

CONNECT 7 DEVOTIONS



THIS CHANGES
EVERYTHING

ROMANS 8:9-11

**THE SAME POWER THAT RAISED
CHRIST FROM THE DEAD
IS INSIDE OF YOU.**



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THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

2018

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead changes everything! We no longer have to fear physical death but rest assured that we too have victory over death and the grave. This news changes not just our future for eternity, but it changes our present. Living in a post-resurrection world we know that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us. That changes the way we live NOW in a dramatic way. We will explore how the resurrection changed the world of the early Christian church (Book of Acts) and now it can still change our lives and how we interact with the lives of the people whom God has placed in our neighborhoods.

April 8

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Caring People, Acts 4:32-35*

Readings: 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

April 15

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Praising People, Acts 3:1-8*

Readings: 1 John 2:1-7, Luke 24:36-49

April 22

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Bold Witnesses, Acts 4: 1-12*

Readings: 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

April 29

Faith Witnessing Sunday

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Confessing People, Acts 8:26-40*

Readings: 1 John 4:1-11, John 15:1-8

May 6

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Welcoming People, Acts 10:34-48*

Readings: 1 John 5:1-8, John 15:9-17

May 13

Mother's Day

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Prayerful People, Acts 1:12-26*

Readings: 1 John 5:9-15, John 17:11b-19

Connecting to Worship: April 8

Theme: The Resurrection Changes us Into: Caring People, Acts 4:32-35 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Readings: 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

Monday, April 2 *Pulling Together*

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Hebrews 10:24

Why do more than five million people a year pay money to run several miles over an obstacle course where they must ascend vertical walls, slog through mud, and climb up inside a vertical pipe with water pouring down on them? Some see it as a personal challenge to push their limit of endurance or conquer their fears. For others, the attraction is teamwork where competitors help and support each other. One person called it "a no-judgment zone" where people who are strangers will reach out to help each other finish the race (Stephanie Kanowitz, *The Washington Post*).

The Bible urges us to pursue teamwork as a model of living out our faith in Jesus. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Our goal is not to "finish first" in the race of faith, but to reach out in tangible ways of encouragement by setting an example and lending a helping hand along the way.

The day will come when we complete our life on earth. Until then, let's spur each other on, be ready to help, and keep pulling together every day.

Father in Heaven, give us eyes to see and strength to help each other in the race of faith today.

We run together in the race of faith.

Tuesday, April 3 *Cherished Connections*

We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. —Romans 12:5

When I heard that David was in the office for a board meeting, I was excited. He and I had a mutual friend, Sharon, who had died several years earlier. We had a few minutes to reminisce about her and her love for life and God. What a delight to connect with someone who has loved someone you have loved! There's a special bond because you love to talk about that cherished person. Those who know Jesus Christ as their Savior have even stronger ties. We are forever connected to Him and to one another. "We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another," Paul says in Romans 12:5. We've been "born of God," and we love those who are "begotten of Him" (1 John 5:1).

When we get together with fellow believers, we have the opportunity to talk about the one we love—Christ—and of the love, forgiveness, and grace we have experienced in Him because of His death and resurrection (4:9-10). At such times, we can encourage each other to continue to trust Him and spur one another on to be faithful in our walk with Him. This coming Sunday and throughout the week, let's remind fellow believers of all that Jesus has done and of how truly wonderful He is.

*We Christians have a kinship with
All others who believe,
And from that bond of faith and love
A mutual strength receive. —Hess*

The more you love Jesus, the more you'll talk about Him.

Wednesday, April 4

Precious to God

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:11

His name was David, but most just called him “the street fiddler.” David was a disheveled, older man who was a regular fixture in popular places in our city, serenading passers-by with unusual skill at his violin. In exchange for his music, listeners would sometimes place a dollar in the open instrument case before them on the sidewalk. David would smile and nod his head in thanks as he continued to play.

When David died recently and his obituary appeared in a local paper, it was revealed that he spoke several languages, was the graduate of a prestigious university, and had even run for the state senate years ago. Some expressed surprise at the extent of his accomplishments, having assessed him on the basis of appearance alone.

Scripture tells us that “God created mankind in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). This reveals an inherent worth within each of us, regardless of how we look, what we have achieved, or what others may think of us. Even when we chose to turn from God in our sinfulness, God valued us so much that He sent His only Son to show us the way to salvation and eternity with Him.

We are loved by God, and all around us are those who are precious to Him. May we express our love for Him in return by sharing His love with others.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your wonderful love for me. I pray that others may see Your love in my words and actions today.

God’s love is meant to be shared.

Thursday, April 5

Lend an Ear

The members should have the same care for one another. —1 Corinthians 12:25

Someone needs to talk to you today. Are you willing to listen? It may be a deep confession of failure, an expression of faith, an old joke, or a comment about the weather, but it needs to be said. The person may be a child or a senior citizen. Are you ready to lend an ear?

For 10 years, Mary Ridgway, a busy college administrator and educator, has regularly visited Mary Jacobs in an assisted living center. Ridgway began by receiving 50 hours of training to be a caregiver. She wondered if she could learn to step away from her tendencies to fix problems and to fill silent moments with words. Today, Mary Ridgway considers listening an expression of her service to Christ. Mary Jacobs thanks God every night for her faithful friend who cares enough to hear what she has to say.

The Bible calls us as Christians to “care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25) by using the gifts God has given each of us by His grace. One of the ways we can care for and serve each other is to listen. Listening is not the job of a talented few but the privilege and responsibility of us all. Someone needs to tell you something today. Are you ready and willing, for Jesus’ sake, to lend an ear?

*A caring heart, a listening ear,
A thoughtful word, a gentle tear
Will help to lift the heavy load
Of weary souls along life's road. —D. De Haan*

A big part of loving is listening.

Friday, April 6

Pursuing Unity

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and in all. Colossians 3:11

Growing up during the 1950s, I never questioned racism and the segregation practices that permeated daily life in the city where we lived. In schools, restaurants, public transportation, and neighborhoods, people with different shades of skin color were separated.

My attitude changed in 1968 when I entered US Army Basic Training. Our company included young men from many different cultural groups. We soon learned that we needed to understand and accept each other, work together, and accomplish our mission.

When Paul wrote to the first-century church at Colossae, he was well aware of the diversity of its members. He reminded them, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:11). In a group where surface as well as deeper differences could easily divide people, Paul urged them to “clothe [themselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (v. 12). And over all these virtues, he told them to put on love “which binds them all together in perfect unity” (v. 14).

Putting these principles into practice may often be a work in progress, but that is what Jesus calls us to. What we as believers hold in common is our love for Him. On that basis, we pursue understanding, peace, and unity as members of the body of Christ.

Amid all our wonderful diversity, we pursue an even greater unity in Christ.

Christ’s love creates unity in the midst of diversity.

Connecting to Worship, April 8

Theme: The Resurrection Changes us Into: Caring People, Acts 4:32-35 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Readings: 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

Connecting to Worship: April 15

Theme: The Resurrection Changes us Into: Praising People, Acts 3:1-8 And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Readings: 1 John 2:1-7, Luke 24:36-49

Monday, April 9 *A Reason to Sing*

Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. Psalm 47:6

Singing changes the brain! Some studies show that when we sing, our bodies release hormones that relieve anxiety and stress. Other research indicates that when a group of people sings together, their heartbeats actually synchronize with each other. The apostle Paul's writing encourages the church to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19). And the Bible repeats, "Sing praise" more than fifty times.

In 2 Chronicles 20, we read a story of God's people demonstrating their trust in God by singing as they marched into battle. Enemies were heading toward the people of Judah. Alarmed, King Jehoshaphat called everyone together. He led the community in intense prayer. They didn't eat or drink, but only prayed, "We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (v. 12). The next day, they set out. While they sang and walked toward the conflict, their enemies fought each other! By the time God's people reached the battlefield, the fighting had ended. God saved His people as they marched by faith toward the unknown, singing His praises. God encourages us to praise Him for good reasons. Whether or not we are marching into battle, praising God has power to change our thoughts, our hearts, and our lives.

God, we praise Your everlasting love and faithfulness! You protect and guide us, and we trust You with our lives.

Hearts in tune with God sing His praises.

Tuesday, April 10 *Praise from Pure Hearts*

A broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. Psalm 51:17

During my friend Myrna's travels to another country, she visited a church for worship. She noticed that as people entered the sanctuary they immediately knelt and prayed, facing away from the front of the church. My friend learned that people in that church confessed their sin to God before they began the worship service.

This act of humility is a picture to me of what David said in Psalm 51: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (v. 17). David was describing his own remorse and repentance for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. Real sorrow for sin involves adopting God's view of what we've done—seeing it as clearly wrong, disliking it, and not wanting it to continue. When we are truly broken over our sin, God lovingly puts us back together. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). This forgiveness produces a fresh sense of openness with Him and is the ideal starting point for praise. After David repented, confessed, and was forgiven by God, he responded by saying, "Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Ps. 51:15). Humility is the right response to God's holiness. And praise is our heart's response to His forgiveness.

Dear God, help me never to excuse or minimize my sin. Please meet me in my brokenness, and let nothing hold me back from praising Your name.

Praise is the song of a soul set free.

Wednesday, April 11

And Then You Laugh

[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. —2 Corinthians 5:21

Noise. Vibration. Pressure. Fireball. Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield used these words to describe being launched into space. As the rocket raced toward the International Space Station, the weight of gravity increased and breathing became difficult. Just when he thought he would pass out, the rocket made a fiery breakthrough into weightlessness. Instead of lapsing into unconsciousness, he broke into laughter. His description made me think of the days leading to my mother's death. The heaviness of life kept increasing until she no longer had the strength to breathe. She was then released from her pain and broke free into the "weightlessness" of heaven. I like to think of her laughing when she took her first breath in Jesus' presence. On the Friday we call "good," something similar happened to Jesus. God placed on Him the weight of the entire world's sin—past, present, and future—until He could no longer breathe. Then He said, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit' " (Luke 23:46). After being suffocated by our sin, Jesus received back from God the life entrusted to Him and now lives where sin and death have no power. All who trust Christ will one day join Him, and I wonder if we'll look back at this life and laugh.

Father in heaven, words cannot describe our gratitude for Your Son Jesus, who bore the weight of our sins. Thank You that to be absent from this body with its heavy burdens is to be present with You forever.

The sacrifice of Jesus points us to the joy of heaven.

Thursday, April 12

Praise in the Dark

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. Hebrews 13:15

Even though my friend Mickey was losing his eyesight, he told me, "I'm going to keep praising God every day, because He's done so much for me."

Jesus gave Mickey, and us, the ultimate reason for such never-ending praise. The twenty-sixth chapter of Matthew tells us about how Jesus shared the Passover meal with His disciples the night before He went to the cross. Verse 30 shows us how they concluded the meal: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

It wasn't just any hymn they sang that night—it was a hymn of praise. For millennia, Jews have sung a group of Psalms called "The Hallel" at Passover (*hallel* is the Hebrew word for "praise"). The last of these prayers and songs of praise, found in Psalms 113–118, honors the God who has become our salvation (118:21). It refers to a rejected stone that became a cornerstone (v. 22) and one who comes in the name of the Lord (v. 26). They may very well have sung, "The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad" (v. 24).

As Jesus sang with His disciples on this Passover night, He was giving us the ultimate reason to lift our eyes above our immediate circumstances. He was leading us in praise of the never-ending love and faithfulness of our God.

You are always worthy of praise, Lord, even when I don't feel like praising You! Help me to learn to praise You more and more.

Praising God helps us recall His goodness that never ends.

Friday, April 13

Hopeful Praise

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits. —Psalm 103:2

One of my friends was in tears on a beautiful summer day, unable to deal with life's difficulties. Another could not look beyond the life-altering sadnesses of her past. Still another struggled with the closing of the small church he had pastored faithfully. A fourth friend had lost his job at a local ministry.

What can our struggling friends—or any of us—do to find hope? Where do we turn when tomorrow offers no happy promises?

We can praise or “bless” the Lord, as David said in Psalm 103. In the middle of trouble, acknowledging God's role in our lives can redirect our thinking from the hurts of our hearts and force us to dwell instead on the greatness of our God. David knew trouble. He faced the threat of enemies, the consequences of his own sin, and the challenges of sorrow. Yet he also recognized the healing power of praise. That's why in Psalm 103 he can list reasons to turn our attention to God, who gives us many benefits: He forgives us, heals us, redeems us, crowns us with love and compassion, satisfies our desires, and renews us. David reminds us that God provides justice and righteousness, and He is gracious and loving.

Take it from David: Praising God's greatness puts hope in our troubled hearts.

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To His feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing! —Lyte*

Praise can lighten your heaviest burden.

Connecting to Worship: April 15

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Praising People, Acts 3:1-8* And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Readings: 1 John 2:1-7, Luke 24:36-49

Connecting to Worship: April 22

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Bold Witnesses*, Acts 4: 1-12 1As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, 2greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

Readings: 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Monday, April 16 *Being a Witness*

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me.

—Acts 1:8

When I was a teen, I witnessed an auto accident. It was a shocking experience that was compounded by what followed. As the only witness to the incident, I spent the ensuing months telling a series of lawyers and insurance adjustors what I had seen. I was not expected to explain the physics of the wreck or the details of the medical trauma. I was asked to tell only what I had witnessed. As followers of Christ, we are called to be witnesses of what Jesus has done in us and for us. To point people to Christ, we don't need to be able to explain every theological issue or answer every question. What we must do is explain what we have witnessed in our own lives through the cross and the resurrection of the Savior. Even better is that we don't have to rely on ourselves alone to do this. Jesus said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As we rely on the Spirit's power, we can point a hurting world to the redeeming Christ. With His help, we can witness to the life-changing power of His presence in our lives!

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do. —
Hankey*

**Our testimony is the witness of what God has done
for us.**

Tuesday, April 17 *Courage to be Faithful*

Do not be frightened. 1 Peter 3:14

Fear is Hadassah's constant companion. Hadassah, a young Jewish girl living in the first century, is a fictional character in Francine Rivers' book *A Voice in the Wind*. After Hadassah becomes a slave in a Roman household, she fears persecution for her faith in Christ. She knows that Christians are despised, and many are sent to their execution or thrown to the lions in the arena. Will she have the courage to stand for the truth when she is tested?

When her worst fear becomes reality, her mistress and other Roman officials who hate Christianity confront her. She has two choices: recant her faith in Christ or be taken to the arena. Then, as she proclaims Jesus as the Christ, her fear falls away and she becomes bold even in the face of death. The Bible reminds us that sometimes we will suffer for doing what is right—whether for sharing the gospel or for living godly lives that are against today's values. We are told not to be frightened (1 Peter 3:14), but to "revere Christ as Lord" in our hearts (v. 15). Hadassah's main battle took place in her heart. When she finally made up her mind to choose Jesus, she found the courage to be faithful. When we make the decision to honor Christ, He will help us to be bold and to overcome our fears in the midst of opposition.

*Father, give me boldness to stand firm in difficult
times.*

Let us be bold as we witness for God.

Wednesday, April 18

Witnesses

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me . . . to the end of the earth. —Acts 1:8

In a criminal court case, witnesses provide vital information about a possible crime. Being a witness means telling the court the truth about what you know.

Just as the criminal justice system relies heavily on witnesses, Jesus uses bold, faithful, and credible witnesses to spread His Word and build His church. Before Jesus ascended to His Father, He gave His disciples a final command—to launch a worldwide witnessing campaign. The Holy Spirit would come upon them and give them supernatural power to be His witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8).

Jesus called these early apostles to go into a world where people did not know about Him and to give a truthful account of what they had seen, heard, and experienced (Acts 4:19-20). Since they had witnessed His perfect life, teachings, suffering, death, burial, and resurrection (Luke 24:48; Acts 1–5), they were to go out and give a truthful testimony about Him.

In taking the gospel to the ends of the world, we are called to testify to the truth about Jesus and how He has changed our lives. “How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” (Rom. 10:14). What are you doing to tell others?

*Lord and Savior, Christ divine,
Reign within this heart of mine;
May my witness ever be
Always, only, Lord, for Thee. —Brandt*

God has left us in the world to witness to the world.

Thursday, April 19

Taking Risks

Barnabas and Paul . . . have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. —Acts 15:25-26

In his book *Stuntman! My Car-Crashing, Plane-Jumping, Bone-Breaking, Death-Defying Hollywood Life*, Hal Needham reflects on taking risks. Needham has slugged it out in fist fights, raced cars at high speed, walked on wings of airborne planes, fallen off horses, and has even been set on fire! He risked his life to entertain film audiences and to distinguish himself as a top Hollywood stuntman.

Paul and Barnabas were also “men who have risked their lives” (Acts 15:26). But their motivation was far different. Their goal was to exalt Christ through the preaching of the gospel. As a missionary in the Roman Empire, Paul faced hazards that resulted in shipwrecks, beatings, persecution, and imprisonment—just to name a few (2 Cor. 11:22-30). But Paul was more than willing to take these risks to make Christ known.

Many believers take risks to spread Jesus’ good news. But fear of rejection causes others to remain silent. Have you been passively sitting on the sidelines ignoring opportunities to share the gospel? God has provided His Spirit to empower you (Acts 1:8) and His Word to make the message clear (Rom. 1:16). Ask God for the courage to speak up and witness for the Savior. Taking the risk will be well worth it.

*Will you be bold in your witness
By giving lost sinners God’s Word?
Jesus will honor your service,
And sinners will surely be stirred. —Bosch*

The rewards of witnessing are well worth the risks.

Friday, April 20

Passing on the Legacy

Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise. Psalm 79:13

My phone beeped, indicating an incoming text. My daughter wanted my grandmother's recipe for Peppermint Ice Cream Pie. As I thumbed through the yellowed cards in my aged recipe box, my eyes spotted the unique handwriting of my grandmother—and several jotted notes in the small cursive of my mother. It occurred to me that with my daughter's request, Peppermint Ice Cream Pie would make its entrance into a fourth generation within my family.

I wondered, *What other family heirlooms might be handed down generation to generation? What about choices regarding faith? Besides the pie, would the faith of my grandmother—and my own—play out in the lives of my daughter and her offspring?*

In Psalm 79, the psalmist bemoans a wayward Israel, which has lost its faith moorings. He begs God to rescue His people from the ungodly and to restore Jerusalem to safety. This done, he promises a restored—and ongoing—commitment to God's ways. "Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise" (v. 13).

I eagerly shared the recipe, knowing my grandmother's dessert legacy would enjoy a new layer in our family. And I prayed sincerely for the most lasting hand-me-down of all: the influence of our family's faith on one generation to the next.

What is your family passing down to the next generation?

Sharing and living out our faith is the best way to leave a legacy.

The Resurrection Changes Us Into: Confessing People

Connecting to Worship: April 22

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Bold Witnesses*, Acts 4: 1-12 1As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, 2greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

Readings: 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Connecting to Worship: April 29

Theme: *Theme: The Resurrection Changes us Into: Confessing People, Acts 8:26-40 .” 30 So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”*

Readings: 1 John 4:1-11, John 15:1-8

Monday, April 23

The Highway to Heaven

If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. —Romans 10:9

Under the headline Car Lover Buried In Corvette, the newspaper column opened with: “If there is a highway to heaven, George Swanson may get to the Pearly Gates in style. He was buried in his white Corvette.” His wife Carolyn said, “A lot of people say they want to take it with them. Well, he took it with him.”

Yes, there’s a highway to heaven, but you can’t travel it in a Corvette after you die. You must get on this highway while you are alive, and you get on it by placing your trust in Jesus Christ.

In Romans 10:1-13, Paul declared that the road to heaven is not difficult to find nor to access. It is right in front of us in the Word of God. Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). He died for our sins, broke the power of death by His resurrection, lives in heaven as our Advocate and Intercessor, and places on the highway to heaven all who trust Him as their Savior and Lord. Whether or not you’re buried in a Corvette makes no difference. The highway to heaven starts on this side of death, and the entrance is easy to find. The Bible says, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13). Are you on the right road?

*There aren't many ways into heaven;
God's Word says there is only one:
Confessing Christ Jesus as Savior,
Believing in God's only Son. —Sper*

To get to heaven, you must go by the way of the Cross.

Tuesday, April 24

Bearing Grapes

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. —John 15:4

As I read a modern paraphrase of John 15:1-8, I began to reconsider my concept of what it means to be a fruitful Christian. Jesus said, “I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of Me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing He prunes back so it will bear even more” (*The Message* by Eugene Peterson). Grapes—they’re the result of the life of the vine flowing through the branches. So often I have viewed fruitfulness in the Christian life as activities such as teaching Sunday school or leading a Bible study. These acts of service are good and worthwhile, but Jesus said that being fruitful is allowing His life to flow through me: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me” (v.4). No one can bear “grapes” without being connected to Christ, the Vine. Fruitfulness is not primarily a matter of what I accomplish. It’s the result of my being in close fellowship with Him. Whenever you wonder if you’re being a “fruitful” Christian, ask yourself, “Am I like Jesus? Is His life flowing through me in the ordinary activities and relationships of each day? Do the ‘grapes’ of my life point others to the Vine?”

*Closer let me cling, my Savior—
You're the all-sufficient Vine;
You alone can make me fruitful,
Blessed source of strength divine. —Bosch*

Fruitfulness for Christ depends on fellowship with Christ.

Wednesday, April 25

My Way?

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. —Proverbs 16:25

Think about the worst intellectual matchups possible. For instance, what if we put Albert Einstein in a room with a first-grader to debate the theory of relativity? Or how about George Washington Carver versus a middle-schooler discussing biochemical engineering?

It's silly to think of putting these pairs together for discussions. One is the ultimate expert; the other would know little if anything about the topic. Here's another one: God versus anyone arguing about His plan for mankind. Now we're talking mismatch! Yet we often hear of people trying to explain away God's matchless wisdom and how their way is better than His.

I received a letter from a man in prison who said: "I came to the point in my life where I finally accepted the fact that God is real and the Creator of everything. I grew tired of trying to do things my way. When I started humbling myself and accepting God's Word, I found the answer."

How ridiculous to reject God's plan of salvation because we think we know better! Only by placing our trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins can we be reconciled to God (John 14:6; Rom 3:23; 6:23). Are you still trying to do things your own way, thinking you know best? (Prov. 16:25). Agree with God and go His way.

*There aren't many ways into heaven;
The Bible says there's only one:
Confessing Christ Jesus as Savior,
Believing in God's only Son. —Sper*

**Jesus is not one of many ways to approach God,
nor is He the best of several ways; He is the only
way. —Tozer**

Thursday, April 26

Who Do You Say He Is?

Who do you say I am? Matthew 16:15

In a 1929 *Saturday Evening Post* interview, Albert Einstein said, "As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. . . . No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life."

The New Testament Scriptures give us other examples of Jesus's countrymen who sensed there was something special about Him. When Jesus asked His followers, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" they replied that some said He was John the Baptist, others said He was Elijah, and others thought He was Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Matt. 16:14). To be named with the great prophets of Israel was certainly a compliment, but Jesus wasn't seeking compliments. He was searching their understanding and looking for faith. So He asked a second question: "But what about you? ... Who do you say I am?" (16:15)

Peter's declaration fully expressed the truth of Jesus's identity: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16).

Jesus longs for us to know Him and His rescuing love. This is why each of us must eventually answer the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Lord, I long to know You better. Teach me more about Your beautiful character so that I might grow more in love with You and follow You with my whole heart.

**The identity of Jesus is the central question of
eternity.**

Friday, April 27

Are You a Parakeet?

No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. —1 Corinthians 2:11

On several occasions I visited a retired pastor who had a pet parakeet named Gibby Gibson. It would say, “Gibby Gibson is the prettiest bird in all the world.” Or it would repeat, “Dr. Gibson is a preacher—a Baptist preacher.” But, of course, the bird didn’t understand one word it was saying. Herein lies a lesson. Too many Christians go through the habitual motions of worship and Bible reading without the slightest idea of the meaning of what they are doing. They seem to think there is some secret charm or mystical benefit in just going through it. The issue is not how much of the Bible you read, but how well you read it. I have heard many people boast about how many times they have read through the Bible, but their conversation revealed a tragic ignorance of the Word of God. Better to read one verse prayerfully, seeking the guidance of your “Paraclete” (translated as “Comforter” or “Helper” in John 14:16), the Holy Spirit, than to rattle off a whole book from memory like a parakeet. The important question is, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). When you read the Bible, ask the Holy Spirit, your “Paraclete,” to guide you. Don’t be a parakeet.

*Ever-present, truest Friend,
Ever near Thine aid to lend;
Guide us as we search the Word,
Make it both our shield and sword. —Anon.*

**It's better to live one verse of the Bible than to
recite an entire chapter.**

Connecting to Worship: April 29

Theme: *Theme: The Resurrection Changes us Into: Confessing People, Acts 8:26-40 .”* 30 So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

Readings: 1 John 4:1-11, John 15:1-8

Connecting to Worship: May 6

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Welcoming People, Acts 10:34-48* Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Readings: 1 John 5:1-8, John 15:9-17

Monday, April 30 *A Mutual Friend*

I have called you friends. —John 15:15

Imagine being a visitor in a foreign land, showing up unannounced at a gathering of people you have never met and who have never heard of you—and then being allowed to address that group just a few minutes later. That can happen only if something breaks down barriers— something like mutual friends. It happened when I took a missions team to a church service in Discovery Bay, Jamaica. Before we left the US, my friend Dorant Brown, a Jamaican pastor, recommended a church to attend. So when we arrived at the church, and I mentioned Pastor Brown, we were not only welcomed, but I was also asked to speak briefly and our team was asked to sing.

While sharing Dorant’s name was vital, I really don’t think it was that mutual friend who got us such a warm welcome. I think it was our shared Friend and Savior Jesus who opened our Jamaican friends’ hearts to our visit. Have you experienced a connection with someone you just met when you tell them you too know Jesus? He’s a friend who laid down His life for us (John 15:13), and He makes brothers and sisters of all who believe (1 Peter 2:17). Jesus. Our Savior. Our mutual Friend. He joins hearts around the world under the banner of His love.

*Join hands, then, brothers of the faith,
Whate’er your race may be;
Who serves my Father as a son
Is surely kin to me. —Oxenham*

Those who are drawn to Christ are drawn to each other.

Tuesday, May 1 *Sacrificial Love*

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. —John 15:13

What does it mean to lay down our lives for Christ and for our friends? In John 15, notice Christ’s logic as He taught about sacrificial love.

First He said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (v.12). Then He described the fullest extent of such love: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (v.13). Jesus died willingly for us and we should be willing to die for Him and our friends. Then He added, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (v.14). Jesus didn’t say we’re His friends only if we die for Him. We are also His friends if we obey Him. In God’s eyes, obeying Him as a living sacrifice is the way we lay down our life for Him (Romans 12:1).

Similarly, we may not have to die for our friends, but there are other ways to make sacrifices for them. We can lay down our plans or tight schedules to focus on someone in need. Or we can lay down our possessions to make provision for the poor. Such sacrifices, though small, can be powerful ways to lay down our lives for our friends—if we sacrifice willingly and in the spirit of Christ’s love.

*We say we love humanity,
But it is only true
If we’re prepared to sacrifice—
For those God asks us to. —Sper*

The closer you are to God, the bigger your heart for people.

Wednesday, May 2

Loving All

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself. **Leviticus 19:34**

I worship in a church located in a large, open field—a rare commodity on the island of Singapore (we’re just twenty-five miles long and fifteen miles wide). Some time back, people from abroad who work in my country started gathering on the church property for a picnic every Sunday.

This evoked a range of responses from fellow churchgoers. Some fretted about the mess the visitors would leave behind. But others saw this as a divine opportunity to extend hospitality to a wonderful group of strangers—without even leaving the church grounds!

The Israelites must have faced similar issues in their time. After they settled in their new land, they had to grapple with how to relate to other peoples. But God expressly commanded them to treat foreigners like their own kind, and to love them as themselves (Leviticus 19:34). Many of His laws made special mention of foreigners: they were not to be mistreated or oppressed, and they were to be loved and helped (Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19). Centuries later, Jesus would command us to do the same: to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31).

May we have God’s heart to love others as ourselves, remembering that we too are sojourners on this earth. Yet we have been loved as God’s people, treated as His own.

Father, You have made each and every one of us in Your likeness. May we love those from elsewhere and seek to reach out to them with Your love.

Embracing God’s love for us is the key to loving others.

Thursday, May 3

Love of Another Kind

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **John 15:12**

One of my favorite churches started several years ago as a ministry to ex-prisoners who were transitioning back into society. Now the church flourishes with people from all walks of life. I love that church because it reminds me of what I picture heaven will be like—filled with different kinds of people, all redeemed sinners, all bound together by the love of Jesus.

Sometimes, though, I wonder if church seems more like an exclusive club than a safe haven for forgiven sinners. As people naturally gravitate into groups of “a certain kind” and cluster around those they feel comfortable with, it leaves others feeling marginalized. But that’s not what Jesus had in mind when He told His disciples to “love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). His church was to be an extension of His love mutually shared with all. If hurting, rejected people can find loving refuge, comfort, and forgiveness in Jesus, they should expect no less from the church. So let’s exhibit the love of Jesus to everyone we encounter—especially those who are not like us. All around us are people Jesus wants to love through us. What a joy it is when people unite to worship together in love—a slice of heaven we can enjoy here on earth!

Lord, remind me today that while I was a sinner You embraced me with Your deep and unconditional love and brought me into the fellowship of Your grace. Lead me to someone I can love as You loved me.

Share Christ’s love with another.

Friday, May 4

All Welcome!

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Luke 5:32

The much-prayed-for film night at the church youth club had finally arrived. Posters had been displayed all around the village and pizzas were warming in the oven. Steve, the youth pastor, hoped that the film—about gang members in New York who were brought face-to-face with the claims of Jesus by a young pastor—would bring new recruits to the club. But he hadn't realized that a key football match was being shown on television that evening, so attendance was much smaller than he had hoped for. Sighing inwardly, he was about to dim the lights and begin the film when five leather-clad members of the local motorbike club came in. Steve went pale. The leader of the group, who was known as TDog, nodded in Steve's direction. "It's free and for everyone, right?" he said. Steve opened his mouth to say, "Youth club members only" when TDog bent down and picked up a bracelet with the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) stamped on it. "This yours, mate?" he asked. Steve nodded, hot with embarrassment, and waited while the new guests found a seat.

Have you ever been in Steve's situation? You long to share the good news about Jesus, but you have a mental list of the "right" people who would be acceptable? Jesus was often criticized by the religious authorities for the company He kept. But He welcomed those everyone else avoided, because He knew they needed Him most (Luke 5:31–32).

Lord, please help me to see people through Your eyes of love and to welcome all those You bring into my life.

A heart that is open to Christ will be open to those He loves.

Connecting to Worship: May 6

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Welcoming People, Acts 10:34-48* Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Readings: 1 John 5:1-8, John 15:9-17

Connecting to Worship: May 13

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Prayerful People*, Acts 1:12-26 24And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

Readings: 1 John 5:9-15, John 17:11b-19

Monday, May 7

Giving the Gift of Prayer

You help us by your prayers. 2 Corinthians 1:11

“I didn’t realize what a gift prayer was until my brother was sick and you all prayed for him. I cannot tell you what a comfort your prayers were!”

Laura had tears in her eyes as she thanked me for the prayers of the people in our church for her brother, who was facing a cancer diagnosis. She continued, “Your prayers have strengthened him in this difficult time and have been an encouragement to our entire family.”

One of the best ways to love others is to pray for them. Jesus is our ultimate example in this. The New Testament tells us about Jesus praying for others on many occasions, and even shows us that He continues to come to the Father on our behalf. Romans 8:34 says that He “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Even after showing such selfless love at the cross, the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ continues to express His care for us by praying for us at this very moment. All around us are people who need us to follow Jesus’s example and love them with our prayers, inviting God’s help and intervention in their lives. We can ask God to help us pray for them, and He will! May our loving Lord strengthen us to generously give the gift of our prayers for others today.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for praying for me. Help me to serve You and others through faithfully praying today.

Prayer is a gift to be shared.

Tuesday, May 8

Phone Zone

Pray continually. 1 Thessalonians 5:17

One of the benefits of cell phones is that we now have virtually unlimited access to others. As a result, many people talk on the phone or text even while driving—sometimes resulting in terrible car crashes. To avoid such disasters, many areas of the world have made distracted driving illegal. In the United States, highway signs are popping up to remind drivers of special cell phone zones where they can pull off the road to safely talk and text to their heart’s delight.

While it is a good idea to restrict mobile phone communication for drivers, there is another kind of communication that has no restrictions: prayer. God invites us to call on Him whether we are coming, going, or sitting still. In the New Testament, Paul’s words advise each person who wants to communicate with God to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Paul brackets this divine open-door policy by encouraging us to “rejoice always” (v. 16) and to “give thanks in all circumstances” (v. 18). God calls us to joy and thanksgiving—expressions of faith in God through Christ anchored in continual prayer.

God is available for our quick cry or for a lengthy conversation. He welcomes us into a relationship with Him, a constant and endless sharing of our joys and gratitude, needs, questions, and concerns (Hebrews 4:15–16). We are always in the prayer zone.

I’m grateful, Lord, that You want to hear from me. I need You today.

Access to God’s throne is always open.

Wednesday May 9

Buckling Up!

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. Hebrews 4:16

"The captain has turned on the seat belt sign, indicating that we are entering an area of turbulence. Please return to your seats immediately and securely fasten your seat belt." Flight attendants give that warning when necessary because in rough air, unbuckled passengers can be injured. Secured in their seats, they can safely ride out the turbulence. Most of the time, life doesn't warn us of the unsettling experiences coming our way. But our loving Father knows and cares about our struggles, and He invites us to bring our cares, hurts, and fears to Him. The Scriptures tell us, "This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. 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 4:15–16).

In seasons of turbulence, going to our Father in prayer is the best thing we can do. The phrase "grace to help us when we need it"—means that in His presence we can be "buckled" in peace during threatening times, because we bring our concerns to the One who is greater than all! When life feels overwhelming, we can pray. He can help us through the turbulence.

Father, sometimes life is overwhelming. Help me to trust You with all the turbulent moments, knowing how deeply You care for my life.

Although we cannot anticipate the trials of life, we can pray to our Father who fully understands what we face.

Thursday, May 10

Our Prayers, God's Timing

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. Ephesians 3:20

Sometimes God takes His time in answering our prayers, and that isn't always easy for us to understand.

That was the situation for Zechariah, a priest whom the angel Gabriel appeared to one day near an altar in the temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel told him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; *your prayer has been heard*. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John" (Luke 1:13, italics added).

Zechariah had probably asked God for a child years before, and he struggled with Gabriel's message because Elizabeth was now well beyond the expected age for childbirth. Still, God answered his prayer.

God's memory is perfect. He is able to remember our prayers not only for years but also for generations beyond our lifetime. He never forgets them and may move in response long after we first brought our requests to Him. Sometimes His answer is "no," other times it is "wait"—but His response is always measured with love. God's ways are beyond us, but we can trust that they are good.

Zechariah learned this. He asked for a son, but God gave him even more. His son John would grow up to be the very prophet who would announce the arrival of the Messiah.

Zechariah's experience demonstrates a vital truth that should also encourage us as we pray: God's timing is rarely our own, but it is always worth waiting for.

What are you praying for today?

When we cannot see God's hand at work, we can still trust His heart.

Friday, May 11

The Cure for Anxiety

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

We were excited about moving for my husband's job. But the unknowns and challenges left me feeling anxious. Thoughts of sorting and packing up belongings. Looking for a place to live. My finding a new job too. Making my way around a new city, and getting settled. It was all . . . unsettling. As I thought about my "to-do" list, words written by the apostle Paul echoed in my mind: *Don't worry, but pray* (Phil. 4:6–7).

If anyone could have been anxious about unknowns and challenges, it would have been Paul. He was shipwrecked. He was beaten. He was jailed. In his letter to the Philippian church, he encouraged his friends who also were facing unknowns, telling them, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (v. 6). Paul's words encourage me. Life is not without uncertainties—whether they come in the form of a major life transition, family issues, health scares, or financial trouble. What I continue to learn is that God cares. He invites us to let go of our fears of the unknown by giving them to Him. When we do, He, who knows all things, promises that His peace, "which transcends all understanding, will guard" our heart and mind in Christ Jesus (v. 7).

Dear God, what a blessing to know we do not have to be anxious about anything! Remind us that we can come to You and tell You about everything. Thank You for who You are and what You are doing in our lives.

God's care for me eases my mind.

Connecting to Worship: May 13

Theme: *The Resurrection Changes us Into: Prayerful People*, Acts 1:12-26 24And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."

Readings: 1 John 5:9-15, John 17:11b-19