

BUILDING BLOCKS

SERMON SERIES JUNE 6-JULY 8

FAMILY

PEACE

STRENGTH

SERVING

HOPE

GIVING

CONNECT 7 DAILY DEVOTIONS

BUILDING BLOCKS

EPHESIANS 2:19-22

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Summer is a time for growth. During summer the pace is a little more slowed and relaxed. We have time to focus on areas in our life that need refreshing and renewal. Summer is a time for recreation (re-create) when we can bet back to the basics. Our Christian walk also is in need of being refreshed and renewed. Our theme for our next “Connect 7” and worship series is “Building Blocks.” We will focus on some of the fundamental elements of our Christian faith walk. Each week we will look at a different building block of our Christian walk. These **Connect 7 Devotions** will enrich our understanding of how we should live in our Christian faith.

June 3

Theme: *Building Blocks: When Serving is Worship*, Mark 2:27-28

Readings: Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 81:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-28

June 10

Theme: *Building Blocks: Christian Family: Where Do I Fit?*, Mark 3:33-35

Readings: Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

June 17

Father's Day

Theme: *Building Blocks: Forever Home*, 1 Corinthians 5:1

Readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 1, 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10, Mark 4:26-34

June 24

Theme: *Building Blocks: In the Middle of the Storm*, Mark 4:38-40

Readings: Job 38:1-11, Psalm 124, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

July 1

Theme: *Building Blocks: Giving Your All*, 2 Corinthians 8:9

Readings: Lamentations 3:22-33, Psalm 30, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 13-15, Mark 5:21-43

July 8

Theme: *Building Blocks: Strength Training*, 2 Corinthians 12:10

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Mark 6:1-13

Connecting to Worship: June 3

Theme: *Building Blocks: When Serving is Worship*, Mark 2:27-28 27And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Readings: Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 81:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-28

Monday, May 28

Times of Completion

They sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. Acts 14:26

At the end of the day, the burden of uncompleted tasks can weigh us down. Responsibilities at home and work may seem never-ending, and those unfinished today roll into tomorrow. But there are times in our journey of faith when we should pause and celebrate God’s faithfulness and the tasks completed.

After the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, “they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed” (Acts 14:26). While much work remained in sharing the message of Jesus with others, they took time to give thanks for what had been done. “They gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (v. 27). What has God done through you during the past year? How has He opened the door of faith for someone you know and love? In ways we can’t imagine, He is at work through us in tasks that may seem insignificant or incomplete. When we feel painfully aware of our unfinished tasks in serving the Lord, let’s not forget to give thanks for the ways He has worked through us. Rejoicing over what God has done by His grace sets the stage for what is to come!

Lord, as this day comes to a close, we give thanks for all You have accomplished in and through us. By Your grace, lift our eyes to see what is to come!

God is always at work in and through us.

Tuesday, May 29

Serving Christ

Obey [your earthly masters] . . . as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Ephesians 6:6

“I’m a secretary,” a friend told me. “When I tell people this, they sometimes look at me with a certain pity. But when they find out who I am secretary for, they open their eyes with admiration!” In other words, society often defines some jobs as less important than others, unless those jobs happen to relate in some way to rich or famous people.

For the child of God, however, any occupation, regardless of the earthly boss, can be held proudly because we serve the Lord Jesus.

In Ephesians 6, Paul talks to servants and masters. He reminds both groups that we serve one Master who is in heaven. So we need to do everything with sincerity of heart, integrity, and respect because we are serving and working for Christ Himself. As the apostle Paul reminds us, “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people” (Eph. 6:7).

What a privilege to serve God in everything we do, whether answering a phone or driving a car or doing housework or running a business. Let us work with a smile today, remembering that no matter what we are doing, we are serving God.

Lord Jesus, I want to serve You in everything I do. Help me, as I begin each day, to remember this.

Serving shows our love for God.

Wednesday, May 30

Priceless Worship

She, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on. Mark 12:44

I use writing to worship and serve God, even more so now that health issues often limit my mobility. So, when an acquaintance said he found no value in what I wrote, I became discouraged. I doubted the significance of my small offerings to God. Through prayer, study of Scripture, and encouragement from my husband, family, and friends, the Lord affirmed that only He—not the opinions of other people—could determine our motives as a worshiper and the worth of our offerings to Him. I asked the Giver of all gifts to continue helping me develop skills and provide opportunities to share the resources He gives me. Jesus contradicted our standards of merit regarding our giving (Mark 12:41–44). While the rich tossed large amounts of money into the temple treasury, a poor widow put in coins “worth only a few cents” (v. 42). The Lord declared her gift greater than the rest (v. 43), though her contribution seemed insignificant to those around her (v. 44).

Although the widow’s story focuses on financial offerings, every act of giving can be an expression of worship and loving obedience. Like the widow, we honor God with intentional, generous, and sacrificial gifts given from whatever He’s already given us. When we present God the best of our time, talents, or treasure with hearts motivated by love, we are lavishing Him with offerings of priceless worship.

Lord, thank You for never comparing us with others when we offer You the best of the gifts You’ve first given to us.

Sacrificial offerings motivated by our love for God will always be priceless expressions of worship.

Thursday, May 31

The Night No One Came

Do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. —Matthew 6:1

One winter night composer Johann Sebastian Bach was scheduled to debut a new composition. He arrived at the church expecting it to be full. Instead, he learned that no one had come. Without missing a beat, Bach told his musicians that they would still perform as planned. They took their places, Bach raised his baton, and soon the empty church was filled with magnificent music.

This story made me do some soul-searching. Would I write if God were my only audience? How would my writing be different?

New writers are often advised to visualize one person they are writing to as a way of staying focused. I do this when I write devotionals; I try to keep readers in mind because I want to say something they will want to read and that will help them on their spiritual journey.

I doubt that the “devotional writer” David, whose psalms we turn to for comfort and encouragement, had “readers” in mind. The only audience he had in mind was God. Whether our “deeds,” mentioned in Matthew 6, are works of art or acts of service, we should keep in mind that they’re really between us and God. Whether or not anyone else sees does not matter. He is our audience.

*That my ways might show forth Your glory,
That You, dear Lord, greatly deserve!
With Your precious blood You’ve redeemed me—
In all my days, You I would serve! —Somerville*

Serve for an audience of one.

Friday, June 1

Obedience is Worship

To obey is better than sacrifice. —1 Samuel 15:22

While I was traveling with a chorale from a Christian high school, it was great to see the students praise God as they led in worship in the churches we visited. What happened away from church was even better to see. One day the group discovered that a woman had no money for gas—and they spontaneously felt led by God to take up a collection. They were able to give her enough money for several tankfuls of gas.

It's one thing to worship and praise God at church; it's quite another to move out into the real world and worship Him through daily obedience.

The students' example causes us to think about our own lives. Do we confine our worship to church? Or do we continue to worship Him by obeying Him in our daily life, looking for opportunities to serve? In 1 Samuel 15 we see that Saul was asked by the Lord to do a task; but when we review what he did (vv.20-21), we discover that he used worship (sacrifice) as an excuse for his failure to obey God. God's response was, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (v.22).

It's good to be involved in worship at church. But let's also ask God to show us ways to continue to give Him the praise He deserves through our obedience.

*Lord, I want my worship of You to extend beyond
the walls of my church. Help me to listen to
Your prompting and to serve others wherever
I can—no matter what day it is.*

Our worship should not be confined to times and places; it should be the spirit of our lives.

Connecting to Worship, June 3

Theme: *Building Blocks: When Serving is Worship*, Mark 2:27-28 27And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Readings: Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 81:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-28

Connecting to Worship: June 10

Theme: *Building Blocks: Christian Family: Where Do I Fit?*, Mark 3:33-35 33And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Readings: Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

Monday, June 4 *The Family of Faith*

You had become dear to us. —1 Thessalonians 2:8

During the 1980s, a singles’ class at our church became a close-knit family for many people who had lost a spouse through divorce or death. When someone needed to move, class members packed boxes, carried furniture, and provided food. Birthdays and holidays were no longer solitary events as faith and friendship merged into an ongoing relationship of encouragement. Many of those bonds forged during adversity three decades ago continue to flourish and sustain individuals and families today.

Paul’s letter to the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica paints a picture of life-giving relationships in God’s family. “We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7). “For you remember, [brothers and sisters], our labor and toil . . . that we might not be a burden to any of you” (v.9). “We exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children” (v.11). Like mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, Paul and his associates shared the gospel and their lives with these fellow believers who “had become dear” to them (v.8). In God’s family of faith, He provides mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers for us. The Lord gives His joy as we share our lives together in His grace and love.

Father, You’ve called us to serve one another. Give me a heart willing to accept the care of others. May I ask for help when I am in need and respond with a heart of grace to others when they ask me for help.

God loves you and me; let’s love one another.

Tuesday, June 5 *A Family Thing*

Everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. —1 John 5:1

When I was growing up, I often heard my pastor read the Ten Commandments and our Lord’s command to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. I knew I didn’t fully live up to those demands, but I took them seriously. As an 8-year-old, I felt sadness when a 6-year-old neighbor boy in a non-Christian family died. But I also felt guilt because I was not as sad as I would have been if this had happened to one of my brothers. And still today, even though my brothers and I all have our own families who come first in our lives, we still take a keen interest in one another. God is pleased when we cherish these family ties, but He also wants us to love all who have entered our spiritual family by being born again. This is the family Jesus referred to when He responded to a message that His mother and brothers desired to speak with Him. He looked at the audience before Him and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother” (Mark 3:34-35). Loving the lost is our duty, but loving those born into God’s family, no matter what their faults, should come naturally. It is, after all, a family thing.

*Love is an attitude, love is a prayer,
For a soul in sorrow, a heart in despair;
Love is good will for the gain of another,
Love suffers long with the fault of a brother. —
Anon.*

We show our love for God when we love His family.

Wednesday, June 6

Joining the Family

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
—Galatians 3:26

Maurice Griffin was adopted when he was 32 years old. He had lived with Lisa and Charles Godbold 20 years earlier as a foster child. Although Maurice was now a man living on his own, adoption had been what the family and he had always longed for. Once they were reunited and the adoption was official, Maurice commented, “This is probably the happiest moment in my life. . . . I’m happy to be home.” Those of us who have joined the family of God may refer to that time as the happiest moment in our lives. When we trust Christ for salvation, we become God’s children, and He becomes our heavenly Father. The Bible assures us, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26).

As God’s adopted children, we acquire spiritual siblings—our brothers and sisters in Christ—and we all share an eternal inheritance (Col. 1:12). In addition, Jesus’ Spirit indwells our hearts and enables us to pray using the name *Abba, Father* (Gal. 4:6)—like a child calling, “Daddy.” To be a child of God is to experience the closeness and security of a Father who loves us, accepts us, and wants to know us. Our adoption into His family is a wonderful homecoming.

*I once was an outcast stranger on earth,
A sinner by choice, and an alien by birth;
But I’ve been adopted, my name’s written down,
An heir to the mansion, a robe, and a crown. —Buell*

God’s arms are always open to welcome anyone home.

Thursday, June 7

Abba, Father

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. Psalm 68:5

The scene belonged on a funny Father’s Day card. As a dad muscled a lawn mower ahead of him with one hand, he expertly towed a child’s wagon behind him with the other. In the wagon sat his three-year-old daughter, delighted at the noisy tour of their yard. This might not be the safest choice, but who says men can’t multitask? If you had a good dad, a scene like that can invoke fantastic memories. But for many, “Dad” is an incomplete concept. Where are we to turn if our fathers are gone, or if they fail us, or even if they wound us?

King David certainly had his shortcomings as a father, but he understood the paternal nature of God. “A father to the fatherless,” he wrote, “a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families” (Ps. 68:5–6). The apostle Paul expanded on that idea: “The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.” Then, using the Aramaic word for father—a term young children would use for their dad—Paul added, “By him we cry, ‘*Abba, Father*’ ” (Rom. 8:15). This is the same word Jesus used when He prayed in anguish to His Father the night He was betrayed (Mark 14:36).

What a privilege to come to God using the same intimate term for “father” that Jesus used! Our *Abba Father* welcomes into His family anyone who will turn to Him.

Heavenly Father, I want to be part of Your family. I believe that Your only Son Jesus died for my sins. Please forgive me and help me live a life that pleases You.

A good father reflects the love of the heavenly Father.

Friday, June 8

Family Ties

The whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. —Ephesians 2:21

An elderly man who visited an art gallery was deeply moved by a painting that portrayed Christ on the cross. It was so realistic in depicting the suffering of the Savior that his heart was filled with gratitude for the great price the Lord Jesus paid for his redemption. With tears trickling down his cheeks, he exclaimed, “Bless Him! I love Him! I love Him!”

Other visitors standing nearby wondered what the man was talking about. One person walked over and looked at the painting. Soon he too felt deep emotion welling up in his heart. Turning to the old man, he gave him a firm handshake and said, “So do I! I love Him too!” The scene was repeated as a third man and then a fourth walked over, gazed at the painting, and exclaimed, “I love Him too!” Although these men were from different churches, they felt a common bond because of their faith in Christ.

As believers, we need an awareness of our spiritual unity with other Christians. We need to focus on the fundamentals on which we agree—such as our love for the Savior who died for us—rather than bicker about lesser issues.

Regardless of sincere disagreements, we as blood-bought believers should recognize that we have a strong family tie in Christ.

*Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love!
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above. —Fawcett*

As we draw near to Christ we are drawn near to each other.

Connecting to Worship: June 10

Theme: *Building Blocks: Christian Family: Where Do I Fit?*, Mark 3:33-35 33And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Readings: Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

Connecting to Worship: June 17

Theme: *Building Blocks: Forever Home*, 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

Readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 1, 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10, Mark 4:26-34

Monday, June 11 *Not One Sparrow*

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants. Psalm 116:15

My mother, so dignified and proper her entire life, now lay in a hospice bed, held captive by debilitating age. Struggling for breath, her declining condition contradicted the gorgeous spring day that danced invitingly on the other side of the windowpane.

All the emotional preparation in the world cannot sufficiently brace us for the stark reality of goodbye.

Death is such an indignity! I thought.

I diverted my gaze to the birdfeeder outside the window. A grosbeak flitted close to help itself to some seed. Instantly a familiar phrase popped into my mind: "Not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it" (Matt. 10:29). Jesus had said that to His disciples as He gave them marching orders for a mission to Judea, but the principle applies to all of us. "You are worth more than many sparrows," He told them (v. 31). My mom stirred and opened her eyes. Reaching back to her childhood, she used a Dutch term of endearment for her own mother and declared, "Muti's dead!" "Yes," my wife agreed. "She's with Jesus now." Uncertain, Mom continued. "And Joyce and Jim?" she questioned of her sister and brother. "Yes, they're with Jesus too," said my wife. "But we'll be with them soon!" "It's hard to wait," Mom said quietly.

*Heavenly Father, this life can be so hard and painful.
But You! . . . You are right there with us, loving us,
keeping us, holding us! And You promise never to
leave us or forsake us.*

Death is the last shadow before heaven's dawn.

Tuesday, June 12 *At Home With Jesus*

I go and prepare a place for you. John 14:3

"There's no place like home." The phrase reflects a deeply rooted yearning within us to have a place to rest, be, and belong. Jesus addressed this desire for rootedness when, after He and His friends had their last supper together, He spoke about His impending death and resurrection. He promised that although He would go away, He would come back for them. And He would prepare a room for them. A dwelling-place. A home.

He made this place for them—and us—through fulfilling the requirements of God's law when He died on the cross as the sinless man. He assured His disciples that if He went to the trouble of creating this home, that of course He would come back for them and not leave them alone. They didn't need to fear or be worried about their lives, whether on earth or in heaven. We can take comfort and assurance from Jesus's words, for we believe and trust that He makes a home for us; that He makes His home within us (see John 14:23); and that He has gone ahead of us to prepare our heavenly home. Whatever sort of physical place we live in, we belong with Jesus, upheld by His love and surrounded in His peace. With Him, there's no place like home.

*Lord Jesus Christ, if and when we feel homeless,
remind us that You are our home. May we share this
sense of belonging with those we meet.*

Jesus prepares a place for us to live forever.

Wednesday, June 13

Longing for Home

They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Hebrews 11:16

My wife walked into the room and found me poking my head inside the cabinet of our grandfather clock. “What are you doing?” she asked. “This clock smells just like my parents’ house,” I answered sheepishly, closing the door. “I guess you could say I was going home for a moment.”

The sense of smell can evoke powerful memories. We had moved the clock across the country from my parents’ house nearly twenty years ago, but the aroma of the wood inside it still takes me back to my childhood.

The writer of Hebrews tells of others who were longing for home in a different way. Instead of looking backward, they were looking ahead with faith to their home in heaven. Even though what they hoped for seemed a long way off, they trusted that God was faithful to keep His promise to bring them to a place where they would be with Him forever (Heb. 11:13–16).

Philippians 3:20 reminds us that “our citizenship is in heaven,” and we are to “eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Looking forward to seeing Jesus and receiving everything God has promised us through Him helps us keep our focus. The past or the present can never compare with what’s ahead of us!

Jesus, thank You that You are faithful to keep Your promises. Please help me to always look forward to You.

The best home of all is our home in heaven.

Thursday, June 14

The Hope of Heaven

My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. —Psalm 73:26

A woman in her eighties was bedridden in a nursing home. When a preacher came to visit her, she asked him the same question she had asked of other preachers: “Why am I here like this? I’ve been a Christian for years and have always served God. I taught Sunday school, sang in the choir, and brought up my children as Christians. Now look at me. Can you tell me why I’m here like this?” To her surprise, he answered, “Yes, I can.” “Then tell me,” she begged. He took her hand and said gently, “Old age.” I knew a Christian woman who also lived in a nursing home but accepted her old age. Although she experienced pain and weakness, she said, “In this corner I work for the Lord—and the Lord works on me!”

Psalm 71 tells us that there is still work to be done for God, even when health and strength fail. “I will hope continually” (v.14). “My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness” (v.15). “O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works” (v.17). And when your work on earth is done—what then? “You will guide me . . . and afterward receive me to glory” (73:24).

Whatever your age, condition, or circumstances, if you’re a Christian, the hope of heaven is yours! —JEY

*Though faltering step and failing sight
Reveal that life's a fading page,
Christ's precious image that we bear
Can never be erased by age. —D. De Haan*

As the years add up, God's faithfulness multiplies.

Friday, June 15

With Him Forever!

For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. —James 4:14

In 1859, during the turbulent years prior to America's Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had the opportunity to speak to the Agricultural Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As he spoke, he shared with them the story of an ancient monarch's search for a sentence that was "true and appropriate in all times and situations." His wise men, faced with this heady challenge, gave him the sentence, "And this, too, shall pass away."

This is certainly true of our present world—it is constantly in the process of deterioration. And it's not happening just to the world; we also face the reality in our own lives that our days are numbered. James wrote, "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14).

Although our current life is temporary and will pass away, the God we worship and serve is eternal. He has shared that eternity with us through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. He promises us a life that will never pass away: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

When Christ returns, He will take us home to be with Him forever!

*Awake, my soul and sing
Of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity. —Bridges/Thring*

**For hope today, remember the end of the story—
eternity with God.**

Connecting to Worship: June 17

Theme: *Building Blocks: Forever Home*, 1 Corinthians 5:1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

Readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24, Psalm 1, 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Mark 4:26-34

Connecting to Worship: June 24

Theme: *Building Blocks: In the Middle of the Storm*, Mark 4:38-40 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

40He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Readings: Job 38:1-11, Psalm 124, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

Monday, June 18 *Peace, Be Still*

He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace, be still!” —Mark 4:39

My friend Elouise has a wonderful way of putting life into clever perspectives. Once when I asked her, “How are you today?” I expected the usual “fine” response. Instead, she said, “I’ve got to wake Him up!” When I asked what she meant, she kiddingly exclaimed, “Don’t you know your Bible?!” Then she explained: “When the disciples faced trouble, they ran to wake up Jesus. I’m going to run to Him too!” What do we do when we are stuck in a troubling situation with nowhere to run? Maybe, like the disciples who were stuck in a life-threatening storm, we run to Jesus (Mark 4:35-41). Sometimes, however, we may try to bail ourselves out of trouble by seeking revenge, slandering the one who has caused our problem, or just cowering fearfully in the corner as we sink into despair.

We need to learn from the disciples who fled to Jesus as their only hope. He may not bail us out immediately, but remembering that He is in our boat makes a difference! Thankfully, He is always with us in the storms of life, saying things like “Peace, be still!” (v.39). So, look for Him in your storm and let Him fill you with the peace that comes from knowing He is near.

Lord, teach us to run to You in the midst of trouble. Forgive us for trying to bail ourselves out, and lead us to the peace of trusting Your wisdom and ultimate deliverance. Thank You that You will help us!

Make Jesus your first option when the storms of life threaten you.

Tuesday, June 19 *Calming the Storm*

He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace, be still!” And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. —Mark 4:39

While Hurricane Katrina headed toward the coast of Mississippi, a retired pastor and his wife left their home and went to a shelter. Their daughter pleaded with them to go to Atlanta where she could take care of them, but the couple couldn’t get any money to make the trip because the banks were closed. After the storm had passed, they returned to their home to get a few belongings, and were able to salvage only a few family photos floating in the water. Then, when the man was taking his father’s photo out of its frame so it could dry, \$366 fell out—precisely the amount needed for two plane tickets to Atlanta. They learned they could trust Jesus for what they needed. For the disciples, trusting Jesus in a storm was the curriculum for the day in the dramatic narrative of Mark 4:35-41. Jesus had instructed His disciples to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and then He went to sleep in the boat. When a quick and violent storm blew in, the disciples dripped as much with fear and anxiety as water from the waves. They woke Jesus, saying, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (v.38) Jesus stood up and with three words, “Peace, be still!” He muzzled the storm. We all experience storms—persecutions, financial troubles, illnesses, disappointments, loneliness—and Jesus does not always prevent them. But He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). He will keep us calm in the storm.

Are you in a storm? What do you know about God’s character that could help bring calm to your heart?

In the storms of life, we can see the character of our God.

Wednesday, June 20

In the Storm

[Jesus] said to the sea, “Peace, be still!” —Mark 4:39

A storm was brewing—not just on the horizon but also in a friend’s home. “When I was in Hong Kong,” she shared, “the local meteorological service announced that there was a superstorm approaching. But more than the storm that was looming outside my window, there was a storm brewing at home. While my dad was in the hospital, family members were trying to balance their home and work responsibilities while also traveling to and from the hospital. They were so tired that patience was wearing thin, and the situation at home was tense.”

Life can feel like a storm—tossing us around with winds of misfortune, grief, or stress. Where can we turn? When Jesus’ disciples were caught in a great windstorm and wondered if He cared, they still knew where to turn. He demonstrated His power by calming the howling storm (Mark 4:38-39).

But often He does not calm the storm immediately. And, like the disciples, we may feel that He doesn’t care. To calm our fears, we can cling to faith in who God is and what He can do. We can take shelter in Him (Ps. 91:1). We can find His help to relate to others with grace. We can rest in an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving God. He is with us *in* the storm and cradles us *through* the storm.

*Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea,
Or demons or men, or whatever it be
No waters can swallow the ship where lies
The Master of the ocean, and earth, and skies. —
Baker*

One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think. —Brother Lawrence

Thursday, June 21

Growing in the Wind

Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!
Mark 4:41

Imagine a world without wind. Lakes would be calm. Falling leaves wouldn’t blow in the streets. But in still air, who would expect trees to suddenly fall over? That’s what happened in a three-acre glass dome built in the Arizona desert. Trees growing inside a huge windless bubble called Biosphere 2 grew faster than normal until suddenly collapsing under their own weight. Project researchers eventually came up with an explanation. These trees needed wind stress to grow strong.

Jesus let His disciples experience gale-force winds to strengthen their faith (Mark 4:36–41). During a night crossing of familiar waters, a sudden storm proved too much even for these seasoned fishermen. Wind and waves were swamping their boat while an exhausted Jesus slept in the stern. In a panic they woke Him. *Didn’t it bother their Teacher that they were about to die? What was He thinking?* Then they began to find out. Jesus told the wind and waves to be quiet—and asked His friends why they still had no faith in Him.

If the wind had not blown, these disciples would never have asked, “Who is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41).

Today, life in a protective bubble might sound good. But how strong would our faith be if we couldn’t discover for ourselves His reassuring “be still” when the winds of circumstance howl?

Father in heaven, please help us to remember that anything that frightens us comes with an invitation to find the strength of knowing and trusting You.

God never sleeps.

Friday, June 22

“I’m Really Scared ...”

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

“I’m really scared.” This was the poignant note a teenager posted to friends on Facebook as she told them of some upcoming medical tests. She was facing hospitalization and a series of procedures in a city three hours from home and anxiously waited as doctors tried to discover the source of some serious medical problems she was experiencing.

Who of us, in youth or later years, has not felt similar fears when facing unwanted life events that are truly frightening? And where can we turn for help? What comfort can we find from Scripture to give us courage in these kinds of situations?

The reality that God will go with us through our trial can help us to hope. Isaiah 41:13 tells us, “For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, ‘Do not fear; I will help you.’”

In addition, God offers indescribable, heart-guarding peace when we present our difficulties to Him in prayer (Phil. 4:6–7).

Through God’s unfailing presence and His peace that “transcends all understanding” (v. 7), we can find the hope and help we need to endure situations in which we are really scared.

Dear heavenly Father, when I am afraid, remind me that You hold my hand and give me peace. I’m grateful that I can lean into Your arms and find help when I’m scared. You are good to me.

God is with us in all our struggles.

Connecting to Worship: June 24

Theme: *Building Blocks: In the Middle of the Storm*, Mark 4:38-40 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Readings: Job 38:1-11, Psalm 124, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

Connecting to Worship: July 1

Theme: *Building Blocks: Giving Your All*, 2 Corinthians 8:9-9 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...

Readings: Lamentations 3:22-33, Psalm 30, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 13-15, Mark 5:21-43

Monday, June 25

Multiplied Generosity

See that you also excel in this grace of giving.

2 Corinthians 8:7

Cheryl was in for a surprise as she pulled up to deliver her next pizza. Expecting to arrive at a home, she instead found herself outside a church. Cheryl confusedly carried the pepperoni pizza inside, where she was met by the pastor.

“Is it fair to say life hasn’t been easy for you?” the pastor asked her. Cheryl agreed it hadn’t. With that, he brought out two offering plates that church members had filled with money. The pastor then poured over \$750 into Cheryl’s delivery bag as a tip! Unbeknownst to Cheryl, the pastor had asked the pizza shop to send their most financially strapped driver over. Cheryl was stunned. She could now pay some bills.

When the first Christians in Jerusalem faced poverty, it was a church that rushed to their aid. Though in need themselves, the Macedonian Christians gave sacrificially, considering it a privilege to do so (2 Cor. 8:1-4). Paul cited their generosity as an example for the Corinthians, and us, to follow. When we use our plenty to supply another’s need, we reflect Jesus, who gave away His riches to meet our own spiritual poverty (v. 9).

Cheryl told all her customers about the church’s kindness that day, and, following its example, donated the rest of the day’s tips to others in need. An act of generosity multiplied. And Christ was glorified.

Lord, You meet our needs in surprising ways sometimes. Use us to do that for others as well.

Our generosity meets needs and glorifies Jesus.

Tuesday, June 26

The Offering Plate

See that you abound in this grace also. —2

Corinthians 8:7

Ed Dobson, my former pastor, often said that he disliked preaching about financial giving to the church. He said his previous job required fundraising, so he didn’t like putting any unnecessary pressure on people. But when he was teaching through 2 Corinthians, and he came to chapters 8 and 9, he couldn’t avoid the topic of giving. What I remember most about his sermon was the illustration he used. He placed an offering plate on the floor, stepped into it, and stood there as he talked about the importance of giving our whole selves to the Lord, not just our wallets. Those two chapters in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians give us a number of attitudes and actions that we are to display in our giving to the Lord:

- Give yourself to the Lord first (8:5).
- Give, remembering the example of the Lord Jesus (8:9).
- Give according to your means (8:11-12).
- Give enthusiastically because of God’s love (9:2).
- Give generously, not grudgingly or because of outside pressure (9:5-7).

Next time the offering plate comes around at church, imagine yourself stepping into it. It will help you to excel in the grace of giving (8:7).

*Thank You, Lord Jesus, for giving Yourself for me on the cross. Because of Your love, I give all of me—my heart, my time, my funds, my will—to You.
I love You.*

When we give ourselves completely to the Lord, all lesser giving becomes easier.

Wednesday, June 27

Have You Left a Tip?

Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor. 2 Corinthians 8:9

The practice of tipping is commonly accepted in many countries. But I wonder: Has this courtesy influenced our attitude toward giving money to the church?

Many Christians regard their financial giving as little more than a goodwill gesture to God for the service He has rendered us. They think that as long as they have given their tithe to God, the rest is theirs to handle as they please. But the Christian life is about so much more than money!

The Bible tells us that our Creator owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). “The world is Mine,” God says, “and all its fullness” (v.12). Everything comes from Him, and everything we have belongs to Him. God has not only given us every material thing we have, He has also given us His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who provides our very salvation.

Paul used the Macedonian Christians as an illustration of what our giving should look like in the light of God’s incredible generosity toward us. The Macedonians, who were in “deep poverty,” gave with “liberality” (2 Cor. 8:2). But “they first gave themselves to the Lord” (v.5).

God the Creator of the universe does not need anything from us. He doesn’t want a tip. He wants us!

*Whatever, Lord, we lend to Thee,
Repaid a thousand-fold will be;
Then gladly will we give to Thee,*

Who givest all—who givest all. —C. Wordsworth

No matter how much you give, you can’t outgive God.

Thursday, June 28

Wholehearted!

Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.

Numbers 14:24

Caleb was a “wholehearted” person. He and Joshua were part of a twelve-man reconnaissance team that explored the Promised Land and gave a report to Moses and the people. Caleb said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (Num. 13:30). But ten members of the team said they couldn’t possibly succeed. In spite of God’s promises, they saw only obstacles (vv. 31–33).

Ten men caused the people to lose heart and grumble against God, which led to forty years of wandering in the desert. But Caleb never quit. The Lord said, “Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it” (14:24). Forty-five years later God honored His promise when Caleb, at the age of 85, received the city of Hebron “because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly” (Josh. 14:14). Centuries later an expert in the law asked Jesus, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:35–38).

Today Caleb is still inspiring us with his confidence in a God who deserves our wholehearted love, reliance, and commitment.

Lord, may we love You wholeheartedly today and follow You every day of our journey on this earth.

Commitment to Christ is a daily calling.

Friday, June 29

Yes or No?

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. —John 17:3

If God were to give professing believers a quiz on Christianity, many would score well. They would be able to answer “Yes, it’s true” to questions such as: Did Christ die for your sins? Did He rise from the dead? Is He coming back to earth?

Pastor and author Bruce Larson says that he grew up saying yes to these types of biblical doctrines. But eventually he sensed that God was asking him some new questions:

1. Will you trust Me with your life, yes or no? 2. Will you entrust yourself to My church family, yes or no? 3. Will you serve Me by getting involved with others, yes or no? Only when Larson said yes to these questions did God become real in his life. To the religious leaders of His day, Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Jesus was saying, in effect, “You can answer true to many facts of Scripture, but you won’t say yes to Me.”

Can you say you agree with many facts in the written Word but you haven’t said yes to Christ, the Living Word? Then do it now, and Jesus will turn your head knowledge into a life-changing heart knowledge.

Mere mental assent to the truths of God's Word is not the response God requires; your total dependence on Christ from the heart is what God our Father desires. —Hess

**It's not enough to know the facts of salvation—
you must also know the Savior.**

Connecting to Worship: July 1

Theme: *Building Blocks: Giving Your All, 2*
Corinthians 8:9 9For 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...

Readings: Lamentations 3:22-33, Psalm 30, 2
Corinthians 8:1-9 13-15, Mark 5:21-43

Connecting to Worship: July 8

Theme: *Building Blocks: Strength Training*, 2 Corinthians 12:10 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.

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Mark 6:1-13

Monday, July 2

Hard Way to Strength

My strength is made perfect in weakness.

—2 Corinthians 12:9

Diamonds are beautiful and valuable gemstones, but their beginning is common carbon—black, dirty, and combustible. Through years of intense heat and high pressure, they become pure and strong. This makes them a good metaphor for spiritual strength; God uses intense outside forces to rid us of impurities and to perfect His strength in us.

God's strength is made perfect in our weakness, says the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 12:9). I wish this were not true because I hate being weak. Chemotherapy and radiation treatments taught me more than I ever wanted to know about physical weakness. Then a minor event plunged me into a state of emotional weakness that caught me off guard. After losing 3 feet of hair and being bald for nearly a year, one bad haircut should not have been a big deal. But it was, and I felt silly for being so weak. Some of us are able to create an illusion of strength and self-sufficiency. But sudden loss of health, employment, or a treasured relationship is a startling reminder of our total dependence on God. When we experience the fiery furnace of suffering—whether physical or emotional, whether persecution from without or humiliation from within—God's loving purpose is to make us pure and strong.

God uses testing in our lives

To rid us of impurity

And teach us that our strength's in Him

And not in self-sufficiency. —Sper

Suffering is the fire that God uses to purify and strengthen us.

Tuesday, July 3

The Advantage of Weakness

He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

—2 Corinthians 12:9

It is always a joy to talk with my old college friend Tom and get caught up on what the Lord has been teaching us since we last met.

One time Tom began with a sheepish grin, "You know, I can't believe how many years it's taken me to learn my latest lesson—and I'm a Bible teacher!" He went on to list some of the trials and testings he and his family had been facing and how unworthy he felt teaching an adult Sunday school class. "Week after week I felt I was a total failure," he confided, "and kept wondering if this might be my last Sunday before announcing my resignation."

Then one Sunday, Tom noticed a young woman who stayed behind to speak to him. She was a friend of his family, so she knew what they had been going through. "Tom," she said, "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but you're a much better teacher when you're going through tough times!" Another sheepish grin crept across Tom's face as he told me, "Only then did I feel I grasped the Lord's response to Paul's thorn in the flesh: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"

Weakness helps us to relate to others and lets God's power work in our lives. That may be our greatest asset.

Inadequate but mighty—

How strange, yet wholly true;

Weak ones endued with power

The Lord's great work shall do. —HGB

We may face situations beyond our reserves, but never beyond God's resources.

Wednesday, July 4 *Fireworks and Freedom*

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. —Galatians 5:13

Thanks to the ingenuity of our Chinese friends, we here in the US celebrate our independence this month with massive displays of colorful fireworks. Every year when we sing our national anthem and enjoy the vibrant patterns created by “bombs bursting in air,” I remind myself that most bombs are deadly, not beautiful like the fireworks display. Although both use similar ingredients, one is intended to kill; the other to entertain. In this metaphor we see an example of how something can be used for both good and evil. In the hands of capable, careful, and caring people, something dangerous becomes glorious. But the opposite is also true.

Freedom—the very thing we celebrate with fireworks—can also be used for good and evil. As believers in Christ, we are free from the restrictive Mosaic law, but the Bible warns us not to use our spiritual freedom for selfish purposes: “Do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13). Not everyone has political and religious freedom, but all believers in Christ have spiritual freedom. We must not use it as a weapon to impose our will on others but to display the glory of God’s will.

*Free from the law—O happy condition!
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
Grace hath redeemed us once for all. —Bliss*

Freedom doesn’t give us the right to do what we please, but to do what pleases God.

Thursday, July 5 *Strength in Weakness*

Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. —Matthew 20:26

No one wants to be weak, so we find ways to appear strong. Some of us use the force of our emotions to manipulate people. Others use the force of personality to control people, and some use intellect to intimidate. Although these create an illusion of strength, they are signs of weakness.

When we are truly strong, we have the courage to admit our limitations and to acknowledge our dependence on God. As a result, true strength often looks a lot like weakness. When the apostle Paul prayed that an affliction would be taken from him, God answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul responded with these troubling words: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (v.10).

Toward the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, some of His disciples were striving for positions of prominence. Jesus used their argument as an opportunity to teach them that in His kingdom things are different: greatness comes when we willingly assume positions of weakness (Matt. 20:26).

This is a hard truth. I prefer the illusion of strength to the reality of weakness. But God wants us to realize that true strength comes when we stop trying to control people and start serving them instead.

*The life that we live for God’s glory,
Let’s live it in biblical light:
God’s strength is made perfect in weakness;
He alone controls power and might. —Branon*

God’s greatest power can be displayed in our biggest weakness.

Friday, July 6

Strength Out of Weakness

Out of weakness [they] were made strong. —
Hebrews 11:34

A confident, self-assured person once told me, “My secret for living is simply doing all that I possibly can —and it works!” Clearly, this individual hadn’t had the rock-bottom experience that I once had. My broken life became one big “can’t.” Trying to do “all that I possibly could” became impossible. My only hope was to find resources beyond my own. God began teaching me day-to-day dependence on Him. Gradually I experienced the reality of what the author of Hebrews 11:34 described when he wrote, “Out of weakness [they] were made strong.” Soon, the apostle Paul’s testimony became mine: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Dependence on God became my lifestyle. He was teaching me that He wanted to entrust me with His work and that He would enable me to do it. As I increasingly learned to trust Him, several humanly impossible ministries opened up to me. These challenges reminded me of the axiom: “It’s easier to do the impossible with God than the possible without Him.”

Are you feeling weak? If so, begin depending on God and His Word instead of yourself. As you do, your weakness will be the making of you, not the breaking of you.

*Blessed thought, "If God be for us."
Inner power —His grace supplies
Help for every time of weakness,
Understanding all our cries. —Hamilton*

**To experience God's strength, we must recognize
our weakness.**

Connecting to Worship: July 8

Theme: *Building Blocks: Strength Training, 2*
Corinthians 12:10 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.

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Mark 6:1-13