



Make Every Day Count

WEEKLY DEVOTIONS FROM THE LUTHERAN HOME ASSOCIATION
– VOLUME 1–

THE LUTHERAN HOME
ASSOCIATION



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THE LUTHERAN HOME ASSOCIATION



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Life is simply too short to keep the good news of Jesus to ourselves. Every day there is evidence of how much God loves you and every day there are people who need to hear how much he loves them too. *Every day counts.*

For more than 120 years, God blessed us at The Lutheran Home Association with a ministry to share Christ's love while also serving seniors and individuals with special needs with spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional care.

We want to care for you by providing weekly 'Every Day Counts' devotionals. Straight from God's Word, these devotionals will help you rest in and live out God's love wherever your week takes you.

Our chaplains, who share these devotions, are the lifeblood of our ministry. Since 1898, chaplains provided worship, devotions and Christian counseling to our residents and team members. They are dedicated servants who carry out our mission to share Christ's love with the souls in our care and others whose lives we touch.

We are delighted to share their words of encouragement and comfort from God's Word with you in this collection of meditations for your devotional life. This collection includes devotions to use throughout the year and includes a special section for Christian holidays.

It is our prayer you will be blessed and encouraged by these personal reflections on God's Word.

SERVANT OF THE LORD—LIGHT OF THE WORLD

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 1

The Lord said: It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

The verse we are considering is part of “The Lord’s Servant Song.” In this text, the servant of the Lord is presented, along with his mission and its results. We have the advantage of looking at this song from the vantage point of the New Testament. After hearing it, we can rejoice that this promise has been fulfilled.

The song is a brief summary of a conversation between God the Father and his servant. We have come to know this servant by a name: Jesus.

In verse three of this chapter, Jesus quotes God the Father’s promise to him, “You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory.”

In verse four, Jesus looks at his life of humility and his suffering and death. He says, “I have labored in vain. I spent my strength and came up empty, with nothing.”

In the Gospel, we see what Good Friday looked like. Despite all the good that Jesus did, all the teaching and healing, where did all of this get him? The cross!

But verse four continues, “Yet a just verdict for me rests with the Lord, and my reward is with my God.” This brings us to this wonderful promise that God the Father gave his Son and us. Jesus is indeed the King of the Jews.

His death and resurrection prove it. But this victory isn’t just for the physical descendants of Israel. It is for all nations. As a result, the servant of the Lord is the light of the world! Jesus has fulfilled this promise. Rejoice in that light. As it shines in your heart, reflect it onto others in this world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we praise you for being the light of the world. We especially thank you for seeing to it that your light is shining in our hearts. Help us reflect your amazing light in everything we say and do. Amen.

WHERE IS THE LIGHT?

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

We all have days when difficult times seem to overtake us. Your sister told you that she has to go to physical therapy to help her to recover from an accident. Your brother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer. Problems at work are causing stress. Perhaps you were hoping that the New Year could mean a “new” start for you, your family, and your business. But problems carried over. The sadness and the strife seem to be increasing.

Due to sin and our sinful nature, we live in the darkness. This world is a dark and difficult place in which to live. There are accidents, shootings, theft, and burglaries. People are mugged on their way home from work. Neighbor fights against neighbor, and an agreement cannot be reached. To be honest, we are afraid of the dark. We need light in the midst of this dark world.

Isaiah is right when he talks about “the people walking in darkness.” We are living and walking in darkness. We realize day by day that the darkness is increasing. The love is growing cold as the Lord told us. Neither schools nor churches are safe places anymore.

We worry about the safety of our families and friends. We need light in the midst of this dark world. The Lord knows that we need light. Isaiah prophesied the coming of the great light: “on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

This prophecy tells us about the coming of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. He is the Light of the world. In John Chapter 8, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” In these days after Christmas, let us rejoice in the Light that is Jesus. Let us turn from the darkness. Let us worry no more, for the Lord Jesus has come to live, to die, and to rise again to give light and life to all who believe and trust in him.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, bless us with your light and your love every day. Remind us daily to avoid the works of darkness. You are the Light that lights up our world. Help us to make use of the opportunities that you place before us to share your light. In your name we pray. Amen.

WHY ARE YOU SO HAPPY?

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 3

*Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who
were before you. (Matthew 5:12)*

Have you ever asked “Why you are so happy”? A friend of yours is smiling and humming a happy tune. You are in a bad mood, and your friend is enjoying life, smiling and singing.

You ask, “Why are you so happy? What is there to smile about?” You ask because you don’t want to miss out; you want to be happy, too.

You want to be happy. You want to feel blessed. Jesus is talking to you in the verse from Matthew 5:12. He says to you, “Rejoice and be glad.”

He then gives you the reason you can be happy and be filled with “joy” and “gladness.” He said, “Because great is your reward in heaven.”

There might be all kinds of reasons why your friend is happy, but you need to know that there is a reason why you can “rejoice and be glad” at all times. Even when nothing in your life is going the way you want it, and especially when people around you are making fun of your faith in Jesus, you can still be joyful and glad.

They laugh because you believe that the world and everything in it were created by God in six days. You are ridiculed because you confess and believe that faith in Jesus is the only way to heaven.

When you are being insulted, persecuted, and made fun of because you are a Christian, Jesus says to you, “You are blessed.”

“Blessed!” How can you be blessed if you are insulted, persecuted, and made fun of because of Jesus? Jesus says and promises, “Great is your reward in heaven.”

Jesus paid for all of your sins. He made you right in God’s eyes. You are a stranger here on Earth, but heaven is your home. So, be happy—be glad.

Great is your reward in heaven thanks be to Jesus.

*Rejoice, my heart, be glad and sing; A cheerful trust maintain,
For God, the source of ev'rything, Your treasure shall remain. (CW #443 v.1)*

ONLY JESUS “UNDOES” DEATH

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 4

For I did not look upon anything to know among you except Jesus Christ and this one crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

A young GI soldier during World War II was injured on the battlefield. An Army chaplain came to console him, but knew the soldier wouldn't make it. The chaplain asked, "Son, is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, sir," the GI replied. "What I need is someone who can undo some things for me." That's why Jesus came to this world—to "undo some things" for us. Jesus undid our imperfect lives by living his perfect life for us. Jesus undid the punishment of Hell by suffering Hell on the cross for us. Jesus undid the curse of death and turned it into the crown of life.

The GI did not need bombastic philosophy or flowery rhetoric. These concepts were valued among the Corinthians with their Greek background, but the GI did not need any of that history. He needed Jesus the only one who can "undo" sin and death. When Paul considered what he had to offer to the Corinthians, he knew the Greeks were famous for philosophy and rhetoric. So, Paul "did not look upon anything to know" among them "except Jesus Christ and this one crucified."

It's not what but with whom Paul shared and now we share. It's miraculous. When we share God's word, we share the person of Christ. We do not need philosophy or fancy words, just the real person of Jesus Christ, "this one crucified" in our place which is all that the GI needed and we now need.

Christ is the one whom the chaplain had to share by repeating God's words, the one whom Paul looked upon to share, and the one we look upon when we hear His words. Do not feel inadequate in any circle. For when you share His word, you share the person of Christ without any inadequacy as Christ is the only One who "undoes some things," which are the most urgent things for us.

Prayer: Lord God, your Word has undone the darkness in which I was born. Your Word makes my sin and death "undone." Remind me that I meet you in your Word. Strengthen me in your Word and encourage me to share you boldly. Amen.

GOD REVEALS HIS BLESSINGS!

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 5

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 30:16)

It was a no brainer! Follow God's commands and Israel would receive God's blessings. Do not follow his commands and receive God's curse. Which of these two choices do you think Israel took? You are correct! They promised to follow God's commands, decrees, and laws. Who in their right mind would choose curses over blessings? However, we know how the story with Israel goes. They did not remain faithful to their God's commands, decrees, and laws. God sent them warning after warning through the prophets, but Israel refused to listen.

They were destroyed because of it. They deserved to lose the blessings that God wanted to shower on them. God has given us a reason to follow his law. He wants to shower blessings upon us. It would seem easy for us to follow his commands, decrees, and laws. But Israel's history is human history. We see ourselves in Israel. Even though we know God wants to bless us, we like Israel have not followed God's commands, decrees, and laws perfectly like he wants. We have shown contempt for his laws by changing them to fit what we want. Like Israel, we all deserve curses from our God. What does God reveal to us? Blessings! That's how our God rolls. He reveals to the ones who deserve His curse that He has set them free through his Holy and Perfect Son. Jesus became our curse on the cross and took the punishment we deserved.

Jesus gives us his perfect record so that God would only bless us! God reveals this amazing grace to us through his word. There is no comparison to this spectacular blessing which Jesus earned for us. This blessing brings righteousness, forgiveness and eternal life. How can we show our appreciation to God for this blessing? Love the Lord, your God, and walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees, and laws not because you have to but because you want to!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for revealing your Son as our greatest blessing! Help us show our appreciation to you by listening to your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

GOD'S WORD IS THE TRUTH

by Mark Hayes, President of Ministry

Week 6

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:21)

I once was talking about the Bible with a man who considered himself an atheist. He expressed strong feelings that the Bible was a man's book that everyone twisted it however they wanted it. He had spent a career in law enforcement and had incarcerated many criminals for heinous crimes.

In court, he saw lawyers twist the words of the law to fit their clients' circumstances and watched murderers go free. From his perspective, the law had an intended purpose in the way it was written, but too many people ignored this purpose to get what they wanted.

Then I helped him make a connection to the Bible that hadn't previously occurred to him. Was it possible that the Bible really was God's book, and people sometimes distorted its truth? He allowed me to begin to share the truths of the Bible.

He soon could read the words for himself and see what was there without anyone putting a spin on the meanings within the Bible. Over time, God led him to believe that He loved him and forgave him for everything because Jesus was His substitute.

Based on the Word of God and the Bible's own merits, he now believes in Jesus as His Savior. Love, forgiveness, and sacrifice are larger than life in God's selfless act of sending His Son, Jesus, to save us. This plan amazing didn't have its origin in any human's will. Neither did the book—the Bible—that tells this story.

There is comfort in knowing that God has carefully spelled out His love for us and His miraculous plan to save us by capturing His Word in a miraculous way. He led the prophets over thousands of years to write down and share His message crafted especially for us.

Prayer: Dear Father in Heaven, in a world of conflicting ideas coming at us from every direction, we are comforted to know that everything you needed us to know was carefully written in your Word. Your message and your love remain constant. Guide us to be faithful in respecting the truth of your Word. Move us to be confident in the Gospel message contained in it. Please make your life-giving truths the priority of our lives. Amen.

JESUS—THE GIFT OF GOD IS THE TRUTH

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 7

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24)

Notice there are quotes around today’s Bible verse, which is part of a conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman. It was noon. Jesus had spent the morning walking. He had sent his disciples into town to get some food. At that time, the woman had come to the well to draw water. Jesus was resting from his journey. He asked her for a drink. This really surprised the woman. Jesus was a Jew and she was a woman and a Samaritan. Many Jewish leaders looked down on women. The Jews and the Samaritans not only didn’t associate with each other, they disliked each other. Jesus offered to give her some “living water.”

He claimed, “The water I will give her will become in her a spring of water, bubbling up to eternal life.” He didn’t have a way to draw water from the well. He certainly didn’t have the means to go to the source of the well and get some spring water directly. She was interested, though, and wanted that water.

In our verse, Jesus was pointing to a time that would be soon accomplished and now is established. He was referring to his upcoming victory after his death and resurrection. In Jesus’ day, both the Jews and the Samaritans thought their temple was the place to find God. The place, however, is not important. What is important is a matter of the heart. “God is spirit.” He is everywhere. It is not a matter of us finding God. It is Him finding us. That is exactly why Jesus came to this world. He is the One who came to seek and save.

The Father knows the condition of our hearts by nature. He knows us better than we know ourselves. In grace, he established the truth that we need to worship him. We have a thirst and need for perfection. Yet, we can’t attain it by our efforts. As sinners, we always fall short. The truth is Jesus came to lead a perfect life in our place. He also paid the debt of our sins on the cross. That is the wonderful gift of God that we now receive by faith.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we praise you for coming to this world as the gift of God. Thank you for that refreshing drink of living water that gives us the ability to worship God in spirit and in truth. Amen.

THE BLIND WILL SEE THE LIGHT

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 8

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, and along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them (Isaiah 42:16)

If a blind person is in an unfamiliar place, she or he needs time to learn about this new place. Once the new paths are learned, then memory takes over, and the path is remembered. Many years ago, I conducted a monthly worship service in a nursing facility. The pianist was a resident and legally blind. After I showed her where middle C was on the keyboard, she could play almost every hymn. She played almost as if she could see. As for us, we are lost in spiritual blindness. We walk around in the darkness of sin. We desperately need someone to intervene for us.

Left alone, we cannot find the path that will lead out of the darkness. Isaiah wrote, “I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough ways smooth.”

We can rejoice that Jesus came to remove our spiritual blindness and now leads us along the new path of righteousness. During Lent, we see our suffering Savior paying for our sins and granting us the gift of righteousness in what He did for us. Through the power of the Spirit, Jesus, our Savior, brings us from darkness into the light.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “The days are coming,” declared the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.”

We are thankful to Jesus that he has called us out from spiritual darkness and blindness into the light in Him. Without Jesus, we are lost. With him, we are saved today and forever.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, in your mercy, take away the spiritual darkness that surrounds us. Remove our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. Help us to live in your light and in your righteousness. In your name, we pray. Amen.

EXCUSE ME! I NEED SOME HELP HERE?

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 9

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28)

Who is the boss here? Who is in control? Can I talk to the person who is in charge? These are questions you might ask if you want someone fix a problem for you. You want action and you need it now. You want a person who has authority and the power to solve the problem.

What you need is a person who really understands your problem and knows how to fix it. You don't want a person who thinks he or she is better than you. You don't want to be looked down on and made to feel like you're not important. You want someone who has empathy and who cares about what is wrong.

Let us say your problem is a matter of life and death. If you don't get help, you will be lost not only now but forever. Not only that, you might not even realize how bad it is. It is not an easy fix either. You didn't even realize how complicated your problem was. You couldn't fix it yourself and tried and failed.

So, what is the problem we are talking about? Who is the person who can help? Where do we find such a person? Does such a helper even exist? Sin is the problem. None of us are perfect. We think or do things God does not want us to do and we don't do things God wants us to do. We need help.

Jesus is the helper. He is the boss who has empathy. He has walk in our shoes, lived our life, felt our hurt, felt our pain, served in our place, suffered our punishment, died our death, and buried in our place.

Jesus, the Son of Man, came to serve, and he gave his life as a ransom for each of us. Our Savior left the glories of heaven to serve you and me so we might be rich with the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. His resurrection proves that His life and death paid the ransom price for us.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for being my Savior. Help me to serve others with your love that they, too, may learn to know you as the only one who can help us with our problem of sin. Amen.

JESUS' WORDS BREATHE LIFE INTO US

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 10

Therefore, prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. (Ezekiel 37:12)

There's a saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

So, picture a valley with dry bones. What can dry bones do? Nothing. They cannot resurrect themselves. The Lord brought Ezekiel to a valley full of dry human bones. It's an ugly picture as is the reality of the despair that it makes clear.

We cannot guess the meaning of the dry bones. The Lord tells us in Ez. 37: 11 that: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'"

The Israelites had been carried off to Babylon as captives. The Lord was in their midst and said to Ezekiel what He had heard them conclude. "We are indeed cut off" and "We are never getting back to Jerusalem."

They have utterly despaired of God as they can't bring themselves back to their former lives. But as we read on, we see another picture, not a perception. This picture is reality and an incredibly comforting reality. As we look at these dry bones, they become living flesh by Ezekiel proclaiming God's word to them and the Spirit of Life flows through the words and pours His life into them.

When we hear God's Word, Jesus lives to pour His Spirit of Life into us to revive us. For the Lord says to Israel: I will put my breath in you and you will come to life." (Ez. 37:14)

So, as our text says, he opens our graves of despair and brings us up from them. Jesus, once dead in the grave, is risen. He lives to be faithful to his promise to pour out his Spirit of Life into us. That's a picture worth a thousand words.

Prayer: Lord of Life, I am a sinner when I despair of you keeping your promises to me. Then you came to save sinners. Come to me now through your Word. Lead me to anticipate that you will breathe your Spirit of life into me and revive me to trust in your promises. You live to carry them out personally to me. Amen.

LIVE REVERENTLY!

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 11

*Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially,
live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. (1 Peter 1:17)*

It can be hard to find an impartial judge. Everyone has a slight bias toward one philosophy or another. But on the rare occasion that you find a judge who just sticks to the evidence, it is refreshing.

The judge tends to gain respect from people because he or she does not take sides but instead listens to the evidence. The judge is not swayed by public opinion or ideology.

Now, apply this to the Father! He does not judge according to emotion. He does not judge based on a group. He judges each person based on his or her own merit.

The Father follows the evidence in his judgment! He will base his judgment according to his law and his interpretation of that law. Each person's work will be judged according to God's law, and he will not compare you with another. Knowing this can fill people with dread. There is no way around this judgment unless someone steps in to do something about it. Our Father chose to judge his Son in your place. Jesus was put in the hot seat for you. He was declared "guilty" for you.

Jesus did not try to defend himself but willingly took that "guilty" verdict for everyone, including you! This changes everything! Your Father allowed Jesus to free you from guilt. Your Father chose to send Jesus to hell so that you can be in heaven with him. You are strangers here. Heaven is your home!

How do you respond to this good news? Honor and respect the one who died and rose for you. By doing this, you will live reverently.

By living to honor the Lord, you will be declaring the praise of him who brought you from darkness to light, the one who brought you out of hell and placed you in heaven.

Prayer: Dear Holy Father! Thank you for giving Jesus our guilt and for giving us a new home in the glories of heaven. Help us to honor you and your Son every day as we live reverently! In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

GOD KEEPS ALL OF HIS PROMISES

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 12

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

It is never easy to say goodbye to a loved one who is dying. Sooner or later, we all are going to have to face the fact that we are dying or that a loved one is dying.

What do you say? What would you want to hear? Read the words from the Hebrews passage again. They are words of blessing and words of final greetings. They remind us that Jesus is our good shepherd who leads us through this valley of the shadow of death—our earthly life.

Jesus our shepherd paid the wages of sin in full for everyone with his holy precious blood. We can die in peace—that is, peace with God—knowing that when our lives on Earth come to an end, our eternal lives with Jesus begin in heaven. That is a promise from God. God keeps all of his promises. The believer in Jesus knows that by faith, eternal life in heaven is waiting for him or her. This is not just a nice thought; rather, it is true because Jesus lived, died, and rose again to make us righteous in God's eyes.

What do you say as tears are running down your cheeks when a loved one is dying? Remember that tears ran down Jesus's cheeks, too, when he stood by the grave of his friend Lazarus. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life to live in this world until he died again.

When Jesus brings us back to life again, it will be forever with the Lord, not to die again. This is his promise. God keeps his promises. Keep in mind the words of Jesus:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25, 26)

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, fill me with your peace knowing that I don't need to be afraid of death! I know that when I die, you will take me to heaven, where I will live with you forever. Amen.

UNDERSTAND THE COST OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Week 13

“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:38)

Before people commit themselves to something, they often evaluate the cost and commitment that will be required of them. In the verse above, Jesus helps people to understand the cost and commitment required to follow him. “Take up your cross” is a phrase often misconstrued and misunderstood. Carrying “a cross” does not mean every burden or every difficulty that we might face in life, such as health challenges, financial problems, or general trouble in the world.

“Take up your cross” means anything that I might have to endure for being a Christian. Have you ever been excluded by family members or friends because you lived your Christian faith? The ultimate end of “taking up your cross” is facing physical pain or death for your Christian faith. I doubt that any of us has experienced that, but almost every single day (not always reported), Christians around the world are being executed for their faith.

I don’t know about you, but every time I read about one of those executions of fellow Christians, I ask myself if I would be willing to put my life on the line for my faith. If you reread the verse above, notice what Jesus says about us if we are not willing to carry such a cross: “is not worthy of me.” Wow! Think about that. Jesus says that if we are not willing to carry the cross of giving up our lives or any other cross, we are not worthy to be called his child. Talk about commitment!

Is that what you committed to when becoming a Christian? Did you commit only to following Jesus when it was easy? Or did you also commit to signing up for whatever people might do to you, like they did to Jesus and other followers of his? Think of Stephen (Acts 7:5-60), who confidently put his life in God’s hands as he was being stoned to death for being a Christian. He didn’t shrink back or try to run away. Instead, he faithfully acknowledged Jesus as his Savior until he drew his last breath.

Prayer: Heavenly Father – thank you for calling me to faith in Jesus as my Savior and for making me your child! Forgive me for the times that I have not lived or that I have hidden my faith because I was embarrassed or afraid of what might happen to me. Reassure me that you are with me! I humbly ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.

THE RISEN LORD IS OUR SOURCE OF REJOICING

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 14

*"Therefore my heart is glad, and my tongue rejoiced.
My flesh also will rest in hope." (Acts 2:26)*

What a wonderful springtime verse. For those of us who live in frozen tundra areas, spring is such a great season. Things come "back to life" again. The verse is really an affirmation of that experience. But it is also much more.

This verse is part of what we often call Peter's Pentecost Sermon. The recent events in Jerusalem were still circulating among the people. An amazing thing happened during the Passover; Jesus was crucified. But the story didn't end there.

There were stories going around that Jesus had risen. Jewish leaders were saying that his disciples had stolen his body. Fifty days later, once again, the Jewish leaders were assembled in the temple.

Then, there was a sound like a violent wind and tongues of fire on the heads of those whom they knew as Jesus's disciples. They exclaimed, "We hear them declaring in our own languages the wonderful works of God."

Peter's address was an explanation of what was taking place. Explaining Jesus's death, he now pointed out that the Scriptures had foretold it.

David himself had pointed to it. Quoting Psalm 16, Peter declared that here, David was talking about Jesus.

If you look at the verses, you can say that by inspiration, David was actually quoting Jesus. Because Jesus was never shaken from his mission, his heart was glad, and his tongue rejoiced. He confidently prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"

The reason why we can make this verse our own affirmation is because Jesus made it true. He fulfilled his mission. God the Father declared his mission accomplished by his resurrection.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we praise you for making our hearts glad and for bringing a joy-filled song to our tongues. We always rest in hope no matter what is going on in our lives, all because you have risen. Help us to always declare, "The Lord has risen; he has risen indeed!" Amen.

ACTING IN FAITH

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 15

“Yes, then the Lord will establish his word.” (1 Samuel 1:23c)

1 Samuel begins by introducing us to a believing Israelite named Elkanah. Every year, he made the trip with his family to Shiloh to sacrifice to the Lord. Remember that the Israelite culture is not the same as ours today; he had two wives.

1. One wife was Peninnah, with whom he had sons and daughters.
2. The other wife was Hannah, but she couldn't have children.

This chapter shows that Elkanah was aware of Hannah's feelings. Each year, her rival would use the opportunity to show how superior she was because she gave her husband children. Even though Elkanah gave Hannah a double portion of the fellowship offering, which included a communal meal, the hurt of not being able to have children hurt Hannah deeply. No matter what her husband told her, the hurt remained.

One year when at Shiloh, Hannah left the crowd, went back to the tabernacle, and prayed from the depths of her sorrow. She made a vow to the Lord that if he granted her a son, she would give her son back to the Lord to serve him. She was praying so fervently that the high priest, Eli, thought she was drunk.

When she explained, Eli said, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel give you what you have asked for.” While Hannah made a vow, according to the Law of Moses, Elkanah could revoke the vow. God answered her prayer, and the son she asked for was named, Samuel.

The next year, when it was time to go back to Shiloh, she reminded Elkanah of her vow. She told him she wouldn't go back until he was weaned. That's when Elkanah spoke this verse. This is a good example of a believer's confidence. The Lord does establish his word by fulfilling his promises. God is in charge. He does what he says. Take time to review the life of Samuel to see how God used the answer to Hannah's prayer not only for her joy but also for his kingdom in Israel.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for establishing your word. Now, we can continue to rejoice in the victory over our sin and death that you have promised and supplied for us in Jesus. Keep establishing your word among us. Amen.

CHERISH YOUR HEARTFELT FAITH

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 16

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives also in you. (2 Timothy 1:5)

Most all of us remember our mothers very well. You and I remember the curious things our mothers said, perhaps their unique laughs, and their sense of humor, or lack thereof. My mother died 20 years ago, but her example carries on through our family. Mother was the one who kept the rules, and I am one who keeps the rules. If the speed limit sign on the highway was marked “55 miles per hour,” my mother drove 55 miles per hour. I do the same. If an event was scheduled to start at 1:30 p.m., Mother would be there with plenty of time. Never were we late for the church service on Sunday morning.

The apostle Paul considered Timothy to be his son in faith, someone for whom he cared deeply. Paul also knew that Timothy placed his faith in Jesus, his Savior. Paul had that same faith. Paul wrote to Timothy in his first letter: “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” Paul saw that Timothy’s sincere faith first lived in his grandmother, Lois, and in his mother, Eunice. That faith would help him through trials and sorrows and would lead him to rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and in eternal life in Jesus.

Cherish your heartfelt faith. My mother had a deep, sincere faith in Jesus, her Savior. She passed that example on to me. She made sure that I was baptized and then brought up in the true faith. Our mother and father made sure that our whole family faithfully attended church services, and we have served in many ways at church and in the community.

Cherish your heartfelt faith. I pray that you have a wonderful example of faith to follow in your family, from your mother, your father, your grandparents, or your siblings. I pray that you also believe in and rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and in eternal life in Jesus, your dear Savior.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for bringing wonderful examples of faith and love into our lives from mothers, fathers, and other family members. We ask you to help us to cherish and hold dear the faith you have given us through the Holy Spirit. In your name we pray. Amen.

SET APART CHRIST AS LORD!

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 17

But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. (1 Peter 3:15a)

A lot of fear exists out in the world. People fear the unknown AND the known. People fear sickness, disease, and viruses. People fear doing good deeds for others only to have those good deeds rejected.

What do you fear?

The world can be a scary place, and if you have ever read Revelation, it is not going to get better. As time moves on, things will get worse, and fear can become the norm.

How do believers react? Believers will set apart Christ as Lord. Why is this so significant for believers? Because Christ is Lord, he assured you cannot lose. You have victory over fear!

He won this victory by giving up his life and taking it up again. Think about everything people fear...those things cannot undo what Christ the Lord has accomplished for you!

No matter how many disasters you face, Jesus is still Lord. He is in complete control, and he will bring you to his side.

The devil, the world, and your sinful flesh cannot undo what Christ the Lord has finished. Your sin and guilt are gone, and Christ the Lord gifted you with his righteousness.

Heaven is open to you!

Every time you set apart Christ as Lord, you remind yourself and others that Jesus won complete and total victory over fear.

You will become a beacon of hope to those who live in fear.

Your Lord will use you to bring the victory to them. This is why you will want to set apart Christ as Lord!

Prayer: Our Lord Jesus Christ, help us to set you apart in our hearts as Lord so that we have confidence in the face of fear. Give us opportunities to point others who are full of fear to your victory. In your name we pray. Amen.

SUBPOENAED WITNESS

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 18

“And you also are going to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:7)

If you have been following the news at all, the phrase “subpoenaed witness” is used quite a bit in the last two years. With the investigations that the U.S. Congress is conducting, the people they want to question are subpoenaed. They are given notice that they are to appear, usually with a date and time. These words of Jesus may seem startling. There is no question, Jesus said, “You are going to testify.” We have been subpoenaed.

Right now you may be looking at your own Bible to see if this really applies to you. You see that it was originally spoken to the disciples. Yes, these words were first spoken to them. They were given to the disciples on the night that Jesus was betrayed. He was preparing them for the events that would take place that weekend. They had a lot of learning to do before they were ready to testify, but testify they did.

Now before you write the subpoena off as not applying to you, remember that God’s Word is given to us for our learning and equipping. Like the rest of the Gospel of John, it is given for His disciples of all time. The subpoena stands. Jesus knew his disciples weren’t ready to do this testimony at that time. But Jesus also gave this command with a promise. Verse 26 in John 15 reads: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.”

These words of Jesus are the Gospel for Pentecost. This is the day the church on earth celebrates the literal fulfillment of this promise. The Holy Spirit, the Counselor, still works through the Word. He equips us. Just as the Spirit enabled the original disciples to testify, He does the same today. So, Jesus’ subpoena is there for you and me. The Spirit gives us the ability to testify. Rely on Him. Testify boldly!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I stand amazed that You would call me as Your witness. On my own, I have and would continue to ignore that subpoena. Thanks for sending the Holy Spirit for creating saving faith in my heart. Lead me to be a faithful student of Your Word so that the Spirit can equip me more and more to be the witness You have called me to be. Amen.

WHAT TESTIMONY DO YOU HEAR FROM GOD'S WORD?

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 19

“God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11)

By definition, testimony is a statement or a declaration made by a witness under oath in a court, usually in response to questioning. At one time or another, you and I have all testified in some way, shape, or form—maybe in a courtroom. When you and I use the word testify, a statement of truth is expected in response. In today’s world of “fake news,” truth can be very difficult to determine.

How can we know that what God says is the truth as His Word cannot be disproven? Jesus said to his Father concerning his disciples, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17: 17). What testimony do we hear from the Word? This: “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” You and I, however, often have trouble believing God’s Word. Our sinful human nature gets in the way. Our human nature tries to convince us that we are right in our thoughts, words, and actions. We think, if we have done nothing wrong, why do we need to be saved from sin?

God’s Word tells us that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Word says that we are dead due to our transgressions and sins. His Word tells us that we are easily led astray by the devil, and that we sin every day. His Word also tells us that despite of who we are and what we have done, God loves us and sent his Son to pay for all the sins of the world.

We are overwhelmed by the love of God for us as sinners. We cannot comprehend how God would willingly send his Son into our world to pay for our debts of sin. Yet, that is exactly what God did. You might often hear people say that they have committed terrible sins that cannot be forgiven. Not so. Jesus, in his suffering and death, paid for every sin, great or small. Jesus defeated the power of the devil and opened the gates of heaven to you and me and every other believer. The testimony is clear: God has given us eternal life and this life comes from his Son and the Father.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, you have taken doubt, worry, and concern out of our lives. Your Word is the Truth. You have sent your Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. You have given us the gift of faith to testify to the truth of your Word. In Jesus, we have peace, forgiveness, and the joy of life in heaven. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

LET GOD'S WILL BE DONE!

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 20

“But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:6)

We are encouraged to ask God to help us and to be with us when trials or sadness come into our lives. Trials come into our lives each and every day. Life doesn't always go the way we want or the way we had planned.

As a result, doubts come to our minds as we wonder if there is a God or if God really cares what happens to us. These doubts cause us to feel sick during our journey on the sea of life.

Doubts are not good for us, as they can weaken or even destroy our faith. That is why James was encouraging us to “Let God's will be done” in our journey through life.

We are not supposed to come to our God without doubting but instead knowing that He will help us according to His plan—not ours.

I don't always know what is best for me, though I might think I do. When I think that way and am filled with doubt, I forget to add to my prayers for help a very important thought:

Not my will Lord, but your will be done.

That is why the advice that James gave us is so very important as when you are told you must believe and not doubt. The ones who doubt are like a wave on the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

To endure troubles requires wisdom. We don't always have that wisdom. We also don't know how to handle it. So ask God. Trouble can guide you into the arms of God.

We need to let God's will be done. In this way, we'll find the joy of having a heavenly Father who loves us, a Savior who died for us, and a God who is going to meet our needs.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, into your hands I commit myself each and every day. You know what is best for me. Guide and direct me according to your will. Help me to pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will but your will be done” Amen.

EITHER WAY, WE CANNOT LOSE?

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 21

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

Paul was under house arrest in Rome on Caesar’s waiting list for a trial because he preached the gospel. He could have either been executed or set free. If set free, he would have continued his work as an evangelist and brought beautiful blessings from God into people’s lives.

But Paul’s ministry took a toll on his body, soul, and his mind. He was exhausted and wanted to go home to heaven. That’s why he was hoping to be judged as guilty, executed, and go to heaven.

He was torn between hoping to die or live. If he lived, it would mean more people could hear about God’s forgiveness. We hear in this important verse Paul’s conclusion, For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Dwight Moody was a famous American evangelist in the 1800s and, at one point, traveled by ship on the Great Lakes. A huge storm arose. The passengers were so afraid that they started a prayer gathering and asked God to deliver them from the storm.

They asked Moody if he would join in.

He said, “No, I don’t want to.”

They were taken aback and wondering why he, as a pastor, didn’t want to lead the prayers. They asked him, “Why?”

He answered, “I have a sister in Chicago and I have a sister in heaven and I don’t care which one I see tonight.”

Don’t you love that attitude, confidence, and conviction?

That was Paul’s attitude. It is our attitude as well. Is there life after death? You bet there is, and I for one can’t wait. But in the meantime, I can’t wait to share God’s word and see what God does with it.

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Either way we cannot lose.

Prayer: Dear Father, I long for the day when Christ comes in victory to bring me home to you. Until that day, I am eager for you to use me in sharing your word of forgiveness. I am thankful that no matter what, my future is tied to your Son and my Savior. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

A PAINFUL TRUTH

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 22

“So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified ” (Galatians 2:16b)

Why do people hesitate to go to the doctor’s office? Many fear what they’ll hear:

- You are sick and need surgery.
- You have cancer.
- You have to give up foods you enjoy eating.
- You cannot live in your house.

Paul unleashed one of the most painful truths that all humans fear: “By the works of the law, no one will be justified.” This is a blank statement of fact that covers every single human being.

No matter how hard you try to be good and better than all other sinners, no matter how well you observe God’s law, it is impossible to be declared not guilty. The Law of God will always come back with the same verdict no matter who you are. You may be the best husband, wife, child, worker, and give millions to charity. The law will still say, guilty! This is a painful truth that no one can escape.

So why does God reveal this painful truth to us? Our God uses his law to point us to a comforting and better truth: “So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law.”

Despite the painful truth that all people deserve a guilty verdict, God has revealed to us that through Christ that we are not guilty. Jesus took on our guilt and was punished in our place. We received his righteousness. We cannot be guilty because Jesus set us free. The painful truth of the law was replaced with the joyful truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus assured your life through his death and resurrection. Trust in his work. You are not guilty!

Prayer: Dear gracious and loving Father, we come to you burdened by the painful truth that we deserve your wrath and punishment. Remove our fear with the comfort of your Son, who took our place and gives us his righteousness. Help us trust that through your Son we are not guilty and heaven is ours. In his name we pray. Amen.

HEAVEN IS WORTH THE HASSLE

by Rev. Curt Seefeldt, Director of Church Relations

Week 23

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:24-25)

Have you second-guessed yourself when you decided to take a stand for God’s truth? Moses could have, but he didn’t. He was the adopted grandson of a former Pharaoh—the most powerful man in Egypt. He grew up enjoying the king’s food, was educated by Egypt’s best scholars, and knew the right people. Yet, Moses gave it all up. Why? His birth parents were Hebrews. In the Egyptian pecking order, they were the bottom rung as a tribe of slaves. Yet there came a day when Moses needed to make a choice. Moses chose to listen to God. He confronted Pharaoh. He told the king the Lord God expected him to allow more than a million slave laborers to walk out of the country.

The new Pharaoh made the Hebrews pay for their bold demands and schemed to undermine their confidence in Moses as a leader. Moses was lied to, mocked, and threatened. Like Moses, you may experience consequences when you stand up for what is right in God’s sight. When you assure people of Jesus’ love, some may disagree. If that happens, don’t falter!

Instead, adopt the attitude of Moses: “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:26). Moses knew about his Savior’s love and forgiveness. He was able to look ahead. When he did this, he saw heaven. There he knew he’d see God’s smiling face and be welcomed with open arms. In heaven, he knew he’d hear his Savior say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” God’s promises made it all worthwhile. The same is true for you. When people hassle you for being a Christian, be true to the Lord. Heaven is worth the hassle!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me be a strong witness to your truth! Give me boldness to speak up and help me choose my words carefully so people see me speaking your truth in love. If hassles come, as they will, help me stand up to them. Your love and heavenly promises make it all worthwhile. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.

YET, YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Week 24

"I am the only one left." (1 Kings 19:14c)

It is said that loneliness is one of the most difficult things that people struggle with, especially older adults. It is one thing to feel alone in this life. It is a whole different thing to feel alone and separated from God. That is how Elijah felt as he spoke the words of our verse for this week.

As we can say, Elijah was having a pity party. He was thinking poor me. I've done all this for God and now here I am all alone. You've probably felt the same way at some point in your life. God let Elijah have this pity party and then God gave Elijah a reality check. He helped Elijah see that he was far from alone and just wasn't seeing or thinking clearly. How many times has God listened to your pity party? And how many times did He help you to see that you had failed to reach out for help, blown a situation out of proportion, or failed to see those whom God had placed around you to help you?

Over and over in the Bible, God reaffirms his promise that he is always with us as he speaks words such as "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

God never promises us a life free from trouble. He does, however, promise us that when trouble comes our way, we can turn to him and know that he is always there to help us through and give us peace.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

So if or when you feel alone, run to these promises of our God and know that even if you feel like Elijah and think that you are all alone, God is by your side and will never leave you. You are never alone!

Prayer: Gracious God, forgive me for those times when I have failed to see or trust your presence and guidance in my life. Keep me close to you and your promises as I feed my soul with the refreshing and strengthening power of your Word. When doubts and fears arise, help me to look to you and your precious promises. I ask this in the name of Jesus, my ever present Savior. Amen.

SOARING BETTER THAN SUPERMAN

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 25

“I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

In the past few years, some of the biggest movie theater attractions are the Marvel and DC Super Hero series. A lot of people enjoy them, and you might be like me and are a fan as well.

Generally, the stories are well written and the special effects are spectacular. It’s fun to see the comic book characters I read while young come to life on the movie screen.

Usually, like the comic books, good is victorious over evil. As a kid, it was fun to dream about being a super hero and playing with friends.

Watching the movies is a great get-away. Even as an adult, it is fun to imagine what it would be like to have super powers. Like Superman, to “leap tall buildings in a single bound!”

When you read this verse, you may think that Paul had a super-hero complex, “I can do all things.” What? How can Paul say that?

It is important to read the whole verse. Paul wrote this while he was awaiting trial in Rome. It took many years to find out the truth of this verse first hand in his life.

In fact, 2 Corinthians tells us that Jesus made sure that Paul wouldn’t become arrogant. He gave him what he called a “thorn” in his flesh.

When he asked God to remove it, Jesus answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Yes, by God’s grace through Jesus, we do soar better than Superman. That victory over sin and with death and with the devil defeated we know Jesus will continue to give us the strength that we need.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are many times that I don’t feel like a super hero. Sin and doubt continue to plague me. But your Word points me to you and the empty cross and tomb. The victory is assured. Help me always have my focus not on myself, but like Paul, on you. What a joy that I can confess: “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” Amen.

REMEMBER YOUR NAME WHEN YOU PRAY

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 26

Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" (Genesis 18:32a)

President George H. W. Bush once campaigned in a retirement home, and he went up to one of the residents and said, "Do you know who I am?"

The senior citizen responded, "No, I don't, but if you go up to the nurses' station, I am sure that they can tell you your name." Evidently, that resident had been asked that question a lot by other residents.

Now, forgetting our name is not only a danger that comes with old age, but it is a very real and present danger that can come into our lives as Christians. Abraham was not focused on his name.

I do not mean "Abraham," which means "father of many," but "Jesus." When we are brought to faith in God, our Savior, Jesus gives us his name, which means, "The Lord saves."

Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing Jesus one day; he saw him and was glad (John 8:56). He knew the meaning that Jesus and his life would bring.

When Abraham says, "May the Lord not be angry," he also says, "May it not be hot to the Lord" or "Lord, please don't be enraged." Indeed, we should fear the Lord setting us ablaze because of our disobedience.

But the Lord sent his blazing fury over our self-centered sinfulness onto his Son instead of us. Jesus lived up to his name suffered Hell for us on the cross.

When we were brought to faith, such as when we were baptized, God put his name on us. Thus we may pray boldly to God and not hesitate to bring anything before him for fear that he will set us ablaze.

Instead, we come boldly as dear children to their dear Father. We remember our name is Jesus every time we pray.

Prayer: Lord, I praise you for living up to your name and giving me your name as your child. Lead me to remember my name whenever I may be afraid to ask anything of you, knowing that you will answer according to your name—the Lord saves. Amen.

THE GREATEST TREASURE

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 27

Then he (Jesus) said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 15:15)

How many things did you treasure as a child? What did you put in shoe boxes? Rocks, sea shells, stamps, or coins? What eventually happens to all the things we treasured as children? Sometimes, we still have them but in a different condition, as some may have been lost or broken.

This obsession with treasures does not go away after we become adults. It just takes on a new look. We think our lives become fulfilled the more we fill them with possessions. We have to the best of technology so we do not get left behind.

Not that these treasures are bad in and of themselves. They are gifts from God after all. They turn bad when they take the place of our God.

When greed for more possessions takes our focus off of our Savior, we fall into the devil's trap and his goal is to bring us down into hell with him!

This is why Jesus gives us a warning about this very thing. He knows our sinful hearts! If left to ourselves, we would be lost forever.

He reminds us that all the treasures and possessions in the world cannot save us from sin and bring us to heaven.

Only Jesus did this. The devil cannot destroy Jesus and tried but failed miserably. His failure is our greatest treasure.

Christ crucified removed our sin and guilt and gave us heaven. The sacrifice by Jesus is always with us and will remain with us forever.

With Jesus as our greatest treasure, we can be content and see all the earthly treasures as they truly are...blessings from our God.

Prayer: Dear Giver of all good things, thank you for the greatest treasure of all, your one and only Son, Jesus Christ. Help us be grateful for his work of rescuing us from sin, the devil, and hell itself. Make us mindful of the trap the devil has laid out for us. Keep us focused on our greatest treasure every moment of our lives.

In his name, we pray. Amen!

ISRAEL, BY GRACE ALONE

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 28

“This does not mean that God’s word has failed because not all who are descended from Israel are really Israel. ” (Romans 9:6)

This verse is part of a discussion about the true Israel that the Apostle Paul was directed to write concerning the Holy Spirit. The believers that Paul originally addressed were divided into people who were the actual descendants of Abraham and those who were not. The actual descendants of Abraham prided themselves on their heritage.

After all, considering all the people in the world, God had a very personal relationship with Abraham. The Lord also gave Abraham a very special promise: through the offspring of Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

So that this promise would not be forgotten, the Lord also gave Abraham and his descendants his Word, which assured that Abraham and his descendants were His people. Through the centuries, God also reinforced His promise by sending messengers who proclaimed His Word and will to His people.

Here in Romans, Paul is addressing a sad truth. Although the actual descendants of Abraham prided themselves on their heritage, they were not following the example of their ancestors. So when God the Father fulfilled His promise and sent the Seed—Jesus—they didn’t recognize or believe in him. But they still prided themselves in being God’s people.

Has God’s Word Failed? Not at all. God’s Word makes it clear being an actual descendant of Abraham is not a requirement for being among God’s people. These people are the ones who follow the example of Abraham. Jesus said the door to heaven is narrow. Actually, we could say, it is at least as wide as the cross.

This narrow door is the way Jesus opened by his life, death and resurrection. That door is open to all. Everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior has the “right” ancestry. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank for giving Abraham that promise and making him the “father of believers.” And more personally, thank you for making me one of his descendants. Help me always to rejoice in that heritage and invite others so that they, too, become true Israel. Amen.

WHAT WOULD GOD HAVE YOU PRAY FOR?

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Week 29

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you." (Ephesians 1:18)

Prayer is one of those many wonderful blessings God has given us. But even the seemingly strongest of Christians sometimes struggle with how to pray, or what to pray for, in certain situations. The apostle Paul wants to help teach us what to pray for and what blessing is ours when we pray that way.

So often our prayers seem to go along these lines: "God, please make Grandma better." Or, "God, please help me with the troubles in my (life, family, finances, _____)." Or, "God, I don't know how much more I can take. Please make things better."

None of those prayers are wrong, but Paul aims to teach us that in every situation in life, there is something else which God would have us pray for – a stronger faith and trust in God's plan. Paul first of all teaches us how to pray for a stronger faith – "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened." An easy way to understand those words is to know that God wants us to turn to Him to strengthen our faith when we feel helpless or confused. Through His Word and the power of His grace, He can open the eyes of our heart of faith to see that He loves us and is working for our good.

Once we have a faith that leans on God and trusts in His promises, we can then pray for God to help us trust His plan and know that His plan is always best for us, even when we can't see or understand what is happening. Paul puts it this way: "that you may know the hope to which he has called you." When our spiritual sight gets out of focus, we tend to lose sight of the hope we have in God and begin to feel hopeless and helpless. When we are brought again to realize that we have hope with God for this life and an even better hope waiting for us in heaven, we can then learn to trust God's plans and direction in our life.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive me when I let the devil get the best of me and I lose sight of You and Your promises and working in my life. Through Your Word, strengthen my faith and lead me to trust in You and Your work in my life, knowing that You always do what is best for me. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

YOUR BEST TREASURE IS THE PROMISE KEEPER!

by Rev. Curt Seefeldt, Director of Church Relations

Week 30

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” (Genesis 15:1)

Abraham had a concern that wouldn't go away. While his life was good, God told him to move his family to a new land—sight unseen. After this move, God gave Abraham a multi-level promise. First, He promised Abraham that the new land would be good for grazing his herds and it was! Second, God promised him riches and wealth, and he enjoyed both! Third, the Lord said Abraham would be highly regarded by those around him and that was abundantly true!

Abraham couldn't see how God would deliver on the most important promise: a nation of descendants from a person through whom “all the peoples on earth would be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). That person was the one we know as Jesus Christ, our Savior. Abraham and his wife Sarah knew it would take many generations for God to deliver on that final promise. The Lord made that promise to Abraham 10 years earlier when they didn't have any children, and Abraham was 85 and Sarah 75. For this promise to become a reality, they needed a biological child.

Our gracious Lord wanted Abraham to understand the truth by seeing Him deliver on His promises. The Lord wanted Abraham to know He had the power to deliver on His promises at a time of His choosing and the wisdom to deliver them when He knew best. When we pray for our family's health, we may not see the blessings delivered the way we think they should be.

Jesus provides His forgiveness daily, proving His love and concern for us. We can trust in His absolute power to deliver His blessings and we can rely on Him to know the best time to deliver them.

Remember that the Lord decided to ask Abraham and Sarah to wait another 15 years until they saw God's promise fulfilled. Then, when God knew the time was right, Sarah gave birth to, and held her first baby, at age 90!

Prayer: Dear Savior, help me listen to your words. They assure me my sins are forgiven each day. Your steadfast forgiveness is the highest proof of your love for me and fully demonstrates your ability and desire to keep all your promises to take care all my needs. In Jesus' name. Amen.

LIVE THE HUMBLE LIFE

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 31

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. (James 2:12)

Have you set high expectations for yourself? Do you do your best to excel in your chosen occupation? I assume you have set certain goals for your performance as an employer or employee, as a citizen of your town, as a father or mother and as a son or a daughter.

As a parent, will you show your children how much you care for them? Will you show them great love and compassion? Will you want them to grow into responsible, well-rounded adults? As children of your parents, will you want to honor them and show them respect?

So many questions, so where does your desire to answer them come from? From the Lord and from His humble love and service to us. Paul wrote to the Philippians: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who, being the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made by himself of nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2: 5-8). In other words, you and I could say, “I want to be like Jesus; I want to live like Jesus,” and I want to live the humble life.

In all of our interactions with other people, you and I want people to know that Jesus is our motivation in life. When you read our verse from letter of James, he is showing us how we, as Christians, should live our lives in this world. In other words, live your life according to the faith that is in your heart. Our faith will not be quiet. Instead, it will show itself in all kinds of different works and ways. People will know we are Christians by our love, our patience, our compassion and our willing acts of service. Speak and act as Christians who are made free to serve by our faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ and by living the humble life.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us to live our lives of faith in humble ways. Help us to help others in whatever way we possibly can. Strengthen us each day in faith so that our love for you and for others will never grow cold. Not to us, O Lord, but to your name be the glory. Amen.

HOW DO I GET THERE FROM HERE?

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 32

The Lord had said to Abraham, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)

Abraham (Father of Many) did not have a Global Positioning System (GPS), Google maps or Map Quest. In fact, he didn't want to go anywhere. He and his wife Sarah had settled in a place called Haran. According to their plans, they likely intended on staying there for a while. According to God's plans, Abraham eventually made a big difference in his life and now our lives. God's plans changed Abraham's life and ours as well. If you are like me, I want to go to heaven. I want to go where there is no sin, no sadness, no sickness and no death. The question is I ask myself and all others, "How do I get there from here?"

God tells Abraham, "Pack up everything you have, your people, your household and leave." God didn't give him a place to go. He simply told Abraham, "Go to the land I will show you." So many questions with the same answer: God said, "I will show you."

- How was Abraham and family going to find the place?
- What was Abraham to do to get there from where he was?
- What was this place going to be like?
- What was going to happen there when he got there?
- How was Abraham to get from where he was to heaven?
- What did Abraham have to do to get to heaven?
- What did he have to pay to earn heaven for himself?

To all of these questions, God answered in His Word, "I will show you." God told Abraham that all people on earth would be blessed through him. Descending from Abraham, Jesus, the Savior of the world, was born. God kept His promise. When the time was right Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again so that you and I can go to heaven.

After God tells Abraham that He will show him the way, what does Abraham do? We are told, "So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him;" That is faith. Abraham trusted God's Word. May the example of Abraham who followed God's way be an example for all of us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the faith to trust your Word and Promises, so that like Abraham I go where you tell me to go. Amen.

GOD'S GRACE & COMPASSION

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 33

"Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." (Corinthians 2:7)

Hubert Humphrey, a former U.S. vice president, died on Friday, January 13, 1978. On a Sunday afternoon, President Carter, former President Ford, Vice President Mondale, and many other political leaders attended the funeral ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda.

Before he died from cancer, Humphrey personally invited disgraced President Nixon to attend his funeral. Nixon attended and it was one of his first public appearances since his resignation.

When Nixon entered the room, no one came near him—none of the public officials and none of the dignitaries. He felt ostracized. In fact, he stood in a corner basically by himself.

Then President Jimmy Carter came into the room. He was about to take his seat when he noticed Nixon. President Carter made a point to walk over to him, reach out, smile, shake his hand, and embrace him.

With a big smile, he said, "Welcome, home, Mr. President. Welcome home!" Jimmy Carter gifted Richard Nixon with grace and compassion, even though he had done nothing to deserve either.

It really marked a turning point in Nixon's long ordeal. He was no longer overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Who are you in this scene?

Many of us might see ourselves as Carter reaching out to Nixon, as a Christian reaching out to a disgraced unbeliever. But no, all of us are Nixon, and it is not Jimmy Carter who is reaching out to us. It is Jesus.

We were disgraced. We were out of God's grace.

We did nothing to deserve his grace or his compassion, but he reached out to us with his love and his grace and his compassion, and it was this act of grace on God's part, culminating in His Son's cross and empty tomb, which motivates us to do good for others.

Prayer: God of grace, may your sweet words of forgiveness saturate my mind and direct my thoughts. Help me see my offender through my Savior's eyes. If I can be forgiven, so can he. Lead me and my offender to repent of every sin so we may rejoice in your forgiveness. Amen.

THE SOURCE OF WEALTH

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 34

I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal (Genesis 14:23a)

Why would anyone turn down wealth? Isn't it the American dream? Abraham had his opportunity to become wealthy beyond anything he had accomplished throughout his life. The king of Sodom was willing to give Abraham all the wealth he had won in his battles against the kings of Shinar, Ellasar, Elam and Goyim. Abraham responded with, "I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal." Abraham did not consider earthly wealth from the king of Sodom something worthwhile.

We know our sinful hearts would jump at a chance for this kind of earthly wealth. We are constantly looking to gain wealth in all of its various forms. But what is the end result of all this earthly wealth? We never have enough. It will never satisfy our greatest need. Abraham understood this, which is why he refused. He already had a greater wealth! This wealth was not man made or originated in this world. He had the wealth of God's promise to bless him with an offspring who would save the world from sin!

This promise made to Abraham made him wealthy beyond anything he could have accumulated in his world. Abraham boasted that the Lord made him wealthy. And we, too, have the same boast. We have been blessed by that promise fulfilled in Christ. We have the wealth of forgiveness and eternal life that originated with our God who pours out this wealth onto us every day! How much is this wealth worth? It cost Jesus his holy precious life on the cross.

The wealth that God gives to us far outweighs all the earthly wealth we can gather in this world. This is the reason why we can find contentment in our lives. Whether we are blessed with earthly possessions or not, we still have the wealth of forgiveness and eternal life. The best part about this wealth is that it cannot fade away, get lost or stolen and always belongs to us.

Prayer: Dear gracious and loving Father! Help us look at earthly wealth as a blessing from you. Let us marvel at the greater wealth you have richly give us. Give us thankful hearts for all that Jesus has done for us, that through his poverty we have become rich. In his name, we pray! Amen.

PROSPERITY HAS ITS PITFALLS & OPPORTUNITIES

by Rev. Curt Seefeldt, Director of Church Relations

Week 35

“Woe to you who are complacent in Zion and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.” (Amos 6:1)

The Old Testament prophet Amos wrote 750 years before the birth of Jesus. In this lifetime, Zion (Jerusalem) and Mount Samaria were the capital cities of two Jewish nations. They had received the promise that the Messiah would come from their nation. As governing centers for God’s people, these cities should have been the centers of godly living. However, in Amos’ day, they had a reputation as “sin cities.” That is why he warned: “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.” (Amos 6:1)

He warned the kings and their rich, powerful friends about complacency. He saw they were spending far too much of their energy and money on their own entertainment at the expense of the welfare of the people entrusted to their care. Amos cautioned them: “Your trust in your own prosperity is misplaced.” Prosperity has the same pitfalls for us today. We in the United States are living in one of the wealthiest nations the world has ever seen and living during one of the world’s most prosperous eras. What does God expect you and me to do with our prosperity?

Listen to what he says through his servant, St. Paul: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:6-10). While prosperity has its pitfalls, it also gives us amazing opportunities. It allows us to support work that builds the kingdom of God through his churches and ministries! Here is more good news! When we use prosperity according to God’s plan, we not only bring blessing to many souls, we also are far less likely to be trapped by prosperity’s pitfalls.

Prayer: Dear Savior, I thank you for calling me to your kingdom through the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life promised by Jesus. Bless my efforts to be “rich in good deeds” as I use the prosperity you have given to me to be a blessing. Amen.

KNOW YOUR TRUE FREEDOM

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Week 36

*You have been set free from sin and have become
slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18)*

Throughout the year, you can find conversations in our country about the freedoms we enjoy as U.S. citizens. There are discussions and wrangling about the freedom to "bear arms." Any discussion of this freedom makes us realize how unreliable, and sometimes even questionable, this freedom is on earth. Looking at the verse from Romans above, Paul reminds and reassures us that, despite any questions of earthly freedoms, we have a guaranteed freedom that is more important and valuable and no one can take it away.

Paul tells us, "You have been set free from sin." Think of the ways sin seeks to enslave us in our daily life. We lose our freedom when we think that finding pleasure in a particular sin drags us into the darkness and despair of repeated struggles. At these times, we find ourselves enslaved by sin as the devil leads us to question forgiveness and doubt God's love because we have committed a sin. How, then, do we find freedom from sin? Our freedom can only and completely be found in Jesus. We are set free from sin by his perfect life that God accepted as a substitute for our sin-stained lives.

We are completely freed from the guilt and punishments of our sins as we look to Jesus and see him make the payment for every last sin. God accepted that payment and declared us as "not guilty." Prayerfully, you know these comforting truths of our Christian faith.

Whenever you face a difficult time caused by the devil's tricks, look to the life and cross of Jesus and use the words that Jesus spoke, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). We will never have complete freedom while we live on earth. Our freedoms as citizens of the U.S. will be challenged and the devil will continuously try to rob us of the true freedom we have in Jesus.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, there are many days where I feel enslaved by sin and seek to be free from my sin and its consequences. Thank you for the true freedom from sin that you give me in Jesus and the forgiveness he won for me. Lead me to use that freedom to serve you and others in love. Amen.

REMAIN IN JESUS' WORLD

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 37

"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples." (John 8:31)

Jesus answers the question, "Who is a true disciple?" There is really only one answer: a disciple remains in Jesus' word. How do we do that? We no longer have Jesus speaking publicly, like he did when he encouraged and warned the people that he was speaking to. This section of John records the face-to-face confrontations that the Jews had with Jesus.

They prided themselves on being the children of Abraham. The implication was, that by their heritage alone, they were God's people.

But Jesus pointed out to them their need to repent and that being a child of God was a heritage.

In this way, Jesus was pointing out that it is a matter of their hearts. Jesus saw to it that this Word was recorded. The Bible is God's Word. When we read the Bible, we are remaining in accordance with his Word.

What does it mean to remain in his Word? Verse 32 supplies the rest of the quote. "You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

In Jesus' day, the Jews considered this their birthright as they were the children of Abraham. But they still needed to hear the truth. They were sinners in need of forgiveness and restoration. That is the saving truth.

The truth remains: we have sinned and continue to fall short of the perfection that God requires.

So then what to do? Apply that Word of Jesus to your hearts and lives.

- Read the Word and reflect it in everything you say and do. Your life depends on it.
- Rejoice in the victory that Word gives.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing the Father's will to this world and fulfilling that will. Continue to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts, enabling us not only to read that Word, but remain true to it and apply it to our lives. Amen.

CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 38

*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.
(2 Thessalonians 1: 6,7)*

Do you feel sometimes as if you are being punished for your sins? People say, “God must be punishing me for something I have done wrong. I am paying for my sins.”

As we live our lives in the world, we may suffer persecution for our faith. People might scoff at us and ridicule us for believing in Jesus. People may turn away from us or ignore us because they know we are Christians.

Upholding the truth of God’s Word in our world today has become a daunting task. Ask the Christian shop owner how much ridicule he has faced lately from those who do not believe in God. You are not being punished for sins. God punished his Son Jesus for all the sins of the world.

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed
for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace
was upon him, and by his wounds we are
healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

We can now be Confident in Christ. Paul writes, He [God] will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.” God will send his terrible judgment on those who persecuted us believers. Our persecutors will not be saved. We believers will rejoice in glory.

We look forward with believing hearts to Judgment Day, to the day “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” Earthly suffering and persecution will disappear. We will be in heaven with Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Our Confidence in Christ will be rewarded.

*Prayer: Dear Jesus, we rejoice with believing hearts. At Judgment Day, you assure us of a place in glory with you. Thank you for the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life. “Forever with the Lord! Amen!
So let it be. Life from the dead is in that word, My immortality.”
[Christian Worship hymnal, #213, v. 1] Amen.*

THE YOUTUBE OR INSTAGRAM OF HEAVEN

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 39

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelations 22:5)

The Apostle John in Revelations, Chapter 22, describes heaven: a river of the water of life as clear as crystal. A tree of life with its leaves used for the healing of the nations. Best of all, no longer any curse, meaning no sins or any consequences of sins. Jesus, the Lamb of God, our Savior is here.

When we are in heaven, we are with Jesus—in His eternal presence never to be alone again, never to be in the darkness of sin, never to be afraid of anything again, and never to be separated from Jesus, the Lamb of God.

What Will Heaven Look Like? John says, “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.” That verse gives us a YouTube or Instagram view of heaven.

Who would not want to live in a place like heaven? How can I get there? Do I have to pay to get there? Do I have to do something to get there? How can I get to heaven knowing what I know now? God, in the Scriptures, tells us that the answer is found in His Word. The jailor of Paul and Silas at Philippi was scared to death when the foundations of the prison were shaking because of an earthquake. He was about to kill himself when Paul and Silas stopped him. The jailor asked the most important question, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

The answer given then is still the same answer today: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” (Acts 16: 30, 31) The jailor then continued to listen to God’s Word and we now need to do the same. We need to grow in our faith every day. The Psalmist says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” (Psalms 119:105)

Jesus suffered and died for our sins. He rose from the grave and will someday take us to heaven to be with him in eternal light and reign with him for ever and ever.

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increased faith, hope, and love that we may obtain what you promise and reign with you for ever and ever. Amen.

YOU HAVE SOMEONE TO LIVE FOR

by Rev. Kenley Mann, Chaplain

Week 40

"This is the king of the Jews" (Luke 23:38b)

A chauffeur drove up to a cemetery and asked the minister/caretaker to come to the car because his employer was too ill to walk. In the car was a frail old lady with sunken eyes that showed years of hurt and anguish.

She introduced herself and said that she had been sending \$5 to the cemetery for the past several years to be used for flowers on her husband's grave.

"I have come in person today," she said, "because the doctors gave me only a few weeks to live and I want to see my husband's grave one last time."

The minister replied, "I am sorry you have been sending money for those flowers. I am part of a group that visits patients in hospitals and mental institutions. They dearly love flowers.

They can see them and they can smell them. Flowers are therapy for them because they are living people." Upset, she motioned to her chauffeur to leave.

Months later, the minister was surprised to see the same car drive up, but this time, the old lady was driving. She said, "You know, when I was here the last time, I hated you when I left. As I thought about it, though, I decided you were right. Now I take flowers to the hospitals and it does make the patients happy and it makes me happy, too.

The doctors can't figure out what made me well but I know that it's because I now have someone else to live for."

Do you have someone to live for? Pastors and caretakers in Christ have someone to live for: Jesus, the King of the Jews. That title was mockery on his cross, but it is our glory, for his glory is in the shame of our sin that he bore in our place. That shows us our worth forever. Take joy in Christ, your King, as the one you live for now and forever in heaven.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for delivering me from the hopelessness and despair of self-service as you forgot yourself and were taken up with me. Your love and forgiveness fill me with joy. Lead me to see you as the one I live for now and as my joy in heaven forever. Amen.

KEEP WATCH FOR THE LORD WILL COME AGAIN!

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 41

Let us walk in the light of the Lord. (Isaiah 2:5b)

Why do most crimes happen after dark? Most criminals hope the darkness will conceal their crimes. They think they can get away because they cannot be seen. In order to deter criminals, we set up motion lights outside our homes. We hope when the light shines on criminals, they will turn away for fear of exposure and capture.

One of the greatest ways to keep your home safe when going out of town is to have your house lights on a timer. The lights turning on in the home make it difficult for criminals to choose your home to rob.

Light clearly plays a significant role in keeping us safe. It also keeps us prepared for the Lord to return. This is not a physical light, but the light of the Lord. This is the only way for us to be prepared. Without the light of the Lord, we would remain in the darkness of sin.

As we look forward to celebrating Christmas, we should think of the gift of light that was given to the world! Every day we need the light of the Lord to keep us focused on the return of our Savior.

The devil, the world around us, and the sinful hearts in us would like us to dabble in the darkness so we can walk away from the light. But Jesus remains in our hearts through His words and a light that shines brightly. His light of forgiveness and righteousness is ours through faith.

We continue to walk in the light of the Lord by listening to His words of life and by celebrating the gift given to us by God, the Father at Christmas. Every day is a battle to walk in the light. Yet we still have hope, as Jesus our light won this battle for us when he lived a perfect life for us, died to pay for our sins, and rose declare us “not guilty” before our Father.

With this good news constantly in front us, the darkness of sin cannot prevail. We will continue to keep watch for that day when Jesus returns and take us to the glory he won for us.

Prayer: Dear Holy Spirit Light Divine, keep Jesus as our light as we continue to face this dark and sinful world. Be our strength when the devil comes with his temptations to walk away from the light. Help us to say no to our sinful urges, pick up our cross and follow Jesus. In Jesus' name we pray! Amen.

CAN'T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

by Mark Hayes, President of Ministry

Week 42

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1)

People ask me all the time, "Why would you move from Colorado to Minnesota?" For those mostly interested in the discussion of landscape, I can give a one-word answer: Trees. The mountains of Colorado are incredible. Even seeing them in the distance is a sight I will always miss. But spanning the space between my front window and the beautiful mountain landscape in the distance were brown weeds and zero trees.

Isaiah begins his encouragement to his audience with a look at the views from their windows. When the Israelites looked at their family tree, they no longer saw a thriving kingdom under their renowned King David, the son of Jesse. All they saw from Jesse's tree was a stump. Their kingdom and their family strength had been reduced to a cut-off trunk barely breaking the surface of the earth.

When someone is so caught up in the details of a problem that he or she fails to see the bigger picture, we say, "They can't see the forest for the trees." In Israel's case, "They couldn't see the trees for the stump." They were so weighed down by their current status that they saw no hope at all.

But Isaiah reframed their vision of a hopeless stump with the promise of a shoot that would rise directly from it. The shoot would become a branch that would bear fruit. Jesus, often named the "Son of David," was that Shoot. He was the Branch. He produced the fruit of forgiveness and eternal life.

Now do you see the forest.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I constantly let myself get overwhelmed with problems as though you weren't there to help. I become devastated by the situation around me and let hopelessness creep in. Open my eyes beyond myself and beyond my stress to see the incredible plan that you orchestrated to save my life and nourish my soul. As I begin to see the forest of blessings that you have given to me, move me to hold out my hand to others who have less so that they can see your love through me. Amen.

THE GREATEST BLANK CHECK EVER!

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 43

Therefore, the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Has anyone ever given you a blank check and said fill in any amount you would like? That would really be great, right? You are free to fill in any amount. It's fun to speculate on the amount you would write in, isn't it? This well-known verse of Isaiah is really God's response to King Ahaz's refusal to accept God's promise of a blank check. Ahaz was the king of Jerusalem, a descendant of David. His kingdom, Judah, was facing some fierce opposition from the neighboring countries.

All of the opponents were banding together to rip the country apart. Ahaz was worried because he didn't believe in the God of his father, David. God sent Isaiah to assure him that he need not worry because He was going to protect them. To prove it, God offered Ahaz a blank check. He could ask for a sign, no limits.

Now all of a sudden, King Ahaz became pious. He wasn't going to "test the Lord." You might say that Ahaz's refusal gave birth to the greatest blank check ever given—an unusual fill in the blank for sure. A baby was born, but not just any baby. That son came from a virgin. That meant that this son did not have a human father. To underscore this, the son's name was also given: Immanuel, which means "God is us." Ask yourself this: What price would you give to have eternal life? What is the cost of being made a child of God?

Here are the answers: Because we are sinners, we can never come up with a sufficient payment. This is a special gift. This son of a virgin doesn't have a human father because He is the Son of God! He is the only one able to make the ultimate payment. Acknowledge the fact that God gave this sign to others and not just to Ahaz. The "you" in this verse is plural. God gave this sign to everyone—not just to the king's officials, his court, and the people of Judah—but to all. We are all beneficiaries of this filled-in previously blank check. God has given us a blank check. Our sins are gone. Heaven is open. We have an eternal relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for being that blank check for us. Help us always appreciate the true meaning of Christmas in our lives. Continue to give us the strength, wisdom, and joy to rely on you. Amen.

I WILL SHARE THE LORD'S KINDNESS

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 44

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us, yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. (Isaiah 63:7)

Look back and take stock of what happened during the past year:

- Did you meet your goals?
- Did you meet with your insurance agent and financial advisor to see if the plans you have are still good for you?
- Do your investments make good long-term sense or are there necessary adjustments?
- Are you happy in your present occupation?
- Do you feel a job change might be a good idea?

There are so many positives and negatives that could be examined. In almost any part of your life, there are choices and decisions to be made.

What has the Lord done? He has given blessings: the gift of spouses and children and families, the gift of a job to do and a place to live, and the gifts of relatives, neighbors, and friends. The most blessed gift he has given us is the forgiveness of sins by faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. In Jesus, we know our sins are forgiven and that one day our place in heaven is guaranteed.

The Lord has done great things for us. Therefore, we say, "I will share the Lord's kindness. I will tell what the Lord has done. God has given me the strength and the courage to boldly share his Word. I will invite my neighbors and friends to come with me to hear the Word of the Lord."

We can look back on the past year and be overwhelmed at the goodness and compassion of the Lord. There have been trials and there have been joys. In all things, God has shared with us His love and His compassion.

*Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for your love, mercy, and grace. Each day in the year past, you took such good care of us. You loved us with everlasting love. Thank you for the promise that you will continue to love us and forgive every day in the year to come.
In your name, we pray. Amen.*

EXPERIENCE GRACE, LOVE & FELLOWSHIP

by Rev. Roger Woller, Chaplain

Week 45

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

If this were the last day you would see or talk to one of your loved ones, what would you say? If you had a gift to give to him or her, what would that be? None of us wants to think of saying our final goodbye to someone who is very special to us. Several weeks ago, I said goodbye to my only brother.

Because of the separation resulting from COVID-19, I was not able to see him before he died. I did talk to him on the phone. Although he was unable to talk to me, I was able to say goodbye to him before he died. If I could talk to him one more time in this life, I would say to him what the Apostle Paul says in his farewell words to the Corinthian congregation. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

- My comfort is that my brother knew the **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- He knew the **love** of God the Father.
- He was in the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit.

My brother no longer lives in faith but rather is in Heaven in the presence of Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. He is experiencing the Grace, Love, and Fellowship of God. That is what we as chaplains for The Lutheran Home want for you, my dear friend. This is the gift that surpasses all understanding. This gift is for now and for all eternity.

We cannot earn this gift by ourselves. Our sins separate us from God. Because of our sins, we don't deserve heaven. That is why God sent his only Son, Jesus, to live, die, and rise again in our place. Jesus earned the gift of forgiveness of sins, life everlasting for you and me. That is the Gospel message we want to share with you. If this is the last time in your life here on Earth and you are reading these words, this is my gift to you: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, open my ears to hear and my heart to believe the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 46

For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

Give it the old college try. People are under the impression that if you try to be good, even halfheartedly, that this will be enough to gain the favor of God. However, they are putting themselves under law. It does not matter what law you set up for yourselves: you will not be good enough to gain the favor of God.

This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote, “For this reason, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law.” Anyone who places himself or herself under a law to win God’s favor will only end up being judged by that law.

No one can say to God, “I will try harder next time.” Or, “Just give me another chance.” Those excuses will not work on God. No one can say, “At least I am better than _____,” or “I am not as bad as _____.” God will never judge you according to other people.

This is a harsh and terrible outlook if the law was the only way to heaven! No one would be able to go to heaven. God knew this, so he gave his people something no one can earn and no one deserved.... He gave his Son! Jesus is the only one who can take people who are guilty of breaking every law and place them in heaven. Jesus took your guilt as his own, and he was punished for it. The agony he experienced on the cross was nothing that he personally earned; instead, it was the agony you should have received for breaking the law.

God, our Father, was pleased to do this for you! This is grace. Jesus was also willing to take your punishment for you to guarantee a place with him forever in heaven. You are now declared “not guilty,” and you may enter heaven. Jesus did it all for you. Faith is God’s gift that connects you to Jesus and the work he did for you. By faith, you benefit from Jesus’s death. Faith is our confidence in what Jesus has done for us.

Prayer: Dear gracious and loving Father! Thank you for giving us faith in Jesus, where we can find our confidence that we are not guilty of sin. Help us to turn to Jesus anytime our hearts are suffering from guilt. Crush any reliance on the law to earn your favor. Let us turn to Jesus and receive everything he earned for us! In his name we pray. Amen.

ESTABLISHED & PROTECTED BY THE LORD

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 47

Still, the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and protect you from the Evil One. (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

“Established in 1839.” This is the byline of the oldest Lutheran church in the state of Wisconsin. That is almost 10 years before Wisconsin became a state. In 1843, immigrants from the same area of Germany came to settle in the place where I grew up. Remembering that heritage was an important part of our training as descendants of those who came to America.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul is requesting the prayers of the Thessalonians on behalf of him and his fellow workers. His goal is “that the word of the Lord may spread quickly and be glorified just as it was among you.” (verse 1)

It was important that the Good News of Jesus continued to spread. An eternity was at stake. The Thessalonians were examples of the Gospel’s success. Paul continues in verse 2: “Pray also that we may be rescued from evil and wicked people. For not everyone has faith.”

Not everyone has faith. Paul found that out firsthand. Based on that truth, Paul asserts this blessed truth. “Still, the Lord is faithful!” Paul learned that truth firsthand, too.

Look how he applies it: “He will establish you.” “Establish” can also be translated as “strengthen.” But “establish” hits the meaning of the Greek word better. There are times in life when we find that we have no strength. The future is dark, and it looks like there is no hope. On our own, that is true. That is why it is important to remember that our faithful God established us. Even when we have no strength, our God is with us.

He has established us. Our faithful Lord also protects us. Protection in a dangerous world is always important. It is dangerous because the devil is always looking for ways to destroy and hurt. Pray to the faithful Lord because his Word defeats evil. The devil can’t stand against it.

How do we know that God is faithful? He has given us faith in Jesus. Rejoice in the victory that he has won!

Prayer: Lord, what a comfort to know that you have established us and that you continue to protect us. Keep us in your Word that we will always trust in you, our faithful Lord. Amen

GOD'S WORD BURNS IN MY HEART

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 48

His word is in my heart like a fire. (Jeremiah 20:9)

There may be times when news is so great that you cannot keep it quiet. Your family may be expecting the first grandchild, and you want to tell the world. Perhaps your son just passed his driver's license test, and he cannot hold the excitement in.

Your favorite baseball team wins the World Series, and the celebration goes on for a long time. You want to share the great news. The prophet Jeremiah was given a tough assignment. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, and God called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah thought he was too young for the job. The Lord responded, "You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you." (Jer. 1: 7, 8)

What was his tough assignment? He was called to tell the people of Israel that they had forsaken the Lord. God said, "My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols." (Jer. 2: 11)

The Lord said, "Do not be afraid of the people." And Jeremiah said, "The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior." Now in Chapter 20:9, Jeremiah says, "His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot."

The preaching of the Word brought Jeremiah beatings and imprisonment. However, he continued to speak. He could not hold the Word in. God was with him and rescued him. God's Word burns in my heart. I pray that your heart burns within you when God gives you an opportunity to share his Word. You may have been afraid to speak God's words, but you could not hold them in.

It is a gift of God's grace that he calls people to share his Word. The Lord tells you not to be afraid, not to run away. By the power of the Spirit, you will be given words to share, words of concern, words of love, and words of eternal life. Remember what Jeremiah said: "His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones." God's Word will burn in your heart, too.

Prayer: Dear Lord God, your Word is burning in my heart. You place before me many opportunities to share. May I find strength to speak your holy Word. I am blessed that you call me to share love and forgiveness. Amen.

REST – WONDERFUL REST!

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 49

Therefore, let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall into the same pattern of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:11)

Rest comes in different forms. Before the pandemic, there were so many things I had to do and run to. It was great to look forward to going to work so that I could rest, or at least hope for a breather. Then, something came up at work, and bam—still no rest. Did that happen for you?

Then, the change came. Everything was closed. For some of us, even work was closed. You might be tempted to think that you are tired of rest. It would be good to go to work for something to do, and of course, you still have bills to pay and everyday expenses to cover.

Now, you possibly have no income. So, now, it might not be the hassle of running from this to that, but worries remain. Doesn't it ever end?

In this section of Hebrews, the author is talking about the Sabbath Rest that God began at creation. He rested on the seventh day. He wanted that for his creation. But we know the story. It was lost. Even though God had formal rules for the people of Israel to follow, they couldn't do it, either.

The Israelites' going to the promised land was a picture of entering rest. But that entrance wasn't the fulfillment of rest, either. In verse 8, we read, "For, if Joshua has given them rest, then God would not have spoken about another day."

Hebrews continues: "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God rested from his work."

The Scriptures point out that we can never supply our own rest. No matter how hard we try, we can't find peace with God on our own for that true rest. The rest is supplied. God's word declares the rest. It has the power to work the rest. Sins are forgiven, and heaven opens in Jesus. Yes, true rest is possible. It is the gracious work of God. Yes, rest—wonderful rest.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for winning wonderful rest for me. When I get sidetracked by all of the things that disturb my rest, remind me of the victory that you have supplied. Fill my heart with the rest that only you can bring. Amen.

CONTINUE TO LOVE

by Rev. Patrick Feldhus, Chaplain

Week 50

Above all, love each other constantly, because love covers a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)

If we waited for people to be loveable, we would never love anyone. It is easy for us to make lists about why we should not love certain other individuals.

- “They talked behind my back.”
- “They spread lies about me.”
- “They hurt my child.”
- “They stole from me.”

The list can go on and on. But I am confident that as much as we can make lists about others, they, in turn, can make lists about us, too. **If love depended on the object, love would cease to exist.**

Imagine if God waited for us to be worthy of his love! If God made a list about each one of us, it would contain every unlovable sin we had ever committed. **God shows us the true nature of love.** Love is given even to the unworthy. God’s love in Christ was given to us despite the loveless sins we had committed against God and one another.

“This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16) God has shown us what love truly is, and this changes how we show love. His love in Christ has covered all of our sins. Now that all our sins are covered in the blood of Christ, we know how to show constant love to one another! We will continue to sin against one another, but the love of Christ that God gives us will compel us to love one another despite our sins. This does not mean that we say sin is okay. On the contrary, we still call sin a sin, but in love.

Our goal will always be to point one another back to the love of Christ. He has covered the sins of all people. Christ’s love is the reason why we will continue to love one another!

Prayer: We cannot thank you enough for the love that you have given us in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to love one another as you have loved us. Give us opportunities to show love to the people in our lives that reflects your great love for all people. In this way, more and more will come to know how your love has covered all sin. Amen.

THE NAME SAYS IT ALL

by Rev. Ed Fredrich, Chaplain

Week 51

He said, "Yes, God has made me fruitful in the land where I was afflicted." (Genesis 41:52b)

Biblical names are often meaningful. The name "Jesus" in Greek and "Joshua" in Hebrew means "The Lord saves." Fitting name. Jesus does save and has saved. God also changed names like Abram to Abraham, or Jacob to Israel. The names of Jacob's sons also came from their mothers as expressions of the conditions at the time of their births. It is quite interesting. Let us consider this one from Genesis 41. Joseph was in Egypt. His jealous brothers had sold him as a slave. However, his fortune turned for the better. After interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, he was made second in command in the country.

He led the food collection during the seven years of plenty. He was also given a wife. That union was blessed with two sons. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh because "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's house." (verse 51) The name he gave his son reflected how he felt. His brothers had totally rejected him. That situation was all forgotten. They were history as far as Joseph was concerned. He named the second son Ephraim. That name reflects a change. He understood some important truths about God's leading and guiding. Being a slave was not pleasant. But Joseph never lost his faith in God.

Even when he was falsely accused and then forgotten by a guy whom he had helped, God was still at work. Now, during the years of plenty, Joseph confessed his thankfulness in the way in which he named his younger son. Look at your own life and situation. Remember the different situations you were in. The problems you faced. The fears that led to troubled sleep.

You might be facing them still. I know that for me, God worked out my life like he did for Joseph. "Yes, God has made me fruitful in the land where I was afflicted." I hope that you are in that same condition. If not, remember that the same Lord who worked everything out for Joseph is the same God who is with you. His name assures us that he saves.

Prayer: Lord, lead me to see you at work in my life. Help me in my struggles with my problems and worries. Give me the confidence that Joseph had, and lead me to be thankful for your blessings. Amen.

A GENTLE WHISPER

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Week 52

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty." (1 Kings 19:10)

What does God look like to you? Perhaps you see him as a powerful judge. You will stand before him, and he will list all of the things you have done. You might ask, "Does God see what I have done wrong? Will he condemn me for my mistakes and my sins?" Perhaps you see God as an understanding, merciful father. He will not hold your sins against you. Are you therefore willing to live every day of your life for God?

The prophet Elijah was in a bad spot. He thought that he was all alone. He said to God, "I am the only one [prophet] left, and now they are trying to kill me too." He seems to be afraid of God, and it appears that he is ready to give up. Jezebel, the wife of the wicked King Ahab, vowed to kill Elijah. Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. He went a day's journey into the wilderness and then prayed that he might die. Twice, an angel of the Lord came to strengthen him. He traveled for 40 days and nights, at which point we find him in a cave at Horeb, the mountain of God. This is where the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The Lord then showed Elijah his power and his love. First, a great wind tore the mountains apart, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then came an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

Then came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. Then came a gentle whisper. Elijah knew the Lord was in the whisper. Elijah had lost his zeal, but the Lord restored it. The Lord assured him that there were yet 7,000 people who trusted in the Lord. Day after day, you might lose your desire for the Lord. Things will be tough. You might feel all alone and apart from God. But listen to that gentle whisper of the Lord, and know his mercy. You will be restored. You will again have great strength and zeal to serve the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Lord God, when I feel weak and all alone, restore to me the joy of your salvation. Help me to hear your voice and to feel your touch in your gentle whisper. In your name I pray. Amen.



Continue to seek God

DEVOTIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS

Important holidays are scattered throughout the calendar year. As we look forward to the next one, let's pause to remember the reason behind each holiday, God.

It is wonderful to be able to spend time with family and have a few days away from work. It is even more special when we keep God in the center as he gives us purpose and loves us unconditionally all year round.

Amid holiday celebrations, I hope these devotions will help you spend a few precious moments with God. The following devotions are each centered on a specific Christian holiday.

LET JESUS SHINE THROUGH YOU!

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Epiphany

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory
of the LORD rises upon you” (Isaiah 60:1)*

Merry Christmas! No, you don’t have the wrong day on the calendar. Today is Epiphany, often referred to as “the Christmas of the Gentiles.” The 12 days of Christmas refer to the 12 days from Christmas (Dec. 25) to Epiphany (Jan. 6).

“The Christmas of the Gentiles” was so named because this is when the Christian Church observes the visit of the wise men, or magi, to see the Christ Child. This visit likely didn’t take place until several weeks or even months after Jesus was born. Contrary to nativity sets, the wise men were likely not at the manger to present their gifts to Jesus.

Our verse reminds us, though, what Epiphany is all about. People are fascinated with the star that guided the magi to see the Savior. The light that matters is the light of Jesus as the Savior shining into our hearts by faith. Celebrating Epiphany doesn’t just mean rejoicing that God has shone the light of Jesus into our hearts, it also means working to make sure that the light of Jesus continues to shine on those who still stumble around in the darkness of sin.

Think for a moment of those around you who don’t live in the light of faith. Are there those in your own family who still struggle and fumble through life because they are trapped in the darkness of sin or unbelief? It is not uncommon as we go through life in this world that we see people who are still in the conflict and darkness of sin and the devil.

Each one of those situations is an opportunity for us to practice “the care of the soul” in a way that might be a little bit different than usual. A simple smile conveys the love of Jesus and lets the light that has shone in us shine through us. A blessed Epiphany to each of you as you let the light of Jesus shine through you in your words and actions today and every day!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for shining the light of the Gospel into my heart and giving me faith in you as my Savior! Please also make me a reflector of the light of the Gospel that you have shone into my heart by my words and actions so that others, too, may live in that light here on earth and forever in heaven. In your name, I pray. Amen.

ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST, IT ' S REAL !

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Ash Wednesday

“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return,” (Genesis 3:19)

Maybe you’ve never heard these words spoken at a funeral or committal service, but likely somewhere in a movie or TV show you’ve seen people gathered at a graveside and the minister speaks the words, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Those are more than just words because they describe what will actually happen to each of us unless Jesus returns before we die.

Maybe you’ve wondered why today is often referred to as “Ash Wednesday.” In Biblical times, people covered themselves in ashes as a sign of humility and especially repentance. It was a very visual and stark reminder that we, as human beings, are truly nothing more than dust and ashes.

This does not mean that we should sit on the ground today and cover ourselves in ashes otherwise we are not repentant. It is more an attitude of our heart. Do we realize that because of our sins we truly deserve nothing more than dust and ashes? Do we recognize that God has every right to strike us dead because of our sins?

The humble sinner who recognizes what she or he has done and what is deserved from God must have a heart and must stand before God clothed in ashes and humbly repent of all sins and beg for God’s forgiveness because of Jesus’ perfect life and innocent death.

Today, we begin another Lenten season where our primary focus is on repentance and having a keener awareness of, and thankfulness for, all that Jesus did for us. There is no way for us to not look at ourselves and who we are and what we’ve done. May God give us a heart focused on our Savior’s cross so we can follow him and remember all that he’s done for us.

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, today and every day, let me come before you with a humble heart that knows my sins, my confessions, and my looking to you for forgiveness. Give me a heart clothed in humility that realizes how utterly dependent I am on you for my forgiveness and salvation. Thank you for everything that you’ve done for me! Help me to live my life in deep appreciation for your grace and forgiveness. Amen.

AN EXAMPLE TO LIVE BY

by Mark Hayes, President of Ministry

Maundy Thursday

*"I have set you an example that you should do
as I have done for you." (John 13:15)*

Have you ever caught yourself being too concerned about your status? There is a Saturday Night Live sketch featuring Will Ferrell where he is hopelessly trying to command the respect of his teenage kids by going on about the car he drives and the number of employees who report to him at work.

It's like the PhD you meet at a party who insists on being called "doctor" even in social settings. There's a reason for a managerial structure at work, and rank has an important place in military life, but it causes friction in a real relationship. When it comes to building relationships with others, if you care too much about your status, well...you don't care too much.

After Jesus famously washed the feet of his disciples, he asked them a penetrating question: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" At that moment, they clearly did not, but do you? What did Jesus do for them? In that moment, he provided a snapshot of how he treated people.

Jesus cared for them, loved them, listened, and sacrificed. He nurtured, healed, forgave, and instructed. If anyone had the right to exert power and authority, it was the Son of God.

But in those relational moments, he didn't. In his personal interactions with people while he walked the Earth, his own self-proclaimed status was that of a servant. Now, he instructs us to pay forward his servant-minded love by saying, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Jesus prepared a banquet for us in heaven. The price of admission was his own sacrifice. By doing for others what Jesus has done for us, he teaches us how to set the table for the banquet. Mirroring the love of Jesus is a far more effective invitation to his love and forgiveness than merely reading the rule book to the guests whom he wants you to invite.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us to understand the depth of your love for us personally. Move us to set our own motives aside to actively serve others as you have served us. Let our reflection of your love be an invitation to others to know your forgiveness and comfort in their lives. Amen.

THE PERFECT SOLUTION

by Mark Hayes, President of Ministry

Good Friday

“and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:9)

A principal and successful high school volleyball coach had a poster on his wall with the words “Good Enough Isn’t.” Like most great leaders, he believed that whether in academics or sports, you should never settle for “good enough.” That mantra is invariably true in the world as we know it. Working harder than others around you is universally accepted as a recipe for success.

Jesus, the Son of God, truly was perfect. When Hebrews 5:9 says he was “made perfect,” it takes us on the journey of Jesus who was made perfect through suffering. He came into our imperfect train wrecks, saved our lives from the debris, and took our place on the demolished trains. The perfect Son of God accomplished the perfect plan to save our lives by taking on our destruction.

When God in Hebrews 5 says that Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, he is reflecting on how we hang onto what he died to give us. He summed it up in two short phrases.

1. Love God.
2. Love your neighbor.

In other words, don’t do things that damage your relationship with God, and don’t do things that damage your relationship with others. Obedience isn’t as mundane as adhering to religious rules to achieve a prize. It is Jesus’s loving advice to stay close to him and to avoid anything that takes you away from him.

Good Friday, when we celebrate the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, isn’t “Good Enough” Friday; it’s “Perfect Friday.” Jesus accepts you just as you are. He opens his arms wide to hold you in them. As someone who loves you very deeply, Jesus gives you guidance to stay close to him.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I am broken and live in a broken world. Through your sacrifice, you made me whole, and you long to be in a relationship with me. Thank you for choosing to be completely broken and seeking only to repair my life. Heaven is my home. While I wait to get there, lead me to see obedience to you as pure joy. That’s how I stay close to you. That’s how I bring others close to you. Amen.

VICTORY!

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Easter

*“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through
our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:57)”*

Some of you may remember the TV show ABC’s Wide World of Sports where the tagline was “The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” The video montage at the beginning showed moments of victory and then some not so glorious performances.

Today is really all about victory. Think of how victory is often experienced in our lives. You win the victory to lose weight or watch your weight and then you gain back everything you lost.

Perhaps you have had the experience of being part of a team which won a championship; but if you really think about it, you’re only the champion until another team wins the championship the next year.

In 1 Corinthians 15:57, the Apostle Paul exclaims “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is not some temporary, earthly victory.

This is an eternal victory over sin, death and the devil. The Bible tells us that on that first Good Friday afternoon the devil thought he was triumphant because Jesus died.

The Bible also tells us the first place Jesus went on Easter Sunday morning after he came back to life – he went to hell to show the devil that he had won and was alive again.

Maybe you have been to a funeral for a Christian friend or loved one which was described as a “victory celebration.”

That is a very appropriate description – it gets our minds and eyes past the temporary earthly rest of death and helps us look ahead to the victory which the person who has died now has.

No more earthly pain, sorrow or trouble, the person who has died has won the earthly battle through faith in Jesus and will rise to a perfect, new life in heaven. This is what each of us as children of God can look forward to.

*Prayer: A blessed Easter to each of you as you celebrate and look forward
to the eternal victory which is ours in Christ!*

WHAT DOES JESUS' ASCENSION MEAN FOR US?

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Ascension

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people." (Ephesians 1:18)

There is no denying that the year 2020 was an unprecedented time of confusion, uncertainty and trying to figure out what was going on. During a pandemic and national strife, people were trying to figure out what "normal" was.

What does Jesus' Ascension mean for us? As Apostle Paul reflects on what Jesus' Ascension means for us, focus on the word "hope." "Hope" is a concept we are likely striving toward now. Does it seem just out of your grasp? Does it seem nebulous or unclear?

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know." Paul knows and understands how easily we can lose sight of hope. Being sinful people in a sinful world is not always easy, but when we look to God for clarity and strength, we can sort things out.

Why does Jesus' Ascension give us a sure and certain hope amid unprecedented change and uncertainty? God is in control of all things, even when it doesn't seem like it or we can't clearly see or understand.

Paul reminds us we have hope because we can look forward to "the riches of his glorious inheritance". That is a reminder for us that our life on earth is just a stopping point on our way home to our final destination—heaven. We get attached to and tied down by this life, and the things of this life. This can cause us to lose sight of our real goal. To put it another way, as much as things on earth seem very wonderful and we think this is what we want, we have something so much better to look forward to in heaven. That is why Paul uses the word "inheritance" to describe what God has waiting for us in heaven; it is something which he has prepared and is saving for us to enjoy once we get there.

Jesus' Ascension reminds us he is still in control and working things out in the way he knows is best. It also reminds us Jesus is back in heaven to prepare our inheritance and is looking forward to sharing it with us one day.

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, even though you have ascended back in to heaven and we can't see you, we ask that you would constantly assure us that you are still working on our behalf. Please help us to remember that you are using your almighty power to work out everything for our good. Amen.

CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

by Rev. Mark Bartsch, Chaplain

Pentecost

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Acts 2:21)

Many people in the world ask the question “What must I do to be saved?” Different answers are given.

- “I have lived a pretty good life. I have done many good things. Surely God would let me into heaven.”
- “If I keep the commands of the law, I will be in glory.”
- “I try hard to be kind to my neighbor. God will see that, and God will understand.”

The Pharisees in the Bible thought they had developed a good way to bypass God. They wrote additional laws, thinking that by keeping them, this would bring them to heaven. God does see what we have done. In his eyes, it is not very good. God also has expectations for us.

- “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” (Lev 19: 2)
- “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5: 48)

Those expectations are beyond our reach. We cannot be holy and perfect. Instead, we are told, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3: 23)

Call on the name of the Lord. Pentecost is 50 days after Easter. Jesus has ascended into heaven. Before he ascended, he told his disciples he would send the Holy Spirit.

- “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.” (Acts 2: 17)

This is what happened. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, or languages, as the Spirit enabled them. The people who were gathered in Jerusalem heard the “wonders of God” in their own languages. The people heard what they had done. But God raised Jesus from the dead. The people asked, “What shall we do?” “Repent and be baptized.” **Call on the name of the Lord.**

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for these tremendous gifts of faith, hope, and salvation. Move us to be willing servants to share your Word so that many more may come to faith in you. What joy there is to know that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
In your name, we pray. Amen.

BEWARE OF COUNTERFEIT BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Reformation

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32)

Those two verses hold a special place in my heart as they are my confirmation verses. I was reminded of the practical value of my confirmation verses when I read a recent article about the sad lack of Bible knowledge among Americans. The article discussed a survey of people who were asked whether well-known sayings were in the Bible or not. Surprisingly, 80% of the people surveyed believed that the oft-quoted phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” is found in the Bible—but it is not!

The point here is that oftentimes what we assume is our knowledge of the Bible—what it truly says or doesn’t say—is not on point. Long ago, Jesus addressed this difference when he spoke these words to his disciples, as recorded by John. In a broader context, he was telling them and now us, “Make sure you know, make sure you really know, what the truth is that the Bible teaches and then you will have the truth that gives you salvation and heaven.”

Consider how the U.S. government trains people to spot counterfeit money. The Feds don’t show them all kinds of counterfeit money (of which there are many) so that they are aware of what most—but not all—counterfeit bills look like. Instead, they teach them to know exactly what genuine money looks like. When a person already knows what’s *real*, he or she can then spot the *unreal* counterfeit currency at a glance.

As we observe the Reformation, we celebrate the blessing of having access to the truth of God’s Word and thanking Him for those who have helped keep that truth from being distorted or lost. This time is also a reminder to us that we need to make sure that we know the truth and can spot counterfeit Bible knowledge. The best way to find and learn the truth is to regularly read our Bible and to know that we truly what it says.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the truth of your Word that tells me that Jesus is my Savior and that heaven is mine through faith in him. Forgive me for the times that I have not always upheld that truth or have let others have beliefs that are not the truth in your Word. Keep me strong in my faith and help me to always hold onto you and your Word. Amen.

FOREVER THANKSGIVING

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Thanksgiving

*“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever” (Psalm 107:1)*

Every year since 1863, the U.S. has observed a Thursday near the end of November as a national day of Thanksgiving. We set aside a day where we, as a nation, join together in giving thanks to God. But if all we do is give our thanks for one day and don't really make thanksgiving a part of the other 364 days of the year, then we have fallen far short of acknowledging how we have been blessed.

“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.” These words remind us where our thanks always need to be directed: “to the LORD.” Since God is the giver of every gift, He alone is worthy of our thanks and praise. Have you ever noticed how Thanksgiving turns into a listing of all of our blessings?

The Psalm writer also reminds us why God gives us the blessings we have: “for he is good.” Lest we fall into the trap of thinking we have received our blessings because we have earned them or deserve them, we are told that God gives them to us out of His goodness. This is a reminder we don't deserve any of the blessings we have, yet God gives us so many blessings that we can't really count or realize. Another thought that we need to remember is that “blessings” aren't just the physical “things” we have. While we certainly ought to thank God for all these physical blessings, we also ought to thank God for his Son as our Savior and all the spiritual blessings he gives us: forgiveness, hope, peace, heaven, and many more.

The verse closes with “His love endures forever.” We can never thank God enough or out-thank God for His blessings. Even when we fail to thank God for His blessings or acknowledge him as the source of all that we have, He keeps giving his gifts in a measure far greater than we can imagine. Today is a good reminder to give thanks to God for His unbelievable goodness to us. May we have that same attitude tomorrow and every day of our lives!

Prayer: Gracious God, we owe you a debt of gratitude and thanks for all your rich blessings. Forgive us for the times we have failed to acknowledge you as the source of our blessings. Lead us to thank you not only with our lips, but also with our lives, each and every day. Amen.

WELCOME YOUR SAVIOR-KING!

By Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Advent

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9)

The concept of a king is something we’ve read about in books or seen portrayed in various types of media. We likely imagine a king as someone who lives in luxury and has people waiting on him hand and foot.

We need to erase that from our minds any previous concepts of a king that we might have. King Jesus is unlike any other king. Instead of pomp and circumstance, he comes in humility and service. King Jesus didn’t come to rule over an area of land and a group of people. Rather, he came to rule in our hearts with his saving Word.

God’s ultimate goal is to help people to come to know Jesus as their Savior and to know that an eternity in heaven is theirs. One word in Zechariah’s prophecy of Jesus’s coming as the Savior-King is often misunderstood. That word is “salvation.” So often people think of things only in terms of earthly or physical things and miss out on the far greater spiritual need and meaning.

People want their earthly woes and challenges resolved. When people understand the salvation they have in King Jesus, their lives will fall into line. When we understand what the forgiveness of sins means for us, we begin to understand that God resolved our differences and guilt through King Jesus’s perfect life and innocent death. King Jesus gives us everything we need for our daily lives, and often so much more. We understand that our goal is to make sure that we are ready for and looking forward to our eternal home. King Jesus rules everything in our lives for our physical and eternal good. When you look at things in this way, it is very easy to welcome Jesus as your King, to look forward to what we are going to see him do.

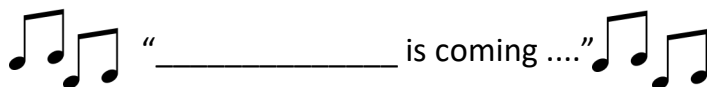
Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for coming as our humble King to serve us and bring us our salvation. As this week we watch and review all that you did to be our humble, serving King, impress on us the depth of your love and the blessings of your service to us. Thank you for all you did for us. We ask that you guide us to live our lives to show our appreciation for your gracious love for us. Amen.

JESUS IS COMING...TO SAVE YOU !

by Rev. Joel Gaertner, Vice President of Ministry

Christmas

"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come....he will come to save you." (Isaiah 35:4)



A song that is heard this time of the year probably came to mind as you read those opening words. People are decorating, attending events, and visiting people. Although this isn't wrong, ask, "What is the most important thing I am looking forward to in the next few weeks?"

I enjoy the food, festivities, and family time of the Christmas season, but all of those things fade quickly. When the food has been eaten, the festivities are over, and the family is gone, what do you have?

As Isaiah looks forward to the coming of Jesus, his words—“Be strong, do not fear”—show complete confidence in the Lord.

These words give us several reasons to have that same confidence as we look forward to the preparation and celebration of Jesus at Christmas.

When we are weak or troubled, Jesus gives us strength and removes our fear. How? “He will come to save you.”

Because Jesus came to take care of our greatest problem—sin—he can help us to deal with any problem caused by sin.

Weakness, fear, doubt, worry, and all of the other problems are a result of sin. All things that try to rob us of joy not just at this time of the year but throughout the entire year, Jesus saved us from.

Savor the food. Enjoy the festivities. Treasure family time. Most of all, look forward to and celebrate the coming of Jesus. You need what he brings after the merriment of this season is done. He will be there for you, save you, give you strength, take away your fear, and give you his love. Always.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, during this busy time of the year, there are so many things that try to catch our attention or demand our time. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the next several weeks, help me to focus on Jesus and to prepare for his coming and what he comes to bring me. Amen.



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