of God's delegated authority) would be meted out on those against whom witnesses would testify. Our legal system today is a descendant of that concept, namely in how those found guilty would be found guilty based on trial against them (including eyewitnesses). If you know your actions could place you in jeopardy, why would you want to act in ways that could bring ruin on you? After all, it's a dreadful thing to fall in the hands of the living God, especially if you may deserve it. If you've ever played the "would you rather" game, then think of this proposition as that game. Would you rather adhere to God's requests or dare Him to follow through?

For further reading: Deuteronomy 17:6-7, Isaiah 6:3, Matthew 18:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Revelation 1:5, Ephesians 4:30.

Lord, I fear, respect, and love you.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 May 2017

For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Hebrews 10, verses 30-31.

Once again I injected myself into a 'discussion' with my friend, the atheist. Once again I found him both vulgar and offensive, and he said he found my Christian faith offensive as well. His online thread was about how atheists are deeper intellectuals than most people. I stayed out of the discussion until the point where he began disparaging to believers. At that point, I waded in, and once again, I feel sad about it.

I'm sad both because I never feel like I do a good job at representing Christ as a loving follower. I feel like I let Him down because of my poor words and my proud attitude. And I'm sad for my friend, who (almost violently) rejects the peace and comforts of faith for the sensuality of this world. For any of us who reject Him, the Triune God reserves the right to judge, avenge, and repay His people – including both followers of Jesus and atheists – for the ways we rebel against Him. I'm not comfortable with that fact, but it's still a fact. It's actually a comfort.

The 'dreadful thing' verse I mentioned yesterday is found here, in verse 31. It is the concluding sentence in a paragraph that talks about God's holiness. It's a convicting verse in a convicting chapter of a book about God's grace. God, whose nature prevents Him from doing anything unholy, is therefore purely holy and, thus, purely just. The only true justice in the universe is therefore found in the presence of God. You can see, then, why it may be a dreadful thing to be found in His hands.

I rarely feel fear anymore, fear here being the terrorizing, angst-ridden emotion of dread. Yet I have genuine dreadful fear of the power of God and what I deserve from Him (absent the saving atonement of Jesus). The discussion with my atheist friend yesterday ventured into the subjects of sin, forgiveness, and truth (specifically about science). Yet every time we have these conversations, I walk away feeling dejected, depressed. It's because I don't like playing 'gotcha' with God's word. More and more, it isn't my place to try to use debating tricks to try to change his mind. Such tricks are unkind and antithetical to the Word. Besides, they doesn't convince him of anything except that I seem like a hypocritical jerk. Yesterday, I simply told him what the Bible said and encouraged him to check it out on his own, told him that perhaps God was talking to him because he was so passionate about the discussion. He told me to perform unnatural acts on myself and other things.

I know that we have to stand up for what we believe. And I know that we need to use the talents God gives us to encourage others in their faith walks, even when their faith walk is a walk away from God. It's one of the reasons why I would dread to be in His presence, answering for these things I've done. I feel like I'm letting Jesus down. Even so, I know it also isn't my place to judge whether or not my friend or anyone would be liable to God's wrath. The better way to live would be to witness, to leave it at that, and perhaps also to do what Abraham did. If you remember, Abraham pleaded for the people of Sodom. When they had clearly, brazenly, unrepentantly transgressed, Abraham still prayed for, pleaded for them. We should do the same.

And so I do. I pray for my atheist friend. According to his own words, this, too, is offensive. Yet I do it all the same. The same God who is over all of us – including him – is also constantly loving us, working for us, living to beckon us back to Him. Jesus died for atheists too, and He gives my denying friend life, provision, and all things. While our holy, just God has the power to smite, it isn't in His nature to desire to do so. Instead, it's in His nature to be merciful, caring, guiding, loving. I hope my friend can come to see this.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 32:35-36, Romans 12:19, Psalm 135:14, 2 Corinthians 5:11, Isaiah 19:16, Matthew 16:16.

Lord, forgive my inadequacies and my sins in how I mess up being a good witness for You. Teach me Your better ways that I may speak well of You.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 May 2017

For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Hebrews 10, verses 30-31.

Before we move off these verses, let's talk about revenge.

Verse 30 is a quote from Deuteronomy 32:35, meaning that the quote goes back to Moses. They are part of what's called "the Song of Moses," which was a recitation he gave in front of the assembled Israelites. In it, he's saying farewell to his fellow Israelites, warning them to not push God to the limit. God gave them free will but He did so in order for them to want to love Him willingly. Moses doesn't have much time left, and he uses it to explain, one more time, the mercy and justice of the Lord. Immediately after, he says that the Lord will judge His chosen people. Left out from the book of Hebrews quote is how got "will have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left slave or free."

On one hand God talks about judging people harshly, and on the other hand God talks about having compassion on them. My friend the atheist might be laughing at this because it would appear to give credence to his assertion that God is crazy. Except that it doesn't. The Song of Moses sings about the same thing the Hebrews 10 says: God is just and merciful. When you devote your heart to God, you set yourself apart from the scoffers, critics, and God-haters. When you realize how full love, peace, justice, and harmony are found only in God's Son, Jesus, you say to the world "I believe. I'm not like the others." Elitist? Not at all. It's a profession of faith in understanding that the Triune God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob is a God of peace and understanding, but that, like any parent, His peace and understanding have limits. When we push our ultimate parent to His limit, should it be a surprise that we would incur His wrath?

It does no good to try to predict what that wrath would look like. Fire, tribulation, burning sulfur, the agony of hell: perhaps it could be any of these. Perhaps, too, it could be discord, anxiety, difficulty, troubles, even depression. These, too, can be God's tools to avenge our rebellion. What did the song say: "Be careful what you wish for cause you just might get it." Perhaps God's wrath in our lives is coated in sensual pleasure. But notice a couple of things about whatever medium He chooses. One, whatever evils beset us, they only do because of our own pulling away from God. He's still there, in the center, where He always is. It is us who move away; it is us who draw ourselves away from His mercy and grace. Draw far enough away and it would be as if He had drawn Himself out of our lives, which He cannot do because He loves us unconditionally.

Notice, too, that all of those pains are temporary things. They are physical or emotional difficulties that come into our lives for a relatively short time. When they do, they are actually for our good. That can be hard to see, but it's true. God disciplines those He loves, and discipline can be tough to endure. Sometimes it's terrible; sometimes it even lasts for years. Yet it isn't permanent, and if we submit ourselves to it, we are disciplined, 'disciplined,' and made stronger. Finally, notice that God doesn't ensnare us into the dread of His justice. We fall into it. Through some kind of circumstance, we initiate that falling. We place ourselves in rebellion against Him and, when we've reached the limit of His patience, we are before Him, subject to judgment. Is that fair?

Fair? What is fair but a four-letter F-word? God is the arbiter of fair. Apart from seeing fair through the lens of God, our interpretation of fairness is skewed. God owes us nothing, yet He constantly provides even if it's only life, air, and food. We earn His judgment, yet He's constantly working to help us avoid it. He knows that, apart from Him, we can do nothing. He understands that, with our limited comprehension, to stand guilty before Him would be a dreadful thing for our soul. God knows that revenge is a terrible thing, even if we bring His revenge on ourselves, and He'd rather spare us that consequence.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 32:35-36, Romans 12:19, Psalm 135:14, 2 Corinthians 5:11, Isaiah 19:16, Matthew 16:16; John 15:15.

Lord, I pray, discipline and mentor me that my heart may change and I may turn from my sinful ways to avert Your vengeance.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 June 2017

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Hebrews 10, verse 32.

I've been a practicing Christian for most of my life. There were a few years after I graduated high school when I fell away, when I felt I had lost my faith. Not surprisingly, even as they were thrilling years of being young, I also felt lost. In my faith walk, that feeling persisted for most of my twenties, until we became involved in a church in Colorado Springs. The pastor who led the church was well-versed in sound doctrine and you could feel the presence of God's Spirit moving in all we did there. It was a pleasure to do church work then. I looked forward to Sunday Bible studies, and found that the company of Christian friends was anything but boring.

It's easy to be 'amped up' on faith when things are good.

Like on my first mission trip overseas. I was in a group that went to China in late 2009. We dug drainage ditches for a school in the southern People's Republic. One souvenir I got from there was a rusty metal bowl. It was a food bowl used by a student at the school; apparently it was worn out and thrown away. For a week I watched the kids at this school as they each ate their two meals a day out of bowls like that. Two meals of rice, vegetables, and sparse meat; thank you to the Big Brother of the Communist Party. If they didn't eat then, they didn't eat. If you didn't like what was being served, keep quiet or you might not get any at all. After the trip I had all kinds of intentions of raising money to help the kids in that school. Those intentions fell apart when, in short order, I steered a tornado through my marriage.

But I remember the passion of wanting to help, of seeing people in need who really needed help. I remember the feeling of God's Spirit motivating me, inspiring me to do something, anything, to help those kids who ate out of rusty metal bowls and slept on hard wood-slat beds with one or two kids to a blanket. I look at the bowl today and am reminded of how much people need food for the body as well as food for the soul.

A few years later, I took a trip to Africa. The one place on earth where I felt closest to God was while walking up into a new church in a small east Ugandan village. Our mission group helped finish construction of the building, and we attended the dedication service for it. There were hundreds of people flowing into the building that day. It honestly felt like being in a procession of angels, with everyone singing, praising, and showing real joy at the simple fact of being together in God's presence.

Those are the kinds of feelings that verse 32 is talking about. When we're new to the faith, or when we are riding the high water moments of our faith journey, it's easy to feel caught up in the moment with the Spirit. It feels completely refreshing to have your soul renewed; if you haven't lived that experience, it's like a spiritual Nestea plunge. Nothing sensual of this earth compares to the touch of God in your life. Yet when you feel it, the world around us doesn't suddenly become any easier to live in. Indeed, professing one's belief in Christ puts a target on your back. Christ Himself promised that, while His burden was light, it would cost His followers everything. Yet there's something completely invigorating about plunging into faith to which nothing else can compare.

Verse 32 reminds us that we should remember those feelings and cling to those times. In a world that's hostile to Christianity, we'll need them to get through the promised rough days ahead and those through which we now persevere.

For further reading: Hebrews 6:4, Philippians 1:29-30.

My Lord, thank You for the times when You've filled my heart. I couldn't have known how empty it was if You hadn't filled it. Help me to remember that when evil attacks.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 June 2017

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. Hebrews 10, verses 32-34.

Is this calling us to actively give up our possessions? Is it telling us to be content in all circumstances, even when we're being mistreated? Actually, yes it is. It ISN'T saying "be happy about it." God doesn't tell us to enjoy suffering. But He does tell us to put our trust in Him alone and be content with Him because He is more than enough to overcome any suffering. He doesn't promise Easy Street: He promises to abide with us on any street. Is this also telling us to turn the other cheek? Again, yes it is. When suffering happens, we should focus our joy on it's true source, Jesus. Instead of focusing on hurt, to stop the 'bleeding' of our suffering, we should focus on He who is with us even to the point of turning the other cheek to the one who is making us suffer.

A few days ago, my Billy Graham devotion reminded me that "joy" doesn't equal "happiness" as the world defines happiness. Brother (and sister), I understand this. I'm sure you do, too. Without divulging too many whines, my family is going through a difficult time. For the moment, my wife and I are unemployed. Just as He did the last time we went through this, God has a plan in all this. To be honest, we don't know what that plan is right now, but we do trust Him and His daily provision. We're still eating; we're still breathing; midnight to midnight, we are still above the dirt. Everything else is a gift from Him, even the struggles. We pray the time will be short, and we're blessed to be able to use it to do things that need to be done here on our farm. God is good all the time and all the time God is good.

Yet it can be a struggle to see happiness or joy in this. "How could it" you might ask? "Dave, you're on the unemployment line again; you expect to be happy?" Happy no, joy yes. Every struggle, even unemployment or financial struggles, is an opportunity to make a choice for Jesus. The verses aren't saying that my problems will disappear. It's only saying that my unseen baggage from them can when I fix my eyes and hope on Christ. If nothing else, why not ease that emotional burden?

And let's get real: the author of Hebrews wasn't talking about a First-World situation like unemployment or paying your bills online. He was talking about struggles like being tortured in Roman prisons. About living in a world with astronomical infant mortality, real starvation, life expectancy of 45 years, and a host of other problems that most of us can't fathom. The first audience for verses 32-34 was comprised of people who lived in the primitive first century nations of the Mediterranean. He was telling them to put all their trust, their hope, their everything on the shoulders of Jesus and let Jesus take the heat. The author was telling his reader to rejoice in Jesus even when the branding iron struck your flesh, or you were kidnapped to row in a galley, or your family was sold off into slavery because you couldn't pay your debts, or when they nailed you to a cross.

My puny problems pale compared to those things. If our ancestors could trust Jesus through things like that, I can too.

I'll admit: it's a struggle. We are having to 'skinny down;' going through possessions, putting our farm up for sale, applying for jobs (literally) all over the world. It's hard to face being let go and rejected; it's hard to face doing without things you've worked for or desire. It hurts to go through this. Jesus understands that. He's with us during these times and is calling us to put our faith in Him. When the tough times are past, the lessons He's teaching us today will come in handy.

For further reading: Hebrews 6:4, Philippians 1:29-30, 1 Corinthians 4:9, Philippians 4:14, 1 Peter 1:4-5.

Lord, help me to trust You in all things. Forgive my weakness and how I've failed You. I trust You in Your teaching, Your provision, and Your discipline.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 June 2017

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. Hebrews 10, verse 35.

I remember when I was a kid, my mom would take business trips. This was in the early 1970s, and we lived in Minnesota. At the time, Mom was the one who had a job that took her on trips; Dad worked in the city. A woman working as the breadwinner was unusual in those days, but, then again, my family was always unusual. Anyway, when Mom would travel, beforehand she would ask my sister and I what special thing she could bring home. We'd tell her our wishes, and then we'd spend a day or two anticipating what we'd get. Then Mom would arrive back home and...well...she tried. She got us things she thought we would like but somehow it just wasn't what we had in mind. One time I remember asking for a toy called Richochet Racers, which was a toy that shot little race cars out of a plastic gun. At the end of that trip, I got a cover for my tennis racket. Another time I asked for a ship model; I got a book. Years later, when Dad traveled, he would get T-shirts and sometimes collectible things like an ebony pig he bought for me in the Philippines (I still have it).

Yet I was always hopeful and always kept the faith that I'd get what I want. Years later, being a parent and grandparent myself, and being one of those who has tried to do what he could with limited resources, I understand my Mom's (and Dad's) situation. They did their best with what they had at hand. Somehow I knew this even when I was a kid, and even then, even when disappointed, I still had faith in my parents that they would do their best. It was love.

What does this have to do with verse 35, which isn't a child's hope for a toy? Verse 35 PROMISES us that God richly rewards those who put their faith in Him. God guarantees that He will reward us for our faith in Him. But faith in God can be a tough thing to hold on to despite the fact that, when you have a 'God moment,' it's better than anything else on this planet. Even better than hoping for a cool toy. When we have confident faith that God is with us in all situations, He richly rewards us. Richochet Racers? Better than that? A tennis racket cover or a book? Definitely better than those.

What God rewards us with shames Joel Osteen and I both. God rewards us with Himself. He imparts to us His hope, His love, His justice, His strength. We don't deserve God's best but that doesn't stop Him from giving it to us. A toy car won't do you much good when your parents are buried in the cemetery, but believing that they are alive with Jesus will. An ebony pig isn't worth much to your soul, but faith in Jesus is priceless because it guarantees you peace now and eternal life forever. A tennis racket cover actually is of good use now but I don't have that tennis racket (or that cover) anymore. But I still have my faith in God.

Being richly rewarded isn't a matter of being rich, or even rewarded. It's about putting your faith in the one who never disappoints because His reward is Himself. It isn't some stupid claim on seventy-two virgins. It isn't a fancy house and cars in the Houston suburbs. It isn't a trip to Disney or even a kiss goodnight from a pretty girl. Being richly rewarded with the God who has revealed Himself to us through His word is a matter of being aligned with Him. Of looking at things His way. Of remembering that He who tests us in so many ways only does so to lovingly build us up for better things. Of knowing that, whenever troubles come our way (and they will), He is there to stand with us and give us what we need to persevere. Of understanding that He loves us immeasurably and wants only the best for us. That's why He gives us Himself.

Even if Mom had brought me the toy I wanted way back in the early 70s, chances are it would still be in the dump by now (along with that tennis racket cover). What mattered more was knowing that she loved me enough to give me her best as a reflection of the faith she had in our God, who always does the same.

For further reading: Ephesians 3:12.

Lord Jesus, forgive my short-sighted selfishness. Thank You for loving me unconditionally, and thank You for parents and loved ones who do that and their best for us.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 June 2017

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10, verses 35-36.

Is it wrong to do God's will – to live as He commands and requests, to keep His commands, to model your life on His – just to get a reward? Isn't that mercenary and sinful?

I've been tilling here on the farm. Last week, I tilled the rows between my pumpkin plants. Yesterday, I tilled the backyard that four dogs had made into a moonscape. Down in the pumpkin patch, the goal was to grind up weeds and make it look more presentable. It also aerated the soil, which is great for the pumpkins. In the backyard, once I tilled it and raked it out, I seeded Bermuda grass. Since two of the four dogs have gone to their proper homes, I'm hoping to see green grass. God willing in both places, the desired plants will flourish.

Was it wrong of me to till the field to get a better crop? And was it wrong of me to till the backyard so as to grow nice green grass? There are things I want for my work (namely plants). I'm confident that doing so was the best option for both kinds of 'crops.' But was it right to churn up the soil to get what I want out of it?

What about disciplining kids? My grandson has lived most of the last 2 months at our house. He's a precocious three and bent on self-focused rebellion like all kids that age. If one parent told him 'no,' he would quickly shift to a grandparent in hopes of hearing a different response (we usually didn't give in). We worked to stay united with his Mom and Dad because we want him to grow up to be happy, respectful, and centered. Spoiled kids are rarely any of those things. Was it wrong to inflict on an 'innocent' three year old conditions (like "no") that were beyond his control just so we could obtain a desired response, behavior or obedience?

It is wrong to look at God as a wish-machine. Jesus isn't some function box where the output in port B is dependent on the input at port A. The God of our fathers isn't Pavlov's dog, responding in kind when we give him a stimulus. If we think that God's rewarding of us is the only reason why He promises us good things, then you need to remember what we discussed yesterday. God's reward to us is Himself. He shares Himself with us. He makes it possible for us to commune with Him. He invites us to share in His blessings because He, Himself, is the richest reward possible. Being in communion with God's perfect love, peace, truth, and justice is the single greatest accumulation of wealth that any human could ever achieve.

We obtain that reward when we believe. In other words, we do something. We do it with knowledge that He is worthy and true. Believing in your heart that Jesus is your savior, that God has done all that's necessary to redeem you from the terror of your sins, is the first (and last) step we take to gain that communion reward. When we believe, we find it isn't unreasonable to want to do things that please God because He begins to re-tool our way of thinking. Petty things that were once important can take on a different appearance. When we believe in Jesus, we shouldn't just want the reward of Him: we must expect it. We must expect it because He promised it. He guaranteed He would pour out His blessings on us that we might share them and invite others into His same communion. It isn't a sin at all, and it isn't hoping wish: it's a promise of true hope.

Still, I hope that, whatever my job is in Heaven, God wants me to be a farmer. I love working outside; I love working in the fields and helping good things grow. And I love that my grandkids have gotten to see the fields, and play in the grass, and enjoy our home in the country. It reminds me of better things always to come. God has promised that and I believe in His promises.

For further reading: Ephesians 3:12, Romans 5:3, Hebrews 12:1, James 1:3, James 4:12, James 5:11, 2 Peter 1:6, Hebrews 6:15, Hebrews 9:15.

Lord, thank You for Your holy promises. Thank You for Your rewards, and for making it possible that I might share and share in them.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 July 2017

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay." Hebrews 10, verses 35-37.

Persevering is tough; duh.

I'm entering the third week with a new job, and it's a true blessing. In reality, all work is a blessing, but it's even more noticeable when you get the rare opportunity to go back to a place where you were successful before. Both my wife and I were out of work for just over a month yet that's ending. As mentioned, I'm starting my third week. As of this morning, my wife is also starting a new job. God has been so good in so many ways, and at the (hopeful) end of unemployment, I'll confess that it was only through persevering in God that we were able to make it through. Because we did persevere in Him, He's rewarding us with new opportunities. Not because of our perseverance, but because of His grace. All we did was trust Him. Yet I'll admit it was tough.

Living can indeed be tough. Just this morning I saw a picture on Pinterest of a Revolutionary War veteran. Yes, you read that right: a photograph of a veteran of the American Revolution. In fact, he was the last veteran. The photo was taken in the 1860s of a man named Daniel Bakeman, who died as the last veteran of the American Revolution on April 5, 1869. If you search on the internet, you can find pictures of other Revolution veterans as well. By the time photography was invented, they were already very old men. Yet it amazes me to see a picture, not a painting, of someone who actually fought in the American Revolution in the 1700s. It's a connection to exactly what such people looked like instead of a representation of them. Such men lived long lives of perseverance and reaped the reward of living in a free land they had helped to build.

It's a tough thing to persevere, to push yourself forward in faith even when things tell you not to. God never promises us that things will be rosy when we believe in Him. Indeed, He promises we'll be persecuted because we're siding with Him. When we say we believe, we're saying that we reject the world which rejects Him. That's most of humanity, and most of humanity doesn't take kindly to having a Christian finger stuck in its eye. Yet that's what we do. We do it by saying "I believe" when logic tells us not to. We do it by thanking God for both the good and the bad. We do it by trusting Him to live out His will in our lives no matter what happens because we know He will bless us through it.

We do it because verses like 35-37 tell us to. Because they point us back to the truth that faith in Jesus is rewarded personally by Jesus. It isn't rewarded with a new job; it isn't rewarded with long life after a long war. Faith in Jesus doesn't make you wealthy, or prosperous, or worldly, or famous. All of those things may or may not happen to you, but if they do, they're blessings from Jesus and not the singular consequence of His grace. You know where this is going.

Faith in Jesus results in Jesus in your life. Jesus in your life results in forgiveness of the guilt of your sins. It results in you being made right again with God: something you and I can't accomplish on our own. Jesus in your life results in you being rewarded with living forever. In a little while, He'll keep that promise to make it true in physical fact. Right now, He's already kept it because He's already done the work to make it happen and you're already a part of His eternity now. For the rest of your life here, you can live knowing the Creator of the universe personally knows, loves, and wants you for His family. When this life is over, you get to be with Him forever and see Him face to face. In the mean time, He promises to abide with us as we struggle when life gets tough.

Would you rather have peace now and later or a new job and a long life?

For further reading: Ephesians 3:12, Romans 5:3, Hebrews 12:1, James 1:3, James 4:12, James 5:11, 2 Peter 1:6, Hebrews 6:15, Hebrews 9:15. Matthew 11:3, Revelation 22:20.

Lord, You bless me in so many ways. Thank You for Your gifts of peace and rewards.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 18 July 2017

And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." Hebrews 10, verse 38.

Does God ever get disappointed in us?

Friend believer, when God the Father looks at you or I, all He sees is the perfection of His Son. He sees you and I as we are, but He sees us through the lenses of Jesus. Everything that we ever did against Him is irrelevant. He doesn't even acknowledge it. He doesn't see the time you cheated on your husband, or when you did time for theft. He doesn't see yelling at your kids, or guilt over being abused, or how you thought the panhandler was a bum. All He sees is a creation who was made righteous by the sacrifice of His own blood. He welcomes us like a Daddy, embracing us and saying to us, "I love you so much! I'm so glad you're here!"

And then there's here. Here, in real time, like any person watching you, God sees when you cheat on your wife, steal from the store, yell at your kids, put up with abuse, and walk by the panhandler. It's only natural to understand that God sees what we do because, well, He can see and we do these things. You can't undo what you do, and you can't expect someone with eyes (especially an omniscient someone) to not see things you do in their plain sight. God does see what we do. It's reasonable to expect that our sins grieve Him, that He's disappointed when we do them. Knowing God is the foundation of all reason, it's also reasonable to expect He holds people accountable for what we do, good and bad.

Does that mean God is disappointed in us because of what we do? Nope, not ever. That's the peace of being a believer, of following Jesus. I refer you back to paragraph one. Better yet, I refer you to verse 38, which tells of how God considers us righteous. Granted, this verse was specifically talking about Christ, about how pleased the Father is with His righteous Son not shrinking back from giving Himself fully for us. Yet it is imputed to us as well, a fruit of His grace. God makes us righteous through our embrace of His Son's atoning sacrifice. Knowing that, God can't have us in His presence if He's disappointed in us. After all, there's a difference between disappointment and being disappointed in someone.

Does that mean Christ is a get out of jail free card? Yes...and no. The difference is belief. Believing in Jesus is the only part of salvation that we even remotely 'do.' We can perform no action, take no step, live well or be motivated by good in any way that merits our salvation. Only Jesus can and He's already done everything necessary. Yet if you or I reject believing in Him, He (God the Father) can't see us through the lenses of His Son. If we reject this free gift He gives to us, it's reasonable to expect that He sees all the things we do, good and bad. John 15:5 says "apart from me you can do nothing." Apart from Jesus, we can expect nothing from God in reference to even the best things we do because everything we do apart from Christ is sin. Apart from Jesus, the God who sees all we do will hold us accountable for why we rejected Him. When we answer that accounting, we reap the consequences. There will be no shrinking back from that moment.

Moral of the story? Don't shrink back now. Embrace the righteousness. Hug Daddy. Cling to your belief, and do what you can to increase it. Still try hard to do your best in all you do, but do so as a reflection of thanks for what He already did for you instead of just a goal or just a fearful reaction to something some Bible thumper told you. God isn't disappointed in you for any of the things you've thought, said, or done. Before you believed, He held them against you. After you believed, it's as if they never happened.

For further reading: Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, 2 Corinthians 5, John 15:5.

My Lord, thank You so much for forgiving me. Thank You for seeing me through Jesus. Thank You for not being disappointed in me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 July 2017

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. Hebrews 10, verse 39.

Yesterday we talked about disappointing God. Today let's talk about not 'shrinking back.' That was mentioned yesterday as well but I didn't talk much about it. How about now? What do those words bring to mind for you? I think of someone backing up, backing away from something. I think of someone standing who then sits down when confronted. Jesus asks us to stand up for Him even if all we can do is sit. Stand first in the heart. Here's a list of ways to do that:

- Professing "I believe in Jesus"
- Doing what Jesus says

Stop me if I'm wrong but I think those may be the only ones that matter. Everything we do in this life should be according to His command. If we believe then do what He says, then everything we do becomes a reflection of what we believe. Welding a straight line? Believe in Jesus and do your best, then thankfully try again when it isn't straight. Feeding the chickens? Believe in Jesus and feed them, tend to them, be thankful for them. Folding underwear from the dryer? Believe in Jesus and fold them, being thankful He's provided them (and that they're clean). I'm betting you're seeing a trend here.

Believe and be thankful. Believe and do what Jesus says.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment of all the law was to fully love God, and that the second greatest commandment was then for us to love each other that same way. He repeatedly taught His followers to love their enemies and to act thankfully in all they did. Love and thankfulness are, perhaps, the greatest of the fruits of the Spirit. They are the tools with which God privileges us to live in the world, to fight the spiritual battles that come our way.

When we believe and are thankful to Jesus in all ways, large and small, then everything we do becomes an act of worshipping him. You're welding, you're feeding animals, you're folding clothes, you're doing whatever you're doing: if you do it with a heart thankful to God to simply be in that moment, you're worshipping Him. You're using the moments He gives you to do the work at hand that's part of simply living on the Third Rock. What's more, you're giving Him glory by using that moment for what He has you doing. You're praising God for the large and small things with which He's blessed you in this life. You aren't wasting the life He's given you; you aren't shrinking back from living fully.

Some moments aren't memorable; think the underwear and the chickens and maybe even those welds. Some moments, however, have deeper gravity. Think when a hostile fellow confronts you. Think when your grandmother is dying. Think mentoring your kids, even when they're in their 20s smoking pot. Think any number of situations where you really need to stand up and say "this I believe." People can see through false words. Convictions matter; are you walking the walk while talking the talk, or is it simply one or the other? You may or may not be Martin Luther standing in front of the council, but you still get to stand. You still get to believe in Jesus, then do what He commands. You get to not shrink back.

When you believe and do what Jesus says, you get to count yourself as one who's been saved. THAT pleases God.

For further reading: John 3:16, Matthew 7:12, Matthew 22:37-40, John 15:9-12, 1 Corinthians 13:13

My Lord, I believe in You. Thank You for saving me, for giving me the privilege of standing for You, of trusting You to live life with me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 July 2017

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11, verses 1-2

Hebrews 11 spends an entire chapter illustrating the faith of our forefathers. Forty verses are used to explain deeds of the heroes of the faith from the Old Testament. It starts in Genesis and walks through the books of the prophets. Not every person who stood up for God is mentioned, but some of the more prominent ones are. Over the next few days, we'll join in by giving a 50000 foot overview of why their faith is commendable.

Let's start by examining that statement "faith is commendable." Why is faith commendable? Why would people spend most of 10000 years lauding Enoch, Abraham, and dozens of others? The simple answer is that they said and did commendable things rooted in their faith in God. But that faith itself: what's so special about that? Have you ever really considered what faith is?

Verse 1 says faith is "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Noodle that concept. If you have faith in Jesus, you can be 1000 percent confident that things you have heard about all your life are 1000 percent true. You don't have to see heaven to know it's real. You don't have to see Jesus face to face to have Him actively participate in your life. You don't have to see His peace to live in it. You can be as sure as your soul that He and all He promised are true. All that's needed is to believe it. All that's needed is to have faith in Him.

That's a tall order in today's skeptical world, isn't it? We've hardened our hearts to believing in only what we see or touch. What's more, thanks to things like "Star Wars" and the Sixties, we trust our feelings more than our faith..."Luke, reach out with your feelings." "If it feels good it must be right." Horse hockey. Feelings are deceptive. They're a barometer, not the air itself. They're a gauge, not a substance. Somehow, many of us have lost sight of those facts and turned our lives over to trusting our feelings instead of trusting our God. If we can't know it or feel it, we find it hard to accept. Is it any wonder our society is plagued by so many fundamental problems?

So along comes a book like Hebrews that tells us to trust our faith and not our feelings, and then it gives examples of people who did and how they were blessed for it. Hebrews tells us that faith is the substance, not the measure. Faith is the conduit through which God reassures us of His promises. Faith is the glue with which we're bound to Jesus forever. It's a reality, not a feeling. When we trust Him, it becomes the means by which God brings glory to Himself and blesses us in doing. When we put our faith in Jesus, He clothes us in the blood of His sacrifice. It covers all our wrong-doings, atones for the harm they inflicted, and sets things right with the Father. God sees us through His Son and sees a redeemed child who is once again made perfect to stand in His presence.

All through faith. All through faith proven by the words and deeds of people mentioned in the book of Hebrews. Come back next time and let's meet them together.

For further reading: Hebrews 11

Lord, I pray for You to increase my faith in You. Thanks for the stories of people who lived in faith before my time. Thanks for increasing their faith and helping us to know about it.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 July 2017

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. Hebrews 11, verses 3.

Let's start at the beginning; God and the writer of Hebrews did. Faith is understanding and understanding comes from faith. God formed something from nothing. God formed things by commanding it to happen, by speaking. We can know this is true because of having faith in Him and His Word. When we do that, we understand a little of God's will in our lives.

That's it. Any questions?

This all matters because, if you don't have faith in Jesus, that's it. As Madeline might have said "that's all there is. There is no more." Reject Jesus and at the moment you meet Him face to face, you learn you're out of time to say "I believe." Embrace Him now and you don't ever have to worry about Him saying "away from me." Fear and coercion: should we believe in Jesus out of fear? Not at all. We should believe in Jesus because what He says is true and reliable.

You can believe whatever you want about how the world came to be, but if you believe anything but Divine Creation, know this: creation by God isn't disproven. If you're honest about science, you end up admitting that science and creation are mutually exclusive. While most non-creation stories regularly present evidence contradicting others, the creation account is whole and not refuted by anything in it. Hebrews 11 affirms that by confirming how our faith in God creating everything is a reassurance of this. We can believe in God's account of what He did because He doesn't give us any reason or evidence to disprove Him. When He says "trust me," He proves Himself worthy of our trust.

In the end, putting your faith in Him is all that matters. When you and I stand before Him at the end of this life, before we embark on what's after, our faith will be shown. Whatever we believe (or disbelieve) will be exposed and we'll embrace the consequences of it. Believe and enter His rest. Disbelieve and you get what you put your faith in, namely an eternity away from His rest. That would be hell. In fact, it is.

You don't get to take what you keep in scrapbooks. You don't get to take the pretty house in the country. You don't get to take your money, your grandma's recipe for pumpkin pie, or a really great bottle of 21 year old scotch. You get to appear before God equipped only with your faith, either in Him or something else. If He who constantly proves Himself true by all He's done, says, and does today promises eternal reward for faith in Him, why would anyone believe differently? And if He promises eternal punishment for the idolatry of anything else, isn't that believable as well? Who do you trust?

Just this last week I learned that an old friend has entered hospice. Our families were once good friends but we fell away from each other when my family left the church hers pastored. I thought a lot about her yesterday as I was doing yard work and thinking about what to write here. Then I re-read verse 3 and the words fell into place. My friend is dying. By this time next week, she'll probably be gone. She'll leave a husband and six grown kids who will learn that they never stop missing a wife and mom. Please pray for all of them this week as they're going through the agony of watching a loved one die. Pray for strength, peace, and healing tears for all of them. Yet pray in celebration, too, for my friend because she's going to heaven to be granted her eternal rest. All her life she's believed in Jesus and now she'll get to know in full how her belief was true all along. She trusted Him, so she'll live with Him forever.

Believe in it.

For further reading: Genesis 1:1-5

My Savior, I pray in praise to You for the honesty and truth of all You are and say. I believe in You. Give comfort to those who are in peril, and confront those who disbelieve.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 July 2017

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. Hebrews 11, verses 4.

Yesterday we explored how faith is truth. Today let's talk about the first person in the Word who is remembered for believing that.

Read the story of Abel in Genesis 4. We don't know much about Abel beyond his birth, his vocation, and his death. He was the second-born child to Adam and Eve. Abel was a shepherd, and he loved the Lord. He proved His love for the Lord by offering the best of his possessions as a sacrifice.

Stop and consider that. In a time when humanity was only beginning, before communities, before commerce, before money, before crime, and even before most families, Abel saw fit to offer worship to God by sacrificing the best of his flock of sheep ("the fat portions" from "the firstborn"). He recognized that the only thing he could offer in worship to his creator was all he had. He gave the best and he gave it from his heart.

Then he gave his life for that. His brother, Cain, murdered him for it. In truth, Cain murdered Abel because of Cain's own sin. Idolatry, greed, rage, and envy took hold in the older brother so much that they consumed him and planted the idea of murder in Cain's heart. Whatever his motivation, Cain killed his brother because his brother had done what he, Cain, had not.

Thousands of years later, when we talk about this story, we don't just talk about Cain: we talk about "Cain and Abel." We use their account as the ultimate story of how sin can divide loved ones. Cain lived a long life after he murdered his brother. God put a mark on Cain so that everyone would know who he was and would shy away from him. We know he became the father of a tribe, the builder of cities, and a 'great' man known for his actions. We don't know how he died; he may have died as an old man, or even when the flood drowned everything other than the beings on the ark.

Yet it was Abel who we remember. The writer of Hebrews commends Abel – not Adam, Eve, Cain, or Seth the younger brother Abel never met – as being righteous. He does so because Abel demonstrated faith in God that God would accept the blood of his sacrifice as fitting. Indeed, God, who still walked the earth with people even then, regarded Abel's gift as good while rejecting Cain's as not. You and I can identify with Cain, who may have thought he was giving God his best when all he was doing was giving God what he wanted. Cain gave God leftovers: Abel gave God his best and his all.

Many billions of people later, do we do any different than Cain? Do you or I give our very best to God every day? Most obviously, do we do so in our tithes and offerings? More to the point, do we give God our best in our work, in how we live with our families, in how we relate to other people? Do we put God first in our thoughts and ask Him to be involved in everything we think, say, or do? Abel did and it cost him his life.

Are you prepared to go that far? Abel was.

For further reading: Genesis 4:4, 1 John 3:12, Hebrews 12:24.

My Lord, thank You for the story of Abel. May I be as willing as he was to give my all to you, to dedicate the best in my life only to you.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 July 2017

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11, verses 5-6.

Do you know the story of Enoch? Outside of the Bible, to our society today, he's pretty irrelevant. From Genesis 5: "When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away." So let's recap. Compared to the others in the line from Adam to Noah, Enoch didn't live very long (only 365 years) and he had kids when he was a "young" man of 65. Enoch was the father of Methuselah (who is recorded as having lived 969 years: longer than any other human in history). He had other unnamed children. And Enoch "walked with God."

In the rest of the narrative, that phrase matters. None of the other men or women in the narrative (from Adam to Noah) are said to have "walked with God." My Concordia Bible reminds that "walking with God" is different from merely living. Seth, the child of promise after Cain murdered Abel, isn't said to have walked with God. Not long-lived Methuselah, and not his son, Lamech, who became the father of Noah. Only Noah is said to have also 'walked with God' and that was long after Enoch.

It wasn't for not knowing God. Genesis 4 says that, around the time of Seth, men began to call on the name of the Lord. This means that men and women knew God and knew they depended on God. Adam and Eve had known God perfectly and had rejected Him. Their son, Abel, had known and understood God, but had been killed by his envious brother. Cain knew God face to face and flaunted Him. Cain's brother, Seth, and then Seth's children and children's children all knew God and started to call on Him for things He would do and provide. Yet they didn't walk with God. Only Enoch did that.

We can't know for certain how many people were on the Earth in those days. A website, <https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/how-was-the-world-populated/>, mathematically postulates that the pre-flood world population could have been massive by the time of the flood; at least as much as the 6 billion people alive now. That makes for a great many people who knew God, or at least knew of Him, yet the Bible says only Enoch walked with God. Enoch believed in God, put his faith in God, trusted God all through his 365 years. Enoch lived to seek God, to know God more. Not until King David many centuries later is there a person mentioned in the Bible who sought God's heart this way. At the end of His life, Enoch didn't die. Like Elijah the prophet, God simply took Enoch. One second he was here and the next second he wasn't. That's a rare gift from a graceful God since the Bible records it happened to only one other person.

Knowing God isn't enough. Instead of simply knowing of Him, which even un-believers do, we need to believe in Him, to put our faith and trust in Him. We NEED to do as Enoch did. Instead of simply saying "I believe in God" because "In God We Trust" is on our money, we need to believe in God in such a way that we let Him become a truly intimate partner in our lives. We involve ourselves with Him. We talk with Him. We plan with Him. We cry, obsess, think, scream, laugh, and do everything with Him. Like Enoch, we learn to walk with God. We put our faith in God and this pleases Him because we do so from the heart.

Maybe it was easier for Enoch. Maybe God walked and talked with Enoch the way He had with his ancestors Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. Or maybe not; Scripture doesn't say and, to be honest, it doesn't really matter. What matters to us is walking with God.

For further reading: Genesis 5:21-24, Hebrews 7:19.

Lord, I pray, let me walk with You today. Walk with me today that I might know You more and model my day in Your way.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 July 2017

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. Hebrews 11, verse 7.

Even unbelievers know the story of Noah. The account of Noah and the great flood is perhaps more famously known than even many stories about Jesus. God made a number of covenants with mankind, and the one he made with Noah was the second. God first 'covenanted' with man through Adam. The covenant with Adam consisted of blessings before and after the fall. In Eden, God promised to bless mankind; after Eden, God promised to curse the ground because of mankind while sending a redeemer to redeem mankind. Noah lived under that covenant, awaiting that redeemer...until the day God confided to him that He was going to wipe out all living things because of man's sin. That's when Noah's faith had to kick in. So what exactly did Noah do by faith?

He built the ark. Some scholars think it took almost 100 years to build the ark. Up until the mid-1800s, Noah's Ark, a craft of Biblical 'legend,' was considered to have been the largest ship ever made. Noah, his 3 sons, and their families worked for decades to build the ark that would protect living creatures from extinction. They did it based on a promise made by an unseen God. I get frustrated if it takes me longer than a few days to complete a project on my farm. Imagine how I would feel working on something, full time, for an entire century. Morning, noon, and evening, for days, weeks, months, and years...then decades. Imagine how Noah's neighbors must have ridiculed him for what he was doing, all the more so when he answered "because God said so" when they asked him why he was building this thing out in the middle of nowhere.

He built the ark out of fear. Noah built the ark because God told him to, and Noah walked with God. He knew God and pursued God's heart. To do that, like his ancestor Enoch, Noah feared God and respected Him. He understood his place as a man yet also his place as God's cherished creation. A thousand or more years before Moses recorded Genesis, Noah listened to stories told by his ancestors about the Father's indescribable power and love. Yes, Noah built the ark out of fear: a healthy fear born in love.

He had faith that God hadn't forgotten him during the long days on the ark. Noah and his family lived on the ark, floating on the world-wide ocean, for nearly a year. Imagine how it must have felt hearing things crash up against the side of the ark. Think of how they must have felt to hear the muffled screams of people pounding to get in as the rains poured and the waters rose. Think about the somber loneliness when those screams stopped. I can't imagine taking care of dozens, maybe hundreds of kinds of animals for all that time. Perhaps the eight people on the ark kept so busy that they didn't have much time to think about it, but I imagine there must have been times on the ark when they wondered if God had forgotten about them. Noah probably clung desperately to his faith because that faith of 500 years had persisted through a century of building, and a year on the waters, and all through everything that happened afterward.

After the flood, when God caused the waters to recede and it was safe to leave the ark, God covenanted with Noah to never again destroy the world in a flood. God made Noah the heir of righteousness so that, through him, the world would eventually know redemption. Noah had faith that God would use all this to change things for the better. And that's exactly what happened, even as it would take many generations before Noah's descendant, Jesus of Nazareth, would come to make it so. These days, in America, the rainbow has been co-opted by the gay rights community as their 'pride flag.' Yet even this serves God's purpose for He gave rainbows to the world as a reminder of his ancient promise to Noah: to love and sustain us and never again destroy the world in the way He had once done. What mankind would twist for his own ungodly devices our God is still overseeing for His better purposes. Perhaps that's part of what kept Noah going all those years ago. Even unbelievers can understand that.

For further reading: Genesis 6:13-22, 1 Peter 3:20, Genesis 6:9, Ezekiel 14:14-20, Romans 9:30.

My patient Lord, thank You for the life and account of Noah. Thank You for the rainbow reminder of Your love.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 August 2017

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Hebrews 11, verses 8-11.

When I was a kid, Jerry Lewis used to call himself “the super-Jew” because he would entertain the entire world for 20 hours straight on his annual Labor Day telethon. Every year, “Jerry the Super-Jew” would sponsor A-list entertainers to work without pay to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA). Over forty years, he raised hundreds of millions of dollars by singing, dancing, vamping, and doing whatever he could to raise awareness that there were thousands of children afflicted with deadly diseases that could be cured. According to Wikipedia, Lewis began to host telethons to raise money for heart disease. Later, people with knowledge about muscular disorders came to him and broke his heart. He had pity that people would respond in kindness when presented with the news that their fellow man needed help. That’s faith.

Much like Abraham. I don’t know if God ever told Jerry Lewis to go on TV to raise money, but He told Abraham to simply go to live in a new place. Abraham did it. Can you imagine hearing a strange voice from inside you, telling you to leave everything you know and go into some new place? And it wasn’t as if Abraham did it on a whim. He was an old man when he first acknowledged God’s command, and what a command it was. God promised to bless ALL peoples of the earth through Him. All Abram (as he was then called) had to do was believe and obey.

That’s a tall order, even in Bronze Age Mesopotamia. ‘Obey me by leaving your home and going to a strange land full of strange, hostile people. Go there and you’ll be blessed.’ Let’s face it: we’d both be hard-pressed to say ‘yes, Lord, I’ll go.’ Not Abraham. He believed that God would bless his fellow man so he left. He left and headed northwest, to Canaan. He didn’t know specifically where or why, just that God told him to do it and God would keep his promises.

Beyond these things, we don’t know much about Abram’s upbringing to give us any background as to why Abram would so willingly accept God’s promise as true. Perhaps that’s the most miraculous part of the mystery. Abram took God at His word and believed Him. It’s almost as if he intrinsically understood that this God meant only love and hope for him. Abraham trusted that God would do good no matter what He told him. For this, Abraham is remembered as the first of the Semites: descendants of Noah’s son, Shem, who followed God and became His chosen people.

That’s the real “super-Jew.” Would that you or I could have such faith and be super-Jews who believe in Jesus. Here’s the kicker: we can. Nothing from God is stopping us. When we don’t exercise such faith, it’s not God’s doing. It’s something else. What’s in your way today? Will you let it block you, or will you listen to the voice that says “go” no matter where it takes you? In Matthew 28, Jesus echoes the same command He once gave to Abraham. Jesus tells us to “go.” Will you go today? Where will you put your faith?

Jerry Lewis is still very much alive (currently 91 and still both super and Jewish) but the telethon became a shadow of what it used to be. In 2011, the MDA unceremoniously dismissed Jerry after decades of his service because they didn’t feel he connected with younger audiences. As of 2014, the annual event was discontinued. I find that sad. To tell the truth, it was always a bore for a little kid to watch the Labor Day telethon because it was on all three channels and my family wasn’t interested in the Las Vegas entertainment it showed. Yet I find myself amazed now at the faith this actor and comedian had in his fellow man to simply help kids in need. I’ve heard Jerry Lewis can be a tough man to get along with. Perhaps Abraham was as well. Both men must be shrewd and wise, but also very kind of heart. Those are super qualities for anyone.

For further reading: Genesis 12:1-18, Acts 7:2-4, Hebrews 6:17, Hebrews 12:22, Revelation 21:2, Matthew 28:19.

Lord, may I go where You lead me today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 August 2017

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. Hebrews 11, verses 11-12.

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac is a miracle. If you aren't familiar with it, the 50000 foot synopsis is that God tells an 80 year old Abraham that he will have a son from his similarly elderly wife, Sarah. Abraham believes it...and God then waits another generation before making the promise come true. Sarah initially laughs at God's messenger when said messenger delivers the news. Yet nine months later, Isaac is born. Eventually, Isaac has children, and their children and children's children become the nation of Israel. In time, they are as numerous as stars in the sky. In time, Abraham also blesses all people after him because one of his descendants is Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, in a day of invitro fertilization, advanced medicine, and modern sanitation, American women having children at advanced age seems like no big deal. Janet Jackson, who is a few months older than me, just had a baby...and she and I are both in our fifties. That simply wasn't the case in Abraham's day. Thousands of years ago (in fact, only a few decades ago), if a woman was beyond her mid-thirties, it was unlikely she would even conceive let alone have a viable, healthy baby. The risk to both child and woman was too high. In the Third World today, that's still very much the case, though even this is improving.

Can you imagine a woman in her eighties having a baby to a man who is 100 years old? You might read about it in a tabloid...or in the book of Genesis. I found a story online about a woman in her seventies in India who recently had a baby. But she had the baby in a modern hospital and benefitted from modern practices. Sarah bore Isaac in a tent in the desert when she was in her seventies, maybe eighties or older.

It's a miracle. What's the miracle, though? That God created life out of lifelessness? That old people had kids? That a nation of believers was created from a barren couple? That the Messiah would eventually be born to this couple's descendants?

Or was the miracle that they believed?

If you think about it, that miracle still happens every day. In the face of a world that is still hostile to the idea of God (let alone the physical being of Him), that's miraculous. People in Abraham's day rejected God en masse. After all, Sodom and Gomorrah happened in Abraham's day. Of the 7 billion people here on the Third Rock today, most still reject God. Most people reject this story of Abraham as just a fable. Most of those 7 billion people reject Jesus as Savior, or even as a fact.

Face it: if you believe, and if you hold onto that belief despite a world marching in lockstep to vigorously oppose that, then it's a miracle. It's the Spirit of the living God taking hold of your soul. It's the Great I AM joining with you to help you live your life for others. It's the Savior demonstrating His endless love for you by redeeming you from that world hostile to Him. Whether or not God will use you to produce a nation of His chosen people remains to be seen. It did for many years in Abraham's life, and then it all came true.

For further reading: Genesis 17:17 – 18:14, Genesis 21:2, 1 Corinthians 1:9, Romans 4:19.

Lord, I praise You for the life of Abraham and the miracles You worked through Him.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 August 2017

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. Hebrews 11, verses 13.

Today's verse is a powerful conviction of the human race and an even more powerful demonstration of the grace of God. It's kryptonite to the world thinking of itself as Superman. It's a grace bomb.

Up until now, the writer of Hebrews has mentioned Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham as paragons of faith. They were men who lived out what God asked them to do. They weren't better than anyone else in their day; they weren't better than you or me. They simply did a better job at putting all their faith in God. He said then they believed. They had faith that, if God said so, it would be so *no matter what*. No matter what it cost them (even their lives), no matter what had to happen in the world, no matter anything, if God promised something, it would be so. His word is more reliable than anything else. I'll ask you to back up a bit and consider the unspoken implications of what the verse is really saying.

Faith in God is worth dying for because when you have faith in God you're a stranger in this strange land.

God created this place to be perfect. It was perfect for a time, though we don't really know how long Adam and Eve lived in Eden. God created Adam and Eve to be perfect and they were for a time, existing in harmony with God and the nature He created. In the Garden there was perfection and there was even evil. Yet Adam and Eve lived perfectly with evil present until they accepted evil's lying proposition. After that, they (and we) embraced evil in corrupting the perfection of what God had created. As a result, they (and we) fell out of harmony with God and the perfection He intended for us.

Sin, evil, corruption, sickness, deterioration, death: those weren't what the world was created for. They are the abnormalities that have overtaken the world and made the normal perfection for which it was created abnormal. We have become abnormal in a world that considers things truly abnormal to be normal. The way around all this dysfunction, this frustration of God's good plan, is faith in Him. Putting our faith in God, in His Son, Jesus, changes the equation of abnormality back into one of true normality. Disharmony becomes harmony again.

And to have that harmony in full again, unless Jesus returns, we have to die for it. Loving Jesus fully means being willing to die for Him. After all, He died for us.

The world of hate that we inherited from Adam and Eve's idolatrous rebellion thinks itself to be above God. The men cited here in Hebrews saw past that. They didn't have the benefit of the knowledge of Jesus for Jesus wouldn't be incarnate for thousands of years. Yet they still put their faith in this unseen God, trusting that He would redeem them from the hatred of sin. They put their faith in Him doing what they couldn't. They hoped He would redeem them in this life, but trusted He would keep His promise whether in this life or the next.

My friend, Bill Brimer, likes to talk about 'grace bombs.' This is a big one. It dropped right in front of you and exploded in your face. Blew you away, in fact, with it's power of love. The 'you' that revels in the sensuality of our world is paled by the 'you' who is better than all that. You're better than all that because God re-made you to be better. He remade you by redeeming you even when you and I distrusted Him. His grace overcame our grudges. He exploded his grace in your face by being His Word, by giving His word, by keeping His word, by being Himself for us. All we have to do is believe because He does everything else and He does it because of love. He proved it to these biblical forbearers. He does it still. BOOM. Take that, wannabe Superman.

For further reading: Matthew 13:17, Genesis 23:4, Leviticus 25:23, Philippians 3:20, 1 Peter 1:17.

Lord, thank You for exploding Your grace in my face, for all You have done and do today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 August 2017

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. Hebrews 11, verses 13-14.

I'm a wanderer. I learned it as a kid. We first moved in 1969, when I was three, moving from Bloomington to Minneapolis, Minnesota. That isn't very far, but it's a quantum leap for a family from the suburbs. I went two years to an old elementary school before they tore it down in 1974. That year, I spent a year in private school in east Minneapolis. 1975-1976 saw me attend two different third grade classes, one in Iowa and the other in Pennsylvania. From 1976 to 1978 we lived in Pennsylvania, 1978-1980 in Oklahoma, 1980-1983 back in Iowa, and 1983-1985 in southern Indiana, which I refer to now as 'home.' After that, I joined the Air Force, and spent 1985 in Texas, then 1986-1989 in Texas, Maryland, and TDY (on temporary duty) around the world. From 1989 to 1992, I lived in Italy (living in two different towns during that stay). From 1992 until 2004, I lived in Colorado, residing in six different places in twelve years. 2004-2005 found me in Montana, then 2005 back in Colorado before moving to Texas. Since 2005, I have lived full time in Texas, but have traveled all over the country (and the planet), and have lived in three different houses in two towns. After fifty years of wandering, I'm finally in a home I've always dreamed of. Wouldn't you know that even my time here may be short, in jeopardy, and that there could be more wandering just up ahead.

Sometimes I feel like I'm looking for a country of my own.

I wish I could say that my story is one of deep public faith, but it isn't. In fact, more times than I care to admit, my faith has wandered too and has been weak with my practice of it weaker. I've been rightfully accused of being a hypocrite, and Billy Joel could have once described me as "a man with so much tension and far too many sins to mention." I've tried, but in following Jesus, trying isn't enough. You have to "do" to be believable to other people, and sometimes what I've done has been quite opposite of what I believe.

You know what? I'm in good company. Abraham was a wanderer and God did wonderful things through Him. Jacob was a deceitful wanderer and God led him to live an amazing life. Moses, David, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and finally Jesus Himself were all wanderers who did incredible, great things in the lead-up to the time of their Messiah. After Jesus, all twelve of His disciples wandered, going from place to place to spread the Good News of the friend-Savior they knew. Some of them were murdered for it; only one lived into old age.

I bet all those people were looking for a country of their own. I wonder, then, if the country mentioned by the writer of Hebrews isn't actually the nation of Heaven. Shakespeare called death "the undiscovered country." Hamlet lamented that his life was all sorrow and he longed to journey into the undiscovered country of what lay beyond. Don't we all, yet here and now are all we know. This is where we make our bones, discover what it means to live. And the longer any of us live – and wander – the more we find that the only real meaning in the fallen world is found in Jesus Christ. In Christ there is no more wandering. In Christ, the discovery is amazement and it is continuous. In Jesus Christ there is fulfillment of all of life's desires, answers to every question, and peace to settle all restlessness. In Christ, we no longer need to wander.

Christ is the undiscovered country I wish to explore, yet isn't it wonderful to be able to do so now, as best we can, in this place that's rife with both life and imperfection? Until my prayers are answered and I meet Him face to face, I guess I'll continue to wander, awaiting my endless time in the country of my own that I know in hope is only a short time away.

For further reading: Matthew 13:17, Genesis 23:4, Leviticus 25:23, Philippians 3:20, 1 Peter 1:17.

My Lord and Savior, abide with me as I wander here.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 8 August 2017

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. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11, verses 15-16.

More thoughts on the idea of longing for a country.

As we talked about, the country we long for is indeed with God. I go back and forth with the idea that “heaven is our home.” That’s great talk, but what about now? Here and now, people die. Here and now, it’s tough to pay the bills. Here and now is all we truly know about. I’m all for heaven but what can help me here and now?

Don’t mind me: as my grandpa might have said, ‘it’s just piss and wind.’ What can help me here and now is quite apparent. His name is Jesus, and He is the Son of the Three in One Godhead. His perfect sacrifice made it possible for me to stand in front of my perfect Father and say “forgive me, Father, because I’ve really messed things up.” Because of Jesus, I know my Father will pick me up and embrace me and tell me “I’m so glad to see you again, Dave. I love you.” I know all this because the Spirit Jesus and His Father share teaches it to me. He has all my life, even in the doubting times. In the days when I’ve wanted to give in, His Spirit said “one more time.” In the times I’ve wandered, He has said “follow Me.” What can help us here and now? You know.

So what will the city look like? Beats me. None of us knows. All we know is that we’ll see Jesus there in full and we’ll be both known and knowing. It’ll be beautiful and it’ll be forever. Personally, I’m hoping for a farm on a cool spring morning, with smells of the earth and growing and life. I’m hoping there will be fishing in the sun, hot coffee in the sunrise, and fellowship with the loved ones (which will mean everyone).

I hope for those things because some of those things are memories I have from the here and now. Walking barefoot in loamy black soil and tending good things as they grow. Of fishing with my pals in the mountains, or with my boys way north in Minnesota, or with my Dad and Grandpa on those same lakes. I think of mugs of hot coffee with my Hunnie during our morning devotions, or the taste of good coffee from a cool morning campfire pot. I think about times with my family, and friends I’ve known for decades, and of basking in the love of togetherness. Good scotch on the rocks, all the dogs I’ve ever owned, waking up to the smell of biscuits and butter, and warm summer nights under a blanket of lush stars. These are things that warm my visions of heaven, of the country I long for still. How about you?

Intertwined in all of them, participating in every scene, and holding all these visions together is my friend and Savior, Jesus. He’ll be there to talk with, and learn from, to listen, to love. And I’ll get to praise Him with my words and songs and moments. All my life I have wandered, sometimes wandering very far from where I should have been. Yet in all those moments, I always hoped for more, hoped for something better than where I found myself. If that had been my only hope, then I would have gotten what I wanted (and found it eternally lacking). No, even when I feel I’ve let my God down, He’s never let me down. Through it all, He’s always brought me back and kept me looking forward, looking forward to that undiscovered country where He lives.

I don’t know where that city is, but I know I’m on the road that leads there. You and I, we weren’t made for imperfection. We were made to live in full harmony with God in His heaven. In that respect, heaven is indeed our home, or it will be. Until then, we wander here.

For further reading: Genesis 24:6-8, 2 Timothy 4:18, Mark 8:38, Genesis 26:24, Exodus 3:6-15, Hebrews 13:14.

Lord, I long to be home with You. Until You call me there, wander with me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 August 2017

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. Hebrews 11, verses 17-19.

So much to unpack here.

Devotion. Are you amazed by Abraham's devotion to God? And even his devotion to Isaac? Our modern interpretation of the Bible can paint Abraham in an unkind picture. "He was willing to murder his own son." Admit it: you've thought that; so have I. How could Abraham MURDER his child? Our society (rightfully) looks at that as heinous. Here comes the part you won't like (because it's uncomfortably true): Abraham wasn't told to murder, nor did he try to murder Isaac, nor did he have the heart for murder. God commanded Abraham to SACRIFICE Isaac to Him. God was saying to Abraham "commit to Me everything about what you love most. Be willing to give even your son's life to Me because you trust Me." A murderer thinks otherwise (if he thinks at all). Abraham was willing to kill his son, his most precious family member, if it meant dedicating that person's life and his own to his Father. Devotion like that is rare even in the Bible. Would you or I be that devoted?

Foreshadowing: "He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son" could have been written about the Father Himself. From the moment of man's fall, God had promised to redeem mankind from the sin we accepted and made our own. This included Abraham and Isaac, who were sinful people not unlike you or I. Abraham had trusted that God would keep His promise to give him a son and God kept that promise. God then commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, that firstborn son and the heir of all Abraham had or would be. Can you see how, in all of this, God was foreshadowing to Abraham (and us) what He Himself would do with Jesus? What's more, God promised that it was through Isaac that all this would happen, that Abraham's offspring "would be reckoned."

Reason. Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. He didn't just FEEL it: Abraham REASONED. He thought it through. He quickly but logically, cogently deduced that God had kept His prior promises and that God was powerful enough to do anything He wanted. Abraham reasoned that, if God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God would bring Isaac back from death. It wasn't an emotion, and it wasn't being caught up in the moment, though both of those probably happened. Instead, Abraham intellectually deduced this honest conclusion about God.

That brings us to our final point: resurrection. Abraham deduced that God could resurrect Isaac, so he prepared to end his son's life. It was the action of faith that Abraham took in response to the action of faith God had already offered to him. God foreshadowed yet again that Isaac's death could be overcome by God. He promised Abraham that the sacrifice would be worthwhile because it was to God Himself. That sacrifice could only be completed in resurrection, which was how God ultimately completed the even greater sacrifice of faith that took place on Calvary. Death could only be reasoned, only be accepted, only be tolerated, only be made right through resurrection, through Divinely restoring life to lifelessness because spiritual death was true lifelessness. Abraham grasped that thought as he held a knife to his son's throat. And that's when God stayed the knife.

Like you and I, Abraham and Isaac wandered in this world. Abraham perhaps more than any of us because he lived as a nomad, residing most of his life in tents as he traveled from place to place. He knew that God would bring him home, and he knew that God would always abide with him no matter where he wandered. Yet in this greatest test of his life (and perhaps ours), God called him to account and asked him "what do you REALLY believe?" It was for Abraham's benefit, not God's. Abraham wasn't a super-human: he was just a man, albeit one of good character. But he was simply a man, like you or me. How amazing is it that God chose to reveal these things about His character and ours through the life of this ancient patriarch.

For further reading: Genesis 22:1-10, James 2:21, Genesis 21:12, Romans 9:7, Romans 4:21, John 5:21.

Lord, thank You for the willingness of Abraham to commit everything to You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 10 August 2017

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. Hebrews 11, verse 20.

Perhaps the story of Jacob and Esau is a good example of 'mixed blessings.' If you don't know much about Jacob and Esau, they were twins born to Isaac and his wife, Rebekah. Esau was born first, only minutes before his brother, but was the blood-born heir as firstborn. Yet God wasn't with Esau as He was with Jacob, and Jacob shrewdly talked his brother out of Esau's birthright, then deceitfully gained his father's first-born blessing by posing as Esau. Shady story? Perhaps, yet I'd ask you whether or not such things happen in our world today. You know they do: from families to nation-states, each of us acts in our own best interests.

Sometimes those interests are in line with how God is blessing us. That was the case with Jacob.

When Isaac was old and nearly blind, he wanted to give his formal, ecclesiastical blessing to his first-born son. In cahoots with their mother, Jacob and Rebekah schemed to deceive Isaac so that Jacob, and not Esau, would receive that blessing. You'd be mad enough to kill if your younger brother had taken away everything that was supposed to be yours. Esau was, and he swore to kill Jacob, then prepared to make good on that vow. That's what happened yet in being both fascinated and repulsed by this story, don't overlook the miracle of it.

Isaac blessed his sons because he had faith his God would bless them accordingly. What's more, God blesses Jacob and Esau both after the deception.

Isaac lived his life knowing God, having seen God bless both his father, Abraham, and himself. Isaac gave his blessing when he was old and while Abraham was still alive. In doing this, Isaac is a witness to his belief that God was good and would bless and prosper the world as He said He would. Such faith in adherence with worldly customs like birthright blessing shows trust in God and thankfulness for all that God has given us. Isaac seems like a bit-player in Biblical history yet his faith is most important. God made the covenant with Abraham to bless the world through him. It is Isaac who puts that covenant into motion by passing on his faith-based blessing to his son. God kept that covenant promise despite Abraham's shortcomings (like lying about the identity of his wife) or Isaac's (who did the same thing about his own).

And when the world (via Jacob) intervenes with the sin of deceit, God still uses that to make good on what He promised. Hearing about Esau's vow, Jacob, again with the help of his mother, flees to her homeland and is, himself, deceived by his uncle. Jacob falls in love with his cousin, Rachel, yet is deceived by Rachel's father into marrying her sister, Leah, in exchange for seven years of work. Eventually, Jacob marries both Leah and Rachel and fathers twelve sons who will become the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In the meantime, God blesses Esau by giving him wealth and a large family through his cousin Ishmael's line. Esau never forgot his vow to kill his brother, yet God blesses him with the spiritual gift of mercy. Many years later, a wealthy Jacob returns home to submit to his brother's will (itself an act of faith). Instead of murder, Esau forgives his brother, and the families are reconciled. When God sees Jacob's willingness to submit to his brother's punishment for the deceit of years before, His heart is moved and He renames Jacob "Israel." The rest, as they say, is history.

Read the story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau in Genesis; start in Genesis 27. I'm hoping you see how yesterday's themes of foreshadowing, devotion, reason and resurrection play out in all their lives because, in some ways, they are both the picture of the life of Jesus to come as well as a picture of the kind of lives even we live today. Each of our lives is a bag of mixed blessings. It's my prayer you come to see how, mixed or otherwise, they're all still blessings from above.

For further reading: Genesis 27.

Lord, thank You for mixed blessings. And thanks for the story of Isaac and his dysfunctional family. May it be a blessing to my own.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 August 2017

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. Hebrews 11, verse 21.

Jacob: he is revered yet he is reviled. I've heard Biblical critics savage the Scriptures because of Jacob. He was a liar, a cheat, a scoundrel. He was the radically imperfect vessel through whom God chose to display His grace. Later there was Moses, and Ruth, and David, and the prophets, and Paul. Much later came you and me. Like it or not, got skin, got sin. You, Jacob, and I are cut from the same cloth.

Yet you and I aren't going to be remembered in the Bible whereas those other people are. Jacob was an old man by the time the story of Joseph fully played out. He had known the consequences of the sins of his youth as well as those perpetrated against him. He married two sisters who quarreled. Said two sisters hated their father, and this animosity carried over into the next two generations. His wife had played favorites with their children, just as Jacob's had; just as Jacob did himself. Those children, twelve sons from multiple women, quarreled again and sold their youngest brother into slavery. When Jacob was praying like this, he was in danger of losing both his life and his family. Indeed, at the time Jacob praying while leaning on his staff, he and everyone around him was still in real danger of starving to death.

Through all of it, two things remained. One, Jacob remained a cheeky fellow, and two, Jacob came to rely more and more on God. God had sustained him when he journeyed in the desert to his uncle's land. The pillow, the ladder, the visions, the miracle food: all God's provision. In return, Jacob worshipped and prayed, built altars, dug wells, and dedicated his life to God. Through God's woven plan, Jacob regained the son whom he thought had died. When his life was nearly over, he blessed his sons and their future in the name of the God he had come to know well, the God who had sustained him physically and spiritually against long odds.

Do you know any Jacobs in the world today? Better yet, do you know of any in your own life? Are you one of them?

I'll admit: I have a soft spot for Jacob. When I was a boy, I was quiet like he was; I would have rather stayed around the house than go out hunting in the open country. I'm still that way. I've done my share of deceiving to get what I wanted, and I've come to own the consequences of sins I wish I had never done. Yet I also know God. I rely on Him more and more, even as so many times I still rail against Him. I'm not wealthy like Jacob, and I haven't yet known real famine. Yet I have been in real danger of destitution and death many times, many of them times of my own making. In all of them, I grew closer to my Maker because He sustains me in the bad times and provides for me in everything. Anything good I have known is from God and nobody else.

Sometimes I see Jacob in the mirror. God hasn't made me into an Israel yet, but there's still time. What He has done is bring me from long ago days that seem fearfully ancient into today, where I am unafraid to talk of God and talk about Him in this life. Where there have been mixed blessings, the 'mixed' part has always been because of something I or someone else did. The blessings overwhelmingly come from God. There are people who revere and revile me equally; it's all fair. Put it on my tombstone that I wish for them to revere God instead and revile the bad choices they, too, have made. I'm Jacob. How about you?

For further reading: Genesis 48-49.

My Lord, You and only You sustain me, just as You did Your servant, Jacob. Thank You for this.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 15 August 2017

By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. Hebrews 11, verse 22.

I respect wisdom; I only wish I practiced more of it. Like I said the last time, I'm Jacob. I tend towards living out the unwise even as I crave to be wiser. If I'm Jacob, that makes Joseph my son. It's as if my Dad and I had switched roles. When I think of Joseph, I think of my Dad because I believe they shared a similar temperament.

If you don't know the story, Joseph is Jacob's favorite son. He's his son by Rachel, the beloved wife for whom Jacob had slaved seven years. Joseph is animated, insightful, lively, and honest. He's also naïve and wise, and not very tactful. Joseph alienated his older brothers so much that they wanted to murder him, but couldn't bring themselves to do it. So they sold him as a slave to passing travelers, who carried him away to Egypt. There Joseph became a slave in a rich man's house. Over ups and downs, God provided for Joseph in everything, abiding with him when he was unjustly thrown in prison, and abiding with him when he rose to great power afterwards. Second only to the king, Joseph worked miracles in using the knowledge and talents God gave him to prepare for seven years of famine. Because of Joseph's faith in God, all Egypt had food to eat during that famine, so much so that the extra was sold to foreigners...including Joseph's family. After some drama even Hollywood couldn't imagine, Joseph is reunited with his family, and his father, Jacob, is able to die in peace.

Joseph was wise. He recognized the hand of God in all good that had come his way. When bad things happened, he thanked God for providing rescue and knowledge. When good things happened, he gave all credit to God who had made it so. Yet Joseph never underestimated the power of human depravity. He understood the fickle nature of politics, and of being a foreigner serving a foreign king; Joseph believed there would be trouble after he died. Thus, he prophesied that a time would come when his Israelite kinfolk would become a nation in need of deliverance. "God will come to your aid" was what he told his children and grandchildren. Joseph was a wise realist. He 'played long ball' were good and when they weren't. He knew that, in both, God is still God and over it all. His faith didn't decrease even when he realized he was dying. Indeed, he clung onto it steadily even when he knew God would see him die in a strange land.

My dad was a Kenneth, not a Joseph. Yet I'm reminded of Joseph when I think of my dad. Dad wasn't a deeply religious man. He went to church nearly all his life, yet it seemed like he taught my sister and I to be Sunday morning Christians. It wasn't that he was a bad man, or that he lived a moral life on Sunday and immoral otherwise; nothing could be farther from the truth. Dad always believed in Jesus. It's just that his faith wasn't something he practiced openly. That is until he was dying. Dad died of cancer in 1997. The disease took him in a little over two years of up's and down's and painful treatments. Through it, like Joseph, Dad learned to cling onto his faith. Even up until the last time I talked with him, Dad was content with his life and realistic about his death. "I know where I'm going. I wish it wasn't now, but that isn't up to me." His words; not mine.

My Dad wasn't a perfect man, and he didn't try to be one. He did his best. His father did the same even as he, my grandfather, wasn't a particularly strong example of the kind of man my father once wanted to be. Dad worked to teach the people around him to have faith and be better. He did his best to prepare us for hard times that would one day come.

If I as the son am more Jacob – an impetuous believer – then I remember my Dad as more Joseph: a wise believer. God took Joseph from obscurity to the depths to great fame. God took my Dad from obscurity, through the hills, and to a quiet grave in a green field of white stones. Yet I remember him as wise, and prospering, and usually laughing, and good. I learned from my Dad to always try my hardest, and to 'give it my all' no matter what 'it' is. And I learned from him the basics of believing, of learning how to trust God. I'm betting Joseph could have said the same thing about his dad.

For further reading: Genesis 50:24-25, Exodus 13:19, Joshua 24:32.

Lord, thank You for letting me be my Dad's son, and Your created son. Thank You for the example of Joseph, for all he did.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 16 August 2017

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. Hebrews 11, verse 23.

"No ordinary child:" we like to think those words can describe any child, and indeed they do. Yet another translation lists this phrase as "because they saw he was a fine child." Moses was a fine child. From the start, he was unique, set aside for unique work, a unique life. He was no ordinary child.

Something told Moses' parents (Amram and Yochebed) that their boy was special. It was something called faith in God. They knew what was happening around them. They knew the king's decree, to kill every newborn boy because the Israelites had grown too numerous and were a threat to the security of the throne. The family, descended from Jacob's son, Levi, believed in El Shaddai, the great God Almighty. They had come to believe He would deliver them from the slavery their Egyptian "hosts" had put them into. Hadn't Levi's brother, Joseph, prophesied, many years before, that God would deliver the Israelites in their time of need?

Something told Amram and Yochebed that their son might just be the man to do that. They had to save him because God had put it on their hearts that he was a fine child, no ordinary child, a unique child with a unique future ahead of him. So they hid him. Can you imagine doing that, let alone doing that for three months? Here you are, a slave toiling in the most powerful nation on earth (ruled by a tyrannical, royal despot) and you consciously, secretly violate the edict of that king. You know the penalty for disobedience is immediate death for you and everyone in your family, but you disobey anyway. People had seen Yochebed pregnant; how would they explain her sudden weight loss without a baby (or even a body to bury)? How did she feed young Moses? How did she care for him when he cried and she was working, making bricks in the mud pits of Goshen?

How did all this happen? Amram and Yochebed believed in God Almighty, and El Shaddai provided for them. God provided calm for their hearts and food for their table. God gave them peace deep inside to overcome the threat of violence against them. And God provided cover for young Moses, keeping him safe until the time came for his mother to place him in a basket so he could be found by Pharaoh's daughter.

I wonder what Amram called the young boy. He wasn't named "Moses" until the Princess of Egypt plucked him from the Nile. His original name was is lost to history: we know of him as Moses today, nearly four thousand years after he lived. If you think about it, it's a miracle we even know about him, or about his siblings, his parents, or even their parents before them. Because of the Bible, we know the name of Moses' ancestors going all the way back to Adam. You can't say that about most of the people who have ever lived; you can't even say that about that Pharaoh. We know what he ordered, but can't tell you for sure which Pharaoh he actually was. But we can give you hundreds of details about Moses.

Moses was born for a unique life.

My granddaughter spent a few days with us this week. I got to hold her, and play with her, and have some Pops & Emma time together. I love that little girl, just like I do all my kids and grandkids. I think they're extraordinary, and even fine. Yet God has never put it on my heart that they will deliver their people from slavery. God has never identified to me that one of them will do something that will be recorded for the rest of human history. My grandkids are no ordinary kids, at least to me. God provides for them, too, in ways they're far too young to understand. History has yet to be written about what lives they lead. I simply pray they choose to know God because He already knows them in full. And they are no ordinary people. But they aren't Moses.

For further reading: Exodus 1:16-2:2

Lord, than You for your servant, Moses. Thank You for recording things for us to know about him.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 17 August 2017

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. Hebrews 11, verses 24-26.

Moses isn't Charlton Heston. Remember "The Ten Commandments?" Cecil B. DeMille's last picture, which is one of the most famous movies of all time? It's a tradition in America to show it every year around Easter, and it's one of the movies I don't (yet) have on DVD (or should I do Blu-Ray? Get all 2010...). Here's a true confession: most of what I know about Moses, I learned from watching Charlton Heston. He was manly, gutsy, stoic; if you wanted a statue of Moses, you'd want it to look like Chuck Heston. But Moses isn't (as my father called him) "the blue eyed Jew." Or Christian Bale (in the not-as-good re-telling from a few years ago). The movie took a great many liberties with Biblical history, so much so that, when I actually read through Exodus through Deuteronomy, I felt let down. Only after doing further study did I feel impressed, again, by the story of this great man. The mis-understanding was mine, not Moses'.

However, make no mistake about it: no movie star I know of – not even Charlton Heston – would choose to give up Hollywood to be treated like a slave. Moses was brought up in the palace of Pharaoh. He was treated like a grandson, even a son, even though he was the known child of Hebrew slaves. His mother, Pharaoh's daughter, lavished him in luxury. She raised him to educate him, to teach him how to rule a nation, master a court, prepare for royalty. Born a pauper, Moses grew up into a prince, a prince of Egypt: the heir apparent to rule wealthiest, most splendid and powerful nation on Earth. It wouldn't have been unprecedented for a Hebrew, a foreigner, to rule as the power behind a throne. After all, Joseph had done so.

Yet when Moses came to a crossroads in his life, he unwittingly chose God. One day, he saw an Egyptian mistreat a Hebrew and he killed the Egyptian. Long before God forbade it, Pharaoh forbade killing as a way to preserve order in society. Moses hid the body, until the next day. He saw two Hebrew men fighting and, when questioning one of them, learned that his crime had become known. The brave prince of Egypt turned quickly into a coward on the run. He fled Egypt and didn't return for forty years.

During that time, Moses went from prince back to pauper. He became a shepherd in what is possibly now western Saudi Arabia. He actively shunned his past, perhaps out of fear, but perhaps out of humility. Moses fled Egypt at about age forty and he lived in the desert another forty years. He raised a family, worked from his in-laws, and disappeared from public life. What did he do during that time? What did he think? What visions filled his dreams? Surely Moses must have used much of that time to wonder why his life had gone off track. I wonder if he had a crisis of faith, perhaps wrestling with faith for the first time in his life. Eventually, he accepted that his life wasn't off track but had, instead, traveled on to a different one. He who had been born no ordinary child now lived the most ordinary, unrecognized of lives and what had it all been for?

But God recognized him, and Moses chose to accept the invitation. He saw the burning bush on the mountain and hiked up to see it. From then on, all history changed. Moses definitely did. God shook Moses out of his navel-gazing rural complacency and called him to the task God had prepared for him (and prepared him for). He knew that the generation which had wanted him called to Egyptian justice was dead, but that the mission God had called him to perform might also get him killed. Yet He went. After some grumbling and stalling (in front of God Himself; can you imagine?), Moses went. And then everything changed.

All because Moses looked heavenward. All because Moses believed. Charlton Heston couldn't have done any better.

For further reading: Acts 7:22, Exodus 2:10-Luke 14:33, Hebrews 10:35, 1 Kings 4:30, Isaiah 19:11.

Lord, thank You for the example of Moses. Thank You for guiding Him, and for delivering Him from the slavery to his past while You delivered Your people from the injustice of real slavery.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 August 2017

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. Hebrews 11, verses 27-28.

Just yesterday I was talking with a friend who is on the front lines of spiritual warfare. If you aren't familiar with that term, it's trendy...but it's real. If you say "I believe in Jesus" then you're a foot-soldier in the line of the army of the Living God. You're acknowledging Him as God, all good, pure perfect love. Whether you realize it or not, you're also subtly accepting the existence of non-God, all bad, pure incarnate evil. That's Satan. It isn't cool these days to talk about Satan as real, but he is. He's real, he's still here, and his methods have changed with the times even as his mission hasn't. Since that long-ago day in Eden, he has wanted to be God, not realizing he isn't and can't be. Jesus called him "the father of lies" and that was two thousand years ago. If you believe in Jesus, you're setting your beliefs against those of the prince of this world. You're on the front lines of spiritual war.

My friend and his wife work in Uganda, helping to mentor villagers in farming and self-management. However, they may be moving into a new mission field soon. They're currently on the front lines of spiritual warfare in Africa, and may be moving into spiritual trench warfare someplace else. Please pray for Floyd, Tamra and the Stanley family as they discern where God is leading them. Yet no matter where they go, they're going to be on the line against Satan, helping other people to 'gear up' in their own fight of standing for good against consummate evil. Just like Moses. Just like Moses, my friend, and me, and you, and anyone who has faith in God, are standing against evil. Moses went back 'home' to Egypt, to the palace where he was raised, to the enslaved people from whom he descended. God had given him the mission to go to Pharaoh and be God's mouthpiece. In doing so, Moses would confront the ungodly practices of slavery, and pagan divination, and even murder. "Have faith in Me" God told him, and then God thrust him back into the scene of Moses' crime and the source of his flight into Midian.

Yet Moses went and he stood. He stood because he believed in God and God was all he needed to stand against the evil of Egypt. Through nine plagues, rising tension, and escalating hostility, Moses went to Pharaoh and passed on God's command to let his people go. Nine times Pharaoh declined and hardened his heart...while sharpening his army's swords. The tenth time, Moses foretold that death would visit Pharaoh's only son and the first-born child of everyone in Egypt. What would save them? Faith: faith in God. Faith proven in deed with the blood of innocent lambs painted on their door-frames. When the angel of death 'passed over' Egypt, all Israel would quiver in awesome respect as it stood in humble worship on the Goshen front line of spiritual warfare.

That very night, as every house in Egypt wept, Pharaoh summoned Moses. Three miracles happened there, and all in short succession. First, all Israel believed that the sacrifice of lamb's blood, which would fore-tell the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, would save them from sure death. Second, God's promise came true as Israel was saved and Pharaoh then relented and freed them from their bondage. And third, the pagan Pharaoh was humbled to acknowledge that there is only one God, and that Israel should "go and worship the Lord as you have requested." Not 'your God' or 'who you say is God' but "the Lord." How the high were brought low, and the humble brought up. And all because of faith, all because a few stood watch on the front lines that night.

Just like the kid's song says, I'm in the Lord's Army. Cheesy? Maybe a little on the surface, but it doesn't take much to see that the war is real, the fight is intense, and the enemy's objective is to destroy anyone who gets in his way. My friend and his family fight overseas. Moses fought in Egypt, then in the desert against temptations. I fight here in these words, and in my hometown and wherever I'm given the opportunity to shine kindness against the dark. I fight Satan with faith in my Lord, knowing my Savior will prevail no matter what the enemy throws against us. There are many who think the battle of the ages is coming, with signs all over the world happening more and more. Even today's eclipse. It's time to join the army, my friend. Pick up your sword and stand.

For further reading: Exodus 12:21-51, 1 Corinthians 10:10.

Oh Lord, I pray help me to stand against evil where I am today. I pray You guide me as you did Moses, and strengthen me to stand in awe of You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 23 August 2017

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. Hebrews 11, verse 29.

If pop culture wrote the Bible, this verse might say, "by faith they all survived the eclipse of 2017." Did you see the eclipse in America this week? From all the media hype, one might have thought the world was ending. From what really happened, it was a cool astrophysical yawn. As are all such things, in fact. They're predicted by mathematics (itself a wondrously baffling knowledge gift from God). Any astronomer who didn't want to be on TV could have told you that, barring a miracle, the moon would pass between the Sun and the Earth without incident. Animals (like reporters) would get a little freaked out by the mid-day darkness, but most everything would hum along just fine, which is what happened. Eclipses happen about every 18 months or so someplace across the Earth. This one was unique because it would be visible by the easily sensitive US media. Unusual but, in reality, no big deal.

Unlike crossing the Red Sea, which wasn't witnessed by the network news. Four thousand or more years after it happened, we're still talking about it (but the media isn't). We're still talking about it because Moses, who wrote the book of Exodus, recorded for us what happened.

You know the account. Pharaoh finally obeyed God's command to free Israel from slavery. Yet Pharaoh also soon developed a royal case of buyer's remorse. He summoned his army and they set out to chase the departing Israelites. When the Israelites found themselves bounded on one side by the approaching Egyptian host and on the other by the unmovable Red Sea, God delivered a miracle. He moved the Sea, cleared a path, and dried up the ground. Israel quickly hurried through, followed in close pursuit by the Egyptians. When the last Israelite was clear of the ocean, God closed up the Sea over the Egyptian Army and drowned them. All because of faith.

Faith? I thought it was because of God! Of course it was because of God, but the reason the Israelites made it through and the Egyptians died was that Israel had faith in God. They believed God would deliver them and He did. The Egyptians, despite four hundred years of exposure to the faith of the Israelites, had no faith in God. So God turned them over to the consequences of their unbelief and they drowned. Would they have lived if they had faith? Who knows; ask the Lord. I like to think that, if God saved Israel because of its faith, He would have saved anyone else who believed.

Can you imagine hurrying through the walled up Red Sea? Walls of sheer, rushing water held back by, it would have seemed, nothing. The noise, the spray, the terror of walking through such power on display: if you didn't believe in God when you stepped down onto that path, you would have definitely believed on the other side. Perhaps there never was before or never has been since such a muscular display of God's raw power. Perhaps, that is, until that first Easter Sunday. But that wouldn't come for most of another two millennia. We know about Jesus' resurrection and the power of God displayed in it, the power of God over death. All Israel got to see His power on display over war, specifically that army which designed to bring war and death upon them had death brought on itself instead. The best made plans of the unbelieving Pharaoh were, once again, made to not be so.

Just like it wasn't to be this week that the world would end because the moon traveled between us and the Sun. Out here in East Texas, it got dark during the peak time. I made a pinhole viewer and saw the obscured sun through that pinhole. I also saw the crescent shapes outlined in tree leaf shadows on the ground. Stupid me, I forgot to look through a welding helmet. But I and so many others had faith that this was just a natural phenomena, a display of God's power of astronomy, gravity, and interplanetary motion. Come to Texas in 2024 for the next one. I hope we don't have to view it while on the run from armed charioteers.

For further reading: Exodus 14:21-31.

Lord God, thank You for the miracle You did in saving the Israelites at the Red Sea. Thank You for preserving this story of faith for us here today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 August 2017

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. Hebrews 11, verse 30.

After yesterday's entry, let's fast forward a few generations. In the space of a few months, Moses went from a shepherd, to renegade troublemaker, to general and judge, to leader of a nation. In the space of a few months, Moses followed God through the Red Sea, then led the Israelites into the desert of Sinai (likely in today's Saudi Arabia). Not long after, Moses disappears onto Mount Sinai (to receive the Ten Commandments), the Israelites rebel, Moses loses his temper, and God punishes Israel for its disobedience by making them wander in the deserts of Midian for forty years until all the rebels died out. When that generation is gone, Moses dies and Joshua, Moses' lieutenant, takes over as leader. God then commands the Israelites to march around the Canaanite city of Jericho for six days, praising God each time and blowing their trumpets behind the Ark of the Covenant (minus Indiana Jones). On the seventh day, they marched around Jericho seven times, and on the seventh time, they screamed out in praise of God that God had delivered Jericho to them.

Which He had. On that seventh march, the walls of Jericho that had protected it for decades, maybe even centuries, tumbled down and the Israelites took the city. Jericho had been a military, economic and political threat to Israel. More than that, they were a city full of pagan's who gave the collective Canaanite finger to the great I AM. I AM brought justice and the threat was removed. Great story, eh?

It is great, and it's history, not just a story. It really happened. Excavations at Jericho confirm a cataclysmic destruction of an ancient city there: an account that lines up with the book of Joshua. All if it happened because the Israelites believed that God would deliver the city to them. If it doesn't make much sense to you, then you're probably in good company. The story seems illogical to us today because we focus on the improbability of it. Marching around the city, blowing trumpets, no conventional military attack to achieve a military objective: it all seems preposterous.

Thee focus of the story isn't on the unconventional (though effective) military tactics. The focus of the story is on the faith the people had that God would do what He said He would do. God had told Joshua to lead his people to do these things and then the city walls would collapse so Israel could take the city. That's exactly what happened. Imagine the curiosity, then anxiety, then terror felt by the pagan 'haters' who lived in Jericho as they watched this foreign army surround their city. Imagine watching thousands of these marchers, coming back day after day. How would you have felt? Would you have laughed at first but, by the end of that sixth day, been thankful for the stone walls that kept the invaders out? And how would you have felt when the walls came down?

What is Jesus saying with the account of what the Israelites did after Jericho fell? If you don't know, they killed every living thing there. How can God be merciful in that? Before you get all judgy, remember that God asks for faith, invites us to faith, proves the worth of faith. Jericho had heard about these Israelites. They knew what had happened since the time of Abraham. They knew and ignored it. More than ignoring it, they flaunted God. How could God spare them? Friend, it isn't our place to judge God but to heed Him and obey His Word.

Tell me, my friend: what walls have you built that need to come down? Have you walled off parts of your heart? Have you walled off your emotions, your feelings, your past, your dreams? More than this, have you walled out God from your life, thinking there's no way He could love you, forgive you, want you? Do you hate yourself and your life this much?

Perhaps its time to march around your heart a few times and then blow the horns. The purpose of the account of Jericho is, for you, to do what God asks of you and open your heart to change. Watch what happens when God keeps His word.

For further reading: Joshua 6: 12-20.

Lord, thank You for what happened at Jericho. Thank You for the faith of the Israelites, and for the promises You make.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 August 2017

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. Hebrews 11, verse 31.

God likes hookers. God loves whores.

Yes, I said that. God loves prostitutes, murderers, thieves, liars, adulterers, cheaters, haters, and Democrats. Excepting that last category, God loves all those kinds of people who flagrantly violate the Ten Commandments He gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. And, yes, God loves Democrats, too, (and Republicans, Libertarians, Antifa thugs, and KKK neo-Nazi punks who really need to get a clue).

You know one place you could lump all those people together? Answer: a church. Churches are spiritual hospitals, places for sick twisted freaks to go to get better, to receive medicine, to give of themselves to someone who doesn't deserve all their disease but wants to take it anyway. More than that, worship is the time to commune with the God who loves us despite everything we do to piss Him off. He loves everyone, even the neo-Nazis, Democrats, and those other bad actors.

Know how we can know that? Rahab. Rahab was a hooker living in Jericho. She had heard about this God; Jehovah, Yahweh, IAM; she had heard about Him through the grapevine and she believed He was real. She had heard the stories about this massive nation that God had brought out of slavery in Egypt. When Joshua sent spies into Jericho to scope it out, Rahab hid them because she respected God and wanted to know more of Him. She who had earned her living in sin on her back wanted to turn from how that made her feel and live. She didn't want to die; she didn't want to be killed when Israel took the town. So she hid the Israelite spies in her home and made them promise they would spare her and hers when they overran Jericho.

And that's what happened. Rahab the prostitute, Rahab the damn dirty sinner whore believed in a God she had only heard about as a rumor. When presented with facts of His existence (the Israelites), she immediately believed. She believed out of fear but then she believed out of hope. She understood that this God unknown to her had proven Himself to be all He said He was through keeping His word. Rahab wanted to live and she believed God was the only way she could. She was right. And she was a hooker. She was considered the worst of sinners.

How about you? Are you a prostitute? Do you whore yourself out for nothing? How many whores will you see in church on Sunday morning? Look around. There'll be quite a few even if they make their livings wearing a suit and tie. Or if they have the perfect family and the perfect blonde hair. I wonder how many of us have the faith that Rahab had. Not to be Dave the Downer but I'm betting there are few. Just this week, an astounding thing happened to me. I found a woman lying in the middle of the road. This was a four-lane road very early in the morning, and she was passed out, lying up against a concrete barrier. She was uninjured despite lying down in the middle of a highway. The policeman and I surmised she was high on some kind of drug. To make the story short, I called the police, an ambulance came to take her for a check-out, and it appears the woman would be just fine.

Yet do you know what amazed me? While I was waiting beside her on the road, protecting this stranger from harm, probably a dozen cars whizzed by. Any one of them could have run over both of us; we could easily have been killed. Yet any one of them could have stopped to help, even just to investigate, and none of them did. Remember Jesus' story of the good Samaritan? Well, I'm no good Samaritan and I'm not worth the dust on Jesus' feet. I'm just a guy who found someone who needed help.

But those other people who kept driving after seeing this woman flat on the road? It looks like they aren't even hookers with a heart like Rahab. Maybe they were frightened themselves. Maybe they couldn't stop for some other reason. Or maybe they just didn't give a damn. Whores. At least Rahab believed and then put her nascent belief into action. She didn't have to help, but she wanted to because she wanted to live. She wanted the hope of this God.

And she received it. Remember: God loves hookers, too.

For further reading: Joshua 2:1, Joshua 9:14, Joshua 6:22-25, Luke 10: 25-37, James 2:25.

Lord, help me to have the faith of Rahab the prostitute. And bless & forgive those who can't or won't help others in time of need.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 August 2017

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Hebrews 11, verses 32-34.

Where are there great heroes today? Gideon, who led when nobody else would. Barak, the warrior who answered God's call to rally troops and defeated the Canaanite, Sisera. Samson, the self-centered leader in the days of the Judges, who rejected his selfishness to rally the power of God in his death and, in doing so, slew the Philistines. Jephthah, the great Israelite leader who conquered the Ammonites yet made a foolish vow, then considered his word to God to be more important than any other word he had ever spoken.

Here in our day, is President Trump a hero? Hardly, especially since (as one of my relatives pointed out) so many of our countrymen consider him to be a boor, a scoundrel, and "an incomparable cheat." How about his predecessor, President Obama? Hardly again, especially since so many more of our countrymen consider him to be weak, of poor beliefs, and an enemy of liberty. The leaders of our major churches live in luxury and opulence. The gulf between the richest and poorest in our country, in our world, keeps growing ever wider. We all want to believe we are special in God's eyes yet we, myself included, look across the room and see people of different beliefs, different colors, different places in this world and we consider them aliens. How must our God feel about us? Where are the people whose weakness God turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle through the Lord and routed foreign armies? Where are the men and women of honor and valor who walk the walk and talk the talk for Jesus today?

You saw a few of them on the news this weekend. They were friends, relatives, first responders working beyond exhaustion to retrieve strangers from the floodwaters in Houston. They were the pastors in Africa who walk miles between villages on Sunday afternoon just to share a few minutes of Christian worship with people hungry to know more about Jesus. They're people who smile at you when you meet them in the streets, mothers who raise their children (and new puppies) while husbands and fathers are deployed overseas. They are nurses in hospitals, grandparents raising grand-babies, the people who hold open doors. Ordinary people live extraordinary lives and, very often, just by doing so are heroic in small ways that matter.

Yesterday in church, the sermon text was on the fruit of the spirit. From Galatians 5, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." The heroes of the Bible listed above knew these things, knew them centuries before Paul recorded them in his epistle. The heroes mentioned in our world today know them, too. Whether any of them, or us, know it or not, they are evidence of God for only from God's Spirit are these things possible. Apart from the Savior, they're just niceties, ways to get along for a short time in a hostile world of hopelessness and futility. Abiding in the Savior, they're evidence of His presence. And they're the makings of heroes. When we consider how people of faith live out these good things from God, we can be sure that our God feels only love for us since it is His love that binds all those other things together.

I don't consider myself a hero. More often than not, I mess up these words and mess up the message I'm trying to convey. I offend people who are trying to understand where I'm coming from, and I don't represent the God of our Fathers in the good way He deserves. Maybe I'm describing you. I know I'm describing me. Yet perhaps there's someone, somewhere who looks at you differently. Perhaps there's someone who sees through our warts, who looks past our sins and failings, who doesn't tolerate our cruel words but loves us enough to look past them. There's someone like that for all of us; His name is Jesus. If we see our blessings, we get to see how others live out the fruit of His Spirit and they are heroes whether they do good deeds or not. A few days ago, I wrote things that offended someone close to me. For that, I apologize, especially since she's a hero in my eyes. I pray that she, and you, would know a hero today.

For further reading: Galatians 5:22-23, Judges 4-8, 1 Samuel 15:1, 13-20, 2 Samuel 8:1-3, Daniel 6:22, Daniel 3:19-27, Exodus 18:4, 2 Kings 20:7.

Lord, I praise You for the fruit of Your Spirit that lives out in the heroes of today. They're my brothers and sisters, and I look up to them because when I see good things they say and do, I'm looking at You in their eyes.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 29 August 2017

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. Hebrews 11, verses 35-38.

Read through these verses again and you get a, well, Biblical feeling about them (pun intended). Then read through them again and consider that, somewhere in the world today, there are people who are being mistreated, persecuted, and tortured for believing in Jesus just like these church forebears thousands of years ago.

You and I read about that on the Internet, but it's true. In Sudan, people are tortured for being Christian, for denying anyone but Allah. In Iran, you can be executed for being a Christian. Ditto in North Korea (or any communist country for all that matter). In Cuba you can still be thrown in prison for saying you believe in Jesus (but, then again, Cuba is still a communist dictatorship). Same in the People's Republic of China (also still a communist dictatorship). In Saudi Arabia, if you're a Christian (or any non-Muslim for all that matter), you can be punished with instant death for trying to enter the holy mosque near the Kaaba. Being tortured and dying for what you believe goes a long way back. But look at the benefits. Indeed, consider ONLY the benefits of believing. Jesus or the world? Jesus wins.

Only Jesus can bring you back from death because only He has done that. Only Jesus can give you true peace inside, true calmness of your Spirit. That's here and not, not just some day. Only Jesus can steel your spine to face down agonizing death because only in Jesus can you have full assurance that physical death is only a tiny passage into eternal life.

That's not to say that living your faith is rosy or even easy. I wonder if that's not a disappointment for many folks who say they believe. They are looking for something that takes away the hurt, the difficulty, even the pain of things that happen in life and when Christianity doesn't instantly do that, they walk away disappointed. Who knows when we got away from the idea that following Jesus could be tough? Somewhere along the way, (especially) we in America began to serve up a Christianity that was light and easy, an egg-white omelette of faith if you will.

That isn't the faith Jesus advertised. He said that, if we wanted to follow Him, we would have to take up our cross and walk with Him daily. That means we would, every day of our lives, have to stand against the world, against our nature, against even those who love us but don't love Him. That means we would have to carry our instrument of death with us everywhere we go until, at the end of all things, we are nailed to it. When Jesus taught from the Scriptures, he taught from the accounts of the Old Testament heroes who died for their faith but died IN their faith. For them, there was no death at all, but only that passage to something far better in paradise. Death in the service of the Lord was an honor, maybe even a duty, but not a burden.

They understood that the God of their fathers was loving, just and true. That He kept His promises. That He was all He said He was. They understood that, even in a century-long life, time here on earth is short. The men and women of ancient days who died for Christ in their faith seemed to know something we have misplaced.

Here's the hard part: what are you willing to do to get it back?

For further reading: 1 Kings 17:22-23, 2 Kings 4:36-37, Jeremiah 20:2, genesis 39:20, 1 Kings 19:10, Jeremiah 26:23, 1 Kings 1:8, 1 Kings 18:4, Luke 9:23.

My Lord, forgive me when I fail You. Thank You for the blessings of enduring hardship in service to You, in faith in You. Let my sufferings be a good witness to others and strengthen them.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 August 2017

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Hebrews 11, verses 39-40.

At the end of all things: that's a phrase from the final "Lord of the Rings" movie. Frodo and Sam have destroyed the one ring and are trapped on a rock amidst a sea of lava. They completed their mission but now, it seemed, they would perish as Mount Doom exploded around them. Free of the evil power of Sauron's ring, Frodo tells Sam he feels liberated, and is thankful to be together with him "here, at the end of all things."

I like that phrase. I can't exactly explain why, but I like the phrase. Perhaps it's because we have not yet reached the end of all things, yet the faith I have in my Lord speaks constantly of it. The words He left for us in His Scriptures speak of them. Words like these two verses from Hebrews.

All through chapter 11 we've read about these heroes who lived by faith and did great things. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, all of them: their greatness wasn't because of themselves, but because of the God they followed. Some of them followed Him through works that brought great glory. Some of them followed Him through works that brought them into eternal glory.

THAT was the point, you see: following Jesus leads to eternal glory.

That is the point of all Scripture. That is the point of all human history. It isn't to gain knowledge; it isn't to find renewable energy. The point of all things isn't to wield power, or amass wealth, or to travel the seven seas. It isn't even to love and be loved in the warmth of your family. No, the point of human history has always been Jesus Christ. To follow Jesus is the highest calling in all humanity. To follow Jesus means being made righteous by Him, and to be made righteous by Christ is to be redeemed.

Do you know what is different between you and me and the people of the Old Testament? It's knowing Jesus. We have an advantage they didn't have. We actually do get to know Him as He revealed Himself. None of the heroes of the Old Testament lived in the time of Christ. They lived hundreds, even thousands, of years before Him. Yet they knew the triune God of Whom Christ is the Son. Even as they didn't know Jesus face to face they knew Him in their hearts, deep in their souls. And because they lived in a savage world of common brutality, they understood dying for that belief.

What about the world we live in? We talked just yesterday of how, even today, professing belief in Jesus can cost you your life. Common brutality 3000 years ago isn't much different from common brutality and savagery today. I'm betting, too, that the statistics of believers to non-believers back then weren't so different from those we have now. How many people back then truly followed the living God? If God's chosen people were the Israelites and to follow God you numbered yourself among them, then there weren't many. Just like today.

And still the point of it all is to follow Jesus. When we do that, we march in the Lord's Army in lockstep with Jacob, Moses, Gideon and the others. They did the same thing. At the end of all things, that's what matters most.

For further reading: Hebrews 10:36, Revelation 6:11.

Lord, I praise You for the examples of these people. Thank You for recording their stories that we can know of their faith today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 31 August 2017

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Hebrews 12, verse 1.

If only it were that easy, right? Actually, it is. Last night, I watched “The Alamo,” with John Wayne. I’m drawn to the story of the Alamo; I was even before I became a Texan. I believe every American should see the Alamo in San Antonio at least once. If you’ve never been there, you might be more impressed by the movie set where Mr. Wayne directed his movie; that can be found out in Brackettville, in West Texas. If you want to sense the Alamo, you’ll find it on a tiny city block in the middle of downtown San Antonio. It’s almost unimpressive, and it’s difficult to imagine barely 200 untrained ‘militia’ holding off an organized army of nearly six thousand: the largest attacking force in the Western Hemisphere. Yet that’s what happened. They did it for nearly two weeks, buying time for General Sam Houston’s army to gather and prepare. At the end, all the defenders were killed. Only a few weeks later, the tables were turned, Santa Anna defeated, and Texas became its own country.

It seems like such an easy choice to make, that is, standing up against a dictator like Santa Anna. Freedom against oppression; standing up for what you believe instead of living under the boot of an oppressor. That ought to be an easy choice to make, almost no choice at all really. Then again, I’m just a spectator, a movie-watcher. I haven’t yet had to choose death over surrender against an overwhelming army. Or have I?

If you think about it, we choose death every day. We aren’t heroes like the men at the Alamo, but we choose to stand up and fight every day simply by believing. Every day we are given the choice to stand and fight again or sit out the battle and watch events affect us. Every day we’re given the choice to hold onto things or to throw off every thing, every sin, that hinders and entangles. Most of the time, we do throw them off; at least some of them. Others, well, we hold onto them. Why? Why hold onto the guilt, the danger, the agony of that pet sin? What good does it do you? Or has the hurt of it wrapped around you like an old quilt, enfolding you in false warmth as it actually, slowly, smothers you from within? For the love of God, and because of it, throw it off already. Stand up and fight. You have witnesses to support you. As Crockett, Bowie and Travis might have said, ‘you don’t have to stand tall but you do have to stand up.’

And that ain’t easy. Read verse 1 again and you’ll see that it doesn’t promise easy. But it does promise support. That support comes first and foremost from Jesus. I read a blog called “Trusty Chucks” by a Christian lady named Mary Graham (www.trustychunks.com). Her current posts are agonizing, about how her husband, a recovering drug and alcohol addict, has back-slid. Their family is right now being ripped apart by something that entangled and hindered, something they, and she, thought had been long ago thrown off. Why would her husband secretly use these poisons that endangered the happiness and security of all they had built? Why would you or I? You know we do the same damn thing.

Yet Christ calls us to stand up and do it again. Every night when we embrace the cold arms of our sins, we entangle ourselves in all the dysfunction that’s involved in them. And every morning, Christ beckons us to come to Calvary and die with Him, to put to death the sins of yesterday. To throw them off, then stand up and start again. Most every morning, most of us do. Through that process, He is there. When all our cards are played, He is still there, supporting us, encouraging us, loving us through the worst and the best. And when we get the energy to look around, we find we’re one of many fighting on the line. Christ does that. He inspires others to stand with us, beside us.

What will you do today? If you have a few minutes, go read Mary’s blog. She’s very candid, very real, and a passionate soldier in the army of the living God, and she’s taking fire now. And make plans to one day go see the Alamo. The Shrine of Texas Liberty is hallowed ground for us all.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews 10:36.

My Lord, You stand with me. You are my backbone, my spirit, my energy, my rest. Help me to get up again today, then stand with me to battle these temptations and evils once again.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 11 September 2017

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews 12, verses 1-2.

Last time we talked about the Alamo. Today let's talk about rebuilding. You saw the stories over the weekend: Hurricane Irma smacked the Caribbean and Florida. A number of people lost their lives, millions of people had their lives impacted (many destroyed), and billions of dollars will be needed to build back.

On Sunday morning, I saw a Tweet about Samaritan's Purse. Threading a short time between two hurricanes, Samaritan's Purse landed an airplane full of supplies and volunteers in St Martin. Irma laid waste to the island late last week; Jose threatened to do so soon after. Fortunately, Hurricane Jose turned north instead of passing over the island. Yet the volunteers from Franklin Graham's Christian charity didn't know that would happen when they landed. Thinking they would have only a short time, the afflicted islanders worked quickly with the frightened volunteers to distribute tons of water, medical supplies, and critically needed food.

In the weeks since Hurricane Harvey, thousands of volunteers have been working behind the scenes to clean up and restore normalcy to the lives of the millions of people affected by that storm. In the days since the earthquake in Mexico killed 90 people, volunteers and neighbors have been working to bring in food and help to total strangers. In battling fires in Montana and California, thousands of firefighters have been working around the clock to put out fires so that the lives and livelihoods of total strangers aren't destroyed. Every day, ordinary people in ordinary neighborhoods commit their lives to others' needs so that kids can grow, grandparents can endure, and families can succeed.

They're all running with perseverance the race marked out for them because many of them, maybe most of them, have their eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. More than that, Jesus is the ONLY real comfort for those who have been savaged by these acts of a fallen nature. The writer of Hebrews spent the entire previous chapter citing acts of faith that the ancient heroes of the Bible performed. He then takes that testimony about those men and calls them 'witnesses' to our ability to throw off all that hinders and the sins that entangle us. After all, they did. Don't go off thinking that Moses, Jacob, Gideon and the rest were supermen. They weren't. They were people, sinners in need of a God who could redeem them from the things they had taken into themselves. Yet they had something in common with those folks from Samaritan's Purse and those ordinary people everywhere: faith in God.

Faith in God makes the difference between living an ordinary life where sin entangles and an extraordinary life as an ordinary person throwing off that same entangling sin. Today is the day after the storm caused so much pain; today starts rebuilding. Today is also 9/11, the commemoration of a wholly different kind of pain and anguish; today commemorates building back. Who will you trust to help you run your race? In whom will you put your faith?

You don't HAVE TO believe in Jesus. You really don't. It's a choice and this is a free country. Most of the world doesn't believe in Jesus; most of the world thinks this Christian faith is a waste of time, foolish even, given that people have only so much time alive here on the third rock. Why would they 'waste' that on some unseen ancient legend? Yet if you want to live a life of meaning, you can't do it alone. Occasionally you need the help of others. And, when the chips are really down, you find you need a Savior, someone who can help in ways that relief workers, governments and charities can't. You need help to get back into the race. You need someone to save you from yourself and the terrible choices that we, dearly beloved, make when we gather to get through this thing we call "life." Even Prince knew that. So does Franklin Graham, who has dedicated his life to advancing the Gospel of Jesus. He does it by helping strangers. I pray that your life isn't afflicted today, that you know Jesus without pain or suffering. But when you do encounter pain, I pray that you reach up to grab Christ's helping hand. He'll get you back on your feet to finish the race set before you.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews 10:36, Psalm 25:15, Hebrews 2:10, Philippians 2:8-9, Mark 16:19.

My Lord Jesus, I believe in You and You alone. Only You have saved me. Only You are Savior. Help me run my race today with confidence, perseverance, and grace. And thank You for the hearts of servants serving You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 September 2017

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12, verses 1-2.

These are the same verses from yesterday, but I've added in the last sentence in verse 2. It's one of the most famous, most quoted verses in the entire Bible. To get the full effect, you really need the previous words. "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Read that to yourself over and over a few times, and try to let it sink in.

Yesterday we talked about Franklin Graham and his relief organization, Samaritan's Purse. Neither Franklin Graham nor anyone in Samaritan's Purse set aside pure joy to endure pure torture for you or anyone else. We talked about volunteers and first responders fighting fires and rebuilding after hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes. None of them ever set aside joy, endured the cross, and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. Your neighbors haven't done this. Barack Obama never did this and can't; ditto Donald Trump. Neither can Brad Pitt, the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, Benny Hinn, Miss America 2017, nor your saintly little old lady grandma.

Jesus did. He didn't just do it willingly: He did it lovingly, fully, without hesitation. It's the theme of the entire Bible and the central event in all of human history. Everything that every is or was or will be hinges on Jesus dying on the cross, then rising to live forever.

The creator of all things, the most powerful being imaginable, who created everything simply by speaking; the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (as both Isaiah and Handel called Him): He, the omnipotent and omniscient God willingly, enthusiastically let sinners He created nail Him to the most humiliating device of torture ever devised in hell. He did it with gusto. Jesus not only took the worst mankind could throw at Him: He ASKED for it. He ran the race of life fully, to its end, to show us where we were going.

He did so because Barack, Donald, Brad, Francis and the rest of us can't. We simply can't. We aren't Him; we aren't God. He is. We desperately needed Him to do it, too. All too often, we don't throw off those entangling sins. Too often, the race seems like too much for us.

Yet there He is in the race, running ahead of us, drawing our gaze, our focus. He's in there to pace us, to give us someone to run toward. He beckons us to persevere, to endure because He endured much tougher things than our day to day lives. Notice that Jesus doesn't take us out of the race. He doesn't pluck us from the middle of the world, removing us from our sins. No, Jesus stays with us to give us a reason to push forward. The reason is Him, sitting as equal with His Father in heaven, beckoning us to persevere, to run the race day by day. With Him there is peace now and a meaningful forever. In Him is the victory; in Him is the goal of running the race. All of human history prepared for His coming, and when He came, all of history after Him was set on a different path. No empire could prevent His resurrection; no ideology can refute it, deny it, or withstand it. Every Christmas, memes and cards say "Jesus is the reason for the season." That's true, but don't bottle that up until the Holidays. Jesus is the reason you run your race today. He's there in every step, not just every December.

Get up and get back in your race. Your goal is dead ahead. For the joy set before Him Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. He did it so you could run your race.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews 10:36, Psalm 25:15, Hebrews 2:10, Philippians 2:8-9, Mark 16:19.

Lord, I lift up Your Name to praise You for running my race with me. Abide with me, push me forward, and help me to finish in Your strength.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 September 2017

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12, verse 3.

I become easily depressed. It doesn't take much to get me down, and sometimes I don't even realize I'm in a funk even when I am. Sometimes my wife will ask me "what's wrong" and I didn't even realize I was showing a face that showed anything was bothering me. Sometimes, depression seems like walking in a dark forest, wandering down a path you've wandered before and not knowing how you'll get out alive.

And then I read a verse like this one. I'll admit: sometimes these words seem like just trite. In a way they seem like they aren't enough to snap me out of my depression. They're almost a euphemism. When I get to feeling like that, it's time to step back and look at the forest for the trees. Looking at just the one verse, it's a tree. Jesus lived and died a tough life and death. So what? What about me. How do I get around this big tree? It's so much bigger than me, and it's so cold in here, and dark, and I'll admit I sometimes still get scared of the dark.

Back up a few steps...look at a few trees together...

Consider Him. Really, truly consider Him. He didn't deserve the cross. We of the twenty-first century First World focus on "fair." "It isn't fair" are some of our favorite words, especially when we're depressed. Have you considered it wasn't fair for Jesus to give up the beautiful perfection of heaven to come here and live? Have you considered how He felt sometimes, knowing He was God but living among people openly hostile to Him (some of whom were even His closest friends)? Have you considered how terrified, anguished and in pure agony he felt being tortured to death by people He could extinguish with just a thought? None of that seems very fair.

On your hardest days, have you or I ever truly considered the man Jesus living here among us, let alone the man Jesus living now at the right hand of God the Father?

Back up a few steps more...there are a few more trees, a few more things to consider...

Consider Jesus losing heart. He did, you know. That last night of His life, in Gethsemane, He was scared to death. He wanted anything but the cross, anything but the torment of being ripped away from God while fully being God in the moment. Only He could understand the physical and spiritual agony of it and it terrified Him completely. What He wanted more was to submit to His Father, and that made all the difference in the world. Literally. And consider when He wept. He did, you know. He wept – crying, inconsolable grief – when His friend, Lazarus died. Have you ever cried because someone you loved died? Jesus did, and He was God.

Keep backing up a few more steps...it's starting to look like the beginning of a forest...

Consider that the God-man who didn't deserve the cross, who didn't deserve the torture, who fully experienced all the emotional agony that you or I could know lived that extraordinary life so that you could live your ordinary life by taking your lead from Him. It's easy to lose heart in this world. It's easy to get down when really tough things plague you. Often you don't do anything and still the blues hit you. Sometimes that depression can seem like a spinning weight, pulling you down into emotional black water that you just can't seem to swim out of. Consider, then, that you aren't alone in it. At your very toughest moment, when every other human deserts you and your thoughts seem to close in on you like walls, Jesus is there. He's in your heart; He's in your conscience. He beckons you to put hope in Him, hope being a promise and not just some wish. He listens, He conveys peace to you, He gets you through the moment. Sometimes, when every day seems piled high with interminable moments, well, sometimes the first step on the road back to peace is realizing Jesus is there with us.

Sometimes there's a tree planted in front of you, but when you and your Lord back up a few steps, you realize He's with you there in the forest. And that a forest is just a bunch of trees. It's dark there in the forest, but it doesn't have to be. Hold onto His Hand and consider Him. He's walked around a few trees in His time. He's been in the dark forest, and wherever He is, there's light. Hold onto that light; hold Him by the hand, and walk forward through the forest passing one tree at a time. Before you know it, you'll be on a different path to something and some place better. Sometimes, that's a great place to start.

For further reading: Galatians 6:9, Revelation 2:3.

My Lord, You sustain me in the toughest times. You guide me, You forgive me, You uphold me. When I consider You, I can only feel awesome humble thankfulness.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 September 2017

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Hebrews 12, verse 4.

"I ain't got time to bleed." That quote is 30 years old this year. In case you don't know where it came from, it entered the pop culture lexicon in the movie "Predator," starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse "the Body" Ventura. Let's not discuss Arnold; our focus is on "the Body." You'll recall that Jesse Ventura had been a Navy Seal, then a professional actor. After Predator and a few other less than memorable movies, Jesse ventured into politics. He was eventually elected governor of my home state of Minnesota where his performance was less than stellar. His tough-guy approach to governing didn't quite fit in. Harkening back to Hollywood, "I ain't got time to bleed" was Jesse's most famous line in the movie, uttered before his character became prey to the alien predator.

When you're out of time, you bleed. Better to make time to bleed now. Whether you make time for it or not, here on this planet, you're gonna bleed.

When you're really down for the struggle, you commit your blood to it. In other words, if something means enough to you, you'd better be willing to die for it. Your spouse, your children, your pride, your image, maybe even your country: for these things, most people make the time to bleed. For most people, these things are important enough to die for. Ask Jesus about it. After all, you were important enough for Him to die for. Jesus had time to bleed because His bleeding made it possible for your peace and your life after bloody death.

Do you believe enough to die?

In the developed world, when most people die their bodies are bled dry. Whether you were ready to die or not, when you die in the West, you're gonna bleed. The undertaker cuts open your body and opens an artery until all your blood is drained. Then they'll sew you up. They will then inject a solution of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, methanol, ethanol, phenol, water, and dyes back into your cadaver in order to simulate a life-like skin-tone (see <https://www.everplans.com/articles/the-embalming-process-explicit>). Yep, it's gruesome, but that's what happens.

When you're out of time, you bleed. At that time – and there will be 'that time' for all of us one day – it won't matter whether or not you bled when you still had time. Were you a giver, giving from your heart to live out the calling Jesus gives you, living out His fruit of His Spirit? Or were you Jesse the Body, raging day to day because "I ain't got time to bleed?"

Tell me: is what you believe important enough for you to allow someone to kill you for it?

The fact is, Jesse had it all wrong. If you really want to overcome the temptations of our world, you make time to bleed. If you struggle against them, it'll cost you. You'll be persecuted, attacked, maybe destroyed. It (literally) may kill you. If you believe enough in resisting the temptation of sin, you'll bleed. You'll bleed emotionally. You'll bleed rhetorically. You'll probably bleed physically. All this will happen because sin and its father, Satan, are the ultimate predators.

And resisting the urge to sin, whatever your pet sin might be, is depressing. It'll bleed you from the inside out. It's tough to fight off the voices that tell you "just one more." It's wearying to have to say "no" when it would feel so good, so right, to simply give in. The predator knows that. He's a damned coward, you know. He only attacks when we're weak because we're easier to overcome when we're weakened. Yet if you truly believe in this Jesus and all He's called you to be for Him, you resist. You hurt; you struggle; you'll bleed. It's important, you know. It's what Christ did.

I'm sorry if this hurts; I'm sorry if you came here today looking for some happy uplifting words to get you through your day. That isn't what's on deck for today. This is a harsher truth. Today there is the sober reminder that, if you haven't

resisted the devil to the point of it shedding your blood, then you aren't broken yet. Much as it may hurt, there will be more pain in store for you. It's going to cost you blood. Life is a one-way death trip, and the only thing that'll get you through it is blood: your believing in Jesus' redeeming blood to the point of the world taking your own. Take heart, then, in knowing that it cost Jesus His as well. He's right beside you as you struggle. When you dig for that courage to resist, that urge to go on just a little more, that's Jesus' Spirit building you up. Putting strength in your resolve and steel in your spine. Jesse Ventura could only dream of that. I hope he has time for it.

For further reading: Hebrews 10: 32-34, Hebrews 13:13.

Lord, when I bleed, let me bleed in service to You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 19 September 2017

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? Hebrews 12, verse 7.

When we think of parental discipline, we tend to think of punishment, that discipline is strict or harsh or carries negative connotations. That's all sometimes true, but it's also only half the picture and I think it misses the kind of discipline God is advising us to share with others. My parents weren't harsh. They weren't physical disciplinarians (though we got occasional spankings) but they could sometimes be cold. Mom and Dad had my sister and I when they were older, in their thirties (a rarity in the 1960s), and I don't think they had it in them to be physically harsh or abusive. They had struggled to build a family and didn't want to be physical. Yet they could sometimes be distant, disconnected, even mean. They yelled and argued from time to time; what couple doesn't. But that was the extent of their 'violence.' I wish, now, that they had felt closer to God, seeing Him as a providing Father. I wish they had been more active in 'disciplining' us. God, our Father, is, and in being our disciplinarian, He plays many roles.

Mentor – I believe God schools us as parents. He wants us to be, first and foremost, mentors to our kids. Life is the most precious gift He gives, and He gives it to us as parents. We get to create these little beings like ourselves, then raise them and teach them how to live in this world. God wants us to mentor them so they will know Him, then know the ways of the world. By focusing kids' view of the world through God, we teach them that He is supreme over all. That He is the provider, giver, and lover of all. That He is all through the world yet close inside their hearts. The best teachers for that lesson are Mom and Dad. They can most effectively teach it by modeling that relationship, by inspiring their kids through active examples.

Show and tell – God gives us a world to live in so that we can teach our kids how to do the same. Sometimes that involves teaching tough lessons; sometimes it involves standing by while we watch those kids learn those tough lessons on their own. Yet we equip them to persevere and succeed if we mentor them in the ways of the Lord, then show them how to apply that teaching in all they do. It's like a game of show and tell, where you bring something and show it off to your class. In parenting, our class is our kids, and they're interested, engaged, ready to learn. How about we teach them about their Savior?

Listening – One of the first times I remember really connecting with my father was the night my girlfriend (my fiancée actually) and I had a huge fight. I stayed up all night, so upset that I couldn't sleep. Dad woke up and asked me what was wrong. He then spent the rest of the night listening to me talk through the relationship from start until it's (soon to be) finish. I believe God put it on his heart to listen to me that night, so that when he finally did open up and share some of his own story I would be ready to receive it and understand.

Leading – Finally, we must lead. This isn't an option: it's a requirement. You may not be comfortable 'leading from the front' but if you're going to be a parent (and especially if you're going to live as a God-fearing and God-following one) then you must lead. You don't have to be General Patton; you aren't Billy Graham. God didn't make you to be either of them (unless He did). Instead, He made you to be you, with your own memories, experiences, and abilities. When you're a parent, it's your duty – and your privilege – to lead your kids and grandkids to the Lord. You get to serve as the go-between, facilitating the relationship they can have with their Creator. You do that by leading, by being yourself and using your talents to inspire others.

Sometimes doing all this involves tough love. Today's verse reminds us of that. Sometimes that's even the approach God takes with us. God doesn't bring sin into our lives but He can and does allow, even move, sin's consequences to affect us. That feels harsh when it happens, but He does it to build us up. After all, the Proverb reminds us that 'iron sharpens iron.' Yet even in those times of adversity, God's providing love is still with us. If you're a parent, you can understand that. You love your kids even when you discipline them because, after all, they're disciples and you want them to grow strong. Now go out and prove it.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 8:5, 2 Samuel 7:14, Proverbs 13:24, Proverbs 27:17.

My Lord, I praise You for the tough love You show, for discipline in my life, and for building me up through all of it.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 September 2017

If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Hebrews 12, verse 8.

Yesterday we talked a bit about discipline, and how discipline is done through both tough words but also mentoring, listening, and a number of other positive but strict behaviors. That's the "what," maybe even the "how." Today we get "why."

If you aren't disciplined, then you're a bastard. Know that I use that word here for effect, not as profanity. A bastard is "a person born of unmarried parents; an illegitimate child; spurious; not genuine; false." That's from dictionary.com. If you aren't disciplined, you're fake and illegitimate. Your birth is beyond your control, but claiming a birthright that isn't yours isn't. You have no right to be an heir to what's good. Taking it a step further, if you don't allow yourself to be disciplined by God – made a mentored disciple – then you're that fake, that illegitimate false person.

That's rough. You could use the slang of that word to describe it; you might even describe me with said word. Fair enough. I'll throw down another hard truth: this isn't teaching for lightweights, for the weak of mind. This is serious business. I think of myself as a serious man. Sure, I'm lighthearted, joking, and I try to get along with most folks. But that's the method brought about from within. If you strip away everything I think or believe, at the very core of it you'll find I seriously believe in Jesus and I take that belief seriously. It's the bedrock of my existence. I take it seriously because it merits serious investment of the heart. Faith in Jesus is a matter of life and death. Embrace the faith and live; reject the faith and die. It really is that simple. I want to live, so I take it seriously.

That matters because our opponent does too. Jesus cautions us through His close friend, Peter to "be self controlled and alert" because our "enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Those are powerful words, figurative in language yet packed with realistic power and warning. The devil, a very real bastard, is a miserable demon. He's false. He isn't heir to anything. He covets endlessly, destructively, viciously. He wants company, and he uses every means at his disposal to lure in followers. I don't know what they see in him; perhaps none of us does. Jesus called him the father of lies and Peter cautions that he's mortally dangerous.

If you want to stand against a dangerous foe, you need discipline. You need to be trained up in the ways of doing so. Most of all, you need something to believe in when the foe attacks and knocks you back hard. You can't be false; your belief must be legitimate, honest, firm. Jesus can give you that truth, that legitimacy, that honesty, firmness, and genuine quality that you need to stand fast. When He gives it to you, He's disciplining you as His brother, sister, son, and daughter. Faith takes courage; faith requires steel in your spine. Growing in faith is serious business, even as He honestly says that His "yoke is easy and burden is light." Jesus knows that and knows it can be tough. When He disciplines us, it's like He is drawing us closer to Himself as family. That makes us bona fide, legitimate.

Am I disciplined? In some ways, yes; in others I'm very much a work in progress. Some folks might call me a bastard, though, and many of them wouldn't use it as a compliment. They may have a point. If you want to not be called such things, then retool your life in such a way as to make those words inappropriate when used to describe you. Why? Because Jesus makes you His own. He was serious enough about believing that that He willfully bled and died for you. That's serious. After all, in Jesus there are no bastards.

For further reading: John 8:44, Matthew 11:30, 1 Peter 5:9.

Lord, holding on to You can be tough, but You have made me legitimate. Thank You for loving me that much.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 September 2017

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. Hebrews 12, verses 9-10.

The other day I mentioned my parents, stating that they weren't physical disciplinarians. After my sister and I entered elementary school, I don't remember Mom or Dad ever spanking us. Especially Dad. Spanking and physical discipline just wasn't part of him. Yet for years I thought my father was a weak man. It was only after I grew up that I realized how wrong I was, that he was actually a good and fundamentally decent man who stood fast on principles. Dad 'shook off' a lot because, if it didn't interfere with his principles, then it didn't matter so much. But he rarely gave an inch when his principles were called into question.

One of those principles was that a person, especially a man, should always do their best. I never really knew the side of my father who worked in an office. Dad was an ammunition inspector for the Army, and I don't recall ever seeing him in the office (because he worked on Army bases where we usually didn't go). But I have a box full of awards from his 30 years of work testifying that he had always done a great job. I do remember Dad working around the house, doing all kinds of home improvements. He self-taught those things; nobody taught him how to fix electrical wiring, hang drywall, or make home repairs. When I was growing up, except for a two year period where we lived in a house that needed no work, I don't think I could have named a weekend when my dad didn't work hard at something.

He always did his best.

Since I got out of the Air Force 21 years ago I have worked for eight different companies (nine if you count my own in that I'm currently an independent consultant). I can honestly say that, for most of those jobs, I did my best. A few times I didn't, and one time I didn't cost me a job last year. I felt betrayed by those people; maybe some day I'll share the rest of the story. But the long and short of it was that they abandoned me so I abandoned them and it showed in my work. These days, I love what I'm doing. I enjoy the work, I really enjoy the team I'm working with and the ones I'm leading, and I am energized at the challenge of the task. It's a pleasure to do my best. When you think about it, I wouldn't be where I am in this job if "those people" last year hadn't launched me along the trajectory I'm traveling today. That's something to be thankful for. See what happens when you do your best?

Have you considered that God is doing His best as well? Moreover, He's doing it for you, on your behalf, for your good.

God made you legitimate. He bought you back from the consequences of your sins and set you on a better path. He gave His Son for you. He gives you food, air, water, shelter, other people, and love and you don't have to do anything to deserve them. You and I are on God's mind 24/7 even when He isn't on ours. Have we really considered that God does His best for us every day, even when we refuse to notice?

It seems so easy to question God when things aren't going well for us. It seems so easy to curse His name when we're up against the wall, or when we don't get what we want. Yet have you considered that these are times when God allows (or brings) adversity into our lives to refine us for better things? I know this is true in my own life, and it hurts when it happens. But things always turn out for the best eventually. God gives us only what we can handle and asks us to handle the negative things only so that it will lead us back to Him somehow. Through them all, He still provides those things mentioned above whether we are in want or in plenty.

God's a father like me, like my dad. He gives us His best in all things. It's a trustworthy, true thing to believe, to make the bedrock of your life. Today would be a good day to make sure we do the same for others because of Him.

For further reading: Numbers 16:22, Revelation 22:6, Isaiah 38:16, 2 Peter 1:4.

Lord, thank You for doing Your best for me. Your best is simply You because nothing is better than You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 September 2017

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12, verse 11.

No pain no gain, right? That does seem to be what the verse is saying, doesn't it? But here's the kicker: you don't have to be in pain. You know this is true. All the pain ever needed was felt on the cross by our Savior.

Why is it that our country, America, seems to have so little righteousness, peace, or even discipline in it right now? I was one of the fools caught up in debating the NFL national anthem brouhaha this weekend. None of what I read, or even what I said, seemed very peaceful. North Korea seems bent on starting a war and we seem more than willing to oblige their intention. The stock market is in joyful turmoil, seemingly poised to either rise even higher or crash very soon. Hurricanes, over-zealous media, hyper-sensitivity over small things, differences in beliefs and politics and ideologies, gender confusion, violent 'protesters' in the streets: it seems like we have lost our way. Or have we?

Isaiah said that "the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever." Those were his inspired words over 2800 years ago. In his day, Israel was indeed being disciplined. Isaiah prophesied the coming messiah who would bring about peace forever. Yet that peace would come only after great testing.

Let's be honest: there are nations in history who have been tested far worse than we of 21st century America are being tested now. There are times in our history when we have been divided so much that war broke out. There have been divisive figures all throughout history and history still clocks on today; it will continue to do so until Jesus returns as He said He would. Until then, we are being disciplined.

Sometimes it hurts. Death, divorce, unemployment, losing your home, sickness, pain: they all hurt. It hurts when God allows them into our lives. Yet Romans reminds us that "we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Those beautiful verses, my wife's favorite, don't tell us "suck it up buttercup." Instead, they remind us that God is with us, at work in us even in the hardest times, and even when we don't like it. Good comes from bad. Suffering teaches us about the character God built into us. And God refines us as we persevere, instilling into us hope as a guarantee of peace to come. Think of yourself as 10 carat gold being refined by melting into 24 carat. The impurities are being stripped away, and that hurts. But it's for good. Think of it as medical treatment for a dread condition. Before the healing can start, the cancer needs to go away.

Right now life is hard. It's hard to talk with people. It's hard at home. It's hard in public and sometimes even in private. I don't like the feeling of being disciplined, of having God tear me down to build me up in other ways. Yet I do know He's doing it, and that what He does is always good, for good, to produce good. Gain from pain? Yes, even when, as Johnny Cougar sang, "it hurts so good." But we don't need the pain because Jesus already felt it.

For further reading: Isaiah 32:17, James 3:17-18, Romans 5:3-5.

My Lord, the refining You're putting me through hurts. Strengthen me to persevere by clinging to You. Abide with me that I may come closer to You in all ways here.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 September 2017

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12, verse 11.

A few more thoughts about this verse before moving on from it. Life 'hurts so good' and we endure pain that can discipline us. Pain can either break us or make us; talk about a cliché yet it's true. Pain made my parents and it disciplined their path home.

I'm going through a tough time right now. I don't want to share details at the moment but it's a time of dread, anxiety, and uncertainty. It seems like God is disciplining me for things I've done, almost like it's punishment. Bad decisions, risky gambles, and poor choices seem to be coming home to roost, and I've felt more down in the last few days than I've felt in years. I take heart, however, in words like verse 11, knowing that God's discipline is given to me in order to build discipline. In this season of change, He's changing things in my life to prepare for something else, something good. When I think of it that way then things don't seem so bleak. When I think about the pain of these days, I think there's something better just up ahead.

I think about my dad. I've said before that I grew up thinking my dad was less than he was. It was only when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer that I saw just how iron-strong he really was. It wasn't just Dad's strength: it was God's strength in him. Dad endured disfiguring surgeries, painful radiation, and sickening, weakening chemotherapy. He had always been a handsome man, but the cancer treatment robbed him of his looks. Dad loved to sing and listen to music, but the treatment made both unpleasant. And even his hobby, watching movies, seemed to be badly affected because it was tough for him to sit still for long periods of time with his body trying in vain to heal. Or even to see. But I never heard him complain about it, not even once. The week before he died, we were talking and he said "I don't want this but I've got it. I know where I'm going and I know it'll be ok." Is that the expression of a man resigned to a death-fate, or is it the faith of a dying man expressing knowledge that God is in control? I will always know it was the latter.

And I think about my mom. By her choice, she spent the last year of her life in assisted living, moving to Texas to live in care and to be near some of her grand-kids. Quite honestly though, I spent much of that year mad at her. It had fallen to me to clean out her house and renovate it for sale: a monumental task. My wife and sister helped a lot, and my son and son in law helped with the move, but most of the physical, financial, and emotional work was mine. In the last week of her life, Mom called me several times per day, asking me to come over to her new place and do things, check on things. In-between her calls and my work, I felt frazzled and exhausted. On the night she fell ill, her heart started racing and wouldn't slow down. I took her to the hospital and they admitted her. Even though I knew inside that something was happening, I took it for granted that she would recover because she always had. A few hours later, she had a massive heart attack and was put on life support. A few hours after that, she briefly regained consciousness. Confused at first, she quickly understood what was happening and spent her last few waking moments saying goodbyes, giving forgiveness and praise to people who needed it, and even telling a few jokes. She died a few hours later. I will always know she went home to heaven because she had expressed to me over many years her faith in God. In her last moments, she was accepting and ready.

Please excuse all the times I've referred to myself in this missive. I wanted you to know how these good people passed from this life to the next. They did it with Godly dignity and realistic courage. Mom died quickly; Dad lingered for months. Both of them knew the pain of debilitation, and the pain of worry over how to meet their human responsibilities. Yet the real love of God was stronger for both of them, and when it mattered most, the pain paled in comparison. I don't like the things that are happening in my life now, but when equipped with the God-loving faith my parents taught me, I know that the pain is only temporary. That what I believe is stronger, and that the things of this world, in God's good time, will pass.

For further reading: Isaiah 32:17, James 3:17-18, Romans 5:3-5.

My Lord, abide with me and all who hurt. Love us and forgive us and help us to do the work You set before us. Help us to trust you more.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 27 September 2017

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Hebrews 12, verses 12-13.

These verses strongly echo Isaiah 35, which says "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." And it carries the echo of Galatians 6 which cautions men to counsel each other wisely and in Godly love, but to be wise ourselves to not be pulled into temptation.

So I'm attending a School of Discipleship and Ministry at the Calvary Chapel where we attend here in Paris. This week's lesson was about how to carry out the mission of the church. In doing that, Jesus followers are encouraged, even expected, to live in ways that edify and glorify God, that are Godly and upright, and can be a good example for others. That doesn't mean being goody-goody or snotty: it means 'walking the walk and talking the talk.' It means being honest and moral. And that's tough, especially in a poor town full of drug use, poverty, despair, and economic disadvantages.

Every day you live your life like that is like working out hard in the spiritual gym. It's like pumping serious iron of the soul. Every time you say 'no' to temptation, you lift the weight, then put it down. Every time you walk away when you could be confrontational you run the extra spiritual mile. Every time...you get the picture.

Yet it's true. In order to walk a Godly walk we have to choose the best path. We have to train ourselves up in the ways of the Word. That requires studying Scriptures. That requires personal prayer with God. That requires doing things that Jesus wants us to do: loving, listening, helping, serving, being selfless. When all I want to do is buy a six pack and forget my many troubles, God calls me to write these words instead. To listen to other believers, to share my story and work to serve others. To walk away, confess my pain, accept His peace.

Man, that's a tall order. You better believe, then, our Savior is a tall, tall man.

During this School of Discipleship and Ministry, the pastor is talking about core beliefs of the church, about church history, about mission and vision, about leadership in the Lord. The center of all he's taught is Christ and only Christ. I find that refreshing, and even though change is coming in my life I intend to keep returning to finish out the course. I find it refreshing because so much else of the world in which I walk is focused elsewhere. You know yours is as well. NFL debates, same sex marriage, public corruption, celebrity wreckage, divorce, unemployment, kids having kids and kids aborting kids: pick your poison. In 2017 America there's plenty to go around. So I find my respite these weeks in going back to God, in focusing on first principles. First of those is Jesus Christ is God who lived, died, and lives again to redeem sinners like me and you. He did everything necessary to make that happen, and now He asks us to follow Him. To follow requires a spiritual workout where you'll flex muscles of the soul, sinew of the conscience, blood pumping and heart racing to new beats.

Yep: that's a tall order indeed. Are you willing to stand up for the mission? "I don't think I can" you might be saying. It might seem too embarrassing, too inconvenient, perhaps even too risky given the social world we live in. But let me propose that, if you're even thinking about it, God's Spirit is already working within you, calling you to a new purpose, a new mission. He's giving you a mission He's prepared just for you, and He's going to ready you for it. Put on your gym shoes, my friend. We're in training.

For further reading: Isaiah 35:3-4, Proverbs 4:26, Galatians 6:1.

Lord, help me to train up more to serve You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 September 2017.

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. Hebrews 12, verse 14.

Here's another tall order: live in peace and be holy. How does that fit in with America's NFL controversy this week? Or our political discourse in general since the start of this century? How well are we living in peace with our enemies and even our allies? Is there peace in Detroit or St. Louis? Is there peace at your table on Thanksgiving? And are you and your spouse at peace (if you're married)?

Let's get this out there: peace is NOT the absence of conflict. Don't think that just because we don't have conflict that we're at peace. Yes, I mean that. Sure, not shooting each other in war is indeed "peaceful" yet there's all too often no real peace in that. It's a good thing to not have someone shooting you, attacking you, berating you, and that condition is indeed conducive to overall peace. But it isn't real peace. There isn't peace along the DMZ on the Korean Peninsula: there is only a cessation of hostilities that has lasted since 1953. There isn't peace in Sudan. There isn't peace in Ukraine. There isn't peace in Baltimore, St. Louis, Detroit, or most of America's inner cities.

You can only have peace if the Holy Spirit is working within you. The bumper sticker meme "no Jesus no peace. Know Jesus know peace" is spot on true. The only real peace you can know in this world is when you open up your heart and let Jesus crowd out all the rest of the noise. Sure, there are some true believing folks in all the areas listed above (even in North Korea) but without God's Holy Spirit in control, the peace we will know is uneasy, tenuous.

That isn't easy to do. I have a schedule to keep. There are Facebook posts that require my brilliance. My wife and kids aren't doing what I want them to do. That guy who passed me on the right was a real jerk! DO I LOOK LIKE I HAVE TIME FOR PEACE? Actually, Dave, if the truth is told, you don't have time to NOT have peace. Without the peace of Jesus, you got nuthin. You've got nothing without Jesus because, without Jesus, the second half of verse 14 is also impossible. I'm not holy; you aren't holy. Neither Franklin Graham nor Pope Francis (nor even Pope Emeritus Benedict) are holy. We're all dirty sinners on our own. Without Jesus, we still own our sins; owning our sins, we are unholy. Without Jesus we still own the consequences of our sins. What's more, without Jesus you won't see the Lord. You won't see heaven. You won't be there.

Don't get mad at me for pointing that out: it's what verse 14 says. Without knowing Jesus we can't be holy and if we're unholy we won't be going to heaven. The ONLY cure for that is to put your faith in Christ. And the way to do that is to say "I believe" and then start walking the walk. Read your Bible. Pray constantly. Be with other believers and be built up by your fellowship with Jesus and each other. Tithe from a giving heart. And, most of all, practice what you preach by starting to live your life in ways the Lord has told us to. Once again, that's a tall order. It means giving up the porn, holding your tongue, confessing your dark secrets to the unseen God, and changing the way you act with other people. Pick your pet sin: you and I GET TO give up these things and follow Jesus closer so that His holiness can be imputed to us and we may stand with Him in paradise. These are simply the practices of a follower of Jesus. If my tone seems preachy, I apologize.

I have no illusion that everyone turning to Jesus would immediately solve the world's problems. Perhaps we would still have conflicts, arguments, and hurt. Or, perhaps we wouldn't. Si Robertson once said "it ain't gun control we need. It's sin control." Right on brother. If we all embraced Jesus more and did what He asked, perhaps we'd have more control over those temptations that lure us in. If we all did better and walking the walk and talking the talk, perhaps the world's problems would indeed be solved. Sin control looks a lot like Jesus.

For further reading: Romans 14:19, Romans 6:22, Matthew 5:8.

Lord, thank You for giving us Your righteousness, for making us holy. Help us to believe in You more, to practice our faith.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 October 2017

See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12, verse 15.

A bitter root: what is that? The media is a bitter root. Left wing or right wing: the purpose of today's media is to get ratings because getting ratings equals profit. Yes, this is an opinion, yet what is fact is that the media's opinions, which is most of what they report now, cause trouble and defile many. Like it or not, it is true. Perhaps it has always been true.

Celebrities are a bitter root. Been paying attention to the NFL controversies these last few weeks? What about celebrities on the Emmy Awards (or any awards show) expressing their opinions instead of just their thanks? I have enough trouble living up to God's standards on my own: I really don't need or want celebrities pointing out how superior they are. They're bitter.

Angry opponents are a bitter root. I'll lump in disagreeable relatives into this category. The aunt or uncle or grandparent who spouts off their comments causes trouble. The folks protesting the removal of Confederate monuments – and more than a few of those in favor of keeping them – cause trouble and defile many. Name whatever 'hate' group you want and you'll find they are a bitter root. Indeed, perhaps all social media is ripe soil for bitter roots.

But most of all, I'm a bitter root. You are a bitter root. I cause trouble with my words, even when I say some of them to heal. I defile many by being argumentative, contentious, and combative. I cause trouble and defile many with my pride that I carry to extremes. You know, too, that when I'm judgmental I'm misusing God's grace. Isn't it true that, when we judge others, gossip, or look down on others, our motives for doing so are almost always based in some kind of selfish thing? And that it feels bitter? There is no judgmental coldness of the heart in God's soul-warming grace. "Judgy" words and attitudes, anger, selfishness, pride, arrogance, condescension: they're all fruit grown from bitter roots.

All this happens because we're short of the grace of God. God gives His grace to us no matter what we do, even when we cause trouble and defiling. But I set myself against His grace when I set myself up above Him. I have chosen to fall away, to alienate myself from Jesus. Today's verse hails from Deuteronomy, translating it into advice that fits into the context of chapter 12. Moses commanded the Israelites to not let anyone spring up as a root that would grow and produce poison. If you think about it, whenever we actively move contrary to Jesus, we reject His grace and choose to spout poison. Sin is poison; it destroys and kills. It is vile and defiles God's grace. Just one verse ago, God was imploring us to be holy and live in peace with others, knowing that apart from Him there is no peace possible. Have we truly considered that, when we fall away from God's grace, we are moving ourselves just a little bit further away from that peace and holiness?

But let's take heart in the words that begin this verse: "see to it." If we choose to embrace sin, we can choose to reject it. We have each other, fellow believer, to encourage each other, to fellowship, to build each other up. When you're feeling weak, I can be there to see to it that you don't fall. I'd love your help when the same thing happens to me. We don't have to live our lives mired in these sins. Jesus took them away and we don't need to keep coming back to them; we don't need to be fools for the world. God's grace is given to us to build us up, to bring us closer to Him. One way we do that is by 'seeing to it' that none of us, by our choices, positions ourselves away from God by planting in the dirt as bitter roots.

For further reading: Galatians 5:4, Hebrews 3:12, Deuteronomy 29:18, Proverbs 26:11.

My Lord, keep me accountable to you through the fellowship of other believers. May I reject being a bitter root and become closer to you through the fellowship of other believers.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 3 October 2017

See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done. Hebrews 12, verses 16-17.

If you were just skimming through the verses today, you might blaze past those first seven words: “see that no one is sexually immoral.” They jump out at you, but then most of them talks about Esau, presenting him as another example of immorality. But did you know that the Bible says in over 25 different verses that we are to not be sexually immoral? Most of those are in the New Testament, some of them (like Matthew 5:28) spoken directly by Jesus Himself. Sexual behavior is something God wants us to understand in His way.

Now, I’m not here to preach to you or talk you down for your sexual sins. You’ve got them; so have I. For years, I put sex on a pedestal, thinking it was the thing you did if you wanted to show someone you cared for them. That’s true, but it’s also cheap. It’s that kind of thinking that gets you quickly in the sack, unless you were teenage me. For years I had a low opinion of myself, and throughout school I only had one really serious relationship. The whole “go out” thing didn’t go for me. Or at least the local girls didn’t. By the time I finally did have sex, I didn’t know a thing about it, only that it felt physically great and emotionally torturous at the same time. I struggled with sexual identity, wanting to be attractive to the opposite sex but feeling that (no pun intended) I somehow didn’t measure up, that nobody would want me. I kept sex up on that pedestal and in actuality valued it as “my right” or just something you do. No wonder affairs resulted.

Asking for a “do-over” is usually a fool’s game. We rarely get them in life, and I believe that’s a blessing from God. He wants us to live in the here and now, relying on Him for our guidance in everything. Yet if He ever asked me what do-over I’d like, I’d ask Him for a chance to re-do my attitude about sex. I’d want the attitude the 51 year old Dave has to be the one 16 year old Dave lives by. It’s not to be prudish: it’s to seek God’s wisdom. Middle-aged me looks at sex as a gift instead of just something physical or something to worship.

You know that sex is intended for marriage. It is indeed intended to be the ultimate expression of caring for someone: someone you’re committed to before God. God made us as men and women to complement each other in how we live, including between the sheets. He intended for physical union to be an expression of our relationship with each other and even with Him. He intended it for procreation, for pleasure, for intimacy, for physicality, for love. I know that in my own life I haven’t often asked God what He thought of my sexual life, of what I should think about sex. If I could ask for that do-over, I’d want more of God’s input, more of His heart in how I give my heart and body to the woman He created just for me.

God wants us to value His gift of sex, to cherish how we take our pleasure from it by cherishing who we have sex with. There is no “free love” and sex always carries emotional and even spiritual connotations. God wants us to value those, so He commands us to steer clear from the easy morality that is, in fact, immorality. That’s why the Bible mentions it so often. Sex outside of marriage cheapens something that God gave us as an expression of the pleasure it is to be in union with Him.

Where yesterday we were talking about how to not be a bitter root (and thus abandon God’s peace), wouldn’t it be a thing of wonder if we all sought out God’s heart when we look at each other with more than just a passing interest? My wife is hooked on watching shows about the Duggar and Bates families. If you don’t know much about them, they’re very faith-based and live their lives by that faith. One of the things these large families have taught their kids is the lost art of Godly courtship. Of waiting for marriage to share any kind of physical pleasure, even a first kiss. In a time and age when new TV shows like “The Deuce” seem to reach for the lowest sexual denominator, I find that refreshing. These families live their lives in a way I wish I had. I believe, perhaps, that I still would have chosen the wife I did because I believe she’s the woman God created specifically for me. Yet perhaps our path to deeper intimacy wouldn’t have been as rocky or as full of heartbreak and hurt.

And on that note, tomorrow let's talk about Esau.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, Hebrews 13:4, Matthew 5:28, Ephesians 5:5, Genesis 25:29-34, Genesis 27:30-40, .

My Lord, thank You for sex. Thank You for opening my eyes to how You view it. Help me to cherish this gift and to share it thankfully with my spouse.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 October 2017.

See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done. Hebrews 12, verses 16-17.

Esau. We've talked about Esau before, early on in discussing Chapter 11. Refreshing your memory, Esau was Jacob's brother who was rash, impetuous, and emotional. He and his brother knew their father and grandfather had been promised by God Himself that He would make them into a blessed nation. It was their family inheritance; it set them apart from everyone else on the planet. It's logical to assume Esau grew up hearing these accounts (first-hand even, from both Abraham and Isaac), yet Esau treated God's promise with casual contempt. One time, Esau's emotions got the best of him and it had eternal consequences for mankind. He traded his birthright – perhaps the most important thing a man of antiquity possessed – for a bowl of stew. Later, following his brother's trickery, he was subjected to being a second-place citizen in his own family even though he was first-born.

Admit it: the reason Esau did this was that he was godless. Specifically, he craved less God in his life except when it served his own purposes.

Then there's his brother. Jacob's deceit was two-fold. First was the verbal acquisition of Esau's birthright by taking advantage of Esau's own foolishness. Then came the physical blessing of their father, Isaac, through active deception and playing on Isaac's own loving words. No objective analysis of Genesis 25 and 27 can reach any conclusion other than that Jacob was a crafty deceiver, maybe even dishonest. He must have been a conflicted man, harboring deep, real faith in the living God while still clinging to the worldly ways of taking what you want. Before the world was made, God had marked Jacob to carry His lineage and fulfill His purposes. Even without Jacob's participation, I'm sure God would have found another way to include him. It's amazing how God can turn human dysfunction into Divine glory.

Yet none of this excuses Esau. Esau treated the gift of divine birthright as a cheap thing. He didn't regard it as important. He didn't consider the implications of rejecting it. Instead of saying to himself "I'll get a bite someplace else", Esau demanded his weaker brother feed him. Jacob pressed Esau with what must have seemed a silly demand, that Esau forswear his first-born birthright to property, blessing, and special status as God's chosen vessel of the redemption promise. Rather than taking this seriously, Esau flippantly signed away his birthright in exchange for a full stomach. I hope it tasted good; I'm betting Esau didn't give it a second thought.

And when the time came for their father to die, Isaac wanted to bless his sons respecting that birthright. Jacob tricked Isaac and got the blessing that had been intended for his older brother. But Isaac was a man of character, an upright and faithful follower of his Lord. He couldn't go back on his word even when his favorite son pressed him for something you and I might consider fair. The firstborn blessing had been given and Jacob would become heir to all Isaac was and owned. And it had happened because Esau had shamefully regarded God's promise.

Moral of the story: don't treat God's gifts cheaply.

I mentioned yesterday that it seemed strange that the writer of Hebrews would talk about the powerful concept of sexual immorality in only a few words before spending the next two verses talking about Esau's immorality. Those words were almost an off-hand comment. Yet perhaps the message of these two subjects actually fits together. It's not about the sex; it isn't about hunting for wild game. It isn't about the lust for flesh or the lust for status. Immorality is immorality no matter what form it takes, and the writer cautions followers of Jesus to be on our guard against it. If we, like Esau, treat God's gifts cavalierly, it should be no surprise to us when all we receive in return are cavalier rewards. If we, like Esau, think God-less thoughts from our hearts, is it any surprise we might find ourselves dis-inherited and at war with the world of our own making?

For further reading: 1 Genesis 25:29-34, Genesis 27:30-40.

My Lord, I pray You had mercy on Esau. And I pray here for Your guidance that I might not treat Your many gifts flippantly. Help me to appreciate Your value in all times.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 October 2017

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." Hebrews 12, verses 18-21.

Are you seeing as I am that it takes effort and study to understand the Bible? A few nights ago, a pastor I know said that he thought simply turning to the Bible and picking a random verse for advice was dangerous. If you randomly pick a verse and expect it to give you life-altering advice, you're subjecting God to a game of Russian Roulette where you hold the gun against the other guy's head. I understand his point, because context matters, background matters. You may not have a degree in hermeneutics or have a bookshelf full of commentaries, but knowing a little bit about the verses you read might just help you to understand them (and what they're saying) better. A good website for this is <http://thetorah.com/what-happened-at-mount-sinai/>.

The background of these verses is, as you've guessed, from the time of the Ten Commandments. God led the people of Israel to Sinai, His holy place. There He would minister to them and give them His commandments for how to live in the world. To protect them, He ordered Moses to set up boundaries so that no one would set foot onto God's holy mountain in some disrespectful way. It was for them, not Him. Why wouldn't God want His people to flock to Him? The answer is in the millennial joke: "it's you, not me." Putting it simply, it was the people's sins.

God can't be unholy. Un-holiness is against His nature. He can't tolerate it. Specifically, it seems like the sin of disrespect would be one He would not tolerate. For the people to accept His holy law, God wanted to ready them. So He gave them instructions to follow. "Stay off the mountain." Listen to God and He teaches. God would speak to them through Moses, and in doing so He would affirm Moses' leadership over them. That's a practical as well as spiritual matter, you know. 2 million souls wandering hungrily in unfamiliar territory needed a leader. They didn't need another pharaoh or some strongman: they needed an authority. God speaks to them directly from the mountain, but at a distance to gather their attention and to set up some ground rules. By acting through Moses and by requiring the Israelites to follow directions, God installs Moses as leader and affirms that authority. What's more, when God speaks directly from Sinai, He has Moses stand above the people, in-between them and Himself. He couldn't have told them any clearer: "This guy Moses is my spokesman here. Listen to him."

Then why would He allow un-holy Moses to stand in His presence? There wasn't anything special about Moses regarding his sinful nature. Moses was a sinner just like the rest of the Israelites. Perhaps it was that God knew how Israel would rebel in Moses' absence. Don't forget that Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights, fasting and being made ready to receive God's direct commandments. During that time, Israel defied God and made itself an idol for worship, then they partied like a one-hit wonder on Grammy night. Moses wasn't a part of that (reaffirming again his status as above this sin). Can you imagine the terror of seeing Moses descending from the mountain that first time, carrying two stone tablets, his anger burning stronger with each step down? Can you imagine the thunder and shaking earth and the fire spewing from the mountain in front of you when God's wrath was poured out on the rebellious deserters?

It must have been a fearful thing to have been one of the thousands freed from Egypt and then wandering to this strange place in Midian. It must have been frightening to journey to a mountain where fire, smoke, thunder, and earthquakes were common indicators of the uncommon God occupying it. It must have been terrifying to see God's representative coming down to find that you've been unfaithful. And it is always humbling to have to submit to someone's authority when you know they have every right to rebuke you.

There is a better way. The better way is to follow as soon as you hear you should. God never leads people in unjust ways. His path is always good and for good. If you want to avoid the stern teaching of a harsh rebuke, or if you fear the fire and brimstone, then live your life in such a way as to make them un-threatening to you. It really is that simple. As Billy Currington might have said, thank God for good directions.

For further reading: Exodus 19:12-22, Deuteronomy 4:11-12, Exodus 20:18, Deuteronomy 5:5 & 25, Deuteronomy 9:19.

Lord, thank You for Your fire, Your high standards, Your good directions, and the hard lessons You taught our ancestors..

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 12 October 2017

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Hebrews 12, verses 22-24.

One of my favorite Christian songs is “Days of Elijah.” There’s a particularly good version of it by Twila Paris that’s not saccharin, not too rock & roll, not too corny. It’s just uplifting, and one of the verses in the song says “out of Zion’s hill salvation comes.” Look up the geography of Jerusalem and you see that Zion is the hill on which the first and second temple’s were built. It was literally God’s home address on terra firma. It’s where the Temple was located, where King David reigned and is buried, where the Last Supper was held, and it’s not far from Calvary. In contemporary usage, Zion refers to the land of Israel itself, and to the cause of establishing the modern nation of Israel. Yet in days of old it was where God lived.

That’s a lot to draw from just a few verses. Then again, Jerusalem has been ground zero for most of human history, and Zion is the spiritual heart of Jerusalem. There’s a lot to consider with it.

The writer of Hebrews invoked Zion to symbolize heaven made possible by Jesus. It is the new heaven, the new dwelling place of the living God. You and I get to go there, to worship in His true temple, to make our home with Him (to tabernacle with Him). Where Sinai symbolizes our need for Jesus before heaven, Zion symbolizes our heaven with Jesus both here in this world and in the next. Sinai was a place of power and fear: Zion is a place where the greatest power in the universe – God’s love – took root and grew. Sinai was law: Zion is love. Sinai was remote: Zion is connection.

I can hear Twila singing about “righteousness being restored.”

Read, too, about Abel. The writer recalls Abel, invoking that the sacrifice of Christ means more than the sacrifice of Abel (both the blood of the animal Abel sacrificed as well as his own as the victim of history’s first murder). Abel gave a representation of divine blood in a sacrifice about his personal faith; Jesus actually gave His own blood as the faith sacrifice for all persons.

Read, too (again) about the firstborn. Recall the story of Esau and Jacob (or, for that matter, Cain and Abel, or any of the first-born sons of the patriarchs). Jesus makes us all as if we are first-born. We ALL get to inherit the best of the family. We all get to be treated as special because of what Jesus did in dying on that rugged cross.

“These are the days of Elijah declaring the word of the Lord.” Elijah declared God’s word to an unbelieving world. You and I get to do the same, thousands of years after Elijah, thousands of years after the Word of the Lord Himself.

Finally, there is the new covenant. We’ve discussed how a covenant is more than just a contract or an agreement. It’s a blood oath, a God-affirming vow made in faith and justice. God had made covenants with humanity all through the age of the patriarchs yet all of them were made to point us to our need for His redemption. When Jesus came, He delivered that redemption and made it possible for men to speak directly with God. He restored balance by making the perfect atonement. He made a path for us to spend both now and eternity in God’s presence. The Old Testament covenants pointed us to our need for God, yet the covenant made by Jesus points us to God in our lives. God has always judged all people yet now we get to see His judgment more clearly, more as an act of loving justice instead of punishing vengeance. We get to see that God’s holy law from Sinai was made perfect by His holy sacrifice from Zion. That the covenant Jesus made by Zion is one to which we can still be bound today.

Go download Twila’s song. I guarantee you’ll like it.

For further reading: Isaiah 24:23, Revelation 14:1, Galatians 4:26, Exodus 4:22, Revelation 20:12, Genesis 18:25, Psalm 94:2, Philippians 3:12, Galatians 3:20, 1 Peter 1:2, Genesis 4:20, Hebrews 11:4.

Lord, thank You for so many messages in so few words. In these days of Elijah, help me to declare Your Words to those around me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 23 October 2017

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? Hebrews 12, verse 25.

Now. Because eternity matters most, the time is now to talk about it, to listen about it. There is no tomorrow guaranteed for any of us, and yesterday is done. Today is the day to listen to what God is saying to you. Today is the ONLY time to listen.

I took off last week from writing these proverbials because my wife and I were moving. We did “the big move” from our small farm in Paris to an apartment in McKinney. There are a few reasons why, some good, some not so good. In time, I’m sure I’ll talk about them here; for now, it’s just raw. You’ve probably moved a few times in your own life, so you know it’s hard work; emotional and physical work. We’re almost done with it, but it’s hard work all the way up to the end. So I needed some time off.

I’ve spent that time wondering what Jesus is saying in all this. We’re moving to make sure we don’t lose our livelihood, and to be closer to family that needs us. Yet it hurts. I’ve always felt we were led to Paris, to buy the farm and start a new life together. Now I also feel we are being led elsewhere, to start another new life together in a different way. We are both following God’s lead, and so we understand that, no matter what happens, it will all be ok. One of my favorite movie lines is from “The Best New Marigold Hotel.” Judy Densch: “everything will be alright in the end. If it’s not alright, then it isn’t the end.” Very Indian; very Hindu; very apropos. I know things will be alright because God ALWAYS works in our lives for good. In the end, because of Him, it will be alright, all right, all the time. If it isn’t yet alright, then it isn’t yet the end and He isn’t done leading us through better things. If we don’t believe that, then don’t we simply bring on ourselves the consequences of not following God? If we don’t follow God, don’t we get what we ask for? The verse today implies this is so.

So we’re following Jesus yet it still hurts. Now it’s tough. Now I’m mourning what’s lost, ambivalent about today, unafraid of the future but also uncaring of it. Even angry. I suppose I’m actually numb because I’m having difficulty sorting out what I’m feeling and prioritizing what I can and can’t do about it. What is God saying to me when I’m numb, when I don’t know where I fit in right now? What’s He saying to my family when my wife and I are both working so hard to get set up to ‘be there’ for those who need us yet feeling distant and hurt? What is the Lord saying when it’s the end of some things but it doesn’t really feel alright?

You know what He’s saying. So do I, even when I don’t want to admit it. He doesn’t promise the easy road: He promises to walk it with us. He promises to abide with us when His words say “I know the work is hard but you aren’t finished. I’m with you, so keep it up.” He’s calling me to submit to Him in all this, and He’s calling me to trust in Him even though that hurts. He NEVER guarantees that things in life won’t hurt because, in a fallen world, we feel hurt when it stings into our lives. He simply says “I’m with you. Always.” Why, Christ’s last words here were “lo I am with you even until the end of the age.”

That’s now. That means He’s with me, with us, now. Ages end every day; yes, I mean that. Things begin and things end and through it all, like we talked about a few days back, these are the days of Elijah when we get to declare the word of the Lord. We do that because we listen to Him when times are good and bad both and we declare that, in both, He’s with us. He’s celebrating with us when we’re glad, and He’s holding us, mourning with us, hurting for us, when we’re hurting. He meant what He said and He’s with us now.

Because now is the time. Eternity does matter most so now is the time to listen and make ready for it. No matter what happens today, He’s abiding with us, working with us to make things better. He already did everything to make eternity matter most, to make it possible. And He’s with us each day to make things alright in the meantime. Right now, today, He’s talking to us and telling us what matters most. That HE matters most because He is our everything and He makes all things all right, right up until the very end.

For further reading: Hebrews 3:12, Hebrews 1:1, Hebrews 8:5, Hebrew 11:7, Deuteronomy 18:19, Hebrews 2:2-3, Hebrews 10:29, Matthew 28:20, Mark 8:36.

My Lord, abide with me these days. I'm hurting and struggling. Thank You for walking with me now.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 24 October 2017

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Hebrews 12, verses 26-27.

Some words about the end. Remember that movie line from our last time: "everything will be alright in the end. If everything isn't alright then it isn't the end." Today's words talk about the end. The end is coming.

According to the internet, the end should have happened this past weekend when the hidden planet, Nibiru, was supposed to crash into the Earth. It didn't happen. And, if you remember your American history, the Millerites thought the world would end sometime between 1843 and 1844. It didn't happen then either. And REM sang that this is "the end of the world as we know it." So far it hasn't happened, which is good for their record sales.

When the end comes, you'll know it. You'll hear the trumpet. You'll see Jesus in the clouds. You and everyone around you and everyone everywhere will acknowledge that He is God, that all you've learned about Him is true, and that He's back. Will you be what remains because it cannot be shaken?

In the past, God came with fire and earthquakes and, well, announcing His presence. Throughout history, He's made His presence known. I think about that scene from Forrest Gump when Lieutenant Dan is screaming at God to show Himself, and Forrest says "and then God showed up" as a hurricane starts to blow. When the storm had passed, the tortured lieutenant was at peace, and God provided a new wealth for Dan and Forrest. Isn't that kind of a small picture of what God does? The majesty of God is an amazing thing. The power of a storm, the magnificent sunsets and sunrises, volcanoes, vast seas, sun-swept deserts and snow-capped mountains: nature screams out praise to God simply by existing as He created it. That's here and now in a fallen world where His majesty is viewed through the gauzy lens of our sins. God can do as He pleases; we're here in the world He created for us.

When the time is right, God will shake it. What God created by words – by The Word – will be shaken again by His words, by the return of The Word. Only God the Father knows when; not even the Son and Spirit with whom He's in perfect union know. When the Father deems it time, all will be shaken, all will be turned over, all will be moved. Everything will be turned upside down.

Will you remain? By accepting Him as your only salvation, you can stand fast. When the physical and spiritual shaking starts, will you be able to? When the fallen world realizes its predicament and quivers in terror, will you stand up and welcome this advent? Will you have put your trust in Him and realize that, once again, He will make all things new as He shakes the world at its foundation?

The end didn't happen in the 1840s, and it didn't happen when REM sang about it 20 years ago, and it didn't happen this weekend. Today, weathermen forecast the weather for tomorrow and the next few days. Project managers plan work for the next few weeks, months, and years. Government bureaucrats march towards deadlines, athletes train for the next game, and kids are planning for Halloween (next week). And if God deems that, right now, the world should be shaken and time be at its end then that's exactly what will happen. Nothing we can do can stop it. Indeed, if it ushers the return of Jesus, I don't want to stop it. I'm ready for the end. How about you?

For further reading: Exodus 19:18, Haggai 2:6, Isaiah 34:4, Isaiah 54:10, 1 Corinthians 7:31, Hebrews 1:11-12, 2 Peter 3:10, 1 John 2:17.

Lord, You will shake everything when the time is right. When You do, I pray I am standing for You, eagerly awaiting Your return.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 25 October 2017

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. Hebrews 12, verse 28.

Awe. That concept comes from Malachi 2:5, which mentions revering God with awe. When was the last time you really felt awe about something? One time when I was at sea, I felt in complete awe being caught in the middle of a storm off the coast of Alaska. And standing on the ridge of the Grand Canyon was awe-inspiring (and awesome). The courage of my son standing up to give his very real confirmation testimony gave me a feeling of awe. And now, during my last days on my east Texas farm, when I look out at the simple beauty of morning mists shimmering off the pond my heart is full of awe and wonder at the beauty of it all.

God has that effect on us. Imagine the feeling of awe at falling at the feet of Jesus when this life is over, of having Him reach down and take your hand and lift you up. "I'm so glad to see you," He might say. Imagine the awe of having the very much alive Jesus speak those words to you. Of simply being in the presence of the Alpha and the Omega. Of knowing He chose you and I to be with Him forever.

All that is possible because His kingdom is unshakeable. The verse doesn't just talk about the temporal, earthly kingdom here. No, it's talking about His kingdom inside us. We are the church; we are His church and His vessels for carrying Him to the ends of the earth. We do that because He lives and reigns within us. When we live our lives following Jesus, we can't be shaken. The world around us may quiver, tremble, and quake, but we won't. We may get knocked down but we won't be knocked out. We may be hurt but we won't be vanquished. With Jesus as our lead, we will always advance.

That's because His kingdom is within us. Noodle that thought for awhile and you'll find it's awesome as well. It will inspire real awe, real star-struck feelings within you. He who died on the cross thinking about you, He who faced down the moneychangers and Pharisees and Pontius Pilate, He who walked on water and talked with Moses and Elijah on the mountain, He who was born in that manger, He who told Sarah she was pregnant, He who walked in Eden, He who spoke and made everything appear: He has built His church on your heart and lives day to day here on this earth through you. He's real and He's now. When you live in godly ways, you're letting Him work through you. When you have mercy, you're letting Him act out through you. When you choose real love, you're letting Him love through you. You are a knight in His kingdom because His kingdom is alive and in your heart. The world of hurt and pain can inflict those on you but it can't destroy what Jesus has instituted within you. Nothing can.

Yet His kingdom is also physical, tangible, and on its way. Jesus' coming kingdom will be a real, physical place here with real, physical work and real, physical actions. There will be true government that is un-corrupted by sin. There will be true justice that is measured by love. There will be true leadership that is exemplified by Jesus on His throne yet walking with each of us. There will be real people and real angels and real apostles and real work to be done. To paraphrase my friend, Phil (of Calvary Chapel here in Paris), our personality, passion, character, and skills – core traits of Christian servants – will be put to work in service of Jesus' real kingdom, even more than they are here and now. In that day we will live in the kingdom He intended for us all along: a place for us to thrive in harmony with Him and in unity with others and even nature. Remember those words about the lion and the lamb living together? They weren't poetry. They were an advance preview of what's to come. Real peace in the life we've all longed for. And it is awesome to think of it all.

My friend, Mark (of Water's Edge in Frisco), is fond of saying "you're part of eternity now." Right on brother. You and I get to choose that awe right now. We don't have to wait for the end of this life to be in awe of Jesus. We get to do that now because He has made us righteous and worthy of Him now through what He did at Calvary. That's more awesome than an Aleutian storm, or a misty morning in Paris, or even the love of my kids and grandkids. You and I: we're part of Him now, and it is an awesome God we can ponder.

For further reading: Psalm 15:5, Isaiah 11:6, Daniel 2:44, Malachi 2:5, Hebrews 13:5.

My Lord I am in awe of you, of Your love, Your power, Your heart. Align my life more and more with Yours.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 26 October 2017

For our "God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12, verse 29.

My son in law (one of them) is a firefighter; the other is a military police officer. Josh (the fireman) serves in College Station, Texas, and is combined firefighter, EMT, and paramedic. He has skills and passion for this kind of work that I can only imagine. A few years ago, when he was still in training, we were driving around town and saw a house under construction that had just caught on fire. He was mesmerized watching it, and I was fascinated at how he described what the fire was doing to the building. Josh predicted that the fire would spill over from room to room and engulf the whole floor; as if on cue, that's exactly what happened. The building went from somebody's future home to a pile of ashes in a matter of minutes.

That's a consuming fire.

Or there are the wildfires that happen out west every year. Every year, fires consume thousands of acres of land that is both under-maintained and over-developed. When we lived in Colorado Springs, I watched one particular wildfire rise from a pillar of smoke to miles-high mushroom cloud almost instantly. I later read that the fire (the Hayman Fire of 2002) was caused by arson. I remember driving out Highway 24 west of Pikes Peak and seeing mile after mile of emergency responder vehicles, makeshift responder camps, and mobile command facilities. According to Wikipedia, that fire burned over 138000 acres and killed six people.

Consuming.

Intense preaching; short-term deadlines; focused workers; heated arguments; passionate evenings: these are all consuming things that regularly show up on our lives. They consume our focus and consume our attention. They'll consume our lives in obsession if we let them. Have we ever considered how God is the consuming fire mentioned in the verse? Is he like the fire mentioned when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal, a fire that burned to nothing even soaking wet logs? Is He the fire in your fireplace that warms your house while destroying old wood? Is He nuclear fire, both destructive and immensely powerful in its magnitude? Or is God a candle in the dark, giving the only light to an empty space?

You know the answer.

Our God is an awesome God; ok, over-used platitude and verse. But it's true! God is awe-inspiring, awe-inducing, awe-producing. His overwhelming power and His understated but equally-overwhelming love are the ultimate sources of the only real awe in the universe. When we let Christ be the Lord in our lives, He consumes us from within and without. He changes our heart, He evolves our attitudes, He teaches us better ways to act. Those become self-fulfilling prophecies because when we display cleaner hearts, new attitudes, and those better ways, things around us change. People treat us differently and we act differently. That's the crux of it (the cross, if you will): we react more as Christ would have us react. We pro-act, acting out of His love instead of just our own perspectives. The world doesn't change immediately but it does change.

It's all because Christ consumes us. He paid the price for our sins, and when we let Him into our lives, He scours out the shame, guilt, anger and hurt that held us hostage. He replaces those feelings with His love and makes it possible to move forward in better ways. In this way, He, our God, is like Elijah's fire; He's like the fire on top of Mount Sinai. He's the fire in our fireplace that helps us survive, comforts and warms us, and provides us with what we need. And He's the candle in the dark, replacing (and consuming) the darkness with undeniable light that provides focus, guidance and hope.

For further reading: Deuteronomy 4:24, 1 Kings 18.

Lord, consume me with Your holy love-fire.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 October 2017

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Hebrews 13, verse 1.

REO Speedwagon, circa 1980: Keep On Loving You. Big hit for a late Seventies/early Eighties arena rock band. It's an earworm, actually; very poppy, very catchy. "I'm gonna keep on loving you. Cause it's the only thing I want to do. I don't wanna sleep. I just want to keep on loving you." I bet you can hear the song in your head now; you're welcome. That's what Hebrews 13, verse 1 tells us to do. Keep on loving each other. Whoever you are, I'm going to keep on loving you because it's the only thing I really want to do.

It's what Jesus asks us to do because it's what He does with us.

Yesterday, my wife and I went to see "Let There Be Light." It's a new Christian movie about a man whose atheist life is successful but still a disaster until he comes to believe in Christ. Then his life both falls into place and falls apart. We like the recent wave of Christian movies and like watching entertainment that shares things we believe. Some of them (like this one) are a little corny, melodramatic in places, but the message still comes through whether the vehicle is corny or not: we believe. And then we get to prove it by living as brothers and sisters with everyone we meet. I walked out of the theater feeling more energized as a believer.

Romans 12:10 tells us to be devoted to each other with brotherly love. We are to be Philadelphians, living our lives in that brotherly love, loving each other like family, being family with each other as friends. Do you watch "This is Us?" It's one of the TV shows that was new in 2016 and it's about a blended family and their relationships. There are two brothers in the show, and part of the central theme is their brotherly love, which includes struggles, identity crises, and simply being different people while still being brothers. Rock on in that thought because it's how Jesus tells us to live with each other. We struggle, we fall in and out of crises questioning our identity as people and even as believers. And we are all different people in temperament, in background, in levels of our faith and enlightenment, and in race. And yet we are brothers and sisters, bound in the family of Jesus as just that: family.

Notice that neither the Romans nor Hebrews verses talk about just followers of Jesus. Paul (in Romans) and the writer of Hebrews (whoever he was) exhort us to love others as our brothers and sisters. The verses simply tell us to love other people with brotherly love, with that phileo love that is familial and familiar. They remind us to love strangers as brothers and sisters even as we don't know them. They remind us to love fellow believers and friends as brothers and sisters because we share a common bond as close family in Christ. They remind us to love people with whom we're estranged because sometimes in a family people become estranged from each other. They remind us to love other people as brothers and sisters because that's how Jesus loves us. The woman you see in Target buying toothpaste? Stranger, but sister. The guy you see on the news who was at the hit and run? Stranger, but brother. The people beside you in church, your co-workers, your Facebook friends, your real siblings if you have them: all sisters and brothers. Phileo love; loving other people with brotherly love as friends. It could be from "This is Us". It was in "Let There Be Light." What about the movie of your life?

Yesterday, after church, I was also watching another Christian movie: "The Shack." One line from it stuck with me at the time. Jesus is talking with Mack and He says "I just want people to be friends." That's true to life with Him, you know. He who created everything, He who bled and died to save us, He who was and is and is to come, He who is fully God yet fully man: He wants to be your friend. He wants a personal relationship with you that starts one on one, as friends. Not as slaves, not as subservient, not by being compelled. As a friend because He's my brother. It's one of my favorite parts of that movie; it's one of my favorite things about the real Jesus, not just the one on the screen. It's because He keeps on loving us, just like REO Speedwagon sang. As a savior and as a friend and as a brother.

For further reading: Romans 12:10.

My Lord, my brother, and my friend, thank You for these wonderful roles You play in my life. Teach me more and more to emulate You and to be brother, sister and friend to all those around me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 31 October 2017

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Hebrews 13, verse 1.

If you're a protestant follower of Jesus, then today is a special day. Five hundred years ago this very day, an obstreperous monk named Martin Luther put his life on the line and challenged the church to a debate. A professor, Luther strongly disagreed with the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences, which were "get out of hell" declarations the Pope would give you if you paid him enough. At the time, the church was selling indulgences to pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther considered this to be sinful and a bastardization of the Scriptures. So he nailed 95 debating points (theses) to the door of his local church in Wittenburg, Germany. Over the next few years, everything changed. The church split. The Gospel was finally translated into languages common people could understand. Mass printing, itself a new industry, soon allowed the mass communication of that Gospel in ways never before possible. The political power structure that had existed for nearly 500 years was shaken. And the basis for what we know as "Western Civilization" took a great step forward.

Luther's point: we need to love one another as brothers and sisters. We do that by sharing the love, grace, and forgiveness that only Jesus Christ can give. It doesn't come from the church. It doesn't come from the pope. It doesn't come from having your time in a place they called "Purgatory" shaved off. It doesn't come from good deeds. Forgiveness of sins ONLY comes from Jesus. Somehow, over time, that message was lost in the traditions, corruptions, and practices of the church Saint Peter left behind. Luther started the process of chipping off the barnacles and making the ship of faith seaworthy again.

That happened on this All Hallows Eve, October 31, 1517.

In Protestant churches all over the world, the last Sunday of October is traditionally known worldwide as "Reformation Sunday." My family used to attend a church in Colorado where, every Reformation Sunday, we held a German festival of remembrance for what Luther did. Great food, lederhosen, German music; it was fun and good fellowship. Martin Luther was a hero of the faith, and we who follow the Protestant tradition owe him a debt of gratitude for having the courage to stand up and say "what about this?" My friend, Jerry, (who I met while attending that church in Colorado) once said something that stuck in my mind: "every Sunday is Reformation Sunday."

Noodle that thought for awhile, then take it a step further. EVERY DAY is Reformation Sunday.

Jesus gives us His Gospel, His Word, as His personal communication to each of us. He gives us called servants of the church to help us understand it, and He gives us other people to reinforce and build up our belief. But when you boil it all down, Jesus is talking to each of us individually. Folks like Dr. Luther help us to understand that talk. We should stand up to anyone and anything every single day when people and things get in-between ourselves and our Lord. Every day we should challenge our faith. Every day we should echo Luther and say "here I stand" and base our stand only on the Word of God. Everything else, well, isn't the Word. Every day, we should take courage from what Luther and others did and rely only on Jesus for our salvation and only on God for everything in our lives. Every day we should remember the blessings of living in the world Luther helped to shape.

Yet we should also remind ourselves that "there are no Lutherans in heaven." There are no Baptists, or Wesleyans, or Episcopalians, or Catholics, or Methodists or Presbyterians or any other flavor of Christians in heaven. There are only followers of Jesus there. If you believe Jesus is your savior and that He is the only way to an eternity of love, then the denominational label you wear (or don't wear) doesn't matter. Worship where you're comfortable and go where you're led. Just don't get too wrapped around the axle about the label. Indeed, I wonder if Martin Luther wouldn't be horrified to learn that a large group in the church he founded is named "Lutheran" instead of "believer."

No matter, all of that started 500 years ago today. When you get a few minutes today, Google Martin Luther and read up on what he did. Then say a prayer of thanks for it.

For further reading: Romans 12:10.

Lord, thank You for inspiring Martin Luther, for all he and so many others did to expand Your church, and for letting me live in a time when I can learn about You from all they have done.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 1 November 2017

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13, verse 2.

Do you still believe in angels? Did you ever? Angels are mentioned 273 times in the Bible. Scripture talks of them as real beings, not as glorified human beings. Contrary to our pop culture concept, you don't become an angel when you die. Sorry to disappoint you but, while there may be angels named "Clarence" there isn't an angel named "Clarence" who used to be human as in "It's a Wonderful Life." They aren't Cary Grant or Denzel Washington either. Instead there are beings called angels who were created by God to be ministering beings with super-human abilities we don't fully understand. Some angels minister to God, serving Him in heaven. Others minister to people, providing messages, guidance, and help in ways that people can't. Angels are powerful beings, capable of doing things men cannot and using supernatural abilities that ordinary people don't seem to possess.

I believe I've had encounters with them. One time, when my son was a toddler, we lived in a two story house. I was cleaning on a Saturday morning and playing the radio, and I quickly ran downstairs to get something, leaving my son upstairs alone. All at once I heard the music blaring, much louder than it had been a few seconds before. My first thought was that Dillon had climbed the shelves and turned up the stereo. Thinking he could get hurt, I rushed upstairs. Much to my surprise, though, Dillon was no where near the stereo shelves. He was, in fact, all the way across the room and had gotten a bottle of bleach water out of the cleaning bucket. He had sprayed himself with it and bleach had gotten into his eyes. Here I had thought he was playing with the radio but there was no way possible he could have gone from where I had left him to the stereo, then back over to where I found him. And yet something, someone, warned me to come back upstairs immediately. I believe it was an angel.

Another time, I took food to a homeless person in San Francisco. I spent 3 years working in downtown San Francisco, and occasionally took food to homeless people. The deal was you'd get food from the concierge lounge, then find a homeless person on the street – there were always dozens on the way to work – and give it away. This particular morning, I got strawberries and coffee, then tried to give them to a lady on Mission Street. She spent several minutes arguing with me: she didn't want food but she did want money, which I refused to give. So I continued on towards the office. That's when I saw the man. He was a large, hulking, smelly black man wearing rags and shuffling around aimlessly as if he was stoned. "Him" I seemed to hear a voice inside of me say, and I reluctantly went over to him. I walked up to him, held out the food and coffee, and I said "this is for you my friend." I'll never forget his response when he lucidly looked into my eyes and said "thank you, my brother." He was calm, controlled, and he had piercing blue eyes that weren't clouded, hazy, or drug-addled. I'll always believe he was an angel, sent to give me food for my soul instead of the other way around.

Today's verse reminds us that we should be hospitable in what we say and do because we don't know exactly who we might be conversing with. In Bible times, angels appeared to men and men didn't always recognize them. What's more, Christ Himself appeared pre-incarnate to bring news to people such as Sarah, Abraham's wife, or possibly as Melchizedek the priest of Salem. We don't always know the strangers we meet in the street, so God encourages us to practice genuine hospitality from the heart. We are to be honest, graceful hosts, offering up ourselves, our possessions, even our homes to people who meet us. They could just be divine visitors. In this day and age, that isn't easy to do, especially when the world around us doesn't feel very safe. Yet God asks us to do it anyway, knowing that our trusting Him for our safety and provision only strengthens our bond with Him and our witness to others.

Today, when you meet someone, offer up yourself to them starting with simple kindness. You never know who you might be talking with.

For further reading: Job 31:32, Matthew 25:35, Genesis 18:1-33, Genesis 19:1-3.

Lord, I praise You for the angels You created and for sending them into my life to help.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 2 November 2017

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Hebrews 13, verse 3.

In case you haven't noticed, this final chapter of Hebrews is spent in catch-all exhortations. The writer is telling us some final things he wants us to remember. In this verse, he's talking about remembering people who are in prison. I've only known a few people who are actually in prison, though I've known many who have been to or been in jail. It's frightening, shocking, overwhelming, and sobering when that state takes you into custody. You are forced to surrender your liberty, your freedom, your rights, your movements, all control.

Are you one of them? Are you someone in jail right now?

You realize that you don't need to live behind bars to be in a jail. There are all kinds of cells that aren't 6X6, and we usually aren't there because of anything we've done or because higher authorities put us there. You know the truth: most of our jails are places we willingly live in. It's like that scene in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" when Jack Nicholson is talking with the other psychiatric inmates and learns that he is the only one who is there involuntarily. The rest of his friends there willingly checked themselves in. What a realization!

You're getting divorced and you can't sort out the myriad emotional, financial and legal issues pressing in on you: you're in jail. You feel like you've never really measured up for your mom or dad, or maybe even your spouse: you're in jail. You aren't making deadlines that you've set for things like financial security, workplace achievement, or personal advancement: you're in jail. You depend on others for your emotional satisfaction and happiness: that's jail. Your spouse is abusing your relationship, abandoning you; worse, physically or emotionally abusing you: jail. You aren't having as much sex as you want, you want things you can't have, you allow yourself to be used by other people: jail, jail, jail.

And worst of all, you know how you got there. Other people may start the issue but you perpetuate it. You and I tolerate it, maybe even embrace it. You went up to the jailer and said "let me in." Satan is the ultimate jailer: he's in eternal jail (doesn't even realize it) and wants company there. So he opens the door, shows you to your cell, and closes the bars behind you. Every so often he breezes by and reminds you, "you know you're here because of X," or "are you sure yet" or some other deceptive nonsense. And you and I believe it. We buy that bill of goods and keep ourselves in jail. We never even try to open the door, never realizing that it isn't locked, that the door out of the jail is always wide open, always facing towards the light.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us to keep those in physical prison in our prayers. Indeed, he (and the Lord who inspired him) reminds us to minister to those in prison. To visit them, talk with them, let them know they matter, teach them that they, too, are forgiven. He implores us to put ourselves in their places, to truly consider how they feel, how they live, so that we can empathize. God wants us to feel humble and to have the heart to reach out to those who are imprisoned and persecuted so that He might reach them through us. Those who are imprisoned are there against their will, and some are wrongly put there. They have lost their freedom but they haven't lost their worth to our Lord. He wants us to remember that, then reach out to help.

What's more, He also wants us to focus on people in all kinds of jails. When Paul said "remember my chains" he was both asking for help and imploring the thoughts and prayers of his readers. His Roman chains in a Roman arrest were real, yet it was the imprisoned state of being as much as its fact that confined him. Indeed, my Random House dictionary partly defines prison as "any state of confinement." Each of us can be confined by the guilt of our sins, even by the random things that affect us in this world that aren't sinful or aren't even things for which we're responsible. I struggle with 'getting past' some things and in doing so I'm keeping myself in their jail. Jesus wants to free us from that. He's right outside my cell, saying "come out and let me help." Jesus wants us to surrender to Him, to be in chains of love for Him instead of imprisoned in sin. Satan may imprison us that way but it is we who keep ourselves there. When we take Jesus by the hand, He walks us out of the cell and walks us out into that light.

For further reading: Matthew 25:36, Colossians 4:18, Hebrews 10:34.

My Lord, every minute You free me from the hell-jail where I keep myself. Thank You and please always remember me.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 November 2017

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Hebrews 13, verse 4.

If you've never had an affair, please take my advice: don't. Infidelity is its own kind of jail. If you are like me and you let it, it will keep you in that jail forever. Without sharing too much, I've done this, and it is, for me, a unique kind of self-imposed torture.

For years, I invested my heart, then my body, then my life, in other people. You don't need to have sex to have an affair and because that's the case, I've had plenty. I poured myself into other people who weren't my wife. I cheated without ever touching them, and I cheated later by touching and being touched as well. That's a prison; it's a jail that you lock yourself into. It may start innocuously, and it may start as just real friendship, but it's too easy to go farther. If you get yourself into an affair, it's because (at some point) you let yourself fall for the "what about me" angle. When you're in that cycle, you don't see how you're hurting your significant other, or the person with whom you're cheating, and all the people around them and yourself. You don't have the right to make the promises you do, and you don't have the right to do the things you're doing, but you do them anyway. It hardens your heart, and it's a small step beyond that to move into unrepentance. "I deserve to be happy" becomes your self-defeating mantra, and that can be torture. It's as if God turned me over to the consequence of my actions...in reality, THAT is what I deserved, and it is painful. My conscience still bothers me for all the people I hurt and it has been years now since I did these things. I've ebbed and flowed in my emotions, yet even today I sometimes find it hard to forgive myself for things I've done.

Yet I also know of someone who is forgiving. Someone who doesn't tolerate these sins but who is so intimately affected by them. I know of someone who rejects these sins and focuses on building up instead of hammering with guilt. There is someone who is willing to forgive things done in the past and move forward in building something new; someone who believes in turning from sinful behavior and growing into someone different, someone better, someone who can live more honestly.

That's my wife. I could have been describing Jesus because Jesus is her model. Where she could have permanently held my sins against me, she chose to help me change and become someone different. Her example became my example; her embracing of God helped me to do the same. The words you read today came in large part because of that. In the most supremely Christian and loving moment of my life, she reached out to me and said "God's not done with us yet" and made all the difference in the world, this when she had left me, when I was mired in the consequences of adultery, and when I had destroyed all she held dear. She didn't have to come back and I didn't deserve it. She chose to.

When you're a Christian and you confess adultery, most of your peers treat you as if you had AIDS or the plague, especially your married friends. It's shocking how quickly people pull out of your life when you cross that particular line, and it's shocking how they avoid you after. It's almost as if they are worried that, if they're around you, they'll catch the disease. Maybe there's some justifiable fear there, and certainly there's justifiable treatment if the motivation is to educate someone's heart back towards Christ. Yet just the verse before today's, the writer implores us to empathize with those "who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Now he reminds us to do that but also to keep our sex lives pure. After my the days of my affairs, my wife and I became close friends with a group of people who became 'our posse.' We talk openly; we laugh and cry; we share the Gospel; we enjoy wine and fellowship. 'Our people' know our story and accept us anyway.

It's because of the intimacy. God wired us to be intimate with Him. He gave us fellowship to model how He wants us to relate. And He gave us sex to share physically, emotionally, perfectly as a reflection for how He feels for us in a personal, singular, unique relationship with just one other person. Joining, pleasure, being out of control, sharing our most personal selves, vulnerability, love: all those things and more are some of what we embrace when we make love. God intended it to be a gift for us to share with another person in a relationship blessed and covenanted by & with Him. The writer reminds us to remember that, to love our brothers and sisters when they fall but to not fall ourselves in doing so. The penalty for un-repentance is dire.

If you find yourself in an affair, even if you've fallen in love, end it. If you're tempted, back away. If you're walking down a path that could end in bed, walk a different way. If you don't, at some point the person you see in the mirror will wish they had. And when that happens, remember the Lord who beckons you back to a better way.

For further reading: Malachi 2:15, 1 Corinthians 7:38, Deuteronomy 22:22, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Revelation 22:15.

Lord, forgive my sexual sins, and teach me again to forgive myself. Help those tempted by these things, and be with us as we recover.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 November 2017

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13, verse 5.

Love your neighbors. Be hospitable. Visit those in prison. Stay faithful in your marriage. Next on the list of exhortation is to keep our lives free from envy. Yes, it says "love of money" and don't downplay that. But then it says "be content with what you have." THAT is the key. It's a heart-thing again; in the Bible, would it ever really be anything else?

One of my favorite day dreams is of winning the lottery. When things have been tight – and that has been so much of my life – I dream of not having to worry about money. I dream about owning a big house, maybe another one in the country, and building a bar there where my family and friends can come to let down their hair. I dream of building another cross by the pond, like we did at the farm we're now leaving, and of having a place for my grandchildren to come and have fun.

The thing is, I've never really had to worry about money. My wife is a great accountant and she has always done a great job of making our dollars go farther than I ever thought they would. Even when we weren't really making much money, she always did things to make sure we enjoyed life. For awhile, I thought she worshipped money, but over time I came to see that she simply enjoyed accounting and liked knowing where our dollars went. Through lean times and plentiful ones, we've always done alright.

Even that truth still misses the big picture.

The big picture is that love of worldly wealth, whether it's money or possessions or the status they bring, displaces our love for God. God gives us all things in both paucity and plenty. He provides for both atheists and believers, for every living thing that has breath. If you have food, air, water, shelter, and anything at all, you have it because God gave it. The key to happiness here on the Third Rock is to be thankful for it, whatever "it" is. Waking up in the morning: thank God. Good workout at the gym: thank God. Date night with your honey: thank God. Rough day at work: thank God. Lose your job: thank God. Fall asleep in the evening: thank God. Drawing your last breath: thank God. In all this thankfulness, be content. Being honestly contented with being thankful is knowing the heart of Jesus, who has promised to always be with us.

And when we forget to do that, then we open ourselves to loving anything but Him. Put simply, that's idolatry, and when you boil it down, the writer of Hebrews is exhorting us to reject idolatry. In his day and ours, one of the easiest idols to worship is wealth. Then as now, the founder of a wealthy feast is the founder of all feasts: God Almighty. And only Him. The writer exhorts us to not only reject this idolatry but, in doing so, to pivot to the better way that is embracing God. God is already embracing us, abiding with us, providing for us, not forsaking us even when we have forsook Him.

My wife tells the story of how, when she and her sister were children, they would play "rich days and poor days." Her sister jokes that they always played poor days so they would be ready for adulthood. "Couldn't we have played rich days more?" they joke, and it's only half joking. We've known tough times and easy ones, and right now things are hard. Yet I know, I fundamentally believe, that God is still with me. That He's still providing what we need, and that even when things are tough they will turn out ok in the end. God promises us Himself, meaning that we are already wealthy beyond anything the wealthiest person could imagine. Everything we get along the way is extra, it's biscuits & gravy. Sure, I still have my lottery dreams; who wouldn't dream of living in a beautiful home with everything you've ever wanted? The better truth is that, when my days are over, I'll be going to wealth far better than some nice pile of sticks and bricks.

For further reading: 1 Timothy 3:3, Philippians 4:11, Deuteronomy 31:6-8, Joshua 1:5.

My Lord, thank You for always providing what You know I need. Thank You for always being with me, for never letting go of me.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 9 November 2017

So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" Hebrews 13, verse 6.

This verse actually goes hand-in-hand with verse 5; as you'll remember, that verse concludes with "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." God will never forsake us and never abandon us no matter what we've done. Even if we lead a life of despicable sin, He will work until our very last moment to turn our hearts back to Him. When we realize that, we GET TO shed even our worst fears.

Knowing that gave Jesus the courage to hang in agony on the cross. Knowing that let all His disciples save one to go to their deaths as martyrs. Knowing that has allowed missionaries for two thousand years to go into the field, turn their worlds upside down, and even risk death for the sake of being "there" and being able to say "do you know this Jesus?" Knowing that enables you to stand and say "I believe" even when pressures of friends, family, and the world challenge you to deny it.

The world, the devil, and other people can kill your body but nobody can extinguish your soul. That's the ultimate truth of faith, namely that eternity really does matter most.

Have you considered that, if you're consigned to hell, you're alive? You aren't annihilated. You're conscious there of what's happening and you know it forever. The "life" one leads in hell isn't the living for which we're intended. Indeed, it's the full consequence of the sins we embrace in this life that separate us from the heart of God. It is the ultimate separation from the love that makes life worth living. Misery, anguish, sorrow, pain, torture: they exist from the inside out for all who walk through hell's gate. Hell isn't a place to which God sentences us: it's the place we choose while we're here by continually rejecting Him.

Here on the Third Rock, each of us lives as a sentient body for only so long and then we enter eternity. During our time here, God continuously provides for us life, food, water, air, shelter, and love. He does it until our very last heartbeat. It's up to us what we do with those things He gives to us. Do we only consume them, or do we consume and share them? Are we only existing or are we existing and thanking God that we are? Can we get by with what we have or can we get by and then use our time, talents, and treasures to share with others as God shares? What will you believe and then what will you do about that?

When we turn to God, He begins His work in us. For us, it starts with "I believe", realizing that Jesus has already done everything needed for that to happen. The path to hell is changed into a guaranteed entrance into heaven. He takes up residence in our hearts and begins to work from the inside out. He helps us in all we think, say, and do. No we don't always get it right, and sometimes we do terribly wrong. That doesn't mean God has abandoned us. It means we've chosen something else. Yet even in the middle of those choices, God's Spirit is still within us and beckons us to choose differently. We get to choose life even when we've previously chosen death. To turn from the heart-attitude that caused us to sin and let Him scour it out. He helps us and flourishes in us. When that happens, we can't help but share it, we can't help but want to follow and do His better will.

When that happens, we begin to realize that nothing can extinguish His love inside us, and nothing can take it away, and nothing can overcome it. Satan and his world may kill us for it but that won't stop it. In the next life, God's love comes to full miraculous fruition. Can you imagine, then, what even a hint of His love could do here and now?

The robbers next to Jesus on Calvary both heaped insults and scorn on Him as they hung there dying. Yet sometime during that day, one of them realized his sin and appealed to Christ for mercy. In that very moment, Jesus promised the man eternity in paradise; you can have confidence that he's there now. Even in those moments of physical torture, God filled up this man's heart and gave him the courage to die and then truly live. There are stories of mercy even in the Holocaust of World War II. There is the story of the girl at Columbine who stood up for her faith and was summarily

murdered for it. Just this past weekend, 26 believers were slaughtered by a lunatic who had gleefully abandoned God. Those people are more alive now in heaven than they ever were here; I feel pity for the killer who is probably alive some place else. All of these are manifestations of God's promise to always help us and quench our fears. When He is with us, there's no need to ever be afraid of anything the world thinks it can do.

For further reading: Psalm 118:6-7, Matthew 13:50, Revelation 20:14-15.

My saving Lord, thank You so much for always being with me. Thank You for inspiring courage in me. Thank You for always working Your will in my life. Help me to better live out Your wonderful will today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 13 November 2017

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13, verse 7.

As I've matured, I've developed a great admiration for people who are bold in the Word. Over thirty years ago, I went to a Billy Graham crusade in Washington DC. Now, I'm not a Southern Baptist and I find some of their methods to be grating. My upbringing was far from the kind of approach Baptists and Billy Graham commonly use. When I was a kid, every few months a Billy Graham crusade would take over one of our three channels of TV and I found it to be hard, boring to watch. It was ironic, then, that I found myself there that day, listening to Rev Graham exhort the crowd to come to Jesus. It was even more ironic that I found myself compelled by the things he said. I met Dr. Graham and I was moved, but not moved enough to seriously consider the things he was saying. It took me decades before I would come around to Graham's way of thinking.

The older I grow the more I see the truth in Christ's command to go and make disciples of all nations. Our first, best task in this life is to reach out to other people and share Jesus. EVERYTHING we experience in the next life depends on knowing Him here. We do our part by living our lives, being ourselves, and being ready to communicate when the opportunities arise. Even including the fire and brimstone sermons, I'm betting Billy Graham would agree.

I was baptized by a pastor named Reuben Youngdahl, who built the largest Lutheran church in America. I remember well his son, Paul, who is still the benchmark against whom I measure all clergy. Reverend Ann Haw confirmed me in Oklahoma and she's one of the most courageous workers for the Spirit I can think of. Dr. Guy Newland back in Mitchell, Indiana was the most genuine minister I've ever known and the one who, at least in my life, convinced me that faith should be an everyday, practical thing instead of that thing you do on Sundays. Pastors named Vogt and Uhlhorn in Colorado Springs taught me the depth of faith, and Pastor Vogt's reading of Romans 8 on the night my father died was actually the first time in my life that I fully understood how all the Scriptures were completely true. I've learned much from the wisdom of my friend, Reverend Gauthier, and men named Schaefer, Miller, McKay, Brimer, Kemp, Celia, Radkey, Kaija and Hartjen all inspire me today as peers, friends, and spiritual guides in the confusing, self-focused world of consumerist North Texas.

We put a lot of faith in our pastors, but do we put as much into the God they serve?

The verse today reminds us to learn from and revere called servants of the Lord. God picked them out especially for the purpose of being Barnabas – the encourager – to people in need of an encouraging Savior. They have a special calling and unique education to prepare them for the task of ministering. We do well when we remember that it's a Godly calling to live a life of faith, of submitting even our aspirations and career wishes to God. That's what they do. It's also tough work. Successful churches aren't the ones with the cool sound systems, the huge congregations, and the rock band in front playing the latest Chris Tomlin mash-up. No, successful churches are the ones where the parishioners know they're close to Jesus because Jesus is close to them. In such places, that usually starts with the pastor. If you look close, you find that the pastor is simply walking closely with Jesus and all blessings flow from Him.

Yet we can't think of our pastors as being supermen because they aren't. They are sinners. They're strugglers. They like football and beer and music and barbecue (or queso). Some of them are jerks. I know some pastors who are recovering alcoholics. I know some who have done jail time. I know of some who struggle with identity, sexuality, and crushing depression. And I've known some pastors who I liked in the pulpit but I couldn't stand out of it.

In other words, pastors are a lot like me. Or you.

Just yesterday, Pastor Celia (which still sounds weird) was talking about Gideon. Gideon was an ordinary, even cowardly, man who was called by God to do extraordinary things. Gideon had the gifts God needed and God empowered him to use them in big ways. Yet Gideon was also just a man. He succeeded when he walked closely with

God and he floundered when he strayed back into paganism. I suspect that, like other pastors, if you met Gideon today you'd find he wore his pants the same way as you or I do. Or Billy Graham, who is 99 now and no longer preaching in crusades. In his life, he personally witnessed to millions of people, maybe even as many as a billion. Yet he still says he could do more. He's still hungry for the Spirit. That's a good quality to have if you're going to become a pastor. In fact, it's a great quality for any of us.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:16, Hebrews 4:12, Hebrews 6:12.

My Lord, I am hungry for Your Spirit. Thank You for the men and women you call as servants here. Bless their work and their examples to all of us.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 14 November 2017

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13, verse 8.

You know it's true: you might as well just say "amen" now (which actually means "this is most certainly true"). Verse 8 is one of the foundation verses of the entire Bible. It's the explanation, motivation, and reason for everything. There's a Maren Morris song that mentions old time country music as "my church." It explains life; it's always great; it's always the same; it's always there to uplift a sad soul. I agree with some of that; "can I get an amen?"

Here's something that merits an amen whether Maren sings about it or not: Jesus our Savior is the same person He was yesterday as He is today as He will be tomorrow. Can I get a hallelujah?

Wrap your noodle around this truth. When everything around you is changing (and the only constant in this crazy world is change), Jesus is. The great I AM is. As you feel like your feeling careen around like a pinball, Jesus is the same. The same Jesus who talked one on one with John, Peter, and even Judas Iscariot is the same Jesus who speaks to your heart today. In science, gravity and time are constants. Everything else changes, and you can even vary the effects of both time and gravity even though they are standards. Yet Jesus is the same. He is the same no matter the temperature, the time of year, or the phase of the moon. Yet Christ is more than science; indeed, He invented it, inspired it. Christ is beyond our science, and beyond our puny religion. Jesus is the same whether you're a Baptist, a Hindu, a Shiite (or Sunni or Wahabi) Muslim, or a card carrying atheist vegan who loves Crossfit. He's the same Savior we think about when we sing "Jesus Loves Me" as little children or "The Old Rugged Cross" as old people.

Consider, too, that this statement comes at the end of the exhortations where the writer has given us concluding thoughts. He wants us to remember that, no matter what advice we give, the founder of all advice is Christ. The source of all wisdom is Christ. The reason for all we know is Jesus. And when the world gets sideways as it always does, Jesus is still there just as He always was/is/will be. Maybe the Doobie Brothers summed it up: "I don't care what they may say. I don't care what they may do. Jesus is just alright (oh yeah)."

He's just alright. He's just in time. You can count on Him. We should sing about that. Can I get an amen?

I have a friend who is going through a particularly rough time right now. He just left one job, and his family situation is all in turmoil. My friend has always been plagued by darkness and has become one of the more hopeless people I know. No faith, no grounding, he's lost his way and is miserable. Some of it is circumstances beyond his control; some environment; some the past; and some of it is his chickens coming home to roost. Just last night we were talking about his having no identity, and I asked him to call me when he's ready to seek it. To call me because there's really only one place to find your lasting identity. It's at the cross. It's there and only there that we can lay down our weapons, our guilt, our fears, and our pride and be renewed in both spirit and mind.

It's because the Jesus we find on the cross is the same Jesus who walked on water is the same Jesus in the Word is the same Jesus listening to our prayers today is the same Jesus who loves children is the same Jesus who will judge the world. He's the same God no matter what. When my friend sees his world collapsing around him and he feels bereft of all that's good, by going to the cross and meeting the same Jesus there, he can begin again and move in a different direction.

I'm not a pastor. I sometimes wish I had some of the knowledge my pastor friends have gained. If not the knowledge, then maybe a little of the wisdom. When people come to me and ask about why I believe what I do, all I can do is paraphrase C.S. Lewis who said that he prayed because he couldn't help himself. I believe in Christ because I can't help myself. Everything else I've sought in this world has left me wanting and hollow. Yet I go to Jesus and see that He's the same as He always is. That helps me to realize that He's the God I crave, the God I want to follow, the leader I want to emulate, the unchanging Savior I desperately need, and the friend I want to always cherish. Jesus is just alright because He is ALL RIGHT and is always Himself. Can I get an amen to that?

For further reading: Psalm 102:27, Hebrews 1:12.

My Lord, this is most certainly true: You are God. You are the only constant in the universe. You are good, worthy of praise, and all life.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 15 November 2017

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. Hebrews 13, verse 9.

For the last few weeks I've had "La La Land" playing in my head. I've heard the catchy opening number – "Another Day of Sun" – playing over and over in my head. If you haven't seen the movie and you like musicals, watch it. And you have to watch right from the opening credits because that opening number sets the stage for the entire movie. "Climb these hills I'm reaching for the heights and chasing all the lights that shine. When they let you down. Get up off the ground. Then morning comes around and it's another day of sun."

That kind of sums up one of the great things about Christian faith. Jesus is always here, always the same, always a constant. Every day is a gift, another day of Son in the sun. We chase all kinds of things here on the Third Rock and they let us down. Yet to survive, to persevere, we have to get up and try again. Without knowing Jesus, life is just a senseless drudgery. With Him, it's another day of sun.

And in the process of getting through life we get distracted by lots of lights that shine. They glitter, they're cool, they're trendy, they're the thing; gotta chase em! Sometimes those lights that shine are bright fires that burn in hostile camps. Sometimes the things that are cool aren't so cool when we become part of them. Sometimes when things let us down we can get crushed. Not to put an insensitive point on things but "that's life."

Here, then, is some more life. Sometimes in worship we get distracted by thinking we MUST say the Lord's Prayer every time we are in church. Sometimes we forget to regard our brothers and sisters as fellow believers even when they royally mess up. Sometimes we split our fellowship based on things like 'just when (or if) do the wine and bread of communion actually become the body and blood of Christ?' Sometimes our friends insist that we are becoming weak in our faith if we don't do all the things they insist we must do.

When they let you down, get up off the ground and realize these are just shiny things you're chasing. Get back in the Son because it's another day of sun. Jesus hasn't changed. He's the same today as He was yesterday and as He will be tomorrow. No, what's changed is our position in relation to him. We've moved ourselves away from Him. We chose something that wasn't Him and we shifted. And that's crazy because He freed us from the need to follow human codes. He freed us from the constraints of having to prove ourselves to God.

Centuries ago, the early followers of Jesus were genuinely conflicted about what foods they could and couldn't eat. Most of them had been raised as Jews, and Jews had all kinds of ceremonial laws about what foods were unclean (and thus forbidden) and those that were allowed. Many of the foods common to pagan communities in the Roman Mediterranean area were considered unclean, and the early believers struggled with 'how Jewish' they should be in observing these ceremonial traditions. Their Jewish friends, who had a vested interest in seeing the nascent Christianity fail, insisted that these new followers follow all Jewish codes. First Century Judea had become spiritual La La Land, complete with the tyrannical government controlling the people and the complicit spiritual leadership doing whatever it needed to do to stay in power.

Jesus changed all that. He made it so that we are free from following anything but Him. As the Apostle Peter learned, we are free to rise and eat and not worry about whether it's ceremonially unclean. All that God has created is good. And when you realize that, you realize that those old codes would only let you down. That's when it's time to get up off the ground and follow Jesus. When you do that, you realize that it's morning and it's another day of sun in the Son. And you get to leave La La Land.

For further reading: Ephesians 4:14, Colossians 2:7, Colossians 2:16, Hebrews 9:10, Acts 10:9-48.

Lord, thank You for making all things possible, for removing barriers we crazy humans put up in your creation.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 16 November 2017

We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. Hebrews 13, verse 10.

My Concordia reference explains this verse by saying this verse refers to the cross (the true altar), “which marked the end of the whole Aaronic priesthood and its replacement by the order of Melchizedek. The priests could not eat of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement but we can partake of our sacrifice, so to speak – through spiritual reception of Christ through faith. We have a higher privilege than the priests under the old covenant had.”

In the days of the ancient priesthood, the high priest was the only representative between the people and God. He and only he was allowed certain privileges in how worship was conducted. Priests were provided with free food out of the stock brought to the Lord and thus were very well fed. Yet on the Day of Atonement, the day when the high priest went before the Mercy Seat of God to ask for atonement of the peoples’ sins, the priest was not allowed to consume any part of the sacrificed lamb. He sprinkled its blood on the altar, and the remainder of the sacrifice was taken outside the Israelite camp and burned until nothing was left.

When Christ volunteered to die for your sins, He removed the need for the Old Testament system of sacrifices. Ritual animal sacrifice as a substitution for an atonement was replaced by the real sacrifice of the pure blood of God Himself, who made atonement needing no ritual, animal, or substitution. What’s more, we who believe in Him partake of this sacrifice – and thus of Him – in many ways simply by believing. Our faith in Jesus is the food that feeds the soul, and feeding on the love of Jesus removes need for anything else.

Pretty tough stuff to comprehend, right? Then let’s try it another way. Translation: you don’t need a go-between to get to God. You get to consume time and the essence of your Savior in person, one on one. Your faith in Him removes all obstacles between you and Him.

You and I, as followers of Jesus, don’t need a high priest to sprinkle blood on the Ark of the Covenant. We don’t need a priest to slaughter an animal in our place. We don’t need to follow the intricate, ancient rituals of old to make ourselves righteous before God again. And we don’t need to wait until just one day in a year for someone else to take our case before God. Even as a believer, some religions still insist a priest is necessary to intermedate between you and your God. Yet the Bible says this simply isn’t true.

Right here, right now, wherever you are, you GET TO commune with Jesus one on one. He came to you; you don’t have to go to Him. He meets you from within, and your saying “I believe” puts your faith in Him. In doing so, you accept that He did everything possible and necessary to make you right before God again. You have communion with Him and share in His death and resurrection right now, today, in this very moment, and all the time. When you periodically observe Holy Communion, you get to remember Him further, in different ways, partaking in elements that point us directly to Him as the true Spiritual food. Right here, right now you get to go to the altar of the cross and lay down your sins, lay down your successes, lay down your pride, lay down everything you have and are and love, and submit it all to Jesus. In return, He guides you as friend, Savior, and fellow, and says “I’ve made it right for you.” You don’t need me or anyone else to tell him on your behalf or to sacrifice for you. He did it all and you and I get to each meet Him where we are. Right here, right now.

For further reading: Hebrews 8:5, 1 Corinthians 9:13, 1 Corinthians 10:18.

Lord, I praise You for doing everything needed in faith. For loving me enough to die and rise for me. I praise You for being the food my soul needs to thrive and the true living water to quench my eternal thirst.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 20 November 2017

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. Hebrews 13, verse 11.

Word came out today that Charles Manson died over the weekend. Charlie masterminded the 1969 grisly Tate-LaBianca killing spree, convincing his young, drug-addicted followers to savagely murder for him. Manson had lived a tortured life of abuse and crime, and the late 1960s counter-culture was a petri dish in which he enthusiastically grew the bacillus of true hatred. Charlie didn't kill anyone himself: he directed others to do it for him. Originally sentenced to death, Manson's sentence was commuted to life in prison after California changed its death penalty laws. In the (over) 45 years since, Manson gave no sign that he repented of his heinous crimes, and there's no reason to believe he did so at his end. Hell may very well be one soul richer this morning.

Do you think Jesus is grieved at that? I do. I've talked about how Jesus loved Osama Bin Laden, Adolf Hitler, and the most notorious people in history. He created each of us as "very good" and loves us unconditionally. Even mass murderers, criminals, and people who do the worst things we can imagine. So if Charlie checked into a hellish eternity yesterday, it happened in spite of Jesus love and that must sadden our Savior. It's as if His sacrifice was burned up for nothing.

The verses associated with this one talk about sin offerings. During the time after the Ten Commandments, God revealed to Moses how He wanted His people to recognize their need for atonement. The Israelites could no more atone for their own sins than we can, so God provided them with a system of animal sacrifices that would remind them of their spiritual dependency on Him. Once a year, a Levite high priest would slay an animal, sprinkle its blood in the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle, and 'make atonement' for all the peoples' sins. Afterwards, what was left of the animal would be taken outside the camp and burned to ashes, then the ashes would be sprinkled in a place that had been made ceremonially 'clean.' All this was done to remind Israel that it was sinful and that it should depend completely on God for its salvation as much as it did for its three squares, air, shelter, and safety.

You know where this is going: Jesus was our sin offering. Jesus was the ultimate offering to God Almighty to atone for our myriad sins and appease His holy, righteous anger. His blood sprinkles on all of us. He was executed outside the city, buried outside the city, even rose outside the city. Jesus Christ did for mankind the most important thing that mankind couldn't do for itself.

When we turn our backs on this truth, we are keeping Jesus outside our camp. "I'd never do that. I'd never act like the Manson Family" you or I would say. But have we considered how we do it every day? Every time we embrace even petty evil, we side with what defined Charlie Manson. I've never killed anyone but I've harbored deep grudges and hatred. I've followed idols. I've hurt and destroyed things Jesus commanded me not to. I've done evil just as you have, and when I have I have sided with the evil that drove Manson. What do we make of Charlie?

In-between drugs, sex, violence, and helter skelter, Manson once declared himself to be Jesus. His followers believed it and did his bidding. I was only a small child when all this happened, and I grew up learning about the things the "Manson Family" did in its savage killing spree. It was confusing and hard to understand, how someone could orchestrate such unspeakable evil and convince others to follow. But now that I'm an adult, I look back and realize it really isn't very hard to understand. Evil is as old as Eden and as common as the air we breathe. Charlie kept Jesus outside the camp of his life for all his life. He rejected God's invitation to be at peace, and in doing so he led astray other equally confused people. In rejecting Jesus, there could be no sin offering for Charlie but himself, and all that's left now are worthless ashes. I believe that must grieve Jesus. I picture Him today, sitting alone and contemplating the loss. We walk up to Him and say "is everything ok Lord?" "Yes," He might reply, "but I'm a little sad right now because one of my dear people has gone." He might even have real tears in his eyes for Charles Manson and everybody else who goes astray forever.

Mass killing has become common place in our society; that's a legacy of the Manson Family. None of his followers has ever been released from prison (though one is up for parole at this time). One of his acolytes even tried to a president.

Yet the evil Charles Manson came to represent is his legacy. Manson was consumed by it. That evil tries to permeate everything we do, and it works on us daily to separate us from God because evil is lonely and desires bad company. It rages at all that is good in the world. Will you let it overtake you? For those of us left behind, this message is clear. Don't be Charlie.

For further reading: Leviticus 16:15, Exodus 29:14, Leviticus 4:12, Leviticus 4:21.

Lord, bless You for Your deep mercy, for Your sacrifice, for Your unending love. Help me to turn away evil in my life today by relying fully on You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 21 November 2017

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Hebrews 13, verse 12.

Yesterday I mentioned that Jesus was killed, buried, and rose outside the city walls of Jerusalem. That happened to fulfill Scriptural prophecy. Being criminally punished outside the city was a common practice in ancient days for a number of reasons. It dishonored the accused and it accorded them unique, public status to be despised. It sent a message to the public: don't mess with the authorities. Burying bodies outside the city limits also was a health issue; it still is. Indeed, removing decomposing corpses from the places where we live is still our practice today; it's why cemeteries are usually found at or outside the original boundaries of most towns. But most of all, it happened because God used the lowest among us to perform the highest function.

It gave God "street cred." We give great honor, glory, and social status to the pretty things. That's the foundation of street credibility. It's all about being perceived as "legit," about being respected, about being able to walk the walk and talk the talk. On the streets, honor and status are (supposedly) earned, and glory is taken. In the way Jesus died, He earned real street cred.

So did His house. The Jewish Temple was one of the great marvels of antiquity. The Second Temple, renovated by Herod, rivaled any building in Rome, Thebes, Athens, or Babylon for its beauty, architectural wonder, and impact. The original Temple of Solomon had been the actual "house of God:" the place where His presence physically resided. Its location was on the very spot where Abraham had bound Isaac, where Jacob had his famous dream, and where David purchased the threshing floor. Tradition held that it was even the spot where God first touched earth after creation. Solomon's First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians but was rebuilt as the Second Temple by Zerubbabel. This Second Temple, however, lacked God's presence as well as many of the original artifacts (like the Ark of the Covenant) that traced their origin back to Moses. Those have been lost to the ages. Still, the Second Temple stood for nearly 600 years, and had been greatly renovated and expanded by Herod the Great just before the time of Jesus. You would have been able to see it for miles around as it was the tallest building in the city and stood at the top of Mount Moriah (later called Mount Zion). Its massive size, glistening gold, and snow white stone would have made it shine brilliantly in both sun and night.

By the time Jesus arrived, the Temple had become the focal point of the Middle East. It was the focus of Jewish life, the singular place to which Jews made annual pilgrimage. Jesus Himself would spend much time in the Temple as the building represented God's promise to His people and His continuing magnificence. As mentioned, it was the most prominent building in the city, more visible and ostentatious than any of the city's palaces or government buildings. Great glory and honor was accorded to being in the Temple and especially to those who worked there and maintained the religion there.

For Jesus to have worshipped and taught in the Temple gave credence to His status as Messiah. In our time, it would have meant He earned that 'street cred.' All through His life, Christ honored the practices and traditions of God's people, including honoring the Temple. Repeatedly during His ministry Christ taught at the Temple and challenged the political and ecclesiastical authority of the men who ran it. Immediately after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus went to the Temple and cleared out the merchants who had set up shop. He did this to cleanse out God's home.

And when the conspirators of the Jewish Sanhedrin determined to murder Him, they wanted to do so in a way that would both reinforce their status and power AND consign him to the lowest place in society. That meant Jesus would die outside the city. He would be tried inside Jerusalem, but when it came to His actually killing, that was to take place away from the honored Temple Mount. Christ was crucified on Golgotha, which ancient tradition (even then) held was the burial spot of Adam, the original man; how ironic is that? How ironic it was, too, that, at the moment of Jesus' death, the veil on the Holy of Holies was miraculously torn asunder.

What's the point in all this history? It's a sign for us. It's interesting that God used human history to give His story honor and credibility but getting wrapped around the archaeology of it misses the central point. It's not where God performed

His salvation of us but WHAT He did that matters. The focal point of all human history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the real street cred. That happened in the places we've discussed and was made credible to humanity by the fact that it happened where it did. Yet it is the resurrection itself – God's saving atonement of our sins – that matters and not the place where God did it. We study the history of the location to help us better understand the context of the time and place for the life of Jesus. Yet it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that is the ultimate street cred on which we all can and should depend.

For further reading: John 19:17, Ephesians 5:26, Romans 3:25.

Lord, thank You for using these places and events in history to point to Your Son.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 22 November 2017

Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. Hebrews 13, verse 13.

Jesus earned “street cred” by dying outside the city walls. That wasn’t the intention of the Jews who murdered Him. They wanted to discredit Him, to consign Him to a place with the worst of society. The Sanhedrin that sentenced Jesus to death wanted to erase the memory of Him so that He would soon be forgotten. To do that, they reasoned that having Him executed as a common criminal would cause people to abandon following Him. By branding Jesus as a criminal worthy of death, they would so disgrace His name that people would be repelled by even the mention of it. Within a few years nobody would remember this evangelist from Nazareth.

With anyone else, it might have worked. After all, there is only a small handful of names we actually know out of the billions of people who lived before, say, one thousand years ago (maybe even one hundred years ago). The people we know of (like Jesus) earned fame or honor. Who even knows the names of condemned prisoners from Phoenicia, Babylon, Athens or Rome? Do we know the names of the men crucified with Spartacus? Without using Google, who are the people on death row now in Idaho? Can you name anyone shot for cowardice during the Mexican War? We don’t know the names of these men because they’re lost to history.

We don’t know their names because we don’t want to. They died in disgrace. They died in ignominy and dishonor. You, me, and our friends don’t want to be associated with their dishonor and disgrace. It’s like adulterers in church: nobody wants to be associated with them because we feel like, if we are, we’ll be tainted by their sins. It’s a stupid, highly irrational feeling even if it is a constructive psychological defense mechanism.

It’s also ungodly. What would Jesus do? Not that. Jesus ran to the cross. He wrapped Himself in the dishonor and ignominy. Jesus knew that His sacrifice would bring glory, honor, and love to the Father. THAT is our better example.

Luke quoted Christ in saying that each of us who wants to really follow Him must deny himself and take up his cross daily. We must willingly, even gleefully, run outside the camp and pick up the weapon of our own death. We must embrace the disgrace. And the writer of Hebrews reminds us that human disgrace for faith in Jesus is worth more than all the treasures in the world. Joy in being persecuted for believing in Jesus is the street cred of faith.

A few years ago I read the Left Behind books. I’m not a millennialist, so I didn’t accept the rapture/7 years tribulation idea; to me, getting mixed up in the how & when details of the end of time misses the miracle of being called home to heaven. But one scene from one of the books (I don’t remember which one) stuck with me. In it, one of the main characters is talking with a condemned man who is on his way to the guillotine. The man is about to die for not taking the mark of the Antichrist and instead of being hesitant about it, he is joyful. Imagine that: the man is about to be murdered for what he believed and he is enthusiastic about it. He’s ebullient, joyously embracing the disgrace of dying for the one you love. And I don’t even remember the character’s name.

But that’s just a book. The truth of it is that that this happens here and now. It’s been happening for real to Coptic Christians for years. It happens wherever ISIS rules. It still happens in Communist China, and Cuba, and Islamonazi Iran. A watered-down version of the persecution even happens in American universities and American corporations. I am challenged regularly online for words like these, and I have lost friends over my faith. The best response when that happens? Joyfully thank God and press forward. The world thinks it’s a disgrace to believe like this. Embrace the disgrace and advance against an enemy that has already lost even when it costs you everything.

For further reading: Luke 9:23, Hebrews 11:26.

Lord, let me embrace the ‘disgrace’ of serving You, of loving You, of faith in You. Teach me and uphold me to better serve you in the world.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 27 November 2017

For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Hebrews 13, verse 14.

Do you struggle with the here and now as I do? I remember from years ago a sermon presented by our pastor in west Colorado Springs. It was about heaven being our real home, how we are really just transient citizens on this fallen earth. You know the details: this world will end and Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, then usher in a new heaven and a new earth. "No matter what is happening here, don't lose heart. Heaven is our real home" said this pastor. We shouldn't get too wrapped around the axle about holding on to this place because we're actually citizens of another, better place.

But what about now?

Here and now is all I know. Like so many people, I have déjà vu moments that seem like fleeting glimpses of something else. Sometimes I wonder if they aren't "soul memories" of where I was before I was born. I know: crazy stuff. Or is it? A learned, educated, rational Lutheran pastor insisted (as millions of others do) that I, as a believer in Jesus, am actually a citizen of a multi-dimensional existence that is a reality outside of what we know as time and space. Trusting that I will spend eternity there with a Savior who I've never met in person is a bedrock of my faith. It keeps me going sometimes because, as they say in the church I now attend "eternity matters most." To an unchurched mind, THAT is crazy stuff. Here and now is the known. So what about now?

You see, I get it. The pastor was correct. I get that Jesus has a place ready for me in heaven. Whatever heaven is, wherever heaven is, I'll be going there when my time here on the Third Rock is done. I really, truly do trust that this earthly home – the only home I know – isn't a permanent place, that my permanent residence is a place I haven't yet seen, or that I remember so deeply from so long ago that I can't recall the memories and can't tell you what it looks, smells, and feels like to be there. I get it.

And that's good. It really is. But while it's a focus, that's the forest. Today is built with trees. Here and now is where I'm a front line soldier in the army of the Living God. I know I have a place in His ranks someday in heaven, but for now I also know that I'm on the lines here on terra firma. That most of the world doesn't believe in this Jesus. That much of the world believes in a host of terrestrial ghosts, or the manufactured demonics of Islam, or, worse, in nothing at all. Here I'm armed with Christ's command to love as He loves, to tell others about Him, and to use what time, talents & treasures He has given me to do my best in my various callings. Here I'm fighting on His front line every day, defying the prince of this world, sometimes minute by minute, so that people won't look at me and be led astray from Jesus. I'm glad that heaven is my home, and I'm glad that I'm not part of this un-permanent settlement in the land east of Eden.

But east of Eden is all I really know and it's more than a Steinbeck novel. Jesus calls me to remember that I'm a part of His eternity now, but that, for now, my role before eternity is here. To do His bidding here; to do His work at hand. And I struggle with that, struggle to keep my eyes on the ball, to follow His commands, to lay down my hypocritical judgments, to turn aside from my petty thinking and small ways. East of Eden is all I know, yet I also know Jesus walks with me here.

For further reading: Hebrews 12:27, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 11:10.

Lord Jesus, I live in the land of Canaan, and I struggle here. I pray, encourage me, walk with me, and strengthen me to fight Your good fight today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 28 November 2017

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Hebrews 13, verses 15-16.

If you can't do anything else, you can always do these things: say praise and do good. In doing good and in praising, we share God with others. In praise and good works, we act out the life of Jesus on behalf of people who may not know Him but need Him never the less. Giving praise to God leads to giving thanks to Him, and it leads to wanting to live out ways that show your thanks. If you want to sum up the Christian walk through life, these two verses are basically it. Praise God and live out your faith. Do it because it pleases God.

Have you considered how you offer your praise? How do your lips openly profess His name?

Do you realize that it's not just your spoken word that professes His name, that gives Him praise, that proclaims your faith in Him? It's the words from your mouth, your blog, your attire, your attitude towards strangers, your actions, your demeanor. If you are having trouble measuring up to a Godly standard, join the club. I have trouble doing that, and I've been a follower of Jesus for nearly all my life yet 'walking the walk' is sometimes tough. These days, I have zero problem saying I believe in Jesus, but I still struggle with how to put that faith into common conversation without seeming preachy or condescending. Those qualities are the opposite of the ones God wants me to live out, especially when talking about Him. And if the conversation is with friends, especially ones who have known me in the past, then I find the task even more difficult. I'm a hypocrite. Indeed, I wonder how much dishonor I've brought on my Lord instead of praise.

In church this weekend, Pastor Mark talked about how only God can change hearts. Hollywood can't do it. Politicians can't do it. Your wife and kids can't even do it. If your heart is hard, cold, hurting, or indifferent, only God can work in it to change it. Other people can chip away at the exterior, but only by letting God into your heart can it be truly changed. His Spirit acts like peroxide on a wound. When His Spirit begins that work in you, you simply can't hold it in. You feel moved to express it, to give praise, to give thanks, to share it. Only when God works in you can you see the error of dishonor and want to change how you live to avoid continuing on a dishonorable path.

When that happens, praise God from whom all blessings flow. You'll feel the push to do just that.

Yet it's true that there will still be setbacks. There may still be times of back-sliding, of slipping up. When those happen, you might just feel the unfamiliar (and unwelcome) feeling of guilt, of shame. In those times, it helps to remember that even those emotions are gifts from Him to serve as barometers, white lines to keep us in the safe lane. When that happens, even guilt and shame become feelings of praise, of being grateful for a God who would love us even our lowest moments and want to meet us where we are.

So if you can't do anything else, if all abilities leave you or if you're at the end of your rope and you simply don't know what to say, try giving thanks and praise. When you do, you make God smile.

For further reading: 1 Peter 2:5, Isaiah 57:19, Hosea 14:2, Romans 12:13, Philippians 4:18

Lord, I praise You and thank You for all the ways you bless me today.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 29 November 2017

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. Hebrews 13, verses 17-18.

Pastors, presidents, parents, bosses: they are our leaders. So are mentors, quarterbacks, famous actors, media figures, teachers, and drill sergeants. Every group has leaders and followers; it's human nature. Some leaders have natural aptitude for it; some have elected authority; some have power they have simply assumed from those around them or the situation in which they find themselves. Some leaders inspire you to want to follow them in anything; some leaders are complete jerks. Some are virtuous; some are murderous Communists. Whether these verses are talking explicitly about ecclesiastical leaders alone misses the fact that these verses actually do apply to all situations.

God allows leaders to be vested with (and use) authority that originates with Him. Just before ascending after His resurrection, Jesus said that "all authority in heaven and on earth" had been given to Him. God the Father owned it and vested it into His Son. That means Jesus is where the buck really stops. And because of that word "all," through delegation, if someone on earth has any kind of authority, they have it because Jesus directly or indirectly gave it to them. Even people who don't believe in Jesus have this endowment.

Yesterday evening I was having an online discussion with a friend who doesn't profess conventional belief in God. I don't think of him as an atheist, or even an un-believer as I don't think his heart is hardened against God. Indeed, I'm hopeful that God is working on him as we speak. He's going through a terrible time right now, and I hope and pray that He learns to seek comfort from the Lord. He's having a leadership crisis because he has lost faith in many of the leaders in his life (work, family, etc). If you told him that these verses required him to have confidence in these leaders he might rip your head off.

Yet think about the writer of Hebrews. He was saying these words and echoing his contemporary, the Apostle Paul. Paul exhorted his fellow believers to submit to authorities, and many of those believers were being actively persecuted by those authorities. Paul himself was imprisoned and tortured by both Roman and Jewish officials. Unless you have been tortured by ISIS, you and I may not be able to comprehend what kind of character it must take to put trust in leaders who are evil. But we've all worked for bosses who didn't seem to know how to lead; sometimes those bosses have been us. And we can each tell stories about parents or people we looked up to who let us down or didn't do things they should have.

The verses are another of God's reminders to us that we are to remember that those in charge are in charge because He allows it. He allows their selection (or assumption of power) because it serves His purposes (even when we don't understand what those purposes are). I don't know what purpose was served by God allowing tens of millions of innocent people to be murdered by Communists in the last hundred years but I do know that God worked to turn that evil for good purposes after. I don't know what good purpose was served at Auschwitz, but I do know about the stories of faith and love from people who survived there. I don't know what good is accomplished by allowing pedophile priests to rape kids, or presidential candidates destroying classified information, or the exploitation of people for profit and power, but I do know that good people come out of those situations even stronger. It's tough to admit but we, as people, have the power to stop many of these things, yet we don't, and then we blame God when they happen. But a tangent of this is also true: when good prevails, you can count on the fact that it was because God was at work through it.

Besides, those in charge will have to give an accounting for how they used the power entrusted to them. Did they use it in ways to further God's Kingdom? Was love increased because of things they did? To God be the glory or was it to the person waving the flag? It's important to remember that we must not hold God to standards that we ourselves won't abide by. Thus it's a fool's game to blame God for all evil because doing so simply means we're putting ourselves in His place as God. I don't know of anyone who's worthy of that.

I've been fired from jobs, and it's hard for me to do honor to my former employers but that's what God calls me to do. There are leaders in our government whose words and actions I detest, but Jesus tells me to abide and follow them. Some of what elders and mentors tell me is tough to hear, and some of it is dead wrong, but the Lord still tells me to respect them. All of this is true because God entrusts them with the authority they have and we all serve His purposes in one way or another.

For further reading: Isaiah 62:6, Acts 20:28, 1 Thessalonians 5:25, Acts 23:1, Romans 15:33, Matthew 28:18.

Lord, abide with humanity's leaders. Empower them, instruct them, guide them and forgive them. And teach me to do the same as I follow them. When I follow, I'm following You.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 30 November 2017

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon. Hebrews 13, verses 18-19.

Notice what the writer asks for: prayer. Not money. Not weapons. Not food. Not manual labor or physical assistance or anything tangible we might consider. He asks for prayer.

Sure, if you think prayer is just a wishing well or self-talk, this might seem like a harmless (albeit useless) request. No harm in asking someone to do something that costs you nothing and doesn't hurt anyone else, right? If there is no God, then self-talking to a god who doesn't exist is strange but mostly harmless.

Except that's not how the writer of Hebrews viewed it. Indeed, he realized his readers might not be able to help him, so he asked that they do what they could and pray. Go back to that last paragraph and read it again: no harm in asking someone to do something that costs you nothing and doesn't hurt anyone. That's true about prayer. Prayer costs you nothing, not even your time because you're engaged in DOING something. It has no physical cost; indeed, psychologists admit the mental health benefits of confessing one's in-most thoughts in prayer. It hurts nobody; indeed (again) disposing one's attitude towards the needs of others builds compassion, empathy, and understanding. I'm betting you can see that even non-believers would be hard-pressed to find the negatives in simple prayer.

But prayer is actually more. Prayer is you taking an interest in someone else straight to God. There's no intermediary, no pontiff, no priest, no elder between you and your Lord. You talk with Him directly and take your petition to Him. That's a pleasing thing to Jesus when we do it from the heart. When you're praying for someone else's benefit, you're participating in their lives even if they don't know it. You may not have any resources available to you to physically interact with them, but you can pray. When you do, you're asking for God's personal touch in someone else's life. You're asking the creator of the universe, the one who created you and whoever you're praying for, to intervene for someone else's benefit. You're asking Him to use you and the rest of His creation to help another fellow human being. Smiles in heaven result.

And it's even more than that. Prayer is war. Prayer is a weapon, a tactic, and a soldier. When you pray, you are directly combating the evil prince of this world. It isn't cool these days to acknowledge that evil is real and that Satan is the father of evil. It may not be cool but it's still real. The first, best way a follower of Jesus can combat Satan is to pray to God. Even Satan knows God is real and more powerful than himself. When you ally yourself with God through prayer, especially on someone else's behalf, you're directly confronting Satan. He knows he has no power to stop or thwart that. Sure, he may hit back; he probably will. But he can do nothing to stop your prayer or lessen God's response to them. Hit your knees or pray as you will, but you're in a long line of soldiers directly confronting the evil one and knocking him flat on his back. Pray and advance forward.

The author of Hebrews knew all this. That's why he asked his fellow believers to pray. He was sure in his faith and sure that their prayers would bear good fruit. You and I can be sure of it as well.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:25, Acts 23:1, Philemon 22.

My Lord, thank You for the gift of prayer, for hearing my prayers, for teaching me to pray.

Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 4 December 2017

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13, verses 20-21.

This is a love letter. It bids adieu like a love letter would.

For many years, people assumed Paul wrote Hebrews. The words used in concluding it were part of the reason. Paul closed his letters with flourish, and the writer of Hebrews, whoever he was, did the same. Not to set myself up as equal to the Apostle Paul (or the writer of Hebrews, whoever he was) but I could have written this. Why say "bye" in one word when you can use 158? Paul did this in most of his other letters so it's understandable that people might think he wrote Hebrews. Current thinking is that the letter might have been written by Barnabas, Paul's contemporary. The fact is, we don't really know...and it doesn't particularly matter. What matters is what the letter says, even how it says it, not so much who said it.

But, you know, letter-writing seems to be an art we are losing. I have one pen pal who still writes me long-hand letters (and she was my third grade teacher, who is now in her late nineties). Not so long ago, if you wanted to impart thought, you had to write them down. In the day of Hebrews, writing was the only way to exchange thoughts long-distance. Whoever wrote a letter knew that his thoughts could (would) be read over and over by both his intended audience and complete strangers. Knowing that makes it more understandable why one would conclude their letters with flourish.

Like a love letter.

Not only, but the entire book of Hebrews is a letter explaining the faith to people who needed encouragement in it. It's an explanation and re-iteration of the tenets of following Jesus. Hebrews is a primer for why people should put their faith in this Son of Man. I'm hoping that we've seen how the book explains in common sense ways why Jesus is who He said He is, and why it's a good thing to follow Him. With that established, it makes sense that the ending of the letter should contain flowery language, some of it almost a catch-all.

It's like it's a love letter...because it is. It's a vehicle to show long distance agape love to people who need it.

Thirty years ago this week, I started dating the lady who is now my wife. Our relationship started as friends in Indiana four years before, then stayed long-distance over years and miles before she found me while I was overseas with the Air Force. Thirty years ago this week, we went out on a date and have been together, through many ups and downs, ever since. I used to write letters to her like this, letters full of flourish, grand visions, and sparkle. With time and togetherness came the lazy complacency of familiarity. Today we share more, and less, and I think we both look back and sometimes wish we could recapture the elegant times when we devoted many words and many moments into building "us."

That's a beautiful thing about love letters: if you keep them and re-read them, they can remind you of what matters most. They share things you might not get to say any other way, things you want someone to remember. In the case of the writer of Hebrews, he wanted people to remember that their God is a god of peace. That He gave His Son for our salvation. That through Him all things are possible. That He is worthy of glory that we get to witness and share and grow.

For further reading: Romans 15:33, Genesis 9:16, Isaiah 55:3, Ezekiel 37:26, Matthew 26:28, Acts 2:24, John 10:11.

Lord, thank You for this love letter You shared with us through Your writer. Thank You for preserving it so we might enjoy and learn from it so many years later.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 5 December 2017

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly. Hebrews 13, verse 22.

Please allow me a few words of praise for my wife. Living in harmony with verse 22, she has borne my words of exhortation (and other kinds) for exactly thirty years today.

The longer I know her, the more I think she's been living for God for longer than that. Understand, I'm not making my wife, Kimberly, out to be a saint. That wouldn't be fair, and I don't want to live with or love with someone who lives on a pedestal. She's the queen of our home and even of my life but I won't put her on a throne and keep her remote. But I am saying that she's the most selfless person I know. Her "love language" is "Acts of Service" and her idea of a perfect Christmas is for her to be able to give hundreds of gifts to strangers and family alike without receiving any in return (except from me...I don't get off that easy). Kim could give and give and give and get back up the next day to go at it again. We have a running joke in our family that, because I'm the dad and the man of the family, of course I'm going to die first. If that's true (and that's a big if), I look forward to the day in heaven when I see her approach the real throne of Jesus and He gives her a crown for her giving heart. I'll be cheering louder than any angel.

Until then, she's my angel here. I get the privilege of calling her that because, on December 5, 1987 she went out on a date with me. We had been friends since high school four years before. She was, in fact, one of the first people I met when I moved to Mitchell, Indiana in August of 1983. We went out on a few dates in school (she actually turned me down for my junior prom), but just didn't click as a couple at the time. That changed in 1987. She found where the Air Force had stationed me, and we scheduled a date for December 5th. We've been together ever since.

It hasn't been easy; it never is. Got skin? Got sin. We both have and we both do. When you fall in love with someone you embrace and accept all of them, including their sins past and present. Adjusting to living with a fallen person like yourself is an adventure not for the faint of heart. I think so many couples fail because they don't accept that accepting someone else means admitting you, too, have flaws. Like Garth sang, "I could have missed the pain, but I'd have had to miss the dance." Spot on, Mr. Brooks. I've caused her more pain in our three decades than ever she deserved, and I've accepted more pain from her than she would have thought possible. Through it all, we've learned to dance, and I couldn't have asked God for a better partner. Today, she even works at a dance studio, giving her time and heart to others. Spot on there, too.

We've learned to bear each other through exhortation. That's another thing that hasn't been easy. Our backgrounds in faith were as different as everything else about our background. We started walking with Jesus together a few years after we were married when a neighborhood pastor came to our door and invited us to church. That walk has been up and down hills; in marriage, it always is. For years, we stayed together yet drifted apart and came together again but didn't fully grasp what God was saying to us. Finally, when we should have fallen apart (as most couples do in similar situations), we each turned to God. Her gift of giving became even more selfless, then, when she realized God was the real giver in her heart. Finding that God had already found us bound us back up. Every morning now, we 'do devotion' and spend a few brief minutes together drinking coffee, reading our Bibles, talking through a joint devotion, and praying. We've done that as a way to hear God exhorting us to cling to Him so that we can cling together in the face of a world that always says "it's too, tough, guys. Give in."

For my Hunnie I have only praise because she never gave up on me. I won't give up on her either. I've seen her at her best and I've seen her at her worst. Life, death, sins, celebrations, plans, anguish, success, failure: welcome to the world. We've shared them all for years. They're the events in our lives, and the music that plays life's soundtrack. Leading the orchestra is God, conducting, playing, singing, and enjoying. And so we dance. We dance on together because we have for thirty years now. Sometimes it's a slow dance, sometimes the Charleston, sometimes it's even hip hop (and we don't do it very well). But I'm thankful to dance with her. I praise God for that, and thank Him for all He's done for and with us so far. I praise God for my friend, dance partner, and wife, Kim. If the final words of Hebrews are a love letter, let these be mine to her.

For further reading: Romans 1 Peter 5:12.

Thank You, Father, for thirty years of life with my wife. Thank You for sustaining us, for keeping us together, and for her.

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 6 December 2017

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Hebrews 13, verses 23-24.

My son in law is current deployed overseas and he talks with his wife and daughter almost daily via Skype, Facebook, and Marco Polo. I wish those things would have been available when I was still in the military. And when my wife was overseas on a mission trip in Romania, we talked online (and did our daily devotion) every day via Skype. When we were stationed overseas (in Italy) in the late 1980s, my wife and I would call home about once per month. We looked forward to those calls as a real morale booster. And, speaking of morale boosters, in the mid-80s, when I was deployed to sea, our team received periodic "personals": messages called into our unit office, then transmitted to us on the ship. Getting one could make (or break) your day.

Still, it's not the same as a letter.

No matter how you communicate, the important thing is to communicate. In the days of the Hebrews, letters were the only method. You could send someone to relate an in-person, personal account of something, and that was convincing (it still is). But if you wanted to transmit an explicit, word-for-word message, you had to write it down and send it. Years later, it would still preserve your message. For instance, consider what you know just from these concluding verses in chapter 13:

- Timothy, a fellow believer, has been released from custody
- That same Timothy was on his way to meet the writer
- Together, the two of them would likely travel to where the recipient of the letter lived
- The writer fondly thought of his audience and asked them to greet mutual friends
- Someone from Italy, acquainted with the writer, sent greetings.
- There was more than one person there from Italy
- There were things the writer wanted his reader to know

That's a lot to pack into just a few words, but those are some of the messages the writer of the book conveyed as he closed out his epistle. Two thousand years (and across five continents), we are still reading his messages. The only way he could reach people across the Mediterranean and into southern Europe was to write a letter, and that letter enclosed good news about Jesus. When it was done, the writer wanted to close fondly. He wanted to end on a positive note, so he sent warm greetings. How he did it didn't matter as much, though, as THAT he did it. That he answered God's call to share a message with his fellow brothers and sisters. We benefit from that today.

I saved the 1987 personal message that my (now) wife sent to me while I was at sea, asking for me to call on her when I returned home; as you'll remember, thirty years ago yesterday I did. It's hanging in a small frame on the shelf as I walk into my closet. Somewhere out in my storage unit I have several small boxes full of cards and letters that Hunnie and I exchanged when we were dating. I also have boxes with that same correspondence from my parents in 1950s Germany, and even my grandparents thirty years before that. One day, I'll go back and read those old letters. They still have something to say.

So this is a challenge to you, friend reader. This Christmas, send out some Christmas cards (my wife and I are actually sending a New Year's card this year instead). Pick just one person you know and write a letter to them, then mail it. Actually use snail mail. Better yet, share a little Jesus in that letter, and close it out with warm regards. Years from now, someone may just read it and cherish.

For further reading: Acts 16:1, Acts 18:2.

Lord, thank You for communicating with us!

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Practical Proverbial, from Hebrews, 7 December 2017

Grace be with you all. Hebrews 13, verse 25.

Once again, we find ourselves at the end. If you've been reading this blog for a long time, you've seen the ending of Hebrews, Mark, The Ten Commandments, Ruth, 1/2/3 John, James, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. That's a lot of real estate to cover. Thank you so much, my friend, for reading, sharing, learning, and hopefully hearing the voice of God inside you through these thoughts.

Yet it's time to finish up this section. After this, there are other things I'd like to cover. Next week, we'll spend the rest of the Christmas season talking about Santa Claus and giving. After that, I believe God is leading me to walk through the "five T's" of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus; we'll be walking with the Apostle Paul, so get ready to get real; Paul has that effect.

Until then, grace be with you all. Grace: that's a concept I haven't given nearly enough thought to even though my mom and grand-daughter are both named Grace. I used to think of grace as a quiet thing, like sunny meadows and warm tea. But that's only part of what it is. My friend, Bill Brimer, however, calls the book of Ephesians "a grace bomb." It's an explosion of God's grace in your face. An overpowering force of enormous power that can undo physical reality. Ephesians spends much of it's time explaining God's grace as a living, vital thing instead of just a pastoral quality.

Boom.

Have you ever really thought about what grace means to you? My Random House dictionary defines grace as "a pleasing or attractive quality or endowment; favor shown in granting a delay or immunity; the freely given, unmerited favor or love of God, the influence or spirit of God operating in man; moral strength." All those meanings (and more) for such a small word. And to think they could all blow up in your face with the peace of a rural pasture. In the context of talking about Jesus, grace means all those things, and all of them at once.

We don't deserve it, but Jesus richly blesses us to live in His grace. We've done everything we can think of to tick him off, to merit His wrath, but, instead, He likes us, wants to be with us, runs to us where we are in the middle of our dysfunctions. If I listed here even a fraction of the sins I've done against Jesus, I wouldn't list much before you'd see I don't deserve His grace. I don't even deserve air, food, water, and my beating heart. News flash: neither you you. We're damn dirty sinners.

But we have so much more than air, food, water and life. We have love, friends, jobs, possessions, liberty, opportunity. We have each other. We have seven billion people here to live, thrive and survive with, and we GET TO tell them that this Jesus blesses us all in His grace. That He wants them to know Him, too. That's grace. When I deserve punishment, Jesus wants love for me. When I deserve scorn, He lives in my heart. When I merit revenge, He urges peace. When I deserved to die, He ran to the cross for me and took my place. Boom!

When the writer of Hebrews had only a few words left to say, he said that he desired for God's magnificent grace bomb to explode in the lives of his readers. "Grace be with you all" is more than just a benediction: it's a challenge. It's a powerful this-I-know-to-be-true amen. It's a quiet prayer but also an artillery-packed lock and load on the front line. Grace is the quiet strength of Christ from the cross giving you peace. And grace is the raw edge of God's knife in your hand, cutting away the scar tissue of sin to cure the flesh below. When there was nothing else to say to his friends, the writer affirmed God's presence in their lives and called on them to realize all God does for undeserving people while sharing His saving love with those who don't know about Him.

I'm not worthy to argue with wisdom like that. I'll simply accept it as a gift of love from our God. Grace in your face, indeed. Back in the race for us now. Lace up your boots, pick up your gun, and let's march.

Until next time, grace be with you all.

For further reading: Hebrews 13:25

Lord thank You for Your grace, for how You love and provide for me.

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