

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 4 November 2019

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:1-2. (EHV).

Welcome back, my friend. I'm very, very glad you're here. To echo Paul (and Timothy), grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whew! That's a pretty weighty way to begin a chat, isn't it? Here's another weighty thing: I'm not being very original here. In fact, I'm following in the footsteps of my friend, Phil McKay, who pastors a Calvary Chapel in Paris, Texas. Listening to his sermons inspired me to dive into Philippians, which has become one of my favorite books of the Bible. If you haven't read it, do yourself the pleasure of reading it today. It's only four chapters, only a few pages in the New Testament; it won't take very long.

But it may just change your outlook today. That may just change your life. It isn't me doing it. It isn't the Bible. It isn't even the Apostle Paul. If your life is changed, it's because God Himself is at work in you. Philippians is about joy. It's about expressing joy over other believers living out their faith in Jesus. Philippians is about real, practical Christianity at work in skeptical people. It is about thankfulness, and humility, and standing firm in the faith, and about putting the Gospel to work in our world.

Or Paul's world, to be specific. Specifically in Philippi: the same Philippi mentioned by Shakespeare in Julius Caesar 1500 years later. The armies of Rome had fought a civil war battle near the Roman colony of Philippi (in Macedonia) after the assassination of Julius Caesar. The outcome of that battle saw the primacy of the emperor rise because the victor, Octavian, soon crowned himself Emperor Augustus: the same Augustus who reigned during the birth of Christ. Philippi sat at the intersection of two roads that brought trade out of Asia Minor and to the western parts of the Empire.

Philippians was written only a century or so after that battle. It was a crossroads of the Empire. It's no coincidence, then, that God would use Paul to plant a church there. Think about it: there were multiple paths for people to carry the Gospel further throughout the known world. That could change lives everywhere because it already had in the pagan area around Philippi.

And it's still happening in our world today. You and I live near crossroads. Because of where God has us, the Gospel can literally travel anywhere because people everywhere still need to hear it. Philippi was an early success story in receiving that Gospel. Paul knew it; so do we. Welcome back my friend. Let's dive in.

For further reading: Acts 16:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 1:3

Lord Jesus, I praise You for Your grace at Philippi and in this letter.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 5 November 2019

I thank my God every time I remember you. Philippians 1:3. (EHV).

Confession: I don't pray all the time. Just the other day, in church, Pastor Anthony mentioned praying all the time. He mentioned how many Bible passages exhorted the Israelites (and we Jesus followers) to pray all the time, to pray unceasingly; to pray by mumbling thoughts about God's word to ourselves, in quiet, in public, in our comings and goings, at all times.

So, confession (again): I haven't done that. I stink on ice at doing that.

Yet even I can say in all honesty that there are some people for whom I thank God every time I see them. Or talk with them. Or even think about them. The people I love most in the world are such a giant blessing to me that I'm grateful for them in ways my small words can't convey. But God knows because I tell Him and He understands my heart.

Perhaps Paul felt that same way (and, unlike me, he had a lasting way with words). Many of his letters begin with words like these. He began his communications by letting his friends know how much he valued them. He told them that he thought of them often, that he often thanked God for them in his thoughts and prayers. He conveyed that he did this every time he even thought of them. That would be quite a blessed routine to train one's self into, but in our distraction-filled world it would probably take some lengthy training.

Yet think about how life-changing it could be to pray a small, quick prayer for someone every time you think of them. Your spouse, your kids, your parents, your aunts and uncles, your siblings, your significant other; your friends, your co-workers, your bosses; your enemies, your antagonists, the people you genuinely dislike. You get the picture. Think about how life-changing it would be to pray for everyone, even a little at a time, every time you remember them. Your outlook would transform. Your behavior would change. Your faith would increase. You'd more easily start living out those Galatians 5 fruit-of-the-Spirit behaviors because Jesus' Spirit would be working to remake you: one prayer at a time.

All from praying. All from thanking God when we remember people who are in our lives anyway. Just like Paul did. Just like Jesus does.

Yes, I confess that I don't do these things very often, and when I do I don't usually do them very well. But that can change. I can change. So can you...because it's the Spirit of the living God who will do the work in you. And for Him nothing is impossible.

For further reading: Romans 1:8, Galatians 5:22-23, Philippians 1:4

Lord Jesus, I open my heart to Your Spirit today. *Help me to change my ways and pray for the people in my life today.*

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 6 November 2019

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:4-6. (EHV).

You and I can't even have faith in God without Him first planting it in us. That's a standard of evangelical belief because, well, it's the truth. We aren't vassals; we aren't powerless; we aren't slaves or nobodies or without impact in our lives. We have free choice, and God stands back to respect our choices even as many of them end up enslaving us in destruction and pain...and God respects us anyway, asking that we respect Him likewise. Because He reaches out to us first to plant faith in us when we refuse to do it ourselves.

Think about that for a minute. He plants the seed of faith in our lives, provides for us so that it might grow and bear fruit in us and in the lives we touch. He tends to us even when we thumb our noses at Him, and welcomes us back when we repent and return to Him. And He continues to do it all the days of our lives until we either die or He comes back at the end of all things.

Think about that, too. Even back in Paul's day, believers anticipated that Jesus would come back, that "the day of Christ Jesus' would appear in time for them to see it. I wonder how shocked they would feel to find us, two thousand years later, still awaiting that day. Would they be discouraged? Would they be surprised? Would they lose heart?

Or maybe would they be excited? It's safe to assume that there are many more people in the world today than there were in Paul's day. According to <https://www.prb.org/howmanypeoplehaveeverlivedonearth/>, it is estimated that there were about 300 million people on earth during Paul's life. Today there are over 7.7 billion, and over 2/3 of those are not Christian or haven't heard about Jesus. That's quite an opportunity for us to share the Good News with people who really need it. Perhaps Jesus hasn't planted faith in them yet, or perhaps He has yet He's working to arrange it so that the sun and water of you and I might nurture that particular seed. This side of heaven we probably won't know.

But what we do know is that God has planted His faith in Him within us now. It's a living and growing thing that remakes broken hearts. Faith in Him makes beautiful things out of us who are dust. What will you do with that today?

For further reading: Ecclesiastes 3:11, Psalm 138:8, Acts 2:42, Romans 1:8-10, 1 Corinthians 1:8, Philippians 1:7

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, yet use me to share Your Word until you do!

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 8 November 2019

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. Philippians 1:7. (EHV).

Truth: I have never visited anyone in jail. I once picked up someone who had to stay in jail overnight, and I've toured prisons, and, from personal experience, I know what it feels like to have to stay in a jail cell. But I've never visited anyone in jail, or prison, or someone who was involuntarily confined like that.

And I've never been in chains for the gospel. I've never been arrested, beaten, tortured, or threatened with death for saying "I believe in Jesus." People in Communist China, and Iran, Indonesia, Cuba, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and dozens of other nations are regularly assaulted for their belief in Christ. Paul was chained for the Gospel, imprisoned for defying the Jewish authorities, for witnessing to Romans, maybe even to Nero himself. Paul was eventually murdered for his fidelity to Jesus.

That has never happened to me, or people I know, or even people who know people who I know. But it happened to Paul. And the goofy thing about it is that such a way of life was the right way for Paul, the right way to think and act and speak and feel. It's the right thing for us, too, no matter what it costs us.

Because Jesus is the right way, really the only way. That's what kept Paul going through the persecutions that were happening to him; that would eventually kill him. It was right and proper and fitting and the best thing of all for Paul to feel thankful for the people God put into his life. It was right for him to thank God in prayer for people in his circle. It was right because Jesus put love into Paul's once-cold heart. It was right to feel grateful for and want to share God's grace, his undeserved gifts of love and mercy and peace, with everyone who didn't know about it.

You? Ditto. Me? Ditto. It's right for us to want peace in our lives and it's right to appreciate how deep and abiding is that peace only Jesus can give. It's right for us to want this for other people. It's right for us to have God's Spirit re-align our lives to share this gift with other people. It's right to want to reach out to people who live their lives in the prison of sin and guilt. It's right to be willing to die for this.

It's right. Because of Jesus.

Today, visit someone in jail, either in a physical prison because of crimes, or the emotional prison of one's sins. Share some Jesus with them.

For further reading: 2 Corinthians 7:3, 2 Peter 1:13, Philippians 1:8

Lord Jesus, thank You for springing me from the prison of my sins.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 18 November 2019

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:8. (EHV).

This is a pretty bold statement. It's another proclamation demonstrating that either Paul is faithful or he's the most arrogant jerk in antiquity. Paul doesn't rely on just his own words or even the testimony of his friends to prove that he loves the Philippians. No, Paul calls in God Himself, Jesus Himself, Holy Spirit Himself, to witness about how Paul reveres his friends in Philippi. If you read Romans 1:9, he said something similar there.

Either Paul is a lying piece of work or he really does love the Philippians. Either his words are lies or they are truth. Given the impact of them for the last two thousand years, it seems pretty evident they were true. More important, given that God Himself grew the faith from a Mediterranean Jewish sect into the most powerful ideology in history, Paul's words must be true.

Not only, but it's REALLY bold to say you love someone as much as Jesus does. Have you (or me or Paul) ever been willing to die for all of humanity? Jesus was. Have you (or me or Paul or Pope Francis or Billy Graham or your sainted grandmother or mine) ever lived your whole human life knowing an excruciating, humiliating, soul-crushing execution awaited you at the end, and yet you willfully, even joyfully, boldly lived it anyway? Jesus did.

You get the picture. Jesus lived a truly bold life, both bold in challenging temporal authorities of His day and bold in translating the true meaning of God's love and His law to a world that hated Him for doing it. Paul trusted Jesus completely, fully, in every way, so Paul felt bold enough to say "go ask Jesus. He'll tell you the same thing." You'd have to be either crazy or brutally honest to do that. I'm siding on thinking Paul was honest. Because Jesus is honest.

Because Jesus is bold.

The media today is aflame with the news about Kanye West and Joel Osteen hosting a joint worship service yesterday. Say what you will about either man yet one thing remains: Jesus was boldly proclaimed. Christ crucified was shared with thousands. Jesus was there in Spirit, loving and moving in that crowd. We can be skeptical of Osteen's & West's motives in this huge production number but, boldly said, that doesn't really mean anything. What does mean something is that Jesus was boldly shared. Out of the thousands who participated, who knows how many received Christ? Some surely went home and gave up on the message, but some didn't. Some, maybe even a great many, opened their hearts and let Jesus' Spirit in. All because of two men boldly proclaiming Jesus is Lord.

Because Paul was bold. Because Jesus is bold. It's bold to believe.

For further reading: Romans 1:9, Philippians 1:9

All praise to You, Lord, for Your loving boldness and bold love!

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 19 November 2019

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

Interviewers used to ask Billy Graham what he wanted to hear from Jesus after he died. (To paraphrase) Rev Graham would respond, "I'd like to hear 'well done good and faithful servant' but I don't think I will." Graham would then go on to recount all the ways he felt he had failed the Lord. Very poignant but powerful.

And then there is the story that I read this past weekend of the man from the Netherlands who rescued Jewish children from Nazi custody. Without notice, he would occasionally walk children out of the building where Nazi occupiers were holding the children before shipping them off to death camps. He simply walked them out when the Germans weren't looking. The interviewer asked the man if he ever thought about the children he had saved. (Again, to paraphrase) "No, not much," he replied, "but I often think about the thousands that I didn't."

It's those times you snap at your kids. It's the time you spend looking at panty pictures on the internet. It's the years you've padded your expense reports. It's the grudge against the kid who bullied you in eighth grade. It's that last time you had an argument with your spouse. There are thousands of ways we fail the Lord, misusing gifts He has given us. Or His name, or the fruits of His Spirit. If salvation is left up to us doing things to please the Lord, well, we're finished. Toast; hopeless; put a fork in us because we're done. Maybe Billy Graham was right: even when I've done good things, I don't think Jesus will tell me "well done" because there are just too many other times I must have really pissed Him off.

Yep: it's a good thing salvation isn't left up to us. We wouldn't measure up. It's a good thing that God doesn't think that way. It's a good thing that God operates on the level Paul was praying for. It's a good thing that God allows us to discern what is pure and blameless so that we might know conscience and repentance. More than that, it's an even better thing that Jesus sees us as His beloved instead of filthy sinners; that He sees us as blameless because He made us blameless when He bled, died, and rose for us.

Someday I'll ask Billy Graham what Jesus said to him. I'm betting it wasn't what he expected.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, Philippians 1:13

Lord Jesus, all praise and thanks to You for making us discerning and blameless.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 20 November 2019

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. Philippians 1:12. (EHV).

Let's talk about Chick Fil A. And Kanye (again). The other day I mentioned Kanye West and the service he did with Joel Osteen last weekend. Whether or not Kanye's conversion is deep, true, or long-lasting we don't know (nor should we judge). We simply know that it has happened and that it has advanced the gospel. The service introduced Jesus to people who didn't know Him, who might never have accepted Him without the introduction from this celebrity.

And then there's Chick Fil A, in the news this week for changing its policy on corporate donations. In recent years, Chick Fil A has donated to the Salvation Army and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. A change in donation policy (brought about by the expiration of those donation agreements) means Chick Fil A will no longer donate to them. The COO for Chick Fil A said this was because of those organizations' LGBTQ policies: something immediately became radioactive.

Are we so arrogant that we (or Chick Fil A or the Salvation Army or FCA or any of the gay rights groups) actually think that God's word can be stopped simply because some company says their checkbook is closed? God completed over a thousand years of prophecies in just the birth of Christ. God used the death of the Messiah to accomplish the deliverance of all mankind from sin and death. God used the orphan life of Moses to deliver Israel from slavery; He used an arrogant punk named Samson to destroy the evil Philistines; there are hundreds of examples of how God makes His glory known and perfected through the weakness of sinners like us. Do we really think that He will be stopped simply because of some change in corporate charity?

Sure, I'm angered that a company I support appears to have caved to bullies (who, in my opinion, won't be placated by this. Bullies never are). Sure, I wish another company would stand up for Christ the way Chick Fil A has until now. And, sure, I don't like to lose. But even surer than these things is the power of God to advance His gospel no matter what we do. Throughout history, whenever the church has been targeted, it has always advanced, always spread, in spite of what the haters do. Jesus doesn't need Kanye to spread the Gospel but He thrives more when Kanye – or we here – do so. Jesus doesn't need Chick Fil A to donate to Christian charities because He thrives whether the money flows or not. The Gospel cannot be contained by our human failings.

For further reading: Philippians 1:13

Lord Jesus, I pray you use my failings to bring greater glory to Your Kingdom.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 21 November 2019

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Philippians 1:12-13. (EHV).

Have you ever had something bad happen to you that turned out for good? Or have you gone through a bad period in your life but it turned out to be a blessing to other people?

In the last few years I have lost three jobs, a house, and a business. I've had a brain tumor, lost my hearing, and have lost my confidence in myself. My mom died, and then just this fall her brother died. My income was slashed, then slashed again. Some of those things are my fault; others not. Some are just the consequences of one thing happening after another. Sometimes it has felt like I've been in chains, like I've been punished for bad decisions and bad behavior.

In all of it, God has been active. For every loss, every challenge, He has gotten me through. The brain tumor is gone, my other ear has compensated for the loss in the other, and the whole thing identified some health concerns that I needed to address. I'm in a great job right now, working for a great company that pays better than any other job I've had. Most of all, I have a wife, three kids & their wonderful spouses, four grandkids, and dozens of friends who love & support me. In a world where there is so much suffering, God has blessed me so much more than I deserve.

Through my 'tribulations,' others were watching. Other people have learned from my lessons. More importantly, I've been able to share the Gospel with some people whose paths I doubt I would have crossed otherwise. Who knows how that could be a blessing to them, or to others in their orbits, or even to total strangers? Just as God made Paul's suffering for Christ known through the hostile, pagan palace guards, He has made my comings and goings known to others so that His glory might increase.

We talked about it yesterday: none of our puny thoughts, words, or actions can contain the Gospel. God advances it as He chooses, yet He does so through us, through the lives we live. When we prosper it is because He has prospered us. When we suffer, we are given the privilege of allowing His grace, mercy, and glory to shine all the more through us. In this, we find that suffering really isn't misery unless we let it be so. Has something bad ever happened to you that turned out for good? I'm sure it has, and in that, God was working on you, in you, and through you.

For further reading: Acts 21:33, Philippians 1:14

My Lord and God, may You only increase, be praised, and become known through me.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 25 November 2019

And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. Philippians 1:14. (EHV).

Here's that why behind the what again. In the previous verses, Paul said that his bad thing – being imprisoned, in chains, for the gospel – turned out to be a good thing because the Gospel spread. The reason why that's a good thing is that people see what true believers are willing to endure for faith in Jesus and then they, themselves, become more confident in their own faith and bold to share it without fear.

Have you considered that the biggest Christian nation on earth – the nation with the most believers in Jesus by population – is the United States? And that the one place where it should NOT grow (because the government there is atheist, Communist, and hostile to God in all ways) is the People's Republic of China? According to Pew Research, in the USA there are 248 million Christians; that's approximately 75% of the population. In the USA, for the moment, people are mostly free to exercise any religion they want, especially Christianity. There are dozens of denominations; there are services and practices for any comfort level in the faith. Think of that: 248 million people saying they believe in Christ crucified. And yet that number is actually declining.

Then consider the People's Republic where, according to billionbibles.org, there may be as many as 234 million Christians. Out of a current estimated population of 1.435 billion Chinese, this means that 16% of the Chinese population professes to believe in Jesus Christ. If their faith is discovered, Christians in China are likely to be persecuted in one way or another, either by forced silence or actual imprisonment. Untold thousands have been sent to Chinese gulags and no accurate number is really known how many have been executed for being Christian. Yet the faith is growing.

In North Korea, Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen it is a death penalty offense to say you believe in Jesus Christ. And people do it anyway. Just in those countries, thousands of people do it anyway.

Because watching someone be persecuted, lightly or harshly, may just spur you to think more about your own faith. It may spur you to profess truths you hadn't seriously considered. It might just make you think in different ways. The same "why" that explains why first century believers were strengthened by Paul's persecution explains the things happening in our world today. The Gospel can't be contained by puny human methods, and where it is actively denied in the dark a tiny light can shine all that much brighter.

For further reading: Acts 4:29, Acts 21:33, Philippians 1:15

Lord Jesus, where I'm stumbling in dark failure to share You where I am, teach me to shine so that others may benefit.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 26 November 2019

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. Philippians 1:15. (EHV).

Tell me: how do you feel about others who have what you don't?

A few days ago we talked about boldness, about how faith in Jesus makes one bold. I think it's because He gives us peace, removing the unconscious 'need' to be right or to worry or to control. Jesus' peace changes all that, and when those changes happen, our energies are freed up for other things.

Like boldness. Paul was in chains, literally living imprisoned for his faith in Christ. He had stood up for Jesus in front of Jews who wanted him arrested, beaten, and killed. That almost happened until Paul spoke up and reminded the crowd that he was a Roman citizen. As such, he was accorded rights and privileges to appeal his case directly to Rome. While awaiting his audience, Paul remained in custody. That meant he was, most likely, living chained to a wall or someone else or something static most of the time.

Tell me: would you envy someone who was in jail? Or would you envy them for the fame that landed them there? Some might say it was infamy, actually. But Paul was famous in the Christian world. He was the Pharisee who had converted, who became a follower of Jesus after a mystical encounter in the Syrian desert. Paul was the missionary who started churches all over Asia Minor, then mentored hundreds, maybe thousands, of new believers.

Tell me now: would that make you envious? If you were a contemporary of Paul's, or a Jew, would you be jealous of the following this unlikely apostle had been given? Would you be envious of his gifts, of his personal history with Jesus, of his influence both with Jesus' apostles AND all those new converts? Paul was indeed confident and bold in his faith; would that make someone else jealous? You know the answer.

Just like you know the flip side of that envy. The same people who would envy Paul all these things could easily choose to celebrate them instead. They could easily choose to be thankful God would pour out His grace into this man and his friends. They could choose to follow his example and be glad to know such a strong mentor and leader. They could choose boldness.

Faith can find us either jealous or grateful. Me and you, we aren't much different from those people who lived back in Paul's time. We feel the same emotions because we are human and we follow the same Jesus Paul followed. Paul was bold; perhaps you or I are as well in our own ways. Tell me: how will you boldly follow Jesus today?

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 1:8, Philippians 1:16

King Jesus, convict me of my envy and grant me Your peace and boldness to overcome it.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 2 December 2019

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. Philippians 1:15-17. (EHV).

Ambition is a blessed curse.

I'm a liberty guy. I think American liberty is one of the most precious things on earth. It saddens me to know that so many of my fellow Americans are grossly ignorant of the fact that our freedom is a gift from God. That it is He, not some government, that gives us our rights simply because He loves us. It saddens me to know that so many people would willingly trade our true freedoms for false security. And it saddens me to know that so few of today's generation don't know what an amazing, blessed, unique and wonderful country America is because they haven't been taught our splendid history.

But you know what's even sadder? What's sadder is knowing that a critical key to American exceptionalism is how we value ambition. One huge key to our success as Americans is our notion of independence and self-reliance, of how hard work can launch an American to levels of success and prosperity that most people on the planet can't even dream. That can be a wonderful thing but embedded in it is unchecked ambition. And that ambition can be a double-edged sword. It can be the healthy, natural outcome of a dream for good more. Or it can be a lethal tool of avarice.

It really is a blessed curse.

Ambition that isn't centered in the teachings of Christ is avarice. It is self-focused and eventually destructive. Yes, it may lead to temporal success and reward, but those things aren't eternal or lasting. It stirs up trouble for others like it did for Paul while he was imprisoned. Selfish ambition undoes the good things others may be doing and yanks the focus of life away from Jesus. While our boldness in faith can be a great tool for the Holy Spirit to use in His work, that boldness when founded in selfish ambition can also be a tool for the evil one.

That plays out even in America, and it's why we need to always be vigilant that our pursuit of our American dreams doesn't ace out the pursuits of other good people as they pursue their own dreams. I love our freedoms to say, be, and do whatever we like, but freedom isn't freedom if it isn't focused on Jesus. Only through Him can we truly secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

For further reading: Philippians 1:18

Lord Jesus, You and You alone are the basis of our freedom. Thank You, praise to You for this. Teach me to live out this blessing of freedom today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 3 December 2019

What does it matter? Only this, that in every way, whether for outward appearance or for the truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Philippians 1:18. (EHV).

I once lived in an Oklahoma town where there are churches named “1st”, “2nd”, and “3rd Baptist Church”. It’s a little over the top but I’m serious! So, apparently, are the members of these churches because they all originated with the 1st Baptist Church and, sometime in the last 100 years, split into three churches over small, internal disputes. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Christ is proclaimed, likely to more people than before the splits.

And over the years, I’ve belonged to quite a few churches; I’ve attended even more. Yet in Christ I will boast that my current church, Water’s Edge, preaches Christ crucified no matter where you go. My friend Mark, the lead pastor, openly, enthusiastically, and with tears welcomes new members. It’s hard for a church to grow without them! Yet he also enthusiastically gives glory to Jesus when members are led elsewhere because Christ is being proclaimed, then, in other places. Just worship, even if it isn’t here.

Kanye: whether or not his conversion is genuine doesn’t matter. What matters is that so many new people heard about Jesus.

Finally, one of my favorite American legends is that of Johnny Appleseed, the wandering preacher of the early 1800s who went from town to town, ministering to new friends and planting apple seeds as he traveled. He did this so that other pioneers would have apples to eat. That’s kind of my model for faith in Jesus. We’re to believe, follow, and share the faith a little at a time. Plant some seeds but keep moving forward in faith, in Jesus.

Sharing like Johnny Appleseed so that someone may have something to live on after we’ve done our part. Sharing like Kanye, who has a giant megaphone to which many people are listening. Sharing like Pastor Mark, who plants the seed of faith and trusts Jesus to grow it where it needs to grow best. And sharing like the folks who go to all those numbered Baptist churches in McAlester, moving to where they believe they hear the word of God best.

In the end, what does it matter whether the name on the church is one thing or another, whether we’re worshipping with the LCMS or WELS or whatever denominations, or whether a celebrity is more down for the Jesus struggle than you or me? What does it matter whether we plant one seed or a thousand so long as the tree grows? The ONLY thing that matters is sharing Jesus the best we can. Some will do that boldly, others meekly. The only thing that matters is that we do it.

For further reading: Acts 16:7, 2 Corinthians 1:11, Philemon 22, Philippians 1:19

Lord Jesus, I pray Your help to share Your word with others today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 4 December 2019

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. Philippians 1:19. (EHV).

This morning I read a Facebook post from a non-believer friend of mine. I've written about this young man before; how he's an atheist and thinks the idea of Jesus is ridiculous. Today he posted a link from a music lyric, one from a death metal song. The words are pretty hopeless stuff even though, to be honest, the drive and beat of the music itself (sans lyrics) are pretty compelling.

Reading through the lyrics got me thinking: can God use the hopelessness of death metal to point someone towards Himself? You know the answer.

That answer gives me hope. Jesus can come into our lives at any time and use the circumstances of them for His glory and our betterment. I reject the idea that God starts things in this world and then stands back, disinterested, waiting for the outcome. Instead, I believe Jesus is active every single second of our lives, working to bring us closer to him. He works to use the ungodly events of the world to give us opportunities to come to Him instead of simply living. Without Jesus, our souls are empty. With Him, they overflow. It makes me think of a line from the King Arthur movie "Excalibur." King Arthur has been languishing, needing refreshment from the Holy Grail. When Percival brings it to him, Arthur is restored and then says "I didn't know how empty was my soul until it was filled."

Right on right on. King Arthur could have been saying that about my life, about yours, about my atheist friend's life.

And when our souls are refreshed & re-awakened by God's Spirit, it's usually in response to someone's prayers. Someone has been imploring Christ to help someone else, to care for them, to make Himself known to them. Jesus has already redeemed them whether they know it or not. Now we ask that they accept Him, accept that forgiveness of sins. Mind you, that doesn't make God a wish machine; He doesn't answer our prayers simply because we want Him to. But He does answer them in His love because it is done out of that love and for good.

Even when the vehicle is death metal. I hold out lots of hope that this atheist can come to faith in Jesus. This man acknowledges that there may be a God who made everything, but he won't go as far as acknowledging who Jesus is. Yet at least he's part of the way there. I'm praying that he'll open his heart and take the rest of the short walk to Jesus' side.

For further reading: Philippians 1:20

Lord God, I pray for You to make Yourself known to all who don't know You or who reject You, and that they'll come to believe.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 5 December 2019

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. Philippians 1:20. (EHV).

Everyone has a breaking point. If you talk to military SERE instructors, they will tell you that one of the biggest lessons Americans learned from POW experiences in World War II, Korea and Vietnam was that every prisoner has a breaking point. Every person has a point at which they can't withstand further incarceration, discomfort or torture. Eventually, every person, honorable or not, can be broken.

Paul understood this. He expected Christ would empower him to stand, to resist the temptation to give in to Rome. Paul knew Christ wouldn't abandon him, wouldn't leave him to fend for himself. Paul understood that his sufferings were meaningless when compared to how Jesus Christ would be glorified by every petty attack against him.

Paul understood it because he also understood that, on his own, he wouldn't last. Without the Spirit of God to speak for him, work through him, Paul would break. He would give in to what the Jews and Romans wanted and he would recant. It's simply human nature because a person can only take 'so much.' The North Koreans understand this concept. So did the Vietnamese, and communist Chinese. So did the Soviets, Nazis, and the mafia. The interrogator or oppressor simply has to find what will break the subject and then do it. With some people, it's physical; with others it's emotional. Everyone has a breaking point.

Jesus knows this too. Jesus knows that we can't stand on our own, that without Him we are nothing. He knows that the world is fallen and set against Him, so He gives His Spirit to us so that we might stand with Him and endure, even overcome. Even when we break, or are broken or killed, He is with us so that we might endure in Him and yet prevail. And when we prevail for His sake, Jesus is glorified. He is increased in the world. He is given praise and we benefit. We especially benefit eternally.

Again, Paul understood all this. He understood that, if he didn't succeed here, he would succeed in eternity because Jesus had already succeeded, already prevailed, for him. He understood that his (Paul's) first, best mission is to live for Christ no matter what that required. Paul knew he would reach his breaking point but that he could endure past that with faith and honor because Jesus was with him at all times. Two thousand years later, that's still true. I suspect some of those SERE instructors would agree.

For further reading: Romans 8:19, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Philippians 1:21

Lord Jesus, be with me when I'm attacked or persecuted and help me endure for Your sake.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 9 December 2019

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21. (EHV).

This verse is one of the key verses in the entire New Testament. It expresses Christ's promise of eternal life and temporal peace. It conveys Paul's hope and Paul's confidence. It gives us today both a purpose and a reward. Chances are you've heard this verse before. From the viewpoint of a skeptical world, this is foolish braggadocio. From the view of a believer, it is a profound and confident boast of faith. Both are true.

You and I: we aren't Jesus. We aren't God. We can't atone for sins. We don't have much power on our own. We are fully human without being any God at all. On our own, my friend, we're damned. The sins we've chosen, even the unconscious ones, even the times we thought we were doing good for ourselves, separate us from God. The older I get the more I believe God isn't vengeful, that He doesn't smite people out of anger or revenge. He can; He could; He doesn't. More and more, I believe God simply allows the natural consequences of sin to work on us when sin is the path we've chosen. Those things separate us from Him because He's holy and we sometimes choose to put off that holiness.

Enter the miracle of Jesus. Jesus carries us past this. He looks past our sins to see us, to pull us away from the natural consequence of them. Fully God and fully man, Jesus searches for us in the dark places of our hearts and shines His light there. He extends His hand and says "focus on Me instead of where you are. Believe in Me. Trust in Me." When we do that, things start to change. The miracle happens differently for all of us. For some it's instantaneous release. For others, it's a small process, drop by drop, until we're washed clean. From that moment on, when we let Him and His Spirit begin to remake us, things are different.

To live becomes to really live, to let Christ's Spirit work through us in what we say and do. To be kinder, motivated to serve, motivated to love and be patient and seek to share His peace. To live is to use our lives in ways we hadn't before for the increase of His Kingdom. To live is Christ is to carry the Spirit of Christmas and Easter every day of the year, especially to others hurting as we once did. To live is Christ because nothing in this world can stop us when we know that our eternity is sealed in Him, that we're part of heaven now and later. This is foolishness to the rest of the world. That is, until the rest of the world allows itself to live for Him as well.

For further reading: Galatians 2:20, Philippians 1:22

Lord Jesus, to live today for You is my only goal.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 10 December 2019

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! Philippians 1:22. (EHV).

This morning I was in an airport. Rather than bury myself in my phone or a book, I watched people. In airports, this is one of my favorite activities. It's easy to do these days, not just because there are so many people in airports. No, it's easy to do because so many people are, themselves, buried in their phones.

Except one man. I saw one man in particular who wasn't on his phone, mainly because he was working. He was emptying trash cans. He spoke with nobody; he stayed out of others' ways. He wore rubber gloves while he grabbed already full dirty trash bags and pulled them out of the equally dirty cans. I watched as this man efficiently went about his work. If any of the other travelers noticed him, they didn't give notice themselves.

And I wondered: did he dream of becoming a 'dustman?' When he was a little boy, did he say to himself "I can't wait to grow up so I can be a trash man?" I doubt it. I mean, who among us dreams of collecting garbage for a living? Who dreams of having a job collecting peoples' empty wrappers, coffee cups, and who knows what else? Yet we who travel through the airports unconsciously know (and refuse to admit) that this man and his work are indispensable to us. We benefit greatly from him and his work even when we do our best to ignore them. If he stops doing his job, we all lose. Trash piles up. Flies gather. Germs, bacteria, odor, disease: we would all suffer.

If he goes on living in the body, this means fruitful labor for him (he gets paid) and us (the trash is removed). Do you think this man is a believer in Jesus? I didn't ask him. But his work is something Paul would understand. Indeed, we all should.

If Paul took the easy route and simply died, he would join Christ in eternity. That's a good thing. A very good thing. In fact, it's our best goal possible. Yet, to be frank, that's not why we live. We're here to serve others by sharing Jesus because, in doing so, we are best serving Him. We share this good news of redemption, of love, of forgiveness to destroy the darkness. We further Jesus by doing this. Tempting as it must be to want to be in paradise, we have work to do for Jesus here. His work. Because to go on living in the body now is fruitful labor.

I wonder if the trash man knows this. I wonder how many of us are using our time for fruitful labor or simply throwing away the rubbish.

For further reading: Philippians 1:23

Lord, let me do Your work today and let it be fruitful.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 11 December 2019

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Philippians 1:23-24. (EHV).

“We’re here to serve others by sharing Jesus because, in doing so, we are best serving Him.” That is our mission in life, our prime directive. When we serve Jesus, He is living, working through us. Wherever and whenever we act for Him, even unconsciously, He is present. His Spirit is at work.

We’re in a world where that’s needed more than ever. I’m in Massachusetts for work this week, and it’s snowing as I write these words. To those living in north Texas, the word “snow” is magically terrifying. I grew up living in snow, so driving in it is no big deal; just go slow already and leave a little earlier. But I don’t like driving in the stuff. In fact, I loathe driving in snow. My hotel is only a couple of miles from the office, so I’m not expecting it will be much trouble to get to work today, but to be honest one never really knows.

As mentioned, work brought me here. There’s a reason for my trip and it’s to do a presentation, then to take a class. I have about a dozen phone calls to make, and some client work as well. The powers that be consider it necessary for me to be here, in person, to do these things. It’s necessary, for the meeting attendees, the students, the participants even though I’m really just a low-level person in this company. Though I love being included, I would much rather be at home where it’s warmer, where my own bed is there for rest, where there are people who love me, and where things are familiar. Where it isn’t snowing. But it’s necessary instead that I be here.

Eventually, that time will end. As Paul said in 2 Timothy, eventually the time will come for our departure. Most of us don’t know when we’ll die. We only know that we will. My hotel sits near a highway and just a few minutes ago I heard a siren; it’s probably a first-responder going to someone who’s been in an accident. I can only hope there isn’t injury or pain involved. Yet the same God who’s at work in my daily living here is at work in this moment as well, in whatever accident has happened. Even if it involves death. That same Jesus who met Paul and guided him for the rest of his life is at work in these words in your heart. I really, truly desire to be with Him, and eventually that day will come; maybe today, maybe years from now. Until then, we’re each needed here, even in the snow.

For further reading: John 12:26, 2 Timothy 4:6, Philippians 1:25

Lord Jesus, praise to You for using my life for Your service here.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 12 December 2019

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. Philippians 1:25-26. (EHV).

Paul never undersold his talents. Indeed, here in Philippians (and in his other books as well), Paul expresses confidence in his abilities and especially in his faith. That's the key, you see: confidence in faith. Paul is convinced that his mission on earth is to express Jesus boldly to others; that others are built up to do the same through this ministry. That is borne out by the fact that he started a number of successful churches, that the faith spread exponentially and quickly during his lifetime in the areas where he worked, and by the fact that his writings have endured as the backbone of Christian evangelical practice for two thousand years. God blesses each of us with talents. He richly blessed Paul with the talent to evangelize.

It came from Jesus' Spirit filling Paul with a heart to serve. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul eagerly served the Jewish faith even to the point of persecuting Christians. When Christ converted him, Paul's outlook changed and he threw his talents into building up Jesus to a skeptical world (one that was understandably skeptical about him). We have all benefitted from that because of how Paul's ministry served us with examples of how to 'do ministry.' Why?

So that Christ Jesus will abound because of him. So that Christ Jesus will abound because of us, because of the lives we live and the things we do. So that Christ will abound.

Think about that: we do what we do so that Christ will abound, so that Christ will increase, so that Christ will become known to billions who don't know Him. Muslims, atheists, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Communists, and even Joel Osteen: all people who don't know about Jesus or reject Him get another look at Him when we live out our lives in faith. It's not to convince them: it's to share Jesus so that His Spirit can do the work through us. We're just supposed to live godly lives and share honestly. We're just supposed to have confidence to do that in the way Paul had confidence.

Look at yourself in the mirror today and tell yourself about the talents you have. Maybe it's speaking, or managing, or coding, or following. Singing, dancing, bartending, writing; fixing cars, working the line, bagging groceries, working in the White House: do what God gave you the ability to do for HIS glory. Be confident in that, confidently share Him as you do, then get out of the way to watch Him work.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 4:1, Jude 3, Philippians 1:27

Lord Jesus, thank You for the abilities You gave to me. Help me to use them to confidently share You today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 16 December 2019

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. Philippians 1:27-28. (EHV).

“These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.” Thomas Paine wrote those words. Paine was no Christian, but his words from “The American Crisis” in 1776 echo those of the Apostle Paul over 1700 years before.

There comes a time to stand. God doesn’t need our stand; He doesn’t need us to stand up for Him...but He asks us to do so while trusting fully in Him. Because in every person’s life there comes at least one time to stand up for what – and Who – you believe in.

I think of the big fight at the end of Avengers: Endgame. You know the one. All the Marvel heroes arrive back on the scene, fresh from being ‘un-dusted.’ It is the epic battle of the movies, the time when good has to stand up against evil and fight to defeat it. Jesus wasn’t in the movie, but it’s a scene with which He’d be familiar having, Himself, fought against legion demons a thousand times a thousand times.

I think of Star Wars, which is really just a glorified morality play. It, too, is about good standing against evil, and George Lucas isn’t exactly known for his Christianity.

I think about The Stand, itself another morality play, this time by Stephen King (also another man not known for Christian faith). If you haven’t seen it, you guessed it: it’s a story about forces of good standing against forces of evil.

What’s the point? The point is that, very often, we have to stand up for God, stand up for this faith we have inside us so that the darkness cannot try to drown it out. Again, Jesus doesn’t need this, but we do. We need the backbone and so do our brothers and sisters, especially those who reject it. We have to stand because every age lives in a time when men’s souls are tried and we have to stand up for what we believe.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 4:1, Jude 3, Philippians 1:29

Lord Jesus, when I need to stand, stand with me. I place all my faith and trust in You for You to be the power in my stand. For you to fight for me.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 17 December 2019

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. Philippians 1:29. (EHV).

A scene from a particular movie has stuck with me since childhood. It's a scene from a movie called "A Man Called Horse" with Richard Harris starring as an Englishman who lived with an Indian tribe. In it, the man, known to the Sioux as "Horse," is initiated into the tribe. His chest is pierced, eagle talons are inserted in the pierce holes and then attached to long straps that are also attached to a center pole. The man then hangs from these straps until the talons rip out of his chest, proving that his suffering becomes enough to purify him as a warrior for his new people. The first sequel to this movie contains a similar scene.

Pretty gruesome stuff, eh? Now think about crucifixion. If you haven't read up on just what happens during a crucifixion, go do it. Or watch "The Passion of the Christ." Go watch the kind of thing that the Lord endured on our behalf. Or go watch "A Man Called Horse." There. That's what's in store for you as a believer. It's the kind of thing that Jesus had to endure, so if He can do it you or I can, right?

Don't take it too lightly because I'm actually being serious here. Saying "I believe in Jesus" may some day take you to that level of physical agony. Just this past weekend I saw pictures of a woman who was whipped in Iran for professing her belief in Christ. I've read accounts of people in China and Indonesia and Saudi Arabia being executed for believing in Jesus; usually that comes after they have been tortured.

But to live is Christ and to die is gain, right? Yes, actually it is. The actual risk of death – or likelihood of it – is part of the reward. We live to share Him as heaven on earth, being part of heaven right now, here. It is a privilege to stand for the Most High. And when we die, we get to spend forever on adventure with Him in the fullest lives possible. The torture or circumstances of our passing won't matter. Indeed, we'll be thankful for them.

Until then, we may really be made to suffer here for our people. Whether it's having our chests pierced to hang from a pole or, like Jesus, have our hands and feet pierced to hang from a tree, we may actually suffer real agony, real torture, real persecution in the name of Jesus. It would be for His glory, you see. And our gain.

For further reading: Matthew 5:11, Acts 5:41, Acts 14:22, Philippians 1:21, Philippians 1:30.

Lord Jesus, let it be Your good will if I am to suffer here for You. Thank You for the privilege. Abide with me through the pain into Your glory.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 18 December 2019

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. Philippians 1:29-30. (EHV).

Was Paul one of these people who said “well, it’s good enough for me so it’s good enough for you?” From these verses, it sure seems that way. Paul was in intellectual living in a world where, like ours today, the intellect was daily confronted by the reality of brutish living. Greece was the home of warriors and philosophers. So was Rome. So, in fact, was Jerusalem. Paul had been educated as a Pharisee, and was taught the entirety of the Scriptures from boyhood. Like other young Jewish men, he memorized them, took them to heart. Later, as an adult, Paul zealously lived out the commands of the authorities in the synagogue. Shut down “the Way” and get rid of anybody in your way. He enthusiastically persecuted new Christians, even overseeing the murder of Stephen: the first Christian martyr. That all changed on a lonely desert road, where Paul learned how to stand up for Jesus.

Now enter his time in Philippi. There Paul started the first Christian church on the European continent. He cast out demons. He preached Christ crucified to the mostly poor and merchant populations of that former Greek colony. In doing so, he antagonized the powers-that-be who didn’t want to see their businesses or way of life altered. All through this, Paul reasoned his way through, standing behind the truth that the Lord revealed to him and appealing to his friends and peers any way possible.

The payoff? Pain and suffering. Paul was ridiculed and scored: things tough to bear for one who prided himself on his knowledge and God’s power through him. By the time he got to writing these verses in Philippians, it would seem he was responding to his friends in Philippi, “well, if I have to suffer then you do, too.” But read closer, especially in context of the verses around these, and you see that Paul isn’t saying this at all. Instead, Paul is telling them, “rejoice in these sufferings. Model me as I stand up for Jesus.”

Stand up for Jesus and rejoice when you lose your job because you won’t do something repugnant. Stand up for Jesus and rejoice when your old friends reject you because you won’t go down those same old roads. Stand up for Jesus and rejoice when the knock on the door comes, the tap on the shoulder is felt, or you’re led away. You’re in His company and that of a man named Paul who had to learn how to stand.

For further reading: Acts 16:19-40, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, Hebrews 10:32, Philippians 2:1.

Lord Jesus, I don’t want suffering. I really don’t. But when it comes because of standing for You, I welcome it. Praise be to You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 19 December 2019

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Philippians 2:1-2. (EHV).

It's ironic to write about these two verses the day after the House of Representatives impeached the President of the United States. I'm not here to discuss that; we'll leave that for other blogs. To me, it really doesn't matter who divided the good old US of A. What matters is that we're politically divided, devastatingly polarized in ways I've never seen in my life. Maybe the people of 1941, 1860 or 1776 could talk about how their nation was divided, challenged, or up against a wall. Maybe, better, so could the people of Jerusalem in AD 70, when the Romans finally destroyed the city after occupying it for over a century.

How do you come together when the anger runs deep, when your forces are destroyed and depressed, when you've gotten the wind knocked out of you? When the other side seems unjust? How do you put rage and defeat behind you when the other side is on the march?

It all starts by going to Jesus. Today, before you go back to what you were doing before you read these words, say a prayer for the people with whom you disagree. It'll be tough, but I'll do the same. Let's go to Jesus with our disagreements but also with our heartfelt words of prayer for the welfare, souls, and actions of the people on the other side of the aisle (no matter what side we find ourselves on).

After that, it becomes easier – conversation by conversation, day by day – to find unity in Christ, then unity in outlook, then unity in action. Let's be encouraged today by knowing that we can differ in our politics but we are one in Jesus Christ. We are the same in Him. When we embrace that, maybe we can be like-minded again on the important things, then on trivial things like politics and viewpoints after.

Yes, it's tough. It's a tough day to watch our country go through all this for the second time in just over twenty years. It's a tough thing to see friends and family so divided, so torn. Yet our world has seen tougher times. Indeed, most places outside the United States have it far tougher than we do. People there must look at our divisions as petty and ridiculous. Maybe Jesus thinks that way too; maybe they, and He, have a point. That's not to say we should give up fighting for what we believe in. It is to say, however, that what we believe in should be worth fighting for. Unity in Jesus is.

For further reading: John 3:29, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Colossians 3:12, Philippians 2:3.

Lord, please heal our broken and divided land.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 6 January 2020

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:3-4. (EHV).

Step one in restoring unity is to start with me then realize it's not about me.

Once again, I'm writing this from an airport. Today is my first travel day of the new year and I'm sitting in a Southwest terminal in St. Louis. I'm transiting one airport to get to another to go to a client for work. On days like this, I like to watch people, and today the people I'm watching are in the group gathered at gate E38. A few feet away from me sit two Asian nuns, enjoying a morning snack. Across from them are two women in hijabs; I presume they're Muslim. Off to my right sits an older gentleman who, like myself, is chubby and looks tired. Off to my left there is a man who is carrying a camouflage backpack and is dressed like he could be going to a construction site. Off to his left there is a young woman staring at an orange laptop that is festooned with stickers; she may be a student. The agent working our gate today is a tall, bald black man who was just joking with a few of the other waiting passengers.

If you want a place to remember that 'it's not about me,' come to an airport gate. So many of our moments in life seem to be thrown-together moments where people from so many different backgrounds come together for a common purpose. In our case today, it's flying to Detroit. Other groups with that single purpose are concerts, church services, office meetings, holiday dinners, or online chat rooms. The list is endless.

Today, it's in our shared interest for all of us to arrive safely at our destination, the first of which is an airport in Michigan. Yet after that, this temporary, disparate group will dissolve and we will all go our separate ways. Who knows if we are like-minded or one in God's Spirit? Maybe yes, maybe no, especially in a plane with nuns, Muslims, and folks like me. Yet you can't be on an airplane full of strangers and not realize that you're all in this together, especially on an egalitarian Southwest flight. When you get irritated, to get along, most people suppress their irritation. When a child cries, most people understand that an airplane in flight is a more unnatural place for little kids than it is adults. When the flight is delayed and tempers are raw, we're all in this together in having to adjust our lives to fit a bigger schedule.

Isn't it the same with spreading our faith? It isn't about me; it isn't about you. Maybe it's time to take Paul's advice.

For further reading: Matthew 16:26, Philippians 2:5.

Lord Jesus, help me to be humble today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 7 January 2020

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5. (EHV).

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” That’s Matthew 11:29 and it’s the mindset of Christ Jesus. The verses after Philippians 2:5 talk about how Jesus humbled Himself to assume the lowliest position in creation. He, who made all the universe by speaking, had the mind to become what we’d consider to be the worst among us in order to save us from ourselves. We’ll talk about that more in the coming days.

Until then, tell me: have you found rest for your soul by being humble in heart? I’ll admit: I’m really, really struggling with this concept. Part of me is chiding myself for not doing more of it, and part of me is actively struggling against it in the name of honor (that sometimes doesn’t seem to honorable). Here in America, we’re in the middle of a culture war. It’s more than just our politics: it’s one side versus the other on seemingly every issue, view, or position you can think of. I’m sure this has happened during other epochs, but it’s happening now during ours and it has left us more divided than I can remember.

Personally, I want to be humble and gentle and kind like Jesus but then I want to stand up for the things I believe in, things that I want to think would honor Jesus as well. And in doing so, I find myself being anything but humble and gentle and kind. These days, more often than not, I’m being a jerk to a few people whose reciprocal intolerance is equally egregious towards me and those like me.

Right is right and wrong is wrong, but what good is right when we do wrong in defending it? What I really want to do is take up Christ’s yoke and be more like Him. He wouldn’t respond on Facebook. Jesus wouldn’t stoop so low to argue about things that don’t much matter. Jesus stood for what He believed without trying to demean or destroy the other guy’s heart. My politics, our interactions, this culture in which we battle seems hell-bent on destroying the other guy while trying to claim the high ground.

I’m not talking about defending national interests, or the fighting the war that seems likely up ahead. I’m talking about talking with our friends. Jesus set His mind to deal with others humbly and kindly, even when He was forceful. It was a choice to work from a position of love in all things. Jesus said and did all that He did from this true high ground. How can we do the same? I believe it starts with us falling on our knees.

For further reading: Matthew 11:29, Philippians 2:6.

Lord Jesus, build in me Your mindset, Your heart, in how I deal with others.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 8 January 2020

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! Philippians 2:5-8. (EHV).

We've been here before. Let's just dispense with it now by saying neither me nor you could do what Jesus did. One, we aren't God and He is (and was back then). Two, we don't have that kind of courage; not even the bravest among us, not even Audie Murphy, would have that kind of courage. Most important, though, we don't have that kind of love.

It's not enough to have a mindset like Jesus, putting humility and gentleness above all. And the difference actually isn't between His powers and our lack of them. No, the difference is love. We don't love the way Jesus does. We don't love enough to humble ourselves. If you or I were a god, most likely we wouldn't want to give up or compromise our status as a god. If you or I were immortal, chances are we wouldn't agree to give up our immortality to die here. If me or you lived in the glory and majesty of heaven, I bet we wouldn't even consider leaving heaven for puny little Earth. If either me or you had the chance to have all the bling, we'd choose the bling instead of giving it all up.

Those things never crossed Jesus' mind. His mindset was love and only love. His love is both perfect romance and perfect justice. His perfect love was Jesus' only choice. It was the only choice He ever considered because it's who He is. All of human history would have been different if He had made even the slightest change to His action for our salvation. If Jesus had chosen the path you or I would likely have chosen, He would have proven to us His gross imperfection and hypocrisy as the God of all love.

Thank Him that He didn't. Even in the middle of times when it looks like the world is coming undone, rushing head-long into another war, thank God Jesus chose perfect love instead. Thank God He chose the nails. Thank God He chose the torture. Thank God He chose Calvary and the anguish and the alienation and the tomb. All those things were just on Friday...just before Sunday. And thank God for Easter Sunday, when that perfect love shone best. Thank God for that most of all.

Thank God for all those things that we wouldn't have chosen. We've been here before.

For further reading: Matthew 26:39, John 1:1, John 5:18, Romans 5:19, 2 Corinthians 8:9, Hebrews 2:17, Philippians 2:9

Loving Lord Jesus, thank You for choosing Your love for us.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 9 January 2020

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9-11. (EHV).

Here are three verses that even the most ardent unbelievers have probably seen before. Maybe those folks rail against Christ because they don't like having their choices taken away. After all, the verses say "every" and that means every one, everyone. It's pretty absolute and, in my experience, those who deny Jesus don't want to be told about absolutes (such as every person will confess that Jesus is Lord). Those kind of things matter a lot to folks who believe they are in full control of their lives.

And you know what matters more? What we talked about yesterday: Jesus' love. It's the foundation of the unbeliever's denied freedom; it's that highest place, the name above all names, the glory and majesty and praise and honor. It's the motivation for people to confess that He is who He says He is: Lord of all.

See, the majesty doesn't matter to Christ. All those confessions, all that praise, all that kneeling isn't what matters to Him. Do you know what matters to Jesus more than all that? Love for every one, everyone. Love for those people who use their choices in this life to run away from Him. Love for them to take away the hurt, the separation they feel even when they don't realize they feel it. Love for saying to even those who reject Him "you are my beloved, my friend, my brother and sister, my cherished, my very good woman and man."

Boom! My friend, pastor and musician Bill Brimer, would call it a 'grace bomb' exploding in your face. Jesus doesn't have to love those who don't love Him but He really, truly does. He doesn't love them more than anyone else but He loves them surely just as much as the one who follows Him all their life. He loves them enough to die for them, to have walked up that hill after being tortured all night, then to endure His last day being murdered on that cross.

Jesus loved Qasem Soleimani enough to die for him. He loved Margaret Sanger, Richard Dawkins and the Iranian mullahs and Ilhan Omar enough to die for them. He loves all those people the same as He loves those who cleave closely to Him. It's who He is, what fills His heart.

Remember that today when things get tough; when work piles on your desk or the kids are screaming or you feel isolated and alone. It's who He is.

For further reading: Psalm 95:6, Isaiah 52:13, Daniel 7:14, Romans 14:11, Colossians 1:20, Philippians 2:12

I can't say "thank You" enough for loving me, Lord. Thank You anyway.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 13 January 2020

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Philippians 2:12-13. (EHV).

Be careful about reading these verses because part of verse 12 – “work out your salvation” – is easy to misconstrue if you forget the rest of verse 13. This isn’t about me or you doing it ourselves. It isn’t about us doing the work of salvation for ourselves. Jesus already did all of it, everything necessary, for salvation. Instead, the verse is about our faith, our letting God’s Spirit work through us. The good things we say and do are God Himself working through us as His Spirit guides our thoughts and actions.

That’s easy to forget, you see, because sometimes it feels like there is something we have to do to feel worthy or be worthy or involve ourselves in our salvation. Mark this and remember it: the only involvement we have in salvation – being saved from damnation – is saying “I believe.” All the atonement, all the work, all the actions, all the bloodshed, all the spiritual healing was done by Jesus and only by Jesus. As Madeline might have said, that’s all there is; there is no more.

Yet here on the Third Rock we get confused. We fill our lives with busyness (and business), and we spend most of them learning, striving, working to attain. If you’re in America, you’re also imbued with the concept of personal liberty and independence. It’s our God-given right to exercise our liberties because we’re free. That’s where it should stop but all too often it doesn’t. We get our independence here mixed up with our dependence on God for His saving us from ourselves. And the worst part is that we don’t want to admit when we’re wrong. That He’s God and we aren’t. That we don’t, we can’t, save ourselves from the consequences of our sins.

Faith is a choice. We choose to accept what Christ has done for us. When we do that, He sends His Spirit to live and work through us. Our hands may do the physical lifting but it’s His heart that gives us the motivation to do it. Our eyes do the seeing, our lips speak the words, yet it is God’s Spirit seeing what we see, speaking words we speak in order to do our part in His Kingdom work. This is where ‘working out our salvation’ occurs and where we meet the water’s edge.

For further reading: Ezra 1:5, 1 Corinthians 12:6, 2 Corinthians 7:15, Galatians 2:8, James 2:18, Hebrews 13:21, Philippians 2:13

Lord Jesus, continue to work Your work through me today. Help me to know You better so that all my words and actions may be ones Your Spirit works through me

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 14 January 2020

Do everything without grumbling or arguing. Philippians 2:14. (EHV).

Here's a tough one for me. I like to debate and I like to argue. I don't like to be quarrelsome, and I don't like not getting along with people. But I like to talk in-depth about things like faith and politics and topics that are generally off-limits, especially if it's with people with whom I disagree. I'm a big believer in people talking it out and agreeing to disagree when, well, we don't agree. In fact, I respect people who stand up for what they believe in especially if it's something with which I disagree. Mind you, I'm not defending people who believe in the indefensible (things like murder, avarice, violence, etc). I simply respect people who stand up for what they believe even if it's something I don't believe in.

Some people will lend you money, then grumble about doing it. Some folks will offer to help you move your furniture, then complain about having to do it. Some good people will itch for a fight even when they know that no good can come out of it. Got skin? Got sin. My arguing, the money-grubber's grumbling, the Indian-giver who says they'll do one thing and then take it back later: all sins. All contrary to what Paul advises us to do in one way or another.

Instead, Paul reminds us to do EVERYTHING without those petty sins like arguing, grumbling or the like. Not just work, not just Thanksgiving dinner with crazy Uncle Bernie (or Joe), not just getting along with your argumentative Facebook friend: EVERYTHING. Making dinner, cleaning the house, walking the dog, talking on the telephone, talking online, writing blogs, chatting in the narthex on Sunday morning: EVERYTHING. Do it all without arguing or complaining.

Yep: that's a tough one. Here's an idea: let's be tougher. Let's take up Christ's light yoke and burden and do everything we do with His attitude. Serving and serving thankfully; going the extra mile; forgiving when others fail us; giving up on revenge and gossip and getting even: let's work to infuse our words and actions today with the fruits of Galatians 5 and the words of Christ's Gospels.

For me, that starts with watching what I say, online and in person. I have a friend (with whom I almost always politically disagree) who seems to have an insatiable need to be right or have the last word. Today I'll let him. Instead of being Eeyore the pessimist (someone my wife accuses me of being) I'll keep quiet. Rather than focusing on the negatives, I'll say prayers of thanks for them and good things around them. It's about giving praise instead of criticism and thanks instead of something else.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:10, Galatians 5:22-23, 1 Peter 4:9, Philippians 2:15

Lord Jesus, thank You for yet another opportunity to retrain my brain to better serve You. Strengthen me to not grumble or complain or argue.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 15 January 2020

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. Philippians 2:14-16. (EHV).

Let's start this with a prayer: "Dear Jesus, please forgive me for making a mess out of being blameless and pure. I stink at it. Also, Lord, thank You for all the wonderful people and opportunities You put in my life because they're magnificent blessings."

Perhaps that's another way of saying what Paul was saying in these verses. He advises that we should do everything without complaining so that Jesus and the world (both) would see us favorably. It's Jesus' power, His influence, His re-shaping of our lives that makes this happen.

Don't believe me? Do something nice for someone today without expectation of anything in return, then watch how people treat you. And how you feel about yourself. Compliment a person who has wronged you. Forgive someone. Hold a door; buy the guy behind you a coffee; open your lane to the lane-shifting pushy driver and do it with a real smile. Start small and watch the random acts of kindness make you shine.

When that happens, remind yourself that it's actually Jesus' Spirit shining through you. You get the luster even as He makes it happen. He gets the glory but we get to join in.

And, as you know, that ain't easy. When the government is severely dysfunctional; when you're angry with your spouse; when you're over-stressed and over-committed at work; when you're in a car accident; when the gossip about you just won't stop; let's go on and on and on. Paul (really Jesus) is asking us to put those feelings and emotions of the world aside and see through His eyes instead. Seek His mindset so that, when those worldly things happen, we can act as He would have us do.

And, as you know (again), I stink at doing that. I'm betting you do, too. Me and you, we do over-react. We do blow up and vent and rage. We hold grudges and gossip and berate and swear and spout off. If you're like me, you do the opposite of those good things that Christ asks me to do. And then I feel regret about it and realize, for the umpty-hundredth time, that I need to change and I need His help to do it.

So it isn't easy. Jesus promised it wouldn't be easy. But He also promised to abide with us, and to bless us, and that we would shine by standing by Him. I'll pray that prayer again now.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 2:19, Philippians 2:16

Lord Jesus, it isn't easy to live out this faith I have in You. Thank You for blessing me anyway, for staying with me, for these despite the evils I've done.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 16 January 2020

...as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. Philippians 2:16. (EHV).

On this Christian walk, one part of our reward is pride in what we've done. Mind you, excessive or misplaced pride is destructive. There are numerous verses throughout scripture that talk about how God hates our misplaced pride, how He will bring us low for it because it puts up a wall between Him and us.

That's not what Paul was talking about here.

When you or I start with kindness, letting Jesus' light shine through us, He is justifiably proud of us. God IS proud of us when we follow Him closely, when we live the way He asks us to live. It's ok for us to feel the same way.

That's how Paul felt about the Philippians. He was proud of their faith, proud that they were taking what he had taught them about Jesus and put it into practice. He was proud, satisfied to know God had let him to have a hand in bringing it about. We don't know if Paul ever made it back to Philippi; probably he didn't. So it made him feel happy to know that his friends kept up what he taught them. That his legacy would endure.

It's ok for us to feel the same way. Just last weekend, I attended the 20th anniversary celebration of my daughter-in-law's church. Hope Fellowship has been around since 2000 when its (now senior) pastor moved here from Nashville to plant a new church. It started in a day care center, later moved to an elementary school, then later, still, moved into its own large building. An interesting side-note is that my own church, Water's Edge, started in this exact same way in the exact same day care and school (not long after Hope moved out).

The Hope pastor, John McKinzie, reminisced about their first service, which had a good turnout of over 50 people. Today, the church's membership is in the thousands, spread over three campuses. John spent much of the sermon reminiscing, talking about how God richly blessed the fellowship by bringing people and their talents to bear in spreading the Gospel. You could tell from watching him that he felt proud at having had a hand in bringing it about. That God had worked through him and the group he led to make it happen; to grow the faith. To walk where Jesus led.

While we live here, we SHOULD feel proud to do our part in God's kingdom work. We should feel happy about it; it's ok for us to boast in Christ about the good things He does in and through our lives. Paul did; Paul would.

For further reading: Proverbs 8:13, Isaiah 25:11, Philippians 2:17

Lord Jesus, I'm thankful and proud of what You do in remaking me and working through me!

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 21 January 2020

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. Philippians 2:17. (EHV).

What is a drink offering? You'll have to open your Old Testament for that one (and that's a good thing to do, since everything in the Old Testament points to and explains Jesus and the world He came into). From <https://www.gotquestions.org/drink-offering.html>: "The first recorded occurrence of a drink offering was that given by Jacob in Genesis 35:14, right after God changed his name to Israel. Drink offerings were also included with burnt and grain offerings in God-ordained sacrifices, including the morning and evening sacrifices of Exodus 29:40. One-quarter hin, about one quart, of wine was poured out into the altar fire for each lamb sacrificed (Numbers 15:4-5). A ram sacrifice required one third of a hin (Numbers 15:6), and a bull required one half (Numbers 15:10)."

That's a lot of wine. What's more, the drink offerings were given only to God, only done in worship and over sacrifices offered on an altar. It was symbolic of life, worship, Sabbath, victory, and devotion. I'm betting a Bible scholar could tell you more and better about all this; I'm no Bible scholar. I simply know what I read and what others have taught me. Now, consider that the wine (and the amount of it) really didn't matter. It wasn't for the booze that God commanded Israel to do these things. It wasn't for the ceremony of it, or seeing if the Israelites would follow instructions, and it wasn't because God wanted His people to jump through a bunch of hoops.

It's about that pouring out. Then as now (as in Holy Communion), wine symbolized blood. And, then as now, blood meant life. In a drink offering, God commanded his people to cover their atoning sacrifices in symbolic blood, pouring themselves out, in turn, while doing so. He wanted them to empty themselves so He could fill them. God commanded the Israelites to do what was necessary to cling to Him, to remain devoted to Him. It was for their good, not His.

God didn't force them; He didn't compel them. He asked His people – us – to give everything from a willing heart. He asks that we devote ourselves to Him and not hold back. He asks us to dig deep in our psyches, digging deep into our souls and turn over what means most to Him. These days, He doesn't ask for sacrifices or poured wine over them, but he still asks us to pour ourselves out to Him...because He poured Himself out fully for us. On the cross.

For further reading: Genesis 35:14, Exodus 29:40, Numbers 15:4-6, 10, Romans 15:16, 2 Corinthians 12:15, 2 Timothy, 4:6, Philippians 2:18

Lord Jesus, YOU are the ultimate drink offering, covering Your own sacrifice in Your perfect blood. Teach me to pour out my heart to You and You alone always.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 22 January 2020

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. Philippians 2:17-18. (EHV).

Building on yesterday's thoughts, we should be glad when one of us is poured out, spent, sacrificed for God's greater kingdom. Yes, you read that right. You and me: we should celebrate when a fellow believer is poured out, spent, persecuted, tortured, even murdered (and martyred) for faith in God. Again, yes, you read that right. Read it again because, as things go in our world, some day soon it might be you or me being martyred. And if you think about it, maybe that's not such a bad thing. Yes, I'm being serious.

Years ago, I read one of the Left Behind books, which aren't my usual taste. It was the one in which non-believers accepted the mark of the devil, and those who didn't have the mark (believers) were rounded up and marched to the guillotine. One of the main characters was awaiting her own beheading when she saw a group of other believers marching toward their execution, and they were joyful. They were singing, joyful to be going to die. By the end of the book, the main character joined them. She, too, went joyfully.

I think about the people who are sentenced to die in Iran and Saudi Arabia and China and Cuba for being followers of Jesus. Do they know they are heroes of the faith? Are they happy to be dying? Surely their families aren't happy about it...are they? Do the families or the persecuted realize that there are people all over the world who are both praying for their release while celebrating their defiant courage? I love reading stories of their quiet dignity, their iron resolve to not renounce Jesus. Those people – women and men both – are being poured out like Paul was. They're doing a courageous thing; something we, ourselves, may one day be called to do. When they die, we can celebrate that their mission is complete, that they accomplished what God sent them here to do. They're enjoying eternity with Christ, enjoying their reward. That's something to celebrate.

When Peter and John were flogged and imprisoned, they sang. Paul encouraged his friends to celebrate as approached death. But should we be happy about it when our turn comes against the wall? Yes: yes, we should. We're each going to die; unless Jesus returns first; that's a certainty. When it happens to us, we can either face it with courage and be an example for others to celebrate or we can choose differently. And when it happens to someone else, we have those same choices. How we die matters. Let's make ours count.

For further reading: Acts 5, Philippians 2:19

Lord Jesus, encourage me to celebrate the heroic faith of others and to demonstrate it myself today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 23 January 2020

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. Philippians 2:19-20. (EHV).

This week, I saw “1917.” Absolutely compelling movie. It’s the story of two British soldiers in World War I who are given the assignment of going behind German lines to contact a battalion about calling off an attack (because the attack is a trap set by the Germans). One of the men is entrusted with the mission specifically because he has a vested interest in completing it: his brother is in the battalion. If they don’t complete the mission, the battalion will be slaughtered. But completing the mission might just get them killed. Naturally, the two soldiers take the mission, and the rest of the movie is about their journey through the battlefields of northern France.

The general who sent the two men on their mission was like Paul. He desperately wanted to get good news from the stranded battalion. He had no one else like either of the two soldiers (especially the one with the brother). And he hoped to hear good news – that the soldiers delivered the message to call off the attack – out of genuine concern to serve someone else.

That genuine concern should be our motivation as well. We should be looking to send out other people to help, people who show real concern. And before that, we should be willing to go, ourselves, out to help, to do whatever needs to be done to help someone else. That’s the fundamental reason for doing mission work: to go out to help others as Jesus would. We should be willing to, excited to, pour ourselves out for others so that they can prosper, then can celebrate. When we can’t go ourselves, we should help others go.

That’s what happened in the movie (because that’s one thing a military does): others were sent to do a job to help someone else. It’s not easy to do, this pouring one’s self out. But it’s rewarding, and it’s rewarding for the one who sends as well. To know that, even if you can’t do much, you can do at least this. It’s one way the world goes around.

If you haven’t seen the movie, go see “1917.” It brings to life a war that ended over one hundred years ago but whose outcome still affects us now. And then think about how you could go out to help someone. Or, if you can’t, how you could support others as they venture out.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:10, Philippians 2:21

Lord Jesus, thank You for people who want to go into the world to do Your love-work, for putting it on my heart to go and to help. Help me to do these things for You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 27 January 2020

For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:21. (EHV).

We're people: this is what we do. Our own interests are the reasons for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and every other social media platform we have. When something happens, our first, our go-to, reaction is to react based on how it affects us; what we think, how we feel, why this affects us and our opinions.

Kobe Bryant died yesterday. But let's be real and ask when was the last time you or I honestly considered Kobe Bryant? He retired a few years ago. He was another among thousands of athletes and entertainers even as he was surely one of the best to ever play his game. From what I've read, he later became a devout Catholic who spent much his time split between his family and charity work. Part of me wonders if he was working to make amends for what happened in Colorado years ago. We'll never know, so let's, instead, pray for peace for a family left to grieve.

So what was your reaction when you first heard that this celebrity had died? Stop in your tracks and consider those words "your reaction." Because when things happen, our first natural instinct is to consider how they affect us. Psychologically, even physiologically, that's probably a healthy thing. We need to first safeguard our biological selves any time something happens around us. Is it a danger to me? What does it mean, and then what does it mean to me? Considering things in the light of how they affect ourselves is actually understandable and realistic.

Yet we must not allow our consideration to end there. Paul rightly cautions us that our self-focus can prevent us from focusing on what Jesus is doing, what Jesus wants, how this affects our lives with Jesus. If all we do is each consider only our own interests, then this world breaks down quickly. We have to learn to take our thoughts captive and re-direct them towards God. The better way is to submit our thoughts, our reactions, our pro-actions to Christ and let Him take the lead in whatever comes next.

I'm not much of a basketball fan, yet even I appreciate the natural talent of a Kobe Bryant. More important than some game or even unproven actions, he later spent considerable time and resources helping inner-city kids succeed. Yet beyond how this affects our community at large, let's take captive those thoughts and give them over to Christ, then celebrate that Kobe and his daughter got their "well done" from Jesus yesterday. For them, like others who died in the faith, yesterday was the best day of their lives and the start of the most important part. That matters so much more.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 10:24, Philippians 2:22

Lord Jesus, encourage me all the time to submit all my thoughts to You. Thank You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 28 January 2020

But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. Philippians 2:22. (EHV).

Is talent natural (God-given) or can it be learned? Answer: yes.

Let's be honest: some folks have natural, God-given abilities that are superior over others who attempt to do the same thing. Athletes, businessmen, pastors, solid managers, moms & dads: some people simply live as if they were born to do what they do, and they do it better than anyone else. God bless them as they earn success doing what they do best because it's a pleasure to watch excellence, especially if it's done in Godly ways.

And there are others who don't know how to do a certain thing but teach themselves and then do it well. My father was one such person. He wasn't raised to renovate houses; his parents never did that kind of thing. Indeed, his mom/my grandmother was a housewife (and sometime boardinghouse manager), and his dad/my grandfather was a civil servant who, to my knowledge, never even did his own yardwork. But my dad wanted to know how to build things. It started with the house my parents built in Bloomington, Minnesota. A couple of years after building the house, they wanted to use the garage as a second living room/play room (for my sister and I). So dad had a new garage built and singlehandedly renovated the existing garage into a play room. He learned how to demolish, build walls, string electricity, install plumbing, and all the finishing work. When the work was done, he had the playroom he and mom talked about. Not long ago, I drove by the house and his work is still intact, almost 60 years later.

I can't say Dad's renovation work was a work of the Gospel, but the good news of it is that he couldn't have done it if God hadn't provided him the back-talents to make it happen. God gave Dad curiosity and drive and the ability to see something and learn from it. He gave him a degree of fearlessness and the ability to learn new things. God lined it up so that his income and schedule and resources would enable him to do the work that he wanted to do. And God drove him to want precision, excellence, and sturdiness in all he did. I don't know how many folks have lived in the house since we moved out in 1969, but it's safe to say that many more people were blessed by what my Dad did while working outside his comfort zone. He proved himself competent and full of excellence because of the Lord.

Sort of like Timothy.

Now how about you?

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Timothy 1:2, Philippians 2:23

Lord Jesus, thank You for inspiring us to excel, for the talents You give us.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 29 January 2020

I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon. Philippians 2:23-24. (EHV).

Prudence is a good thing. We should be wise and judicious with the talents & resources that the Lord puts in our paths, even when we're motivated, excited and generous.

But confident?

As far as we know, Paul never made it back to Philippi. He worked for thirty years after his conversion on the road to Damascus, and Philippi (an old Greek, then Roman, trading center) was where he drove out the demon from a girl who was being exploited by local merchants. He had been staying there awhile, and when he drove out the girl's demon, he was dragged before Roman authorities. In exchange for his kindness and faith, Paul was beaten and jailed, then driven out of town. Years later, Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, praising God and telling them of his plans to return to them soon.

Again, we don't know if Paul ever made it back to Philippi but it's possible, even likely, that he didn't. He had first visited Philippi during his second missionary journey (approximately 51 to 53 AD), and likely visited it again during his third journey (approximately 54-58 AD). It is thought that Paul wrote Philippians sometime in the early 60s AD, possibly in 62; during that time he was imprisoned in Rome. Some people think Paul journeyed back to Greece one last time, between 63 and 64 AD, before returning to Rome and dying in 67 AD.

All that just for the chance that he might not make it back to visit friends. Was Paul's confidence in the Lord misplaced? Answer: only if you think it was about actually showing up.

We know (from his words) that Paul believed God would lead him back. Paul believed God would lead him EVERYWHERE, that every place Paul visited was because God had led him there and Jesus had orchestrated his life to these ends. He had confidence in Jesus that, wherever Jesus led him, Paul would prosper. That his fondest wishes would be best realized in the growing faith of his friends, not just in another working vacation. Paul was confident in Christ that Christ would do whatever was necessary for God's Kingdom.

It's a good thing for us to make plans wisely, to line things up, best as we can, in order to make the most use of what we have been given. Yet perhaps more important than this prudence is having confidence in Jesus that He will do the right thing in our lives. Like Paul, we may want to journey to see our friends, but Christ knows what is better for us and He'll line things up so that can happen.

For further reading: Philippians 2:25

Loving Jesus, all my praise is to You for doing Your work in my life. For letting what's best happen.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 30 January 2020

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Philippians 2:25-27. (EHV).

Do you pray when people ask for “thoughts and prayers?” Full confession here: sometimes I don’t. Sometimes, I let the selfishness of this world lead me to say “I’ll pray for you” and then I forget to. Usually, if I say I’m going to, I stop what I’m doing and say a quick prayer for whatever is requested, then I go about my day. Out of sight out of mind? Maybe a little. More than that, I simply understand that I’ve put the matter in God’s hands and He is always to be trusted to do what is best.

I don’t know that anyone has sent another person ever to specifically care for my needs. When I was in the hospital some months back, my family all visited me and tended to me in the weeks after (when I was recuperating). And friends also visited, shared gifts, and let me know of their love. But I can’t say that I’ve ever known of anyone who ever sent someone from far away to assist me in my work or tend to my needs like the Philippians had sent their brother, Epaphroditus. Indeed, by sending a co-worker to help Paul, they were doing more than just online thoughts and prayers.

So maybe that’s a good cue for us to consider doing more as well. Reach out and bring a meal to someone. Go help a friend move furniture. When someone doesn’t have enough to pay a bill, help them out. Haven’t talked in awhile with an old friend who’s going through some trouble? Call them...better yet, go visit them. More than any of these things, listen attentively. Let’s each resolve to follow Jesus closer here, today, by starting to listen attentively to what the folks around us are saying. Listen to relate to their problems, their concerns; to empathize and feel their hurt the way they do, then maybe sympathize and do something to help where we can.

Start that out by giving honest thoughts and prayers. Sometimes we can’t do much but we can do that. Besides, putting matters before the Lord is the first, best way to start the healing. Take time this day to shut out the noise and pray when someone needs our prayers. Then move forward however we’re led by Him.

For further reading: Romans 16:3, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Philippians 2:28

Lord Jesus, hear my prayers today and always for those in my life who are in need. I trust You fully that You will begin their healing.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 3 February 2020

Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Philippians 2:28. (EHV).

Did you see the Super Bowl last night? Yes, I was quite happy with the outcome; we were rooting for Kansas City. One thing really struck me after the end of the game. The game winning quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, donated a million dollars to Make A Wish. You know them: they're the foundation that sets up once-in-a-lifetime moments for critically ill children. From everything I've read about him, Mahomes is a first-rate man; the kind of man you'd want on your winning team, and the kind of man who you wouldn't be surprised to learn had donated a million bucks to a charity that helps kids during the pinnacle moment of his life. He also uses his time to build housing for US veterans.

After reading today's verse, I'm thinking Mahomes is an Apostle Paul sort of guy. It's a wonderful thing to win the biggest game in the world. It's an even more wonderful thing to send out good people to help others, especially when it costs you.

Paul was glad to send Epaphroditus home to the people who loved him most and could care for him best. It wasn't that Paul wanted him to leave. Re-read the verses prior to this one and you'll see Paul was doing this out of love. Paul needed help, and Epaphroditus had been extremely helpful, extremely useful. Yet Epaphroditus had also been extremely ill; he nearly died.

Paul's response? Whatever it takes, let's do what Jesus is leading us to do. In that case, Jesus led Paul to send his friend back home where he could be cared for and where he could use his experiences to grow the church even more. By staying with Paul, Epaphroditus would be cherished but might be at risk (because Paul couldn't attend his needs). By leaving, Epaphroditus would be cared for and able to fight another day. It might be a tough journey home, but it would be worthwhile.

I'm betting Patrick Mahomes would understand.

So please forgive my shameless exploitation of a football game to try to make a point about Paul and Epaphroditus. The comparison is timely because Mahomes seems like a pretty selfless guy, and it was that same kind of selflessness that Paul and Epaphroditus were displaying. The work of the Lord requires that selflessness and usually requires self-sacrifice. It's the heart of mission work. It's the heart of winning the Super Bowl. It's the heart of taking that winning position and using it to help others in a Godly way, which makes the game actually worthwhile.

For further reading: Philippians 2:29

Lord Jesus, all praise to You for showing the selflessness we need to show as we work for You. Thank You for the example of Paul and Epaphroditus.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 4 February 2020

So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. Philippians 2:29-30 (EHV).

Is Paul being mean here? In the last few verses, Paul says he is sending Epaphroditus home so that he can be cared for. In these, however, it sounds like Paul is, well, being a jerk.

Or is he? Maybe Paul is simply being honest (because the Philippians couldn't do more to support him and his ministry).

Years ago, my son played junior baseball. One of the coaches on the team was, hands down, the best junior coach I ever saw. He had a way of teaching pre-school boys and girls how to play on a team. Part of that included sometimes telling one that he needed to move them when they weren't working out at the position where they started. Or when they hit the ball but it was caught out. He was being honest while being kind, firm while still gentle. Sort of like Paul must have been with those for whom he cared, this coach had a talent for breaking bad news clearly but kindly.

Or there was the NCO for whom I worked in the Air Force. When I was a young airman, I wanted very badly to win an award. I watched as others in my unit won it, and wondered what I was doing to be consistently passed by. So I went up to the MSgt and he responded quite bluntly, "if you want the award, you need to do the work. So far, you haven't shown that kind of material." That was rough to hear but it helped me take a look at myself and admit that he was right. I was 'calling it in' with a lot of my work. That edgy and, yes, humiliating assessment was the start of turning myself around. A few years later, I finally started to do it the better way by turning to God. And then things started to really happen. Now, I'm thankful for that moment.

Paul must have been like that. Honest, almost brutally so, but forthright and caring. Able to let someone down while doing so in a way that actually builds them up through caring truth. Sometimes we have to be bluntly honest with people and that's tough, both on them and on us. Sometimes we NEED to hear hard truth; sometimes it's ok to simply have someone speak squarely with us. Paul wasn't being mean with the Philippians: he was being their friend and speaking frankly in their best interests. We should do the same.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:17, 1 Timothy 5:17, Philippians 3:1.

Lord Jesus, let us always be honest, forthright, and caring as we deal with others. Help us to continually follow Your example.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 5 February 2020

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Philippians 3:1 (EHV).

Why does Paul say “it is a safeguard for you?” My Concordia says, “when serious error is present, there is safety in repetition.”

Tell them what you’re gonna tell them. Tell them. Then tell them what you told them. That, and the law of seven. If you’re flummoxed about what I’m saying, these are rules for public speaking. If you want to reinforce a point, repeat it. And if you want to ensure a listener remembers a point, repeat it at least seven times. Paul did this in his letters.

In all of his letters except Philemon, Paul used this vehicle to reinforce points he had previously mentioned either in person or in his writings. In those letters, Paul carefully outlined both positive behaviors to model and negative ones to avoid. Flee from those who are immoral, impure, debauched; turn from ways of anger, envy, drunkenness, adultery, and more. In doing those, watch God remake your heart and your life. Model Jesus in how you show love, joy, peace, kindness and much, much more. Right trumps might; Christ always prevails over evil.

Isn’t it safeguarding someone to keep encouraging them to follow Jesus instead of following the evil one? To display those Galatians 5 fruits of the Spirit instead of trying in vain to find their own way in the world? Isn’t it better, more loving, to mentor someone to display God’s qualities instead of those of an ungodly world in rebellion? If we really care, shouldn’t we care for someone’s welfare right down to their soul?

If that takes telling them over and over about the basics, well, so much the better.

Fact is, in our world today, we live with serious error. The horrors of abortion, war, crime, terrorism, division, disease, and so many more things demonstrate how fallen our world is; how there are innumerable things that are deadly wrong here on the Third Rock. How separated we are from God while trying to do it all on our own. Fact is, without someone to bridge the growing chasm, on our own, we’re damned.

It’s a good thing that there are people who will tell it like it is. It’s a better thing that someone keeps encouraging us that we don’t have to fall into that chasm. It’s a great thing that we have heroes of the faith to show the way. And it’s the greatest thing in all history that Jesus bridged the chasm of our sins and saved us from ourselves. That’s the truest safeguard of all. I’ll gladly repeat that any time!

For further reading: Galatians 5: 19-24, Philippians 3:2.

Lord Jesus, thank You for words You inspired into Paul. Thank You that we get to still learn from them today, and for safeguarding our hearts and minds forever.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 6 February 2020

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. Philippians 3:1-2 (EHV).

In verse 2, Paul subtly echoes Psalm 22, which was a prophecy about Christ and both His death and His glory. In this verse, Paul is not just calling out the Jews and Judaizers who were challenging the early church: he also calls us out to do the same in our lives.

Tell me: how hard is it to resist temptation? If you're like nearly everybody else, it's one of the toughest things you'll do, especially since we do it every day. Especially since the evil one still attacks us the same way he did people in Paul's time.

These days, people make fun of Mike Pence for his policy of not being in a room alone with a woman who isn't his wife. Billy Graham lived by that same policy. So did President Harry Truman. It seems ludicrous and old-fashioned, and their enemies make hay about it, accusing Graham and Pence of not trusting women. But that's not why they did / do it at all. It's because they don't trust themselves. It's not that they wouldn't have self-control. It's that they don't want to put themselves in any situation where their morality could be compromised or given the image of impropriety. They don't want to bring dishonor or disrepute on God or their wives. By removing the possibility of being tempted to do anything at all, they safeguard that morality (as well as their images as upright and honorable men).

Good for them. What about you when your demons come calling? Are you tempted to lash out online? To insult back when someone insults you? Are you tempted by porn or sexual thoughts? Are you tempted to burst out in anger when you're having a bad day? How do you resist that temptation?

Same way Paul did: first go to Jesus and ask for His help. Put our faith in Him before being tempted, or especially if we've given in. Let Him restore honor to your soul even if we have to face the physical consequences here. It is only through the lens of Christ that we can look at temptation and not buckle before it.

Paul excoriated those who were accusing the nascent church of abandoning God by abandoning Jewish customs and Mosaic law. He called out those who would put traditions over the Gospel of Christ. And he warned his friends to stay far away from anyone who would tempt them to backslide. Thousands of years later, that's still Godly, excellent advice for any of us in any situation.

For further reading: Psalm 22:16-20, Revelation 22:15, Philippians 3:3.

My Lord, lead me not into temptation and deliver me from the evil one.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 10 February 2020

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reasons for such confidence. Philippians 3:3-4 (EHV).

Paul uses much of this first part of Chapter 3 to remind us to have no confidence in our flesh; to not put our trust in this world but, instead, in Jesus. He does it using a comparison to circumcision.

Reading this in 2020, even I'll admit: it's uncomfortable, especially as a man. Yet it's also logical to compare our faith in Christ to being 'cut around.' In the Bible, circumcision goes all the way back to Abraham, who was told by God to do it to the men in his life as a mark of devotion to God. In today's world, women will (ok, rightfully) joke that a man's penis is, to him, the most important part of his body. Even knowing that joke, God is STILL right, then, to have asked men to circumcise it. He's saying "dedicate the most important part of you to Me. Serve me this way." In that, it becomes an act of love. Yet the more you read about it, the more you see it isn't about a physical surgery.

Medically, there are some uses for circumcision but it is still mainly elective. Even going back to Paul's time and beyond, that was true. It seems likely that this was something with which Abraham might have been familiar even before God commanded him to do it. For Jews of Paul's day, it was part of Mosaic law; something they HAD to do. Yet, for Paul and we who came after him, it became just another Jewish custom we were no longer bound to obey because our circumcision was one of the heart: where God was asking us to cut around all else from the start (even in Abraham's day).

Keep that in mind when reading the rest of the verses in chapter 3. It's not about getting your foreskin cut off: it's about excising from your heart any prideful sin that hides if from God. It's about dedicating to Christ that which really is most important of all: our soul. Romans 2 spells it out: that our faith in God is a circumcision of the heart, where it matters most. Colossians 2 then takes that a step further, stating that it was Christ himself who cut off our sinful nature.

It is for men and women both to be circumcised of the heart, to have our sinful nature cut away and our souls reconfigured to be someone new. Only Jesus can do this.

For further reading: Romans 2:28-29, Galatians 6:15, Colossians 2:11, Philippians 3:5.

Lord Jesus, circumcise my heart and mark me as Your own. Cut away that which doesn't matter and make me into a new person to serve You in Your work.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 11 February 2020

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. Philippians 3:3-6 (EHV).

Paul's throwdown; mic drop; BOOM (Boomer?). He takes the 'Ivy League' credentials of Jews who oppose him as an unqualified lout and rubs his 'loutness' in their faces, turning their own reasoning upside down. "Oh yeah? Hold my beer."

We should do the same. Righteously, but, yes, we should. Yet let's remember a few good ideas that go with doing that same. One, take it to Jesus first. Paul did by submitting that all he was saying was to serve God, serving Jesus. Everything he did after Damascus was to serve Jesus, including confessing his lineage here (and also in Romans 11 and 2 Corinthians 11).

Then remember that Jesus made us who we are, where we are, when we live for a reason: His reason. Each of us has a talent to refine and a gift to share. Every one of us becomes who we are to become a part of the Body, an instrument in a divine orchestra. My wife and I don't do much "coulda woulda shoulda" thinking because it's a fool's game to rethink and re-live the past. Yet we are each acutely conscious of the roles our individual and personal histories have in shaping who we are today. God has us where He has us because there are things to say and do here today; people to serve, ways to help right now in this world of 2020. All that came to be because of what has happened.

Finally, it's okay to be proud of who God has made us to be. Paul had a Jewish pedigree and he was deservedly proud of it. His ancestors had lived their lives just so that their unknown descendant might one day use the lineage they bequeathed to him as a way to advance the Gospel. That was a good thing for Paul, and it's a good thing for us as well. We should be proud of who we are because the God of the universe made us and considers us to be His "very good" creation. In the verses to come, we'll get to see that Paul puts his history in context, submitting it as worthless compared to being made new in Jesus. We get to say the same thing.

For further reading: Luke 1:59, Acts 21:20, Romans 11:1, 2 Corinthians 11:22, Philippians 3:76.

Magnificent Lord Jesus, thank You for my past. It all helped to shape me to serve You now.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 12 February 2020

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Philippians 3:7 (EHV).

I went to a "Valentines for Veterans" program at my grandson's school yesterday. He lives in College Station, so I took a day off work and drove down. The program has been presented every year for six years to celebrate veterans and first responders. My grandson is in kindergarten and I was surprised to learn that the kindergarten classes in the school put on this program for all the other grades. They even made the local TV news; my grandson, enthusiastic performer that he is, was front and center on camera.

In the program, there were dozens of veterans, firemen, paramedics, and policemen who showed up to be honored. The kids sang patriotic songs, waved flags, showed pictures of their responder and veteran relatives, and handed out over 600 valentines for us to pass out to others. The point of the program was (obviously) to honor the service and sacrifice of people who serve our country and our communities' greater good.

Yet the kids didn't celebrate that it was all for loss compare to Jesus Christ.

Now, College Station is, of course, a college town. It's a cosmopolitan place with thousands of students who attend Texas A&M University. And it is home to all the people who support the college, and those who support the town and other small industries based there. Yet College Station is also, undeniably, smack dab in the middle of the Bible Belt. It's in a place where people are largely familiar with Christ and where churches are plentiful, well-known, and easy to find (even for college students). People spend outrageous amounts of money to get college degrees and to learn about all this world has to offer.

Yet do they also learn it in the context of understanding how, compared to knowing Jesus Christ, this knowledge is worthless?

My grandson is a believer. His mom and dad take him and his sister (my granddaughter, whom I affectionately call "Peanut") to church because they believe that's most important. He knows about Jesus, about salvation, and about serving others the way Jesus does. Even a kindergartner can understand that (perhaps better than college students). And while I'm so glad that he and his school take time to honor public service, I hope he grows up to learn the better way that public service isn't publicly serving if it doesn't focus on doing the greater good through the body of Christ. Without Jesus, service men and women have served and died in vain. Without Jesus, first responders rescue for nothing. Without Jesus, what we think, say, and do, even in college towns, is meaningless.

For further reading: Matthew 13:44, Luke 14:33, Philippians 3:7.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the service of other people, and for young people recognizing it. But thank You more for teaching us to serve You through serving others instead.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 13 February 2020

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. Philippians 3:8-9 (EHV).

Imagine losing everything and being satisfied with that. Imagine viewing EVERYTHING in the world as trash compared to the unseen, un-measurable, intangible called 'faith in Jesus Christ.' Imagine being powerful and famous and well-to-do and turning away from that into lifelong poverty and being happy about it.

Enter the Apostle Paul. That's where he was.

Yesterday, I was doing dishes with my three-year-old granddaughter. Yes, it makes the job harder. Yes, she makes a mess everywhere. Yes, it's a huge inconvenience. No, I wouldn't trade those memories for anything. The memories of doing things together? That's the good stuff.

A few years ago we sold our dream house. It was a house on a small farm, in the woods, with a pond and a big workshop, and space to have lots of fun with fireworks and skeet shooting and chickens and all that's good about country living. I loved having it, but things changed and I lost my job and we couldn't pay for it. So we sold and moved back to the city. And it's ok because God is still in charge. That's the good stuff, too.

I've known success. Three great kids; four wonderful grandchildren. A long and happy marriage. Homes, cars, great jobs. Published books; sending this blog to thousands of people weekly. You know what? I'd give it all up in a second to have faith in Christ.

Just like the Apostle Paul. Just like him because he was right: everything is a loss – even the good stuff – compared to a grain of faith in Jesus. The house, the job, the grandkids, the success: they're only for here and now (well, maybe not the grandkids). They're all fleeting; they will all pass away. What will never pass away is Christ. Faith in Him is the ticket to forever. Faith in Him is the difference between ordinary and extraordinary. Faith in Him can stand up to evil and stand down the storm.

Faith in Jesus is the good stuff.

Jeremiah said that our greatest gift is to boast of knowing the Lord. That He has plans for us to prosper us (here and in heaven). That He will save us in the worst of times. And in those times, when we turn to Him, we get to realize that everything here is nothing compared to Him. Paul knew this; so, now, do we.

For further reading: Psalm 73:25, Jeremiah 9:23-24, Jeremiah 29:11, Jeremiah 33:16, John 17:3, Romans 10:5, Philippians 3:10.

Lord Jesus, nothing compares to you. I give up all for You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 17 February 2020

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:10-11 (EHV).

Somehow. That's a booming, small word with powerful implications just hidden in the middle of verse 11. Somehow, this will all make sense to us. Somehow, we'll muddle through today and tomorrow (if it comes) will be another day closer to the end. Somehow we'll get by even when things look dark.

Now consider 'somehow' the way Paul did. Paul wanted to somehow attain resurrection. Paul understood that, somehow, Jesus had won resurrection for him and you and I and everyone else. Paul wanted to live like Christ, think like Christ, love like Christ, knowing that, somehow, Christ would live more through him. Paul wanted to live forever with Christ, understanding that, somehow, a minute of that eternity with Him would be superior to a lifetime of the best things here. It was a supernatural thing that, somehow, happened and, somehow, Paul believed it.

Put your faith in somehow.

Through Jesus' somehow, Paul reminds us (in 2 Corinthians 1) that, just as the sufferings of Christ flow into our lives through Him, so do does all our comfort. Even when we don't understand it, it happens. When we're hurting, Jesus hurts with us because He knows what it feels like. When we grieve, Jesus grieves with us because He understands death. When we are anxious and worried, Jesus understands because He's had those feelings, too. In our worst days of struggle, Jesus is beside us, living and touching and breathing through us: His hands and feet and eyes and ears.

When we accepted the faith that He first inspired into us, we accepted what came of His suffering at Calvary. We feel the nails pierce us; we feel the intense pain, the struggle for every breath, the public humiliation. We look down and our friends and family who are weeping for us as well as the soldiers and Pharisees and commoners who mock us. We know that death is only a few short hours away but those hours will be full of suffering and agony and despair. Especially when we know it's only Jesus who can atone for the trillions of mankind's sins.

Yet when we accepted that same resurrection faith, we live beyond death on Friday to rise triumphant on Sunday. We inherit His forgiveness, His peace, His redemption, His relief. We become His pierced hands and feet to carry His message to a weeping world that still needs it more than ever. We live our lives here as best we can in preparation for eternity that matters most. And we know that, somehow, Jesus made all that happen and is making our best that's yet to come.

Somehow.

For further reading: John 11:24, Romans 6:3-5, 2 Corinthians 1:5, Revelation 20:5-6, Philippians 3:12.

Lord Jesus, thank You for somehow saving us!

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 18 February 2020

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Philippians 3:12 (EHV).

If you're reading this, you're still alive here on the Third Rock; duh. You and I: we are still pressing on to take hold of eternal life. Paul has already entered there; he's in heaven. That's the reason Jesus came to him and remade his life. It's the reason why Jesus did the same thing to you and me.

Yet we need to work to maintain our grip on our faith in Him when we're tempted and laid low in this fallen world. Have you ever considered that, when you feel beaten down because you're been attacked over and over again, you're being attacked precisely because your faith is stronger? Satan has to work even harder to get you. Some people roll over easily; they're an easy conquest. Yet others require more effort. If you're being attacked again and again, perhaps you aren't one of those easy conquests.

Perhaps you believe more in this goal for which Christ Jesus took hold of you. Perhaps you struggle harder, fight tougher, beat back the evil one more precisely because you ARE tougher for him to overcome.

Paul understood that. For decades after his conversion on that Syrian pathway he struggled against attacks from the physical and spiritual realms. Yet he learned quickly that the only way he could continue to press forward – to really work for eternity – was to submit himself to Jesus. To double down in his faith. To come to Jesus when he had prayers of both anguish and thanksgiving; when he had anything at all to say. As long as he lived here on good old terra firma, Paul pressed forward with one eye on where he was and the other on the road forward.

He did it for the same reason we should: eternity matters most. Jesus came here to make eternity with Him possible for us, knowing full-well that we would be challenged, tempted, burdened, stressed-out, and attacked every day by the unseen world that was hostile to His love. Jesus pushed all that to the side when He pushed aside the rock in the garden and walked out of His tomb. He knew we would be savaged every day, so He wanted to give us something worth fighting for, worth struggling over, worth pressing on towards.

That was then. This is now. Here and now, we're still alive, and since we woke up today, we GET TO fight the good fight again. To ask forgiveness for yesterday's sins while giving praise for a new day today. Then we get up, look forward, and press on.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 13:10, 1 Timothy 6:12, Philippians 3:13.

Lord I need you and struggle for You. Abide with me, strengthen me, forgive me, and teach me again today Your better ways.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 19 February 2020

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12-14 (EHV).

We're each still pressing on to take hold of heaven, to win the prize for which God Himself in Jesus Christ called us. And that's tough. We get to be part of eternity the second we accept Christ's gift. When we believe, we're sealed as part of it now. Only we can recant of it; only we can lock ourselves into hell by rejecting it after. As far as Jesus is concerned, our eternity with Him is guaranteed.

And yet we still strain. And yet we still try to hammer in differences between pressing on to grasp forever and the fact that we win that prize of heaven because He already won it for us. That He's running with us in our life-race, straining toward the finish line of this mortal life. That while He's in us in our race, He's actually WITH us every step, every strain, every moment.

Even the awful ones. He was with Ryan Newman the other night when Newman lost control of his car at Daytona. Thankful, Mr. Newman will live to fight another day. He knows that, in any race, there are many competitors but only one winner. Even when Jesus goes with every racer, how we run each race matters. That's a good thing because this life is never easy. In fact, Jesus tells us we WILL strain, we will struggle; that nobody who clings to this world is fit to serve His Kingdom.

And some days truly are harder than others. Ask Ryan Newman. Ask my co-worker who is in hospice up in Washington state. Ask anyone who has ever lost their belongings in a fire, storm, or bankruptcy. Some days of struggling make it hard for us to forget the world and press forward, no matter what, towards a heavenward goal. Satan thrives on that, thriving on dividing us from Christ, from His promises. The evil one wants us to consider that this world is as good as it gets, that anything we can have here right now is so much better than what we may get at some future, undetermined date.

Don't believe it. Keep racing. Let's keep our eyes on Christ and His resurrection because He guarantees that we've already won even as the race helps us improve. That it's a goal to keep pressing for.

For further reading: Luke 9:62, 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews 6:1, Philippians 3:13.

Lord Jesus, run my race with me, and strengthen me to press onward for You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 20 February 2020

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Philippians 3:15-16 (EHV).

Love differently because, when we mature, we get to and we can. We get to love differently because God 'has our backs,' and because He has made it possible to already be part of eternity. We get to do this because He blesses us with lives in which we experience His grace in a multitude of ways.

I'm 53 and I don't think about matters of faith the way I used to. I guess that means I'm getting old (and, no, I won't use the phrase "back in the day") because I'm seeing things differently. The older I get the easier it becomes to acknowledge that God is God and I'm not, that I don't have all the answers, that while most of my life is probably behind me the best parts of it are still to come. I'm content and know I've been richly blessed, even in small things, in ways I just don't deserve on my own.

Enough about me; what about you? Where are you in how you view your faith? Has life made you look at things differently, rely on Christ more or less? Has experience illuminated some things about your belief in Jesus that you hadn't considered before? Or are you wandering?

Wanna know a secret? It's great for us to acknowledge what we believe, but what we believe is tiny compared to God's grace, His mercy, and His revelation. It's helpful for us to know more about the Christian faith: the inter-connected meanings in the New and Old Testaments, the authenticity of the life of Christ, how science and archaeology and philosophy and human history all point to the truth of God in nearly everything we are and have here on the Third Rock. That's all fine; that's all good.

Yet what's greater is that God puts it all in perspective. That viewing everything about our world through the lens of God's word helps us take a new view of things we know so well. What's greater is simply being in praise and awe of Him. Simple thanks, simple repentance, simple honesty with Him: these things Jesus asks for and builds in us the longer we live through Him. He could smite us instead. The same touchy-feely Jesus proclaimed in so many churches today is actually the same war-eagle Jesus who smote the Egyptians and wiped out Israel's enemies. We deserve that too, but, instead, He grants us a better way. The older I get, the more I see this is so.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6, Galatians 5:10, Ephesians 1:17, 1 Thessalonians 4:9, Philippians 3:17.

Mighty, loving Lord, thank You for letting me live longer in You.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 24 February 2020

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. Philippians 3:17 (EHV).

Let's imitate Paul in how we think, live, and worship. More than that, let's imitate Jesus in how we think, love, and live.

And let's admit it (again): we stink at modeling Jesus (and Paul). Jesus is upright and moral; I'm not, even as I know I'm forgiven. Jesus judges against His standard of loving justice; I'm just 'judgy.' Jesus is kind; I've been a jerk. Jesus forgives EVERY sin, even the little ones I've forgotten (because, news flash: there really is no such thing as a little sin. Sin is sin. It's all rebellion against the Lord). Jesus loves perfectly; I love conditionally, even the people I love most.

So when someone (like me) asks me to follow Jesus better and join together in living better for Christ, I immediately know I have a lot of work to do. I'm convicted by it; I see my own sins of the past and want to do better now. Just yesterday, I found out that a long-time friend on Facebook (and in my personal circle as well) had de-friended me. This is someone I have known for years. Whether it was an accident or on purpose I don't know but it made me wonder: did they see me or harsh things I've said online or things that are un-Christian and decide they'd had enough? Would I want to see myself from that person's point of view and, if I did, would I like who I saw? Would I maybe not want to be friends with me, either?

Let's be real: being de-friended online isn't a big deal. But since all things serve Jesus, maybe this incident is a good thing. Another news flash: those sins of the past and my failures or unkind words? They're in the past. Jesus has forgiven them. Who knows what hostile effect, what harm I've done, that I can't undo? What should define me now is Christ alone. In order to cleave better to Him, I (and maybe we) need to do a better job on keeping my eye on Him, on those who model His behavior. That doesn't mean compromising who we are (unless who we are compromises our faith). And that doesn't mean not taking a stand (unless that stand makes you stand between Jesus and someone else). But it does mean watching Him and those who live out His behaviors and then changing how I think and act in response. It means real repentance. It means honest change and patience and caring.

Maybe it's a bigger deal than it seems.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 4:16, 1 Timothy 4:12, Philippians 3:17.

Lord Jesus, teach me today to better model my thoughts and actions after Yours and those of Your devout followers. And help me to see myself through someone else's eyes.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 25 February 2020

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Philippians 3:18 (EHV).

This is a verse that gives me pause, makes me stop and think “am I genuine?” The promise from Jesus of eternal salvation is unbreakable by anyone but us. He guarantees us a place with Him forever when we say we believe. NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Yet the devil sows doubt in us, exploiting our sins to try to turn us away from Christ. “Did God really say?” is a quote as old as Eden but it still works on us today. The devil wants us to repudiate our salvation.

Have my thoughts, words, or actions compromised my faith so that Jesus would turn away from me and say, “you broke your promise to me?” I’ve often mentioned the story of Billy Graham where an interviewer asked him if he would hear Jesus say “well done good and faithful servant” when he died. Graham’s response: “I’d like to, but I don’t think I will.” Was that self-effacing humility or genuine doubt? Maybe it was a little of both. But, to be honest, it’s a question we each probably worry about. Have we been faithful enough? Was our belief in Jesus real enough? Am I good enough? Have I done enough?

You know the answer. On your own, no, no, no, and no.

There is no “enough.” “Enough” happened on that cross. Enough was what Jesus paid so that you and I don’t have to think about “enough.” Our works, our good thoughts, our best of intentions aren’t enough to purchase a ticket to eternity with Jesus. That’s not how it works.

How it works is that we believe in Jesus and He’s enough. Everything to make that belief mean something was already done by Him. The ONLY thing we bring into the equation is ourselves. But that’s how He designed things; that’s how He wanted them and arranged them. Have we done enough? Am I genuine? The better question is, “why bother asking?”

To Jesus we are enough. The same Jesus who is the Alpha and Omega and the center of all things in the universe touches our hearts by saying, “I’m all you’ll ever need.” Sure, Satan will try to lead us astray; he works through people who may not even realize they’re working for the dark one. Yet the light of the world overcame that darkness thousands of years ago. He’s still shining today.

Did God really say He is enough? Yes, He actually did. And that’s where the questioning ends.

For further reading: Acts 20:31, Romans 8:39, Galatians 6:12, Philippians 3:19.

Lord Jesus, YOU are enough. You are all I could ever want or need or hope for. Only in You are light and life.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 26 February 2020

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. Philippians 3:19 (EHV).

There's an ugly truth that we need to talk about: not everyone will end up in heaven. It's true. It's not Dave Terry saying it: it's the Bible. Jesus talked about hell, damnation, and eternal punishment over sixty times in the Gospels. Later on, in verses like verse 19, Paul expands on it.

Yet Jesus talked so much more about heaven, the kingdom of heaven, and the love of. Indeed, if you read Christ's words about hell in their context, you see they were said as teachable points; as lessons that contrasted the mercy of God. It's not a "do this or else" proposition: it's "God loves you so much more so why choose any other way?"

Yet now that we've gotten past the "Jeopardy" part of our reading (where we can pass around trivia), we can't gloss over an important fact: Jesus means what He says. He means that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that nobody goes to the Father except through believing in Him. He didn't say things just for effect or to hear Himself talk: He meant them.

That means He meant the part about eternal punishment for rejecting Him. It's uncomfortable for us to acknowledge, but it's true. I'm in a men's Bible study by David Platt about how something has to change. We have to find ways to get the Gospel out to the world because the world desperately needs it. Because if we don't, then many, many billions of people may be damned to hell. He who died to live to prove He is enough for us also wants those unknowing billions to live with Him, too. They matter.

"But but but," you may think, "God wouldn't condemn someone who doesn't know Him, would He?" Yes, He may very well. A friend of mine (who is a pastor) told me that he wouldn't be surprised if God didn't find a way to rescue even those who were never introduced to Christ in this life. That's most of humanity. I believe that now, too; at least I'm hopeful it's true. Yet if it isn't, if He insists on what He said about being the only path to a heavenly eternity, then we're wasting time debating this point of trivia as well.

If Jesus means it – and we have every reason to believe He does – then we had better get crackin' soon. There's no time to waste in sharing that Jesus loves us. That He forgave everything. That anything except Him isn't of Him. There's no time to lose in sharing the truth that eternity doesn't have to be hell. Because Jesus means it.

For further reading: Ephesians 2:19, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 12:22, Philippians 3:20.

Lord Jesus, You mean Your words. They are truth. Let me share You with someone today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 27 February 2020

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Philippians 3:20-21 (EHV).

You're part of eternity now even if you don't think so. There's a spot for you waiting in heaven beyond this life, yet it's guaranteed to you now. It's like Jesus put His credit card on deposit at the best hotel anywhere. More than that, the king of a distant land came to you and I and gave us the keys to His Kingdom. He invited us to live well here and then join Him when we're done where we are.

More than that, we'll be in a glorious body. Last time I looked in the mirror, a middle aged fat man looked back at me and reminded me that I'd be in better shape if that reflection shed about fifty pounds or more. Come heaven, this chubby self I now call "me" won't be chubby (or maybe it will be). It will be made perfect, in whatever for Jesus has deigned it will be.

Maybe that's happening right now. Maybe Jesus is using these days we're living in right now to refine us here on the fallen Third Rock. He's already forgiven our sins. He's already purchased eternity for us. He's already sent His Spirit into our lives to re-shape us and motivate us. Maybe part of this Spiritual transformation actually is showing itself in physical ways.

Maybe, actually, is true. If you don't believe me, think about reflecting Christ's kindness to others. That's a physical manifestation of a spiritual lesson. Think about wanting to take better care of yourself; perhaps you've heard of the biblical concept that our bodies are God's temple. Consider turning away from destructive behaviors to better your place in life...some in the church call that "repentance."

You see: it's true. It's true because Jesus spoke only truth. Yes, He spoke the truth about damnation for those who refuse to know Him. There's no denying that. Yet it's also undeniably true that He spoke more of love and of our place in His Father's Kingdom. Of how He was preparing places for us there. Of how He has the power to forgive sins and change hearts. That means transforming our bodies, both through hard work here and glorious miracles in the time to come. That means living in eternal ways on a mortal earth because eternity matters most. And that means trusting that Jesus has everything under control, always, even when the world seems to be careening out of bounds. Even if I'm chubby.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 6:19, Ephesians 2:19, Colossians 3:1, Philippians 3:21.

Lord Jesus, everything is indeed under Your control. Transform me now, I pray, to serve You best here. Then welcome me into my glorious being in Your paradise after this life.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 2 March 2020

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! Philippians 4:1 (EHV).

You don't have to stand tall but you do have to stand up. That's a movie line, of course, because I love quoting movie lines. They're easy to remember and they're sound bites; snippets of out-of-context wisdom. This one about sums up Philippians 4, verse 1. It's great advice.

Tell me: who is the most influential person since the year 1900? Who, by their words or actions, has been alive since 1900 and has affected the world the most? Yes, Jesus Christ would be the first, logical choice; it would also be the 'catechism answer.' An easy way out. There are some pretty obvious choices: Winston Churchill; Adolf Hitler; Vladimir Lenin; Martin Luther King; Gandhi. Those are major people, who said and did big things (even if some were evil). But there are other, more obscure choices like Gavrilo Princip, who murdered Franz Ferdinand and ignited the tension that soon led to World War 1. Or there's Philo Farnsworth, who invented television. There's Jonas Salk, who cured polio or Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin. Or there are even forgotten names like Georges Melies, John Dewey, Kemmons Wilson, John Sherman, Jane Addams, or Robert Watson Watt; look them up to learn what they each did. Who is the most influential human to have lived since the year 1900?

Or maybe it's someone closer to home for you? Your mother or father; or one of your grandparents. Maybe a teacher, or a mentor, or a friend who died young? To you, who's the most influential person? It depends on what they mean to you.

Paul might say that such a person would be someone who stood firm in the Lord. Lenin stood firm on a great many things, but he rejected the Lord and has been rejected as evil. Ditto Hitler, Stalin, Chairman Mao and all the other dictators who shaped the last one hundred twenty years. Improbable as it may seem today, two thousand years from now people may remember those evil men as murderous novelties of history. They'll simply be trivial; dead and buried relics.

Two thousand years after Jesus and we're still testifying about His life then and now. Good people still stand up for Him everywhere. Evil people spend an eternity in hell for their choice to reject the Lord, yet those who stand for Christ today enjoy an eternity of peace now and after this life concludes. Paul's words still encourage us to stand up for Jesus, then stand firm in His faith. We do so for Christ, and for each other, no matter who else influenced us most.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:13, Philippians 4:2.

Lord Jesus, I'm standing today for You. Be my courage, my words, and my heartbeat today and always.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 3 March 2020

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Philippians 4:2-3 (EHV).

Is your name in the book of life? What is this book? According to Revelation, the Book of Life is indeed a large book that, as a set of names, spells out those who believe in Jesus. If we accept Revelation as a recording of visions, then let's simply accept the Book of Life as that set. It may be a metaphor or it may be literal; at the moment, we have sufficient information. What matters more is that the Lord knows who is for Him and who isn't. That's the bottom line.

How do you get your name written in the Book of Life? You know the answer: repent and believe in Christ. How do you keep it there? Answer: that really isn't up to you.

It IS up to you whether or not you choose to keep believing. Faith is indeed a choice; we choose to follow Christ (because He first came to us). We choose to say, "I believe" and to pursue godly living over other choices in the world. We choose whether or not we let our faith grow stagnant and cold, or whether we let ourselves simply drift away with the whims of this life. It is up to us what to do, what to believe, about these things.

Yet it isn't up to us whether or not our names are ones about whom Jesus says, "I know you." He is fully in control of this; only He is the judge of whom He will recognize as sheep and who He'll see as goats. Once Christ writes our name on His list, nothing can take it off. He won't blot it out. Satan or storms or even sins can't erase it. Nothing can remove it. Only we can choose to remove our names, yet He promises He won't remove them if we overcome the world and cling to Him.

That may take many forms; let's not try to list them all here. Yet let us indeed say that coming back to pleases Him. The prodigal returned and the family celebrated; Christ said there are celebrations in heaven when a lost soul returns. Those lost souls are written in Jesus' book. Thus, perhaps it doesn't matter as much whether or not the Book of Life is a literal thing or not. What matters is being known by the Lord as one of His own. That comes from the heart.

For further reading: Revelation 20:12, Philippians 4:4.

Lord, I pray You will know me, that my name is written in Your book of life because I believe in You and You alone.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 5 March 2020

Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Philippians 4:5 (EHV).

While we're rejoicing, let's keep it in perspective. We're to rejoice always, and the closer we get to Jesus, the easier that becomes. He exudes joy; He is love; He gives peace. Those are all the ultimate reasons to celebrate "bigly."

Um, let's not let those things get in the way of gentleness or self-control. Those Galatians fruits of the Spirit? As mentioned yesterday, they're evidence that Jesus has taken up residence in our hearts. When we experience God through His Son, we're overwhelmed in one way or another. He doesn't just drip living water into our hands: He turns on the spigot full blast.

But how should we respond? Honestly, to be sure, and earnestly. Even vigorously, lively. Yet in all these reactions, we should let gentleness rule the moment. We should let His peace remake our hasty attitudes. Instead of a hair-trigger response, we should each let a Spirit-led contentment show through all we do. Our smiles, our demeanor, our words and actions: the best response to a skeptical world is gentleness on display for all to see. It's possible to be excited for Christ without being raucous.

But (as Will Kemp would say) that reminds me of a story Jesus told. Remember when He was entering Jerusalem for the last time, and some Pharisees were imploring Him to silence the "Hosanna"-shouting throngs? Jesus' response: if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out. Message? There's a time and a place for excitement. In a rally, yes. In a quiet room with others? Not so much.

In most places and at most times, we should let gentleness lead the way. Calm demeanor conveys inner strength. I think about Robert E. Lee, perhaps the most talented of all the generals in the Civil War. He could be known for a furious, volcanic temper when pushed too far. But for most of the time, Lee was known for having a calm, controlled, almost gentle demeanor even when preparing for battle. Think about Martin Luther King, who stared down the hatred of bigots with faith and peace. Think about Mister Rogers, who taught deep life lessons to children and adults alike while displaying a countenance that could only be described as gentle.

All three of these great men were committed followers of Christ. And they let His peace and gentleness guide their lives. I'm sure they're rejoicing in heaven today where there's no longer any need to restrain themselves. Yet until we join them there, our best bet is to quietly rejoice most of the time so that Christ's message of forgiving peace might best take root in others.

For further reading: Psalm 119:151, Psalm 145:18, Luke 19:40, Galatians 5:22-23, Hebrews 10:37, Philippians 4:6.

Savior Jesus, I'm not usually quiet and gentle. Help me, today, to be gentler for You to better reach other people.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 5 March 2020

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Savior Jesus, I'm not usually quiet and gentle. Help me, today, to be gentler for You to better reach other people.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 9 March 2020

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6 (EHV).

Two thousand years ago, Paul was giving us advice and direction on how to handle this particular Monday. Here in March 2020, the country is beginning to worry about COVID-19. Our media and our politics are trying to ramp this up into a full-fledged panic. Some stores are emptying of some essentials and that's building a mob mentality. The virus itself seems to be doubling in lethality every week which means, here in the US of A, that there may soon be thousands per week dying, many thousands more infected (with this low-grade cold). All that seems to have no end in sight because we don't know when the virus will peak despite the coming change in seasons and herd immunity. Katie bar the door: woe is us.

Today, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Yes, I mean that. I really, really mean that (even the Sally Field voice in my head saying those words means that). Two thousand years ago, Paul laid down exactly the right words that sheep headed to the media-encouraged slaughter need to hear.

Want to stop the panic? Pray. Ask for God's guidance. Take what's really scaring you, what's really making you anxious, what's really worrying you to Jesus. Today. Now. When you're in line to buy hand sanitizer and toilet paper and water and all those things you would ordinarily buy anyway, close your eyes and ask for His presence. Be honest and dig deep. If you're scared of getting sick – and who isn't? – then tell Him that and ask for Him to protect you, to heal you, to help others as well. If you're worried about someone who is sick – with this stupid virus or something else more, um, ordinary – then talk with Jesus about it.

We get to take our prayers, thoughts, requests, objections right to Jesus without a filter. We get to talk to the one who created us, abides with us, redeemed us, and guides us about everything that's on our hearts. Now, when some folks want to spin the world out of control, we should be doing it more than ever and in every way.

This isn't to shame you into doing something you haven't done as much. And it isn't to scare you about rising sickness numbers or falling market ones. It's to invite you, in the middle of a crisis, to come home and pray. To pray where you are and to do it as you will. To seek Jesus' help now. He's ready. Are you?

For further reading: Ephesians 6:18, 1 Timothy 2:1, Philippians 4:7.

Lord Jesus, we pray to You to help us in this need. Keep us from getting sick, ease our peoples' worries, move in our lives with Your peace.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 10 March 2020

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7 (NJKV).

I like how the New King James Version of the Bible translates this verse, especially verse 7. It's a very great comfort today, when the media is hyping up all doom and gloom.

The peace of God, which surpasses ALL of our understanding of it – which is deeper and wider and more meaningful and more immediate than anything we can comprehend – THAT will guard us against anything of this world because it is from and of and through Jesus Christ.

Take that, coronavirus. Take that, doom and gloom media, stock market, and Twitter. Take that, worry and stress.

We must be anxious about nothing because Jesus has our six. We must take what we think and say and believe to Him daily, regularly, submissively, but confidently, trusting that He's listening and answers us and gives us peace as we need it to get us through. We must believe when understanding just doesn't 'get it' about God's peace because His peace is an illogical thing in a logical world but is more powerful than this logical world.

Because when you strip away the 'logic' of this world, you see that God's illogical peace (and our illogical belief in it) is actually the only logical, reasonable thing there is. The 'logos' that makes the natural world go around IS dysfunction, decay, and destruction. It's chaos. We're fallen here and this world is fallen because of sin: our sins, the sins of our ancestors; sin.

But in the face of a world of sin there is Jesus Christ, who is the cure for the common sin. Jesus gives peace when we are worried. Jesus gives confidence when we're stressed. Jesus gives clarity when we question. Jesus gives hope when we despair. It isn't that Jesus is the band-aid that we slap onto every wound. It IS that Jesus lives through us especially when we are faced with terrible things. We don't understand how He does this; we don't have to.

We don't have to because His peace surpasses our understanding; it's next-level. His peace at work in us and through us gives us the courage to face whatever is in front of us.

That's good to know because things will probably get worse before they get better. No matter what happens, I will – we can – face it with the peace of Christ in our hearts to guide.

For further reading: Isaiah 26:3, John 14:27, Ephesians 4:19, Philippians 4:8.

Lord Jesus we need Your peace in our lives more than ever! Ours is a world of fear-mongering and anxiety. Overcome that because you're way beyond that. Teach us and abide with us today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 11 March 2020

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. Philippians 4:8 (NJKV).

I had a bad day yesterday. It was a bad day at work, compounded by a day of bad news, made worse by the matter of being at home alone. Woe is me? No, not really, but even as a believer in Jesus, we have bad days.

At work, I had been chastised for work I had never done before on a moment's notice, without preparation, and with minimal guidance. I had made several small but correctible errors yet the subsequent upbraiding from my manager struck me hard. By the end of the afternoon I was both angry and agitated, despairing and depressed. It kept me up last night.

Then, yesterday, I learned that a co-worker died last week. We weren't close; in fact we barely knew each other. But her death hit me as unfair, cruel. Not more than an hour or so after learning that, another friend informed me that, just the day before, her own daughter had also died. That really shattered my mood because, while I never met her daughter, my friend and I worked closely together for several years and I consider her dear. Death goes beyond simple cruelty: it is hostile to all we love.

Last, I'm alone at home. My wife and our temporary resident daughter and grandchildren are gone for the week. It's spring break, so we all agreed they should go out and enjoy themselves. I'm glad they are, but on such a tough day, I feel left alone. Yes, I know Christ never leaves us fully alone, yet I believe even Jesus must sympathize when our feelings get the best of us.

On days like these, Paul's words of advice for us to meditate on what is good, pure and righteous are both hollow and uplifting. In the middle of my dark mood, they seem like sauce for the goose; a waste of time given my gloomy circumstances. Yet that's only the evil one attacking me. In darkness, even a dim candle shines brightly. In my darkened mood yesterday, Paul's advice to remind me to focus on the better angels of Christ's nature is actually what I need to hear most. Word by word, little by little, the light they cast brightens over the gloomy dark. Thought by thought, they replace the dark with something much better.

And that's the strength to start again. It's Jesus' strength.

Please pray for the families of Marci Crawford and Janice Blankenship. Pray for comfort, God's peace, and balm in this time of grief.

For further reading: Philippians 4:9.

Lord Jesus, grant Your peace to my friends' families today. Shine Your light into their lives to overcome the darkness. And in mine and ours as well.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 12 March 2020

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:9 (NJKV).

The peace of God is with us.

Starting in verse 4, Paul blesses his friends with the peace of God that surpasses our understanding as they display gentleness while avoiding anxiety and what results from it. Then, here in verse 9, he blesses them with God's peace as they meditate on the good things of God. He must want them (and us) to understand that God's peace is present with us.

That's good to know, isn't it, especially in a world turning itself upside down over a virus? After all, these words were written at a time when it was common for villages to shun, even kill, people with leprosy (which is cured by modern antibiotics); when cholera, typhus, or dysentery could wipe out a city in days; when there were no blessings of medicines or sanitation to prevent and cure such things. They lasted through the Black Death that killed 60% of Europe (because people didn't know about hygiene and fleas). They persisted through the 1918 Spanish Flu that came and went in a year but killed more people than World War I. They will be true when this passes by as well. In the meantime, they'll get us through and provide encouragement when we need it...because He will actually abide with us.

Don't lose sight, too, of Paul reminding us to put faith into practice. Let's not just believe in Jesus: let's do something with it. Now is the time for us to show people our faith by showing them our works because of it. The other night, I was talking with a friend who reminded me that Martin Luther exhorted Christians (during outbreaks of disease) to continue ministering to others out of Christ's love. Care for people in real ways and share the medicine of Jesus. If someone is sick, find out what you can do to help them...bring groceries, cook them a meal, help with laundry or cleaning; anything. Yes, we should be preventive and cautious in how we conduct ourselves. But we MUST NOT allow fear or even government edict to prevent us from carrying out our faith in Christ by helping people who need it.

And in it, through it, God will be giving us His peace as we work to help each other get by. Today I'm praying that, when the crisis has passed, our world will be able to look back and see how God blessed us richly by the works and faith we believers can share as we served each other through it. Sin is a disease, too, and disease is a result of sin. God Immanuel is stronger than either.

For further reading: Romans 15:23, 1 Corinthians 4:16, James 2:18, Philippians 4:10.

Lord God, abide with us and grant us Your peace to better serve You by serving each other.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 16 March 2020

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. Philippians 4:10 (NIV).

Today, show your concern for your fellow man. You know where we are, what's happening. Our world is in Coronavirus panic right now. God help all those who are infected, sickened, or dying from it. God's peace to those grieving ones lost to the virus. You and I probably have opinions about the virus and our world's reactions to it but let's table those for a few minutes and move on to something more important:

We get to help now. We are the church of the living Christ who wants all mankind to live. Some of our sisters and brothers are in need, and we can do something about it. We get to help and we get to do it in the middle of a worldwide crisis.

Paul would understand this. His world knew pandemics though they didn't call them by that word. They were just diseases; plagues and pestilences that appeared for reasons they didn't fully understand. But Paul would understand both praying out of concern AND taking the opportunity to follow through on that concern. Wherever he went, Paul worked to support himself (he was a tent-maker), but he also encouraged the churches he planted to support him and each other through offerings and material support (food, housing, etcetera). It was for their benefit, not his.

He would understand the predicament we're in and might even echo what I'm saying here. We should indeed keep praying for each other. We should bring those concerns to our living God who hears them and acts in His glorious way. No matter what we're going through, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding is in us and with us. More people need that.

But let's take that concern a step further. Let's not just talk about church: let's be the church...today. I've been challenging Facebook friends to call me for a few days now. If you're in North Texas, call me if you need help doing anything: running errands, helping you clean, get meds, run kids, whatever. If you need help, message me and I'll help you.

I'm challenging you to share that same thing. Sure, be prudent and take care of yourself; don't do foolish things. But beyond that, have faith that our Lord is stronger than some unseen virus and that He will protect us as we help our fellow women and men who need help. Pray first, then lace up your boots and get in the battle. Harder times than these are coming. Get involved. Check on neighbors. Volunteer at a church; check online for groups where you can help, even the Red Cross. Comply with civil guidelines but let's be bold in Christ. Today; now.

For further reading: Esther 4:14, 2 Corinthians 11:9, Philippians 4:11.

Lord Jesus, show me someone or way I can help today!

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 17 March 2020

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. Philippians 4:11 (NIV).

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul also writes “godliness with contentment is great gain.” Those are powerful words that illuminate both what Paul is saying here in Philippians 4 AND what’s going on in our world today?

Here in the good old US of A, have you been to the store lately? Have you seen what hoarding and panic and “me-first” and, yes, stupidity look like? Christ (through Paul) tells us to be content with what we have. I suppose there are many, many people who are now content with a closet full of Charmin or a trunk full of hand sanitizer. I sort of hope they’re stuck with it when all this ends soon. I also know many more folks who know things will be just fine.

No matter where you are, however, it doesn’t seem like we’re very content, either to live in want or to live in plenty. And let’s keep it real: here in the land of prosperity, we aren’t really living in want. We’re in danger of temporary shortages because of foolish panic, but, so far, there aren’t that many people who are lacking much of anything.

So how do we get back to that “being content whatever the circumstances?” Maybe we should take a cue from Paul, who denied himself most material comforts and rested his pride in being thankful for whatever he was given. Yes, he encouraged his friends in churches all around the Mediterranean to give generously so that people like himself could continue their work. Yet Paul also understood that it was Christ, not others, who ultimately determined Paul’s contentment.

That knowledge opened wide the door to peace. After all, it becomes easier to live through almost anything when you realize that this Jesus has your back. This Jesus, who happens to be God Almighty Himself and the Savior of all the world, takes a personal interest in making sure people like you, me, and the Apostle Paul have what He knows we need. Sometimes that’s a lot; sometimes not so much. It ALWAYS includes Himself.

No matter what’s happening, it becomes easier to remember we can be content because God will provide...because He always does. He is providing now, even when things are getting scary. Remember: many, many more times in history were far scarier than now. Think AD70 in Jerusalem; or the 1300s in Europe during the Black Plague. Think April of 1861, or July 1914; there are only a few people left who would remember that. Think December 1941, or October of 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. God was with people then. He’s with us now. Let’s be content with that and the rest will all fall into place.

For further reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-8, Hebrews 13:5, Philippians 4:12.

Lord Jesus, I’m content with You. All with which You bless me is Yours to give.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 18 March 2020

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:12-13 (NIV).

Read verse 13 and read it again. Then read it one more time. It's the secret to success. It's the secret to overcoming the panic, shortages, and, well, stupidity of our world during this Wuhan virus fracas.

We can do all things, in plenty or in want, through Jesus Christ, who gives us strength.

Take that coronavirus. Take that over-reacting governments. Take that panickers. God bless all of them (except the virus, though God is working through that, too). But they don't stand a chance against Christ, who gives us strength to persevere and overcome them.

Sure, it's easy to say that now, when the shortages on the shelves are just because of selfishness. The shelves will be re-stocked soon...or maybe they won't be! Let's read these verses again in a month if or when things begin to get tough. When people are anxious; when fresh food supplies run low or run out. Let's say them again when people start marching for an end to the shutdowns and a return to normalcy. Let's say them if this mindlessness degenerates into violence or, worse, war.

Yes, let's say them again then because, then, they'll be just as true as they are today.

We can and will overcome the fear, panic, and madness that are gripping our world through Christ who gives us strength. Even in times of scarcity and war, we can rest content knowing that, even then, Christ will provide us with what He knows we need. In times of plenty, we get to rejoice that He has given us so much that we can share it abundantly. In times of need, we get to rejoice that He is still providing for us through the kindnesses of each other.

We've got this, people, because He's got us. Because we can do all things through Him who gives us strength.

Not just strength of rhetoric and words: real strength. Real strength of character to resist the temptation to hate or hurt, to clash, to resort to what is worst about humanity. Christ gives us real strength to cling to His better ways, to share them and foster and grow them in others in similar predicaments. We'll need that strength in the coming days. It's good to know it's sure.

Read that verse again, and take it to the bank today. "Touch" someone with it today in a way that matters most.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 4:11, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 3:16, Colossians 1:11, Philippians 4:14.

Lord Jesus, You're with us through the chaos that's happening today. Grant us Your strength and help us to share it with people in need.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 19 March 2020

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Philippians 4:14 (NIV).

I went to the store again last night and it just made me mad. This is the United States of America. We raise more food, produce more goods, perform more services than any other nation on the planet. Yet today, shelves are empty because of hoarders, because of people panicking, because of selfishness, because of stupidity. I know: they're worried too. It shows. But for everyone who needs a can of baby formula and can't find one because a swarm of greedy locusts descended and bought 10 each, I'm left wanting to scream, 'shame on you.'

But God bless you, too. You're scared; I get it. We all do; I suppose we are all a little spooked. Like others are saying, we're in this together.

So, yes, it made me mad to see the shelves picked clean. This happens in other places, but it rarely happens here. It's senseless and doesn't have to occur. Quarantines I can understand, but hoarding simply makes me see red. Yet that's where the anger has to stop. Getting mad about it vents off the emotion, but then it does little good. It's not what Jesus would do. Besides, there's still plenty of stuff there, if you just look. There is more on the way. There will be more food, and when the crisis has passed, there will be plenty again. Even more important, in the midst of this, there are still many, many more people who are caring and sharing through the early stages of this shortage-inducing outbreak.

For those people, God bless you, too. Maybe even more.

God bless the families who want to share. God bless the people who help you when your car breaks down; who pray for you when you lose your spouse; who speak out for you when other people are talking you down; who do what Jesus might do..

Because He's God. Because He blesses people even with His righteous judgements. Because He blesses even the scared hoarders.

Perhaps the hoarders are hoarding because others around them will need those supplies. Perhaps they need the food now for some family member we know nothing about. Perhaps, instead of getting angry about what others are doing, we can be courageous and simply wish them well. No matter what someone else is doing, Christ is sharing in our misfortunes. God is still providing what we need. These things are merely temporary setbacks. Jesus is forever.

In the past, the Lord told our forefathers to be strong and courageous because He would be with us wherever we go. That includes going into Wal-Mart and Kroger and facing the shelves that other people emptied in haste. I probably didn't need those things anyway. I'll simply check again tomorrow and be thankful for whatever I find. It'll be because of Him.

For further reading: Joshua 1:9, Philippians 4:15.

Lord, thank You for always providing.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 23 March 2020

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Philippians 4:15-16 (NIV).

What are you doing to share with those in need during this Wuhan virus crisis? This isn't to guilt you over things. It's to make you ask yourself. So I'll ask it again: what are you doing to share with those in need during this virus crisis?

There were homeless people before the virus. They're still homeless. Indeed, because they don't have shelter or safe food or hygiene or medical care, they're probably more at risk than you or me. There were old people in nursing homes before this who needed cheer. Even if we can't visit in person, they're still there and still in need of something to lift their spirits. There were grudges you held, sins against you that were unforgiven, things that still made you angry many years after they happened. I'm betting those are still a thing.

You're in need and Jesus reaches out to you through dozens of methods every day. These words, your own readings, the kindness of friends and family and strangers. Moments of clarity; moments in the sun; all the 'coincidences' that seem to line up just right. Have you ever considered that maybe those are Christ's way of reaching out to you because you're in need of Him.

Hint: He does it all the time. He does it because we are in need. Not just me and you: all of us, especially right now. There are 195 countries on this planet. As of yesterday, 141 of them had COVID-19 cases or fatalities. There's a need. There are real people who really need help and encouragement now. I read yesterday that there are over a billion people at this moment who are on some kind of lockdown or quarantine. Whatever is happening, it is upending our systems and our way of life.

The church in Philippi began to share resources with Paul as soon as they heard the Good News of Jesus. They shared with him as he traveled through Macedonia, knowing his work would help spread the news of salvation everywhere. He simply needed support. So they gave it. Because God gave to them and they were grateful.

Perhaps now is our time to support others the same way. Lockdown or no lockdown, even if it's only in prayer, there are active things we can do to support the growth of Christ's church. How will you do them?

For further reading: Acts 16:9, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, James 2:18, Philippians 4:17.

Lord Jesus, show me today how I can support Your work in this world that needs You so much. If You aren't returning yet, then work through me to help someone today.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 24 March 2020

Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. Philippians 4:17 (NIV).

A Twitter friend of mine lives in Cincinnati and was riding his bike around the downtown where the streets are mostly empty...except for homeless people. The homeless have no place else to go: no home in which to shelter in place, no family to take them in, nobody to look after them if they get sick. They desire many things, I'm sure, but the even the simplest things that we take for granted – food, clean clothing, a place to sleep – are beyond their grasp. My friend said he wished he knew of a way to help them.

How about you? Do you or I wish for that? Perhaps, during this crisis, we should find a way to take food to the homeless. Maybe we should even open our homes. Imagine what God would credit to our spiritual accounts if we did that.

Yet don't get the big head thinking we can buy God's love. We can't. No, what God wants is for us to selflessly love other people in need without much thinking about what He would think of it. What God wants is for us to selflessly, even unconsciously care for each other, especially those in need, with the gifts of our hearts, our time, our resources. Go ahead and know that He'd be pleased but then leave it at that.

Look at your reflection in the mirror, then resolve to do that today. Tonight, if you've failed at doing it, look at yourself again and ask yourself why you failed; I'll leave you to your own answers. But before you take your eyes off the man (or woman) in the mirror, remind them that God loves them anyway. He loves you and me the same as he did this morning. Tomorrow, get up and honestly try again.

And thank the Lord that He gives us each other to pass around those gifts, no matter what they are. He gives us all we need to survive, then thrive. More importantly, He then gives us each what we need to share with others so that His love – His true provision – might be shared as well. Knowing this, maybe go find a homeless person and find a way to really help. And if you can't do that, then take a meal to your local ER or firehouse, where the crews are working exhausting, sometimes frightening shifts. Call up a friend and see how they're doing, maybe take them a plate of brownies (I have a great recipe if you need one). And do whatever you do in the name of the providing Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us what we need at the proper time.

My friend in Ohio might agree.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 9:11-12, Philippians 4:18.

Lord Jesus, thank You for providing for us. Empower me today to reach out in Your name to help someone else.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 25 March 2020

I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. Philippians 4:18 (NIV).

I like how Paul equates material support from his friends to a sacrifice to God. He isn't putting himself in the place of God but, instead, is commending the Philippians on their caring willingness to want to help someone. It's their attitude and not Paul's status that is the focus of the verse.

And it should be our starting point for the day. In a related verse (from 2 Corinthians), Paul alludes to our words and deeds also being a 'fragrant offering' before God. Like what the Philippians did for Paul – money, supplies, encouragement – we, too, should offer up what we say and do as a kind of worship to the Lord. What we say and do should be noticeable to others as something respectful and worshipful of our God.

Admit it: that can be a tall order when you're sheltering in place; when you're locked down in your home and forced to spend quarantined time doing unusual things to keep busy. Tedium can quickly set in and tempers wear thin. Yes, this is very much a first-world problem, but don't forget that most of the world is dealing with this same crisis. Instead of lighting a short fuse, how about we step back from that and regard what we say and do as ways to honor God?

Sick of working from home? Thank God that we can. Tired of being with your kids and family and those closest to you? Thank the Lord you're all safe. Weary of the hoarders in the store and the me-first attitude that short tempers reveal? Thank God for His provisioning anyway. God is still very, very active in what we're doing, especially now when millions of people are affected by this common crisis.

If you think about it, maybe if we used the crisis as a common way to return our focus to Him in what we think, say, and do, it could turn around our attitudes about it. That starts with the people still right beside us. We get to resolve today to spend a few minutes more talking with Jesus, then a few minutes putting His peace to work in our relationships. One step at a time, one interaction at a time, one person at a time. Whether we give of ourselves in serving others or simply talk with each other more, our words, actions, and gifts could then be regarded as fragrant sacrifices to God, pleasing to Him and noticeable to others. In that way, His Kingdom may better grow and prosper even when it's under attack.

For further reading: 2 Corinthians 2:14, Philippians 4:19.

Caring Lord Jesus, mold me today to serve You in what I think, say, and do with others. Grow Your Kingdom starting in this place.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 26 March 2020

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19 (NIV).

Think of it: whatever God is giving you, He is meeting ALL your most important needs, and He's doing it according to all He did through His Son, Jesus.

BUT BUT BUT, how can God be providing for us in disease? In unemployment? In fear? In this terrible worldwide crisis?

Have you considered that He's providing us with Himself and His physical meeting of our needs in spite of those things and not because of them? God is acting on, not reacting to, what He knows we need most.

That starts with salvation. Next comes encouragement. Then comes His overcoming Spirit.

And isn't that sometimes tough to do? I'm working with a very difficult client. They don't like our company; they don't much like me. Yesterday was a particularly tough day with both a dissatisfied client AND impatient leadership demanding immediate answers to matters that take time. In some ways, it's thrilling but it's also frustrating because I'm working out of my element and feel like I'm waiting for the next shoe to drop. It's a no-questions-allowed culture in the middle of a no-mistake project. Yesterday I felt crushed by too many conflicting priorities, too little control over my own future, and too many competing needs.

Where was God in all this? Right where He's always been. He was here, reminding me (and you) that His salvation was once for all and that He meant it. He's here reminding us that, when He saved us, He made us more than conquerors of anything that opposes us. We WILL overcome this because Christ is with us, despite the best chaotic intentions of the evil one.

Sometimes it's easy to lose sight of that, especially on tough days. Especially when the TV says that the world is coming to an end. Especially during crises. The devil is working much harder than anyone else now and, quite honestly, this is his best shot. Sure, he can do more, but he'll have to work overtime to overcome what Christ has already sealed and finished.

Salvation. Encouragement. Overcoming. Even on the bad days...ESPECIALLY on the bad days, those words mean more because the God of all time and all the universe made Himself completely known and fully intimate with us through the person, words, and resurrection of Jesus. He tells us everything about Himself in Christ, and His words resonate even louder, even clearer, when the world looks scary or we have a bad day.

More than conquerors, you see. He meant it.

For further reading: Romans 8:37, Philippians 4:20.

Lord Jesus, in You I'm made more than a conqueror to overcome and defeat anything the evil one tries. Fight for me, strengthen me to stand, and work Your Kingdom work through my hands and words today.

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Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 30 March 2020

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Philippians 4:20 (NIV).

Hello friend. There are many new people reading this blog today so please bear with me as I reiterate what the Apostle Paul said centuries ago: in all things, to God our Father be glory forever and ever.

That struck home this weekend when I found out my cousin died. I didn't know him well: we had only met a few times, but I kept up on him through my aunt. He died a tough death but, in a way, a miracle happened through him. For that, I'd like to give God glory forever and ever.

You see, my cousin was a hardcore drug user. Drugs killed him; likely a heroin-fentanyl overdose. He had spent most of the last decade living on the hard streets of Philadelphia, struggling with addiction, dependency, mental illness, and horrible things that I, in my sheltered suburban bubble, don't want to think are possible (let alone happening to someone in my family).

Yet the hand of God kept him alive for the moment he died because, when this happened, he helped many other unknown people. His mom, as his guardian, had registered him as an organ donor. Miraculously, despite decades of heavy drug use, those organs were undamaged; no trace at all of chemicals or disease. That, itself, is a miracle, and I can't help but think it was God at work through my long-suffering cousin. I don't know specifically how many organs he donated, but perhaps up to a dozen people will now live because this tortured soul's time here was complete.

Even the circumstances of his death seem God-sent. His heart must have stopped only a few minutes before the first responders found him. Either way, had he been gone for more than ten minutes or so, his organs would have been unusable. That wasn't the case. As mentioned, the end of his life gave new life to others.

How can we not give glory to God for that?

I don't know if my cousin was a believer or not. I hope he was. I hope he got to know God in the years before he died because he surely met God when this life ended. Yet I also fervently hope the Lord said to him, "look at the chance you've given those other people. I'm so glad to have you here." Pray for peace for my aunt, and her other three grown sons, and their families. Pray for God's loving healing through grief. Pray for good health for those with new organs that give new chances. But mostly, pray praise and glory to the Father for His gifts of life, mercy, and love. Rest peacefully, Cole. Your life here helped so many others.

For further reading: Philippians 4:21.

Lord Jesus, all glory to You. I pray for Your mercy for Cole, and Your comfort for his family here.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 31 March 2020

Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. Philippians 4:21 (NIV).

Did you view a church service on Sunday? Last week, our church in Frisco, Texas had done a partial online message, but this week we did a full online service. For a first-time effort, it was a success: over 75 couples showed up. With all those who attended via Zoom, there were easily over 150 people together even if it was virtually.

That's a huge blessing, you know. In the middle of both imposed and self-imposed shutdowns, brothers and sisters are together and send each other greetings in the name of Jesus. Even when Satan is on the march and working to shut down God's church, God's church finds other ways to persevere and move forward because our mission is to greet all of God's people in Christ Jesus. That's especially true today, during this COVID-induced crisis. He is still abiding with us even during fear, uncertainty, and panic. He may be even more active, considering so many in the world are, at least for now, living upside-down lives in ways we'd never imagined.

He is still our shepherd and we are still not in want. Sure, there are still shortages of some things. And, yes, the news is still trying to get us to panic. Yet God is still very much in control and watching over us, wanting to guide each of us to repentance, then His riches, so that none around us will be lost.

In all ways, He is still providing what we need – Him first and foremost – to prevail. Did you wake up? Did you eat today? Whatever your condition, are you still in functioning health? Our primary needs of spiritual triumph in Christ, then physical, hierarchy needs of survival are still being met. Christ is still the healer of our souls, then the feeder of our bodies: just like He was before this madness started.

He's still giving us new opportunities to dig deeper into Him and share Him with others. More people turn to God in times of crisis, proving the old saw true: better late than never. If this is your first time communing with Him, try doing it in prayer, on your knees. Open up your heart and talk with Him. Open up His word and let it touch your heart, then do what it says. Be the church especially outside the building.

These things are nothing new. He has sustained every generation since Eden just as He is sustaining ours now. To prevent infection, perhaps we shouldn't meet in groups in a large building for now, but thank God He gives us other ways to do so. These hard times will pass but God never will. During them, let's keep the faith and use it to encourage others.

For further reading: Psalm 23:1, Romans 2:4, 2 Corinthians 9:8, Philippians 4:22.

Lord, abide, lead, and guide us in these days. You prevail.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 1 April 2020

All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. Philippians 4:22 (NIV).

Here we are in Corona-induced shutdown and we're chomping at the bit for social interaction. Can't travel for work (if folks are still working); can't go out to eat; can't go to church; a mile-long list of "can't" seems to be the phrase of the day. Seeing as how this is April 1st, it would seem like this list of "can'ts" is a huge April Fools joke...except it isn't.

What we can do is send each other greetings in the name of the Lord. We can especially send greetings to people who are hurting through all this. Paul sent greetings (from Rome) from people who worked in the Emperor's palace. Think of that for a moment: there were Christians – followers of this new and "subversive" sect known as "The Way" – who served the Emperor of Rome, who was hostile to such things. Those people were in very real danger, yet they believed anyway. They were unknown heroes of the faith.

Just like first responders who are working exhausting hours during this crisis. Just like my friend whose father died early this week and they are stoically making plans to memorialize him after all the crisis has passed. Just like another friend who announced just yesterday that he is discontinuing his stage 4 cancer treatments because the cancer is winning and he'd rather trust God exclusively with the rest of his life. If you think about it, I bet you could send greetings from and to dozens, even hundreds, of people who are living their lives in faithful strength (and strong faith) through terrible circumstances.

Yet we don't need to suffer to benefit from greetings. I got a letter from a friend in Arizona last week that brightened my day considerably. On my work project (that just last week was wearing me down) I got a few "kudos" just this morning. Last week, I met most of my neighbors on our cul-de-sac and we were all glad to simply see other people.

If you think about it, maybe that's one of the blessings of this quarantine: we get to find ways to connect (and re-connect) with others. I can think of many people who have fallen off my radar; this is an opportunity for us to re-connect, at least greet each other and check on each other. We're going through this shared experience: let's use it to rebuild our human connections and share some Jesus in the doing.

So that's my challenge to you today. Reach out to a friend. Call your mom, dad, or sibling. Message a friend who is working hard through all this. Share a kind word in the name of Jesus today.

For further reading: Philippians 4:23.

Lord Jesus, I'm sharing Your Name of greetings, love, and peace today. Encourage me to do this with everyone, especially people with whom I haven't communicated recently.

Practical Proverbial, from Philippians, 2 April 2020

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Philippians 4:23 (NIV).

Once again we come to the end of a book. Except for Colossians, 1 Timothy, and Titus, Paul ended his letters by invoking the name of "Jesus Christ" (or "Christ Jesus" or "Lord"). So let's think about ending this book with that theme of, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

See, my friend, Gary, died from cancer a few days ago. A friend's dad, Gary courageously battled the disease for many months but it finally got the upper hand and took him. I can almost picture Satan laughing with delight, just like Don McLean sang, the day the music died.

Except that isn't what happened at all. It was the grace of Jesus. It's really God who was laughing. It's really Jesus, and Gary, standing on the other side of death, laughing a big ole belly laugh at Satan taking yet another punch in the eye. That happened because my friend believed in Jesus. He believed in Jesus enough to inspire his son to grow up to be the kind of man who would devote his life to preaching and teaching the world about Jesus. His son, Patrick, is a friend to whom I send my warmest tears and fondest prayers for Christ's peace today.

Jesus understands that, because He imparts His awesome grace on my friend's family, and all of us, and our world in general. Especially today. In the face of death all around, it matters more than ever to know that Jesus gives us His grace to be with our own spirits. What is best in us gets to show through right now, because of Him, so that God's kingdom might grow: one kind act at a time by showing His grace.

That's how it grew in Philippi. That's why Paul knew he could send prayers of Christ's grace to his Philippian friends and they would know what he was talking about. That's how we can still know today that these words God gives us in the Bible mean more than ever and are still how Christ communicates.

Another is in knowing good people of faith pass from this life to the next. It's hard to watch good friends mourn the people they love most, even when we know those loved ones are celebrating in Paradise. It hurts them. Yet all things end, even books, and even our lives here. The best we can do is listen, love generously, and pray. Pray the Lord's grace in my friend's family because in Jesus, now and later, there is real life, true peace, honest meaning, and endless adventure. There's heaven now and later. Until then, may His grace be with our spirits.

For further reading: the last verses of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Titus, Philemon, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians

Lord Jesus, all praise to You. Thank You for Your grace.