

Reading the Bible
through in a year.

Reflections by Michael Perry

Volume 3

DAYS 182-270

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs
Isaiah

Acts
Romans
I Corinthians
II Corinthians
Galatians

JUSTICE
WISDOM
SUFFERING
INTEGRITY
TRUST
COVETING
LOVE
MINISTRY
CONFESIONS
WORSHIP
ADULTERY
ENCOURAGEMENT
DEVOTION
GRACE
ACCUSATIONS
STRUGGLES
HEALINGS

This effort is dedicated to my wife Denise, the love of my life, who has been my constant morning companion in reading God's Word for 27 years.

To my assistant, Katie Witbeck, for transforming 365 blog entries into workable documents.

To Lynn Fischer, SpringHill Development Coordinator, along with my wife Denise, for their diligent and effective editing of 365 days of journal entries—thank you.

Special thanks to Mike Smith and his team at Designvox for their creative giftedness, encouragement and willingness to take on this project. Their work made the publication of these journal entries a reality and the life transformation of many more people possible.

Dear Friend,

By now you have probably experienced what I have experienced after months of daily Bible reading. You have moved from feeling like reading the Bible is something you have to do, to something you now want to do. It has become a habit; a part of the ebb and flow of your life.

Holy habits are gifts from God. They are how He has wired us to live. But habits are only formed by our cooperation with the Holy Spirit through faith and practice. Thus, our lifelong goal should be to continually form holy habits through faith, practice, and by the grace of the Spirit, whether it is such things as Bible reading, prayer or acts of service.

In this next quarter, your holy habit of Bible reading will take you through much of the Old Testament wisdom literature, which includes books like the Psalms, as well as tackling most of Paul's letters found in the New Testament. It is in this quarter of the reading schedule you will see, compared to the other parts of the schedule, the greatest variety of literary genres. Yet, a variety of genres does not mean a variety of truths. Instead, what you will find are many common themes and truths within the Old and New Testament readings. The beauty of having these different genres to read is that they will shed a different light on these common truths, bringing them alive in ways a single genre could never accomplish.

So my prayer for you, over these next few months, is that the variety of genres and perspectives will help you see God, and His truths, in a new and life-transforming light.

By the transforming power of His Word,



Michael Perry, President
SpringHill Camps

DAY	VOLUME 3	PAGE	DAY	VOLUME 3	PAGE
182	Job 21-22, Acts 10:1-23	1	210	Psalms 56-58, Acts 28:1-15	31
183	Job 23-25, Acts 10:24-28	2	211	Psalms 59-61, Acts 28:16-31	32
184	Job 26-28, Acts 11	3	212	Psalms 62-64, Romans 1	33
185	Job 29-30, Acts 12	4	213	Psalms 65-67, Romans 2	34
186	Job 31-32, Acts 13:1-23	5	214	Psalms 68-69, Romans 3	35
187	Job 33-34, Acts 13:24-52	6	215	Psalms 70-72, Romans 4	36
188	Job 35-37, Acts 14	7	216	Psalms 73-74, Romans 5	37
189	Job 38-39, Acts 15:1-21	8	217	Psalms 75-77, Romans 6	39
190	Job 40-42, Acts 15:22-41	9	218	Psalms 78, Romans 7	40
191	Psalms 1-3, Acts 16:1-15	10	219	Psalms 79-81, Romans 8:1-18	41
192	Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40	11	220	Psalms 82-84, Romans 8:19-39	42
193	Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15	12	221	Psalms 85-87, Romans 9	43
194	Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34	14	222	Psalms 88-89, Romans 10	44
195	Psalms 13-16, Acts 18	15	223	Psalms 90-92, Romans 11:1-21	46
196	Psalms 17-18, Acts 19:1-20	16	224	Psalms 93-95, Romans 11:22-36	47
197	Psalms 19-21, Acts 19:21-41	17	225	Psalms 96-98, Romans 12	48
198	Psalms 22-24, Acts 20:1-16	18	226	Psalms 99-102, Romans 13	49
199	Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38	19	227	Psalms 103-104, Romans 14	51
200	Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-14	21	228	Psalms 105-106, Romans 15:1-20	52
201	Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:15-40	22	229	Psalms 107-108, Romans 15:21-33	53
202	Psalms 34-35, Acts 22	23	230	Psalms 109-111, Romans 16	54
203	Psalms 36-37, Acts 23:1-11	24	231	Psalms 112-115, I Corinthians 1	55
204	Psalms 38-40, Acts 23:12-35	25	232	Psalms 116-118, I Corinthians 2	56
205	Psalms 41-43, Acts 24	26	233	Psalms 119:1-48, I Corinthians 3	57
206	Psalms 44-46, Acts 25	27	234	Psalms 119:49-104, I Corinthians 4	58
207	Psalms 47-49, Acts 26	28	235	Psalms 119:105-176, I Corinthians 5	59
208	Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-25	29	236	Psalms 120-123, I Corinthians 6	60
209	Psalms 53-55, Acts 27:26-44	30	237	Psalms 124-127, I Corinthians 7:1-24	61

DAY	VOLUME 3	PAGE	DAY	VOLUME 3	PAGE
238	Psalms 128-131, I Corinthians 7:25-40	62	259	Proverbs 30-31, II Corinthians 8	88
239	Psalms 132-135, I Corinthians 8	64	260	Ecclesiastes 1-3, II Corinthians 9	89
240	Psalms 136-138 I Corinthians 9	65	261	Ecclesiastes 4-6, II Corinthians 10	90
241	Psalms 139-141, I Corinthians 10:1-13	67	262	Ecclesiastes 7-9, II Corinthians 11:1-15	91
242	Psalms 142-144, I Corinthians 10:14-33	68	263	Ecclesiastes 10-12, II Corinthians 11:16-33	92
243	Psalms 145-147, I Corinthians 11:1-15	69	264	Song of Songs 1-3, II Corinthians 12	94
244	Psalms 148-150, I Corinthians 11:16-34	70	265	Song of Songs 4-5, II Corinthians 13	95
245	Proverbs 1-2, I Corinthians 12	71	266	Song of Songs 6-8, Galatians 1	96
246	Proverbs 3-4, I Corinthians 13	72	267	Isaiah 1-3, Galatians 2	97
247	Proverbs 5-6, I Corinthians 14:1-20	73	268	Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3	98
248	Proverbs 7-8, I Corinthians 14:21-40	74	269	Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4	99
249	Proverbs 9-10, I Corinthians 15:1-32	75	270	Isaiah 10-12, Galatians 5	100
250	Proverbs 11-12, I Corinthians 15:33-58	76			
251	Proverbs 13-14, I Corinthians 16	77			
252	Proverbs 15-16, II Corinthians 1	78			
253	Proverbs 17-18, II Corinthians 2	80			
254	Proverbs 19-20, II Corinthians 3	83			
255	Proverbs 21-22, II Corinthians 4	84			
256	Proverbs 23-24, II Corinthians 5	85			
257	Proverbs 25-27, II Corinthians 6	86			
258	Proverbs 28-29, II Corinthians 7	87			



There is no justice in life and all people come to the same end.

Job responds once again to a message from one of his friends. This time the response is stronger as if Job is growing weary of the philosophical musings of his friends. Job concludes that there is no justice in life and all people come to the same end—whether righteous or wicked. Job's speech prompts a third message from Eliphaz, who becomes blunter, blaming Job's problems on his obvious wickedness and sin. There continues to be a collision of perspectives on evil and suffering between these four friends.

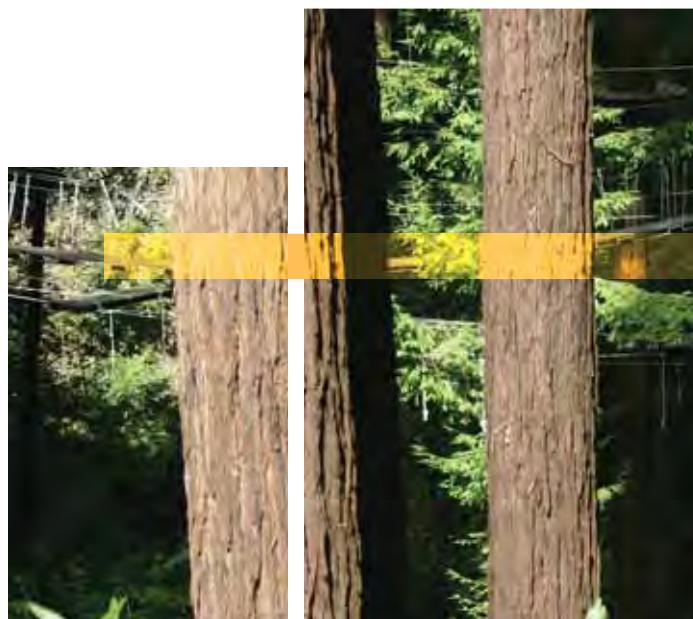
Though Paul has been introduced in Acts, Peter continues to be the central figure. In this theologically important episode, God shows Peter, and thus the Church, that all things are pure that God has made clean. As it turns out, this truth does not solely apply to animals and food, but to people as well. The implication that God's grace extends to those who are not Jewish sets the stage for the Church's rapid growth and change from being Jewish-centered to being Gentile-dominated (non-Jewish).



The power of God.

Job responds once again to Eliphaz and his other friends. In doing so, he acknowledges the power of God—so powerful none can stand against Him. It is this power that causes Job to become terrified of God. Job arrives at a place where he is actually terrified because of the suffering he has experienced. Job clearly holds God responsible for his circumstance, which is why he has a healthy dose of fear and respect for Him—a truth Bildad affirms when he says, “Dominion and awe belong to God” (Job 25:2).

This same fear and awe is at the heart of a Gentile named Cornelius. He was a God-fearing man, and as a result, put himself into position to receive God’s grace. He receives this in dramatic fashion through a visit by an angel followed by a visit from God’s appointed leader of the Church, Peter, which is then followed by the Holy Spirit Himself. This visit by God’s Spirit transforms Cornelius and his entire household. As evidence, they are baptized by Peter; an affirmation that no “man is impure or unclean” (Acts 10:28).



Job replies to his friends’ explanation of his suffering.

Job replies to his friends’ explanation of his suffering. This time Job goes deeper with his response. He first defends his integrity and challenges the accusations of his friends. Then, he moves into looking at God. He sees God as all-powerful and out of our reach. As a result, wisdom—the place where one can find understanding—seems out of reach for Job and for us. This leaves Job wondering where he can find the wisdom he is seeking to explain why everything has happened to him.

Seeking wisdom and understanding of God is essential to the Church as it deals with the new reality of Gentiles being included in the Gospel. It is a transformational moment for the Church and came about because of God’s call, Peter’s obedience, and the Church’s openness to the Lord’s plans; even if these plans were outside of their understanding. Though the Church is making steps to broaden the inclusion of who receives God’s grace through Christ, it will face further questions about the implications of this inclusion; requiring further wisdom is vital in making sure all is addressed as God desires.



Job's response to his losses.

As Job continues his response to his friends, it really becomes a response to what God has done to him. Job is dealing with the fact that not only has he lost his health, wealth and kids, he has lost his place in the community. He had a place of honor, but now people mock and despise him. However, he does not attack those who mistreat him, but instead, turns to God looking for an explanation.

Peter's perspective is different than Job's because he is released from jail by an angel of God. Peter is facing sure death, but does not give a hint of feeling he is a victim, questioning God or blaming others. Peter, as well as the Church, trusts God because they believe He is in control. This seems to be the case regardless if Peter is released from jail or not. Peter is an example, unlike Job, of trusting God regardless of his circumstances; even if it does not make sense, he knows God's plans are bigger than his.

Job lists all the sins he did not commit.

Job finishes the defense of his life before his friends and God by listing all the sins he did not commit. He starts with lust and moves to dishonesty and adultery. From there, he moves to ill-treatment of his servants, neglecting the poor and so on. It is a defense that says "I am not perfect, but I have no pattern of any of these sins being a part of my life." Just as Job finishes, a new friend (one younger than the others) speaks in an attempt to provide wisdom where it has been lacking through the past conversations.

Acts 13 is a transitional chapter where the story moves from Peter being the central character to Paul becoming the story's focus. This transition begins with God's call to Paul and his companion, Barnabas, to complete the work He has planned for them—the work of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles. The church in Antioch responds to this call by praying and fasting for these two missionaries and then placing their hands on them as an act of dedication and blessing, sending Paul and Barnabas off on their first missionary journey.

Elihu's God-centered perspective.

Job's youngest friend, Elihu, begins the meat of his talk with Job and his other friends. Elihu presents a more God-centered perspective than Job's other friends. However, he still accepts that somehow Job has received what he deserves. The response Elihu recommends to Job is to accept what is happening to him as being God directing and to not question God's authority or wisdom. As we will read later, this advice is not far from the conclusion Job will soon discover.

Paul continues in one of his first recorded sermons to the people of Pisidian Antioch, on his first missionary journey. Because he is speaking primarily to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (Gentiles who are practicing Judaism), Paul uses the Old Testament to build his case for Christ. This approach appears to be working when the audience is familiar with the Old Testament text. Later, we will see that as Paul's ministry reaches more and more Gentiles, he adjusts his approach and message so that these new audiences can understand their need for Christ.



Elihu acknowledges God's greatness and power.

Elihu continues his discussion with words directed towards Job. Elihu acknowledges God's greatness and power, and adds that God speaks and makes Himself known. If we do not hear or see Him, it is because we are not listening or our sins are getting in the way. It is a very persuasive message—again one that prepares Job for a response directly from the Lord.

As Paul's ministry continues to impact more people, it also stirs up jealousy among some Jews and Gentiles. In Lystra and Derbe, where at one point the people were worshipping Paul and Barnabas as gods, the crowd turns on them and stones Paul leaving him for dead. By divine protection, Paul survives the assault and continues his work of bringing the Good News of Christ to the Gentiles. Both Job and Paul's life remind us that even though we may be doing good acts, this does not exempt us from suffering by the hands of others or from nature itself.



God makes a point.

Job finally hears from the One who has all the answers, the only perfect perspective, and who can see and understand all—the Lord. Unlike the Lord's discussion with Elijah, God speaks to Job out of a storm; it is a message that is strong and forthright. Yet, the answer is not a direct answer. It is really a series of questions, questions that Job could not affirmatively answer. God is making the point that it is impossible for Job to understand God and His ways—certainly not the answer Job is looking for.

As Gentiles become Christians, a disagreement arises about what is required of them—or anyone for that matter—to become part of the Church. The disagreement centers on if it is necessary to follow the Law of Moses in order to become a part of God's people. It is an important question, one that has a significant impact on the future of the Church and who will be part of it. The Apostles hear both sides of the debate and work through their own Biblical understanding to come to a conclusion that will allow for significant growth of the Church by reaching those who are not Jewish.

Faith in God alone is the key.

The Lord finishes by continuing with the same line of questioning as Job. At the end, the Lord does not explain why these bad things are happening to him. Instead, He challenges Job to see that he will not know all the answers he is looking for in this life, but he can rest in knowing that God does. Since God knows the answers, Job can put his faith in Him. Faith in God alone is the key to finding peace in the midst of suffering.

As the Apostles agree to the expectations for the Gentiles who become part of the Church, we see their growing understanding of God's grace as expressed through the death of Christ on the cross. The perspective is not much different from the one the Lord challenged Job with—you cannot find peace with God through following a list of religious practices, but instead, through faith in Christ alone. It is a faith that requires the acceptance of mystery, as with Job, and trusting that God has a bigger plan than we are often capable of seeing.



A collection of songs.

We begin a new Old Testament book—the Psalms—which is a collection of songs to be used in worship. The writing is beautiful, poetic, and at times, very personal as we read in Psalm 3. There are a number of authors who contribute to this collection of songs including King David, who wrote the largest number of them, followed by a man named Asaph. As we read David's Psalms, most of which can be found in the first half of the book, see if you can place the circumstances of his life from which he wrote about.

Paul is now on what scholars call “his second missionary journey” where he and Silas plan to revisit all the churches Paul and Barnabas planted on the first journey. It is during this second journey that God clearly calls him to go to Macedonia and northern Greece to bring the Gospel to those who need to hear it. There is a woman named Lydia who becomes a Christian, and as a result, Paul baptizes her and her entire family. This is the first record of a specific woman becoming a Christian and being baptized in the book of Acts, indicating the significance of both Lydia as a person and her station in life (being a woman) as it relates to the Gospel.

Psalms are as much prayers as they are songs.

These three Psalms are as much prayers as they are songs. David addresses the Lord as one who has an intimate relationship with him. David acknowledges God as the only true God; a God who loves His people but hates those who take pleasure in evil—whether it is worshipping false gods, deceiving others with lies, or worse, destroying the lives of others for personal gain. However, those who humbly seek God find safety in His protection and a place to sing His praises.

Paul and Silas find themselves in prison after confronting a fortune teller, a young slave girl owned by a local family. They exorcize the spirit from her, resulting in her loss of ability to tell the future. The family sues Paul and Silas which leads to them being flogged and put into prison for the evening. Just as David sang his Psalms, God protects Paul and Silas using the situation to open the door for the jailer to hear about Christ. The jailer responds to the Gospel by being baptized with his whole household. God never promises that we will escape suffering or difficulty. Instead, He will turn these trials it into something for His glory.



David acknowledges that God is the true King over the entire universe.

David sings the praises of a great God. He reflects on creation—the stars, the moon, the entire sky and sees the hand of their Creator. David also understands the special place and role God has given people within His creation—the role of caring for and nurturing what God has made. Ultimately, David acknowledges that God is the true King over the entire universe and thus deserves our praises as well.

Paul and Silas continue to visit new cities where the Gospel has yet to be presented. The reaction to their message varies depending on the character of a particular city and the Jewish synagogue found there. Though Jews and Greeks accept the message and put their faith in Christ, some do not and begin to create problems for the fledgling churches. Paul and Silas' message is so radical, it is threatening to those who live in comfort, and are not willing to change. However, no resistance stops the spread of the Good News of Christ that is for all the people.



God has a place in his heart for those who have suffered.

In these three Psalms of David there is an underlying theme of God's love for the poor, destitute and fatherless, as compared to His judgment against the arrogant and the lawless. God clearly has a special place in His heart for those who have suffered in this life and are less fortunate than most. It is this care that we are to emulate in our lives and assure we do not grow cold and callous to the needs of those who suffer around us.

This grasp of who God is, and His call to the people of this world, oozes out of Paul as seen in his message delivered at Mars Hill in Athens. In a message that could be no longer than a few minutes, Paul presents the true God and His Son Jesus to the Greeks. The message's structure and style reflects and is adapted to his audience, but the truth Paul shares is the same truth he shares throughout the known world—Jesus is God's Son, the true God sent into the world to save it and everyone who puts their faith in Him.

“Under sin.”

In the first two Psalms of today's readings, David describes a bleak picture of people and human nature. Paul quotes Psalm 14 in Romans 3 as part of his case that no one is righteous and all are “under sin” before God (Romans 3:6). This theological truth is foundational to understanding the Good News of Christ. In the following Psalms, David provides hope that people can live for God, but as Paul points out, it can only truly happen through faith in Jesus Christ.

Speaking of Paul, he continues on his missionary journey spending significant time in Corinth building and encouraging the local church. God provides Paul with encouragement in two ways. First, he allows Paul to meet a couple (tent makers like him) who become friends and partners in the Gospel. Secondly, God speaks to Paul in a dream encouraging him in his work and letting him know of His protection during his time of ministry. Both of these provide Paul with the strength he needs to continue his work, even in the face of adversity.



David's devotion to God.

David begins in Psalm 17 by acknowledging his devotion to God as evidence through his life. David turns to God for protection against the ungodly looking to harm him. His appeal is based on his devotion to God and their lack of devotion. This then turns into praise and thanksgiving in Psalm 18. David acknowledges all that God has done to protect him and elevate him above his enemies.

Just as God elevated David in the eyes of his enemies, God elevates Paul and Jesus Christ in the eyes of the people of Ephesus. God does this by using Paul to perform miraculous healings. In one episode, an evil spirit even acknowledges Christ and Paul over those trying to copy Paul's healings. These events elevate both Christ and Paul in the eyes of the Ephesians and create fear and respect for God throughout the city. We see that God elevates people not as a reward for right living, or for their personal benefit, but to fulfill His plans and glorify His name.

Two complementary realities.

David's Psalms echo two complementary realities. The first is that God is both Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe. This reality allows us to trust His revealed words—His Law and commands—as truth, making Him not just Creator, but Ruler and King. The second reality is that God loves and cares for us by being involved in every detail of our lives. David acknowledges this in his own life, but it is not just David's life that God is concerned about; God cares about all of His people, including you and me.

Another disturbance surrounding Paul and the young Church erupts. Once again, the true cause lies with people feeling threatened by the Gospel and its implications on their lives. It also has to do with a false god named Artemis. Now as you read, do a comparison of the god, Artemis, and the God David writes about in his Psalms. Compare a god who "fell from the sky," to the God who created and sustains everything in the entire universe. There is no comparison, which may explain the strong reaction by the people of Ephesus—the threat of the Gospel is true because it exposes all that is false and replaces it with what is real.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The first two Psalms we read today are two of the best-known of all the Psalms. Both reflect the thoughts, mood and situation of a man threatened with death. Psalm 22 is also a prophetic Psalm quoted by Jesus while on the cross. Jesus repeats the first verse of the Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” His call is not so much a plea to God, as it is to direct us to the fact that His death fulfills this messianic Psalm. As you read, reflect on the details of Christ’s death and see how they align.

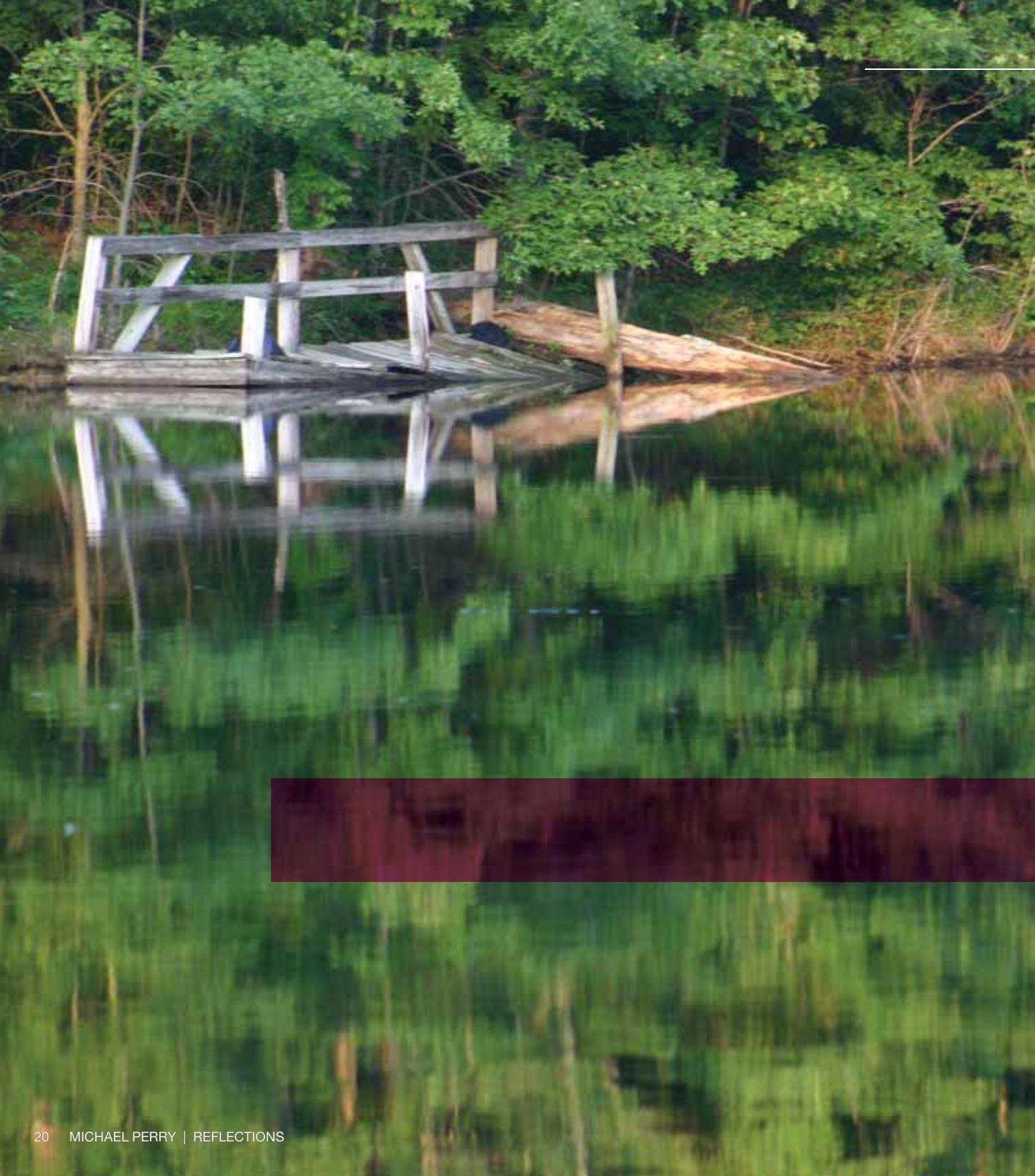
Paul faced the strong possibility of death as David did on numerous occasions. Yet, Paul stayed focused on his calling of presenting the Gospel to the Gentiles. He takes another trip visiting the churches he helped start to continue encouraging them in their faith. In Jerusalem—Paul’s new destination—he knows he will be walking “through the valley of the shadow of death,” and as David, he “fears no evil” because of his faith in God.



David’s personal devotion to God.

David moves from acknowledging his life on the edge of death to seeing God as his Savior and his Salvation. Those Psalms provide beautiful examples of prayer to God by one who is intimate with Him. They reflect David’s personal devotion to God, living right for Him and acknowledging God’s faithfulness to His people. For David, and for us, God is the “light and salvation” and the “stronghold of our life” (Psalm 27:1).

As Paul says his final goodbyes to the Christians in Ephesus, he shows the same faith in God as David does. There is no doubt that Paul (being raised a good Jew and Pharisee) memorized many, if not all, of David’s Psalms. These Psalms, ones we have read over the past few days, would have been on Paul’s mind and on his lips as he contemplated his future. Both Paul and David have become role models for us by demonstrating what lives of faith can look like in the face of suffering and troubles.



David hears God's Word loud and clear.

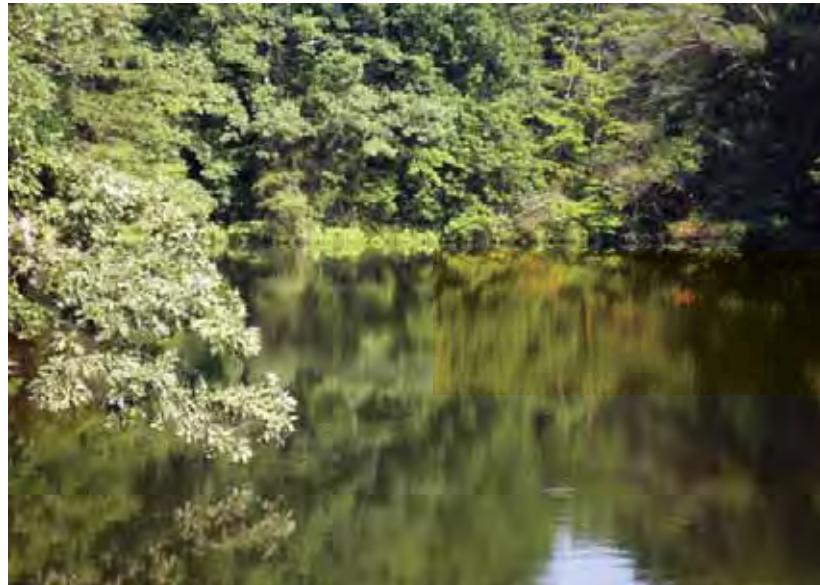
David sees God as his Savior, the only One who can rescue him from all evil—including the grave. Yet, this faith did not appear out of nowhere. It came as a result of David hearing God's Word loud and clear. Notice how David describes God's voice in Psalm 29—it is loud and it is obvious. God's voice is not hidden or tucked away only for a few special people to hear. Instead, God has made Himself known to all. First, God speaks through His creation which testifies to His glory and majesty. Secondly, God speaks through His Word in the Scriptures.

Even in Paul's own life, God speaks loud and clear on many occasions including his trip to Jerusalem. Paul's intention on returning to the Jewish capital is to bring the gifts and offerings of the churches from around the Roman Empire to the poor and suffering Christians in Judea. Paul states clearly that by going to Jerusalem he will most likely end up captured and taken to prison or possibly worse. Regardless, Paul is intent on obeying his call from God and completes his work by bringing the gifts to the Jerusalem Church.

David's prayers of confession.

Though many of the Psalms of David reflect his call to God to be saved from his enemies and for God to punish them, David is just as quick to acknowledge his own shortcomings and failures. When he does, as in Psalm 32, his songs become prayers of confession. These confessions show us a person whose heart is convicted of sin and wants desperately to be forgiven by God and have his relationship with Him restored. These Psalms are great examples of confession which we can follow when it is time for us to face God with our own failures.

As many predicted, within days of arriving in Jerusalem, Paul is falsely accused and nearly killed for breaking the Law of Moses. Ironically, Paul had just taken a public vow stating that he has not turned his back on the Law of Moses and its application to the Jews, even Jews who have put their faith in Christ. Because the crowd is prejudice against those not Jewish, they beat Paul to near the point of death. Once again, David's Psalms must have come to Paul's mind and provided him comfort amidst this chaos.



David turns to God for justice.

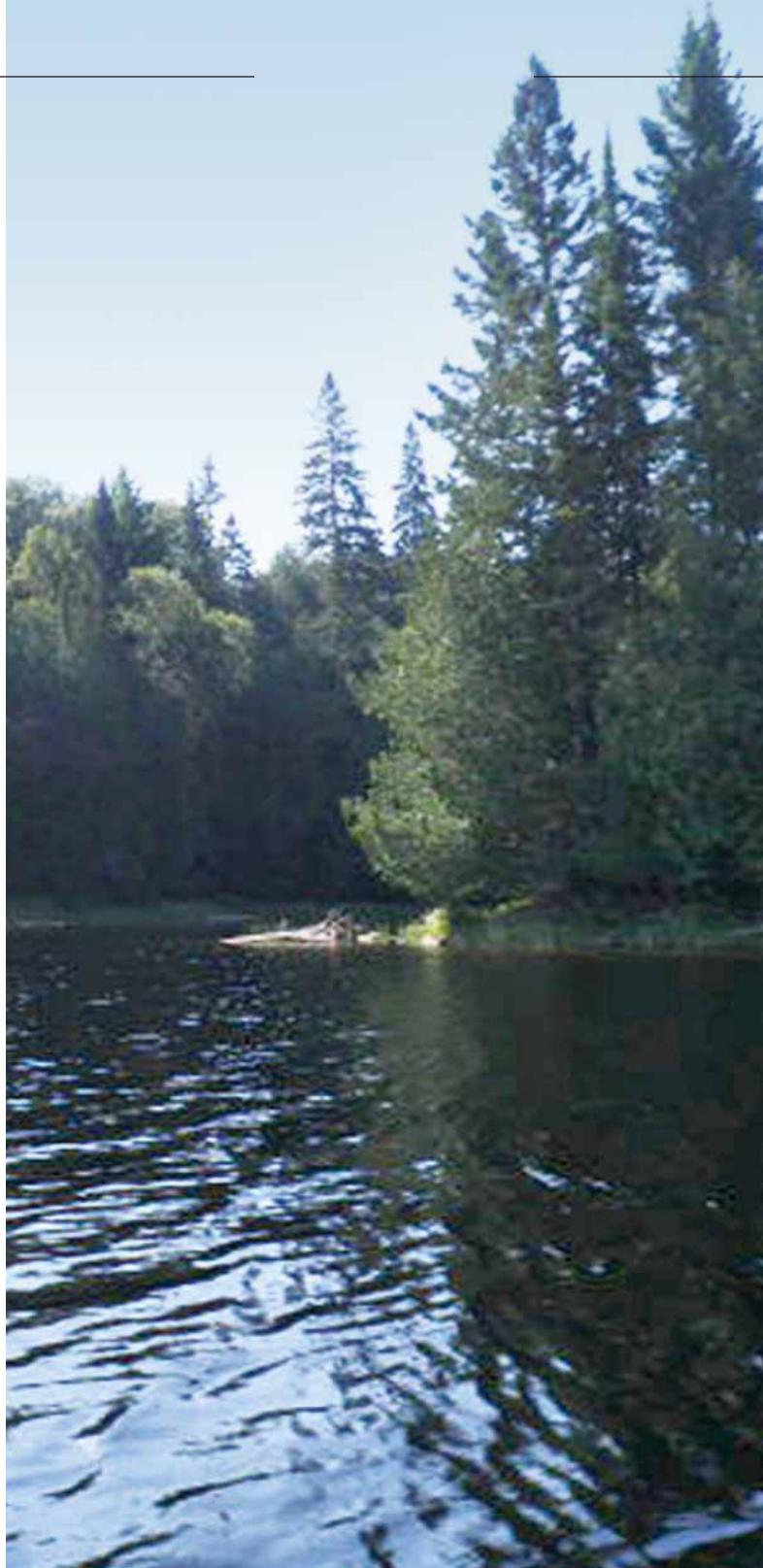
Once again, David's Psalms reflect times in his life when he is threatened, falsely accused or his enemies are just plain out to get him. In each case, David continues to turn to God for his salvation and for carrying out justice. David wants God to provide justice in response to the evil and wrongdoing of his enemies. It is quite remarkable to consider that David, being a great warrior and leader of his own army, is more than capable of taking revenge and bringing justice, but turns to God instead.

This same attitude is seen in Paul as he is taken away from the angry mob. Paul is able to make his plea of innocence to the people; however, his speech on the steps leading to the Roman barracks is not designed to get Paul out of the current situation. Instead, it is an honest testimony about Paul, his life and what God has done in it. He is truthful and frank, but at the same time, speaks to the concerns of these Jews. Unfortunately, the Jews do not wait to hear the end of Paul's defense, and as a result, Paul finds himself in chains and about to be flogged for no reason.

Trust, delight, commit and be still in the Lord.

As David grows older, he begins to see the world through new lenses. In particular, as we read in Psalm 37, he understands better the advantages of living a righteous and upright life compared to living a wicked and evil one. He calls us to trust, delight, commit and be still in the Lord (Psalm 37:3-7). This singular focus provides the foundation to living a life that pleases God and honors Him.

With this same singular focus, Paul lives his life for God and Jesus Christ. This he states in the first words of his defense before the Jewish leaders. Using wisdom, as David wrote, Paul moves the focus of the leaders off him and onto the controversies these leaders had among themselves. Paul, though sincere, strikes at the core question that existed not just in his day but in ours as well—is there a life after this one and what does it look like? Christ clearly proclaims the answer, as Paul did, that yes there is life after this one and it is found in Christ and Him only.



David's humble disposition.

From confessing his sin and the suffering that his sin has caused, to seeking God's protection and salvation, David's humble disposition continues to be reflected in the Psalms he wrote. David shows his faith in God and His forgiveness and protection. As a result, David expresses the kind of heart and disposition we are to have before God as we live our life.

The drama around Paul continues as a plot is being hatched to kill him. There is anger and malice directed towards Paul in specific and the Church in general. There are 40 men who have vowed not to eat or drink until they have killed Paul (I have always wondered what these guys did when they ended up not killing him). Once again, by God's providence, Paul escapes the plot and finds himself with the opportunity to testify about the Gospel before governors and kings, just as God had told him he would.

Salvation of our soul.

A downcast soul—a soul that is saddened, in despair and lost—has only one hope, and that hope is in God through Jesus Christ. The writer of these Psalms understands these two realities—people will have times where they find themselves in a place we call depression, and secondly, the ultimate medicine comes from God, the lover of our souls. God not only grants us eternal salvation in Christ, but salvation of our soul in this life as well. Jesus says in John 10:10, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.”

Paul continues to defend himself before both the Jewish and Roman rulers. Yet, because of the political situation, there is no ruling made resulting in Paul’s continued imprisonment. Paul’s defense continues to be the same—he is being accused of his hope in our resurrection; finding this hope in Jesus Christ which is not against the Jewish or Roman laws. Notice also Paul’s position on the Old Testament law in verse 14—it is a helpful perspective as we continue to read and study these same Old Testament scriptures.



A wedding song.

The beautiful Psalm 45, written for a wedding, is included in our reading today. Not only is it a beautiful wedding song, it is also a song that allegorically reflects the Church’s relationship with God. As you read it, look at it from both a wedding perspective as well as from our relationship with God. Using both perspectives will enrich the benefits of this Psalm in your life.

Once again, because of a change in Roman leadership, Paul makes his defense before his accusers and the new Roman leader. He continues to contend that he is no troublemaker, and in fact, there are others who have actually been the troublemakers. As before, it is apparent there is no case against Paul; he is innocent of any illegal wrongdoing, but because of politics, remains under arrest. As we will see, God continues to use this frustrating situation to expand His Kingdom through Paul as he meets new Roman leaders. In the end, Paul appeals to Caesar leading to a new phase of his ministry.



God is ruler over all.

The “Sons of Korah” write the three Psalms we read today. They focus on God’s royalty and His kingship of all the earth. God is the ruler over all people and nations; we are to see this rule like the rule of an earthly king over an earthly kingdom. Our response to God’s Kingship is to be the same and even greater than our response today to a king or leader of a nation we might meet.

Speaking of kings, Paul has his opportunity to give testimony of Christ before a king and queen. His testimony is a part of his defense against his Jewish accusers. Once again, Paul speaks to his audience with language and sources that they could relate to. In the end, there are no conversions to Christ; however, they acknowledge Paul’s innocence and have a seemingly new respect for the Christian faith and the Gospel.

David’s prayer of confession.

Psalm 51 is one of David’s most famous Psalms. It is a prayer of confession revealing the heart of a person who just sinned and morally failed in a significant way. Notice how David faces his own sin and failure—it is a model for how we are to confront ourselves, and confess our sin before God, when we have sinned. David confesses his sin, acknowledges his wrong doing, asks for forgiveness and seeks cleansing from his sin—all things that ultimately only God can do for us.

Paul is finally on his way to Rome, though probably not in the way he expected or planned. He is going as a prisoner on appeal to Caesar. This provides him an opportunity to share Christ with those in Rome as well as with the Roman political powers. The trip is full of its own dangers, but once again, Paul is assured by God of his protection so that he is able to finish the work God had laid out for him to do.



Living as if there is no God.

Psalm 53 highlights a reality that we often believe to be only true today, but was also true in early times—that there are many people who do not believe in God, and if they do, they live as if He does not exist. David's Psalm makes it clear that believing or living as if there is no God is not solely a contemporary reality; it goes back to the beginning of time. Why? Because, though the world has changed, human nature has not. The natural inclination of people is to reject God and His way goes all the way back to Adam and Eve.

This worldly, self-centered nature of people is present on the ship taking Paul to Rome. People worry about themselves and their survival, over the others on a ship sure to be destroyed by a storm. Through this, Paul's leadership is obvious. He leads the passengers and crew on a course of action to save themselves, all while praying for their safety and assuring them that faithfulness in God will lead to their current salvation. When the ship crashes ashore on Malta, as Paul promised through God, everyone survives.



David turns to God for safety and salvation.

Once again, David writes about difficult circumstances in his life where he is threatened by his enemies. In these most difficult situations, David turns to God for safety and salvation. David's Psalms provide us with the same encouragement when we find our lives unraveling and it seems as if all are against us. David is a model of someone who is after "God's own heart." Because of this, his Psalms are a place to turn to in our times of need.

Paul continues his leadership as well as his ministry as he heals the sick and ministers to those who live on the island of Malta. As a result, not only do the islanders take care of Paul, but all who were with him from the ship do so also. Paul's ministry and character blesses those in a relationship with him. Eventually, Paul arrives in Rome and is warmly greeted by other Christians from the area. Paul begins ministering in the capital of the known world by bringing the Good News of Jesus to the people who live there.

Comfort to the heart.

The beauty and appeal of David's Psalms rest in that they are often written about real events and circumstances in his life. His writings mention desperation from days when King Saul is looking to kill him, to victories waged as King of Israel. This transparency into David's life provides a sense of authenticity and practical wisdom to his Psalms. We can read them knowing that if writing these words provided comfort to David's heart, reading them can do the same for ours.

Paul, after meeting with the local Christians, does what he did in every city he visited on his missionary journeys—he meets with the local Jewish leaders and community. The Jewish community in Rome did not know anything about Paul, but heard about this new "sect". Because of this, Paul is able to present the Gospel by working his way from the Law of Moses through the Old Testament prophets. As this book ends, we see that Paul continues his work for over two years as he waits for his appeal to be heard by Caesar.

A deep relationship with God.

There is an intimacy and vulnerability in David's Psalms. In the three we read today, it is clear that David has a deep relationship with God that pours through his words. This relationship is reflected in the sheer dependence on God. David seeks God, is satisfied with God and sees God as his rock and salvation. As a result, David clings to, pants for and thirsts after God. It is an intimacy we are all created to have with God, and one we need to "thirst after" as well.

We will see this same intimacy ooze out of Paul as we begin to read his letters. Quickly we will find a depth of understanding in the Scriptures, the world and of God that is stunning. In this first chapter of Romans, Paul explains in-depth the people's relationship with God and the condition of their hearts. It is hard to read it and not believe Paul must have been looking at our world, instead of his, when writing. The truth is that the condition of the human heart has not changed over these 2,000 years. For this reason, Paul's writings are as relevant today as they were the day he wrote them.



Blessings.

These three Psalms are Psalms of blessings—God's blessings on the earth and on His people. The earth is blessed so that it will provide all that people need to live—water, food and all other necessities. God blesses His people by testing and refinement, through hearing their prayers and for giving the earth as a gift that provides the daily needs of life. There is clearly a sense of wholeness and integration about life presented in these Psalms; a wholeness often lost in the reality we live in today.

Yet, on the other hand, because of incredible blessings bestowed on all people, Paul reminds us that there is accountability that comes with it. Paul lays out his argument that because of God's blessings and His grace, all people are under God's judgment, requiring us to live as He intended. This includes the Jews who had the written Law and all others who have the law written on their hearts. This Law is the standard to which God judges and the reason we have a need for a Savior.

David's need for God to rescue him.

Once again, David's Psalms read of the need for God to rescue him from his own shortcomings and from those who attack him. His faith in God stems from the fact that God has made Himself evident in the creation of the world, in His words and in the obvious grace provided to His people, the Jews, over their entire history. As a result, God deserves and His character demands our prayers, honor, reverence and praise to be a part of our lives.

This same faithfulness of God is reflected in Paul's understanding of how God is dealing with the unfaithfulness of people. Paul writes that people have fallen short of the written law, or the Law written on their hearts, deserving God's judgment, yet God satisfies His judgment through Jesus Christ. This provides all people a way out of His judgment through faith in Jesus. Our hope in standing before God's judgment comes, not in our own righteousness, but in claiming the righteousness of Christ and resting in Him.



The return of faith.

The first two Psalms we read today reflect the needs of the writers. Their needs stem from external circumstances caused by the attacks of their enemies, internal pressures from their own sin and lack of faith in God. Yet, as their Psalms unfold, faith returns in God, not because their circumstances go away, but because God is seen as their only hope to provide what is needed to live through them. Once again, these Psalms provide us with beautiful prayers when we find ourselves in similar circumstances.

As Paul continues to build his case for the Gospel, he uses Abraham as his example of one who is justified by faith. Chapter 4 is a strong argument for being saved by faith through grace—a theme that weaves itself throughout all of Paul’s writings. It also provides for some serious theological reflections as to the nature of God’s people. Who are they and what makes people God’s people? The answer is not tied to ones ethnicity or genetics, as Paul clearly says, but it is spiritual—it is sharing faith in Jesus Christ.

Seeking clarity.

Psalm 73 and 74 reflect a spiritual restlessness and dryness in the lives of the writers and the nation of Israel in general. As the writers sought God, it was in His presence—His Temple—that clarity at some level appeared. The psalmists, like Job, are seeking clarity to explain life, but find they need to live by faith in God and not by clarity. This God is the King over all the earth; He is the sovereign Lord who rules for His glory.

This same faith, in the midst of blurred vision, requires trust in something outside us. The Good News, as Paul explains, is that this faith brings hope and peace by providing us what we need in the face of life’s challenges. Paul provides a vision of how faith gives us life now and into eternity with God through Jesus Christ. It is the Good News—actually Great News—for those of us who believe. Paul closes by reassuring us that just as sin and death entered the world through a single person, Adam, life and righteousness enters the world through a single person, Jesus Christ.

God is our Judge.

Asaph, the psalmist who writes today's Psalms, touches on aspects of God not often highlighted in other parts of this book. He approaches God as our Judge; the one who evaluates the lives of all people. His judgments are filled with wrath and grace. We often desire God's judgment on others, but have more interest in His grace in our own life. We are reminded that God judges because of His character and through His righteous judgments He is glorified.

Paul approaches God's judgment through the perspective of our sinful nature. God judges by allowing people's natural inclination to sin take them to both a spiritual and physical death. It is the end, the judgment, for all who live in rebellion to God. Yet, God provides us a way out—an escape from this judgment—and this escape is found in Jesus Christ. For as sin, judgment and death enters our world through one, righteousness and eternal life enters the world through one man, Jesus Christ.



Historical reminders.

Asaph provides a sweeping history of God's interaction with the Jewish people from their time in Egypt to the reign of King David. This history provides the people with two reminders. First, he reminds them of their forefathers' tendency to rebel against God and to fall away. Secondly, he reminds them of God's faithfulness to His people in spite of their rebellion. God rescues, delivers and establishes them as a nation, just as He promised He would, even in the midst of their continual lack of faith.

This same sinful struggle the Jews dealt with throughout their history, Paul acknowledges in his own life. He sees this as an example of the struggle all people have with sin. Even when we see God's faithfulness in our lives, our natural inclination is towards sin and away from God. God's good and right Law leads us to sin, but Paul explains how we can be rescued from this treadmill—Jesus Christ. Over the next few days we will see just how Christ brings us the life we so desperately want and need.

Israel's need to be rescued.

The psalmist calls to God to rescue Israel, and these people need rescuing for a number of reasons. First, the enemies attacking the Jews are intent on destroying them. Secondly, because of Israel's sin and rebellion against God throughout history, they often find themselves in a place needing His salvation. In these Psalms, we see the connection between these two needs—their enemies attacking and their own waywardness, and how one leads to the other.

Jesus Christ, as Paul explains, provides what is needed to live a life above the pattern of rebellion, suffering and salvation set by Israel. Paul explains that we are like ancient Israel, but because of Christ, we can live a life controlled by His Spirit and not by our sinful nature. Jesus Christ not only provides hope for eternal life, but as Paul says, hope in living a life today that aligns with God.

The blessing of being in God's presence.

Psalm 84 provides an incredible perspective of a person's heart whose focus and desire is to be in God's presence and to be connected to Him. The blessing of being in God's presence—to have intimacy in this relationship—shows itself in the answered prayer, clarity and purpose within life. The desire expressed by the psalmist is the same longing we all need to have. If we have this same desire, we will enjoy the same blessings.

In Romans 8, Paul writes about this same desire and blessings. Paul details these blessings in one of the most powerful and well-known sections of Scripture. The blessings are so great they can overcome all that we might face in our lives. These blessings supersede all things in this world as well as in Heaven. The hope and promise for us who are in Christ Jesus is that we will never be separated from Him and His deep love for us.

A prayer of deep felt emotions.

As the sons of Korah and Asaph write more Psalms with a corporate perspective, David's Psalms tend to be personal in nature and become the favorite Psalms of those who read them. In Psalm 86, we have a great example of a David Psalm written as a prayer. As you read it, say it as your own prayer to God, allowing the words to become your own words and the deep felt emotions to be yours.

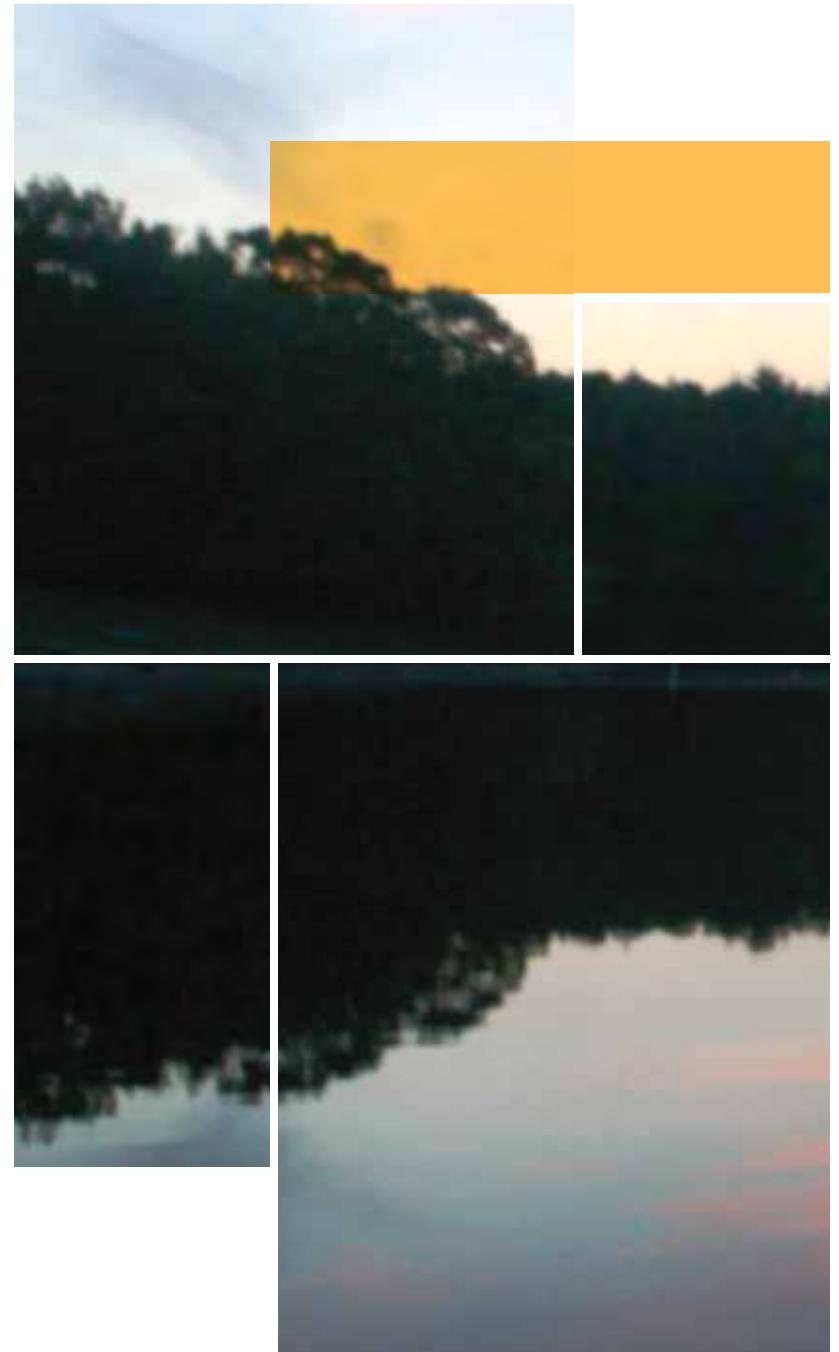
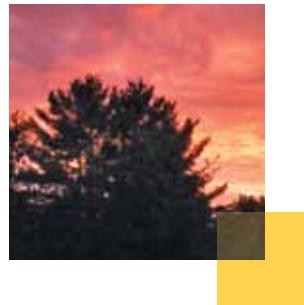
It may be easy to read David's Psalms and take his words as our own, but the words of Paul in Romans 9 are not quite as easy. Over the next few chapters, Paul addresses some difficult theological issues concerning God's people—both Israel and the Church. It is important to not allow our bias about God (or how we think things should be) influence our understanding of these chapters. To truly begin to grasp these chapters requires humbleness, prayer and the guidance from the Holy Spirit.



Dark night of the soul.

Our Psalms reading takes us from one writer whose soul is in a dark place, to a Psalm that is full of praise. In the first, the palmist feels attacked and experiences a dark place in life. It is as one ancient writer calls it, the “dark night of the soul,” where the only hope is in God. The psalmist pleads with God to be rescued from this dark place, which is immediately followed by a Psalm written by a writer who appeared to have received that salvation and was rescued from that dark place.

As we read Paul’s words in Romans 10, we understand where the hope comes from for those stuck in the “dark night of the soul” and seem lost and buried. Paul says it comes from the Good News of Jesus Christ and those who believe in Him; only those who hear the Good News can believe. There are those who must go and share this Good News with others so they have the opportunity to believe. Paul quotes the Old Testament to affirm the importance of people sharing this Good News so that others may be saved.



A community of people.

We read a Psalm by Moses today which provides a unique perspective on Israel, life and how God interacts with each. It reminds us of the big picture and how God is not solely dealing with us as individuals, but also a community of people. This Psalm is followed by another that is specifically written for the Sabbath. It esteems God and encourages us who commit to His righteousness.

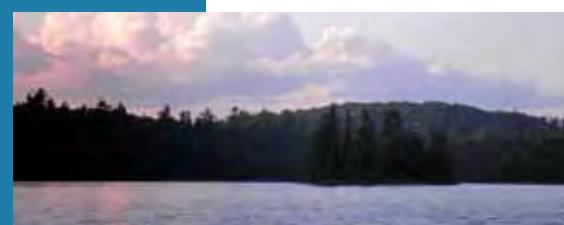
Now in light of Moses' historical perspective, we have Paul tackling the challenge of what God is going to do with Israel, and the Jews, in light of Christ. It is a difficult theological issue; one that is debated still today, but Paul does what any good theologian does, he goes to the Scriptures to solve the dilemma. He points out that God saved a remnant among His people (the Jews) so that His promises to them would be fulfilled. This pattern of God dealing with the Jews, will continue in light of the Church. God's requirements for salvation are the same for the Jews and Gentiles—to trust in Jesus Christ.



Characteristics of God.

Our reading today begins with the majesty of the Lord and moves to His vengeance, judgment and ends in a call to sing praises to His name. In each of these Psalms, God's characteristics become evident. The writers articulate many of God's qualities which leads us to the appropriate response as His unique and special creatures. These beautiful songs and prayers provide us a fuller picture of God and the reason to devote our life to Him.

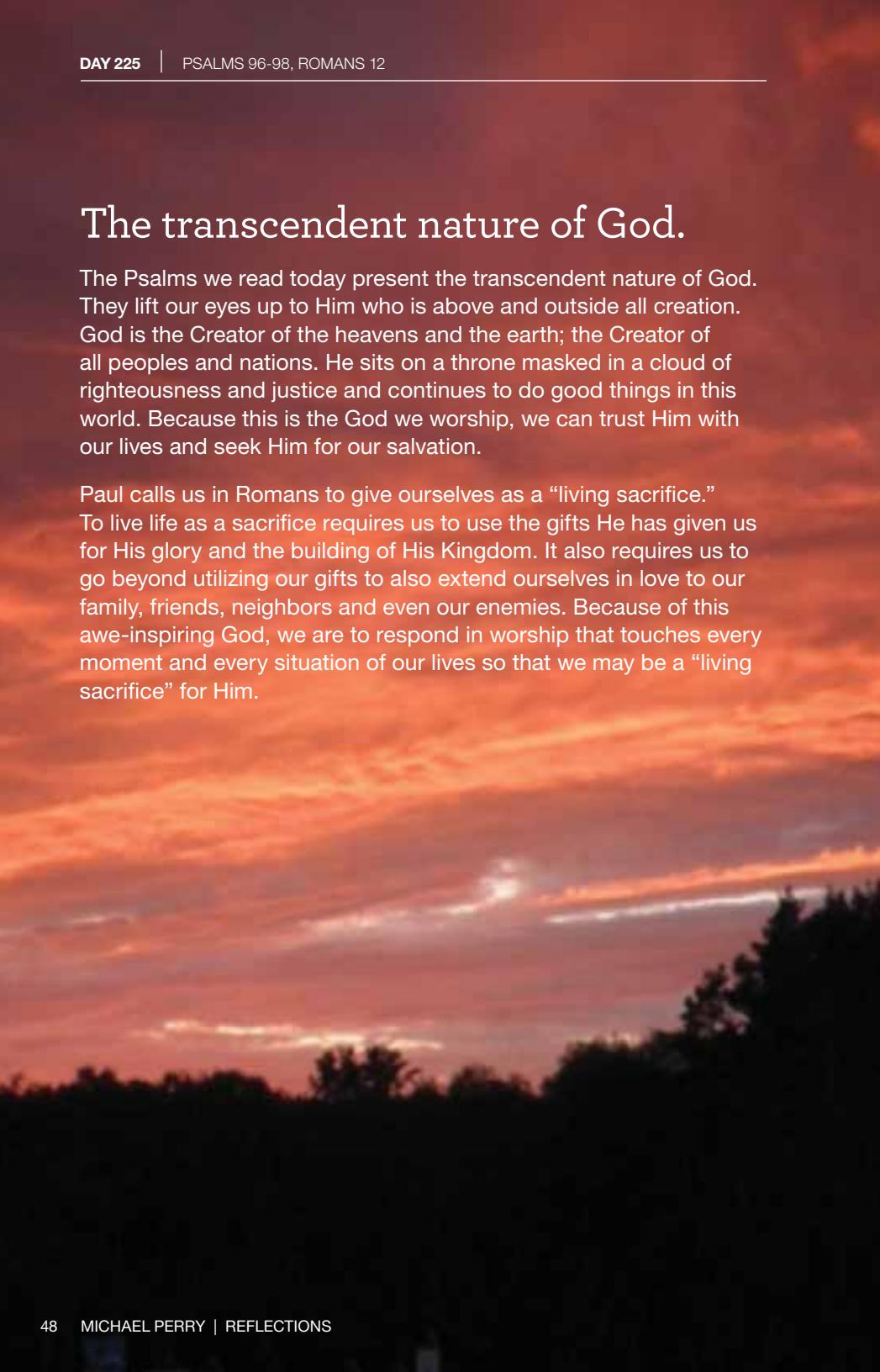
Paul concludes his discussion about the Jews, Israel and their relationship to the Church, by acknowledging many of the same qualities of God as the psalmist did. Paul ends this complex line of thinking on a very difficult topic with a Psalm of his own. It acknowledges that as much as we might know about God, there is much we do not know. The Lord's judgments are unsearchable—as the Old Testament says—and no one knows the mind of the Lord. Once again, Paul calls us to praise His name above all other names.



The transcendent nature of God.

The Psalms we read today present the transcendent nature of God. They lift our eyes up to Him who is above and outside all creation. God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth; the Creator of all peoples and nations. He sits on a throne masked in a cloud of righteousness and justice and continues to do good things in this world. Because this is the God we worship, we can trust Him with our lives and seek Him for our salvation.

Paul calls us in Romans to give ourselves as a “living sacrifice.” To live life as a sacrifice requires us to use the gifts He has given us for His glory and the building of His Kingdom. It also requires us to go beyond utilizing our gifts to also extend ourselves in love to our family, friends, neighbors and even our enemies. Because of this awe-inspiring God, we are to respond in worship that touches every moment and every situation of our lives so that we may be a “living sacrifice” for Him.



God of Heaven.

Our Psalm readings continue to lift our eyes up to the God of Heaven. He is the God who is great and awesome, holy and forgiving, providing both justice and mercy out of His great wisdom. We know we have been created by Him to love and serve Him and to acknowledge all His great qualities. We are to desire to be in His presence, to walk in His ways and to live in such a way that brings honor to Him.

Once again, it is in this context that Paul continues his practical application of his previous theological teachings we have been reading in Romans. To respond to God as a living sacrifice means we are to see the world as Christ sees it and thus do things such as honor governmental officials whom God has put into these positions. We are to give to others what is owed and deserved because of who they are as people and the positions they hold. Finally, we are to live a life of purity so that we will reflect the reality of Christ in our lives to others.



God the Provider.

"Praise the Lord, oh my soul" is the phrase that begins our reading today. Both Palms take our perspective of God to the highest places, seeing Him in the context of all creation. They explore God's forgiveness of our sins, and the righteousness He gives us. The Psalms move to God's specific involvement in our world, causing "grass to green," providing the earth with its water, and giving us the food we need to live each day.

Paul continues his practical instruction to the Christians in Rome by helping them understand how their lives can positively or negatively impact others, even if what they do is acceptable in God's eyes. Paul encourages us not to judge one another, but to edify each other by living for others first and enabling their growth in Christ. In this discussion, Paul clearly shares the community-centered nature of faith with the Roman Christians, and in turn, with us as well.

Object lessons about God and our relationship with Him.

Today we venture back to God's people in Egypt; to the time of their release from bondage and their journey to freedom. Psalm 105 reflects on God's action and divine guidance throughout the Jews' time in Egypt. We see how God uses this period in history as a cornerstone to fulfilling His greater plans. Psalm 106 reflects the constant falling away from God that the Jewish people experience in their journey to the Promised Land, in spite of all God has done for them. Both Psalms provide us object lessons about God and our relationship with Him.

We read of Paul moving from practical instruction to discussing his own ministry in light of Christ. Paul shows his own heart for why he has written to them, why he serves and why he has committed his life to the work of Christ. Paul shares his concerns for the people in the churches, for those who are lost and his concern for Christ and His Kingdom. Paul wants to proclaim Christ wherever He is not known so that as many as possible can be saved.

Love and faithfulness.

Today we read Psalms of supplication. The writers acknowledge the goodness of God and His desire to rescue and save us when we are faced with trouble. God's love is steadfast and His faithfulness is true. We are called to display that same love and faithfulness to Him. And it is from this place that God gives us this peace, a peace that transcends all understanding.

As we have previously read in the New Testament, Paul is a model of this steadfast love and faith in Christ. It is reflected in his ministry and his focus on reaching people who have yet to experience the Gospel. His goal is to eventually go to Spain—a corner of the Roman Empire where the Gospel has not yet reached. Through this, Paul does not forget his duty to the saints in Jerusalem who are poor and in need. At risk to his own life, Paul plans on delivering a financial gift to the impoverished Jewish saints in Judah given by some of the wealthier Gentile churches Paul planted throughout the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

The coming of Christ.

Psalm 110 is considered a Messianic Psalm foreshadowing the coming of the Christ. For being such a short Psalm, it is quoted at significant junctures in the New Testament, including Jesus. Jesus uses this Psalm to point to the fact that He is the Christ, the One the Jewish people have been waiting for. The mention of the priest, Melchizedek, which is repeated in-depth in the book of Hebrews, will be discussed in upcoming weeks. The Hebrew passage is significant in understanding the nature of Christ and His role as High Priest.

Paul ends his letter to the church in Rome with acknowledging all the people connected with him and the church. It is a beautiful reminder of the family of God in all its locations and in all its diversity. Paul's final words provide the context for both his work, as well as our work, in Christ's Kingdom. We are reminded of the mystery and power of the Gospel and of Christ's ability to transform the world.

God's involvement in the history of the world and His people.

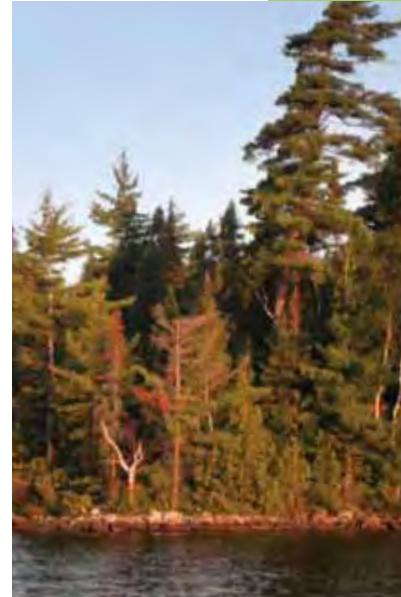
The Jewish and Christian faiths are rooted in historic facts, as reflected within these and many other Psalms. It is not that the historic facts somehow prove the Christian faith to be true, but instead, the facts show how intentionally and intimately involved our God has been in the history of the world and in the history of His people. This involvement, and the remembrance by His people, provides the nourishment we and believers from all times and all places need to grow in our faith in Him.

Paul begins his letter to the church in Corinth with one of the frankest openings of any of his letters—it does not take long for us to see why. The church at Corinth has more than its fair share of issues creating serious problems for the church and its mission. The issues run deep and can be shocking when reflected upon, and considered, in light of our own churches. This seems to be the reason why Paul gets right down to business and begins to help the Corinthians correct the problems they have.

A depth of relationships.

Psalm 116 is a personal song and prayer to the Lord. It acknowledges God's intimate love and care for the writer (by inference, all of us). This sense of depth in this relationship is seen in every part of the writer's life. Psalm 117 moves to a short song that is corporate in nature and continues into Psalm 118. Psalm 118 combines both, a personal perspective of one's relationship with God from Psalm 116, with a corporate perspective of Psalm 117—reflecting the diversity and depth of God's relationship with His people.

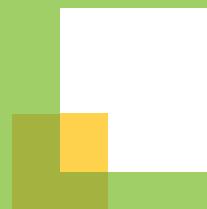
Paul continues to wrestle with the first issue facing the Corinthian church—the division between its members. This division seems to have many sources including theological, intellectual, and later we will see, even social. Through this all, the core issue is truth, its source and who had it within the church. This can happen in our faith communities today (who is right and who is wrong) and can create division that harms the community and its ability to fulfill its mission. It is a reminder that, although the context is different, unfortunately people have not changed over the centuries.



The significance of God's Word.

Psalm 119 is not only the longest chapter in the Bible, it is also the longest one focusing on the significance of God's Word. The writer walks through the importance of hearing, believing and obeying God's Word as written in the Scriptures. It is not by accident that the longest chapter in the Bible has this topic as its focus. It drives home the fact that if we are to live for and love God, His Word needs to be deeply ingrained into our lives.

For the church at Corinth, knowing and obeying God's Word became confused with knowing and obeying the words of men like Paul or Apollos. Paul confronts them on this point and sees it at the root of the division that exists with the church. It is a point we can and need to learn from, so we too can avoid the same errors as the Corinthians. We are to base our unity on Jesus Christ (the Word that became flesh) and the Scriptures that point us to Him so that we do not become a person or people-centered church, but instead, a Christ-centered church.



Promises, precepts, commands, decrees and law.

Psalm 119 continues in its “Word of God” message. The writer describes God’s Word giving breadth and depth to its importance by using words such as: promises, precepts, commands, decrees and law. Each word has a slightly different meaning, providing a full picture of the Scriptures richness that gives us the motivation to read, absorb and then live by it.

Paul moves from divisions in the Corinthian church to defending his ministry. He specifically defends his ministry with the Corinthians against those who have talked poorly about it within the church. Paul takes the high road in his defense by putting the focus not on himself, his gifts or abilities, but on Christ Jesus from whom all good things come. Paul is willing to be seen as a fool if somehow Christ and His Word can be heard and lifted up among the Corinthians. Paul’s focus is not to defend himself as much as it is to defend Christ and to call others to Him.

Committing to God’s Word.

As the Psalmist finishes this Psalm focused on God’s Word, there is an expressed commitment by the author. The author commits himself to God through committing to His Word. There is a personal, intimate tone between the writer and God that finds its expression through the reading, mediating and living out of God’s commands and statutes. Intimacy comes from knowing “another” and this comes from listening to, watching and learning as much about the “another” as possible.

This intimacy with God is lacking in the Corinthian church. They have members who are clearly living outside the expressed boundaries given by God. Not only is this occurring, but what makes it worse is that the church accepts it and appears to even be proud of their tolerance. Though the Corinthians have spirituality, they lack depth in their relationship with Christ. The truest evidence of intimacy with Christ is a life committed to the Scriptures.



Songs of Ascent.

Over the next few days we will be reading what is called “Songs (or Psalms) of Ascent.” The Jews would sing these songs as they made their way up to Jerusalem, and in particular, to the temple to participate in holy celebrations. Both Jerusalem and the temple mount sit in high altitudes compared to the Jewish occupied lands surrounding them. Going “up to Jerusalem” and up to the temple mount literally meant walking up. This geographic truth provides a powerful spiritual image of our life in Christ, as it did for the ancient Jews who sang these songs.

In ancient Corinth, “going up” meant looking up the hill that overlooked the city to see the temple of the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sex. Living in this temple was a community of prostitutes whose job was to serve people as they worship Aphrodite. The presence of such a temple created a sexually charged culture in Corinth that led to many of the issues Paul is addressing in his letter. These issues include sexual immorality of all types and strange perspectives about marriage. Each of these issues will be addressed by Paul over the next few chapters.

Look up to God, whose throne is above all creation.

In the Psalms of Ascent, the writers consistently call us to turn our eyes up and look to God. The geography required the ancient Jews to look up to Jerusalem and the temple mount where God had placed His presence on earth. The meaning for us (and for the ancient Jews) is more profound—we are to look up to God whose throne is above all creation. It is from Him that our help and our salvation come from. He can never be shaken off His foundation and so our faith in Him should never be shaken.

Paul moves from lawsuits and sexual immorality in marriage to helping the Corinthians have a Godly perspective of the institution. On this topic it is easy to become confused about what Paul is saying. From this point forward in this letter, Paul is answering questions and addressing topics the Corinthians have written him about. Since we do not have that letter, we can only speculate what the specifics of each issue were. As we read Paul’s answers, we need to be reminded that we do not know the specifics that the Corinthians asked. The hope is that knowing the context will help us better navigate the difficult words he sometimes states.

Seeing our frailty and brokenness compared to God.

These Songs of Ascent are very God-centric Psalms. The intent is to have the God of the universe, the One and only true God, be held up high in our eyes and lives. The flipside to this perspective, as the writers point out, is to see ourselves in light of this great God—to see our own frailty and brokenness and to grasp the great gulf between us and God. As the writers lead us up, they help us to look down and thus bring us to a place of true worship of God.

As Paul continues his discussion on marriage, we begin to see a theme that runs through his thoughts on marriage and singleness that is helpful for us today. In each state of marriage, God is to be the central focus and the reason for our marriage or for our singleness (as the Psalms of Ascent tell us). Each of these situations provide us an opportunity; if the focus is correct, we will grow in our relationship with Christ and in our service to Him and His Kingdom.



An intimacy between Israel and God.

As we complete our reading of the Psalms of Ascent, the focus continues to be on God. In addition to the God-centric perspective of these Psalms, there is also a national and ethnic focus. The writers see their nation (themselves as a people) in light of God and His workings throughout the world. The Psalms show an intimacy between Israel and God that is unique. It is the same intimacy we the church now have with this same Maker of Heaven and earth.

Paul continues answering questions proposed to him in the mystery letter written to him from the Corinthians. The question in today's reading clearly has something to do with the permissibility of eating meat sacrificed to idols—a common practice in ancient Corinth. Though we are not faced with this dilemma today, the principle Paul lays out for the Corinthians to guide their behavior is applicable to many today's situations. The principle is even if something may be permissible in God's eyes, if by doing it we cause another to fall, sin or live against their conscious, then we should not do it. Our freedom is secondary to the spiritual conditions of others.



God rules and governs all.

The psalmist continues to present God in the context of Jewish history and of the world in general. The God the Jews worship (the same God we worship today) created all. He not only created all, He rules and governs all—from the stars in the sky to nations and their kings. The psalmist presents to us a God who is worthy of our praise, honor and most importantly, our devotion.

Paul moves from meat sacrificed to idols to defending his personal ministry and his role as an Apostle. Again we do not know if this is in response to part of this mystery letter or simply Paul's sense that he needs to continue defending himself and his work before the Corinthian church. It is within this chapter that we find many principles that still apply today to those in vocational ministry. It is an instructive chapter, but also a sad chapter, as we are once again reminded of deeper issues within this church.





David's relationship with God.

Psalm 139 is an incredible, beautiful and theologically powerful Psalm. David captures the nature of God in the context of his personal relationship to Him. David shows God's all-knowing nature, His all-present nature, His fore-knowing nature and His wisdom. With all these parts of God's nature, David asks God to search his own heart and convict him of any waywardness—a prayer we all should pray every day.

Paul does something that is unique in the New Testament when he uses Israel's history as an object lesson. Though seeing the history of Israel as an object lesson in the New Testament is not unique, what is unique is Paul's pronouncement that it is an object lesson for us. If we take Paul at his word—and we should—then it provides one more reason to read the Old Testament, as we do the New Testament. Our goal is to know the entire story of God, how He deals with His people and the world throughout history. Why? For one reason, to provide us object lessons for our own lives today.

David's dependence on God.

Each of David's Psalms we read today were written during specific periods of his life, reflect the nature of those periods and his perspective on them. Each Psalm, as with so many of David's Psalms, are personal in nature. They show a dependence on God and devotion to Him that is powerful and worth modeling. David lives a full and exciting life, with many ups and downs, but it is clear that his relationship with God is his one constant.

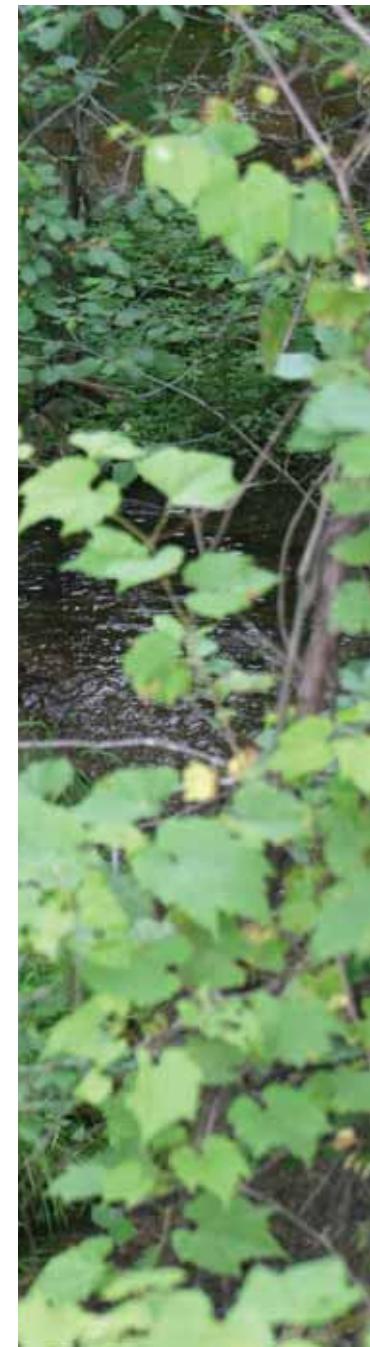
Paul moves from the history of Israel and its lessons onto more complex issues that can seem somewhat blurred. They are blurred because we do not know exactly what is in the mystery letter he is responding to. What we do know is that the root of the issues is the paradox of what we call Christian freedom and conscience. Paul addresses this paradox of living in freedom and also living under the Law of Christ—Law calls us to think of others before ourselves. Thus, the ultimate principle of the Law is "to do all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).



Sovereignty of God.

Our Psalms reading today focuses on the sovereignty of God, which means God's exclusive rule and control of all things. It becomes one of those difficult theological truths if we wade in too deeply, raising questions and dilemmas that can be difficult to resolve. David has no hesitation in accepting that all things are under God's rule and that nothing, be it history, contemporary events or acts of nature, are outside His control. If we can accept in faith, as David did, this truth will provide us peace even when things appear outside anyone's, including God's, control.

Paul continues to address questions presented to him in the Corinthians mystery letter. These questions regard appropriate actions and dress for a church worship service. It is easy to either reject Paul's input or to embrace it as a letter for our present time. Either approach misses the point of Paul's teaching. Paul simply wanted for the Corinthians, as for us today, to never act or dress in a way that distracts us or others from the true focus of worship.



Praise and worship the Lord.

These last Psalms encourage us to praise the Lord. We find the word “praise” 28 times in the 27 verses we read. It is an appropriate ending to this important book of Scripture. Appropriate because one of the main purposes of the Psalms is to lift our eyes up to the Lord, and in response, praise and worship Him. One day every person and creature will acknowledge Him in worship, but until that day, as God’s children, we are to praise and worship Him today and every day.

As the final Psalms call us to praise Him, we see Paul continuing to address issues within the Corinthian church and their lack of God-centered praise and worship. Even the sacredness of the Lord’s Supper is become a selfish, drunken party. Paul, echoing the psalmist, tries to bring the Corinthians’ focus back to the purpose of the Communion meal so that participating in it would result in unity within the church. This gave praise and honor to God as they remembered Christ’s death on the cross.

Warnings about temptations.

We are now entering into the book of Proverbs—a collection of short sayings that express truth and provide instruction in memorable quotes. The Proverbs begin with warning us against temptation and its ability to pull us off the path God has intended for us. Then we are challenged to embrace wisdom because it is the antidote to the temptations we will all face in our lives. This introduction lays the foundation by opening our minds to all the wisdom we will find throughout the rest of this book.

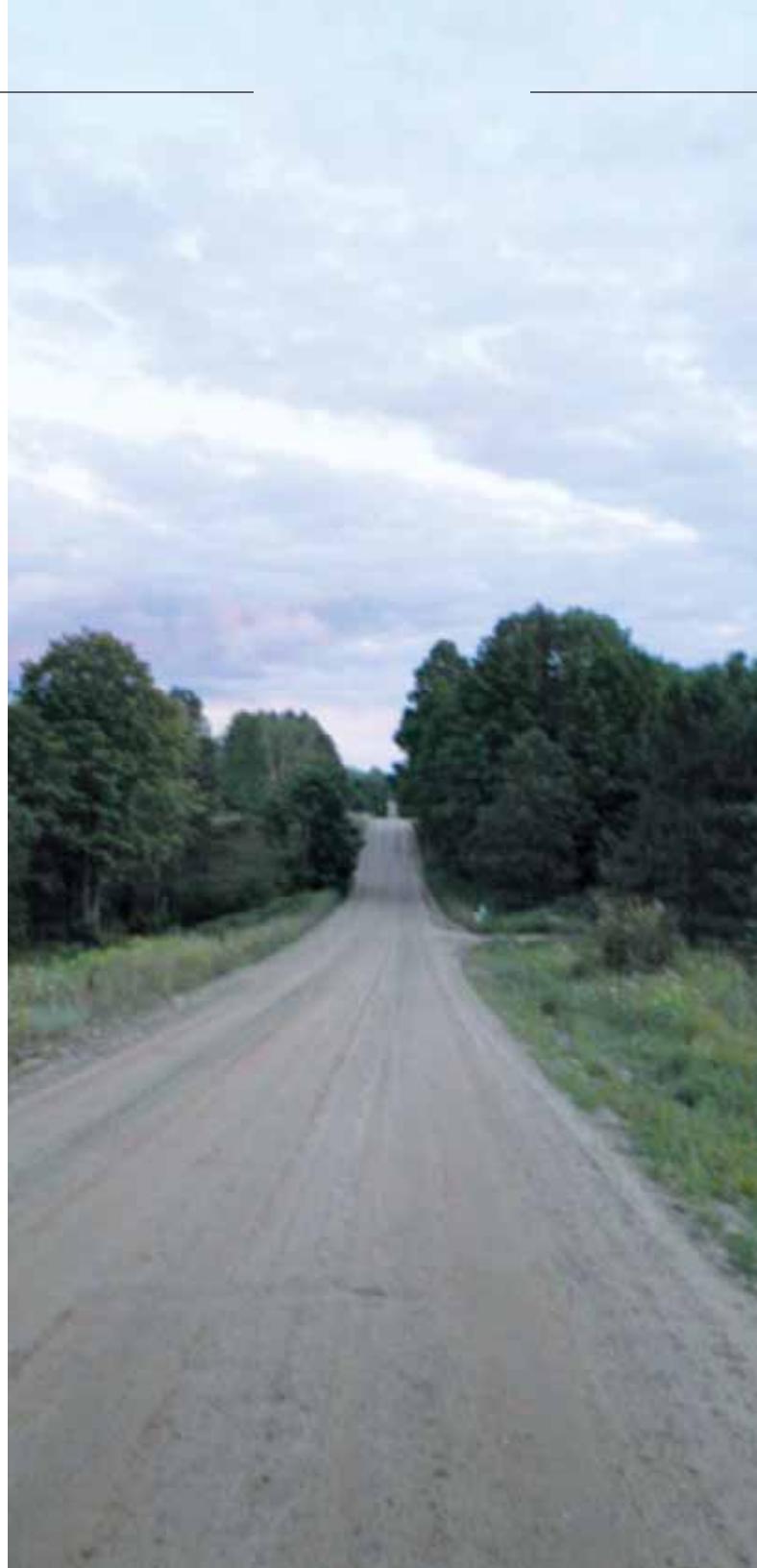
The Corinthians are focused on a wisdom (wisdom that only a few privileged people had) different from the wisdom expressed in Proverbs. This led to divisions within the church. Paul addresses this issue by discussing people’s individual giftedness as well as confronting the idea that some people were more important within the church than others because of their giftedness. Paul uses an illustration of the body and its parts to demonstrate that each person, no matter how gifted, is an important and necessary member of the Body of Christ.



Pursuing wisdom.

Solomon continues to express importance of wisdom in our lives and why we should pursue it at any cost. Solomon is clear that wisdom is not just knowledge; wisdom is something deeper and more life impacting. Wisdom gives us good judgment to do what God desires us to do in our life in general and in specific situations. Wisdom is connected to love—something we are to bind to our necks. Wisdom is love and knowledge working together for the benefit of others and God's Kingdom.

This same line of thinking is expressed in 1 Corinthians 13—the famous love chapter. Paul makes it clear that knowledge, giftedness or even great faith apart from love is meaningless. Love is what gives these things eternal value and makes us wise today. Applying love to knowledge, giftedness or great faith is wisdom. We need to acknowledge that even in the best case, our wisdom is only partial for we cannot see all. We do know that one day we will see clearly when the dirt and smudge marks of sin are finally cleaned away.



Adultery and sexual impurity.

Solomon moves from his care for the Godly wisdom to specific places and situations where wisdom is needed. The first topic is adultery and sexual impurity—a topic that will be throughout this book. It is a reminder of the power of sexual temptation and the terrible destruction it causes when we give in to it. Wisdom keeps us from falling into temptation's trap. In addition, wisdom keeps us from living a meaningless life that is focused on just pleasure, fun and self-satisfaction.

Paul addresses the focus on ourselves and what we do in our lives, as opposed to a life of purpose on behalf of others and God's Kingdom. The people of the Corinthian church appear to pursue their brand of spirituality for their personal benefit apart from others within their church community. Paul clearly sees spiritual growth happening within the context of the spiritual community that benefits all and not just an individual pursuit.

Personification of adultery as a wayward wife and wisdom as a noble woman.

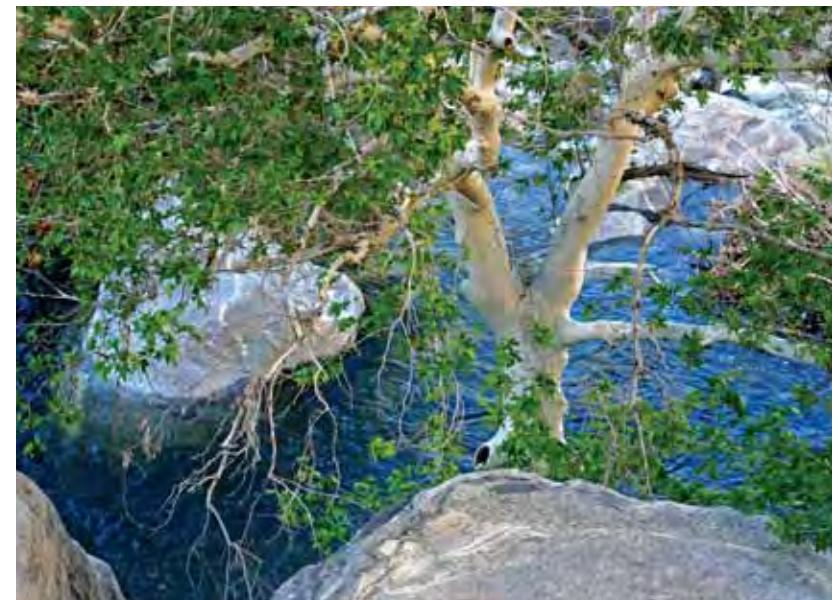
Solomon continues to discuss the two contrasting topics of adultery and wisdom. In these two chapters he personifies each—adultery as a wayward wife and wisdom as a noble woman. In the personification, we are able to see how adultery looks from an outside perspective as we watch the adulteress woman entice a man into being unfaithful. This woman is contrasted to the picture of wisdom who, instead, calls out to follow her as she leads us down the good and righteous path.

This is the same wisdom that Paul uses to challenge the Corinthians in considering the character of God as their standard of living individually and collectively. In particular, Paul discusses the application of God's orderliness to the Corinthians' worship services. Paul's argument is simple—God is a God of order which means the worship of Him, as well as our lives, should reflect this quality. We judge ourselves, and the standard for which we strive to attain in our lives, against the standard He created us for. God has called us to nothing less and to attain this requires us to know God and His character so we can strive to emulate it in our own lives.

A life that pursues wisdom and one that does not.

As a summary of the previous two chapters, Solomon closes with a comparison between a life that pursues wisdom and one that does not. His intentions are to build a case where the reader, including us, comes to the conclusion that the only life worth living is one that is guided by wisdom. Not just any wisdom, but instead, the true wisdom that only comes from God. For as it says in Proverbs 9:10, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” How can we pursue anything less?

Paul applies Godly wisdom to a topic from the Corinthians' mystery letter—the truth and reality of the resurrection of Christ. There must have been people who did not believe Christ's resurrection was real. Paul drives home the point that this is no small theological point of disagreement, but instead, a foundational truth for which the Gospel is built. If Christ did not rise from the dead, we would not have the hope of being rescued from our sins, or a hope for true life now or into eternity. To not believe in the resurrection is, to use Solomon's words, folly.



Wisdom.

Much of the remaining chapters in the book of Proverbs appear to be a collection of random wisdom sayings. Each proverb can stand alone, but when brought together with others, creates a more complete picture of the Godly wisdom we are to strive for in our life. Proverbs about money, generosity, hard work, justice and character make up the many themes we will see woven throughout the upcoming readings.

Paul's letter ends with both practical and theoretical instructions to the Corinthians. Paul continues his discussion of the resurrection moving from whether there is an actual resurrection to what the resurrection will look like for each of us. Paul explains the new bodies we will receive at the final resurrection and why we will receive them. Though this may not be a very practical discussion, it provides us hope in what our future state will be like as we continue to live in our current state today.



Managing your image.

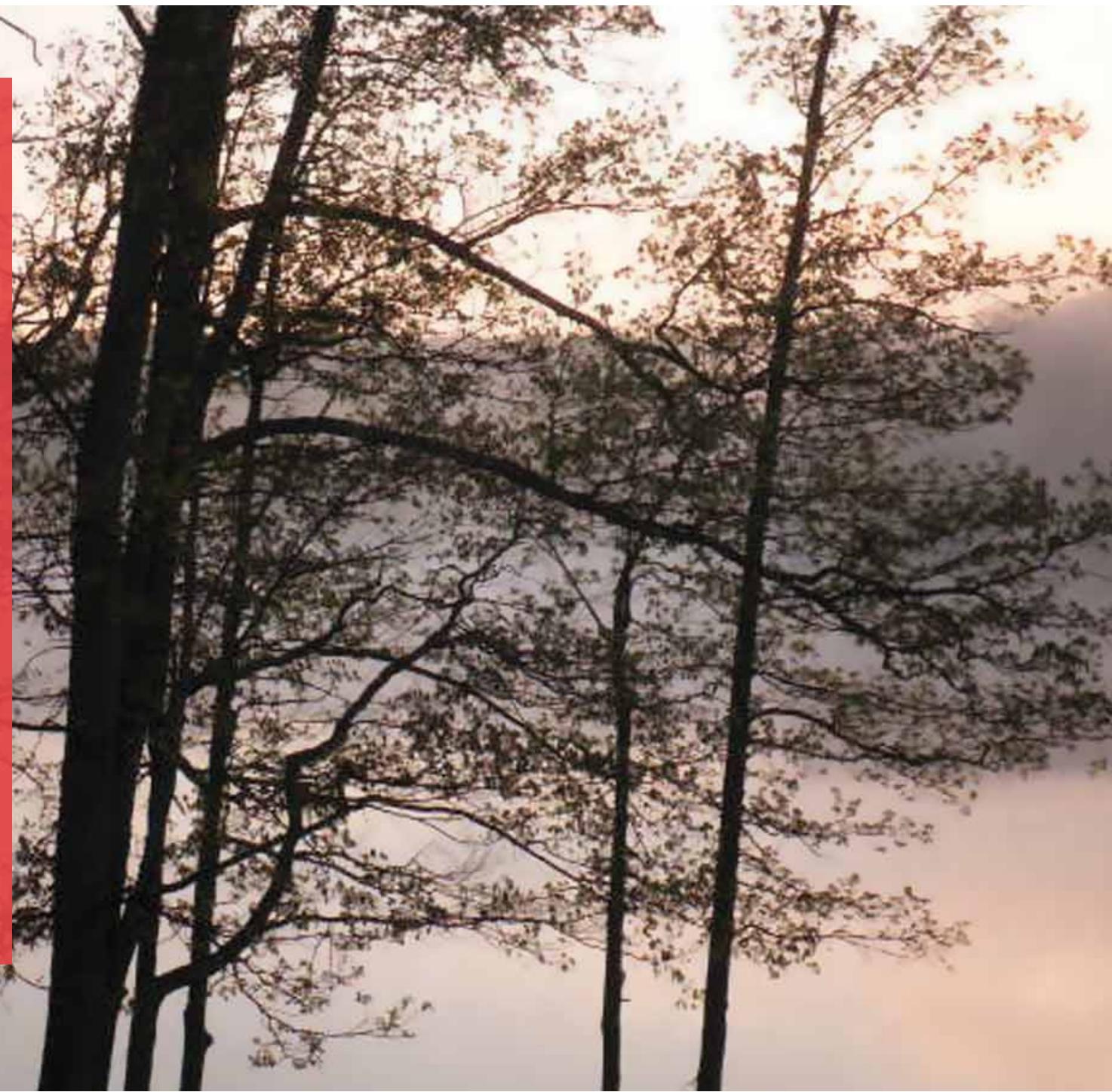
As we read Proverbs, there is one theme that continues to be addressed. It is a theme that we might be tempted to believe to be only a contemporary issue, but as we read, we discover it is not. It is the theme of people managing their image and trying to project to the public something about themselves that may not necessarily be true. This could be presenting themselves as rich when they are poor or generous when they hoard. Since the beginning of time, people have commonly attempted to present images of themselves that do not align with their actual lives.

Paul finishes his first letter to the Corinthians with some basic house-keeping issues. An important issue is a collection Paul has been working on for the believers back in Judah. Paul provides some practical steps the Corinthians should take so their gifts will be ready and given in a spirit of joy when Paul arrives. Though Paul is concerned about the gifts themselves, he is always more concerned about the giver, wanting their gifts to be used in such a way that it will reflect the condition of their hearts.

Potential pitfalls in pursuing wealth above all else.

Solomon touches on two of the most problematic issues we face as people—our mouths and our money. The Proverbs see the tongue as a wild uncontrollable beast that we should use sparingly and be watchful of all the time. There are many issues created by a tongue that is out of control. The same can be said for the love and pursuit of money. Solomon warns us of the potential pitfalls in pursuing wealth above all else—especially by means that are contrary to the designs of God.

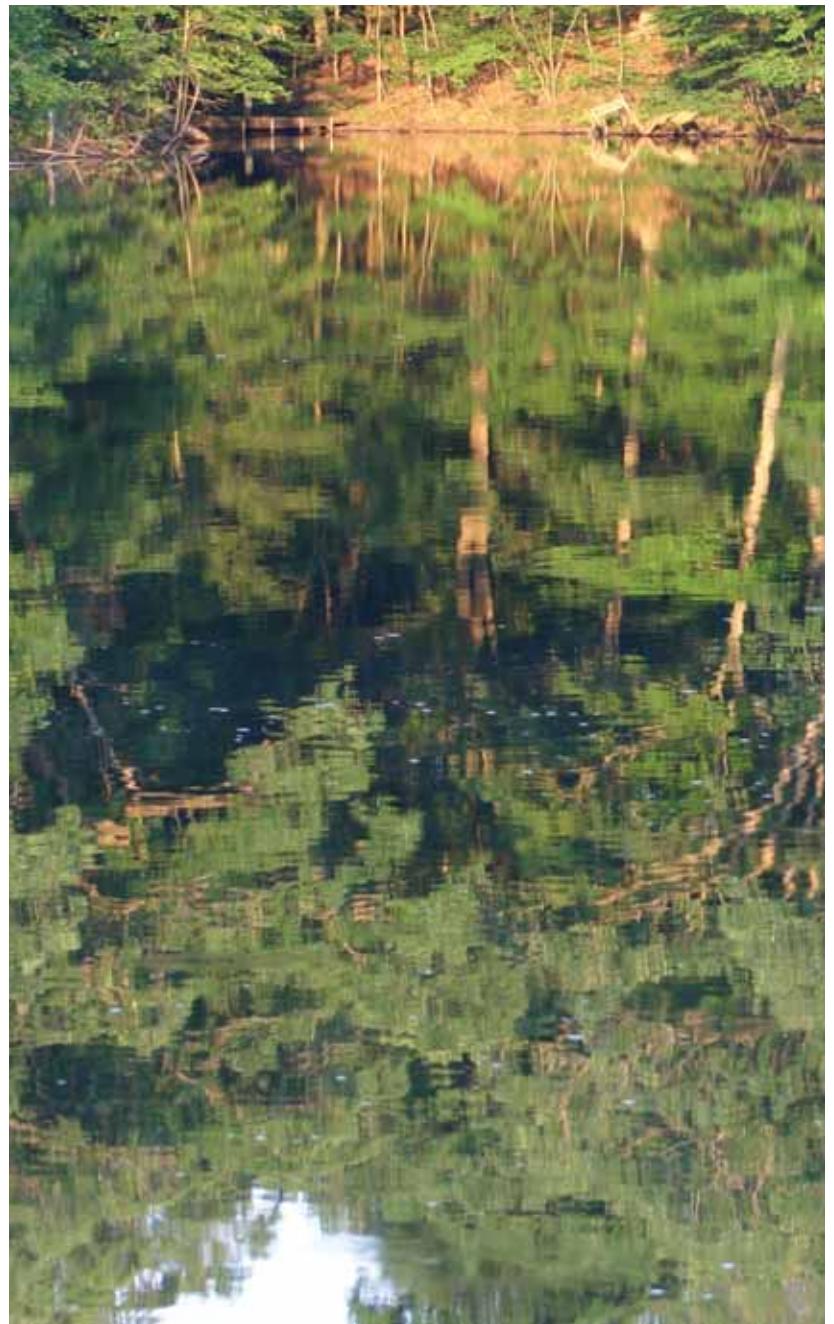
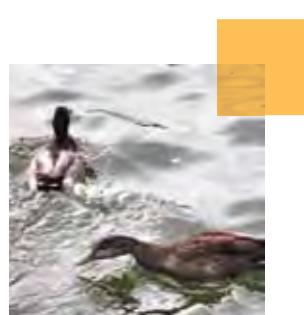
The struggles discussed in our Proverbs reading seem to play a part in the struggles of the Corinthians. Paul, as in his first letter to them, seems to be defending his own work and actions. Paul assures the Corinthians (as the Proverbs calls us to do) to test his words to see if he lives what he preaches. Yet, in the midst of this defensive posture, there is a sense of love that Paul still has for the Corinthians, and especially his continuing concern for their spiritual wellbeing.



Integrity.

Solomon moves from our tongues and pocketbooks to the general integrity of a person. He includes dishonest people, “fools”, are those who start arguments and shun wisdom in pursuit of a life of selfish gain. The theme that binds these people together is the idea that the ultimate good is what one can gain in this life, and that anything that could get in the way is to be avoided. This is the complete opposite of what Godly wisdom calls us to do.

Paul and the Corinthian church seem to be dealing with the same kind of people that Solomon wrote about. Someone or some people have created conflict and strife within the church and somehow it centers on Paul. Paul takes the high road personally, and in his instructions to the church. Paul’s goal in doing this is to spread the “fragrance of Christ wherever he and the church find themselves.”





To think and live without integrity is to think and live as a fool.

The character of a person is more important than their wealth, position or power, as well as a person's family and friends. However, so often people will throw away their integrity or their family as they pursue wealth, position or power. Many times it is a risk people are willing to take, believing somehow they can keep their integrity and their family even as they compromise themselves in pursuit of these things. As the Proverbs tell us, to think and live this way is to think and live as a fool.

One of Paul's most precious possessions is his integrity. It is so important he asks the Corinthians if they really need letters of recommendations for him because he has already proven himself as a person and as an Apostle. Paul's integrity, as it is with all of us, should come from the Spirit of God working in his and our lives and not through following the letter of the Law. It is in light of the Spirit of God that we see more clearly the life we are to lead and the grace we need.



The sluggard.

Our Proverbs reading today introduces two different people. The first is the “sluggard”—a lazy person who does not take care to plan or think ahead. A sluggard thinks just about the moment, and as a result, lives scared of what might be out there, instead of confident of his or her preparations for a possible crisis. The second person is one who takes advantage of the poor. This is a tragic situation which continues even today—people becoming rich at the cost of the less fortunate. Justice is the word the Scriptures use many times to describe this situation.

Paul’s perspective on his life is 180 degrees different from that of the sluggard or one who takes advantage of the poor. Paul sees the struggles and pain in his life as a part of the ingredients needed to produce spiritual fruit in the lives of those he serves, as well as his own life. Paul has an eternal perspective on his life and work, not a “live in the day” perspective. This leads him to be willing to suffer on behalf of others, knowing it will lead to life in Christ for others and for himself.

Coveting another's possessions.

Our Proverbs reading today covers an interesting subject, one that is important but not always addressed in our present age. It is the idea of coveting or desiring of another's possessions. Proverbs 23, in particular, challenges us to not only examine our desire of what others have, but also to examine those who have it. Do we really need what another has? More importantly—do we want to be the kind of person who has that stuff? Desire that leads to coveting material things can corrupt in ways we may not see or understand.

Paul has an obvious low view of possessions and material things. His focus, and thus the focus he calls us to in Christ, is an eternal focus. Whether it is our future heavenly bodies, or the work of reconciling others to God through Christ, the eternal and righteous nature of God is to be paramount in our lives. To bring others into this same place is even more desirable—all the more righteous because we are sharing the incredible news of Christ and this honors Him.

Godly wisdom provides insight for living.

The Proverbs continue to explore the more subtle, but important, issues we face in life. The goal is to help the readers, including us, apply wisdom to the most common areas of life. From caring and tending to our work, to laziness and its consequences, Godly wisdom provides insight for living. In some of the Proverbs, the sayings simply describe different facets of life—either good or not so good—providing us a way to articulate such situations.

Paul continues to present his life as a model for us to follow. He shows how his concern was always for Christ, His Kingdom and for others—especially those who are part of God's family. Paul applies the Godly wisdom we have been reading about in Proverbs by telling the Corinthians not to partner with non-believers in the important matters of life. These matters include marriage, business or other formal relationships which require people to have similar values and spiritual perspective.



Justice, generosity, leadership and community relationships.

Once again, Solomon focuses on the more complex and subtle parts of human character and society. Issues such as justice, generosity, leadership and community relationships continue to be addressed over the final chapters of Solomon's Proverbs. The progression of topics makes sense; we started with simple human temptations—lust, greed, laziness—and move to the deeper issues. Aligning our lives along the wisdom Solomon provides helps to give us the ability to align our lives to God's standards.

Paul's discussion with the Corinthians continues to be personal in nature. It reflects the complex relationship that must have existed between him and the Corinthian church. It appears that the love and respect for each other carried them through difficulties and misunderstandings. The idea that they serve Christ together, and love each other, serves to lift them above any hard feelings there may have been between them. Their story provides hope for us when we find ourselves in similar situations where misunderstandings and hard feelings can move our focus from what God has called us to do and be in Christ.

What a Godly woman looks like and how she lives.

Authors, other than Solomon, wrote the last two chapters of Proverbs. The first takes on a poetic nature and compares many things in life to earthy, everyday things. The final chapter contains one of the most well-known and loved proverbs—a proverb about a Godly woman. It has provided the model of what a Godly woman looks like and how she lives. Its truth actually transcends gender and can easily be applied to men as well.

As with the reputation of a Godly woman described in Proverbs 31, Paul highlights the reputation of Godly people within and outside of the Corinthian church. One of the characteristics we see from both readings is generosity. Godly people give to others who are in need regardless of their own situation. The giving is thoughtful, intentional and done with joy—such giving reflects well on the giver, and more importantly, on God's generosity. Generosity truly is the cornerstone of living a life that aligns with God.



Living a meaningless life.

We begin a new book today that many believe Solomon wrote. It is a fascinating book that takes a hard look at life, especially life without God. The praise “meaningless, meaningless” (verse 1:2) can be found 33 times in the book. Life and its pursuits are meaningless because of living “under the sun”, a phrase found 34 times. This last phrase is another way of saying living a worldly life, or a life without God. As you read this book, notice the hopelessness of living a life with an “under the sun” perspective.

Paul quotes his own proverb by explaining to the Corinthians what life looks like with God. A life that “sows sparingly”—one that does not give is a life that becomes meaningless. But a life that “sows abundantly” becomes a life full of meaning. The key to this meaningful life rests in our heart—do our hearts welcome the opportunity to give and to share? The cheerful giver finds meaning—eternal meaning—in life and the world in which we live.



Pursuing material possessions, seeking pleasure...

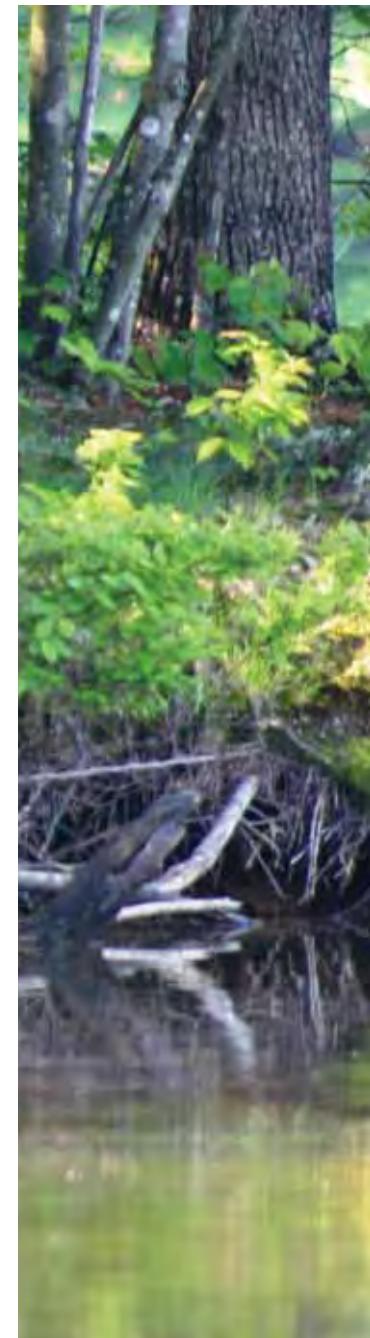
Ecclesiastes covers a broad range of issues that continue to confront us in our current day and life. The author examines them with an “under the sun” perspective. The issues cover a wide spectrum including the folly of pursuing material possessions, seeking pleasure, gaining wisdom without God, oppression of others, being a workaholic, etc. As we read the perspective of each of these topics, it is easy to see that the issues are as relevant today as they were 2,500 years ago.

Paul refuses to have his work be compared to “under the sun” standards. He says in verse 10:2, he and his co-workers do not work by the “standards of this world.” He calls the Corinthians to stop looking at the “surface of things” (verse 10:7), to start to see life through the lens of Christ and to evaluate life by the standards He gives us. We are to see the world, not with “under the sun” eyes, but through eyes that see life from an eternal perspective.

Leading us to despair or providing us hope.

One of the challenges of understanding Ecclesiastes is separating the author’s writings with an “under the sun” perspective from his writings of a Godly perspective. The author at times mixes the two together in the same flow of thinking making it difficult to pull them apart. It requires wisdom to see when the author is leading us to despair or providing us hope. It is this approach that makes this book so reflective of “real life” and thus helpful in providing us wisdom to live a Godly life through a Godly perspective.

Paul challenges the Corinthians to have this same wisdom that separates despair and hope, as they encounter many versions of the Gospel. In particular, Paul challenges them to see past the surface of the “super Apostles” to the content of their messages. Though Paul is defending himself, his true motive is to push the Corinthians to have a Godly perspective and not an “under the sun” perspective so that, in the end, they are able to discern what is true and what is not.



Fear God and keep His commandments.

After taking us on what, at times, seems like a roller coaster ride between the meaningless life and the life lived out with God's perspective, the author brings us to his conclusion. His final analysis seems almost frustratingly simple—we are to "fear God and keep His commandments." Why? Because it is the "whole duty of man" (verse 12:13). We are to live by faith that what we do not understand about this life, God does and He will work out to both His benefit and the benefit of those who love Him.

In a remarkable moment, Paul admittedly acts a fool—as one living "under the sun" and brags about his qualifications and service to Christ and His Kingdom. Yet, even as he does, we are left with the impression that Paul is not all that impressed with himself. Paul continues to be impressed only with Christ and His work in his life. Paul uses this moment to remind the Corinthians that there is a difference between worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom. Worldly wisdom is self-centered and Godly wisdom is humble and Christ-centered.



A romantic poem about two lovers.

As we spend some time in a book that has its detractors, it is good for us to understand it with the proper perspective. Though it is clearly a romantic poem about two lovers, many scholars also have accepted it is an allegory of our relationship with Christ. Christ is our bridegroom and we, the Church, are His bride. When we read it from this perspective, we not only enjoy the benefit of reading a beautiful poem, we receive a picture of what the love of Christ looks like and what our love of Him should be.

This love is not exactly the love that we see the Corinthian church has for Paul, his companions, or even for Christ. Therefore, Paul continues to defend his ministry in an effort to help the church see the true Gospel and the humble posture the church should take in light of Christ. Paul even acknowledges that it is through his own weaknesses that the power of Christ is made perfect—how much more would the Corinthian church experience Christ's power if only they would acknowledge their own weaknesses.



Pursue Christ out of love, He is there waiting.

We read the description of the romance, including its ups and downs, between the lover and the beloved. It reflects not just the reality of human romance, but also in so many ways our relationship with Christ. Many times in our relationship with Him, we seek Him but it seems that He cannot be found. Other times our attention turns from Him and we find ourselves distracted by the cares of this life and world. Yet, when we turn back and pursue Him out of love, He is there waiting.

This type of love unfortunately does not seem to exist between Paul and the Corinthian church. His final words become a warning to the Corinthians not to judge Paul's spirituality before they have completed an examination of themselves. This examination ultimately is to test the reality of Christ living in them as He lived in Paul. For when Christ lives in us then we can stand before God and people with a clear conscious.

Love between Christ and His people.

This romantic poem ends with a different but helpful picture, not just of the love between a man and a woman, but more importantly, between Christ and His people. We are to pursue Christ as the beloved of this poem pursued her lover. The beloved showed her faithfulness and single focus by doing more than just being available, but by chasing after her lover. We are to follow her example in our pursuit of Christ because He, like the lover, first demonstrated the same love and faithfulness to us, His beloved.

Today we begin another letter from Paul. This one is written to the churches in Galatia which is part of modern-day Turkey. Paul needs to address the theological drift that is occurring within these churches. This drift is a result of taking on a new teaching from false teachers who have led them away from the true Gospel. Paul's language indicates the importance and necessity of holding onto the foundational truths of the Gospel. Because it is on these truths that the Gospel stands, without them there is no Gospel.



God's pronouncements to Judah.

In one of the cornerstone prophetic books of the Bible, we read about God's pronouncements to Judah, the Jewish southern kingdom. Isaiah is called to be a prophet during the years after the split of the Jewish kingdom into a southern kingdom—Judah and a northern kingdom—Israel (Samaria) and before the exile. Take a moment over the next few days and review the life of the kings mentioned in Isaiah 1:1 by looking at II Chronicles and II Kings. This review will help us better read and understand the rest of Isaiah.

Chapter 2 of Galatians reveals a clearer picture regarding the false teachers who have taught a false Gospel to the Galatians. These teachers were Jews who believed that Gentile Christians needed to also become practicing Jews to be truly accepted by God and the Church. In other words, God's grace through Christ is not enough for salvation. Paul, as we see, stands strongly opposed to such thinking and even declares it to not be the Gospel—not *good news*—at all.



Isaiah comes into the presence of God.

In one of the more famous descriptions of God calling a person to service, in a vision Isaiah comes into the presence of God. When Isaiah is in His presence, he immediately recognizes he is unworthy to stand before Him because of his sin. There is an act of purification by an angel who cleanses Isaiah so he is able to answer God's call. The amazing part of this story is the fact that Isaiah has not earned his calling or his cleansing—it has come through faith as a gift from God.

This foundational truth that we cannot earn God's favor or our salvation is at the heart of Paul's discussion with the Galatians. The Galatians moved from receiving the Gospel as a free gift to seeing their relationship with God as something to be earned by focusing on the Law. The Galatians began to experience the words God gave Isaiah in verse 6:9, "Be ever hearing, but never understanding, be ever seeing, but never perceiving." This spiritual deafness and blindness keeps the Galatians from living in the power of God's Spirit—a fact that saddens Paul and prompts him to try to steer the Galatians back to faith in Christ.



The new covenant.

The book of Isaiah is full of promises and prophetic words pointing us to the coming of Christ. There are a number of verses in today's readings that we find quoted in the New Testament as affirmations that Jesus fulfilled God's promises as the coming Messiah. There is much hope in the tone of these passages—they offer the truth that Jesus came to fulfill the Law and reestablish the covenant. This new covenant was based on grace and freedom, not on sin and slavery.

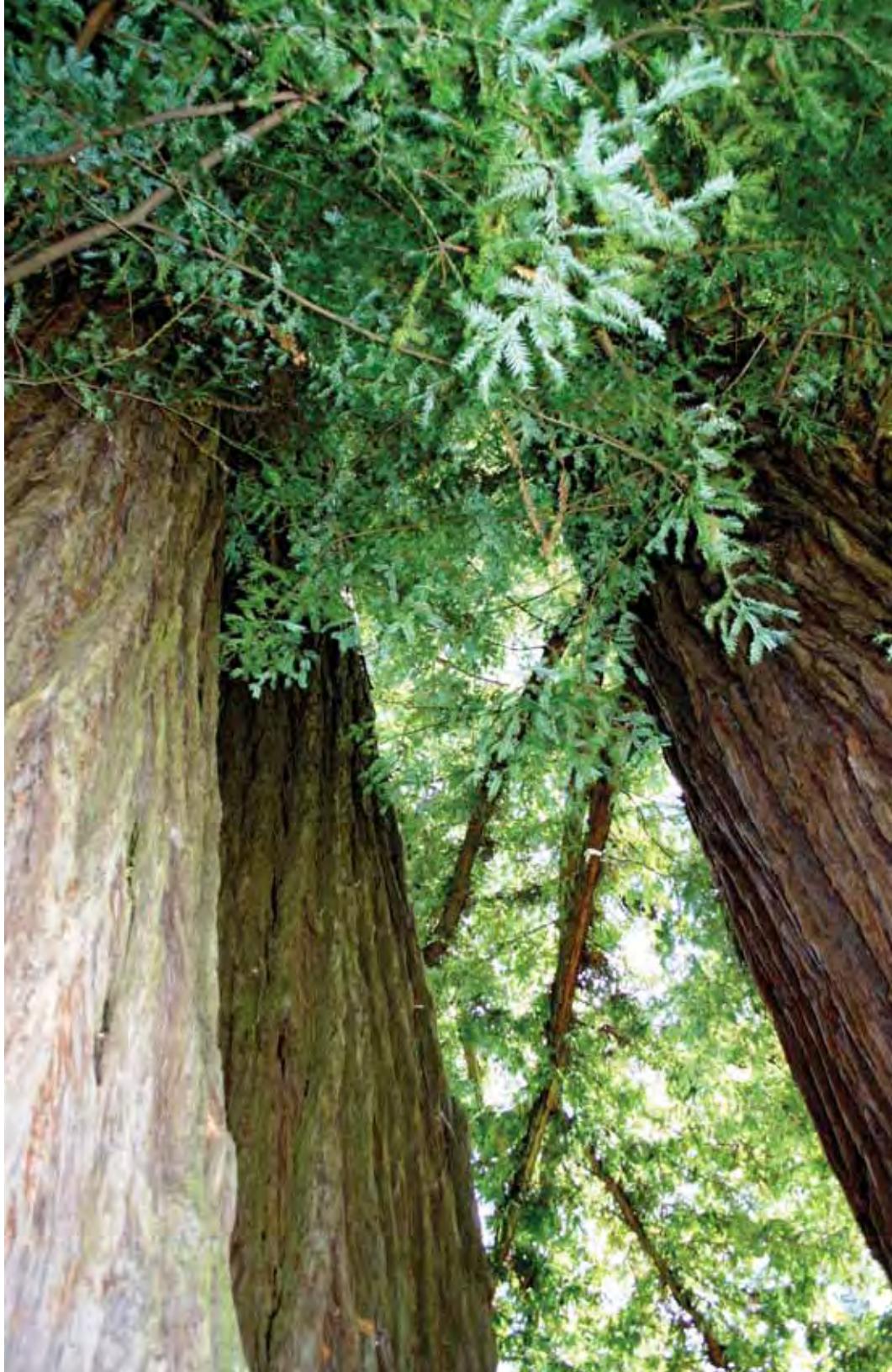
As obvious as it was to Isaiah that a new covenant would come in the form of a descendent of David, the Galatians were choosing the old covenant—one that showed us our sinfulness and lead us into slavery. Paul uses people from the Old Testament to illustrate the difference between the two covenants. Paul's appeal shows us that the true covenant, the one that Isaiah first pointed us to, has its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It is a covenant of freedom based on grace through faith and not on the law.



Remaining faithful.

One of the major themes of Scripture that is prominent in Isaiah is the idea of a remnant. A remnant represents those people who have remained faithful to God regardless of the circumstances, or the fact that many others have fallen away from Him. Isaiah assures the world Jews who will be in exile that there will be some who would never forget God or Israel. It is for these people that God sends the Branch of Jesse—Jesus Christ—to rescue and restore.

This remnant remains today. It represents people who have put their faith in Christ and not in the “law,” in other gods, or in themselves. These people live by the Spirit of God and not by human effort. We know them, because when we are one of them—the remnant—the fruit of the Spirit becomes ever more evident every day in our lives. We want and need to be included in the remnant, and we can be, if we place our faith in Jesus Christ and live our lives for Him.





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About Michael Perry

I'm married to Denise and we have four children, M.D., Christina, Mitch and Jonathan. I've worked for SpringHill Camps since 1998 and have been its President and CEO since 2001.

I graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in Business Administration in 1984. I obtained my MA in Ministry Leadership at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary through Cornerstone University in May 2012.

Since my days at Central Michigan, I have made reading the Bible in its entirety a major commitment. This practice has made a significant personal difference in my life and I'm excited to help others live out this similar commitment.

Though I am not a Bible scholar or theologian, I have a deep love of the Scriptures and have taught it for over 15 years through adult Sunday school classes and retreat seminars. My goal is to inspire others to spend time in all of the Scriptures on a daily basis allowing the Scriptures to transform their lives and the world in which they live.

For additional copies, please contact the Development Department at 231.734.2616.





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