STILL A MESS

A STUDY OF 2 CORINTHIANS

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PREFACE

What A Mess was a previous verse-by-verse study through the book of 1 Corinthians. The church was (and often is) a mess. There was an emphasis on unity as a number of errors in the Christian conduct were addressed. We addressed litigation, sexual immorality, marriage, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, love, and the resurrection. The free digital version of this is available on our website: theriverchurch.cc.

Still a Mess is the sequel study (a verse-by-verse study through the book of 2 Corinthians). Bruce Wilkinson made a nice observation concerning 2 Corinthians, "Christ is presented as the believer's comfort (1:5), triumph (2:14), Lord (4:5), light (4:6), judge (5:10), reconciliation (5:19), substitute (5:21), gift (9:15), owner (10:7), and power (12:9)."

Still A Mess consists of nineteen study guides for personal or group discussion and one hundred fourteen devotions to help you better understand God's love and plan for you. It will also help you realize your place, responsibilities, benefits, and opportunities as a valued part of the church.

LESSON ONE

CLOSING PANDORA'S BOX

1 CORINTHIANS REVIEW

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

In Greek mythology, Zeus gives Pandora a box. She was told not to open the box, but her curiosity won out and she just cracked the lid. All the troubles known to mankind flew out into the world. Today, "Pandora's box" has come to be known as a multitude of sins.

1. What is the true biblical account of how sin entered the world?

_____

_____

_____

On Paul's second missionary journey, he spent time in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17 records Paul's visit to Corinth). He planted a church there. Now, Paul was already on his third missionary journey when he had been given some disturbing news about the lifestyle of the Corinthian believers that needed to be addressed. He wrote 1 Corinthians to address such issues.

Author: Paul

2. His name went from Saul (inquired of God) to Paul (small or little). How could this be significant?

_____

_____

_____

Recipients: Believers at Corinth

Corinth was the leading commercial center of southern Greece. It was called "the bridge of the sea".

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages (physically, socially, and spiritually) of being such a visited city?

_____

_____

_____

Key dates (approximate):

30 AD	Jesus' Death, Burial, and Resurrection
36	Saul's (Paul) Conversion
47	Paul's Call
48	Paul's 1st Missionary Journey Begins
51	Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey Begins
51	Paul at Corinth
54	Paul's 3rd Missionary Journey Begins
56	Writing of 1 Corinthians
58	Paul's Arrest at Jerusalem
60	Paul's Imprisonment in Rome
64	Paul Goes to Spain

Galatians 1:15-18

"But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days."

4. What did Saul (Paul) do for three years after his conversion?

_____

_____

_____

In Acts 13:2, (verse 9 Saul starts being referred to as Paul) ***"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"***

5. Saul (Paul) was saved in about 36 AD, but not called (ordained) until 47. Why do you think this was so?

_____

_____

_____

Chronological Order of Paul's Epistles

Six Epistles before Acts 28:

Galatians (49 or 53-56)
1 Thessalonians (51-52)
2 Thessalonians (51-52)
1 Corinthians (56)
2 Corinthians (56)
Romans (57)

Seven Epistles after Acts 28: (After 60 AD)

Ephesians
Philippians
Philemon
Colossians
1 Timothy
Titus
2 Timothy

(Note: The author of Hebrews is unknown)

1 Corinthians 5:9
"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people."

6. This verse is not included in the letters earlier than 1 Corinthians. Could Paul have written a letter that was not inspired by God?

_____
_____
_____

Theme:
1. Unity
2. Errors of Christian conduct corrected

Remember: The only Bible some people may read is your life.

Key people:

Saul (Paul)
Sosthenes - ruler of the synagogue
Chloe – informs Paul of the sin at Corinth
Cephas - Peter
Crispus and Gaius – baptized by Paul
Stephanas' household - the first converts in Achaia
Aquila and Prisca – tent makers
Apollos – needed further teaching

Acts 18:24
"Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures."

7. A complimentary description is given of Apollos. How would you like to be described?

_____
_____
_____

Key topics:

- Divisions and unity
- Litigation
- Sexual Immorality
- Marriage
- The Lord's Supper
- Spiritual Gifts
- Love
- The Resurrection

Key verses: 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40
"For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.
As in all the churches of the saints."

But all things should be done decently and in order.

8. How does this relate to our Gatherings?

_____
_____
_____

The Jesus element: 1 Corinthians 1:30
"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

9. Define the words righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

_____
_____
_____

10. Whose work made it possible for me to be saved (redemption)?

_____
_____
_____

11. Whose work makes it possible for me to grow in my walk (righteousness and sanctification)?

_____
_____
_____

Familiar verses in 1 Corinthians:

1:18 - ***"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."***

2:9 - ***"But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."***

6:19-20 - ***"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."***

9:24 - ***"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."***

10:13 - ***"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."***

10:31 - ***"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."***

11:26 - ***"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."***

12:12 - ***"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."***

13:4-8a - ***"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."***

13:13 - ***"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."***

12. Which of these verses is your favorite? Why?

_____

_____

_____

PANDORA'S BOX

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

In Greek mythology, Zeus gives Pandora a box. She was told not to open the box, but her curiosity won out, and she just cracked the lid. All the troubles known to mankind flew out into the world. Today, "Pandora's box" has come to be known as a multitude of sins.

Somehow, every worldview has to account for how sin entered the world. The Bible starts with creation and immediately shows how sin entered the world (Genesis 3). Sin entered the world by the disobedience of Adam and Eve. 1 Corinthians 15:21 gives a strong contrast between Adam and Jesus, ***"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead."*** Adam's sin brought death. Jesus' death covered man's sin and allowed for life again, life eternal.

As we previously studied 1 Corinthians, we saw them regularly struggle with sin. Paul takes the time to write a lengthy letter pointing out their sin. He does not write as an arrogant judge, but as a friend and mentor who wants the best for them. Their moral problems have created divisions in the church. Paul tries to bring unity.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*** We, like the Corinthians, will struggle with sin. Hopefully, we have a friend and mentor who will be willing to point out our steps before destruction leaves deep scars.

We are reminded at the Lord's Supper to examine ourselves regularly. Personally, I appreciate David's words and heart in Psalm

139:23-24, ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"***

Hopefully, our review of 1 Corinthians and study of 2 Corinthians will not simply be a spectator mindset noticing how bad they were. As we study Scripture, we need to invite the Lord to do a little house cleaning in our heart and mind.

"Give me one hundred preachers
who fear nothing but sin
and desire nothing but God,
and I care not whether they be clergymen or laymen,
they alone will shake the gates of Hell
and set up the kingdom of Heaven upon Earth."
John Wesley

TOGETHER WE CAN

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Amongst the sin and selfishness, Paul in 1 Corinthians said a lot about unity. Unity is vitally important, and the danger of all these sins is they tend to divide us. Colossians 3:13-14 says, ***"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."*** There are several roads to unity. Forgiveness and love tend to be the ones most often used and needed.

Ravi Zacharias has said, "Where destruction is the motive, unity is dangerous. For example, if I have evil intent and I galvanize that evil intent with many others, the capacity to destroy is immense. Where goodness is the motive, unity is phenomenal and actually has some good issues to it." Perfect unity is working together for the cause of Christ. It is something bigger than we are. Romans 12:16 says, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." Unity takes work.

There is power in unity. Ignatius of Antioch said, "Take heed, then, often to come together to give thanks to God, and show forth His praise. For when you assemble frequently in the same place, the powers of Satan are destroyed, and the destruction at which he aims is prevented by the unity of your faith."

The story that has challenged me the most on unity is that of Jonathan and David. Jonathan could have felt entitled to be the next king. He could have listened to the many voices urging him there. He could have sided with his dad. However, 1 Samuel 23:16 says, ***"And***

Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God." Jonathan was more concerned on what God wanted than what he "deserved." He chose unity.

Remember: They will know we are Christians by our love.

Has God placed someone on your mind? Seek unity.

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" Psalm 133:1

SWEET FRIENDSHIP

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

The basic themes of 1 Corinthians were:
1. Unity
2. Errors of Christian conduct corrected

As I spent time in the book, I became more and more challenged with the concept of these two themes coming together. To have unity, we must be willing to point out the moral discrepancies in other believers. I am not promoting the bashing of unbelievers. I expect an unbeliever to live consistently within their worldview. It is the erring believer that we need to approach in love.

Proverbs 27:17 says, ***"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."*** When this is done regularly, we do not have to have as big of a clash. While in college, I worked in a factory over the summer and any other break. It was the coveted 5:00 pm to 4:30 am shift. My job was to smooth out the edges of metal pieces using a grinding wheel. Smaller "snags" typically came off easy. However, if a piece burned too long during the cutting stage, it could destroy a piece. We need to sharpen each other. This can be done by exposing sin, weaknesses, or even by complimenting accomplishments and strengths. Balance is good.

I am not sure you can have perfect unity if errors of Christian conduct are not corrected. Sin going unaddressed is not unity. Unity comes from thinking and walking together in the mind of Christ.

Gatherings are important so we can, ***"consider how to stir up one another to love and good works"*** (Hebrews 10:24). Teamwork does not get overemphasized. Great teams have unity.

Proverbs 27:9 says, ***"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel."*** That is such a beautiful picture and analogy. Unity comes from a friend's counsel. It might not be what we want to hear, but it is still compared to perfume and sweetness.

"There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship." Thomas Aquinas

"I cannot even imagine where I would be today were it not for that handful of friends who have given me a heart full of joy. Let's face it, friends make life a lot more fun." Charles R. Swindoll

Take time today to thank a friend.

Take time today to be a friend.

"My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me."
Henry Ford

REPUTATION

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Some years ago, I was out for a run when I ran into my high school history teacher. I had not seen him in about 25 years. He had not changed. I viewed most my teachers as "old," and now he was. He taught at Warren Fitzgerald his whole teaching career. We had talked some while I was in school, but I knew he had thousands of thousands of students come through his class. I introduced myself, and he said, "Johnson, baseball player and a Baptist." Obviously, I wish he had said a Christian (and a great baseball player). As I thought about it, I was pleased on how he remembered me.

Several people are listed in 1 Corinthians. There is Saul (Paul), Sosthenes Chloe, Cephas (Peter), Crispus, Gaius, Stephanas, Aquila, Prisca, and a leader by the name of Apollos. Not much is known of Apollos. However, Acts 18:24 says, ***"Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures."***

A complimentary description is given of Apollos. He was eloquent and competent. He knew the Word. That is such a great reputation to have. Benjamin Franklin warned, "It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it." We need to focus on character and hope the truth will be seen and heard through reputation. Dwight L. Moody said it this way, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of me."

Proverbs 22:1 says, ***"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."*** Having a good name is a priority.

George Washington said, “Associate with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for it is better to be alone than in bad company.” We all know the phrase “guilty by association.” Could we be guilty of good things through association? I think so.

Finally, Acts 24:16 says, ***“So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.”***

What are you known for?
What do you want to be known for?
What are you going to do about it?

“The way to gain a good reputation
is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.”
Socrates

ORDERLY

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I am organized; my wife is clean. It is an oversimplification, but it does summarize us well. I will “straighten up” the kitchen after a meal, and then she will come through with the bleach. I like to put things where they are supposed to be. Early in our marriage, if my wife wanted to get my attention, she would “move” something on my desk. Simply stated, she got my attention. I need to be careful how I esteem the value of orderliness, but it is important.

The great philosopher (or, at least, fun cooking show host) Paula Deen has said, “I am guilty of buying way too many gadgets - way too many! And though I try to keep things nice and orderly, sometimes I get distracted and stick saucepans where the stockpots should go.” Most people can relate. We get frustrated when we cannot find things because they are not where they are supposed to be. Even in her freelance way, she has a sense of order with her recipes (plus a pound of butter). We like a sense of order.

Most writers choose 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40 as the key verses for 1 Corinthians: ***“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints. But all things should be done decently and in order.”*** God is a God of order. Order does bring peace. Confusion happens when we are rattled, frazzled, and out of control.

Orderliness is when people take pride in themselves and what is around them. They take the time to become aware of everything that is going on in their lives that they choose to handle in a certain order.

In Job 25:2, it says, ***"Dominion and awe belong to God; he establishes order in the heights of heaven."*** If we are made in God's image, I think there is some part of us that can be orderly.

This week appreciate the purposely-planned order of worship.

"To love rightly is to love what is orderly and beautiful
in an educated and disciplined way."
Plato

BIBLE VERSE BUFFET

LESSON ONE, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

As we get ready to jump into a chapter-a-week, verse-by-verse look at the Book of 2 Corinthians, I thought I would remind you of some of these familiar verses from 1 Corinthians:

1:18 - ***"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."***

2:9 - ***"But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"***

6:19-20 - ***"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."***

9:24 - ***"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."***

10:13 - ***"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."***

10:31 - ***"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."***

11:26 - ***"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."***

12:12 - ***"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."***

13:4-8a - ***"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."***

13:13 - ***"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."***

Did one verse catch your attention more than the others did?

Write out the verse. Take it with you. Memorize it. Meditate on it.

Please pray that the next 18 weeks will be fruitful as you and the church study 2 Corinthians.

LESSON TWO

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS

2 CORINTHIANS OVERVIEW

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Most of us have heard or said, “When the cat’s away, the mice will play.”

1. What comes to mind when you hear that saying?

_____

_____

_____

Paul went through Greece and visited Corinth on his second missionary journey. The city was a thriving commercial center. Even though the people were known to be immoral and pagan, Paul was able to plant a Church.

When Paul left, the people slipped away or were drawn away from the Lord and the Gospel message.

Paul kept in contact with the people by writing them and even sending Titus. After Paul left Corinth, it appears some “super-apostles” stepped in at the Church and turned the people against him. Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa describe what the false teachers said about Paul, “They claimed he was fickle, proud, unimpressive in appearance and speech, dishonest, and unqualified as an apostle of Jesus Christ.”

2. How would these claims affect you if they were said about you?

_____

_____

_____

3. What picture do you generally have of Paul?

_____

_____

_____

The book of 2 Corinthians may actually be a couple of letters written by Paul to the Church at Corinth put together as one. The false teachers must have crept in quickly as the letters to Corinth are most probably written within a year of each other. Their goal was to undermine Paul by attacking his ministry, methods, and message.

4. How are Pastors often judged by people?

_____

_____

_____

5. What qualities do you look for in a strong Christian Pastor?

_____

_____

_____

In their book *Talk Thru the Bible,* Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa summarize each book of the Bible. One of their categories has them point out where Christ is portrayed in the book. For 2 Corinthians they say, "Christ is presented as the believer's comfort (1:5), triumph (2:14), Lord (4:5), light (4:6), judge (5:10), reconciliation (5:19), substitute (5:21), gift (9:15), owner (10:7), and power (12:9)."

6. Which of these descriptions of Jesus catches your attention? Why?

_____

_____

_____

There are several key passages in 2 Corinthians.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all

our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

7. According to this passage, what is a reason bad things may happen to good people?

_____
_____
_____

"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." 2 Corinthians 4:5

8. What is the mission of the Church?

_____
_____
_____

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." 2 Corinthians 5:10

9. Should this verse scare us? Why or why not?

_____
_____
_____

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17

10. Summarize this verse in your own words.

_____

_____

_____

"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

11. What mindset helps one be a "cheerful giver?"

_____

_____

_____

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

12. What could be your thorn in the flesh?

_____

_____

_____

13. How can having a thorn in the flesh be a blessing?

_____

_____

_____

This last passage makes a great theme for the book of 2 Corinthians and for our lives – the strength of weakness.

THEY

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ty Woznek

"They" is a dangerous word. One would think that is a silly statement, but over the years, this truth is proven again and again. As we embark on our journey in this series in 2 Corinthians, let us be warned of the dangers of they. This warning carries over into any book of the Bible we read. Why? It is because "they" quite often becomes "we."

They can; I cannot.

One of the dangers of "they" is looking at what others did and thinking we cannot do the same. The thought comes that "we" are lesser than "they." The Bible is written by real people, to real people, with real struggles, and for real reasons. The Bible is not a book of fairy tales, but of history and theology merged into a color portrait to help us grow. "They" were just like us. "We" are just like them. What is also the same is a loving God striving with them just as He does with us.

They should not; I would not.

The other danger of "they," is thinking "we" would not do what "they" did. During my Bible reading on sabbatical a few years ago, this truth leaped out at me. We often see ourselves as the heroes in the Bible, but not as the wavering crowds. We see ourselves as the disciples (minus the "o ye of little faith") and not as the Pharisees. Do not look down at what "they" did, because "we" do the same things.

They were growing.

The church of Corinth is a church of growth, not problems. This goes against what we often hear for preachers, but growing in Christ is a messy task. Seeing our sin and gaining victory over it often lacks the smoothness of a well written movie. They were called out on their sin,

made changes, and also harbored some bitterness. They, however, grew and changed. They were scared or exhausted to restore one they removed in sin, and were quick to look down on Paul. Despite all this, they were growing.

We struggle too.

We do the same things they did. When someone calls us out on our sin, we resent them, even when we changed for the better. We often harbor bitterness, resentment, and emotional exhaustion when it comes to restoring someone who sinned. Simply put, we want to save face instead of embracing grace. Rather than viewing the Corinthians as problem people, embrace the freedom of grace to say, "We struggle with that too."

"They" is a very dangerous word indeed, for it excuses of us working on the same things we struggle with too. When "they" becomes "we," it frees us to live out this truth: ***"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"*** (2 Corinthians 13:14).

RECONCILIATION

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Noble Baird

Part two of books, movies, or albums, can often be very troubling grounds. More often then not, the only reason for doing a part two or a follow-up is simply for the money. If the first book enthralls the readers, then we will make a sequel. If this movie captivates the audience, we will make a sequel, or we will follow the sequel up with a prequel to make up for the awful sequel. The opportunities are endless. However, one sequel or part two that I do truly love, is 2 Corinthians. The letters from Paul to the church in Corinth have always been a staple for me, and I will often read over them when I am looking for a refresh. Yet, there is one particular theme that has always stood out to me in Paul's second letter, reconciliation.

In Paul's first letter, he is imploring the church to turn from their sin and misguided ways, so that they will ultimately grow in their faith and knowledge of Christ. As he begins this second letter, he thanks them for heeding his words and for the change that he has heard is taking place within the church. Why is this so important to Paul? He understands that Jesus is in the business of reconciliation. Therefore, he is imploring that the church in Corinth do the same and make it a priority in their lives, so that they may be able to attest and be witnesses of Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Paul writes, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and***

entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Paul reminds the church of the new life they have in Christ. He explains this new life, by teaching them how they were redeemed and reconciled to God the Father, through the sacrifice of Christ.

As we begin this study on the book of 2 Corinthians, I want to encourage you to view it through the lens of reconciliation. Paul reminded the church of Corinth, and us as followers of Christ, that we are ambassadors for Christ. Therefore, as ambassadors of our Risen Savior, I want to encourage you to heed and remember the words of Paul. Not only have we been reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Christ, but we have been given the call and ministry of reconciliation. I pray that as you continue in your study of 2 Corinthians, this theme and continual reminder of reconciliation will challenge and encourage you as it does me.

LEAN ON ME

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 3

James Mann

The book of 2 Corinthians serves as a letter written by Paul for the Church of Corinth. In this letter, Paul elaborates and clarifies different things that he had written in 1 Corinthians, as well as giving the church new instructions to follow. These instructions are still relevant in our churches today. This is one reason why these letters are so crucial for us to be discussing and learning from today. By reading and studying the history and downfalls of the Church of Corinth, we can grow and avoid the same shortcomings within our own church. While this is something to look for in 2 Corinthians, it is something we should be looking for throughout the entirety of the Bible. One of the most prominent themes you will come across throughout 2 Corinthians is the idea of needing to lean on Christ in our times of suffering. We are unable to do what is needed to be done out of our own strength. Only through Him can we find the strength needed.

Another reason for this letter to be written is that there was another group of people on the opposition with Paul's instructions, which he refers to as false apostles. Paul even goes as far as to refer to these false apostles as servants of Satan (11:14-15). Paul spends a good amount of time calling out those who are doing wrong and their need to change their ways. This should serve as a warning to us as believers that the enemy is trying to put people in our paths who are trying to persuade us that their way is right, but in reality, they could not be further away from God and His plans. We need to use discernment when listening to others and make sure it aligns with the teachings of God. We do this by praying to God and asking for Him to show us His paths.

Paul closes this book, in chapter 13, warning the Church of Corinth of his third visit. Paul tells them that if their ways are not changed, he will deal with them with the power of God Himself backing him. This idea of Paul's third return is terrifying if you think about it. He is not coming alone but instead with the wrath of God alongside him. We need to realize that judgment day is coming. We do not know when that day is. The book of 2 Corinthians serves as an excellent layout for how we should be living our Christian lives. The wrath of God will be upon those who do not follow His teachings on that day as well. We should start living our lives for Him now rather than later because later might be too late.

BLESSINGS OF A CHEERFUL GIVER

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Roy Townsend

I have a long-time friend who was involved in a ministry position for more than 40 years. I was asking him how he had made it financially over all these years. He said that he earnestly believes that God has blessed him in that many of the "big bills" that a household would typically have, he had not experienced them. He said that he had not had many medical bills, furnace, refrigerator, or car repairs. "God has allowed me to live better on 90% than on 100% of my income." He was able to own a home, drive a car, and raise a family of two children on a small income. However, he did not claim that it was his abilities, but God's blessings. He is a servant of God who was able to give generously.

In a survey of the book of 2 Corinthians, a reader will find a lengthy discussion from the Apostle Paul on giving. Paul was collecting funds for the needy followers of Christ that remained in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had promised to give a large amount, but because of some false teachers trying to turn the Corinthians away from Paul's instructions, the Corinthians had not sent the promised gifts. Paul, in chapters 8 and 9, appeals to the Corinthian Church to keep their promise. Moreover, in his appeal, we receive a divine principle in giving.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, he writes, ***"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."***

God is not concerned with how much you and I can give back to His work, but He is concerned with the attitude that we have toward giving. He reveals the principle that if you give ***"sparingly,"*** then we receive ***"sparingly."*** However, the principle works in both directions. If we give ***"bountifully,"*** then we can receive ***"bountifully."*** Again, sparingly and bountifully are more of our attitudes toward giving. In today's culture, we are taught to try to get as much as we can. On the other hand, I love the teaching that each one of us can give cheerfully, ***"Having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."***

BACK TO BASICS

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Manning Brown

The Church at Corinth held a special place in Paul's heart. He established the church while on his second missionary journey. Being a city in Greece, the Greeks were known for their philosophy and intellect. Paul was a Roman citizen and Jew, but he was well-educated and trained as a Pharisee, referring to himself as a "Jew of Jews."

At some point, as pointed out in the book of Acts, Apollos was known for his speaking ability among the Corinthians as well. This drew the inevitable comparison between him and Paul among the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes from a position of almost defending himself and the ministry to which he was called. This letter contains some of the most familiar passages of Scripture, ranging from the ministry of an apostle to him addressing those in Corinth who sought to discredit his ministry and the reiteration of the authority of his call as an apostle.

I like to say that Christians (and churches) have a terminal case of humanity, meaning both will let you down. This is not meant to sound cynical but rather realistic. It was as true in Paul's day as it is in ours. When I first started preaching 30 years ago, my pastor (and mentor) was quick to caution me about not becoming "puffed up." I was a relatively new believer at that point, and that was a valid warning. Over the years, I became more comfortable with preaching and teaching, but still would find myself being cautioned, but also at times criticized on my preaching, or challenged on a doctrinal issue. My fleshly reaction was (and sometimes still is) to lash out, allowing hurt and embarrassment to overcome a rational and measured response.

Yet, it ultimately must always come back to Jesus.

Are my words and ministry honoring Him, encouraging brothers and sisters in Christ, and drawing the seeker to Him? When we face those attacks against our character, we must let our faithfulness speak for itself, and respond in love. As I consider the book of 2 Corinthians and Paul's situation, I am reminded that we all are, at times, faced with the situation where we are questioned by other believers as to the authenticity of our desire to minister and serve. Like Paul, we can feel hurt and the need to defend ourselves. However, when we find ourselves in that situation (and invariably, we all will), we must always remember to point everything back to Christ.

SCENARIOS

LESSON TWO, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Pat Rowland

Life can be rough: Divorced after 18 years of marriage, laid off again, losing someone very close to you, sitting in a courtroom with your child again, begging a spouse to go to counseling, worrying about your family's safety, or hearing the doctor say the test is positive. These are not the scenarios we plan to face in life, yet if you have breath in your lungs, you have experienced some level of a life struggle. Life is always coming at you, and to cope, we look for something to bring us comfort.

The Apostle Paul understood challenges, trials, and life struggles. He highlighted a few in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, ***"I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."***

It is when we face the toughest challenges, the overwhelming stresses, and the daily hardships that we need something on which to hold. We long for the strength of a helping hand to pull us up and to give us hope. A major theme of Paul's letters, and especially 2

Corinthians, is strength found in the comfort of Jesus. In the opening chapter of this letter, Paul mentions comfort ten times in just five verses.

Feel free to count them in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ, we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."***

It is through suffering that our hearts draw closer to God because He is able to comfort us. As we look to Him over other forms of coping, Jesus is working in us for our good, molding us into His image.

LESSON THREE

COMFORT

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Life is not fair! Even the Christian life is not always easy and glamorous. There are trials, tragedies, and tears. People will ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

1. Who do you remember saying to you, "Life is not fair?"

_____
_____
_____

2. When has a "bad" situation turned out "good" for you?

_____
_____
_____

In 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Paul addresses, or alludes to three principles why struggles may occur.

1. Sometimes Christians have struggled because they have made bad decisions.

This is the cause and effect principle. When we spend more than we have, there is going to be an adverse outcome. When we hit our head on the wall, it will leave a mark, possibly on both the wall and our head. A resulting headache should not surprise us.

In the first two verses, we are told Paul is writing to the believers at Corinth again, ***"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."***

3. What do you know about Timothy?

_____

_____

_____

4. What did Paul address in 1 Corinthians?

_____

_____

_____

Paul is writing to the Corinthians again because they have made some poor choices. He needs to get them back on track. The next two points are much more obvious.

2. Sometimes Christians have struggled for the sake of others.

The world does not revolve around us. God's plan includes us, but it is not all about us. We are not the main actor.

5. Did you participate in your school plays?

_____

_____

_____

6. An obvious answer, but who is the Main Actor of life?

_____

_____

_____

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be***

able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."

7. How many times do we see the word comfort in this passage? (Hint: you will need both hands to count)

_____

_____

_____

8. What does this passage say is a reason why we may suffer from afflictions?

_____

_____

_____

9. When has been a time when someone has used their past struggle to help you?

_____

_____

_____

10. When has been a time when you used a past struggle to help someone else?

_____

_____

_____

God is in the comfort business. Psalm 23:4 adds, ***"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."***

"You may readily judge whether you are
a child of God or a hypocrite
by seeing in what direction your soul turns
in seasons of severe trial.
The hypocrite flies to the world
and finds a sort of comfort there.
But the child of God runs to his Father
and expects consolation only from the Lord's hand."
Charles Spurgeon

The third reason why we may have to overcome battles in the world is about us.

3. Sometimes Christians have struggled for the sake of growth.

Trials should make us rely on God. In verse 8-11, Paul writes, ***"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."***

11. What struggle did Paul face?

_____
_____
_____

12. What does the phrase, ***"was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God"*** mean?

_____
_____
_____

Joni Eareckson Tada, as a teenager, suffered a swimming tragedy that made her paralyzed from the shoulders down. Yet, she writes, "You don't have to be alone in your hurt! Comfort is yours. Joy is an option. And it's all been made possible by your Savior. He went without comfort so you might have it. He postponed joy so you might share in it. He willingly chose isolation so you might never be alone in your hurt and sorrow."

In 1 Peter 5:7, we are told to cast ***"all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."*** God loves us and has a plan. He alone can turn a mess into a message.

Difficulties will come. Maybe it is our fault, but we need to draw near to God. Maybe it is not our fault, but we need to be willing to experience God's love so we can help others. Finally, maybe the difficulty is to help make us rely on God.

"Snuggle in God's arms.
When you are hurting,
when you feel lonely, left out.
let Him cradle you, comfort you,
reassure you of His all-sufficient power and love."
Kay Arthur

AVOIDING THE MIDDLEMAN

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 1

John Rigg

All of us are familiar with the phrase “avoid the middleman.” In our efforts to prevent paying too much for a product or service, we strive to cut out anyone that may be adding their fee onto what we will eventually pay. It is a great goal for anyone trying to save a few bucks!

However, we may be making a mistake if we apply this type of thinking to other areas of our life. For example, if we just received news that someone we know is going through great difficulty in their life, we should take this matter to God in prayer and ask Him to help and bring comfort to this situation in a way that only He can.

You probably have prayed this prayer or one like it. I know I have. Someone in our life needs God’s comfort, and so we go to God and ask Him to handle it. However, do we “avoid the middleman” by praying such a prayer? I believe we sometimes do because, as with any middleman, we know there is a cost associated when using one.

Read Paul’s words in his letter to the church at Corinth and see if you can spot the middleman.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.” 2 Corinthians 1:3–5 (NKJV)

Did you spot the middleman?

Too often, when praying for others in trouble, you and I pray, “God, would you handle it?” However, many times, it is we who have been positioned perfectly by God to be the middleman! We are called to be part of the process but “avoid the middleman” because of the cost involved, mainly our time. Being a comfort to those in trouble with the same comfort we ourselves have been comforted by is going to interrupt our schedule. Yes, there is a cost to becoming the middleman, but if we “avoid the middleman,” the price is paid by those in trouble.

Paul’s words teach us that God comforts us in all our troubles. If you know God, you probably have been comforted by Him through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus more times than you can count. Yet, Jesus is not the middleman; He is the source of our comfort.

So, how has He comforted you?
Is it His love for you? (John 3:16)
Is it His overcoming the world? (John 16:33)
Could it be His triumph over all troubles? (Revelation 21:4)

Next time we go to God on behalf of those in trouble, maybe we could pray, “God forgive me when I avoid being the middleman, please help me be a comfort to those in trouble, with the same comfort by which I myself was comforted.”

PRAY FOR US

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 2

Roger Allen

In the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, we find that Paul has endured trials of a severe nature. Through a riot in Asia, to other travel encounters, Paul would risk his life on a daily basis for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With the likes of Demetrius, the silversmith, and others in Ephesus, we see Paul being persecuted continually. Having already seized his traveling companions Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul was in a dangerous time.

Yet, as he is pressed on all sides, Paul finds comfort in the Lord. Experiencing solace and strength through prayer and supplication, Paul is able to endure. Finally, using his own experiences to bring comfort and understanding to others through the peace that only Jesus can bring, Paul presses on.

In Philippians 3:14, he wrote, ***"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."***

For the most part, ministry looks nothing like this today. Here in America, we are free to preach and teach the Gospel. Unencumbered by travel and cultural differences, we are able to give the Good News to those who will listen. Without fear of reprisal, we are able to gather in a way Paul could never do in his day. Whatever push back we receive is of little danger to us or others. However, in other parts of the world, it looks very different. So much so, that the mere mention of Jesus could get you killed or imprisoned. Yet, we know there are men and women, who through their higher calling, are serving under a death sentence. Like Paul asked almost 2000 years ago, "You also must help us by prayer."

In 2 Corinthians 1:11, he pleads, ***"You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."***

While I am not under a death sentence for teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I, too, will ask for a prayer of intercession on my behalf. It is needed so that I may be blessed with the strength and perseverance to finish the race I have been called (2 Timothy 4:7). With humility, I will continue to seek the growth needed in my own walk and those around me. My goal is to be sanctified through the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and to see Him work in the lives of others. I also want to see that the seeds that are planted will find fertile ground just as they did with Demetrius!

In 3 John 1:12, we read, ***"Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true."*** The same Demetrius, who had started a riot against the Lord (Acts 19:23-27), was now for Him. God is in the life-changing business.

OUR COMFORT

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 3

Holly Boston

I have been addicted to some form of carbonated beverage since college (several decades now). If I had a dime for every time someone asked me, "How many of those do you drink a day?" or "Doesn't that keep you awake?", I would be a wealthy woman. Some have sent me articles describing the adverse effects on my health and its contribution to weight issues. Truth be told, I did not read them. Nothing had an impact on me until about 15 years ago. Circumstances were hard. I was dealing with financial issues, marital issues, and trying to navigate my son's struggles with Autism. I went to the drive-through window at McDonald's to get my morning Diet Coke. As the young lady handed it to me, I was shocked to "hear" my thoughts, "I have got my pop. It is a good day." At that moment, I realized I depended on pop the way I should depend on God.

Dawson McAllister, with *The Hope Line,* states that between 60% and 70% of Americans have some form of addiction, costing 500 billion dollars a year. He cites four main reasons for addictions from his research. Number one on the list is to fill the void, satisfy, or comfort. Believer, what comforts you? For many, it is alcohol, drugs, gambling, or pornography. For some, it is a more socially acceptable addiction, such as caffeine, comfort food, retail therapy, or a relationship. Some Christians find comfort in more spiritual things like a thriving ministry, a successful church event, or a well-delivered sermon. The continuum is long, but they all have one thing in common: they are substitutes for God.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3, Paul refers to our Lord as ***"God of all comfort."*** It is not some, not most, but all comfort. The God we serve promises

us eternal comfort (2 Thessalonians 2:16), through His ever-presence (Hebrews 13:5), His complete provision (Philippians 4:19), and His unconditional love (Romans 5:8). We settle for poor, temporary substitutes when complete comfort can be found in intimate conversations with Christ and time spent clinging to His promises of the Bible.

The second reason for addiction, according to McAllister, is the need to escape the struggles of this life. Believer, how do you escape? Some turn to the self-destructive options of alcohol and drugs, while others choose a more culturally acceptable means. When I come home and hear, *"Don't Look Back"* by *Boston* (ironic) or *"Here Comes the Sun"* by *The Beach Boys* pouring through the windows, I know my husband has escaped. I am known to escape via an episode of *"Andy Griffith"* before going to bed. It offers simpler times and simpler problems that are solved in a half-hour (less without commercials). Others take a more spiritual approach; they pray and beg God to change their circumstances. We request relief or escape instead of comfort and strength as we persevere.

Years ago, I had a mentor who was walking the agonizing road of end-stage breast cancer. I will never forget one of her posts on her blog, "I realized the very thing I was asking the Lord to remove was the very thing he was using to transform me into his likeness." In 2 Corinthians 1:4, Paul continues to describe our God of all comfort as the One who ***"comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction."***

We all need to escape now and then. However, perpetual escape from God-ordained struggles robs us of experiencing complete comfort. We are meant to experience divine comfort so that we can then comfort others. My mentor grew spiritually from the battle of her life. Remembering her words and the truth God revealed to her

has comforted me in my own struggles. I am reminded that there is purpose in our pain. Do not avoid it. Embrace it. Grow from it. Share it.

Full disclosure: Those who know me will tell you I continue to battle my addiction to (now) Diet Dr. Pepper. I can honestly say that I first reach for God when things get tough, but the bubbles are a close second. One day I will have complete victory!

COMFORT FOOD

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 4

Michael Fox

I love comfort food. It is usually my go-to when I am stressed or overwhelmed. Food calms me down and makes me feel better. A lot of people know that I get "hangry," and often, my mood will change drastically for the better after I eat. I get made fun of often for this, but I choose to embrace it as much as possible as part of who I am.

Food is comfortable, but it is always temporary. Reading through some of these verses is a great reminder to me that God is our everlasting comfort when many earthly things are all very temporary.

Psalm 146:3-8 says, ***"Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous."*** Here we see our hope is in the Lord, who is forever.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, Paul talks a lot about God being our comforter, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share***

abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."

One of the awesome pictures I get reading through this is our purpose in life, and why God sometimes allows us to go through things. He ultimately will give us the comfort that we need, and He provides us a promise that He will help us through our hard times. However, one of the greatest things we can do is be there for others. What we learn both through our experiences and then receiving God's comfort, we can ultimately use to help others.

Another awesome promise in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 is the power of prayer. Here we see an awesome picture that God blesses because of the prayers of many. A great takeaway today for me as we navigate through each of our own challenges is to give thanks to the Lord for getting us through it, using those experiences to help those around us, and remember those in need around us and pray for them often.

COMFORT HOARDER

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 5

Richie Henson

As a child, my grandma used to sing an old hymn that reminded her to remember the blessing of God even in difficult circumstances. It was called “Count Your Blessings,” and it was a staple of her day. I remember the chorus of this song and often use the words to help me when I feel afflicted. It can feel so great to think about all the ways God has blessed our lives, but as I read 2 Corinthians, one section challenged my thinking with concern to comfort.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Paul says, ***“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”***

In reading the book of Acts, as well as the epistles authored by Paul, we become familiar with the abundant and diverse sufferings met by Paul. Ranging from poisonous snake bites and shipwrecks to imprisonment and beatings, Paul, much like Jesus, was a man acquainted with suffering.

It would seem, given the circumstances, that Paul may consider stopping the above passage at the start of verse 4, “Praise God, the Father of mercies who comforts us in all our affliction.” That sounds wonderful! However, Paul continues and divulges the greater, selfless purpose of the comfort in our sufferings. God comforts us not that we may simply feel better, but instead that we may provide similar comfort to those around us.

Although most of us will never suffer in a similar fashion to Paul, as Christ-followers, we are undoubtedly surrounded on all sides by a sinful world and a prowling devil. Our destruction is being sought by all manner of spiritual powers of darkness. The more we give to Christ, the more we will find ourselves under attack. The easy way out is to only seek God for personal comfort, but the Jesus thing to do is to take that comfort from God and give it to those around us who are similarly suffering. This requires two huge actions. First, we must be honest enough to express when we are hurting. This can be truly embarrassing but is essential if we are to live in real community. Second, we must be willing to dig deeper into the lives of others in order to empathize with their difficulties and then demonstrate and speak of the mercy of God continually seeking to comfort as God comforts us.

Hardship seems to find a way to snowball. One hurt is followed by another, and before we know it, there is a tidal way of damage tearing through our lives. God desires to comfort us, reminding us of His great mercy. In this comfort, we must remember to turn outward and pass the blessing of comfort to others.

BE AN ENCOURAGER

LESSON THREE, DEVOTION 6

Debbie Gabbara

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
2 Corinthians 1:1-2

When was the last time you received a letter in the mail? I am not talking about junk mail, with a computer label with your name spelled wrong, but an envelope with a handwritten address sent to you by someone that cares about you?

In 2005, my son joined the Marines. While he was in boot camp, he did not have access to a telephone, so the only communication we had with him was through letters. For thirteen weeks, he wrote letters on Sundays and sent them home. I checked the mailbox every day looking for his handwriting, hoping to find a letter to tell me how the one I loved and prayed for was doing. Those letters are still a treasure to me.

The Apostle Paul was a letter writer. His letters are scattered through the New Testament, and today we can be inspired by the words that Paul wrote to encourage those in the cities that he traveled to as he spread the Gospel. Paul covered thousands of miles in his missionary journeys, and he grew to care about the people that he met in his travels. He kept in contact with them by writing to them. Paul's letters encouraged the new believers. His letters let them know that he had not forgotten about them and reminded them of the love God had for them. He also wrote to remind them how a follower

of Jesus was supposed to live. Even though Paul encountered many hardships and suffered tremendously for preaching the Gospel of Jesus, he continued sending letters to encourage believers to stay strong in their walk with the Lord.

Paul's letters encouraged the believers of his day, and they still encourage believers today.

In his letters, Paul reminds us how much God loves us. In Romans 5:8, he says, ***"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

Paul encourages us to pray in Philippians 4:6, saying, ***"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."***

Paul reminds us that we are strong when we depend on Christ Jesus. In Philippians 4:13 (NKJV), he says, ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."***

In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV), Paul encourages us to encourage others. ***"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."***

Go to God's Word, read Paul's letters, and be encouraged. Who can you be an encouragement to today?

LESSON FOUR

BOASTING

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-24

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

When my daughter was in third grade, she won a character award at school. My wife and I were excited to put the certificate on the refrigerator. My daughter was not thrilled. When I asked her about her disposition, she said, “Dad, everyone eventually earns an award, and it took all the way to March for them to give it to me.” Sometimes she is too observant for her own good.

1. What is an award you have earned? How did you feel?

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Historian Allison B. Siegel recorded an employee of the *White Star Line* say a famous quote. It was May 31, 1911, and they were launching the Titanic. The employee said, “Not even God himself could sink this ship.” It appears the employee struggled with arrogance, but that might only be “the tip of the iceberg.”

2. What is the difference between boasting, confidence, and sharing a blessing?

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In 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, Paul does some boasting, ***“For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.”***

3. How many times is the word ***"boast"*** used in these verses?

_____
_____
_____

4. What did Paul boast about?

_____
_____
_____

5. When is "boasting" acceptable?

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6. How does the phrase ***"grace of God"*** fit into this discussion?

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There are a number of verses that combine boasting and God's grace:

"So that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" 1 Corinthians 1:31

"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." 2 Corinthians 10:17

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." 2 Corinthians 11:30

"It is one thing to believe in God;
it is quite another to believe God."
R. C. Sproul

7. What is the difference between the two points in Sproul's quote?

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Paul continues his conversation about grace in 2 Corinthians 1:15-22, ***"Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."***

8. What does ***"second experience of grace"*** mean?

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9. What does ***"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him"*** mean?

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"O Lord our God,
grant us grace to desire Thee with our whole heart;
that, so desiring, we may seek, and seeking find Thee;
and so finding Thee may love Thee;
and in loving Thee, may hate those sins
from which Thou hast redeemed us."
Anselm

Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 1:23-24, ***"But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith."***

10. What does ***"we work with you for your joy"*** mean?

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_____
_____

11. How has someone protected you from yourself or shown you "tough love?"

_____
_____
_____

Paul closes this first chapter by expressing love and dedication. He wants them to experience joy and will invest in them whatever it takes to help them reach and experience it.

"As a result of grace,
we have been saved from sin's penalty.
One day we will be saved from sin's presence.
In the meantime we are being saved from sin's power."
Alistair Begg

BADGES

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 1

John Rigg

“Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges!”

One-liners can be special! How many movies have you watched in your lifetime where the only take away from the movie was a line by one of the actors? *Blazing Saddles* is one of those movies for me. I only remember watching it one time, and that was back in High School, but the line that I remember from that movie is, “Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges!”

In a now-famous scene in that movie, the corrupt State Attorney General Hedley Lamarr, played by Harvey Korman, has a sheriff’s badge given to one of his Mexican bandit henchmen, played by Rick Garcia.

Korman says to Garcia: “Be ready to attack Rock Ridge at noon tomorrow. Here’s your badge.”

Garcia contemptuously throws the badge on the ground and replies with a thick Spanish accent: “Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges!”

It was obvious that the henchman, Garcia, did not believe he needed a badge to carry out the work that he was being asked to do.

I wish that more of us as Christians believed the same.

When I first became a Christian, I saw other Christians displaying all kinds of badges. These badges were surely evidence that they were

followers of Christ. Maybe you have seen some of these badges yourself? Have you ever seen the suit and tie badge? Have you beeped at the bumper sticker badge? Do you own the Christian T-shirt badge? Perhaps you have seen the more noticeable front door greeter badge or head usher badge? If you really pay attention to Sundays, you can see a lot of badges! Unquestionably, these are some of Jesus' closest followers.

Of course, I am joking (kind of). However, you can certainly see how easy it is to be confused with what makes us Christian.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, lets us know how you can recognize someone that is "in Christ." We read, ***"Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee"*** (2 Corinthians 1:21–22 NKJV).

The seal, or mark that Paul talks about, is one of ownership and security. Once a person comes to Jesus in faith for salvation, the Spirit of God indwells in the believer and is the sign that the disciple now belongs to God and is secure for all of eternity. This seal or sign, however, is not something that is worn on apparel or placed on a car. People will never know a true Christian by a badge worn, but by a life lived under the influence of the Spirit of God.

External badges are dangerous and can not only confuse new believers but can be a stumbling block to those deciding whether or not to follow Jesus as well. So, I hope you are encouraged by the words of the henchman Garcia, and like him, do not believe you need a badge to carry out the work that you are being asked to do.

"Badges? We don't need no stinking badges!"

GOD'S PERFECT WORD

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 2

Larry Gabbara

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to encourage them and answer their questions. He also promises to come visit them and then explains why he changes his mind. He defends himself as a true apostle of Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 1:18-19 (NLT), Paul says, ***"As surely as God is faithful, our word to you does not waver between 'Yes' and 'No.' For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does not waver between 'Yes' and 'No.' He is the one whom Silas, Timothy, and I preached to you, and as God's ultimate 'Yes,' he always does what he says."***

In this Scripture, Paul explains that God's Word is perfect and is faithful; He never wavers. God will always do what He says. The words of Scripture are God's words. God gave His Word to man through the Scriptures. He also promised to preserve His Word.

Psalm 19:7-8 says, ***"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes."*** We can trust His word.

The Bible is inspired by God, and it is without error. The Bible is the Word of God, to deny this would be to believe that God could error; therefore, the Bible cannot have any errors. It is true today, it has always been true, and it will be true forever!

In 2 Samuel 22:31, we read, ***"This God—his way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him."***

God's way is perfect, His Word is perfect, His promises are perfect, and He is a shield for all of us who look to Him for guidance and protection.

Have you ever felt the Word of God working in your life? Has He ever spoken to you through the written Word, whispering to your mind or heart? Prior to my being saved, which was nearly 20 years ago when I was 50 years old, I thought all the ideas or answers that came to my mind were mine. As I have grown in my relationship with the Lord, I have come to understand that God directs my decisions when I am seeking Him in my life through praying and studying His Word.

Today I believe that all the good things in my life come from Him.

Finally, Jeremiah 29:11-13 says, ***"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."***

YES AND AMEN

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 3

Richie Henson

There comes a time in the lives of young men when they determine to test the alpha status of their father. By the age of 16, most boys have, at least on one occasion, made an attempt, either physical or otherwise, to assert dominance in their household. Although there may be instances where the adolescent is successful, in my case, I was not. I challenged my father in feats of strength, both mental and physical, and lost in both accounts. Each time I would make my challenge to become alpha, my father would remind me, saying, "Don't write checks your butt can't cash." This was a friendly, yet ominous reminder that I must be honest concerning my own abilities.

As a grown man, I have come to live by this phrase in many aspects of my life. One such area is promises. It feels great to make a promise to someone, but it feels terrible to be unable to follow through on my word. As I consider my own shortcomings, I am reminded of God and His great ability to make promises and keep them. Paul discusses this truth in relation to promises of salvation in 2 Corinthians 1:20, ***"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."***

This is an amazingly important concept for Christians to understand. God is a promise maker, and all the promises He makes find the truth and fulfillment in His person. Wow! That gets me so excited. When I make promises, they are often contingent on my ability to get resources or help from elsewhere, but with God, the promises are all fulfilled in His person.

God has promised us so much more than we could ever deserve. We have the promise of salvation, eternal life, and an inheritance that will never fade. These promises are trustworthy because God is trustworthy. In a world where promises are regularly broken, we can all find solace in the knowledge that God's promises are incapable of coming back void as they are directly fulfilled by His person.

A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ben Kirkman

"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you." 2 Corinthians 1:12

Paul is addressing a group of believers that have been hearing all kinds of negative things about him. Enemies of the Gospel have been attacking Paul's character and credibility. He does not seem to be shaken as he just matter-of-factly says, ***"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you."***

He basically tells them, "No matter what is being said about me, I have complete confidence that I am who God wants me to be, and I am doing exactly what God wants me to do. I am not going to be rattled by some haters." One of the factors that played into his confidence was that he had a clear conscience.

Believe it or not, as followers of Christ, we will face difficult people and situations because of our love for the Lord. Not everyone is pumped that you love Jesus. In 2 Timothy 3:12, we read, ***"Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** Our conscience is a tool that God has given to us to help encourage us to stay strong in our faith. A clear conscience gives inner confidence that our faith in Jesus is true, and what we are doing is what the Lord wants us to do. It also works the other way in letting us know that what we are doing is not what the Lord wants us to be doing.

How can we be confident that our conscience is leading us in the right direction? To keep the answer brief and to the point: We can have confidence in our conscience when we base our beliefs and behavior on the Word of God. We must know what God's Word says and act and react in step with it, only then can we follow our conscience with confidence and have the backing of a clear conscience to help us press on.

Finally, we read in 2 Timothy 3:14-15, ***"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."***

OUR WORD

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 5

Josh Lahring

Have you ever had someone who said they would be there for you, and they did not show? Maybe it was a game, a family event, or during a crisis. It definitely hurts and causes you to assume things about the person who did not show. You start to think that the other person just does not care or assume things about them that you just do not know if they are true. In the Corinthian church, Paul had said that he would come to them, and he did not show up when they thought he would. That caused some people to start saying things about Paul assuming that he probably did not care or that he was not who he claimed to be.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:15-18, ***"Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No."***

Here we see that Paul is making it clear that he does want to visit them, but he does not make his plans according to the flesh. His plans are always to do what the Lord would have him do. When he desires to visit them, he means it, and the Lord knows that he is trustworthy in that.

This same concept is seen in James 4:13-15, ***"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town***

and spend a year there and trade and make a profit' — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

We are to live in this way, that we should not make plans according to the flesh. Our word should always be trustworthy, and our word should always be bowing to the will of the Lord. When we promise to do something, as far as it is in our power, we will do what we say; however, it must always submit to the Lord's will. There are those times in our walk with the Lord that things do not seem to be happening the way we think it should happen. We begin to doubt and wonder what God is doing or if He will show up. We see this many times in Scripture where man is waiting on God to do what He said, wondering if He will ever show up. Over and over, the Scripture proves that God is always faithful to do what He said He would do. Therefore, we can have confidence that God is faithful to His promises even when we do not see a way or feel it is possible.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 1:19-20, we read, ***"For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."***

SAVED AND SECURE

LESSON FOUR, DEVOTION 6

Sierra Combs

The older I get, the more I realize that when we put our security in anything other than God, it is bound to fail eventually. This is perhaps why there are so many insecure people running around this Earth. Insecurity is an epidemic among believers and non-believers alike. We are insecure about our looks, our abilities, and our possessions. We certainly can hold no lasting security in our health, because eventually, it will fail. Even the most secure relationships with our nearest and dearest will, at times, be threatened because we are all imperfect messes who fail each other. No job is absolutely secure. No talent or ability is guaranteed to last forever. It can all be taken away, and we are left feeling hopelessly insecure.

If there is anything that we should feel insecure about, it is in our own goodness, because friend, we are not good. Compared to God's standards of holiness, we are far from it. Jesus says that ***"no one is good except God alone"*** (Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19). Ironically, even though the world has a major insecurity problem, I would say that the majority of people would consider themselves a "good" person, putting their faith and security into their own works and merit to get them into Heaven in the end. This is the falsest and most dangerous sense of security one can have. If you find yourself in this place, please listen to me. Your "goodness" cannot save you. Your kindness, charity, and effort cannot save you. You are on a sinking ship.

Without Jesus, we are all headed for disaster. Without Jesus, there is no hope. However, because of God's great love for us, He sends us a lifeboat, and it is the only secure vessel on an ocean of sinking ships. You can choose to be secure in your own goodness and sink,

or you can choose to be rescued by the only One who is truly good - Jesus Christ. He alone lived a perfect life and paid for all of your sins on a cross, and then rose again three days later. When we realize and accept this truth, putting our faith in Christ alone, we can finally have security. It is incredibly freeing to realize that this security comes from One who is perfect and blameless and holy. He did the work for us, and we get to rest in it. What is even greater is that this is 100% lasting eternal security. It is unshakable. It cannot ever be taken away. How do I know this? God tells us! One of my favorite promises that God has given to believers helps me to remember that we are eternally secure. God tells us that the moment that He saves us, He seals us with His Holy Spirit. This seal cannot be broken, and it cannot be removed. Paul touches on this in his letter to the church at Corinth. ***"Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee"*** (2 Corinthians 1:21-22 NKJV).

When you find yourself battling the insecurities of this life, remember that there is only one security that really matters. His name is Jesus, and He is enough to cover every aspect of your life. The world will tell you that you need to just believe in yourself, be confident in your abilities, and learn to love yourself above others so you can finally be secure, but this is not what the Bible says. Put your security in Jesus, rest in His promises, and wear that seal like a badge of honor. You are His child. You are chosen and loved. It does not get any better than that!

LESSON FIVE

REAFFIRM YOUR LOVE

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-17

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Two weeks after Angela graduated from college with her nursing degree, we got married, hopped in our Chevy Citation with all our belongings, and moved to Dallas, Texas, where I was attending graduate school. It was the best of times. No longer would we have to say good-bye at night, nor have a long-distance phone engagement. We had already reserved an apartment and were excited about starting a life together. We had traveled for two days but were so excited that we stayed up late and unloaded the vehicle. We were in our own apartment.

As we were ready to go to sleep, we heard an odd noise. I turned on the lights, but we did not see anything. I turned off the lights hoping to be able to go to sleep (young and naïve). The noise started again. I got up with a flashlight and saw a bug scamper away. I peeled back the bedroom carpet, and it was infested with bugs. The next morning, we moved to a different apartment complex.

1. Where is a place you never want to visit again? Why?

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Recently, we revisited Dallas. We went to the school student center and book store. We reminisced about the corner Jack-in-the-Box we enjoyed when I picked up Angela after her evening shift. We drove by the hospital Angela worked at and where our son was born. We went by the complex where I worked midnights while going to school. However, we never even considered going by the first apartment. We had no desire for that image or resulting flashbacks.

Paul, too, had mixed feelings about going to Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 2:1-4, he writes, ***"For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make***

me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

2. What was Paul's goal in visiting them?

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3. What was Paul's concern in visiting them?

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It has been said, "No man is an island." When one person is hurt, it affects others. Paul goes on to point out that people who intend to hurt him have, in essence, hurt the whole church at Corinth. In verses 5-11, he says, ***"Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs."***

4. Paul uses the word “forgive” five times in this passage. What two other actions did Paul request and require of the believers who had been wronged?

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5. Who is the real enemy listed here? How do we defeat him?

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In 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, Paul faces a dilemma, ***“When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.”***

A hard concept that we face at times is, “Just because you can do something, does not mean you should.” There are all kinds of opportunities, and we need to remember that a “yes” in one area normally means a “no” somewhere else. I remember reading an article entitled, “Pick your no’s carefully.” It was a good reminder for me as I can tend to feel overwhelmed by trying to do too much too soon.

6. Paul was not perfect. Do you think he was right or wrong for not going through an open door? Why?

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7. How do we get so committed to “good” things that we miss out on “important” things?

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Paul starts chapter two, acknowledging an inward and outward battle, but closes the chapter in victory, ***“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ”*** (2 Corinthians 2:14-17).

8. How are the two destinations described?

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9. Describe the contrasting scents described in these four verses.

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10. How is a peddler of God’s Word a negative concept?

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11. How should we share God's Word?

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Paul faced trials and rejection, yet he pressed forward. He thought of what was best for others for the day, but also for eternity. His goal was to share the justice and love of God wherever God led him.

"There are two ways of getting out of a trial.
One is simply to try to get rid of the trial,
and be thankful when it is over.
The other is to recognize the trial as a challenge from God
to claim a larger blessing than we have ever had,
and to hail it with delight as an opportunity
of obtaining a larger measure of divine grace."
A.B. Simpson

AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 1

Wes McCullough

As expected, the Bible covers the topic of forgiveness a good deal. Most Bible readers would be familiar with God's continued forgiveness of the Old Testament Israelites. They would cling to God for a number of years but then slowly fall away from Him. Through forgiveness and discipline, they would return to obedience. God's grace was always more than abundant for them.

Here is an obvious statement: The human race does not forgive as easily as God. We are prone to grudges, pride, ignorance, and spite. Jesus taught about forgiveness and forgave sins within His ministry. The New Testament writers recorded and continued Jesus' teaching on the subject. In 2 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul gave instructions on forgiveness, and part of it stuck out to me. Verses 7-8 say, ***"So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him."*** I was struck by the attitude Paul expects us to have towards those who have wronged us. According to Paul, we should have such compassion towards our fellow man that we would rush to forgiveness so the offender would not suffer in their grief from having sinned against us. Taking it one step further, we are then supposed to comfort them!

This can feel like a punch to the gut for many of us. In our selfish human nature, we can feel the offender does not deserve our forgiveness, but it would be unbiblical to withhold forgiveness of someone seeking it. In fact, the Bible says in Matthew 6:14-15, ***"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their***

trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Whoa! The stakes are high! I hope this one passage impresses upon you the absolute criticalness of forgiving your fellow man.

Colossians 3:12-14 can sum up our approach to forgiveness, ***"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."***

Who do you need to forgive?

Who do you need to seek forgiveness from?

GUARD YOUR HEART

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 2

Taylor McCullough

"Forgiveness." Does reading that word cause you to feel bitter, or does it remind you of God's work in your life?

In 2 Corinthians 2:9-11, Paul writes to the Corinthian church, ***"For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs."***

When someone wrongs us, it is the nature of our flesh to respond with negative thoughts, words, and actions. If we are not careful, we can allow this to affect our hearts. If we are not careful, we can become bitter. It is so important to focus on truth. We need God's Word, wisdom, and guidance, to overpower our flesh. We have to store His Word in our hearts and minds.

Satan wants control over our lives. He wants to create division. God wants to build, and Satan wants to destroy. God wants to heal, and Satan wants to wound. God wants to soften our hearts, and Satan wants them to be as hard as stone. God wants us to have peace, and Satan wants us to have bitterness. The enemy wants the opposite that God wants for our lives.

It is a dangerous waste of time to avoid forgiveness and to allow yourself to focus on negative emotions. The Word of God tells us to protect the condition of our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 (NIV) says,

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That comes from our Savior. We need to fill ourselves with Him daily, so that we are prepared to heal, and forgive.

Be careful with the thoughts you allow to enter your mind; test them with God's Word. Be mindful of the condition of your heart. Do not be outwitted by Satan. Do not be ignorant of his designs.

THE TRUTH HURTS

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 3

Debbie Kerr

"For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." 2 Corinthians 2:4

It is never fun, easy, or popular to rebuke someone. It is just as difficult for the one delivering the rebuke as the one on the receiving end. The old saying "the truth hurts," is very real and accurate. It can divide the closest of friends. In 2 Corinthians chapter 2, the apostle Paul is writing the church of Corinth, yet again, because they needed a loving reminder. He had a history with this church, this was not the first time they started to stray from the truth. Our sinful nature often wants to take control and do things our own way, and that is what was happening in this church. Paul was God's messenger to the church, they did not have the printed Word of God like we do. Paul did not enjoy this type of confrontation, but it was necessary for their growth in the Lord. This is what Proverbs 27:5 is teaching us, ***"Better is open rebuke than hidden love."*** The best way to show abundant love in Paul's mind was and is to confront a friend who is falling away or following a different gospel or a different Jesus.

This is not a fun or popular thing to do nor has it been easy for me. With that said, I have a confession to make, I am a recovering people pleaser! I hope you still like me after you read this devotion. Seriously though, God has recently convicted me and with His help, I am becoming a strong defender of the faith. I have lost friends for speaking the truth of Scripture into their life. It would be much easier to let them believe the lies of the enemy, but that would not be loving. While we cannot make people turn from their unbelief and acts of

rebellion, we must be obedient to the Truth. It is God who opens the eyes of the blind. Our job is to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Every believer in Jesus Christ is called to contend for the faith. We are to warn our brothers and sisters who are enticed by signs and wonders or anything that adds or subtracts from the true Gospel. Are you willing to fight the good fight? If we truly love others we will be compelled to rescue them.

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Jude 1:3-4

PLEASING AROMA

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 4

John Hubbard

"But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?" 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 (NIV)

If you think about how many people you know and care about who are lost, the weight of it can be completely overwhelming. Just off the top of my head, I can think of many friends and family members who reject the message of Christ. The gravity of that is not lost on me and there are times where it is easy to feel like the weight of eternity is on your shoulders. Praise be to God, that is not the truth.

This is a challenging passage for me, but in it, Paul tells the people at the church of Corinth that some people will receive the message of Christ as an aroma that gives life. Others will reject it, and therefore, will experience death and separation from God. How people receive the message of Christ is not up to us. What people choose to believe, or not, is not our responsibility. We are called to ***"spread the aroma of the knowledge of Him everywhere."*** What happens past that is beyond our control. The end of the verse asks ***"who is equal to such a task?"*** It is surely not you or me, only God Almighty is equal to such a task. God Almighty is the One who can open and change hearts. God Almighty is the One who can use seeds sown years ago to wake a dead heart and bring it into everlasting life.

Let us make sure that we are a pleasing aroma to God by continuing to spread His message. The verbiage in this verse reminds me of the Old Testament. All through Leviticus and Numbers, the Lord would describe the offerings that would be received as a ***"pleasing aroma of Christ."*** The Lord can see our hearts, He knows our intents. Let us offer Him our lives, let us spread His message, and let Him receive that offering as a pleasing aroma to Himself. Let us share the aroma of Him with the world so that He is able to use our imperfect selves and our inadequate words to bring life to many.

TOUGH LOVE

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 5

Shawna Johnson

Confrontation - Hard Truth - Tough Love

What feelings come over you when you hear these words? Is it anxiety and fear? Is it hope and potential? Whether you are a fan of having difficult conversations or not, I think we can agree that they are important.

While reading 2 Corinthians chapter 2, we see the sadness that overcomes Paul as he writes to those in Corinth. People he loves whom he once rejoiced in the Lord with, have fallen away from the truth of God. In this chapter we see a great example of grace and truth. Paul says in verses 3 and 4, ***"And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."*** Essentially, "What in the world are you guys doing? I love you, but also, your current behavior and actions are not something to rejoice."

Do you have someone in your life that will call you out? Is there someone that loves you enough to confront you, share the hard truth, and exhibit tough love? If not, I encourage you to find someone who will. It may take practice for you to accept this type of tough love as well. It can be difficult to hear our faults brought to light, but the fruit that comes from a friendship like this, one that is truly based in love and wanting God's best for you, is priceless. We may think we want the advice of the "tell me what I want to hear" friend, but do we

in the long run? I can assure you, the answer is, “No.”

Here are a few verses to remind us of the importance of confronting sin, hearing the hard truth, and showing tough love.

“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” Proverbs 27:17

“Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Luke 17:3

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Galatians 6:1

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Ephesians 4:15

The topic is love. We need to love in word and deed. This should not need to be a daily event, but when it is needed, we must be ready to speak or listen.

AROMA OF CHRIST

LESSON FIVE, DEVOTION 6

Jill Osmon

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ." 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Telling others about Jesus should be easy right? We have the Good News of Jesus, we do not call it good news to make it sound appealing, it is actually good news. Yet, we see in the Bible and in our own lives the difficulty of sharing it.

This is why these verses in 2 Corinthians are reassuring to me. Look at verse 14 again, ***"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere."*** I think we take on the weight of someone's decision, which is heavy! What we are actually called to do is let Christ lead us, speak the Gospel, and bring the knowledge of Him everywhere we go. We are not ***"peddlers of God's Word"*** as verse 17 says. We have all seen the ***"peddlers of God's Word,"*** most of us feel gross after seeing the peddlers, the ones who make money off the Gospel, the ones who use it for their financial gain. We are to be, instead, sincere in our speaking of the Gospel.

What does it look like to be sincere? First, we have to actually believe it. Sincere is defined as free from pretense or deceit; proceeding from genuine feelings. The world does not need another person with arrogance or condescension that tells them all the ways they are wrong. In verse 15, Paul talks about the ***"aroma of Christ,"*** we are the aroma of Christ. It is sweet and loving without pretense. When we approach friends, family, or our community, let us remember to have our love of Christ at the forefront. The ***"aroma of Christ"*** should be what people respond to, not our eloquent or awkward words (raise your hand if you feel like your attempts are more awkward than eloquent - my hand is raised!), but His words and actions.

Lastly, we do not hold the weight of others' decisions. It says in verse 15, ***"To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."*** There will be some who accept and others who do not. Our responsibility is to allow God to ***"spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere."***

LESSON SIX

UNVEILED

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-18

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Stephen Miller wrote an interesting article for *Christianity Today* entitled, *"What Did Paul Look Like?"* In the article, he describes the Apostle Paul, "He was a bald-headed, bowlegged short man with a big nose, and an unbroken eyebrow that lay across his forehead like a dead caterpillar." He goes on to say that he was paraphrasing an early Christian document, "The Acts of Paul."

The original article was written in Greek, and a more literal translation describes Paul as, "A man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long."

It would have been interesting to watch Paul apply for a job. I know he had great credentials and could produce an impressive resume, but I am not sure he would have "bragged" about himself. His application could have been questionable as he did not stay in one place at a time very long. How many times was he in jail? Would the convict get a chance in the interview? I can imagine the employer saying, "Did you come here to get a job or to get me saved?"

1. What fun, funny, or embarrassing interviews have you had?

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In 2 Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul knows false things have been said about him, and he references the concept of letters of recommendation. He says, ***"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink***

but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

2. If you were writing a letter of recommendation for Paul, what could you say?

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3. What would you want people to say about you in their letter of recommendation?

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Paul understood that Jesus changed everything. Jesus changed his life, but His death and resurrection also brought about a new covenant. He knew change would be difficult. The people needed to realize that their relationship with God could now be much more personal. They were moving from relying on the Law to relying on God's grace.

In 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, he says, ***"Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."***

4. How do these verse compare to Ephesians 2:8-9?

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The concept of a new covenant was not initiated by Paul. We read about it in Jeremiah 31:31-34, ***"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."***

Hebrews 8:13 adds, ***"In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."***

5. What was the old covenant and what is the new covenant?

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The old covenant was valuable in showing the bad news aspect of the Gospel, while the new covenant truly is the good news. John Walvoord summarized the value of the old covenant, "The purpose of the law was to provide a righteous rule of life and to bring sin into condemnation. Israel's experience under the law demonstrated that moral, civic, and religious law cannot save or sanctify. The law was never intended to provide for man's salvation, while in force or later, and by its nature was weak in that it could not justify (Romans

3:20; Galatians 2:16); it could not sanctify or perfect (Hebrews 7:18-19); was limited in its force and duration (Galatians 3:19); could not regenerate (Galatians 3:21-22); and could only bring sin out into the open (Romans 7:5-9; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 15:56). The law made it possible for God to demonstrate that everyone was guilty and every mouth stopped (Romans 3:19), and made the need of Christ evident (Romans 7:7-25; Galatians 3:21-27)."

In 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, Paul contrasts the two covenants, ***"Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory."***

6. How are the old and new covenants labeled in this section?

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We know that Abraham was saved by faith just like believers today (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). However, throughout the Old Testament, there is a veil between man and God.

In 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, Paul references the veil Moses wore, ***"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read***

the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

7. What is the practical outcome of the veil being removed?

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When Moses came down the mountain after visiting with God, his face radiated from being with the Lord. He needed to wear a veil. The people could not look at him directly.

There was another veil. It was in the Jewish temple and was a barrier "guarding" the Holy of Holies. It was there where the Ark of the Covenant resided, and God's presence rested. Only the high priest could enter this area and only once a year. He went to make atonement for the sins of Israel (Exodus 30:10).

In 1 Kings 6:2, we read that Solomon's temple was 30 cubits high (45 feet). The veil went from ceiling to floor. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus recorded that the veil was four inches thick. However, in Matthew 27:51, we are told what happened as a result of the death of Jesus, ***"And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split."***

8. Why did the author distinguish that the curtain was torn ***"from top to bottom?"***

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9. What is available to us since the veil or curtain is open?

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"Let us then with confidence draw near
to the throne of grace,
that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need."
Hebrews 4:16

THE COUNSELOR

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 1

Mark O'Connor

I am grossly incompetent. I am not qualified to do my job. If left on my own to do everything myself, I would fail almost every time. Sure, I may have a small win here or there, but most of the time, it would be a tragic mess.

Before I had Jesus in my life, I gave some absolutely atrocious advice. I said things like, "You have to do what makes you happy." On more than one occasion, I told someone to listen to their heart. I may have even said, "You do you." When I look back at those times, I pray that those people did not take my advice. I cringe at what the result of those decisions may have been. I even acted on those impulses, and it set me up for different challenges. Now I have to admit, God has given some incredible blessings out of those choices and challenges. That would not have been the case if I had not realized what Paul tells the church in Corinth.

In 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 (CSB), Paul writes, ***"Such is the confidence we have through Christ before God. It is not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God. He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."***

Other Bible translations will say that we are not sufficient, and I cannot argue the validity of that word. When I see the word competent, it makes it a bit more relatable. It is probably because it is so true. Without guidance from the Holy Spirit, I have messed up way more than I have not. When I realized this, though, there is a peace in

that. I will never have it all together on my own, and neither will you. However, when you see that your adequacy comes from the Lord, you gain confidence. It is Jesus, via the Spirit, who gives life. Jesus, through the Spirit, guides us. He is sufficient, so we do not have to be. When I started to rely on that, my counsel became sound. Please do not feel like you have to carry yourself through. Your power and skill will only carry you so far. Let the Holy Spirit take the reins and steer you in the right direction.

CHISELED STONE?

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 2

Wes McCullough

"Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him." 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 (MSG)

In the early years of the church, there was a struggle between the "old covenant" people and the "new covenant" people. The old covenant, simply put, was the written Scripture which contained hundreds of laws and guidelines for God's people. When Jesus came as the fulfillment of Scripture and died for our sins, the status quo changed. When the new covenant was enacted by the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Spirit of God progressed from being found only in the written Scripture to living inside every believer. I like how Paul describes the old covenant as "obsolete."

This Scripture describes an interesting concept. Human nature is to make a decision based on proof. You may know unbelievers who say, "If God would do" a certain thing, then they say they would believe He is real. They have said, "If He would give me a definitive sign, then I would accept Him." That is not how it works in the spiritual realm. Paul describes a veil that is removed after we turn to God, and once removed, we have a realization that God is alive, and we

can personally experience Him. He is not stuck in “chiseled stone” (the Ten Commandments). We are free of the old laws. Instead, we desire to live lives obedient to Jesus and reflect His glory.

God is always ready for a relationship with the unbeliever. He pursues us, and when we open our hearts to Him, ***“our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him”*** (2 Corinthians 3:18 MSG).

Revelation 3:20 says, ***“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”***

PAUL'S CREDENTIAL

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Gareth Volz

Paul's credential is the transformed Christians at Corinth.

The vision of our church is to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to gather together to praise and worship Him, and to grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. Have you ever felt God calling you to be a part of His ministry? God has gifted each of us uniquely with spiritual gifts so that He can use us to reach people with the Gospel, facilitate our gatherings and worship, and grow and help others to grow in the Lord.

When we answer the call of God to be used by Him, God will work through us to draw others to Himself; and through worship and Bible studies, equip others to reach out to the lost. When God is working in and through us, His Holy Spirit will do a great work in the lives of those to whom we are ministering. Yet, it always seems that when God is doing a great work through His people, Satan begins to attack that work and the workers in various ways in order to keep people from coming to the Lord and growing in His Word.

That is the situation we find in 2 Corinthians chapter 3. Paul, and those ministering with him, are accused by false teachers of not having the proper credentials to be an apostle. Paul responds by saying he was appointed an apostle by God and that the Christians in Corinth who had come to know Christ through Paul's ministry, and whose lives were transformed by the Holy Spirit, were his credentials, ***"You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men"*** (2 Corinthians 3:2 NKJV). The results of one's ministry prove whether he is God's teacher or not.

The false teachers were insisting that God wanted the people to focus on the old covenant, but Paul responded that the Corinthian Christians were his credential written not in ink on tablets of stone, but rather by God's Spirit on tablets of their hearts. His defense is that he was not sufficient in himself, but the Holy Spirit made him sufficient for ministry – and the transformed lives of the Corinthian Christians were the proof (verses 4-6).

Paul then goes on to show how the new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ is more glorious than the old covenant of the Law. God gave His people the Law through Moses on Mt. Sinai, and when Moses came down from the mountain, his face radiated with the glory of God. However, Paul points out that the old covenant was a ministry of death. It pointed out God's perfect standard, but no human could keep it. Since man could not keep the law, it sentenced man to death.

Paul goes on to show the church at Corinth in verses 7-11, that if glory was associated with the old covenant of death, how much more glorious the new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ is because it brings the promise of eternal life.

In verses 12-16, Paul explains that Moses wore a veil over his face because God's glory would blind the people and because this radiated glory and the old covenant would pass away. Those who followed the false teachers and clung to the old covenant of the law would not be able to see the truth and glory of the new covenant of grace that Jesus brought. However, when one turns to the Lord and embraces the new covenant of grace, the veil is lifted from their eyes and their heart, and they can see the greater glory of Christ.

In verse 17 (NKJV), Paul says, ***"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."*** Those who accept the new covenant of grace

through faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross and in the resurrection have a liberated boldness in our relationship with God. Christ did not nullify the old covenant but fulfilled it so that we can boldly approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:16). When we do this, verse 18 tells us that we are being transformed into the image of our Lord by His Spirit.

The new covenant is so much more glorious than the old covenant, and when we embrace this truth, God will use us to reach others for Him, be in our midst when we gather to worship and glorify Him and help us to grow in the likeness of His glorious Son.

BEING ADEQUATE

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 4

Max Sinclair

Have you ever felt like you were not enough? Have you ever felt not worthy of doing something or qualified enough? Almost every day that I walk into our offices, I feel an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, I feel a monster in the back of my head whisper that I am not good enough, or that I am not qualified enough. I will sit in my office and type away at devotions, or lesson plans. I will meet with this young adult or that young adult and try to push them to serve or get involved. Yet still, that voice says, "This is not enough, you are not enough." If I am a betting man, I would argue that you yourself have had this moment, a sense of inadequacy, or incompetence to one thing or another. It is a terrible feeling sometimes; it just makes you want to quit or not even try in the first place. I get it, I feel it, and that is where I spend most of my days. I read books of epic adventures and high fantasies where noble knights battle greater evil for the sole purpose of protecting what they love, and I have a hard enough time getting my devotions turned in on time. Looking at our current culture, it is hard not to see anything but being above average. "Everyone" posts above-average looks, above-average style, and an above-average frame of mind. With all of that, we begin to fall short of what society places on ourselves.

Yet, this is okay. I was never meant to be a knight in shining armor or the President of the United States. I was never meant to go to the moon or to write an award-winning novel. I was never meant to be the best, and I never will be the best. However, I know who is.

In this book, we see that the church of Corinth is still a mess. It is still fighting similar battles that it fought before, and one of those

was the competency of the apostle Paul. Some were saying that Paul was not smart enough or talented enough to have the authority that he has. I mean, the guy who wrote about two-thirds of the New Testament, has his authority being questioned. Yet, Paul does not go on a tirade on how he trained under the greatest Jewish lawyer ever giving him the equivalent of a Harvard law degree, nor does he state the number of churches he has founded, or leaders he has mentored. Instead, Paul states, ***"Such is the confidence we have through Christ before God. It is not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God. He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"*** (2 Corinthians 3:4-6 CSB). He states his own inadequacy but states God's Supremacy.

Our job as Christians is not to be good enough for God to use us. If that were so, we would never be used at all. Instead, our job as Christians is to go and share the Gospel of Christ no matter what. We are to go forth and do what is asked of us because of God's adequacy. We can because He is able. He is enough. For too long, we fight the calling of God in our life because we want something more; we need something more. What more can He give you other than the death of His Son Jesus? We need nothing more than the passion for the Gospel and the love we have for our Lord and His Gospel.

THE VEIL HAS BEEN LIFTED

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 5

John Stone

There is no moment in life more stirring than when a father walks his daughter down the aisle, lifts her veil, and presents her to the man who is to be her husband. Lifting the veil is symbolic of the permission being given by the father for the groom to know her, to love her, to really see her for the first time. They are now free to join their lives together and live as one.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul is writing to remind the Corinthian church that the Gospel he preached to them is glorious, freeing, and alive. It is so much more glorious than what he calls the old covenant of the Law, "the ministry of death." The attempt at keeping the Law never saved anyone, only condemned them. Romans 3:19-20 explains that the Law was intended to show people their sinfulness and inability to please God. We are completely inadequate through our own efforts to be righteous. Without God's intervention, we are condemned already (John 3:18). However, for the believer, there is Good News! Jeremiah 31:33 says, ***"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*** The end of verse 34 adds, ***"For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."***

God, through the work of Christ, has lifted the veil that used to blind our hearts and has made us alive by His Spirit. Instead of condemnation leading to death by a law written on stones, we have been given Christ's righteousness and are being transformed by the Spirit living inside us. What an amazing God we have! Where once

we were separated, God has now revealed Himself so we can really know Him. We can have a real relationship with the only Living God, the Creator, and the Sustainer of the universe. Psalm 46:6 says that He raises His voice, and the mountains melt! He removes kings and establishes kings (Daniel 2:21). He speaks, and the dead are brought back to life! This is our God who desires that we truly know Him and, through knowing Him, glorify, and love Him because of what He has done.

We can live today and every day with God at the center of our lives. We can dive deep into His Word. God speaks to us through the Bible so that we can understand what He is like, what He wants, and how we can please Him. We are loved by an all-powerful righteous God who desires that we know Him on a personal level. The more we allow His Word to work in us and through us by the Spirit, the more we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another until the day the veil of this life is lifted, and we see Him face to face.

TEACHABLE

LESSON SIX, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Paul opens 2 Corinthians chapter 3, by saying, ***"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?"*** Through the years as a teacher and coach, I have written numerous letters of recommendation. Suffice to say, sometimes it is easier than other times. It would have been a challenge to write one for Paul as you try to pen prison, riots, and stoning as a positive character trait. Do I mention the scene in Acts chapter 7 as Stephen is killed?

All too often, you cannot trust letters of recommendation. They just fired the "bum," but they agreed to help they get another job. The letter is a flat-out lie or kind of written in code.

As I researched the internet for words to use in a letter of recommendation, I felt the advice was to portray the person as if they have already arrived. Suggested words to describe them include: accomplished, distinguished, capable, competent, self-reliant, skilled, successful, outstanding, gifted, and knowledgeable.

I am not saying that I would not want those words describing me, but I want more. I want to be known as one who is teachable. That word was not found on the suggested lists.

In the last verse of 2 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul gives another valuable word, ***"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*** I want to be known as one who is being

transformed. It is the same word that is used in Romans 12:2, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*** I want to be as one who is teachable, growing, and renewing my mind. Superlatives might sound good, but I want to be known as one who is willing to be molded.

Later in this book, Paul writes, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"*** (2 Corinthians 5:17). I realize that when I got saved, my standing before God changed (thank you, Jesus). However, even though I am a new creation, it is a process.

Ephesians 4:23–24 speaks of this renewal and new self saying, ***"And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*** Colossians 3:10 adds, ***"And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."*** I like how it says ***"being renewed"*** and not having been renewed or having arrived.

The Christian life is a journey; it is a process. Fortunately, we do not have to walk alone as God is always with us, and we have fellow brothers and sisters who want to walk alongside us.

If I ever ask you to write a letter of recommendation for me (after you try to talk me out of it), please say he has not arrived, but he is teachable. He is trying to be transformed by God and renewed in his thinking. Say, "There is still hope for this guy."

What words describe you? Kindness, loving, gentleness, and hard-working did not make the lists either, but they sure say a lot.

LESSON SEVEN

SHINING LIGHT

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

My wife and I went out with some friends (John and Lori) for dinner. They love to scuba dive. We talked about shipwrecks, cold water, a quarry in Ohio, and the beauty of nature. They shared about diving in the ocean and seeing sharks. We also sat in awe of the colors seen in all the fish. John then said something that caught me and took my thoughts into a different direction. He said, "The beautiful colors leave as you go deeper into the ocean. The light reflects the color."

I thought it was an interesting thought. I later found an article by *Ocean Exploration and Research* entitled, *"Why are so many deep-sea animals red in color?"* The writer mentions that red light does not reach certain ocean depths. Therefore, deep-sea animals that are red, actually appear black. This makes them less visible to predators and prey.

1. Do you have any fun or scary ocean experiences? (Insert soundtrack to *Jaws)*

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We have been told that light reveals sin, but it can also reveal beauty. In 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Paul speaks of the power of light in the darkness.

As I was studying this passage, I was reminded of the prayer acronym ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication).

1. Adoration

In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul says, ***"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."*** This verse reminds me of Galatians 6:9, ***"And let us not grow weary of doing good,***

for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." It is easy and common to lose sight of the goal. We get tired, frustrated, and ineffective.

2. How does 2 Corinthians 4:1 have an element of adoration?

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3. What are some words of adoration you would use of God right now?

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God does not always give us what we deserve. That is mercy. He is often slow to anger. I am constantly awed by the fact that He knows everything about us and still wants to use us for mighty things. He wants to accomplish things through us that are bigger than us. He is awesome!

2. Confession

Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 4:2, ***"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."***

4. How should confession and repentance relate?

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5. Do you see an aspect of confession and repentance in this verse?

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3. Thanksgiving

In 2 Corinthians 4:3, he says, ***"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing."***

6. How is there an aspect of thanksgiving in this verse?

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I am awed that God saved me. I was the one wandering that He came and found. I did not deserve it. He chose me. I am humbled and thankful.

4. Supplication

In the last section of this paragraph, he says, ***"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"*** (2 Corinthians 4:4-6).

7. What should we pray about in this section?

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8. The word “light” is used some 277 times in Scripture. Why is “light” a good description for the Gospel?

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9. Sharing the Gospel involves both talk and walk. Where is talking about the Gospel taught in this passage?

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10. Where is walking out your faith implied?

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11. Which is easier for you, the talk or the walk?

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_____

12. Is there a change or next step you need to take in reaching someone you believe is lost? Who is it? What will you do? When?

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_____
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"The cross is the lightning rod of grace
that short-circuits God's wrath to Christ
so that only the light of His love remains for believers."
A.W. Tozer

LIGHT SHINES OUT OF DARKNESS

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 1

Trent Hall

"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

A quick reset. Who is God? Why am I here?

Going to school in New York, I got the chance to interact with a lot of people. Whether it was from walking down the street to riding the subway or sitting in a coffee shop, I had a choice on topics of choice or silence. This gave me a lot of opportunities to talk to people about a bunch of different things. I wish I could say I was able to share the Gospel with all of them, but that is not how it happened. However, when I was able to share my faith and hear their story, all were trying to find their purpose and who or what was their god.

It is good to do a quick reset and start where the Bible starts.
Genesis 1:1 - God is the creator of all.

Genesis 1:2 - God is with His creation.
Genesis 1:3-4 - God speaks light into existence and separates the light from the dark.

In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul is bringing the people back to these truths when he says, ***"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness.'"***

It is important for us to remember who God is. He is the all-powerful God who created all, but the story does not end there - man sins and is separated from God. Jesus being fully God took on our nature, was born, lived the perfect life without sin, and died on the cross for our sins, and beat sin and death by rising from the dead three days later.

We are to take this Gospel and proclaim it to the nations.

We all have a ministry to tell the people around us the Gospel. This ministry is not something you have created or earned, but it is by the mercy of God. Our purpose is to shine the light of the Gospel in this dark and broken world and to give glory to God in all that you do.

Reset your life and look for the opportunity to share your faith.

You know the Gospel, so share it
You know that God is working in your life, so look for it.
You know that your ministry is a mercy from God.
You know the people around you are broken and in darkness.
If you do not know an answer to a question, say, "I don't know, let me do some research and get back to you."

JESUS GOD'S LIGHT

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Gareth Volz

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Paul follows up his defense of the ministry God had given him with a presentation of his credentials to be an apostle. As transformed Corinthian believers, he explains that ministry is not easy. In verse 1 (NKJV), he states that he and his ministry partners ***"have received mercy, we do not lose heart."*** Paul did not shrink away from the constant attacks Satan brought against his ministry for God. He did not lose heart, because the task of sharing the new covenant in Christ was too important.

In verse 2, Paul says that they "have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways, and they refused to practice cunning and tamper with the Word of God." Paul had been accused of being a hypocrite, and he was saying that when he put his faith in Christ, he repented of such sins and turned away from them, devoting his life to the pursuit of godliness.

Paul then said that the Gospel he preached was given to him by the Lord, and he had not tampered with it or twisted it to profit from it, as his accusers charged. In verse 3, he says that if some do not understand his message (if our Gospel is veiled), it is because they refuse to hear and consider it (it is veiled from those who are perishing). He could only give out the message of salvation. He could not force people to accept it. Those with hardened hearts will not listen to or receive the truth of God.

We need to realize that Satan is alive and active in this world. In 1 Peter 5:8, it says, ***"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to***

devour." There is a small church I pass each Sunday on the way to the River. The sign in front of the church a few months ago read, "Pray without ceasing, because the devil preys without ceasing." When we seek to minister and share God's Word, we need to bathe it in prayer because Satan will use anything and everything he can to try and prevent people from hearing God's truth and responding to it.

This was the battle Paul fought in the power of the Holy Spirit. He did not give up because the truth of God's grace was too important. Whether he saw results or not, he faithfully shared God's Word. He left the result up to God's Holy Spirit.

We need to follow Paul's example of faithfully sharing what God has given us. We should do so in a humble manner, always pointing to Christ, and never giving up. When we do, we will surely see the results as Paul did. God will give those who are open to His Word the light of knowledge to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul was simply a messenger sent from God, who trusted in God's Spirit to do the work in the hearts of those to whom he ministered. That is our task. We need to do it faithfully without losing heart. To God, be the glory.

WIN IN THE SPIRITUAL FIRST

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ty Woznek

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

We too often forget that our vision to share the Gospel of Jesus is a spiritual battle first. We need to break through the veil if we are to gain the victory of a person coming to know Christ. Outward problems are often the symptom of an inward spiritual battle. Satan and his realm of punks actively suppress the truth of the Gospel. This is why Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6 that our "battle is not against flesh and blood."

Spiritual warfare is a polarizing topic for us as Christians. We follow one of two extremes. First, we blame everything on Satan, excusing ourselves of responsibility and building ourselves up as victims. Second, we ignore the reality the Bible teaches us, and get frustrated in dealing with external problems when the real problem is spiritual, not a lack of hard work or poor choices. When Paul describes those who are perishing as being veiled from the Gospel, he is reminding you and me that a spiritual, not merely an intellectual battle, is happening. How do we break through?

We do not.

What you and I need to do is clearly present the Gospel. God is the one who breaks through the veil. When we work hard at clearly,

plainly, passionately, and humbly presenting the Gospel, we give an opportunity for the light of the Gospel to breakthrough. God does the work, but we need to show up and speak up. For some of us, this is not an answer we like. We again ask, “How do we breakthrough?”

We do not.

Paul, in his final instructions to Timothy, gives clarity to the need of God being the One who breaks through the veil. Paul states in 2 Timothy 2:24-26, ***“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”***

God is the one who breaks through the veil. God is the one who grants repentance. Our job is to show up and speak up, all while praying that God would break through it. God is more powerful than the veil.

VEILED

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 4

Max Sinclair

When I went to college for one year, I took a Christian Worldviews Class. Our professor showed us a Vlog by Penn Jillett, the famous talking guy from the Penn and Teller magic performance. Mr. Jillett is a professed atheist, but he is a very non-combative atheist. In this Vlog, he talks about how a young man walked up to him in an airport to evangelize to him. Mr. Jillett speaks with him and politely disagrees and goes on his way. In this Vlog, he states a very earth-shattering comment, "If you have the secret to eternal life and do not share it with everyone, you are condemning everyone around you to death." This devotion is going to get very real and very pointed. I am sorry, but I am not going to pull any punches with this one because the cost of what we do is too high.

Our duty as Christians is to share the Gospel. No matter who we are or what we do, our job is to share the love of Christ with everyone around us. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-5, Paul states, ***"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."*** Too often, we keep the Gospel to ourselves, to our Growth Communities, to our families, and to our church and do not allow the ones who are broken, who are literally dying a spiritual death, go without knowing the love of Christ. We are veiling ourselves off from the world because it is too broken, or we are too scared. I am not saying that we have to be a modern-day Billy Graham that leads thousands to salvation by preaching. I

am not saying that you have to keep score of how many people you lead to Christ. I am just saying share it.

For too long, Christians have taken an apathetic view to share the Gospel with the broken world. At the time of writing this devotion, my Growth Community of Young Adult men are reading the book, *"Something Needs to Change"* by David Platt. In the book, Platt goes on to talk about an urgent spiritual need that he runs into as he watches this village burn one of their dead on a funeral pyre to release their spirit to the next life. He watches as the literal flames engulf the dead individual and now knows that the individual is going to be burning in Hell for eternity. Hell is real; Hell is not a joke. Hell is not some fable we tell kids to shape up, or you will go there. It is a real place where those who do not profess and acknowledge Christ as Lord of their life will end up.

One of the scariest and most overwhelming things to hear is that you or a loved one has cancer. It is a very scary time of uncertainty because there is no true cure to it. I have a few family members who either had or have Leukemia, and the looming thought that on any day it could come back is quite a scary thing. Yet, if you had the cure for all forms and types of cancer at any stage and yet you reserved to yourself, would you not be the most selfish and self-centered person on the planet? Millions of people in an instant could be cured of a terrible life-ending disease. Families could have peace of mind knowing that their loved ones are safe.

Yet, we are so selfish about the Gospel. We keep it to ourselves and do not allow others to see its beauty and its perfection. We have the cure to eternal death and damnation, and yet we do not even share it with others. We sit and allow ourselves to be consumed by a consumeristic church structure where it only benefits the individual. We say things like Jesus is our "personal" Lord and Savior. I am

sorry, but we are so wrong. Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He did not die for just you or me, he died for the sins of the world, and our job is to share that with others by serving others, by praying for others, and by loving others.

I love our church and the congregants that make up the body of it, but I am sorry that what I have to say may offend you, but if you do not share the Gospel with others, do you believe that it has the ability to transform lives? Do you truly believe that it is the cure for a life without a relationship to Him? There should be a burning desire to share the Gospel with others, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Something needs to change in our walk with Christ. Something needs to take priority for us to truly grasp that it is our duty to proclaim the Gospel, ***"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."***

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 5

Pat Bedell

I am sure everyone can relate to a time in their life when we experienced or witnessed something extraordinary. It might have been winning a game by one point, beating an opponent that far outranked you, or beating cancer. During any of those events that you had been a part of, there was a point of time in that battle when you felt defeated, wanted to throw in the towel, and wanted to do nothing but "let it be." The end of the story that you thought you had predicted was proven wrong when you became victorious. We have a thing or two to learn about Paul in 2 Corinthians.

Paul preached his Gospel boldly. When Paul thought about the purpose of his calling, it gave him the heart to face all his difficulties. We often lose heart because we do not consider how great a calling God gives us in Jesus. Many of us could think that Paul was a conceited know-it-all while he was proclaiming his Gospel. However, he goes on to talk about mercy. He knew his calling in ministry was not by his own works, but by mercy. Mercy is so undeserved. Paul also preached his Gospel with humility and honor.

Paul was a true man of God. Anyone could look at his Gospel and what he did in his ministry and see that they could honestly say that it was full of integrity. There was nothing hidden or watered down in his Gospel. It was the raw truth. There was nothing added or taken away.

My favorite part of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 is verse 6 (NIV), ***"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory***

displayed in the face of Christ." God gives us the light of knowing God's Word, and we have the responsibility and calling to get it out to others. He "shined His light in" so that we could "shine His light out."

This reminded me of a movie called *"Coach Carter."* The plot of the movie takes place in a very rough part of town where a majority of minors were destined to be in jail or dead. Coach Carter disciplined these young men and gave them extreme choices to become better men. In a pinnacle point of the movie, a student stood up after a traumatic event happened in his life and quoted Marianne Williamson:

> "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

If we implemented this principle of letting our light shine without fear, the kingdom of God could thrive beyond our own understanding and likewise allow those around us to do the same.

FOCUS

LESSON SEVEN, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Noble Baird

I have had glasses for the majority of my life. The first time I needed them was back in elementary school. I can remember going to the eye doctor. I would sit in the stiff upright chair as the doctor would bring this big crane over to my eyes, and I would look through two little holes. For what felt like an eternity after, the doctor would ask which lens was better to see through using a set of numbers. He would begin by saying, "One or two, two or three, and three or four?" Eventually, through this crazy mathematical process, I would be able to see clear as day!

In 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul is writing about the most important message ever shared to the world, the Gospel of Christ. He begins in verses 1-6, writing, ***"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."***

Paul is reminding the church in Corinth of the power and importance of the Gospel. He writes how it can pierce the darkness and how it

is solely through this Gospel message of Christ through which we can have access to God. Yet, in verse five, Paul gives a reminder and a refocus. He writes, ***"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord."*** Read that again — what an incredible reminder for our daily lives.

Today, I simply want to encourage you and maybe help you refocus as Paul helped me. As time goes on, our vision can get blurry, and we are not able to see as clearly as we used to. However, when we go to the eye doctor, they help us refocus and see more clearly. Paul tells us Who we proclaim, Jesus. At times, we can get distracted by the things of this world: our jobs, school, social media, or fill in the blank. Yet, when we refocus our vision, we remember the incredible darkness piercing light, and life-giving power of Jesus Christ. This helps us remember that our goal and our focus as followers of Christ is to proclaim Him. It is not about ourselves, but our amazing Savior!

LESSON EIGHT

JARS OF CLAY

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-18

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I am quite sure you have heard the saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." It can relate in so many ways. Maybe you heard a different version of it:

"All that glitters is not gold."
"Looks can be deceiving."
"Don't just scratch the surface."
"Things aren't always as they seem."
"Appearances are often misleading."

Judging a book by its cover can be the experience of expecting something great, only to be disappointed. I remember watching kids take a big bite into a caramel apple that was actually a caramel-covered onion. The facial expressions are priceless. I have also seen a guy pull out a small box to give to his girlfriend. Her facial expression was not as priceless as she opened the box and found earrings.

1. When have you expected something special, only to be disappointed?

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The normal situation of falsely judging a book by its cover is when we were not expecting much and got surprised by awesomeness. I remember hearing the audience as Susan Boyle walked on stage at *Britain's Got Talent.* I was hoping everyone would be kind to her. When she started singing, I got goosebumps. It was fabulous. The audience went silent in amazement and then went crazy. It is one of the crowning moments for the show.

2. When have you had your expectations pleasantly surprised?

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Paul talks about how "looks can be deceiving" in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, ***"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you."***

3. What is meant by ***"jars of clay?"***

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4. What is the ***"treasure?"***

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5. How does Paul describe the Christian life?

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6. Why are we to live like this?

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Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 4:13-15, saying, ***"Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."***

7. People often say that they "witness" by the way they live. What does this passage say about believing?

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Walk and talk are both needed in witnessing. Paul says he has something worth living for and sharing. He also described this reality in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, ***"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."***

8. What is God's promise to followers of Christ?

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9. What does it take to be a follower of Christ?

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Paul closes that chapter by saying, ***"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal"*** (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

In Galatians 6:9, Paul also told that audience not to lose heart, ***"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up."***

10. Why might believers ***"lose heart?"***

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11. What is the cure?

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As he closes this chapter, Paul reminds us, "Things aren't always as they seem." There are things that are seen and things that are not seen. We need to keep a proper perspective.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin

that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."
Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)

TREASURE IN CLAY JARS

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 1

Debbie Gabbara

My daughter loves pottery. Years ago, at an art show, she found a potter who had given us both an appreciation for handcrafted art. When my daughter first discovered the world of pottery, she bought a couple of small pieces. That night, when she got home, we talked about the art show as she revealed her treasures. The artist is an incredible craftsman; over the years we have both collected many beautiful pieces. He made the canisters that I use and also the most unique teapot that I have ever seen. They look beautiful on my kitchen counter and remind me of the wonderful times my daughter and I have had together wandering through the potter's booth and thoughtfully choosing something special to bring home.

Like so much in life, pottery is fragile and can easily be broken. The lid for one my canisters was dropped on the day when I was cleaning it and now has a chip in the top. I do not think anyone notices the flaw, but I know it is there and always turn it to the back when I see it.

Did you know that God is called a potter? Isaiah 64:8 (NLT) says, ***"And yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand."*** God is the potter and we are the clay. Think about that. The God of the universe formed each of us, we are the work of His hands.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NLT), we read, ***"We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves."***

In 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to our bodies as clay jars. There, God's Word tells us that our fragile earthly bodies will waste away, yet because of the power of God, our spirits are being renewed day by day. Like that canister lid, we all have some broken and flawed areas in our lives. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness of life. When we are saved through faith and begin a relationship with Him, God no longer sees our sin but sees us as filled with the treasure of the Gospel. One day all believers will be completely renewed and free of our flaws and troubles. So, fix your gaze on Jesus and let your light shine for Him!

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NLT), we read, ***"That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever."***

AFFLICTED

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 2

Mark O'Connor

Afflicted. It is a word that we can relate to all too well right now. It is currently early in May of 2020. We are amid a global pandemic. Our adversary is Covid-19. Along with many in our country and the rest of the world, Michiganders are being asked to say home. Our friends, loved ones, and even ourselves are being afflicted with and by this virus. I can say for our family this has been a mix of highs and lows. There are good days and bad days. As we live in what before 2020 only could have been imagined by most of us as a science fiction movie, I find myself thinking of how good we have it and what it means for our faith.

I have had students and adults alike ask how this could happen if God is there. The simple fact is that God never promised our lives would be without challenges and affliction. Psalm chapter 34 tells us that many are the affliction of the righteous man. Psalm 34:19 says, ***"Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all."***

We are not going to have a life that is just sunshine and rainbows at all times. The CSB uses the word adversities instead of an affliction. Imagine your favorite movie where the plot had no adversity. The Marvel movies would be quite lame if it were not for the villain and adversity they face and overcome. One of my favorite sports movies is Miracle on Ice. It tells the story of the US hockey teams' Olympic victory over the Soviet Union. If the Soviets had not dominated and were not seen as the villain that could not be defeated, the movie would never have been made and there would be no amazing story to be told.

So it is with us. The story of our walk with the Lord would not be anything to talk about, let alone share with others, were it not for our adversities. We are good. We will get by. Paul reaffirms this to us in Romans 5:3-4, ***"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."***

We are to rejoice in suffering. It builds up our character and maturity in Christ. These are the things we will need to pursue the mission we are given to share the Gospel to those who do not yet know Him. James tells us to count it joy when we face trials and tribulations. It is ok if you are going through some stuff. We will be alright. You will, if you rely on Jesus, get through it because as Paul goes on to tell us, no pain or suffering can outweigh the glory that will be revealed to us in the end.

Romans 8:18 adds, ***"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."***

FRAGILE: IN HIS CARE

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 3

Holly Boston

When my son left home to attend the Naval Academy, my life as Tyler's mom changed overnight. As a Plebe, he was allowed minimal contact with us and I struggled. I decided that the Navy would not interfere with me blessing my son on his birthday. I went to Sam's Club, bought him a birthday cake, and marched over to the UPS Store. One look from the clerk removed all confidence I had that Tyler would ever receive his cake in one piece. I realized a label reading: "Fragile: Handle with Care" would never be sufficient. Three days later, I received word that the cake arrived without a blemish and Tyler enjoyed a piece promptly after watching his superiors eat the rest.

If you have ever received an online purchase, you are acutely aware of the meticulous time and energy required to package your treasure. The perfectly molded pieces of Styrofoam that surrounded each piece of the arbor we ordered steadied each piece and prevented any breakage as it made its way to our home. Many young people earn a degree in the Science of Packaging every year to ensure that you receive your treasures unscathed.

As I prepared to write this devotion, I was reminded once again that God's ways are so much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8). In 2 Corinthians 4:7, we read, ***"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."***

While we choose the sturdiest box with the best bubble wrap and peanuts to protect against any rough handling, God uses the weakest

container (vessel) for his Treasure and designs large bumps and potholes as part of the road home. Believer, the day God revealed to you your need of a Savior; and you invited Him into your weak heart, you received the Treasure. Within your weak body resides the Holy Spirit and the promise to deliver you safely home (2 Peter 3:13).

Why would God choose such a flimsy container for such a hard journey? Why would God entrust a vessel carried by the desires of our flesh, susceptible to temptations and attacks by an enemy, and subject to the beatings of this world? I discovered two truths. First, without our weak vessels, we would never experience the value of the Treasure we carry. When a spouse chooses to fight for their marriage instead of pursuing "happiness," she experiences the power of her Treasure. When a businessman chooses not to compromise, he experiences divine prosperity. When an addict chooses sobriety, he experiences freedom in Christ. The humbling detours in our journey home are divinely designed to enable us to experience and appreciate all that our Treasure offers.

The second truth is found in this beautiful statement made by Warren Wiersbe, "Sometimes God permits our vessels to be jarred so that some of the treasure will spill out and enrich others."

Our Treasure is not meant to be hidden. The strength, peace, joy, and provision we experience from a dependent walk with Christ is meant to be shared. We are called to comfort with the comfort we receive (2 Corinthians 1:3), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:1), and strengthen with the strength we receive (Proverbs 27:17). In short, it is our weakness that is the vehicle by which we experience our Treasure, the Holy Spirit, and build His Kingdom.

Last week, I received a late birthday card. It looked like it had been through a meat grinder. The short journey from the other side of

Clarkston resulted in a filthy white envelope with a rip that exposed its contents. I opened it and found that though it had obviously been through a lot, the card was perfect and carried with it sweet words of love and encouragement. What a picture of our journey with Christ! Though the road is rough and our vessel is weak, the Postmaster promises to bring us home. We will arrive perfectly in Christ and our homecoming will be in His perfect time.

Our shipping label reads: “Fragile: In His (All-sufficient) Care”

DREAMS

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 4

Roger Allen

I had a dream. This is not unusual for me for I have dreams both day and night. My dreams are vivid and compelling, so much so, I actually enjoy them. In most cases, I am the hero in the storyline, or at least play the part of a co-worker for good. However, through most of them, there is a thread of fear and dread throughout the dream. They start out generically the same until a sense of foreboding enters into them and I begin to sense danger. What sets this particular dream apart, was the lack of anxiety or fear I typically have. In it, I see myself selling all my worldly belongings and traveling the world preaching the Gospel. Compelled by a force much greater than myself, I easily relented to His urging. In the dream, my wife and I travel to countries that are closed off to Christian doctrine. Freely and without fear, we preach the Good News. Even with the full realization of what it could cost us, we were fully invested.

John Piper has said, “Authentic discipleship may exact from you the highest price relationally and the highest price physically.”

I fear that in America, we truly do not understand what a Spirit-filled life may bring us. In fact, I believe if you asked many Christians what a Spirit-filled life looks like, they would describe one of abundance and ease. Having a lack of understanding of what Jesus has asked allows the culture to determine the cost. Yet, when we actually study the Word, we find something very different from the cultural bias. For the next few moments, I would like to introduce to you the truth of what Jesus has asked of us. Please read Luke 14:26-33, in there we find Jesus speaking to the multitudes that were there. He tells them if they love their mother, father, wife, children, and yes, themselves

more than Him, they cannot be His disciple. He goes further by saying ***"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."*** Using the cruelest form of capital punishment to help those understand, He makes it quite clear there is an enormous cost to following Him. He once again asks them to renounce all in order to be His disciple. For many, the cost is too much and they go away.

Matthew 8:20 says, ***"And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'"***

Throughout His ministry, Jesus never pulled any punches. He told it like it was. He pointed out the concept of having no place to lay His (their) head, and for all intents homelessness, with no promise of worldly abundance. He told it the way it was. Explaining that persecution was coming their way if they followed Him, He shot straight from the hip (John 15:20). Yet, we do see through Scripture there were those who would pick up their cross and follow Jesus. Counting the cost, they freely gave their lives as a disciple of Christ. With great joy, they endured their trials and tribulations just as Jesus did. Withstanding the onslaught of the political and religious leaders of the day and staying firm in their faith, they became martyrs.

Here in America, this is not a positive narrative. We live in the lap of luxury and still want more. Culturally speaking, we cry persecution the moment that a law is passed and we disagree with it. Yet, as hard as it may seem to let go of worldly distractions, we have been given the very power to do so through Him. If we have embraced the very words of Jesus and have put our faith in Him, the Holy Spirit lives within us. Setting aside those things of temporal value, we pursue a higher calling and refute the lust of the flesh. Leaving the world behind, we seek to delight in Him, and not the present age. Our

treasure being Heaven, we seek and take pleasure in the knowledge of our Savior.

As I look back on my dream, I reflected on the words of Paul the apostle. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 about what it should look like if we are in Christ and are being led by the Holy Spirit. Likened to earthen vessels, we are prone to breakage and are fragile in so many ways. Yet, because of our faith in Christ, we now possess the power of God through the Holy Spirit and can withstand things we could only dream about. The strength to look adversity in the face and receive it as a blessing truly speaks to the power of the Gospel. Trials, tribulations, and afflictions are part of being in Christ and should bring us joy knowing we share in the same persecution that Jesus did. That the servant should share in the same trials as the master is an assurance of who we belong to. Just like Paul, the power that raised Christ from the dead now lives in us and should bring us joy. Our fears of missing what the world has to offer should be found wanting in the light of the Gospel.

Paul's encouraging words of how our outer self is wasting away, and our inner self is being renewed daily, should give us strength and comfort that we will be eternally rewarded. The truth is available to all who call Jesus Lord and Savior and share in His redemption. So, do not fear the loss of worldly pleasure, for it only has temporal value and possesses negative eternal consequences that are irrevocable.

Finally, 1 John 2:15-17 says, ***"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life - is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."***

WALK AND TALK

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

One phrase jumps out to most as we read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, ***"Treasure in jars of clay."*** That creates a great image in our minds and reminds many of the award-winning songs by the group Jars of Clay: *"Flood, Can't Erase It, I Need You, Fly, and Valley Song (Sing of Your Mercy)."* This is a great direction, but something else caught my attention. Verse 13 says, ***"Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak."***

I was challenged how this verse twice says that if you believe, you speak. If you really believe in something, it is hard to stay quiet. When someone misspeaks on something, the teacher in me wants to jump in and correct them. Sometimes I weigh out whether it is important or not and if I have earned the right to speak into their life. However, if it is important, I need to speak. If it is life-threatening, I cannot stay quiet. If it could affect "forever," how can I stay quiet?

I used to love the quote by Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." I appreciated how he challenged people to walk the talk. I have seen too many people who could talk "Christianese," but lived a life focused on themselves. However, I have also seen too many people "chicken-out" of talking by saying that they witnessed by their lifestyle. I appreciate a godly lifestyle, but we need to be willing to speak when the opportunity is presented.

Witnessing is not about our walk "or" our talk; it is about our walk "and" our talk. In 1 Peter 3:15, we read, ***"But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to***

anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." Your ***"holy"*** life should be married to your words as you ***"make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."***

When we "walk this way," people will ask, "Why?" We need to direct them to Jesus!

LOOK TO THINGS UNSEEN

LESSON EIGHT, DEVOTION 6

Patrick Bicknell

I like to listen to pastor J.D. Greear. During one of his sermons, he gave an illustration of a man who won the lotto and received a multi-million-dollar check. Immediately he got in his car and started driving to the bank to cash the check. On his way there, his car gets a flat tire. He then asked, "Do you think the man here threw a fit and got mad at his current situation?" Of course not, because he was on the way to go cash a check that would change his life forever. His current situation did not affect him as much in light of what he was going to get. This is an illustration of our spiritual life, and what Paul talks about here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4.

Throughout these verses, Paul gives circumstances that may affect us, persecution, affliction, being struck down, and all sorts of despair. He talks about all these things that will affect us in this world but gives us some incredible encouragement at the end of these verses that tie to my opening illustration. Paul begins verse 16, saying, ***"So we do not lose heart."*** After describing to his readers what we are going to face as followers of Christ, he gives us the assurance that we can find in God.

If you have surrendered to Jesus, and accepted His free gift of grace and called Him your Lord and Savior, then we look to the things unseen. Paul says that the light, momentary, affliction that we face in this life is nothing in comparison to the glory that we will receive when we come into His kingdom and stand face to face with the God of the universe. We cannot escape the troubles of this life, due to our sin we live in a fallen, broken world. Suffering is inevitable, it is real and affects all of us. We face troubles big and small and go through

hardships that feel like they are never-ending. However, these do not define us, they do not control our lives.

As followers of Christ, we do not seek the things of this world for hope. It is not found in job security, health, or wealth. Our hope is found in Christ, He has finished the work, and when this life is over we will be with Him in Heaven for all of eternity. So just like the man who did not allow his flat tire to make him lose sight on what he was going to get when he cashed his check, we also do not allow the troubles of this world to take our eyes off of the eternal glory that we will receive one day.

LESSON NINE

HOME

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-10

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Idioms can be thought-provoking. There is a difference between owning a house and having a home. Some idioms for home are:

"Home sweet home"
"Home is where the heart is"
"Charity begins at home"
"A man's home is his castle"
"Home is where you hang your hat"

Even though "there's no place like home," the average person moves close to twelve times in their lifetime *(United States Census Bureau).*

1. How many times have you moved in your life? Where?

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2. Where do you call "home?"

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Paul spends quite a few lines describing our earthly home and a heavenly home. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, he says, ***"For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee."***

3. In chapter 4, Paul used the phrase “jars of clay.” What synonyms are used in this paragraph?

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4. With what is it contrasted?

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He continues in 2 Corinthians 5:6-9, ***“So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.”***

5. How does Paul’s eternal outlook affect his daily life?

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6. What was the goal (***“aim”***) of Paul’s life?

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Paul also stated his goal elsewhere:

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

"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." Galatians 1:10

"So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Colossians 1:10

7. How would you describe the goal of your life?

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Paul closes this section in 2 Corinthians 5:10, saying, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."***

8. How can judgment be a positive aspect?

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Romans 14:10 also mentions judgment, ***"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."***

Sometimes "judges" are chosen to pick out the winning entry or award fantastic work. The word judgment can imply condemnation or commendation. Paul refers to the ***"judgment seat of Christ."***

Don Stewart wrote, "Greek, like English, uses the word 'judge' in two senses. One sense in condemnation, while the other sense is the

giving out of rewards. The Bible says unbelievers will be judged in the first sense - condemnation, while believers will be judged in the other sense - rewards."

There are two different judgments. The first one is called the Great White Throne Judgment. Revelation 20:11-15 describes the scene, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."***

9. What was the outcome for these people?

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Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV) reminds us how we will respond before Jesus (for some it will be too late), ***"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."***

The other "judgment" is referred to as the Bema Seat Judgment or the Believer's Judgment. Matthew 12:36-37 says, ***"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*** Matthew 16:27 adds, ***"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."***

10. What does this look like to you?

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Romans 8:1 is comforting, ***"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."***

The difference is Jesus. Those who ignored or denied Him are condemned, but His followers (those who accepted the free gift by faith) are commended, and some passages even refer to crowns. John 5:28-29 describes both scenarios, ***"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."*** Matthew 25:46 is the last verse of that chapter saying, ***"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."***

11. What are the two judgments and who are present at each?

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12. How is it determined who goes where?

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13. Even though the believer's judgment does not lead to Hell or the Lake of Fire, how should he live and why?

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"If you want to see what judgment looks like,
go to the cross.
If you want to see what love looks like,
go to the cross."

D. A. Carson

THE REASON

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 1

Sierra Combs

I am sitting down to write today's devotion in my house, where I have spent almost every minute of every day for just about the last two months. There is a global pandemic going on and we are in quarantine. I pray that by the time this goes to print we will be able to go out and see family and friends, gather for church, and get on with our lives, but for now this is reality. It is a hard reality for so many. There is so much uncertainty and fear. Hundreds, and even thousands, of lives have been lost along with millions of jobs and dreams. This has been a devastating time. I have certainly gotten wrapped up in the emotions. I have found myself fearful for the health of my family, and anxious about the possibility of losing my job. What if we cannot pay our bills? What if we will never see certain friends or family again? What if? I am sure that you can fill in the blank with your own fears you remember from the time or maybe even are still feeling in the after-effects.

In times where it seems like everything is falling apart, we often find ourselves asking, "Why Lord?" I wish I could answer that in one quick and easy devotion, but I cannot. However, every time I get caught up in the chaos of the world and end up at that question there is a song that comes to my mind that always puts me back on track. It is called *"The Reason for the World"* by Matthew West.

There are no words in times like these
When tears don't hide the tragedies
And all you want is a reason for the world
No comfort in the greeting card
'Cause God is good but life's still hard

And your heart just wants a reason for the world
But maybe the reason for the pain
Is so that we would pray for strength
And maybe the reason for the strength
Is so that we would not lose hope
And maybe the reason for all hope
Is so that we could face the world
And the reason for the world
Is to make us long for home.

I just love that flow of thought. Maybe the reason for the world is to make us long for home. It is not our earthly home, but our true home that awaits us with the Lord in Heaven. It can be so easy to get wrapped up in our temporary life but for those of us who know the Lord as Savior, this is just the waiting room to eternal life, where there will be no more pain and sorrow. The apostle Paul was certainly no stranger to suffering, having endured much opposition and persecution in his lifetime. Yet he counted it as joy and used his experiences to help and encourage his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-2 (NLT), he touches on our lives, both the temporal and the eternal. ***"For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing."*** I love how Eugene Peterson paraphrases the following few verses in The Message: "Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit

of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less."

God has given us a beautiful world, filled with wonderful people and things. It is also a fallen world filled with sin, trial, tribulation, and sorrow. We tend to float back and forth in a strange balance. Whichever place you find yourself in now, remember and reflect on the hope that we have through Jesus and in what He has prepared for us. While we wait, our mission as Paul writes in verse 9 remains: ***"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him."***

GLAMPING

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Ryan Story

There is something called “glamping.” Glamping is a combination of the words “glamorous” and “camping.” Glamping is the style of camping with amenities and, in some cases, resort-style services not usually associated with “traditional” camping. While I love the aspect of camping in the traditional sense of sleeping on the ground in a tent, there is much allure to the idea of camping with a Ritz Carlton feel to it.

Reading the Bible can be tough. I pray if you feel you are gifted at understanding the Bible you are using those gifts to help someone grow in their walk rather than sit on the sidelines scoffing at people. There is the difficulty of understanding all the theology behind everything, placing everything together in chronological order, and then there is the whole aspect of needing to grow in your personal relationship with Jesus and be molded by the Spirit of God to understand and apply it all. The first ten verses in 2 Corinthians chapter five are tough. The part that makes this section difficult is we do not read our Bibles in the original language (except that one theological student who is fluent in Koine Greek reading this ready to send me a pointed email). Because of this language barrier, we miss an amazing golden nugget in the Bible.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-2, we read, ***“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.”***

In this section, Paul is teaching us that our future bodies will look different in Heaven. God especially makes these new bodies to suit us for the environment of eternity and Heaven. Our current bodies resemble the world we live in now, temporary. Our resurrected bodies will not be like tents that can be destroyed, they will resemble the eternal that is all around us in the heavens.

I just finished a massive study of the Gospel of John. In chapter 14 verse 2, Jesus says, ***"In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"***

If we do a bit of a word study with the ancient Greek, the word used for rooms would be "dwelling place." So, the Father's house that has many places to dwell, each dwelling place would simply be translated into what we know as a mansion. If we add this idea to the one we find in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, in regards to our earthy dwelling is that of a tent, that is some serious eternal glamping,

This mansion from God, this ***"house not made with hands"*** that is ***"eternal in the heavens"*** will be a glorious place to stay. Imagine going from living a life where a tent was your home to living eternity in a mansion. When you think of it that way, no wonder we should be ***"longing to put on our heavenly dwelling."*** The most amazing thing about our new eternal abode is right now Jesus has been preparing that place for us since He ascended into Heaven.

I do not know how hardcore you are about camping, but I am ready for some glamping with Jesus when my time comes.

THE DASH

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 3

Donna Fox

At a funeral, I once heard a poem entitled *"The Dash"* by Linda Ellis. If you look at a tombstone, you see the date of birth, and the date of death, with a dash in between. The idea behind the poem is, "What are you doing with your 'dash?'"

In the grand scheme of things, we only have a short time here on Earth. It seems so long because we do not have anything else to compare it to. However, when you think about eternity, this is but a small blip on the line of time. So how are you spending your 'dash?' Are you busy running kids to school sports? Are you busy working because you want that promotion? Does the TV and Facebook get a bigger chunk of your time than reading the Bible? How about your neighbor, when is the last time you checked in on him since his wife passed, his child got sick, or he lost his job?

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, we read about our earthly bodies and how this is all temporary compared to eternity. We pick up in verse 9, ***"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."***

That should cause each and every one of us to evaluate how we spend our time here on Earth. We will ***"receive what is due."*** How scary is that?

We should not be living for ourselves and our worldly desires, but as Christ said in Matthew chapter 28 (The Great Commission),

spreading the Gospel and glorifying God in all we say and do. That is not to say we should not have kids in sports, try to better ourselves at work, or use Social Media. However, in all that we do, we need to strive to find opportunities to share our testimony and show our love for Jesus. Is what you are doing and saying glorifying God?

Colossians 1:10 adds to this thought, ***"So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."*** How do we please God and glorify Him? Be in the Word, seek to have a deeper relationship with Him each day, look for opportunities He presents each day. For instance, when you are at your child's sporting event, or with a co-worker, strike up a conversation. If the opportunity presents itself to talk about church or a "Jesus moment," seize the opportunity and share the Gospel and your relationship with Him. It is that easy! God will put the people in your path, you just need to be Christ-minded and open your eyes to see the opportunity.

"How can we glorify Him?
God is most glorified
when we are most satisfied in Him."
John Piper

Present-day actions have eternal consequences. What are you doing with your "dash?"

WALK OF FAITH

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8-9

This is one of every Christian's favorite passages. We realize we have been ***"saved through faith."*** The only thing we did was sin, which made us a candidate for salvation. We could not buy it, earn it, or intellectually create it. It is through faith.

Martin Luther is one of the most outspoken advocates of salvation through faith in all of history. He said, "It is faith—without good works and prior to good works—that takes us to heaven. We come to God through faith alone." He wrote against the abuse of the Church in trying to manipulate people into thinking they owned the rights to salvation. It was not and is not theirs to sell or hold over one's head. It is a ***"gift of God."***

I always like to see what the great preacher Charles Spurgeon said on any topic. Concerning salvation by faith, he said, "The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation."

However, 2 Corinthians 5:7 takes it a step further. Not only are we saved by faith, but we live and grow by faith. Paul said, ***"For we walk by faith, not by sight."*** The tendency can be to think we are saved by faith but grow by works. This falls on our own understanding and sight and is very limited. We are to ***"walk by faith."***

The concept was not created by Paul. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, ***"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."*** A lot of us may "know" those verses, but do we realize it involves action without personal understanding. This means I am not in control.

Paul also said the same thing in Romans 1:17, ***"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"*** In Hebrews 11:1, the author (possibly Paul) said, ***"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** I love how the philosopher Augustine said it, "Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand."

Finally, R. C. Sproul wrote, "The issue of faith is not so much whether we believe in God, but whether we believe the God we believe in." I had to read the quote several times. Basically, we say we believe in God, but do we trust Him and obey Him immediately? Take God at His word and move forward toward Him and for Him. Walk by faith. Live by faith.

I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 5

Larry Gabbara

It is so exciting to open your Bible and read 2 Corinthians 5:1 (NLT), ***"For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands."***

God Himself prepared a new body for us! There will come a time while we are here on Earth that our bodies start to break down, a time when we will long to join God. If we have accepted Christ as Savior, God gives us this wondrous gift of eternity with Him. God sent His Son to Earth to absolve all of our sins and to make a way for believers to have eternal life in Heaven with Him.

In 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, we continue to read, ***"So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."***

Our life here on Earth is temporary, we are here to serve God, and to prepare ourselves for His kingdom. While we are in our human bodies here on Earth, sin and the devil are our everyday enemies.

Luke 23:42-43 adds, ***"And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'"***

Jesus makes it abundantly clear, that when we die and are out of our earthly bodies, we will be in the presence of God. Just like the song

"I Can Only Imagine" says, I can only imagine what it will be like to fellowship and worship for all of eternity with the Lord. We will also be with all the other believers, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."***

The Lord has work for us all to do, work that He planned just for us. We have a great responsibility as servants of the Lord. We are all to love God and others. We need to help spread the Word of the Lord to others, do what is good and honorable.

My question to you is are you ready for eternity?

"NO PLACE LIKE HOME"

LESSON NINE, DEVOTION 6

Taylor McCullough

"There's no place like home." There is a good chance you have heard, or even used this phrase from the movie, *"The Wizard of Oz."* Your home should provide you with comfort, rest, and a place of belonging. It should be a place where you can go for shelter. If this home was taken away, where would you go?

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, we read, ***"For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee."***

As Christians, we have hope for an eternal home. It is a home that is far greater than what we as humans could imagine or produce ourselves. It is one that was created and prepared for us by God. This heavenly home is unthinkably better than this earthly dwelling. It is one that could not be taken away due to a lack of finances. It cannot be destroyed, or even touched by any storm, fire, or earthquake. We could not build this perfect home with our own hands. Neither is it one that we could earn.

If Jesus is our Savior, we can be of good courage while here on Earth. We can have peace in knowing where we will be spending

eternity after we die. We can look forward to being in our final home, with the Lord. We will be residing in the place that the Lord has prepared for us, and that does not require constant payments to keep our residency. Jesus paid the price, and I am beyond thankful that He has. I could never earn salvation, or eternity in paradise with the Lord based on my actions.

In 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, Paul continues, ***"So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."***

I will rejoice in knowing that one day, I will be at home with the Lord.

LESSON TEN

AMBASSADOR

2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Eugene Byrne shares a historical joke popular during the 1970s about the Christmas wish-lists of three ambassadors. He wrote, "One year just before Christmas, a disc jockey on a local radio station in Washington DC decided that it would be a nice idea to phone up the ambassadors from various countries in the U.S. capital and ask them what they were asking for Christmas.

When he took the call, the British ambassador, a polished and professional diplomat, saw the question as one fraught with pitfalls – he could appear ostentatious, or even sound like he was open to bribes – so he decided to play it as safe as possible. 'Oh, I really don't want much at all,' he said. 'I'll be very happy with some aftershave and a new pair of slippers.'

Christmas morning came around, and the DJ was on the air doing his show: 'We called the French ambassador, and he said his Christmas wish is for peace and goodwill to all men. The Chinese ambassador, he wants an end to hunger and disease throughout the world. The British ambassador wants aftershave and slippers.'"

1. Bryan Hurt wrote a book entitled, "Everyone Wants to be Ambassador to France." Where would you like to be the ambassador?

_____

_____

_____

"Ambassador" has been defined as an accredited diplomat sent by a country as its official representative to a foreign country.

2. How does this definition relate to Christianity?

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_____

In 2 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul refers to believers as ambassadors for Christ. However, before he calls us ambassadors, he defends his message by reminding the church of their salvation and calling.

In 2 Corinthians 5:11-15, he says, ***"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."***

3. What principles in this paragraph can relate to being an ambassador?

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_____

4. How could or should we be out of our minds (***"beside ourselves"***) for Christ?

_____

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5. What should "control" us? How?

_____

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_____

In 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, he continues, ***"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."***

6. What does God do through Christ?

_____

_____

_____

7. What does God do through us?

_____

_____

_____

8. What does God do for us?

_____

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_____

Paul uses a form of the word "reconciliation" five times in this paragraph. Reconciliation is "the process of making two people or

groups of people friendly again after they have argued seriously or fought and kept apart from each other" *(Cambridge Dictionary).*

9. How does this definition relate to Christianity?

_____
_____
_____

10. What does this passage say about reconciliation?

_____
_____
_____

In the middle of this section on reconciliation, Paul says, ***"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ."***

11. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ?

_____
_____
_____

12. God wants us to represent Him to all people. Who has He called you to talk to?

_____
_____
_____

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17

COMPELLED

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 1

John Rigg

Have you ever wondered why people do what they do? Often when I see people doing things that appear extreme or far from the ordinary, I cannot help but ask the question, "Why would you want to do that?" Sword swallowers fall in this category of people for me. What is it that compels a person to take a long, sharp, solid steel blade and pass it down through their throat and into their gullet, with the hope that nothing seriously goes wrong? What makes a person want to do such a thing?

I suppose that if I were living in the first century, I would look at the Apostle Paul much in the same way that I do sword swallowers. Paul's love for people and his persistence in spreading the Gospel with total disregard for his own safety could only be viewed as extreme and far from ordinary. Evidently, Paul sensed others having this opinion of him as well because he addresses this in his letter to the church at Corinth, ***"If we are 'out of our mind,' as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you"*** (2 Corinthians 5:13 NIV).

When we see others acting in ways that seem a little crazy or out of the ordinary, we want to know why. It does not matter if they are the Apostle Paul or sword swallowers, we want to know what compels them to do what they do.

Notice Paul does not try to make a case for his sanity here. He is simply stating that his actions were not self-serving. He was either acting on behalf of God or was dedicated to the service of others.

So, what exactly drove them to such radical behavior? The answer is at the start of 2 Corinthians 5:14 (NIV), ***"For Christ's love compels***

us." It was Christ's love that compelled Paul and the others to act in such an extreme manner!

The passage continues, ***"Because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again"*** (2 Corinthians 5:14–15 NIV).

They were so convinced that God had shown His love for them through the substitutionary death of His Own Son for the forgiveness of sin, that they were compelled to live a different life! Their lives would no longer be lived out for their own desires but the desires of the One who died for them and was raised again!

Even today, just as in Paul's day, the world thinks you are a little crazy if you are compelled to live for Jesus and not yourself. Certainly, something amazing happens to the spirit of someone who is convinced of the love that Christ has for them.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV), we read, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"***

I may never understand why the sword swallower is compelled to do what he does, but I certainly must remember what should compel me to live for Him and those He loves!

PERSUADE

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

As we look at 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, there are classic passages that jump out at us. First, is the beautiful verse 17, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** I love the concepts of grace, forgiveness, and a fresh start. Not only are we in Christ, but He is in us. The Holy Spirit guides, convicts, and encourages us.

Verse 20 also has a familiar aspect to it, ***"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."*** As ***"ambassadors for Christ,"*** we represent Him and speak on His behalf what He would want to be stated. It is a fascinating image.

Because of those two passages, verse 11 makes a lot of sense and can be very challenging, ***"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience."*** We are a ***"new creation"*** in Christ and represent Him as ***"ambassadors."*** Therefore, we strive to ***"persuade others"*** for and toward Him.

It is important for us to understand the Gospel, God's Word, and some philosophical thoughts. We are not called to fight or argue, but there is to be an element where we ***"persuade others."***

Acts 17:4 says, ***"And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women."*** Acts 18:4 adds, ***"And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews***

and Greeks." Paul ***"reasoned"*** with them. Acts 19:26 continues the topic of persuading, ***"And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods."*** Paul focused on persuading others from the world and to the Lord. He was active in His approach. He thought through his ideas and was willing to engage the minds of others. He rescued people.

Finally, in Acts 26:28, we see the response of the king to Paul's message. ***"And Agrippa said to Paul, 'In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?'"*** Paul's answer by his lifestyle, words, and past experiences would have been a hearty, "Yes!"

Witness as if it depends on you and then give God the glory for the victories that will come.

PURPOSE

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

One of the biggest messes I see in society is people walking around not knowing their purpose. Take a trip to a bookstore and look for the "self-help" section. There are shelves upon shelves full of books that are geared to help a person find purpose and meaning to an individual's life. Somehow this notion of purpose and meaning is being found internally is causing massive ripples in so many aspects is people's lives. Now, by no means have I perfected the confidence in my understanding of what God has planned for me, but seeing any person wandering through life aimlessly saddens my heart. It is a bigger mess when a person who proclaims the supremacy of Christ publicly, does not know what their purpose in life is.

People read book after book, listen to podcast after podcast, and attend meeting after meeting seeking purpose and meaning in life. Yet, in one verse in the Bible, we are able to find the answer. Paul writes, ***"And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised"*** (2 Corinthians 5:15). To think how many books have been printed when 13 words, ***"that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him,"*** summarizes where meaning and purpose are found.

Jesus paid the ultimate price for us by dying on the cross, was buried, and rose again three days later. Because of that Christ was victorious over death, Hell, and the grave. By putting our faith in Him, we are able to have that same victory in our life through His loving sacrifice. Since Jesus died for us, it is only fitting we look to find purpose in meaning found in the One who gave us life. John Calvin

said it perfectly, “He died for us that we might die to ourselves.” By dying to yourself you are humbly laying aside the allure that meaning and purpose are found in another place other than in the One that laid down His life for you.

Life becomes a mess whenever we try to find purpose and meaning outside of God. Our lives lose purpose and meaning the further we get away from the truth of who Jesus was, what Jesus did, and what we are called to do.

AMBASSADOR FOR CHRIST

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 4

Patrick Bicknell

As I am writing this, I am going through one of the saddest times in my life. Just recently I lost a good friend of mine very suddenly. He was a great man, someone who had a great love for me and was one of those people who would be there for you no matter what. Few things have been able to give me peace other than Scripture, and specifically, this portion found within 2 Corinthians chapter 5.

Before he had passed away, he had seen me in my time before surrendering to Christ, and he had seen me after I made the decision to follow Christ. Most of our conversations were just us messing with each other, but I specifically remember a conversation we had about a year ago when he talked to me about God. I was able to give him the Gospel and share my faith with him. I am not sure if my friend made the decision to follow Christ or not, but I do know that because God did not count my trespasses against me, reconciled me to Him, and made me an ambassador of Christ I was able to share this message of hope with my friend. I have regret that I should have done more, and I am stuck with the feeling of what if, but at the end of the day, all I can do is share the message that God has given me to share.

This is what we do when we become ambassadors for Christ. In verse 15, Paul says ***"And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."*** This is what it means to be an ambassador of Christ. God has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation as the end of verse 18 says. We no longer live for ourselves. We do not look to please our own desires or make our own comfort. As ambassadors

of Christ, we live every day for him, to share His Gospel, and to go out of our way to preach this message to whomever we may come into contact with because we do not know if today is that person's last day. In the case with my friend, we were not expecting him to pass, but because Jesus loved me enough to die for me, to raise from the dead, and make me an ambassador for Him, I can rest in the hope that this message changed his heart as it did for me. Live each day for the One who died for you.

REPENT

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 5

James Mann

I was five years old when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. The problem was that at that age, I did not understand that concept of my life needing to change. This idea that my life was no longer my own did not make sense. I went through the majority of my childhood, living my life for my own enjoyment. It was not until I was 17 that I realized something was wrong and missing. There was one of those moments in life that hit me, right in the gut, and I will never forget it. I was hanging out with my friends from school, being a "normal" high school student, when one of my unsaved friends looked at me and said, "You know, if you did not talk about church all the time, we would have no idea that you were a Christian." To them, that was a compliment because I was like them and I was not uptight like much of the world perceives Christians to be. To me, that was one of the wake-up calls in my life.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, we read, ***"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."***

When we are going through our day-to-day busy lives, we need to take the time to evaluate why we are doing the things that we are doing. Are we doing it for our families? Are we doing it to fit in with those around us? Are we doing it for ourselves? We need to make sure that our motivation for doing things in our lives can be traced back to the One who died for us. People should be able to look at you, and the things you do, and just know that there is something

different about you. When they talk about you, one of the first things they should say about you is, “Oh, James sure does love his God.” There is no better way to be described.

The question becomes, “How do we get there?” The answer is simple, but the application might not be. We need to live our lives for Him. If we cannot trace the things we are doing back to Him, then we need to evaluate why we are doing it. We cannot live this life for ourselves because it is not ours. He gave His life so that we could have ours; therefore, we should live our lives in a way that is honoring and glorifying to Him. Our whole creation was done so that we can reflect His image and who He is. This is something that we should take more seriously and make sure that when we look in a mirror, this is what we are seeing.

CHANGING THE DEFAULT SETTING

LESSON TEN, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Pat Rowland

My family, especially my wife, has heard me often say, “Can we just stick to the plan?” I am cursed with this need to plan and to know what the plan is. I do not have to be the one always making the plan, I just need to know what it is so I can prepare myself for what is ahead. For example, if we are going out for dinner tonight I want to know where we are going. I do not like just winging it, I want to decide so I can begin thinking about what I want to order at said restaurant. Come that evening, I do not want to change the plan to the last minute suggestion, because most likely I have already decided on what I am going to eat. I am capable of going to a different restaurant, I am not some kind of crazy control freak. However, my preference or the default setting is to plan.

Default settings are the base settings of a system that can be changed, but when the machine is restarted it will fall back to the “default” settings. For example, I am using Word to type this devotion and my default font is Calibri, but I am typing this in Century Schoolbook because it is the format we use for these devotions. When I go to open a new document, the default font will automatically be chosen.

There is a motivational default setting within each of us that is called “ME.” Though we may want to do things for others it will not come natural because our default setting is to do things for ourselves. We cannot will ourselves to change that setting. It is the make-up of our operating system. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, that the only way to overcome our default setting is to let the love of Christ have the controls of our system or ourselves: ***“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died***

for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

Jesus' default setting was us. He died for all of us and for us to overcome the ME setting we have to die to ourselves much like Christ died for us. It is not a physical death for us, but one of choice, to surrender ourselves, our motivations, our dreams, and our desires to Christ.

In a selfless act Christ died for our sin. He paid the price for our sin, so that we will no longer live for ourselves, but for Him. When the motivation or default setting moves from me to Christ it completely changes the perspective. It is not just on restaurant choices or plans changing, but on valuing others over my desires.

If Christ is not counting my trespasses against me, then I should not count them against others. The only way that will happen is if I change my default setting from "ME" to "CHRIST."

LESSON ELEVEN

EQUALLY YOKED

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-18

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Paul uses the phrase ***"unequally yoked"*** in 2 Corinthians chapter 6. It is a term that makes sense in an older farming community, but not in most communities today. He was describing the scenario were two oxen are joined by a harness or yoke as they pull some cargo. The problem comes when one ox is stronger or taller than the other ox. As the bigger ox walks faster, it causes the load to go around in circles. Progress is not being made.

1. Which of your friends make you stronger? Which of your friends make you a better person? How?

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Friendship is a gift from God, but that does not mean all "friends" help in our walk with and toward God. I think C.S. Lewis understood Paul's situation when he said, "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, 'You too? I thought I was the only one.'" It is good to have friends that can laugh and cry with us. The journey is easier with friends at our side.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 adds, ***"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"***

In 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, Paul lists a number of things "they" went through. Having comrades with the same goal and outlook made a difference. He says, ***"Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's***

way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything."

2. What does Paul use as evidence that they were servants of God?

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3. Which in this list of commendations jumps out to you? Why?

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4. What are ***"weapons of righteousness?"***

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5. What does it mean to have nothing, yet possess everything?

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Friendship is not always easy or pleasant. Tim Keller wrote, "Like a surgeon, friends cut you in order to heal you." In 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, Paul challenges some of his friends, ***"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also."***

6. Why do you think he refers to them as ***"Corinthians?"***

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7. How does Paul challenge them?

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In the realm of friendship, people often quote Proverbs 27:17, ***"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."***

8. What does the verse mean and imply?

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Paul gives a strong challenge in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, ***"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and***

they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.'"

9. Put this section into your own words.

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Paul wrote earlier in 1 Corinthians 15:33, ***"Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'"*** We also read in Proverbs 13:20, ***"Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm."***

10. What do these verse mean? Give examples.

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James 4:4 is strong, ***"You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."*** In working with students, I would often remind them, "If you do not want Satan as your father-in-law, do not date his children."

11. How does this resonate with you? Is it too harsh?

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In the last section of 2 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul says, ***"For we are the temple of the living God."*** This is not a new concept for him, as he earlier said in 1 Corinthians 3:16, ***"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"***

12. How does this relate to the topic?

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13. How does this challenge us to live? Give examples.

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"The next best thing to being wise oneself
is to live in a circle of those who are."
C.S. Lewis

ENDURANCE IN HARDSHIP

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 1

Philip Piasecki

I do not know about you, but I hate running. If I am going to run, I better have a basketball in my hands, be running around the bases, or be about to catch a touchdown. However, even in team sports there are always the dreaded conditioning days. I have so many memories burned into my brain of running until I literally thought I could not take one more step. It always felt pointless at first; however, halfway through the season I would realize our team had the best endurance out of everyone we were playing. There is no better feeling of accomplishment when your opponent is out of gas, and you just keep going. Endurance is also a common theme in the Bible. In the same way, physical endurance is important for athletics, spiritual endurance is essential in our walk with Christ as we see in this Scripture.

In 2 Corinthians 6:1-5, we read, ***"Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you. Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.'"***

This chapter is a fascinating piece of Scripture. Honestly, I feel like I could write a whole book on it. There is so much to unpack just in this one chapter. One of the things we can learn through this Scripture is that our lives can either help or hinder people on their path to having

faith in Christ. We know this because Paul takes time to focus on how he and his ministry had ***"put no obstacle in anyone's way,"*** and then he lays out how the example of their lives actually pointed to Christ.

His first example is their great endurance in times of trouble. Take a moment to read over verse 5 again. If we are being honest, I am not sure many of us would have the spiritual endurance to deal with everything that Paul had to encounter. Still we must strive to do our best to follow this example laid out for us in Scripture. It is likely that in our life we are going to face some of the things that Paul lays out here, and our response to those hardships is going to speak volumes to our spiritual maturity. When people know that we are believers, we are put under a microscope. If we lose all faith in Jesus the moment we are faced with hardship, it sends the message to those who do not believe that our God is not able to sustain us. However, when we confidently and calmly face our challenges with strength only found from Jesus through the power of His Holy Spirit, we show others how truly faithful our God is. The endurance in faith by a believer in the midst of horrendous circumstances is one of the most powerful witnesses that exist. It opens eyes, turns heads, and causes people to ask questions which gives us the opportunity to share the Gospel.

EVERYDAY MIRACLES

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 2

Holly Boston

Our church is studying the life of Moses so my son and I decided to watch *"The Ten Commandments"* with Charlton Heston. I know what you are thinking. Yes, it is the longest movie ever and very dated. Yet, I never get tired of watching God's miracles depicted on the big screen. God is awe-inspiring from the burning bush to the plagues (though Hollywood only included four to keep it short), to the parting of the Red Sea, and the writing of the commandments by His fiery hand. Those were the good old days when God's presence and power were on display for all and unmistakable. For the first ten years of my walk with Christ, I would often think and occasionally say, "What I would give for a burning bush." The closest I ever came was about twelve years ago. In a selfish, angry snit, I decided to go for a walk with God. I spent the majority of the time complaining to Him about my husband and explaining how I deserved to be treated better. I finally came to the point where I asked what I should do. I looked down and there was a perfect heart on the sidewalk. It had been raining and the only moisture left was a perfect heart and the still small voice said, "Love."

I often hear people say God does not work like that anymore; we do not see miracles as they did in the Old Testament. However, the Bible says God does not change (Malachi 3:6); He is the same ***"Yesterday and today and forever"*** (Hebrews 13:8). So why do we not experience the miraculous works of God today? During our Bible study this week, a precious lady shared a health scare she experienced. The doctors found spots on her liver and informed her that they would do more testing but they were sure it would confirm cirrhosis of the liver. In preparation for further testing, she and her

church began to pray. When she went in for the test, there were no spots to be found! Her final statement caught my attention, “All the doctors had some logical reason for the disappearance of them. Only one said it was a miracle.” How could they miss God? How could they miss Him? Do we miss His everyday miracles?

In 2 Corinthians 6:16-17, Paul says, ***“For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord.”***

In the Old Testament, God’s presence was in the Tabernacle or the Temple. His voice was heard through a specific individual, a prophet, and His power was made manifest in natural phenomena and circumstances that defied logic. Today, when a person receives Christ through His sacrificial work on the cross, they immediately receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Believer, we become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) and immediately receive the power to live differently. We now can live a righteous life in a broken world (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

Everyday miracles occur in the hearts and lives of believers, but we must recognize it and give Him the glory for what He accomplishes through us. It is a miracle when we choose to love the unlovable, forgive the unforgivable, or put another ahead of ourselves. It is a miracle when a husband or a wife chooses to fight for their marriage over their right to be happy. It is a miracle when a teenager chooses to be concerned about what God thinks over others. It is also a miracle when an addict chooses sobriety over using. There are everyday miracles occurring around us and through us! Do not miss Him because you are busy looking for the burning bush or manna to fall from the sky.

Choose to see the miracle!
Choose to be the miracle!

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 3

John Rigg

In 1982, *The Clash,* a British punk rock band, released the song entitled, *"Should I Stay or Should I Go?"* If you are familiar with the song, your head is already banging up and down and the air guitar is out of its case. I will pause here and give you a moment.

Selah

If you are not familiar with the song, oh well, you are not really missing anything.

The question posed in the song's title is one that I believe should challenge every Christian. As we read through the Word of God, we learn that the free gift of God's salvation is not to be kept to ourselves and that we should be ready to share it freely.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…" Matthew 28:19

"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.'" Mark 16:15

"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'" John 20:21

The New Testament message here is that believers should be spreading the good news of the Gospel to those that do not yet believe. However, then we read passages like this one in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, ***"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers"*** (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Paul's words say that believers are not to attach themselves to unbelievers. So, do these passages contradict each other? What is a believer to do? Should I stay or should I go?

Notice Paul's command, "***Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."***

The term "yoked together" may be a bit foreign to us today, but not to the people of Paul's day. A yoke was a wooden beam normally used between a pair of oxen or pairs of other animals to enable them to pull together to do the work. An example of an "unequally yoked" pair of animals would be that of an ox and donkey. These two animals vary greatly in size, strength, and demeanor. Placing these two animals in the yoke together would mean that they would constantly struggle to get any work done. Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 6:14–15, ***"For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?"***

By using the phrase ***"unequally yoked,"*** Paul was hoping his spiritually regenerated readers would recognize that they were different than unbelievers. They now live in two different kingdoms, serving two different kings, and like a yoked ox and donkey, they will always struggle.

As Christians we should always be interacting with the unsaved with the goal of reaching them for Christ. However, we should never be engaged in any of the sinful pleasures or activities of those that have hearts unchanged by the Gospel. The work of the believer should stand in stark contrast to that of the unbeliever.

So, should I stay or should I go?
Go, but do not stay.

WIDEN YOUR HEART

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ryan Story

Give a hearty "yup" if you have ever had a conflict with another person? Every person to ever live on this Earth has had a conflict with at least one other person. While you are reading the opening sentences, I hope you are in a place where you can move forward in whatever this conflict may be in a way that gives Jesus the utmost glory in your actions. The reality is navigating through conflict is difficult. For Paul, the mess of conflict is the majority of what he is navigating through with the church of Corinth.

Through much of Paul's ministry life he was questioned for being an authentic apostle. Many of Paul's opponents would use his past against him, and many of the people who Paul ministered to for a substantial amount of time would stray from living in step with the Gospel of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul is defending his God-ordained authority as a true servant of Jesus to people with whom he spent three years. For three years, Paul and the church of Corinth grew together. They accepted Paul as a legitimate servant of God. The church was established and grew and something happened in the time Paul had left and the entire church crumbled. With at least two letters written, we see Paul having to live up to his words that are essential in conflict resolution, ***"speaking the truth in love"*** (Ephesians 4:15).

In 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, we read, ***"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also."*** In these verses, Paul gives an amazing truth about resolving conflict and bringing reconciliation

to a relationship. Paul genuinely loved the Corinthians with all of his heart, and he was willing to speak to them with ***"truth in love"*** and willing to speak openly to them. Paul was willing to say what needed to say, he was not willing to allow sin to be in their relationship. We need to be open and willing to initiate the conversation of conflict, again in love, but to at least begin the process.

Paul's request for the Corinth Church was to also follow suit. Paul opens up about being challenged as an apostle, and he was willing to have a heart-to-heart with people whom he had helped nurture into a mature believer. ***"Widen your hearts also"*** is Paul asking to see the same soul searching honest vulnerability he displayed so that there might be some sort of reconciliation.

If you are in the midst of some sort of conflict with someone, I pray you are willing to widen your heart to the direction that gives God glory and brings reconciliation. Regardless of where you are at in the conflict, widening your heart to allow God to work is the best first step in bringing reconciliation in any relationship.

UNEQUALLY YOKED

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 5

Larry Gabbara

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?" 2 Corinthians 6:14

As an unsaved Christian, I had never heard of the term "unequally yoked." I believed in God but did not have any idea that I could have a personal relationship with Jesus, I was sort of a high holy day Catholic or a "Chreaster" as I have heard it said. I grew up going to church with my family, but as an adult, I was busy, and only attended church on Christmas and Easter (Chreaster).

When my wife and I decided to get married, we struggled to find a pastor to marry us, because neither of us was attending church. She was raised in a strict Baptist church and was not about to get married in the Catholic church. We finally found a non-denominational minister who would marry us at the hotel where our small wedding was being held. He never asked if we were saved. If he had, I would not have understood what it meant! My wife was a born-again Christian, yet at this time she was not walking with the Lord. That was October 1989.

Then in February 1990, my wife came home, and excitedly told me she had rededicated her life to the Lord! I did not know what that meant and was not in any way prepared for how her decision would change our lives. We began to live a life of "unequally yoked" with her making changes in her thoughts and actions to live for the Lord and me wondering what in the world was happening!

So, the next 12 years were not really what I expected. We had some very rough times, yet we both had made a commitment to stay together no matter what. I did not realize that the Lord needed to be in the center of our lives. Through all those years, my wife continued to pray diligently for me to be saved. I gave my heart and life to Jesus when I was 50 years old.

Paul says here in Corinthians, ***"There is no lack of love on our part, but you have withheld your love from us. I am asking you to respond as if you were my own children. Open your hearts to us"*** (2 Corinthians 6:12-13 NLT).

Through the time that my wife was walking with the Lord, she continued to love and pray for me. There was never a time that my wife allowed this to lessen her love for me. She believed in her heart that one day I would give my life to the Lord.

Paul is explaining that the Corinthians need to open their hearts to the Lord. Paul explains that we will continue to live and function with non-believers. At one time we were all unbelievers. However, the unsaved world will drag us into the devil's playground, if we do not do our best to surround ourselves with believers and stay centered with the Lord.

It has been 30 years since we began our life together and we have been blessed beyond what we could have ever thought or imagined. Though we were ***"unequally yoked"*** for a lot of years, God worked it all for His good and we have reaped the blessings in living for Him! Life is easier when you are yoked together and walking the same path. Because we have accepted Christ as our Savior, we will both be spending eternity with the Lord.

DELUSION

LESSON ELEVEN, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Years ago, when I was the Chaplain at a Christian school, a guest Pastor came and spoke to the high school students about the end times. His church had a full drama production that brought out many people. As he closed his message, he warned the students about the Rapture and then said, "If you see me and a bunch of people missing, the Rapture happened. You will know it is all true. Give your life to the Lord."

I was not happy. He just told the students to live as you want and when the Rapture happens, then give your life to the Lord. I then came to the microphone and referenced 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, ***"The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."***

Paul is saying that if you reject the Gospel (***"refused to love the truth and so be saved"***), once the ***"lawless one"*** (the anti-Christ) comes, God will send you ***"a strong delusion."*** No one is promised tomorrow, so do not wait for a special event before you give your life to the Lord. Today is the day of salvation!

I often say, "Today is the day of salvation." Seldom do I reference that the quote is from Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2, ***"For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have***

helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." However, Paul is quoting Isaiah. Either way, do not put off your commitment to the Lord. "Today is the day of salvation."

Paul also uses the concept of delusion in Colossians 2:4, ***"I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments."*** Do not count on the future or even tomorrow. Today is a perfect day to get saved!

LESSON TWELVE

GODLY GRIEF

2 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

The respected apologist for Christ, C.S. Lewis once said, “Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow or reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.” C.S. Lewis was known as a strong believer, and yet, he too grieved.

The topic of grief can be very complicated. I am not an expert on the topic and, in fact, I am not very good at it. The “stages of grief” are often referenced, and it is good to know what they are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

Grief often occurs with the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job, and even death of a pet. It is important to be aware of this for ourselves and those around us. I am thankful our church has a program called GriefShare to help those who are grieving.

The Recovery Village lists “Ten Common Myths about Grief.”

1. Everyone grieves in stages.
2. Grief and mourning are the same.
3. Women grieve more than men.
4. If you are not crying, you are not really grieving.
5. Ignoring your pain will help it go away.
6. The first year is the hardest.
7. Grief gets better over time.
8. Grief has an endpoint.
9. The goal of grief is to find closure.
10. People struggling with grief just need to get over it.

1. Did any point stand out to you in the list? Why?

_____

_____

_____

2. Do you agree with all the points on the list? Would you add another one?

_____
_____
_____

The Recovery Village also expresses how to help a grieving friend. Some of the suggestions are as follows.

1. Check-in on them.
2. Understand the grieving process.
3. Listen more, talk less.
4. Let them cry.
5. Ask questions.
6. Offer practical help.
7. Be willing to sit in silence.
8. Remember important dates.

3. Express how you agree or disagree with any of these suggestions.

_____
_____
_____

4. Are there other suggestions you would make?

_____
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_____

Even though Paul does not say godly grief until verse 10, he builds up to it in the preceding verses.

He opens in 2 Corinthians 7:1, by saying, ***"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God."***

5. What were the promises?

_____

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6. What does cleansing and holiness mean to you? How do you do it?

_____

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_____

In 2 Corinthians 7:2-9, he says, ***"Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us."***

7. How many times does Paul use the word comfort (or a synonym) in this section?

_____
_____
_____

8. What antonyms of comfort does Paul use?

_____
_____
_____

9. In a previous letter, Paul challenged them. Although it was difficult, what was the result?

_____
_____
_____

10. What are ways or steps we can take in challenging the behavior of someone dear to us?

_____
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_____

Finally, Paul officially addresses the topic of "godly grief" in 2 Corinthians 7:10-16, ***"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness***

for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. Therefore we are comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you."

11. How does Paul describe ***"godly grief"*** in this passage?

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12. Compare and contrast ***"godly grief"*** and ***"worldly grief."***

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13. How did Judas display ***"worldly grief?"*** Are there other examples in Scripture?

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14. How did Peter display ***"godly grief?"*** Are there other examples in Scripture?

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"After grief for sin
there should be joy for forgiveness."
A. W. Pink

"The best four-word description
of following Jesus might be:
Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."
Author Unknown

For a more in-depth study, read Psalm 32 and 51.

"GREAT PRIDE"

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Noble Baird

Who is one person in your life that you receive or have received a compliment from, that made you proud? As I read this passage of 2 Corinthians, I cannot help but imagine the pride and encouragement the church felt when reading this portion of his letter. In 2 Corinthians 7:2-9, we read, ***"Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn-fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it - though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us."*** Wow! Now I know that was a lot of verses, however, I do not think we can ever have too many verses from God's Word! In this passage, I love how Paul begins saying that he has ***"great pride"*** in the believers in this church. Two words, that as I read them, I can imagine the faces of the believers as they hear about how Paul feels and thinks of them.

As we read on in this passage, we find out why Paul had this great pride. First, it is because of the comfort Titus received from the believers in Corinth when he came to them. He was accepted and what Paul told him would happen, happened. Secondly, his pride was felt because of the repentance of the believers and their faith in Christ. Paul writes of the believers in regards to their ***"godly grief"*** in 2 Corinthians 7:10, ***"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."*** Paul truly had great pride in the believers because they heard the Gospel, experienced repentance, and confessed Christ as their Savior. As someone who is on staff at a church, but more importantly someone who has experienced the life-changing love of Christ, there is nothing greater than seeing someone accept and experience the love and life-giving forgiveness of Christ! I hope that when you hear of someone confessing Christ or you are part of leading someone to the Lord, you too experience great pride and joy as Paul did!

SPEAK UP

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 2

Shawna Johnson

God's Word tells us with grace and love, ***"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him"*** (Luke 17:3).

Have you ever felt the leading of the Holy Spirit to speak up against a potentially sensitive or personal topic? We are talking about speaking the truth of God's Word with grace and love here, not stating our opinions. Speaking up can be very difficult! Confronting sin, and having tough conversations do not often come easy.

After being led by the Holy Spirit, did you speak up?

Was it received well?

If not, did you then question whether you should have said anything in the first place?

If you have had feelings of regret from either not speaking up when you felt called to, or from questions whether or not you should have, I pray you are encouraged by an example we see from the Apostle Paul.

In the following passage, he is talking to the Corinthians regarding a letter he sent, speaking out against their ungodliness. In 2 Corinthians 7:8-10 (NIV), Paul says, ***"I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you."*** Of course, our intention and desire are never to hurt the people we love. This can be a difficult thing to work through, but beauty lies ahead! ***"Though I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while - yet now I am happy, not because you were***

made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended." He goes on to say, ***"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret."***

Though difficult, Paul's letter helped the Corinthians realize their behaviors and ultimately turn them to the Lord! His courage to speak up is what drew them closer to God.

Galatians 6:1 reads, ***"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."***

"Lord, I pray for the ability to speak Your truth with grace. Help us to be encouraged by one another, have thought-provoking, biblical conversations, and call out sin, ultimately leading each of us closer to You. Thank You for Your Word and thank You for Your Church. In Jesus' name, Amen."

I BELIEVE IN YOU

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

The writers for *Capital Partners for Education* wrote an article in 2016 entitled, *"It Feels Good to Say, 'You Can Do It, I Believe In You.'"* That is such a powerful phrase. Hopefully, someone has said those words to you and you are saying them to someone else. I think every child should hear their father say, "I believe in you."

In 2 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul expresses his feelings about the Christians at Corinth. In verse 4, he says, ***"I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy."*** Paul says, ***"I have great pride in you."*** He was proud of them and told them.

In verses 8 and 9, he repeats the sentiment, ***"For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it - though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us."*** Paul knew he could speak tough love and they would repent. He believed the best in them and wanted the best for them.

In verse 14, we read, ***"For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true."*** Paul also admits that he has been bragging about them. He believed in them, told others, and was proven right.

Finally, in verse 16, he clearly states, ***"I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you."*** Paul said, ***"I have complete confidence in you."*** That is beautiful. Paul was tough, but please do not miss this sensitive side of him. He believed in them and told them.

In Philippians 1:6, Paul is speaking to another group, but it could also be something God would say to us, ***"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."***

God has a great plan for your life. He believes in you. Together you can do all things because He gives you strength (Philippians 4:13). Is there someone you believe in and you have not told them yet? Speak truth and life into those around you.

"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." 1 Thessalonians 5:11

CAST DOWN?

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 4

Sierra Combs

Never in my life have I experienced a time filled with such widespread sorrow, fear, hardships, and trouble. The year is 2020, which for most any adult reading this will ring a bell. It seems to be the year of punch after punch. Besides the usual worldwide tensions, famines, plagues, and wars, America has its own major issues that seem to be ever-growing. Over 100,000 people are dead from Covid-19, the evilness and ugliness of racism are out on full display, racial tension is at an all-time high, cities burning from riots, domestic violence on the rise, and we have the highest unemployment rate in national history. The casualties are many, not just in a physical sense but spiritually and emotionally. Life just seems extra heavy and painful right now. Though it is a bright and warm summer day outside, my heart is downcast.

The life of a Christian is one filled with joy, wonder, and blessings. Even through the pain and sorrow, those things remain, but man can it be hard sometimes! In Job 5:7, Job wrote that ***"man is born to trouble."*** In John 16:33, Jesus tells us straight up that ***"in the world you will have tribulation."*** All throughout the Bible we are warned and prepared for the hardships of life, but we are never left without hope. Maybe you find yourself today in a place of grief, pain, and sorrow. In 2 Corinthians 7:6, Paul writes to the Corinthian church and declares, ***"But God, who comforts the downcast comforted us."*** Even the great apostle Paul felt the hardships of life and needed God's help. Other Bible translations use words like ***"encourage those who are discouraged"*** and ***"comforts the depressed."*** I know we have all been there and needed His comforting and encouragement.

In the book of Psalms, David writes about being downcast. ***"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you"*** (Psalm 42:5-6).

I love how author Phillip Keller explains the term ***"cast down,"*** relating it to David's experience as a shepherd. He says, "This is an old English shepherd's term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself. A 'cast' sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success…in frightened frustration. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die." I have been that little cast sheep more times than I could count, but God, the Good Shepherd, has come to my rescue every time.

Friends, no matter how bad it is for you right now, He does not want to leave you alone to die. David reiterates in verse 11 of his Psalm, ***"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."***

The Lord is the comforter of the downcast and depressed, and the encourager to the discouraged. Most importantly, He is the God who chases after His beloved sheep and offers them salvation and hope. Will you choose to stay cast down or will you let Him pick you up and place you on solid ground? I pray that today you will put your hope in the Good Shepherd!

HEART OF THE MATTER

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 5

Roger Allen

"Covid-19" was first coined by the World Health Organization in February of 2020, it will remain in our lexicon for years to come. It is literally the blending of two words, Coronavirus and disease (2019). It has made an indelible mark on the world. First and foremost, our collective health has suffered. Prior to Covid-19, our country seemed to be on an upward swing in the economy and society appeared quite unremarkable to the casual observer. Granted, the election process was in full swing and the political rhetoric was unabated. Yet, in one swift moment in time, we have seen the true heart of the matter. How quickly sides have been taken up by those who have felt somehow they know the real truth. Referring to those who oppose or disagree as fearful and weak, we see the lines drawn. Whether your concern was for your health or those you love, or a concern for our liberties, there were sides taken. As I watched the social media posts begin to blast the opposing side, I began to see how quickly pride and self-reliance became a common theme. Often, these posts were from those who are in the body of Christ. We must seem to the world barely capable of cohesive thought and look just as they do, lost.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul notes the dissension within the church. Lack of maturity, immorality, and disagreement on the gifts of the Spirit had divided the body of Christ and possibly prompted a visit from Paul. Upon arriving, Paul finds his visit not welcomed by everyone. Insulted and his authority challenged, he vows never to return. However, his love for the church at Corinth keeps him from giving up on them. In a letter that has been lost to antiquity, Paul admonishes those who oppose him and his godly directives. The letter is alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 and 7:8, and

we later find those he wrote to are brought to repentance. With the desired effect, Paul rejoices.

In 2 Corinthians 7:1, we read, ***"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God."***

When we look at this verse, we find a couple of things that stick out. In 2 Corinthians 6:16, Paul reminds them God said that He will ***"make my [His] dwelling among them and walk among them and I will be their God"*** (Leviticus 26:11-12). Here is His promise, but He has also required something from us. He demands that we should separate from the world and not return to the bondage He has delivered us from. Cleansing ourselves from the bodily defilement of the lust of the flesh quickly becomes our focus. However, spiritual defilement becomes an insidious process in which we are totally entrapped by our own pride and self-righteousness. We often live where we perceive the sins of others and are blinded by our own self-worth (Matthew 7:4-5). Comparing ourselves with others only reassures us of our primacy and therefore blinding us to the true reality. We are lost and in need of a Savior.

As I stated earlier, during this time of Covid-19, we see the body of Christ divided by the things of this world. It became very easy for me to point out the issues that others either overlooked or did not realize. I thought of myself as a person who was being pragmatic in my approach and therefore the "smart" one. Oh, how we deceive ourselves! How quickly we can become blind to the Holy Spirit and become self-reliant and prideful. At a time when I should have been an encourager in the faith, I was silent. Having to be reminded by a friend that a "person is more than their post on social media," I was shamed. It is not a worldly shame, but an immediate place of repentance. My pride blinded my ability to see my brother as part of

the body of Christ and one whom I should love. I clearly look at the situation as a chance for those who call Christ Lord to help others see Jesus in this broken world. Even though we live in this world, we are not of this world and that the risen Savior is our reason for hope. Please remember, we are the temple of the living God and that we represent Him as the body of Christ. We must think before we act. It is the heart of the matter.

ENCOURAGEMENT PART 1

LESSON TWELVE, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Ryan Story

Before my wife and I got married, we were going through the pageantry of getting our wedding registry established. I am a bit of a stickler of quality of customer service due to my near-decade working at a grocery store. Upon arriving my wife and I were not met with the kind of customer service I would have thought would come from people who were about to register for a couple of hundred dollars in items from their store. We went through the hour or so of walking through the store registering for various items and we returned to the customer service desk. When we handed back the telxon (bet you just learned a new word) for them to upload our items into the computer, there was an awkward pause. After a few, "Let me see, that is odd, and let me ask someone," it was clear that the items we scanned were not showing up on their screen. I asked if the items where lost, and I was told many times that they were not, but after three managers it was clear that they did not want to tell us that we had wasted an hour. The one thing about my wife that I love is she knows by my body language and the questions I start to ask when I am frustrated, so she sent me to pick out a new nerd shirt. While I was fuming and looking to go give everyone a piece of my mind, and contemplating writing the nastiest of email to coperate, a hand grasped my shoulder and a man asked, "Hey buddy, do you have the time?"

At that moment the guy who had been discipling me for the last few months just so happen to be in the same place as me as I was about to make a not so honoring Jesus scene. There is an amazing godly trait that some people have that I always aspire to develop. It is the ability to be able to bring encouragement simply by being there. I

know this encouragement of one presence changes from person to person, but we all know that one person who is just there and that makes a world of difference.

For Paul, that person was Titus. Titus was a young man who Paul was training up to be in ministry. In 2 Corinthians 7:5-6, we read, ***"For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."*** Paul tells the church of Corinth how tired he was, how difficult things had been for him, and yet the thing that brought comfort was the moment that God sent Titus to be there for him in his low moment.

We all need people in our life who can be a godly encouragement to us simply by their presence. We also need to be able to be that encouragement for someone. Jesus tells us, ***"All people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"*** (John 13:35). There are times one of the best ways you can love someone is to be there for them in a hard time. We need to sit with them when they are hurting. Walk over to a person you know when you see them in public and ask a question. You never know how far something so small will go in their lives.

LESSON THIRTEEN

BEYOND THEIR MEANS

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-24

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Abigail Hess wrote an article for *CNBC* entitled *"Here's why lottery winners go broke,"* where she says, "Lottery winners are more likely to declare bankruptcy within three to five years than the average American" *(CNBC)*. Economist Jay L. Zagorsky agrees with the research. He writes for U.S. *News and World Report*, saying, "Studies found that instead of getting people out of financial trouble, winning the lottery got people into more trouble, since bankruptcy rates soared for lottery winners three to five years after winning." Most of us are probably saying, "I would like to take my chances."

1. Why do you think lottery winners could struggle financially?

_____

_____

_____

2. What would you do if you won ten million dollars?

_____

_____

_____

"A. A. Hyde, a millionaire manufacturer, said he began tithing when he was one hundred thousand dollars in debt. Many men have said they consider it dishonest to give God a tenth of their incomes when they were in debt. Mr. Hyde said he agreed with that thought until one day it flashed upon him that God was his first creditor. Then he began to pay God first and all the other creditors were eventually paid in full. If a man owes you money, it would be wise business policy on your part to encourage him to pay his debt to God first" *(Sunday School Times).*

3. What do you think about tithing (or giving to God) when one is in debt?

_____
_____
_____

4. Do you think we should tithe (or give) from our Income Tax return, birthday money, and work bonuses?

_____
_____
_____

5. Have you ever included tithing or giving in your New Year's resolutions?

_____
_____
_____

On the topic of tithing, please do not get caught up with the whole concept of 10%. Do not be intimidated by that number. Do not be limited by that number. Give back to God what is already His. Give intentionally, regularly, sacrificially, gratefully, and cheerfully.

Paul has a lot to say about tithing or giving in 2 Corinthians chapter 8. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, he says, ***"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God***

to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also."

6. How does Paul describe the financial situation of the churches of Macedonia?

_____

_____

_____

7. What does it mean to give ***"according to their means?"***

_____

_____

_____

8. What does ***"beyond their means"*** mean?

_____

_____

_____

Paul continues the conversation in 2 Corinthians 8:8-15, ***"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do***

not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.'"

9. How did the Lord Jesus Christ become ***"poor?"***

_____
_____
_____

10. How did we become ***"rich"*** through Jesus' ***"poverty?"***

_____
_____
_____

11. Is there something you have started for the Lord that needs to be completed?

_____
_____
_____

12. What does Paul say about giving financially in this section?

_____
_____
_____

Paul concludes the topic for now in 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, ***"But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous***

among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men."

13. What is said about Titus?

_____

_____

_____

14. What does it mean to be ***"honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man?"***

_____

_____

_____

15. Is it possible to tithe, or give, too much?

_____

_____

_____

16. What goal will you set for this month concerning giving financially to the Lord?

_____

_____

_____

The Tithe

"Abraham commenced it.
Jacob continued it.
Moses confirmed it.
Malachi commanded it.
Christ commended it."
Author unknown

ENCOURAGEMENT PART 2

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

One of my favorite details about the second letter to the church of Corinth is that you see Titus pop up a few times. We see Paul talking about Titus in chapter 2, ***"When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia"*** (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). Then we read Paul talk about the encouragement he got that God sent Titus to be with him in his exhaustion.

Paul thinks very highly of Titus. Throughout chapter 8, Paul says such things as:

- Titus had the same care for the church of Corinth as Paul (8:16)
- Paul tells the church that Titus is quickly coming to minister to them on Titus' own accord
- Titus was being led by a desire to love people like Jesus (8:17)
- Paul states that Titus has a bit of fame following him (8:18)
- Paul states that Titus was one who was selected to travel as a missionary from the early church leaders (8:19)
- Paul wraps up Titus' commendation saying, ***"And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of***

> ***his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ"*** (2 Corinthians 8:22-23).

One of the most important aspects of encouragement is that you have to be willing to say words to a person. Paul also writes to another church and says, ***"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear"*** (Ephesians 4:29). The wisest man to walk this Earth, Solomon, said, ***"Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body"*** (Proverbs 16:24). Jesus Himself said, ***"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"*** (Matthew 12:36-37).

How well do you encourage the people around you? I have watched myself destroy a person with my criticism, and I have watched as my words built up a person. The power of the tongue is so prevalent James spends the bulk of a chapter talking about it. We as Christians, husbands, wives, parents, children, and friends have a God-appointed mission to make sure that we are using the breath in our lungs to praise God and lift up others. Look around yourself, what is the morale of the people in your circle? Is it low because there is no encouragement? Is there no encouragement because people do not take your words as sincere? When we look at Paul, we see that he was encouraged by Titus. Titus was never a burden to him, so encouragement toward Titus was not a hard thing to send his way.

I am pleading with you today, take a moment to encourage someone close to you. If you have not said something encouraging to your spouse this week, rush to do so. If you have not encouraged your

children yet today (fathers I am calling you out hard here), go do so. Let us all take a page out of Paul and Titus' relationship, and lift up each other by our presence and let encouragement flow from encouragement.

BOLD FAITHFULNESS

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Pat Bedell

I remember when I was young, our family would go to the Catholic Church just up the road from our house. I was only four years old at the time so I did not understand the concept of the Gospel and why we went to church. The greatest part of the church at the time was when my mother would give me the envelope to put in the offering basket as it was passed around. The ushers always commented on my eager demeanor while putting the envelope in even though I could not understand the concept of what was being done.

Fast forward to my college years when I started pursuing my walk with Christ. I began to learn what giving to the church was actually about. This was a very rough time to learn about giving since I was a poor college student with a very slim bank account. I always lived very frugally and tried to cut my expenses but I still needed all of the funds I had to pay for bills and to put gas in my car. I tried to justify not giving financially by giving my time instead. I was volunteering as a musician, setting up and tearing down our weekly gathering, and any other volunteer opportunity I could find with the organization. I still knew that it was not what I was called to do.

Being paid bi-weekly, there was a month that I received three paychecks and thought it was a great opportunity to give a tithe. I was nervous because I could use that money to put into savings or get ahead on some student loan payments, but I took a leap instead. In 2 Corinthians 8:2 (NIV), we read, ***"In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."*** I remember exactly what happened after I gave to the church for the first time. I was blessed with a check from my

parents for the exact amount that I gave. I could not help but know that this was a God moment in my life knowing that He would always provide when I was faithful in giving to His church. It was the first time that I had wanted to give to the church to help fund God's plans for His ministry. In 2 Corinthians 8:12 (NIV), Paul continues, ***"For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have."*** From that moment on, I have not missed an opportunity to give to the Church monetarily. Some weeks are better than others, but giving according to what one has is crucial to God but more importantly, to spiritual growth and a stronger relationship with God.

The bottom line is that our God is a faithful God. He will always have our best interest in our lives and that includes our finances. He wants us to give to the Church to help His mission while testing our faithfulness to God. He will bless us abundantly in ways we cannot comprehend and according to His timing. Challenge yourself to be bold in your faithfulness towards God. I can attest He will undoubtedly bless your efforts!

NAME ON HEARTS

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Donna Fox

The basic premise of benevolence is that if I have a need, you help me out; and if you have a need, I help you out. However, this goes against the worldly belief that is entirely selfish. The world will tell you to get all you can and hold on tight!

Back in the days of Paul, the Corinthian Church was doing well. God was blessing them with wealth and they had no needs. Yet over in Jerusalem, they were having tough times. They needed help. So Paul is writing to the Corinthians to provide for the others in need.

We see in 2 Corinthians 8:15, ***"As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.'"*** This is a direct quote from Exodus 16:18. In Exodus, Moses was writing about the manna that God had miraculously provided for the Israelites to eat each day. The Israelites were told to go out and gather the manna needed for the day. Not everyone could go to gather, maybe they were sick or invalid. Those that gathered a little extra would share with those that could not gather. No one went hungry!

Wealth, like manna, is a gift from God. Those that have extra share with those who are in need. We see this played out today through soup kitchens, The River Church Community Center, benevolence funds, and neighbor helping a neighbor with a meal or help to pay a bill. Some can have more because of a skill, health, or diligence to work hard; while others are less successful because of illness, age, or lack of skills. Paul is telling the Corinthians "you have a lot, give to those in Jerusalem who have little."

As the Israelites learned, if they gathered extra manna and tried to store it up, it ***"bred worms and stank"*** (Exodus 16:20). Similarly, if we gather great wealth and hoard it to ourselves, it will become useless to us, because when we die, "We can't take it with us." It means nothing in eternity. However, feeding the needy and helping others will mean something in eternity. Hebrews 6:10 says, ***"For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do."***

Keep your eyes open to see who God will put in your path who may have a need you can fulfill. You may think you are only blessing them, but likely you will be the one blessed.

"A good character is the best tombstone.
Those who loved you and were helped by you
will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered.
Carve your name on hearts, not on marble."
Charles Spurgeon

FAVOR

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Tim Tebow (Christian professional athlete) has said, "I pray to start my day and finish it in prayer. I'm just thankful for everything, all the blessings in my life, trying to stay that way. I think that's the best way to start your day and finish your day. It keeps everything in perspective." Having a proper perspective on life is crucial. Seeing things the way God does is the goal.

I remember being taught a lesson on perspective from a fellow teacher named Clare. We were chaperoning a school trip and were on a subway in Rome. I remember hearing him say, "Hey, hey, my passport." I remember getting to him through all the commotion and realizing someone was trying to pick-pocket him. We knew we had to be careful since we were warned by the tour guide. He still had his hand on his passport as the person scampered away. Your passport is your lifeline in another country, so I was ready to take the person down. Instead, we just stayed together and rallied up the troops.

That night Clare and I talked about the situation. I was still a little upset for him. However, he surprised me. He said, "I am glad I am the one who was almost pick-pocketed rather than being in a situation where I feel I need to do the crime." His perspective was godly and encouraged me.

When it comes to finances and giving, Paul challenges our perspective in 2 Corinthians chapter 8. In verses 3 and 4, he describes the churches of Macedonia, ***"For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of***

the saints." They begged to have the opportunity to give. Would you be disappointed if the offering was not taken at a church gathering?

The word ***"favor"*** is an interesting choice. Merriam-Webster gives several definitions including the friendly regard shown toward another, gracious kindness, and a special privilege or right. My immediate thought was that the favor was done for those who received the money. However, the real perspective is that the one who is allowed to give is the one being blessed. It is a privilege to be in a position where you can help someone. My friend, Clare, would be generous and say something like, "I would rather have resources and be obligated to help someone else rather than be the one in need."

"There are several things to be learned
about money from Scripture,
and the concepts of generosity
and giving are in there."
Dave Ramsey

HE GAVE TILL IT HURT

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Roy Townsend

I would think that we have all heard the saying, “Give till it hurts.” I have seen posters in the local gyms or athletic complexes at schools reflecting that we should “give till it hurts” to become better athletes or more fit. Mother Teresa was quoted as saying at that National Prayer Breakfast in 1994, “Give, but give till it hurts.” This is a hard concept to understand. Whether we are giving of our time, talents, or resources, giving till it hurts just does not seem to connect with most people. Maybe you are like me, and I do not like anything that hurts. If there is a way for it not to hurt, I am in!

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, it states, ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*** Jesus as part of the God-head was rich. He had all the glory due to Him in Heaven. He had all the power to have whatever He needed. In truth, He had everything; even things that we cannot imagine. However, for us, He became poor. Philippians 2:6-7 further explains this, ***“Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”*** Jesus emptied became poor by being born as a human baby, but he was not born as a human baby with all the privileges of a king or royalty. He was born to a very poor Jewish family. Then the verses explain that we become “rich” through His “poverty.” All of us can accept Jesus as our Savior and be in a relationship with Him because He came to this world as a baby and then paid the price for our sin with His death on the cross.

This is the example of "giving till it hurts." So, why is this description of what Christ gave to us part of 2 Corinthians chapter eight? Paul was explaining the concept of being generous. The Macedonian churches had given a great gift even though they were in extreme poverty. They were generous in the middle of the most "severe trial." There was an overflowing joy in their rich generosity. Paul goes on to say that the Macedonian churches "pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." They were not commanded, urged, or prodded to give, but they wanted to give just like Christ wanted to provide a way for us to be in relationship with Him.

Many people are stuck in difficult spots in their lives because of decisions, job loss, pandemics, or social unrest. However, we can see from the life of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Apostle Paul that giving is an important aspect of our relationship with God. We are called to give generously and sacrificially the time, talents, and resources that we have been given by God. If my giving does not cause me to rely on Christ more, or my giving does not cause me joy, I may need to reconsider how and why I am giving.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

As you finish reading this devotional, please ask the Lord, "Am I following the example of Christ in giving? Am I giving for the right reasons? Do I have joy over my giving?"

THE HEART OF GIVING

LESSON THIRTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Michael Fox

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints - and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you - see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

As I read through 2 Corinthians chapter 8, I reflected on giving and was convicted back to a time when I was younger and the true heart of my giving.

I did not grow up in church my entire life; however, between the ages of 10 and 12, I began attending with my family and accepted Christ during Vacation Bible School in the summer. I remember growing in the youth group through high school and began to have a desire to serve, or give my time. As soon as I turned 18, I remember the strong desire to drive a bus for the youth group and got a CDL license. It

was a joy (verse 2) and was well within my means (verse 3). I can honestly say that I loved doing it and it was a great way for me to serve at that time.

There are two truths in this passage that I feel like I had a good grasp on then, but I can also say I do not always have a good grasp. They are great reminders for me.

1. Give myself to God first.
2. Give out of grace.

I am reminded to enter into giving with the right heart. If we cannot give ourselves to God first, often we can do things for the wrong reasons. Then, I am reminded of the grace God has given me, which I definitely do not deserve. That love is very hard to comprehend. However, if we strive to give from that grace, I believe God will bless our efforts and it will be pleasing to Him.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Romans 12:1

LESSON FOURTEEN

READY, SET, GIVE

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-15

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Who do you think about when you hear the phrase, “I pity the fool?” I have always enjoyed the personality of Mr. T. Recently, I read one of his humorous quotes, “When I’m ready to fight, my opponent has a better chance of surviving a forest fire wearing gasoline drawers.” I do not know what gasoline drawers look like, but I get the picture. There is great power in being ready. When he is ready, he warns others to watch out.

Teaching students and athletes to be ready has been a challenge for more than half of my life. I remember seeing students come to class without a pencil, paper, or textbook. Class time was wasted. Then came the days when they came with their laptop or tablet, but the battery was low and they did not have their power cord.

I have coached baseball players who have forgotten their baseball glove, bowlers who have forgotten their bowling ball, and golfers who have forgotten their golf clubs. I am stunned when they then ask me, “What should I do?” Do I encourage virtual sports and have them go through the motions without the needed equipment? I imagine my golfer would get a hole in one.

Being ready is crucial. When we are ready, we can take on any challenge much better.

1. When was a time when you were not ready?

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2. What kind of things are you prepared or preparing for?

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In 2 Corinthians 9:1-5, Paul uses the word "ready" five times. He says, ***"Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction."***

3. What does Paul say the Corinthian Church is ready to do?

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4. What would it mean today to be ready to give?

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In 2 Corinthians 9:6-9, Paul continues the discussion on giving by listing some practical principles, ***"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'"***

5. What financial principles did you learn from your parents?

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_____

6. One of our Pastors says that the believer's giving should be "joyful, purposeful, and sacrificial." How does that match with the phrases in this passage?

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7. Would you add any other descriptions on the attitude of our giving?

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8. Re-read the section emphasizing the word "all." What things are being highlighted?

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Finally, in 2 Corinthians 9:10-15, Paul ties in the topic of thankfulness to the topic of giving, ***"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of***

Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!"

9. Paul references being thankful three times in this passage. How does Paul relate thankfulness to the topic of giving?

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10. What is the ***"inexpressible gift?"***

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In his commentary notes on 2 Corinthians, David Lowery writes, "In the grace of God Christians are rewarded in three ways for their generosity: (1) the givers are enriched (vv. 6–10); (2) the receivers' needs are met (vv. 11–12); and (3) God, the Source of all blessing, is praised (vv. 13–15)."

We are blessed to be a blessing. When we bless, we are blessed.

Being ready is important in all areas of life. Part of being ready involves our finances. We need to be ready emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

"Before everything else,
getting ready
is the secret of success."
Henry Ford

GIVEN TO GIVE

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 1

John Stone

What do you have that was not given to you?

This can be a startling question. Without a deeper examination of our lives, we could assume there are a lot of things we have earned, made, or deserve. Many times I have found myself feeling possessive of things that I think belong to me. It can be things like my truck, my house, my savings, my job, my wife, my kids, my time, or my achievements. Not only is this selfish litany extremely prideful, but it is also ignorant of, and insulting to, the One who has given me all things.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, Paul gives a call for believers to give liberally of their resources, time, and money. This is a common theme throughout the Bible and it is one that causes anxiety and stress for many pastors and Christians alike. There is a key paradigm shift in our thinking that must be made in order for us to, not only be obedient and cheerful givers, but to be grateful receivers as well. We are called to give (sow, plant) and there is a promise of reward (verse 6). How much should we give? We should give whatever we feel led to as long as we do not feel forced or unhappy about it (verse 7). This generosity is not to be a source of personal pride.

God gives us the grace and the ability to do good to others (verses 8-9). Not only does He give the ability and the grace but He provides the resources (seed), our food, and everything else we need so that we can continually give to others and never go without (verses 10-11). As a summary, God promises to supply whatever we need to give away (verse 11). That is an amazing promise! We need to stop

and think about that for a minute. God promises to supply whatever we need to give away!

How would our lives be different if we could truly understand and believe what God has promised us in His Word? What would we spend our time and money on if we believed that none of it is ours? It is all His and He wants us to give it away. May we ask God to give us faith to live in a way that gives Him the glory for what He has done.

For a deeper study, see also:
John 1:1-3
Acts 17:24-28
Hebrews 1:1-3
Matthew 6:1-4
Matthew 19:16-26
Matthew 25:1-46
Luke 12:16-21
Luke 19:12-27
James 1:5
James 5:1-6
Galatians 5:13-14
Galatians 6:7-10
Ephesians 2:10
Malachi 3:10

FAITHFULLY AND CHEERFULLY

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Mark O'Connor

If there is a topic that is more uncomfortable to talk about than giving, I do not know what it is. I would rather sit and talk about lust and sexual sin all day. I prefer to talk about foolishness, folly, gossip, and murmur. However, giving, it is tough. It is easier in a one on one conversation, but addressing it to the church? No, thank you. That being said, it is a hugely missed and neglected thing in the church today. Doing ministry takes money on so many levels. Paul addresses it in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, ***"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."***

There are three points in this statement that stick out to me.

First, is the concept of sowing and reaping. This is not the first, nor the last time we see this concept in Scripture. Jesus uses it in parables and Paul continues to teach it. It is a concept that we use in our culture for various examples. Do you want to be good at a sport? You have to put in the practice. Do you want to be a good student? Study hard. Do you want to make good money? Work hard in college and your subsequent career. Yet, when it comes to God's blessing, we do not necessarily want that work and effort. Do you want to grow as a Christian? You need to study the Bible. This is not to say God's blessing is conditional based on your giving, but there is something to giving faithfully. I have seen it both ways in my life. By no means have I experienced wealth as a result of my giving, but my needs have been met and that is a promise of the Lord.

Second, is how much we give. There is the staple of Scripture that states you give your first ten percent to the Lord. If you do that, fantastic. It is what you have decided in your heart. Some can do more. Also, fantastic, just do not let it go to your head and make it about how much better you are for giving so much. Some just cannot give that much.

This is where the second and third concepts meet. I was taught as a young Christian to give faithfully and cheerfully. Also as a young Christian, I had a wife and three kids. We did not have much income to spread around but I decided on a number to give. I understood that giving ten percent was the gold standard but I also needed to feed my family. I chose a percentage to give and I did that faithfully and cheerfully. Sometimes it hurt to put that money in the safe, not knowing what the weeks ahead held for us. Yet, we did it. God has continued to bless our home in that faithfulness. Again, that is not to say things have always been great or abundant, but we have had our most dire needs met at the most unexpected times and by the strangest of sources.

Have that tough conversation with yourself or your spouse. How and what can we choose as the starting place to give faithfully and cheerfully? When you do, you will start to see changes in your life. Things will begin to fall in place a little bit better than they have and you will see God do some incredible things. I am not saying God will give you all the desires of your heart (which is really your flesh speaking) because you will still face trials and tribulations. I am saying you will be in a better place and better equipped when those times come.

READY OR NOT

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

As I was reading 2 Corinthians 9, one word stepped out to me in verses 1-5, ***"Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction."*** The word "ready" is used five times in this paragraph.

I started thinking about the game Hide-n-Seek. How many parents are guilty of sending their children to hide, yelling "Ready or not, here I come," and then sitting down for a brief moment of solitude? It is fun to watch the child who tends to have a hard time finding the perfect hiding spot and is never ready.

However, something more powerful showed up on the same day as I was working through this passage. I received a letter from Daniel. His opening paragraph said, "I am hoping this finds everyone living well and healthy. These are some very trying times we are living in right now. Please stay ready to meet Christ. He will be returning to get us soon. I look forward to that glorious day."

This letter was not from a relative or a Pastor friend. It was from an inmate who wanted to encourage the HIM prison team. I am thrilled with the reminder.

Paul reminds us to be ready in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, ***"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."***

Matthew 24:44 adds, ***"Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*** Luke 12:40 echoes Matthew, ***"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."***

Jesus is saying, "Ready or not, here I come!" Be ready with no regrets.

CONSUMING

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Jill Osmon

I have always thought of tithing or giving as support for the Church. While this is a very important aspect of our call to give to the Church, it is only a portion of this call from God. What 2 Corinthians chapter 9 teaches us is what giving produces in us and other people. It is always interesting, and I fall into this as well, that we do these things God commands of us (giving, praying, and loving) and we do them because we want to obey and "help" other people. What it actually produces in us as individuals is equally beautiful and transformative.

In 2 Corinthians 9:11-14, Paul says, ***"You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you."***

Paul is saying something here that I think we forget; when we obey God in His commandments, we see Him differently, we see the Gospel differently. Giving (of our time, money, and resources) produces thanksgiving in us and when we are thankful we worship and serve God more abundantly. Hebrews 12:28-29 (NIV) says, ***"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"***

We serve an amazing God who should consume us! In order for us to be consumed by Him, we must be thankful for all He has done for us. When we allow this to change us, we can be used to shine a light to those around us. We see this in 2 Corinthians, ***"By their approval of this service, THEY will glorify God because of your submission"*** (emphasis mine). Obeying God proclaims the Gospel! For all of my rule followers out there, this makes my heart sing!

As we continue to grow in His Word, we cannot forget this, we must seek out and be faithful to everything that points people to the Gospel. I am writing this during our COVID pandemic, and when you read this, who knows what the world will be like, but this I know to be true now and in the future, we are called to proclaim the Gospel, in big ways and small ways. Are you being faithful to the things of God? Are you being faithful to the Gospel even when the world around you may be burning down? Obedience to Him is one way to ensure you are proclaiming the Gospel.

A CULTURE OF GENEROSITY

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Ryan Story

A topic people often shy away from is money. Whether it be with your spouse, family, friends, or on occasion even within the church, money can be uncomfortable to discuss. Money, especially the aspect of generosity, was a subject the Bible did not avoid. There must be an understanding when talking about money inside the context of God's people, that God is the one who owns everything around us. With that being said, any pastor or church staff who is seeking to gain by utilizing the Gospel of Jesus as their means will be dealt with by God. Inasmuch as any church member who does not obediently utilize the financial blessings they are given to further the cause of Christ, will be dealt with by God.

We do not know the exacts of every issue that the church of Corinth faced, but it would appear the church was somehow always in a mess. It makes sense that they are also in a mess of a situation in regards to giving. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9, money is brought up, which leads us to believe that it was a topic of concern. The Apostle Paul writes, ***"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God"*** (2 Corinthians 9:10-12).

Paul starts with an understanding of where we get our finances. He brings us back to the reality that what we have comes from God. Paul then indicates that God does not give us health, wealth, or

abilities just to hoard them to ourselves. If I gave you an apple seed, and you did nothing with it, that seed is rendered useless. The seed only becomes useful if you take it, plant it, care for it, and allow it to grow into its full potential. “The message is free but the means might cost you” was a way I heard one person explain giving to me easily in my walk. Since God commands us to give, and commands us to reach the world, what if we do neither? What if you only do one, is that any less disobedient? No sincere Christian would stand by and not disagree with the contradiction of a non-evangelical Christian. Yet, we are perfectly fine with a non-generous Christian.

For you, when you give, how do you view that? Is it a check in the box as a task completed? Do you give begrudgingly, thinking of other things that money could be used for? Or do you give in thanksgiving to God? “That seed that would be useless if I did nothing with it” has unlimited potential when used properly. In the same way, God seeks to use our generosity in our giving, whether that giving be money, time, or abilities, to create unlimited effects. One aspect of American culture that has seeped its way into the church is the sense of individualism. When I read 2 Corinthians chapter 9, I do think there is the individual’s call to reflect and give according to those verses. I also think what if a church focuses on every member giving in this way. Imagine the kind of overflow we at The River would see.

BE A CHEERFUL GIVER

LESSON FOURTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Debbie Gabbara

"I really don't need to write to you about this ministry of giving for the believers in Jerusalem. For I know how eager you are to help, and I have been boasting to the churches in Macedonia that you in Greece were ready to send an offering a year ago. In fact, it was your enthusiasm that stirred up many of the Macedonian believers to begin giving." 2 Corinthians 9:1-2

I love the way this passage of Scripture begins. Paul is excited about the generosity of the people in Corinth. He has been boasting of how eager they are to help others. Their excitement and enthusiasm was an encouragement to other believers.

We find the Corinthians here giving to the work of the church. God starts in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, teaching us to give to the work of God. Paul continues the Lord's teaching and in 2 Corinthians 9:7b-8 (NLT), says: ***"For God loves a person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others."***

When we moved into the warehouse at the Holly location we raised money to purchase additional chairs. My heart was so excited to think about someone coming to the church and hearing the Gospel for the first time while sitting in a chair that had been purchased with the help of our church body.

The Bible mentions money over 800 times and more than half of the parables that Jesus taught were lessons about money. Our wise God

knew that we would need a lot of direction in this area. The Psalms say that the Lord delights in His people. Would it not be incredible to know that we excited God with our generous giving? Scripture says, when we sow generously, we will also reap generously.

The typical title for 2 Corinthians chapter 9 is “God loves a cheerful giver.” I see it in all of my Bibles. What a great title! We should be cheerful when we give to God, after all, God generously provided all that we have!

“Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.” Luke 6:38

LESSON FIFTEEN

AUTHORITY

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-18

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant theologian, author, and pastor. His life was much more impactful than a brief description, "His involvement in a plot to overthrow Adolf Hitler led to his imprisonment and execution" *(Encyclopedia Britannica).* He once wrote, "Being a Christan is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will."

1. What do you think of when you hear the phrase "will of God?"

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2. What do you think about Bonhoeffer's quote? Would you agree or modify it?

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Peter speaks of the will of God in 1 Peter 2:13-15, ***"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people."***

3. What does Peter tell us to do to fulfill the will of God?

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_____

4. Does the word “authority” have a positive or negative connotation for you? Why?

_____

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_____

Paul addresses the topic of authority in 2 Corinthians chapter 10. In verses 1-6, he says, ***“I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ - I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! - I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.”***

5. How do the words Paul uses relate to authority?

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6. How do we see a lot of these traits in the life of Jesus (John chapter 13 – Jesus washes His disciples’ feet; Philippians 2:5-11)?

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John Stott said, “The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned

persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve."

7. Do you agree with this quote or how would you modify it?

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_____
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8. How does Ephesians 6:10-20 compliment this section?

_____
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9. How does spiritual warfare relate to authority?

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10. What does it mean to ***"take every thought captive?"*** How does Romans 12:1-2 relate?

_____
_____
_____

In verses 7-12, Paul continues, ***"Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.' Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when***

present. Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding."

11. According to this paragraph, what is one of the goals of authority?

_____

_____

_____

Paul closes the chapter in verses 13-18, ***"But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."***

12. How does this section relate to authority?

_____

_____

_____

13. What does ***"our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged"*** mean?

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In 1 Chronicles 4:10, we read, ***"Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!' And God granted what he asked."***

14. How does this verse relate?

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_____

_____

15. How do you (or God) want your sphere of influence to enlarge?

_____

_____

_____

"Authority exercised with humility, and obedience
accepted with delight
are the very lines
along which our spirits live."
C.S. Lewis

COMMAND

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Pat Rowland

"You better not be texting me in that tone of voice!" Have you ever felt like saying that back to a friend, spouse, or your teenager? Better yet, have you ever been misunderstood in a text or email due to the fact that your tone, facial expression, and body language were absent from the message? I am a fairly direct person, especially when I go into task mode and need to clear my email inbox. A few years ago, I was sitting with the staff team I was leading and we had just finished taking a strengths finder assessment. One of my top strengths is "command" and after reading about it I said to the team, "I am not sure this is really me." They started laughing and proceeded to read out loud text messages and emails from me. Absent from those messages was the heart and tone in which I was sending them. I was grateful for their grace and willingness to help me see a blind spot in my leadership.

As we move into chapter ten of 2 Corinthians, we see there is a different tone with Paul as he defends his ministry against a group that questioned his authority and heart toward the Church. One of their arguments is based on the strong tone in Paul's letter to the church as opposed to his behavior in their presence. There is a tension for anyone in a church leadership role when it comes to leading and discipling, similar to that of a parent-child relationship. The leader cares yet at times has to strongly speak to explain the importance of the message.

As imperfect people, sinners by nature, we will always drift towards the need for correction. The source of that correction is not the messenger, but the message. When we recognize that the battle is

not with the messenger, we can begin to see our own blind spots and need for change. The Gospel leads to repentance, or at least that is the purpose of proclaiming it to the world. Paul says in verse 8, ***"For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed."***

The next time you listen to a sermon or teaching, focus on the message of the Scripture, not the person delivering it. As humble servants of Christ, they are trying to build you up with spiritual discipline through the Gospel. Unless we are willing to support a spiritual disciplining, that discipline will be largely ineffective.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Pat Bedell

I feel Satan is becoming more prevalent in today's society. Satan has been using media, money, fear, and idolatry to creep into the souls of people changing their morals and inherently, making people question their existence altogether. Satan has been at work tempting people to sin and it has been devastating. One of the more common sins of the world is idolizing something other than God.

In 2 Corinthians 10:7, we read, ***"Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we."*** Breaking this down by sentence, the first statement is questioning, ***"What is before your eyes?"*** I know that I am not the only one who scrolls Facebook and finds himself watching dessert recipes or cats getting scared by cucumbers. I know that I am not alone when I fear a virus or wish to be wealthy beyond my means. Also, I certainly know that some people turn on the TV and wish to be famous and live a ritzy lifestyle. To be real, there are very real struggles and addictions to pornography. To be quite honest and frank, this is all garbage that can fill our hearts and minds. It teaches us to idolize those that are not God and it makes us blind to all of the blessings that the Lord has given us. It destroys marriages and splits families.

The second sentence states that if you are confident that you are a believer, then remind yourself constantly that you are so. To make it easier on yourself, if you put yourself in God's Word more often than you fill your eyes with other distractions, not only will you fix your eyes on God and receive the Living Word, you will also be constantly reminded of God's love for you. It has the power to transform you in a

way that transcends all understanding. He can break addictions and strongholds that weigh you down. He forgives and loves and takes away your sin so you can have everlasting life.

Challenging yourself to be better is always a great idea. Challenging yourself to follow what God wants for you in your life is the greatest way you can honor His leadership. Challenge yourself to take away the distractions. Set a time to fast from technology. Shut off the computer, turn your phone off for the day, and find yourself in the Word. Idolize God for He is your creator. Find yourself learning and listening to what God has to speak into your life. Find yourself taking a step further in your walk with God.

THINK

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

One of my favorite phrases is, "Think about what you are thinking about." What consumes your mind? We can check our credit card statement or checkbook to see where we are spending our money, but do we take the time to evaluate what is passing through our ears and pulling up a chair?

In 2 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul challenges the believers in reminding them that the battle is spiritual and the "high ground" is the mind. Verses 3-6 record, ***"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete."***

I enjoy how Paul describes how they would ***"destroy arguments"*** and ***"take every thought captive to obey Christ."*** This can definitely be a devotion to the importance of apologetics (defending the faith), but there can be more.

Negativity, inferiority, anger, hate, envy, fear, self-centeredness, sadness, and loneliness can break us down emotionally, physically, and even spiritually. We need to ***"take every thought captive"*** and listen to God's Word.

Romans 12:2 commands, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing***

you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." The more you think about what you are thinking about, you will see trends and ***"destroy arguments"*** before they establish residence in your inner being.

Philippians 4:8 reminds us that what we think about is a choice. Paul says, ***"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*** In Colossians 3:2, he adds, ***"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."***

Finally, in Romans 8:5-6, Paul says, ***"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."*** Life and peace sound better than death.

Think about what you are thinking about!

WEAPONS OF THE FLESH

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ryan Story

I have a really bad habit. That bad habit is I am good with conflict. The really bad thing about this is I spent more years living in the flesh and I developed really bad habits. I know I can be manipulative, decisive, and prone to get a person off focus by destroying premises with logic. These are all things I struggle with and fight to not live in that world. Now, luckily for me, Christ has come and cleansed me of my sins and helps me daily to be more like Him. Paul says, ***"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds"*** (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)

When Paul is talking about warfare here, he is not talking about weapons of his own fists being used as a means to an end. The weapons Paul is telling the church of Corinth he is not using are the weapons that the flesh use. These are those weapons you pull out when you intend to hurt, manipulate, or take advantage of a person during a conflict. For Paul, he refuses to use any of these tactics to defend his apostlehood with these weapons, but this got me thinking, well what could these weapons be?

In the last chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul lists what we call "the armor of God." Those weapons are the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the Gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:10-20). These are the weapons God has given us to fight off the schemes of the devil and to live spiritually victorious lives found only in Christ. While I can only make a reader's observation, I feel that Paul's claim that he ***"does not fight with the flesh"*** was his

exoneration and might have also been an indictment on the Corinth church. I often wonder what those weapons of the flesh might have been.

Any time we see flesh, worldly, or the enemy in the Bible, we can conclude these are the opposite ways that God wants us to go. So, if we look at the armor of God, I think we could make some good guesses at what the weapons of the flesh may be:

• Instead of the belt of truth, the flesh fights with lies, half-truths, and deception.

• Instead of the breastplate of righteousness, the flesh fights with pride and self-conceit.

• Instead of the shoes of the Gospel, the flesh fights with "nice words" instead of truth revolving around Jesus.

• Instead of the shield of faith, the flesh fights with a flimsy truth of the need to be right or in control.

• Instead of the helmet of salvation, the flesh fights with the cowardice of not having trust in tomorrow.

• Instead of the sword of the Spirit ("which is the word of God"), the flesh fights with opinions, human schemes, programs, and propaganda.

In all these weapons of the flesh, they do not bring unity, peace, or the love of Jesus into difficult situations. What weapons do you bring into battle with you when sin brings you into a disagreement with another person? Are you sharpening the weapons of your carnality and flesh or weapons that God has given you to bring a victory in the name of Jesus?

GOOD BOASTING, BAD BOASTING

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 5

John Rigg

"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." Matthew 24:23–24

So yes, Jesus warns us that not every pastor, Christian on Facebook, or Bible Study in the Christian bookstore is authentic. This may seem like an odd statement, but the Apostle Paul struggled with this same problem in his day. In 2 Corinthians 10:17–18, Paul writes, ***"'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."***

Paul was fighting against false prophets and teachers that were trying to discredit him and his message. He is teaching us how we can spot them.

First, false prophets will always boast in themselves. Christian leaders today will often communicate that they are the only ones who can understand the Word of God or interpret it accurately, thus commending themselves. Of course, their messages and teachings are almost always mingled with truth to keep their deception going.

Secondly, Paul says that you can also recognize a false teacher by their motives. In 2 Corinthians 10:14-16, he says, ***"For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But***

our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence."

Paul and his disciples were always concerned with the furtherance of the Gospel and increasing the faith of others. This is not the motive of false teachers. Their gospel is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ but one that is designed to draw people to themselves and away from Jesus.

Next, Paul uses the phrase, ***"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*** He somewhat summarizes Jeremiah chapter 9 that prophesied the coming destruction of Judah, a people that were great at looking good on the outside but lacking in the true knowledge of God and His holy character. Paul was reminding us that the true prophet of God will align his character with that of a Holy God. His inside will match the outside. If Paul boasted, it was in the Lord. It was "good boasting" as God is the One who shapes our hearts and character (Psalm 33:15).

Finally, Paul issues a warning for bad boasting, ***"For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."*** Paul is eluding to a previous statement made in this letter, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil"*** (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Deception is out there, hopefully, through Paul's teaching, you and I are now better equipped to recognize the difference between good boasting and bad.

LED BY GOD, NOT THE FLESH

LESSON FIFTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Patrick Bicknell

Have you ever been mocked? Have people ever said things about you that you know to be false? How do you handle these situations? It can be very difficult, hurt us, and cause us to want to lash out and follow our fleshly desires to respond in those moments. Paul is experiencing that in 2 Corinthians chapter 10.

Starting in verse 2, Paul addresses some of what people at the church of Corinth are saying about him. We do not know the full context of what was said because we only hear one side of the argument, but we do see that they accused Paul and who he is with as walking according to the flesh or following their sinful desires rather than following God. When we are put in this situation all of us want to respond in a way that defends ourselves, regardless if we respond in a hateful way. This could be about what someone says personally about us, our faith, our political parties, our families, or whatever it may be. We have this human desire to stand up for ourselves, which is a good thing, but oftentimes we do it in a way that exemplifies a life that is led by the flesh and not God.

Paul, in verses 3-4, addresses how they live their life. He says that we walk in the flesh meaning that they are human beings like everyone else who struggles with sin, but they are not waging war according to the flesh. William Barclay puts it like this, “It is as if he said, ‘I am a human with a human body, but I never allow myself to be dominated by purely human motives.’” He also says that his weapons are not of the flesh but from God and that they take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Paul does not tell us to not respond to people who bring up false accusations about our own personal faith, or of God, but he tells us to respond while also being careful with every thought and intention we have to obey Christ. We are able to do this when we are led by the Spirit and not our own flesh.

Social media makes it very easy to say whatever we want and in any way we want when responding to people who bring up this stuff about us. We need to be intentional to obey Christ in these moments. We must not be surprised when this happens to us as Jesus says in John chapter 15, ***"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you"*** (John 15:18). Be led by the spirit and not the flesh in all areas of your life.

LESSON SIXTEEN

THE REAL DEAL

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-15

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I am tired of phone scams. It has gotten to a point that most people will not answer their cell phones if they do not know who is calling.

Fake, scam, counterfeit, false, bogus, fabricated, phony, fictitious, pseudo, and artificial are words that can create harsh emotions in us if we thought something was authentic.

1. When have you experienced a fraudulent situation or product?

_____

_____

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In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul takes time to prove that he was authentic with them. He also points out that there are some other "spiritual leaders" who are not preaching the truth about Jesus. In verses 1-6, he says, ***"I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things."***

2. What is ***"a divine jealousy?"*** How can that be healthy?

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3. Paul uses the image of marriage. How does that relate to the topic of authenticity?

_____
_____
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4. What warning does Paul give about the message of others?

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_____

In 2 Corinthians 11:7-11, Paul explains how he was real with them. He says, ***"Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!"***

5. What can be the perception with something being "free?"

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_____
_____

6. How can this affect the Gospel?

_____
_____
_____

7. How open is Paul in talking about money and giving?

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8. Is the giving of money talked about too much or too little in the church? Is it an important topic? What suggestions would you give?

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Paul becomes more pointed in 2 Corinthians 11:12-15, ***"And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."***

9. How does Paul describe these other "apostles?"

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10. What is the ***"claim"*** of these other "apostles?" How is their message different from Paul's?

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11. What does Paul say about their end?

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_____

"Authentic Christianity
is a roller-coaster ride,
not a merry-go-round."
Mark Hart

SWING TOWARD TRUTH

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Noble Baird

Have you ever been upset with someone for not following your advice or listening to you? I remember back when I was just a kid, my parents would always tell me, “Don’t jump off the swings.” They would tell me this whenever I was going to elementary school or going to my cousins; the two places I frequented most with swings! One day, while at my cousins, he convinced me that it would be the perfect day to see if we could swing and jump over his parents’ house. I know what you are thinking as you read this and you are probably right! However, we thought for sure that the weather was perfect and we had enough confidence that day to clear my cousin’s house, unscathed.

As we continue in on our series going through 2 Corinthians, we come to this passage where Paul is warning both the church and even us today! He writes in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3, ***“For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”*** I love how Paul writes of his ***“divine jealousy”*** toward the church. He is showing how much he cares and loves the church and desires for them to not stray. This reminds me of God's jealous love for us in Exodus 20:5. Paul is desiring this, not only for the warning and guidance he gave but more importantly the Gospel and ultimately Christ, as we see in verse three, ***“But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”***

You can probably guess what ended up happening to me that day that my cousin and I tried jumping over his house - a broken arm. Today, I hope you will heed my warning as I echo the words of Paul. Do not be deceived by the cunning and alluring things of this world and of Satan. Listen to the warnings and guidance of your brothers and sisters in Christ, of your pastors, and ultimately and most importantly, God's Word. We are called to this beautiful relationship and marriage with Christ. The world is full of temptation and deception. Today, I pray that you will remember the Gospel of Jesus. I pray that you will not be led astray by the things of this world; and if you have, that today would be the day that you remember His truth and turn back to His goodness and love.

FOLLOW THIS JESUS

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Sierra Combs

Here we are, 2,000 years later, and the patterns of life in the Church still ring true. The culture may look drastically different, but the problems addressed by Jesus and His apostles are still incredibly relevant. We see this throughout all of the different epistles (letters) written to the churches, and we have been focusing on Paul's words to the Corinthian church here in this study. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, we stumble upon a big issue. I wish that I could say that this was only an issue back then, one that we have worked out by now, but unfortunately it is a problem that has continued to grow like wildfire. Even worse, many Christians are not even aware of the problem and, perhaps worst of all, many people who claim to be Christians are actually deceived, not actually knowing the true Jesus of the Bible and His true saving Gospel. If that is not downright heartbreaking and terrifying, I do not know what is. We need to wake up and we need to pay attention.

In 2 Corinthians 11:2-4, Paul begs his audience to listen, ***"For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough."*** We need to stop right there for a second. He warns of false teachers who bring ***"another Jesus"*** or ***"a different gospel."*** I am sure many of us can think of some extreme false teachers who obviously present the case

for another Jesus and a different Gospel. We know of men who claim to be Jesus in the flesh or the idea that Jesus was a good person and even a prophet but He was not God, or that Jesus was the God of this Earth but if we live good enough, we will become gods in the next lifetime. These are obvious cases of false Jesuses and false gospels. Yet, the deception runs so deep that there are such subtle false gospels that have crept into the Church, and you may not even realize they have crept into your own life and beliefs.

I could talk about this subject for hours, maybe even days. It was a topic that never really crossed my mind until I started to see it creep into the lives of those around me, even some close friends, and I watched the deception take over their lives and cause absolute devastation. If you place your foundation on a false Jesus and a false gospel, it would not take long until your whole life falls apart and you fall away. This has been devastating for me to see, and it really has opened my eyes to see how many people are being led astray. I will not spend hours on this devotion and will keep it short, but I encourage you to talk to your pastor about these things. Most importantly, read the Word diligently and see what it actually says. Ask the Lord to reveal areas in your life where you might be deceived, and ask Him to give you wisdom with how to lovingly share the true Gospel with others.

I want to talk about a few of the subtle “other Jesuses” that are being presented and celebrated in churches around the country today. If you identify with one, my goal is not to offend you, but to present you with the opportunity to think about it and address it. Do not just take it from me, see what the Bible has to say about it. I once saw a tweet by Owen Strachan that I thought summed it up brilliantly, “There are many fake Christs out there: Walmart Jesus (costs nothing). Self-help Jesus (improves life). Prosperity Jesus (gives riches). Life

Coach Jesus (pumps you up). Gender-fluid Jesus (peccable). Follow the true Jesus instead."

Please hear me out. I am not saying the true Jesus of the Bible does not offer some of these things, but it was not why He came. The free gift of salvation is in fact free. We cannot earn it or buy it by any of our good works (which is another false gospel for another day), but following Jesus is costly. In Matthew 10:38-39, Jesus says, ***"Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."***

We have to die to our flesh and desires daily and take up our cross. To follow the true Jesus we must give Him our utmost attention and affection, trusting Him fully. He must come before everything else. Jesus certainly does improve life, but not usually in the earthly way that we might think or desire. Jesus tells His true followers that we will be hated by the world, just as He was hated. If you are being embraced and celebrated by our worldly society, something is wrong, and you need to address it. True Christians live in the world but not of it. We should look different, act different, and be different. That usually does not end up with an easy-breezy life. When it comes to riches, God can and does bless people in all kinds of ways, some of which might be earthly riches. It is ok to be rich, just as it is ok to be poor. However, Jesus did not come to make you financially wealthy on this Earth, and anyone who preaches that is a liar. Jesus does call us to be content with whatever we have, whether it is a lot or a little. Do not fall for the lie that says if you are not wealthy, you are doing something wrong spiritually. Instead, be thankful for what God has given you and in everything that you have, give glory to God.

When you look at the disciples or apostles, Jesus' closest friends, look at how their lives ended. They were poor, beaten down, persecuted, and all but one was brutally murdered for their faith in the true Jesus. Why should we expect any less? Stop building your life on the false Jesus above and follow the true Jesus instead - the one who came and died for you on a cross because you are a wretched sinner destined for Hell if not for the intervention of a Heavenly Father who loves you, and who rose again on the third day so that you could also be raised up to new life.

Call out to this Jesus, one who wants to save you from your sin and reconcile you to the Father. He is the One who calls you to repentance and gives you hope for a better and perfect life to come. He is the One who will give you His Holy Spirit to guide and to help you, to sanctify you, and make you look less like you and more like the Holy Jesus. He is the One who gave you His Word that so you can read it, memorize it, and know what He has already spoken. Finally, He is the One who will strengthen you to take up your cross and live for Him in a world that will hate you.

This is the Jesus that saves. Follow Him. Matthew 7:13-14 says, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*** It will not be easy, but I promise, it will be worth it!

COUNTERFEIT

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

I am a nerd. The thing I love the most about being a nerd is you do not have to play it cool about how much you love something. I love comic books, and I have no problem telling anyone. I love video games, and I have no problem saying there has only been one person who attends The River Church who has been able to beat me in Super Smash Brothers, and I tip my hat to that man. One of the nerdier things I ever got into was a CCG of a popular anime. For the 98 percent of people who do not know what I just said, I got really into a collectible card game based on the Japanese cartoon Yu-Gi-Oh. Again, the beautiful thing about being a nerd, I do not have to apologize for that.

Through my time playing this game, I ended up wanting something called an "Egyptian god card" (basically, a super rare card to get), and one day I found someone who was willing to trade me. I was pumped to add this card to my collection, and upon inspecting the card to ensure it was in mint condition, I realized that the card this guy was trying to trade me was a counterfeit card. The color scheme was off, there was no registered trademark, and the company that produced the cards (Konami) was spelled wrong. Luckily for me, I was able to not fall for this guy's fake card and I did not trade something of real value for that counterfeit.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul is explaining to the church of Corinth that some of the people the church thought were amazing godly influences were in fact horrible, divisive enemies of the church. In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, we read, ***"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as***

apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."

Throughout Paul's ministry, Paul was constantly defending his apostleship against those who sought to diminish Paul's God-given authority. In this situation in 2 Corinthians, I believe Paul was combating Palestinian Jews who were claiming to be backed by the church of Jerusalem, who was overemphasizing spiritual gifts and used their abilities to be great speakers to sway the Corinthians away from the true message that Paul had taught them.

One of the scariest realities about the spiritual life is that we have a real enemy. Throughout the Bible we can read that our enemy is a liar (John 8:44), scheming (2 Corinthians 2:11), opposing the progress of the church (Ephesians 6:10), spreading false doctrines (1 Timothy 4:1), seeking to destroy (1 Peter 5:8), inspiring false teachers (1 John 4:1-4), and deceiving the entire world (Revelation 12:9). With all those horrible attributes, we often think that the devil shrouds himself in the shadows sneaking around in darkness destroying and corrupting, but that is not entirely true. When Paul is warning the church of Corinth about these agents of the devil, he tells them that they ***"disguised themselves as apostles"*** because even ***"Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."*** The devil disguises himself, his methods, and his lies in light. The devil uses counterfeit godliness as a means to destroy the church from within. That is terrifying.

The devil preys on those who are not paying attention. The devil creeps in unnoticed because the church is not standing guard. We allow those who tickle our ear to gain control of our trust. The devil

does not sneak in the back door, he walks right in the front offering us counterfeit godliness.

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." James 4:7-10

BETROTHAL, PURITY, FALSE TEACHERS

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Donna Fox

I had the privilege of witnessing a purity ring ceremony at our church many years ago. It was a sweet time for the families wherein the teenage girls vowed to remain pure for marriage. The father gave the daughter a purity ring to wear on her left ring finger until the day of her wedding. I later witnessed one of these girls on her wedding day, when she came down the aisle, as her father gave her over to her groom, she removed the ring and returned it to her father. Of course, at the wedding ceremony, that ring was replaced with a ring from her groom.

The idea behind such a ceremony is for the ring to be a reminder of a promise, or covenant, that has been made to remain pure and undefiled, in anticipation of the groom she would someday marry.

This is what Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians 11:2-4. ***"For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough."*** The church is the bride, Jesus is the bridegroom. We, as the church, are to remain pure and undefiled until the bridegroom (Jesus) returns for us.

In Jewish culture, the bride-to-be and the groom-to-be are betrothed in marriage. We would say they became engaged. However, unlike

our engagements which are sometimes called off, the Jewish betrothal was a binding covenant. The betrothal was a time for the bride to dedicate herself to her groom. She spends a year preparing to be taken home with her groom. During this time, the groom is preparing their home. The father of the groom decides when the time is right for the groom to return and get his bride, and the marriage ceremony occurs.

Paul is comparing remaining pure during the betrothal to remaining pure while we await Christ's return. To remain pure, we must stay true to the Gospel, not listening to false teachers. These false teachers will teach of ***"another Jesus," "a different spirit,"*** and ***"a different gospel."*** We must always be alert to ensure that what we read and hear lines up with Scripture. Being in the Word is the only way to know the truth. Compare for yourself and be aware when something does not line up to Scripture.

The world is full of false teachers. The evil one wants nothing more than to lead you astray with what sounds like the truth but is sprinkled with a bit of untruth. As Paul referenced in 2 Corinthians 11:3, in Genesis chapter 3 the serpent used his cunning to deceive Eve and make it sound like truth, with a slight twist!

Once you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are betrothed to Him. You are to remain pure to Him and Him alone. Do not stray off to false teachers. Stay alert and in the Word, in preparation for the day that the Father will send His Son to return to take His bride. On that day, you will hypothetically remove the "purity ring" and replace it with the "marriage ring" of the groom. What a glorious day that will be for those that have been betrothed (saved)!

KISS

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I remember reading a golf article that gave some hints on how to distract your opponent. I was never a fan of this. One of them was to warn your opponent of any dangers. It sounds nice, but it is a mind game. I know as a coach that the last statement I want to leave with one of my athletes is a positive thought. Therefore, getting an opponent to think negative "gets in their head." Warn them of water on the left and they will often hit the ball into the water or go way right. In their mind, they are saying, "Don't pull it. Don't go left. Don't go in the water." All they are thinking about is going left and they probably will.

We tend to complicate things. In sports, we take our eye off the ball, we overthink a situation, or we get too focused on the non-essentials. In farming, while plowing a field, you need to keep looking forward. Even in life, doing onto others as you would want to be done to you is pretty basic. It reminds me of the acronym KISS- Keep It Simple Stupid (I was not allowed to use the word "stupid" as a kid).

In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, Paul's concern is that the believers are complicating the Gospel. He says, ***"But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough."*** The serpent was able to get Eve sidetracked by changing God's words ever so slightly. She missed the big picture and became consumed with a

tree that should have been a no-brainer. Likewise, the believers were listening to false prophets who were adding to the Gospel. They were feeling like the death of Jesus was not enough.

I have watched believers today get so consumed with the Holy Spirit (gifts and blessings), that they miss what Jesus did and offers. They like the idea of what they can get from the Holy Spirit, instead of what they can do for the Lord. It becomes about them, just as it did with Eve and Adam.

We need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Paul already told them the message in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, ***"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."*** The Gospel, which is the work of Jesus Christ, is of first importance. Stick to the facts. Do not complicate things. Keep it, simple sister. Keep it simple son. Keep it, simple students. Keep it, simple seniors. Keep it, simple saints.

EASILY MISLED

LESSON SIXTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Roger Allen

America:

The land of abundance.
The "home of the free."
A place where people of various backgrounds call their home.
Where Eastern and Western cultures come together creating a "melting pot" of divergent ideas.
A mix of all races, creeds, and colors with the potential of explosive outcomes.

Yet, with all our differences, we find ourselves on the common ground quite often. We as a nation, have become enamored with slick productions, sharp tongues, and shallow thought. We often prefer to be led by our pocketbook, instead of by a sincere thoughtfulness for our fellow man. Easily led, we are prone to wander from the course that God has asked of us. Using the trappings of the world as our benchmark, we quickly lose sight of the truth.

Thomas Mudloff wrote, "The city was young, dynamic, not hidebound by tradition, a mix of dislocated individuals without strong ethnic identities seeking to shed their former low status by achieving social honor and material success." He was speaking about the city of Corinth during Paul's time. Does that sound familiar?

What Paul found at that time, was a young and vibrant city. It was a city that less than 200 years prior, had been leveled by the Romans, only to be repopulated 100 years before his arrival. People from the

likes of Italy, Greece, Syria, Egypt, and Judaea, made up the bulk of who lived there. It was a veritable "melting pot," you may say.

The reason I made these comparisons is I wanted you to see how relative the Bible truly is to this day. The city that Paul found almost 2000 years ago, culturally, would be akin to what we find here in the U.S. today. There was a mix of different people searching to move up the ladder, both socially and economically in a place where it was possible. They were a people easily led astray from the simple truth of the Gospel while searching for economic independence. This is where we find Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. In his letter to the Church of Corinth, Paul pleads his case to those that question his authority in the church. Usurping his leadership, they have caused a schism to weaken the church to the point of breaking. By using the rhetoric of the day, they have swayed many to follow them in search of a false Gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, we read Paul's response, ***"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."***

In an ironic twist, we see Paul using a rhetorical argument to convey a simple truth; his undying love for them has made him "jealous" for their well-being. Hiding behind the mask of a false narrative, we see

those that have raised Paul's ire. Swift talking, physically impressive, a commanding tone, and the use of rhetoric, has given them an air of authority. If Paul is to prevail, he first must have an answer for these slick talkers. Maybe they had promised those that followed them, wealth, fortune, and fame or some other worldly pleasure. "For a dollar today, you may receive two tomorrow," may have been what Paul was battling against. Also, using as an example of their superiority, was the demand to be recompensed for their crooning. One thing we know, Paul was having none of it! Using "fire to fight fire" Paul destroys their arguments.

So my question to you is, who is your Paul? Who have you put in your life that will speak the truth to you and defend you from those that only have their best interests at heart? Do you have that person or persons, that defends the true Gospel for your sake?

Do you have one that comes fully armored up to protect and defend against those who would denigrate the simplicity of the Gospel? Or, are you being swayed by those that only have their own well-being in mind when they speak sweet nothings in your ear? Each one of us have a responsibility to get this right and to make sure we are not being influenced by others who have ulterior motives. This might include us. Have we allowed the chase for the American dream, social justice, and respect, to complicate the Gospel of Jesus? May I say to you, that the Gospel remains free, simple, and available to everyone who calls on the name of Jesus Christ and believes.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

LESSON SEVENTEEN

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, QUIT

2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-33

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

The list of trials Abraham Lincoln endured is well-documented *(Forbes, Henry Ford College, Snopes, Library of Congress).* His persistence could be the topic for any motivational speech. He refused to quit.

1816: His family was forced out of their home. At age 8, he had to work to support them.
1818: His mother died.
1831: Failed in business.
1832: Ran for state legislature – lost.
1832: Lost his job.
1832: Applied to law school - denied.
1833: Borrowed some money from a friend to begin a business and by the end of the year he was bankrupt. He spent the next 17 years of his life paying off this debt.
1835: Was engaged to be married, sweetheart died and his heart was broken.
1836: Had a total nervous breakdown and was in bed for six months.
1838: Sought to become speaker of the state legislature – defeated.
1840: Sought to become elector – defeated.
1843: Ran for Congress – lost.
1846: Ran for Congress again – this time he won.
1848: Ran for re-election to Congress – lost.
1849 Sought the job of land officer in his home state – rejected.
1854: Ran for Senate of the United States – lost.
1856: Sought the Vice-Presidential nomination at his party's national convention – got less than 100 votes.
1858: Ran for U.S. Senate again – again he lost.
1860: Elected president of the United States.

1. What stands out to you in the life of Abraham Lincoln?

_____
_____
_____

2. What struggles have you overcome?

_____
_____
_____

3. Who has been an inspiration in your life? Why?

_____
_____
_____

The list of trials the Apostle Paul endured is well-documented (2 Corinthians chapter 11). His persistence could be the topic for any motivational speech. He refused to quit.

Before he listed some of his challenges, he started defending his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11:16-21a, he says, ***"I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!"***

4. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul uses the word “boast” ten times. What kind of things could Paul boast about?

_____
_____
_____

5. What kind of boasting is acceptable?

_____
_____
_____

In 2 Corinthians 11:21b-29, Paul mentions some of the things he endured, ***“But whatever anyone else dares to boast of - I am speaking as a fool - I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?”***

List what happened to Paul:
Five Times _____
Three Times _____
One Time _____
Three Times _____
One Time _____

6. Why did Paul experience these tragedies? Were they a choice?

_____
_____
_____

7. What would your list include? Were they a choice?

_____
_____
_____

Paul closes the discussion with an interesting story in 2 Corinthians 11:30-33, ***"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands."***

8. Acts 9:23-25 describes Paul's escape. Describe the situation. Why did it happen?

_____
_____
_____

9. Finally, thinking of Paul's life, how are actions often stronger than words?

_____

_____

_____

"My great concern is not whether you have failed,
but whether you are content with your failure."
Abraham Lincoln

BOASTING

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 1

Mark O'Connor

"I am not one to boast, but…"

These words usually precede the telling of a story that makes the person speaking very proud of themselves. It is usually a quite prideful and self-inflating story consisting of a "look what I did" or a "look how great I am" theme. We see in 2 Corinthians 11:16, Paul begins the section with these words, ***"I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little."***

Our boasting is typically foolish. We live in a culture that focuses on look at what I did and how much better I am than you. I am as guilty of it as anybody of the one-upmanship of boasting to tell a bigger or better story compared to someone else's.

Paul is speaking a little differently here. We see earlier in this letter that the validity of Paul's ministry and claim as an Apostle was being challenged. Earlier in chapter 11, Paul addressed the false teachers that were being given a stage to teach a misleading and false gospel that did not line with the teaching of Jesus or the message spread by Paul in his preaching. In verse 4, he says that they ***"put up with it readily enough."***

So, in verses 16-33, we see Paul do something that he never does. It seems a challenge to the Church in Corinth. They sit listening to Paul's teaching as he kind of goes into a passive-aggressive rant. In essence, he says, "You want to listen to these people and the boasting, well listen to my resume."

He goes on to list the things he could claim as superior to those around him, starting with his lineage, his education. Paul lists his imprisonments and beatings. He tells of his shipwrecks and dangerous escapes from cities all to be able to continue the work of the Lord.

He basically says, "You want to listen to people boast? Here it goes." No doubt as the people of the church heard this, they were impressed with Paul's resume. More to the point, none of those who came through boasting of themselves before Paul could live up to that resume. Most would have given up after the first imprisonment or the first shipwreck. Paul pushed on.

Then Paul brings it back. He mentions his anxiety and worries for the churches. In verses 30-31, he says, ***"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying."***

God uses us in our strengths and weaknesses. It is in that weakness that He tends to use us for the greatest things. When we allow God to take control and we let Him work in all areas of our lives, we see Him use our weakness. Then we cannot possibly boast about how great we are. Not that I have arrived or speak or teach at a high level, but if you had seen me speak in front of hundreds of people ten years ago, you would have felt sorry for how poorly I did and how uncomfortable I looked. It is only by God's grace and power that I can stand on a stage and string together ten sentences. Allow God to move in your life and you will begin to see how little you and your accomplishments mean and you get to let the Lord use you in both your brokenness and your weakness.

ANXIOUS ABOUT THE CHURCH

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I saw an article recently entitled, *"The Top 5 Things People Worry About And How To Solve Them."* In the article, Sean Clarke describes the list as work, money, health, what others think, and the past. The first three sounded common, but I was intrigued by the last two answers. The list is pretty self-centered without any reference to caring about others.

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, Paul lists a number of items that would cause just about everyone some worry, ***"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."*** Paul had a reason for concern. He was constantly on the edge of death. He never knew what the storyline would be for the next chapter of his life.

However, verse 28 is where he caught my attention, ***"And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."*** Paul's problem was not about physical harm; it was his concern for the church. Paul experienced ***"anxiety"*** over the church. Was it possible for him to be too concerned about his people, the church?

Instead of an article about the top five things people worry about, how about writing out your top five prayer requests. Family, health, work, and finances might head up the list, but where do the church and your fellow brothers and sisters fit in your prayer time. Are you concerned about the church? Does the "anxiety" take you to your knees in prayer?

It has been said, "Worry is like a good rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere." In Philippians 4:6, Paul starts the verse by saying, ***"Do not be anxious about anything."*** Paul tells us not to be anxious, but he speaks of his own "anxiety" in 2 Corinthians chapter 11. The key is the last half of the verse, ***"But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."***

The key to handling worry and anxiety is to give it to God. We will have concerns of all sorts and hopefully one of those is the church. Therefore, it should drive us to prayer. Please pray for the church. Pray for the elders to follow God so close it is easy to lead the flock. Pray for your brothers and sisters, ***"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God"*** (Philippians 1:9-11).

Pray for each other to grow in love, wisdom, and the ways of God.

LOSING AT CHRISTIANITY

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Justin Dean

Growing up, if you spent any length of time around my family you would learn one thing fairly quickly, we are unyieldingly competitive. You could not measure the amount of blood, sweat, and mostly tears, my family shed in the name of winning in our home. It was not until I went to college that I realized that the competitive drive I had affected more than just games. I remember at the end of my first semester in college feeling so frustrated and defeated because I was not the best. It was not just when I was on the ultimate frisbee team or in playing basketball with the guys on my dorm floor, but also in my relationship with Christ.

I remember sitting and having conversations with people in the student dining room or in my room and trying to assert my dominance as a Christian, trying to prove why I was a big fish in the pond of Christ-followers. I remember feeling so crushed when I realized how little I knew. Eventually, my frustration got the best of me, and because I was so busy comparing my own spiritual life to the lives of those around me I gave up trying to deepen my walk with Christ. Eventually, one of my professors really convicted me and I learned of this passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 11:21b-28, ***"But whatever anyone else dares to boast of - I am speaking as a fool - I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was***

shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."

Paul saw the Church in Corinth was playing the comparison game, and he wanted to show them why it was unimportant. He takes a second and essentially says "It is foolishness to play this game, but if you want to play I will win every time." He wanted to show them how little value a competitive spiritual life has to offer. Someone else is always going to have the "greater" testimony, and so you will always be left feeling cheated and defeated. To feel that way about your walk with Christ is foolishness. It is so easy in our culture to hear stories and see others, and it lends itself to comparison, both outwardly and inwardly. Often times, rather than being caught up in the pride of being the best, we become depressed and paralyzed at the thought of being less than. That is not what Christ has for us.

How does Paul follow this up? In verse 30, he says, ***"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."*** He is saying, I endure all these things in the name of Christ, but what I really boast in is my weakness. Though you see all this strength as I am enduring hardships that make me such a "great Christian," honestly, I am just a loser, and at my loss and weakness, you all see Christ's strength win the day. We cannot let ourselves be consumed by competition to prove our "spiritual strength" but rather we should accept our weakness that we may be strengthened by Christ. We want to be the losers so that His win can be made evident and put on display. Sometimes it is better to lose.

WHY DO I VALUE THE WRONG THINGS?

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Roy Townsend

Have you ever asked yourself, "Why do I value the wrong things?" It is a big question that I ask myself over and over as I try to grow as a child of God. It seems to be a big question for a lot of people. The old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover," resonates with people because we often fall into that habit or trap. When I look at a cover on a book, when I look at a yard, when I look at how people are dressed, when I look at what car they drive, I am looking at the outward appearance. It is a difficult trap that we have to overcome.

In 1 Samuel 16:7, we read, ***"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'"*** Here we have the Lord's prophet Samuel going to Jesse's home to anoint the next King of Israel. However, we see that the Lord reminds Samuel not to "judge a book by its cover." King David was a man after God's own heart, but he was not the biggest, best, or most handsome of his brothers.

In 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, we read that the Corinthian church had fallen into this trap. They had been led away from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ by false teachers. They were valuing the wrong things, and it was leading them to the wrong place. This section of Scripture is very interesting where the Apostle Paul was trying to bring them back to the Lord, but since they were judging the false teachers to be greater than Paul in doing God's work, he gives what he calls is a "foolish" defense of all that Paul has done for God. The Corinthians were valuing the wrong things, so Paul gives quite a list of his accomplishments and sufferings on behalf of Jesus Christ.

In verse 22, he gives a defense of his pedigree. The false teachers claimed to come from a great Jewish line of descent. Paul reveals that he is a Hebrew, Israelite, and descendent of Abraham. Basically, he is saying that nobody could have a better Jewish pedigree. We find ourselves in the same predicament today. We value people who have the right background, went to the right schools, or have special people in their lineage. We continue to judge the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.

In verse 23, Paul compares this line of reasoning to that of a madman, but since the Corinthians value the wrong things, Paul makes an argument that he is a better servant of Christ and will boast about his "labors, imprisonments, and beatings."

- Five times receiving 39 lashes
- Three times beaten with rods
- One time stoned and dragged out of the city
- Three times shipwrecked and adrift at sea

In verse 26, Paul lists some generalized dangers that he faced as he went out to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was in danger from rivers, robbers, the Jews, the Gentiles, the city, the wilderness, and the false teachers. In addition, he had sleepless nights, was without food and water, and lived through cold and extreme temperatures. What Paul went through was very difficult compared to most of our experiences. Most of us have not been hunted, whipped, or shipwrecked for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ironsides wrote, "Because his (Paul's) own converts were being distressed and upset by such things, that he found it necessary to direct attention to the marks of his apostleship. He seeks to show that God Himself has put His stamp on his ministry by permitting him to suffer for Christ's sake."

We must guard ourselves against valuing others that have a better testimony, better pedigree, or a better story. We need to be led to be more like Christ in valuing a person's heart. Matthew 7:16-20 reads, ***"You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."*** These words in Matthew make the teaching clear that we will recognize good teaching through the fruits of their ministry.

WEAK CONNECTION PART 1

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Ryan Story

We live in a fascinating time. Part of our society still recalls what life was like before the technological boom of the internet, smartphones, and social media. Some of our society would have been in the epicenter of this boom, where part of their life was lived before all the technological breakthroughs. Also, there is a growing population of young people who have never lived in a world where Facebook, Netflix, Uber, Siri, and WiFi did not dominate one's culture. One of the biggest sociological phenomena is playing itself out right in front of us, and that is the ever-growing usage of social media. While this has been in play since MySpace came on the scene in 2003, close to twenty years later we are still surrounded with apps and programs that are meant to be used to bring us closer as people.

I feel there are positives and negatives about social media, and this devotion is not meant to be a soapbox on which I will rant and rave. However, one growing trend I have seen birthed out of the social media revolution is our necessity to always display the best. Think about what you post on your Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. More often than not it is meant to be something that reflects an event or moment that would get a "like." Even when we post our failures, goof-ups, or blunders, we are still hoping to show our less than perfect moments with the desired effect to prop up ourselves. Social media has created our culture (I am included) to live in a world of snapshots, reshoots, and filters. Unfortunately, when we are actually around people in a real scene, we forget how to be real or genuine.

I have often wondered what godly men and women of the past would think of our present-day culture. Now, I do still believe God is the sustainer of the world and is directing us on the path for His return and fulfillment of all Scripture. I often wonder what David, Solomon, Peter, and Paul would say about our world. Paul seems to be in contrast of modern display when he says, ***"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness"*** (2 Corinthians 11:30). In this section of Scripture, Paul is expressing to the church of Corinth, those who are challenging his authority, his apostleship, and his God-given ministry, that he has weaknesses. Not only does he have weaknesses, but he will also boast in the fact that he does.

Paul is saying something that I feel is truly revolutionary, and I can see why this truth comes from the guidance of God. Paul is not allowing himself to get caught up in the rat-race of comparison, competition, or desire of the fleeting limelight that comes with life. Paul is lowering himself and expressing that if he is going to boast or talk about himself, he is going to display only his downfalls, bad habits, and unmentionables. We live in a world that so desperately needs Christ. I worry about the effect social media has had on the members of God's church. Since there is this obsessive need to come off as an expert, put together, skilled, and loving your best life, we are merely boasting in ourselves and our accomplishments and accolades. The truly counter-cultural way Paul, moreover God's Word, is telling us that there is power in boasting in one's weakness. There is something truly Christlike about not needing to talk about how much we have it together.

THE COST

LESSON SEVENTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Holly Boston

It was my parents' divorce in 1995 that drew me to Christ. I was watching my father do things I knew were wrong. However, I did not remember him ever saying adultery and divorce were wrong. I began to question what I believed and knew my kids' beliefs needed to be based on more than my flawed example. The next five years of my life were riddled with trials: two surgeries, career change, multiple job losses, loss of our home, a cancer scare, and autism. In 1999, I called my sister and said, "If this is what life is like with Christ, I'm done." My brother-in-law said, " You gave your life to Christ and now you're ready to walk away and you don't even know Him." I will never forget his words. They sparked the beginning of me diving into the Bible and learning about the Jesus I serve.

I thought that when I accepted Christ as my Savior He would be with me (Hebrews 13:5), protect me (Isaiah 41:10), and provide for me (Philippians 4:19). What in the world did I sign up for? It did not take long for me to realize I was missing some important information.

The first verse I remember learning was James1:2, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."***

It is not "if" you have trials, but "when!" The Apostle Paul spent his life sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Rome making a way for countless gentiles to come to know Christ. I was stunned to read his resume of trials ranging from daily pressures to daily beatings and imprisonment (2 Corinthians 11:22-28). This man spent his life serving God in ways I never will and yet God allowed and even caused (2 Corinthians 12:6) strife throughout his ministry. With

all that he had been through, he makes an amazing statement in 2 Corinthians 11:30, ***"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."***

Paul states in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that he is ***"content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities."*** Paul had learned the important truth I had been missing. He understood that in those difficult times when he is pressed beyond measure, he is forced to be fully dependent on the Lord. It is in our dependence on Him that we experience His power. When we read Scripture, we must be careful to understand it in its entirety. James 1:2 does state that there will be trials but we need to keep reading, ***"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"*** (James 1:3-4).

Believer, we must not overlook the cost of a life lived for Christ. He does not promise an easy life but He does promise to always be with us (Matthew 28:20), a peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7), and unspeakable joy (1 Peter 1:8) in the midst of it all. My parents' divorce brought me to Christ and all the struggles since have helped me to know Him better and have transformed my life. Life with Christ is a rough road but this I know: The Rewards Far Outweigh The Cost!

LESSON EIGHTEEN

BLESSING OF TRIALS

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-21

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

There were 17.7 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures in 2018 *(American Society of Plastic Surgeons).* Of the total, 227,000 were teenagers (Yes, they start at age thirteen).

From ears, cheeks, nose, lips, chin, and eyes to the calves and everything in-between, a lot of people are not satisfied. I wonder what the percentage is of people getting a second cosmetic surgery as they search for perfection (or at least satisfaction).

1. Was there something about your looks you would have changed if you could have?

_____

_____

_____

2. Other than the physical, is there something you would like to change in your life now?

_____

_____

_____

In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul mentions something he wished he could have changed in his life. Verses 1-10 say, ***"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses - though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be***

speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

3. What do you think was Paul's ***"thorn?"***

_____

_____

_____

4. What was the purpose of the ***"thorn?"***

_____

_____

_____

My mind races to the movie *Karate Kid* as I envision, "Wax on, wax off." We often do not realize how today's struggles will lead to tomorrow's success.

"God has a purpose for trials and testings."
Warren Wiersbe

"So surely as the stars are fashioned by His hands,
and their orbits fixed by Him,
so surely are our trials allotted to us:
He has ordained their season and their place,
their intensity and the effect they shall have upon us."
Charles Spurgeon

5. What is God's response to Paul's request to have his thorn removed?

_____
_____
_____

6. How do you feel when it appears God is silent to your requests?

_____
_____
_____

7. How can this passage be helpful in your life?

_____
_____
_____

"Trials come to prove and improve us."
Augustine

Even though Paul was struggling, he did not want to be a burden on anyone else. In 2 Corinthians 12:11-18, he writes, ***"I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what were you less favored than the rest of***

the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?"

8. How many times does Paul refer to not wanting to be a burden or taking advantage of the Corinthian church?

_____

_____

_____

9. People can often be labeled as "givers" or "takers." What are some signs or characteristics of which one we are?

_____

_____

_____

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 12:19-21, Paul warns the believers, ***"Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish - that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again my God may***

humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced."

10. According to this passage, what was one of the reasons Paul was speaking to them the way he was?

_____

_____

_____

11. What was Paul's concern?

_____

_____

_____

In 3 John 1:4, we read, ***"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."***

"Faith upholds a Christian under all trials,
by assuring him that every painful dispensation
is under the direction of his Lord;
that chastisements are a token of His love;
that the season, measure, and continuance of his sufferings,
are appointed by Infinite Wisdom,
and designed to work for his everlasting good;
and that grace and strength shall be afforded him,
according to his need."
John Newton

WEAK CONNECTION PART 2

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

I stated in my last devotion that I feel that our culture struggles to display weakness. We look at shortcomings and weaknesses as shameful. Paul is lowering himself and expressing that if he is going to boast or talk about himself, he is going to display only his downfalls, bad habits, and unmentionables. Sociology and leadership 101 teaches that people connect more with a person that is real, rather than one who is fake. We are all capable of having this internal feeling about someone's authenticity. One of the biggest downfalls with the social media age is that this feeling has been skewed. We live in a culture that has produced an illusion of closeness and an illusion of what a person is. More people will admit now that they feel less connected on a personal level despite the overabundance of connection via social media. Likewise, the validity of a person's "realness" is skewed by what is posted to social media. No one has the Pinterest perfect house, those projects took work. No one has those Instagram perfect rock hard abs, that took hours of working out and strictness of a diet. We might follow those influences on social media, or may even aspire to that house or healthy lifestyle (those are not bad things), but we do not truly connect with what we see because there is this lacking of authenticity.

In 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, we read, ***"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak,***

then I am strong." Paul is the model of authentic leadership here with the church of Corinth. Paul is not being an influential leader by talking about all of his victories, accomplishments, or merit. Paul is influencing by boasting in his weakness, boasting in the fact that this weakness was still ever-present, and boasting that because of his weakness the "power of Christ rests upon" him.

As Christians, the reason we are transparent about our weaknesses, shortcomings, and struggles is not to play the martyr card, but rather to display that we are in genuine need of our Savior's strength to be the power we rely on to make it through life. Paul shows us the power of being genuine. It is perfectly acceptable to admit you struggle. Let me just put something out there, if you are a Christian and redeemed by the work of Jesus on the cross, you had come to a place in life where you realized you struggled and you were in need of saving. Welcome to the church, the central message we preach is humanity's need for being saved by an all-powerful, loving God. We all need Jesus. That "weakness" is what connects us all. We should all be living lives where we desire to have the power of Christ in us.

GRACE, GRACE, GOD'S GRACE

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 2

Debbie Gabbara

As I read through 2 Corinthians chapter 12 in preparation for writing this devotion, an old hymn began to run through my mind. It is a song that tells of God's grace. God's love for us is matchless and His grace is greater than all our sin.

Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.
Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe!
You that are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

The measure of God's grace is unfathomable. While we were sinners and completely unlovable, Christ not only loved us, He left Heaven and came to this fallen Earth and died on a cross for us. God loves every one of us enough to pursue us, just as He did the Apostle Paul. Paul had to be struck blind before he saw the grace of God.

Paul's life as an apostle was hard, he was beaten, and imprisoned multiple times for spreading the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Yet, in 2 Corinthians 12:5, he boasted of his weakness. It was a weakness that led to total dependence on the strength of the Lord.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (NLT), we read, ***"So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong."***

So many things in life can make us feel weak. Illness, sadness, loss, anger, pain, depression, or even lack of sleep, can all cause us to have feelings of weakness. We do not know what the "thorn" was that Paul refers to here in Scripture, but we do read that it caused him to feel weakness and he asked the Lord to take it away.

Scripture records Paul's words in Philippians 4:13, ***"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*** We can confidently believe that Paul found his strength in God as we read his story throughout the New Testament. Once a teacher of the law and persecutor of Christians, Paul's life took a dramatic change after he met the Lord on the road to Damascus. Scholars say that Paul traveled over 10,000 miles on his missionary journeys as he labored to tell as many people as he could of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The incredible thing about our great God is, as much grace as He pours out, He never has any less grace to give. Like Paul, we are made stronger in Christ. God's grace will always be sufficient for whatever weakness we may encounter in this life. His grace is still freely bestowed on all who believe.

"So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)

POSITIVE GOSSIP

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 3

Philip Piasecki

It is natural for us to want to praise something. Unfortunately, most of the time this desire to praise something causes us to praise ourselves; we lift ourselves up while putting others down. This praise instead needs to be directed to Jesus, making Him great and making less of ourselves. However, we can also use this desire to praise to lift up and encourage our fellow believers. Paul understood the dangers of boasting about himself when speaking in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Now I am going to be honest, the first couple of verses in this chapter are pretty confusing. I think it would take much more than a 500-word devotion to unpack all that is being said.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-5, we read, ***"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast."***

As I said, there is a lot to understand here, we can all agree though that it sounds like a pretty incredible experience that this man has. I want to focus on what Paul says in verse 5, ***"On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast."*** This is the mindset that I want us all to start having. We can do so much good for the Kingdom of God if we started boasting about what other believers are doing. Now, I do not mean worshipping people

or putting a pastor on the same level as the Lord. There is extreme danger in having that perspective. What I mean is talking positively about people. Instead of gossiping about how someone is struggling, share the good things that you have heard.

There are so many believers trying to do incredible things for the Lord and they need our encouragement. Also, when I hear about something another believer is doing for the Lord, it encourages me to seek even more after the Lord. When we boast in another believer, we ultimately are glorifying the Lord by telling people how God has been using one of His disciples! We need to talk less about ourselves and more about what the Lord is doing through His people.

OUTCOME

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Everyone goes through struggles. Covid-19 brought about a new kind of trial or challenge with the restrictions and confinement that came along with it. This pandemic brought physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual turmoil to the forefront of our lives.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul is not facing a pandemic but he has a very real challenge, ***"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited."*** Paul had a thorn in the flesh. It brought physical, emotional, and spiritual turmoil. Paul became a better man of God because of it.

I heard someone joke that the "lock-down" of Covid-19 will make us "a chunk, a hunk, a drunk, or a monk." I found it humorous, but there is a deeper aspect involved. When struggles come, how do we handle them?

Some people drown their sorrows in "comfort food." They binge-watch a TV series while emptying the cabinets. Being locked down during the COVID did not help their waistline. Philippians 3:18-20 warns, ***"For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."*** The phrase ***"their god is their belly"*** is very strong and can be very unsettling. It challenges me.

Some have taken advantage of the "downtime" by exercising. Instead of putting on the pounds, they have focused on getting healthier. This is good, but 1 Timothy 4:8 reminds us, ***"For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."*** Being healthy is important, but our identity and satisfaction in life should not come from the mirror.

It is sad to realize that this pandemic has become an excuse for people to escape their problems with some "controlling" substances. The Bible has a lot to say about the abuse of alcohol, but there are other drugs that often take one down the wrong path. Ephesians 5:18 commands, ***"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit."*** Proverbs 20:1 adds, ***"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."*** Chose the Spirit over the spirits.

Finally, during a quarantine, there is the choice of turning to Jesus. James 1:2-4 says, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*** It seems odd to rejoice over difficult times, but they help us become stronger. Trials can deepen our faith. They can be used to give hope to others who have not turned to the Lord.

I am not asking you to become a monk, but a daily focus and commitment on the Lord is the answer to a full life of meaning, value, and purpose.

GOD PICKING US UP

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 5

James Mann

A passage that has always stood out to me is 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. We see Paul struggling with the sins and problems of this world, and he is praying for God to take away this struggle. He talks with God, and God tells Paul that through Paul's weakness, God's power will be made perfect. The passage ends with Paul being content, and he understands, ***"For when I am weak, then I am strong."*** The portion that always stood out is the fact that this thorn is never leaving the flesh of Paul. His weakness is still left intact. Even though Paul has prayed to God, this pain never left him. I have always wondered why God did not remove this from His follower until I became an adult.

In the home I grew up in, whenever I was struggling with something in life, I had one of my parents to lean on to help me. No matter what the problem was, I knew they would be there. Once I grew up and decided it was time to be an adult and start handling things on my own, I realized how having someone to lean on gave me a sense of security and power. I had to fight the desire to fall back to my parents for help just to feel safe again. I believed that going through these hard times was what was going to make me stronger in the end. I was following the mindset of the great philosopher, Alfred Pennyworth, who said, "We fall so that we can learn to pick ourselves back up."

I did not realize as a child how difficult it is to live in this world. There is sin around every corner that tries to call you in and make your life miserable. That is when I discovered something about God and this passage. When we are at our weakest, we realize we are in need of someone that is stronger than the situation in which we find ourselves. That is where God comes in and helps. In my weakness,

I realized how much I truly needed Him. His perfection and power shined into my life when I did not think there was light at the end of the tunnel. Even though He did not pull me out of the struggles and take the thorn out, He gave me that person to lean on. We do not fall so that we can learn to pick ourselves back up. Instead, we fall so that we can learn to put our trust in God to help pick us back up. When I am at my weakest point, my relationship and bond with Him become stronger, and for that, I am content.

THROUGH IT ALL

LESSON EIGHTEEN, DEVOTION 6

Debbie Kerr

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Life is hard, y'all! It has been hard since Adam and Eve. All throughout Scripture we read accounts of extreme hardship and suffering. Some suffering is a consequence of disobedience and life choices and then there are times we will never know the "why." In this portion of Scripture, Paul is sharing his own personal experience with suffering which many believe is a physical ailment. We learn from this passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 that Paul asked God three times to take this condition from him, but each time God said, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, my strength is made perfect in weakness."***

Have you ever met someone who has had to endure extreme hardships in life, and yet they have chosen to rejoice in their infirmity? Joni Ericson Tada is the first person I thought of as an example of this kind of faith. Joni was a vibrant, healthy, athletic young woman when she unknowingly dove into shallow water and broke her neck. This accident resulted in her becoming a quadriplegic. She struggled with God's plan at first but eventually made the decision to accept it and with His help turn it into something beautiful. Because she chose to rely on God's grace and strength, she is able to use what little ability

she has left to share the Gospel in a very unique way. Today, she is an internationally known mouth artist, author, speaker, and singer.

I often hear people say, “God won’t give me more than I can handle.” I hate to blow this saying out of the water but Scripture does not teach this. If you have read the account of Job, Paul, Jesus, and many others in Scripture you know how much they had to endure, many unto death. God never promised we would not be given more than we can handle, but He did promise we would not be given more than His grace can handle. In Through It All, Andrae Crouch put it this way,

I thank Him for the Mountains,
And I thank Him for the valleys
I thank Him for the storms He’s brought me through
‘Cause if I never had a problem
I wouldn’t know that He could solve them
I wouldn’t know what faith in His Word could do

LESSON NINETEEN

WELL DONE

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1-14

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Are you familiar with test anxiety?

Oxford Learning states, "Test anxiety is more than feeling a little nervous before a test. For students who struggle with test anxiety, a bit of pre-exam nervousness turns into debilitating feelings of worry, dread, and fear, which can negatively impact performance."

The site goes on to say that test anxiety affects an estimated 10 million children in North America. Therefore, approximately 16-20% of students have high test anxiety, while another 18% of students deal with moderate test anxiety.

1. Are you a good test taker?

_____

_____

_____

2. How did you prepare for tests?

_____

_____

_____

In 2 Corinthians 13:1-4, Paul mentions that he passed his "test" by the grace of God, ***"This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them — since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God."***

3. What does he mean by ***"two or three witnesses?"*** How could it relate to his journeys?

_____
_____
_____

4. What does it mean to be ***"weak in him?"*** Is it a good or bad thing?

_____
_____
_____

In 2 Corinthians 13:5-10, Paul challenges the Corinthian believers to "test" themselves, ***"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. But we pray to God that you may not do wrong — not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down."***

5. How many times does Paul use the word "test" or a synonym in this paragraph?

_____
_____
_____

6. What are some good "test" questions for evaluating one's Christian walk?

_____
_____
_____

7. What is Paul's prayer for them?

_____
_____
_____

8. Who should you be praying this type of prayer for right now?

_____
_____
_____

"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." 1 Corinthians 11:28

In 2 Corinthians 13:11-14, Paul gives some final greetings as he closes out this letter, "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

9. What synonyms for peace are used here? How do they differ?

_____
_____
_____

10. Why is each characteristic attributed to a specific person of the Trinity?

_____

_____

_____

"His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'" Matthew 25:21

"My legacy doesn't matter.
It isn't important that I be remembered.
It's important that when I stand before the Lord, he says,
'Well done, good and faithful servant.'
I want to finish strong."
James Dobson

"And in these last hours,
the lifetime of this year passes before my eyes,
and I face the inevitable question:
Did I live it well?
Will Jesus Christ, the righteous judge, say
'Well done, good and faithful servant?'"
John Piper

THE HAMMER

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

Recently, I was doing a bit of remodeling in my house. I was attempting to remove a wall from my basement to open up the area. While I am by no means a skilled contractor, I know how to swing a hammer. In order to use my circular saw to remove part of the frame, I had to remove a few pieces of wood in order to avoid cutting towards wires and pipes. During this whole process my two sons were amazed at their father's skill. While hitting the piece of wood I wanted to dislodge with my hammer, my oldest son, Broly, asked me, "Is that what hammers do dad?" I told him, "Yes," and moved forward with my project. Fast forward a few weeks, and my wife and I were putting together some shelves and I needed my hammer to tack the cardboard backing onto the shelf. Broly glances at me and then asked, "Dad are you going to smash what you just made with your hammer?" Puzzled, I asked him, "Why would he think that," and he resounded, "Because last time you used your hammer, you broke things."

I believe everyone is influential in some way, shape, or form. From a parent's relationship with their children, to one's relationship with their co-workers, and to anyone's relationship with their friends, we all have an influence on someone. One disclaimer, this influence does not mean that everyone is meant to be a leader, but I do believe that all people have the capability of influencing the world around them, especially Christians who have the power of the Holy Spirit. Influence is a lot like a hammer, it can be used to build something up or used to tear something down. I believe Paul echos this sentiment in the last chapter of 2 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 13:10, we read, ***"For this reason I write these things while I am away from you,***

that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down."

The Bible is always saturated with amazing truths. First, Paul knows his authority only comes from God. Every person with any influence or authority is given that gift because God saw fit to do so. Secondly, and where I want to focus on, influence and authority can be used to either build a person up or tear them down. Throughout the letters Paul wrote to the church of Corinth, Paul had to correct many wrongs that were creating a mess inside that church. At no moment was Paul attempting to destroy the church with his authority, Paul's goal was to build the church up so it would be stronger.

How do you swing the use of your influence? Do you influence or use the authority you may have in life to build someone up or do you use it to tear someone down? Even in times of needing to correct someone, we do not break them, we guide them. I truly believe that Christians should be the most influential people on the planet. We live with the truth of who God is, we live with understanding what is needed to set a person free from their sin. Even in Jesus' last statement on this Earth, He said, ***"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*** (Matthew 28:18-19). Christian, you were tasked to use the authority that God gave you, to go rely on God's power to build up a person so they may come to realize God is the ultimate authority in this world. If we are not using that authority to build up someone, then we are tearing them down by withholding the truth of who Jesus is.

Church, it is time to start swinging our hammers.

REJOICE

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Paul has just written his letter about the comfort of God, proclaiming Christ alone, the judgment seat of Christ, being a new creation, being a cheerful giver, and dealing with a thorn in the flesh. As he closes the letter out, he has an important reminder. In 2 Corinthians 13:11, he says, ***"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."*** It is so quick, many miss it. He says, ***"Finally, brothers, rejoice."*** It is a complete sentence. He has dealt with a variety of topics but comes back to rejoicing.

Author J. I. Packer has written, "Even when we cannot see the why and wherefore of God's dealings, we know that there is love in and behind them, and so we can rejoice always." We who know and trust God have every reason to rejoice.

In his two letters to the Corinthians, Paul uses the word "rejoice" eleven times. It is an important attribute and concept to him and for believers. We need more of it. He also uses the word "rejoice" some eighteen times in his other letters. The man suffered often, yet focused on rejoicing.

"Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you." Philippians 3:1

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Philippians 4:4

"Rejoice always." 1 Thessalonians 5:16

"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." 1 Peter 4:13

I am not sure if you have heard of John Calvin from the 1500s. He was a theologian who wrote a classic entitled *"Institutes"* and is attributed to the doctrine known as Calvinism. He was very intelligent and analytical; therefore, perceived as dry, emotionless, impersonal, and cold. No matter how he may have appeared outwardly, I thoroughly appreciate his statement, "There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice."

Pause and smell the roses. Look at the details of nature. See how intricate a blade of grass stands (Yes, watch grass grow). Notice the leaves with their different shapes, sizes, designs, and colors. I love the vibrant colors of flowers as some need full sun while others handle the shade. All of nature speaks of God's ***"eternal power and divine nature"*** (Romans 1:20). The beauty of nature causes many responses and one of them is to rejoice!

AM I SAVED?

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 3

John Stone

"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? - unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" 2 Corinthians 13:5

Am I saved? This is the foundational question of the Christian faith. Our Heavenly Father has graciously made the Gospel message simple enough for a child to understand and believe: We are all sinners (Romans 3:10-18; Psalm 51:3-5) and have failed to meet the standard set by the infinitely holy and perfect God of the universe (Isaiah 43:11-13). Because of our rebellious sinful condition, we face God's judgment and infinite punishment for that sin. However, God made a way through His Son to be a substitute for helpless sinners. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and died on a cross (Psalm 47:15; Romans 3:26) taking the Father's wrath, our punishment, on Himself (Isaiah 53:4-6). Christ rose from the dead after three days as prophesied and later ascended to Heaven (Luke 18:32-33, Psalm 16:10-11) making a way for those who would believe to have eternal life (John 3:16; 17:2). Amen! This is good news!

So, how do we test ourselves? How can we know that we are ***"in the faith"*** as the text says? The evidence of saving faith is not a one-time event but a transformed life.

A repeat-after-me prayer, an aisle walked, or a membership card signed may bring a temporary feeling of belonging and security but is there evidence of a changed life and the Holy Spirit's leading (Galatians 5:22-24; Romans 8:9)?

Each week we may check off a list of spiritual things, maybe even biblical things, with the hope that it will make God approve of us, but to what end? Works cannot save. God does not need anything from us (Psalm 50:7-15; Acts 17:24-25). Instead of the mirage of self-reliance, we need to recognize our total dependence on Him. He is the Creator and sustainer of all things (Job 12:10; John 1:2-3; Hebrews 1:3; Psalm 136) and we need to live a life of humble thankfulness glorifying and relying on Him completely. There is no list of spiritual achievements or self-promotion that will impress or gain favor with God. There were no men more religious than the Pharisees but it was the tax collector who recognized God's holiness, repented of his sin, and went home justified (Luke 18:10-14; Habakkuk 3:2; Romans 4:5).

Do we submit to Christ as King not only of our Sunday morning but as King and Lord of our daily lives (Colossians 1:16)? When life is hard and the world seems to be falling apart, do we pause and remember that nothing happens in the universe except by God's direct action or explicit permission (Job 1:12; Matthew 10:29-30)? Panic and worry will be exchanged for rest in the knowledge that God causes all things, good and bad, to happen for His glory and the ultimate benefit of His children (Romans 8:28; Psalm 24:1).

Abraham was counted righteous when he believed God's promise that He would miraculously give him innumerable descendants despite his own inability. His faith was proven when he was willing, knife raised, to kill Isaac, the heir of promise, knowing that God was able to even raise him from the dead if necessary to fulfill that promise (Genesis 15:5-6; Romans 4:3).

Do we believe what God has said, and if so, are we living like it (James 2:14-26)? Are we trusting that He is able to keep us from

losing faith, and at the end of our life, bring us home into eternal joy in the glory of His presence (Jude 1:24-25; Romans 8:30)?

The faith we are told to rest in, live by, and be in, is not faith in anything we have ever done or will ever do. It is evidence-based, Spirit-sustained, and works-producing faith founded on knowing God, believing what He says, and then putting it into action. We need to repent of our sinful self-reliance, humbly fall at our Creator's feet, and beg for mercy. We need to rely on God completely in everything. Our life should be a reflection of reality; that it is God who created all, sustains all, and will carry all things through to completion. When our last hours come we need to be able to die confidently, knowing that it is far better to depart and be with Christ than to live a hundred or a thousand more years in this sinful body (1 John 2:15-17; Philippians 1:23).

He has always been faithful (Psalm 34:8; 119:90). He has always done what He said He would do (Isaiah 46:9-13), and He always will.

LIVE IN PEACE

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 4

Larry Gabbara

"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." 2 Corinthians 13:11

As I am writing this, there have been nightly demonstrations and protests all over the world due to racism and brutality.

As we know, all of the people in this world are not believers in Jesus Christ.

This Scripture is a sad example that even the true believers that Paul is talking to here in this passage, struggle to agree with one another, and live in peace. If we did, God's eternal love and peace would be with us always.

The world is made up of both non-believers and true believers. As true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are expected to live in peace with one another.

As Paul writes in his closing of his second letter to the Corinthians, he is giving a final blessing to us all. He is directing us and laying the groundwork for earthly peace with all those around us.

Colossians 3:12-13 says, ***"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."***

Romans 12:17-18 adds, ***"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."***

Scripture tells us to live in peace with one another. Even though, as we see in the news today, people who are trying to make a point peacefully and to have their opinion heard, there will always be those who in the midst of this will continually stir up the mess and cause trouble just because they can. I believe the true way to live in peace is to love one another as instructed and strive to live a Christ-like life. Living out the examples Jesus showed us in His life is a must.

Ephesians 5:1-2 says, ***"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."***

In conflict, we should remember to find common ground, find something we both can agree upon, and look to Jesus' teaching. We have to learn to love one another. Hopefully, this will solve whatever our issues are.

BELIEVE, LIVE, LOVE

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 5

Keaton Washburn

Growing up, I would see people have an Ichthus (the fish symbol that often signifies Christianity) bumper sticker on their car. Having parents that were Christians, I naturally asked them why they did not have one on their car. I remember my parents responding by saying that they did not want to act in a certain manner while driving that would reflect poorly on Christ. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they did not want their actions to negatively affect someone's view of Christ. Even though I somewhat understood that as a child, I understand this so much more now that I am an adult and drive every single day.

In the book of 2 Corinthians, we meet Paul as he is writing to the church in Corinth. The book that we refer to as 2 Corinthians is most likely the fourth letter that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. In this letter, he comes to them very sternly, proving and reminding them of his apostleship from God, using his apostleship as the basis for his stern words toward them. In chapter 13, the final chapter of 2 Corinthians, verse 5, he concludes by challenging every hearer in Corinth, ***"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith."*** He continues by saying, ***"Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"***

In a similar manner to how a bumper sticker reflects upon the person in the car, as a follower of Christ, the way that we live has a direct correlation to how those around us view Christ. To properly represent Christ, we must take the time to examine ourselves as Paul challenged the Corinthians. Today, I want to challenge you to

examine your life in three areas that John addresses in the book of 1 John:

1. **Your Doctrine:** Do you believe the truth about Jesus Christ? What do you believe about Jesus Christ? (Read 1 John 2:22-23)

2. **Your Actions:** Are you living according to Christ's commands? (Read 1 John 2:3-6)

3. **Your Love:** How are you doing at loving God and those in His family? (Read 1 John 4:7-10)

It is not about being perfect, but when we do fall short, the Christian life is about confessing our sins and continually accepting what Christ has done for us in living the perfect life that we could not, dying the death that we deserve, rising from the dead, and ascending to the Father. Today, you have the power to point others to Christ in what you believe, how you live, and how you love. Choose today to live in the power that Christ has given you as a follower of His!

DON'T MAKE ME COME BACK THERE!

LESSON NINETEEN, DEVOTION 6

John Rigg

When I was a young man, back when seat belts in a car was not a thing, my brother and I would be cutting up and horsing around while our dad was trying to drive. Naturally, this would not go on for long before we would get our first warning, "Will you guys settle down back there!" Of course, being young boys, we did not always heed the first warning and a more intense, second warning would soon follow accompanied by a piercing stare from the rear-view mirror, "Don't make me come back there!" That usually did it for us, we listened and submitted to dad's authority.

While the Apostle Paul lived some 2,000 years ago, his problem was the same as my dad's. He often had to convince those he ministered to of his authority and records himself having a "don't make me come back there" moment in 2 Corinthians chapter 13, ***"This will be the third time I am coming to you. 'By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.' I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare - since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you"*** (2 Corinthians 13:1–3 NKJV).

Although Paul's words are slightly different than my dad's, they seem to be written with the same intensity, ***"If I come again I will not spare."*** Apparently, there were a minority of believers in the city of Corinth that were not taking Paul's teaching on sin very seriously and continued in it. Evidently, Paul had told them previously that he would return and expose their sin to the rest of the church. He

quotes Deuteronomy 19:15 which states the Old Testament practice of establishing a pattern for verifying the truth of an accusation, by using two or three witnesses.

What Paul was saying to them was that he would not spare them the embarrassment of exposing them at the risk of their sin destroying them or the others. This same practice, more famously taken from Matthew 18:15-20, is used today by God-fearing church leaders to restore those caught up by sin and to stop the spread of sin into the lives of others.

Paul then gives the unrepentant sinners the evidence they were looking for by stating that his unwillingness to tolerate sin was actually proof that Christ was speaking through him, ***"Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me."***

All too often the disciplining of sin in the church today is overlooked for all the wrong reasons. You have probably heard some of them:

- We are not to judge people.
- Jesus loves everyone.
- Christians are to forgive everyone.
- People make mistakes.

Fortunately, Paul understood the price that Jesus paid for the remission of sin and was willing to take a stand against its spread in the church. By caring for the flock of God and by teaching them that their spiritual growth and God's blessing will require the disciplining of sin, Paul was displaying his authority as God's minister, as well as the power of God and His Word.

Just as my dad's statement, "Don't make me come back there" was a way to restore our relationship, church discipline is required to restore our relationship with God.

OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "we don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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