

PRAISE FOR VOLUME ONE:

“These daily reflections from Alistair Begg are simple but profound, short but meaty, challenging but encouraging. They offer truth for all of life, truth to consecrate a life, truth to transform a life. Together, they make an ideal devotional resource for individuals, couples, and families alike.”

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“Here speaks a pastor who knows both his Bible and his people. He not only understands the Scriptures but lovingly applies them like medicine for the soul. These daily devotions will do that. They will help you get to know the Bible better and how it fits together. They will stretch your mind with deep, bracing theology expressed with accessible clarity. They will warm and nourish your heart because they breathe the beauty of Christ. I have been struck by the freshness and variety of the devotions, from every part of the Scriptures, and by the pastor’s heart that beats through them. There is rich nourishment here for the soul, the fruit of many years of mining the Scriptures and caring for people.”

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“A good daily devotional is a wonderful aid to a daily habit of reading and meditating on Scripture. And this one, as you would expect from Alistair Begg, is pure gold. With the skill of a spiritual surgeon, he carefully dissects both the Scriptures and our hearts. A daily devotional dose of wisdom from one of the finest preachers of our time. How could this possibly be anything but life-giving nourishment for the mind and heart?”

DEREK W.H. THOMAS, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC;
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries;
Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

“I found these daily devotions by Alistair Begg to be a huge help to daily Bible reading—a critical barometer of our spiritual health. Time and again I was made to think freshly about a passage and then given another chapter which made me reflect more deeply on the verses that the commentary had opened up. A very timely gift to aid discipleship in the church.”

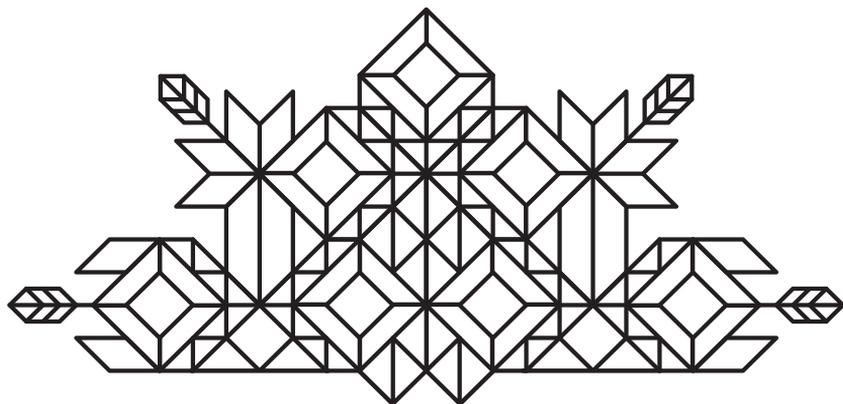
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Christianity Explored Ministries; Author, *Faithful Leaders* and *Honest Evangelism*

“If you are looking for wise and perceptive guidance to help you see and experience the deep impact of God’s words in Scripture, you will love this devotional. Each day’s reflection is a gem, focusing the light of the chosen Scripture text onto our thinking, our affections and our behaviour. I cannot imagine it being read without benefit!”

JOHN WOODHOUSE, Former Principal of Moore Theological College, Sydney,
Australia

“These devotions will help you praise when you are celebrating, will comfort you when you are struggling, will encourage you when you are doubting, and will be a balm when you are hurting. Each day, Alistair points to the glory and goodness of God as He reveals Himself to us in His word. Whoever you are, there is rich treasure for you in this book.”

KEITH & KRISTYN GETTY, Hymn Writers; Founders of Getty Music
and the Sing! Conference

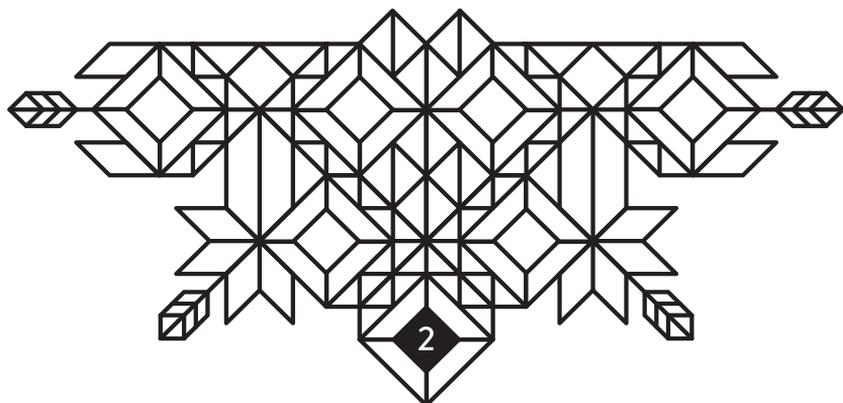


TRUTH
FOR
LIFE

365 DAILY DEVOTIONS

— VOLUME TWO —

ALISTAIR
BEGG



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INTRODUCTION



Welcome to the second volume of this Truth For Life devotional. If you have already enjoyed Volume One, then you will be familiar with this Introduction, and might like to move straight on to January 1st's devotional. If, on the other hand, these are the first Truth For Life devotionals you've picked up, then do read on...

God's word is a glorious gift. Our Father has given it to us in order that we might know His Son and that we might live in the power of His Spirit, in obedience to His truth.

It is worth pausing to consider this reality: when we read the Bible, we're dealing with the words of the Creator of the universe, spoken to His creation. It is impossible for us to understand ourselves, our world, or anything else without His word. As we read a newspaper, as we try to make sense of our society, and as we look to our history and to our future, it is the Bible we need if we are to get a handle on it all. God's word is the truth that you and I need to navigate every day of this life, and to point us to the one in whom we find the life that really is life.

So in this devotional, by far the most important words on each page are the ones at the top, just under the date and title. Those are the words of the living, reigning, eternal God. My aim in the comments below those divinely inspired words is simply to explain them, to encourage you from them, and to reflect on how they inspire and equip us to enjoy living for Christ in every area of our lives. God's word says of itself that it is able to "make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and that these God-breathed words are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This is a *daily* devotional, because man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). That is, God's word sustains us each day and is as necessary to our spiritual health as food is to our physical health. On some days you may find reading God's word a delight, and on other days it may be done more out of duty, but every day it is essential. Think of it like exercise. If you're a runner, there are times when you're running around the track and it feels amazing; and there are others when it feels like an effort and you need to push on and push through. Most of us will not tumble out of our beds each morning thinking how fantastic our time in God's word is going to be. If we approach the Scriptures thinking that we need to be stirred as we read them, or that we ought to "get a blessing" whenever we open them, then we will either be intermittent or disappointed Bible readers. There will be times of delight and excitement and feeling something as you read and meditate on God's word—but do not worry if

those times do not come every day, or even most days. Make a commitment to turn to the Bible every day (and if you realize you have fallen out of the habit of doing so, simply jump back in), for God’s word is living and active, and it will be going to work in you in ways far deeper and more profound than your feelings can intuit.

And the Scriptures will—or they should—make a difference to our minds, to our hearts, and to our lives. Therefore, at the bottom of each devotion you will see three icons:   . These are a prompt to say to yourself, *Now that I have read and considered these verses...*

- *how is God calling me to think differently?*
- *how is God reordering my heart’s affections—what I love?*
- *what is God calling me to do as I go about my day today?*

It may be that God’s word does not speak to all three of those areas each day; but learning to ask yourself these questions will ensure that you are open to what God’s Spirit may be saying about your mind, heart, and life. And they will be helpful prompts to pray in response to what you have read, too.

Beside those icons you will see a passage that is linked in some way to what we have been considering; if you have time, turn up that passage and enjoy going deeper into God’s word. I have also found it very profitable to read through the whole of the Scriptures from start to finish in a year, and so, at the very foot of each page, you’ll see a Bible-reading plan that enables you to do just that.

God’s words are the words that we need. And so I am praying for you: that, in taking you to those words each day, this book would be life-changing for you, God’s beloved child, as His Spirit works through His word to show you His Son. Why not make that your prayer too? You could begin each day by using the words of my friends Keith Getty and Stuart Townend and praying:

*Holy Spirit, living breath of God,
Breathe new life into my willing soul.
Let the presence of the risen Lord
Come renew my heart and make me whole.
Cause Your word to come alive in me;
Give me faith for what I cannot see,
Give me passion for Your purity;
Holy Spirit, breathe new life in me.¹*

1 Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God” (2005).

JANUARY 1



THE GOD OF HOPE

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” ROMANS 15:13

We find ourselves at a period in history when it is easy to question hope in the midst of worldly peril. While even a brief study of centuries past would remind us that our age is not the worst, darkest, most evil age that has ever been experienced, with our limited perspectives we are apt to grow concerned, distracted, and anxious. We would do well to read the apostle Paul’s words as an indirect prayer for our daily lives: that the God of endurance might grant us encouragement in times of fear and uncertainty by filling us with all joy and peace.

The book of Romans, Paul’s greatest theological treatise, was written to a diverse congregation in Rome made up of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, and rich and poor, all of varying levels of spiritual maturity. As he reached the end of his glorious letter, Paul wanted to call them to live confidently as people marked by a distinct and abounding hope.

We find such hope simply by knowing our God. He is our God of hope for two reasons.

First, it is God who generates hope *in* us. His word “was written for our instruction” (Romans 15:4) so that we might think about and learn from His unchanging trustworthiness. Hope, endurance, encouragement, and peace are not commodities outside of ourselves; rather, in giving us Himself, dwelling in our hearts by His Spirit, God gives us all these things, which well up from inside.

Second, He is also the *object* of our hope. The prophet Jeremiah said in the midst of his own dreadful circumstances, “The LORD is my portion ... therefore I will hope in him” (Lamentations 3:24). The psalmist agreed when he wrote in response to the disheartening circumstances that surrounded him: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26). In other words, it doesn’t matter how long difficulty lingers in our lives; if we have God, He is ours for eternity, and He is enough for eternity.

The God whom we meet in Scripture is therefore the God of hope—a hope that is neither superficial nor fleeting. Our enduring Savior stands the test of time.

When you face a crisis, you quickly discover where your hope is placed. If your faith rests on the promises of God, then your hope will be grounded in those promises, and it will not be disappointed. It will abound through all the trials of life. It doesn’t matter what fear parades before your eyes; you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that your God, who brought the world into being and brought you from death to life, preserves it and sustains you by His power.

It is in God alone that true hope can be found. And it is in looking to Him that we find ourselves filled with all joy and peace—today and every day, on into eternity.



JANUARY 2



THE PROPHETIC WORD

“A great prophet has arisen among us!” LUKE 7:16

By nature, we do not see any beauty in Jesus. Of our own accord we do not declare that Jesus is wonderful, that Jesus is beautiful, that Jesus is incomparable. Left to ourselves, we are in utter darkness, having rejected what God has made obvious to us.

Spiritual darkness, noted the 17th-century Puritan Thomas Watson, is worse than natural darkness, yet “natural darkness affrights,” whereas “spiritual darkness is not accompanied with horror” and “men tremble not at their condition; nay, they like their condition well enough.”² We love darkness rather than light because the inclination of our hearts, and of our deeds, is actually evil (John 3:19-20).

Is there any light for our darkness? Is there any freedom from our bondage to self? The answer, of course, is an emphatic yes—namely, in the person of Jesus Christ! And as we consider how it is that Christ brings light and life, by God’s grace we are moved all over again to praise Him as wonderful, as beautiful, and as incomparable.

Consider, for example, how Jesus is the greatest and final prophet (Hebrews 1:1-3). God’s sending of His prophets, and finally His Son, represents an implicit judgment on us, since it is our shortcomings that make prophets necessary. We are by nature ignorant of God. We need divine help in order to grasp life’s most important truths.

Old Testament prophets were anointed and sent by God to speak into the people’s ignorance and blindness. These prophets, however, only *spoke* the word of God. When God came to us in the person of Jesus, He came *as* the Word of God, to speak into our ignorance, to unstop our deaf ears, and to open our blind eyes. Here is the greatest of the prophets.

We find in the Gospels that as Jesus began His ministry, He was almost immediately viewed as a prophet. So it was that following the raising of the widow of Nain’s son, the people responded, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” Similarly, in John 6, when the 5,000 were fed, the response was “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14). Indeed, Jesus Himself acknowledged this role when, in Luke 4, He pointed out in Nazareth that “no prophet is acceptable in his hometown” (Luke 4:24).

Jesus came as the very Word of God. And so, in Him, the prophetic word has found its fulfillment, and in Him we discover the ultimate expression of truth—the truth contained not only in His teaching but also in His person. We need Jesus to teach our hearts, to dispel our darkness, to reach us in a way that no one else can. Until He teaches us, we will never learn about Him. Until we see Him as the Word of God, we will never be wise for salvation. But when this greatest of the prophets speaks truth to our hearts, we say, “This is truth”—and we praise the one who is all truth as our wonderful, beautiful, incomparable Teacher and Savior.

 2 PETER 1:16-21

² “Christ’s Prophetic Office” in *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth, 2015), p 169.

JANUARY 3



LIFE AT LOW TIDE

“Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long?” PSALM 6:2-3

Have you ever felt like your life is at low tide? Perhaps you feel that way now. Sometimes we sense that we no longer have the spiritual vitality we once did. Either our own sins or sins committed against us have sapped our strength. Dark clouds seem to overshadow our faith. What was once a devoted zeal has become a distanced formalism, and what we used to enjoy we now merely endure. Such feelings may barely register at first. The waters seem to recede slowly. But the next thing you know, you look down and see the bare ocean floor. The ship of your faith has run aground.

When David wrote Psalm 6, his soul was at low tide. He was stuck in despair, saying, “I am weary with my moaning” (Psalm 6:6), and “My eye wastes away because of grief” (v 7). David’s experience shows that it is not abnormal for us as believers to feel overwhelmed by sin, be it our own or that committed against us.

But hope for a higher tide remains.

David pleads for God to be gracious to him: “Turn [and] deliver my life,” he asks (Psalm 6:4). Living this side of the cross, we know the ultimate source of that deliverance for which David pleaded. There on the cross is mercy without measure. At Calvary, God canceled the record of our sins and shamed our spiritual enemies (Colossians 2:14-15). Yes, Christ’s cross confronts us with our guilt and brings us to our knees—but the grace and mercy that God lavishes on us there also stands us on our feet. The God who encounters our hardened hearts is the same God who grants us repentance (2 Timothy 2:25) and liberates our lips to praise Him.

Because of Christ, God hears all our weeping and despair (Psalm 6:8)—and if we have come to know and love His mercy, then we can claim with David, “The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer” (v 9). We come to Him. We cry to Him. We commit ourselves to Him. No matter how low we are, how guilty we feel, or how hurt by the actions of others we may have been, God can still turn our mourning into dancing and clothe us with gladness (Psalm 30:11).

God doesn’t guarantee that the tide will come rushing back as soon as we cry out to Him. But hope is never far away for those who trust in the Lord. One day—whether today or the first day of our eternity with Him—we will know complete healing of our souls and bodies and, ultimately, an end to all our troubles. God’s timing may be mysterious to us. But the tide will come in and all our troubles will be swept away. The cross declares it.





FROM PRECEPTS TO PROMISES

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” HEBREWS 8:10

The law of God is a masterpiece, revealing our deep guilt and, at the same time, graciously teaching unholy people how to approach a holy God in worship. Its instructions form a carefully assembled tapestry; if one thread is pulled, the entire thing unravels.

This means that there are no small matters in the law. When we break a single command, we become guilty of violating the entire thing. James tells us this frankly: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). The law is not like a pile of stones, from which you can take one stone away and still have a heap. Rather, it is like a sheet of glass: a single crack compromises the whole thing. Why? Because God’s law is no arbitrary set of rules and regulations; it is an expression of the character and nature of our perfect and pure God of glory.

When you add this all together, it amounts to a terrifying reality. How can we ever hope to measure up to such a high standard? And yet, for those who know Christ Jesus by faith, the law no longer condemns us. The Son of God fulfilled God’s law Himself so that His people no longer have to face His wrath. We have escaped God’s just penalty on our sins through Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Now the law does not remain outside of us; it is written upon our hearts. Now the Spirit of God who wrote it there goes to work to transform us so that we gladly accept its duties and obligations. In Christ we are not only saved from the penalty for not keeping the law; we also have the resources to keep the law as never before.

Imagine a thief who walks into a church on Sunday, sees a list of the Ten Commandments, and trembles in fear at the words “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). He or she repents of that sin and receives the offer of new life in Christ. From then on, when they read that command, it means something different. The prohibition, “You *must* not steal,” has become a promise: “You *will* not steal.”

This is the case for everyone who calls on Jesus as Lord. What sins are you particularly struggling against or giving in to? By the Spirit, you have all the resources to obey your Father, looking to the law neither as a ladder to heaven nor as a source of condemnation but as a guide to life. Armed with this hope, you can battle against your sin with the confidence that comes from Christ’s great victory.

 ROMANS 8:1-6

JANUARY 5



THE CONSEQUENCES OF LAZINESS

“The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.”

PROVERBS 21:25-26

The book of Proverbs is an intensely practical book. It reminds us that a godly life is lived out in the everyday events of our journey. As Derek Kidner writes, “Its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes.”³ In many ways, Solomon’s writings are both immensely profitable and distinctly uncomfortable.

One lesson that Proverbs teaches us is the consequences of laziness. The biblical text uses the word “sluggard” to refer to a lazy person. It’s not a contemporary word, but it *is* a suitable word—one that describes a habitually inactive person whose lifestyle is framed by indolence and dormancy.

The sluggard, we learn, is hinged to his bed (Proverbs 26:14). This could mean that the person rises from bed after lunchtime or simply that they make little or no progress in their daily work. They don’t like to be approached directly or to be held accountable. When asked, “Will you do this?” they resent the follow-up question: “*When* are you planning to do it?”—or, in the words of Proverbs 6:9, “How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?” They never actually refuse to do anything, but they put off tasks bit by bit. They deceive themselves into thinking that they’ll “get around to it,” but minute by minute, they allow opportunity to quietly slip away.

In Proverbs 12:27, Solomon also tells us that “whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.” In other words, a lazy person does not finish what they start. But we, as followers of Christ, are called to a kind of perseverance that, as we work unto the Lord, will reap a harvest in due season if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9). As we remain accountable in Christian community, we can help each other see our blind spots so that the excuses we make for our lazy behaviors don’t become larger issues of self-indulgence.

The real tragedy of the sluggard’s life is that laziness is not an infirmity but a sin. Contemporary culture drives many on a quest for an overabundance of so-called leisure. But believers can set a radically different example. God created us to work with a purpose: that we may let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our heavenly Father (Matthew 5:16). The best adventure you can have is found along the pathway of goodness and duty. The greatest reward is not in leisure and ease and ducking out but in giving and giving and not holding back. How will that shape your approach to your day, and your tasks, today?

 PROVERBS 6:6-19

3 *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Tyndale, 1968), p 35.

JANUARY 6



COMMUNICATING LOVE

“Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” 1 THESSALONIANS 2:8

There is no greater communication of love than proclaiming the gospel of God. Such a love forfeits lesser benefits—being well thought of, meeting the expectations of others, holding a prestigious title, enjoying a comfortable life, and so on—for the sake of making the good news of Jesus known. Not that those blessings can’t be given to us by God, but they are not primary.

Notice that Paul and his missionary partners sought to share both the gospel *and* themselves. The gospel is best communicated within a loving friendship. But a loving friendship is not the same as gospel communication. No one declares the gospel passively; it must be actively shared.

And so we see that while Paul labored to build strong relationships, he also “proclaimed to [the Thessalonians] the gospel of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:9). The word “proclaimed” in this verse denotes the action of a herald, who declares what is given to him to say. A herald’s job is not to make things up, to respond to all the felt needs of those around them, or to make people feel good; it is to stand up and to speak up.

If you are a gospel believer, you are a gospel herald. The only question is: How effective a herald are you? We cannot replace the God-given message of the cross with our own views. If we get caught up in the desire to impress others, then we will quickly neglect what’s most important. We are meant to go into the throne room of the King, to receive His message, to enter our little spheres of influence, and to share what He has said—nothing more and nothing less. As John Stott writes, “Every authentic Christian ministry begins here, with the conviction that we have been called to handle God’s Word as its guardians and heralds. We must not be satisfied with ‘rumors of God’ as a substitute for the ‘good news from God.’”⁴

Some of us, then, need to love others enough to spend time with them, serving them and demonstrating that we are for them, so that we might love them by sharing the gospel of love with them. Others of us, though, need to use the friendships and networks we already enjoy as bridges for the gospel. What will gospel-sharing love for others look like for you, in the place and among the people God has set you today? Whatever the answer, remember this: there is no better way you can love and care for others than to tell them the good news of Jesus Christ.

 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

⁴ *The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity, 1991), p 68.

JANUARY 7



TRUTH YOU CAN TRUST

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” JOHN 17:17

Post-Enlightenment, rationalist, materialist culture has cooked up all sorts of enticing solutions to mankind’s greatest questions and dilemmas. We’re told that science has already delivered a deathblow to religion, and any talk of God or the Bible is dismissed as a superstition of a bygone age. Christian faith is regarded as a leap into the dark—a leap into intellectual oblivion.

One of the great challenges to faith in Christ, then, is whether we will take God at His word and be satisfied with what He says. In our cultural milieu, it’s good for us to periodically ask ourselves: “Do I believe the Bible? Am I actually prepared to trust what it says?”

We can have confidence in the testimony of Scripture for all kinds of reasons. We can consider the undeniable integrity of its manuscripts, its historical reliability down to the details of its claims, or even the way it has engendered faith across cultures for nearly two thousand years. But there’s actually a reason that’s even more fundamental than these or other defenses we could muster: the most essential reason we submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture is because it is a necessary consequence of our submission to the lordship of Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ believed the Bible; therefore, so do we. He acknowledged the authority of God’s word; therefore, so do we.

In His High Priestly Prayer on the night before He died, Jesus prayed to His Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Notice that there are no qualifications here. According to Jesus, God’s word simply *is* truth. So then, the pressing question becomes, *Do I believe Jesus?* And if I believe Jesus, then I believe the words Jesus spoke. Therefore, I accept what He taught about the Scriptures. Therefore, I embrace the Bible, just as He did.

If you have tasted and seen the goodness of Jesus Christ, then refresh your resolve to cherish God’s word daily. In our confused and conflicted world, nothing will steady your life like the truth of the Scriptures. Doubtless, some will try to convince you that embracing the Bible is equivalent to taking a blind leap into the dark. But the truth is that when you read the Scriptures in faith that it is God’s word and that every word is therefore true, you’ll find it to be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (Psalm 119:105).

 PSALM 12

JANUARY 8



REGULAR REMINDERS

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-2

The good news of the gospel can so easily be forgotten or taken for granted. If we begin to feel that we need to go beyond it, or we find it irrelevant in our lives or affections, we should be concerned, not complacent. Just as young children need regular reminders to keep them from forgetting what they need to remember, we need to recall routinely the transforming power of Jesus Christ in human hearts.

Why? Because the gospel is not just the way *in to* salvation but the way *of* salvation; it is not only the ABC of the Christian life but the A to Z. It is the word to which we must “hold fast.”

As Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 4:3, life without the gospel is like living with a veil covering our eyes: we are blinded by our own sin, by our pursuit of comfort or doing “enough” good, or even by our own theology or religious adherence. This clouded vision is common to all mankind; by nature, we all face a No Entry sign at the gate of heaven. The road is flooded, and there is apparently no way through. But the gospel, the glorious news, is this: there is one who stands ready to clear the way. In His living, dying, and resurrection, Jesus lived the life we can’t, died the death we deserve, and conquered death once and for all so that all who believe can have a relationship with God.

On the day we first understood the full weight of this—the day when God’s grace opened our clouded eyes, unplugged our ears, and softened our hardened hearts—we could run no other way than toward Him, crying, “Save me!” As the old hymn says:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.⁵*

Now, having run to Him as the gospel bids us, we need to remain with Him as the gospel reminds us. So, where does the gospel find you today? Are you living in this freedom? Or are you still occasionally living as though imprisoned, trying, trying, trying with all your might to find the freedom only Christ gives?

To the Christian, the gospel is and must be as water in a dry land. It is the priceless, payment-free water that the Lord Jesus offers—it is the water of life (Revelation 21:6). Be sure to rehearse to yourself the simple gospel today, and every day, so that it never grows cold to you and so that you live in the freedom that Christ died to win for you.

 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6

⁵ Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be, That I Should Gain?” (1738).

JANUARY 9



SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS

“Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God.” ZEPHANIAH 3:1-2

Some Christians walk straight toward spiritual paralysis. It’s never something we choose. No one consciously opts for stagnation and impairment. But there is a path down which disaster awaits. What could cause this sort of malady and wreak this havoc on a soul?

Such a devastating debility is often caused by hearing the voice of God in His word but then disobeying Him. It’s like looking Him straight in the face through Scripture but choosing to ignore Him. It is to be confronted with truth from your Creator and to claim, as His creature, to know better.

In the prophet Zephaniah’s day, the Spirit of God confronted the people of God with “woe”—with a warning of captivity and bondage. The “oppressing city” was Jerusalem itself—the city of God’s people. What was true for Jerusalem in a physical sense will be true of us in a spiritual sense if we refuse to listen to the voice of God and accept no correction from Him. There can be no blessing, no life, and no vitality where His word is neglected or disobeyed.

It is wise, then, to ask ourselves some difficult questions, rather than assuming that these kinds of warnings are only for others. Has God been speaking to you about a sinful habit in your life that you’ve decided you will hold on to and not break? Has He been speaking to you about a holy habit that you should establish, and you know that you should but you never actually do so? Has He been speaking to you about an apology that needs to be made, but in your pride you are avoiding doing this? Has He been speaking to you about a reconciliation that needs to take place with a loved one in your physical family or in the family of God?

Thankfully, God always receives His children with open arms when we turn to Him and heed His voice again. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”—all on account of Christ (1 John 1:9). When we are humble enough to listen to His voice and put our trust in Him, then we enjoy the experience of nearness to God once more. How is the Spirit prompting you as you read this passage today? There’s no better time than now to step off the path to spiritual paralysis and find grace in the arms of your Savior.

 ZEPHANIAH 3:1-17

JANUARY 10



TRUTH AND LOVE

“You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

1 THESSALONIANS 2:10-12

There is no doubt that Paul’s life and work changed the world. But what moved him, stirred him, and grounded him?

His first letter to the Thessalonian church gives us wonderful insights into what made Paul tick. He was clearly committed to truth and love—to the truth of God’s word and to a love for God’s people. These two coexisted in and drove forward his ministry. Paul knew that neither can outweigh the other without causing great harm. Truth without love is harsh and can result in a ministry that is motivated by personal gain. Love without truth is rootless and results in a ministry that departs from the gospel.

Paul was not interested in prestige, wealth, or popularity. He simply wanted to see fellow believers “walk in a manner worthy of God.” He longed to see spiritual maturity.

In Paul’s thinking and writing, walking worthy of God means living in the awareness that we have been adopted into God’s kingdom by grace. We can build no other kingdom. We must not strive to establish an empire of our own or of our church or of our ministry, nor focus on success or reputation. More than any attachment to an individual or institution, our greatest concern must be to see in our own lives, and in the lives of men and women around us, a devotion to Jesus Christ—a commitment to holding to His truth and living with His love.

John the Baptist exemplified this humility when he proclaimed of Christ, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He knew he was simply a servant of the Lord, receiving only what was “given him from heaven” (v 27) and nothing else. The best man at a wedding does not bring attention upon himself or want the bride for himself but rather rejoices in the groom’s joy. In the same way, our great excitement must be in Christ pursuing and winning His bride, the church—whether He uses us in some significant way or not.

As you make decisions, as you respond to setbacks, as you care for others, as you serve in ministry, is your greatest desire simply to “walk in a manner worthy of God”? Is it to be a person of both truth and love? Let it be said of you, as it could be said of Paul, that you loved God’s truth and that you truly loved God’s people.

 EPHESIANS 4:1-6

JANUARY 11



TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” MATTHEW 5:38-40

These words of Jesus are familiar, but they are also very challenging, and we ought to be very careful not to strip them of their impact by immediately trying to qualify them in a thousand different ways. Yet we also need to be sure to understand what is *not* commanded here. These verses don’t advocate some kind of apathetic passivity, although they’re pressed in that way by some. So how *should* we interpret what Jesus said?

It’s always important to compare Scripture with Scripture. The instruction given here is for interpersonal relationships; it’s not given to determine the role of the state either in warfare or in the execution of justice (Romans 13:1-7). The key is to distinguish between the temptation we face to enact personal vengeance and the duty we’ve been given to uphold both God’s glory and the rule of law. Jesus doesn’t want us to be unconcerned about issues of truth, righteousness, or justice. But He also doesn’t want us to be driven by a desire to protect our own rights or to pursue personal revenge.

David understood this distinction when he called down curses on people in the imprecatory psalms (for example, Psalm 5:10). He was not seeking to execute personal vengeance. Rather, he was looking at God’s glory and majesty and at the wholesale rebellion of the culture and saying to God, *Please, for the glory and honor of Your name, deal with these circumstances.*

Similarly, although Paul wrote that we should never avenge ourselves (Romans 12:19), he, too, recognized the separation between retaliation and matters of civil justice. In Philippi, he and Silas were accused of unlawful actions and dragged away to jail. Acts 16 records how, when the magistrates tried to release them quietly, “Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.’” Then “the police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens” (Acts 16:37-38). They were afraid because they knew what they had done was illegal. Yet there was no sense of personal vengeance in what Paul did. Rather, he was upholding the rule of law.

We will be helped as we keep in mind this distinction between personal retaliation and matters of civil justice. We need the humility to trust God for justice in our interpersonal relationships and the courage to promote righteousness and the glory of His name and the integrity of the rule of law. But the challenge still stands: without ignoring justice, we are to seek to bless those who have hurt us and to share with those who have taken from us. What might that look like for you?

 ROMANS 12:13-21



EMBRACING OUR LIMITATIONS

“When I applied my heart to know wisdom . . . then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.” ECCLESIASTES 8:16-17

We all like to have answers. In life’s endless uncertainty, and especially when the world or our own personal circumstances feel chaotic, we long for surety. Just think of all the experts to whom we look for guidance: medical experts, social experts, political experts, and so on. Yet while the proliferation of experts may be unique to our day, the quest for certainty is not. In every age, humans have searched for some kind of rhyme or reason to make sense of the grand events of history and the experiences of their individual lives.

We find an ancient example of this quest in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Its writer shares with us his attempts to understand “all that is done under heaven,” applying his heart “to know wisdom and to know madness and folly” (Ecclesiastes 1:13, 17). Yet in the end, he concludes that “man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.” Most people arrive at the same conclusion without so much effort—all we need is enough time to live our lives and to observe the world around us. The wise response to this truth is to humble ourselves and live by the light of God’s word. In other words, we acknowledge that while God does not permit us to know all we might want to know, He has given us all we need. Genuine humility admits, and even embraces, this limitation.

If we were to behold the fullness of all of God’s activity and purposes, it would be like looking up directly into a very bright sun. The light we are meant to live by is revealed in Scripture. It is the word of God that lights our path: “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130). It may not light all our surroundings, but it does light the way ahead—if we will walk in trust and obedience.

Rather than busying ourselves with what cannot be known, we need to come to the Scriptures humbly, expectantly, and consistently, so that we might discover the light it provides. We won’t understand life entirely, but we may understand it sufficiently, and so sing with William Cowper:

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.⁶*

This view of life under the sun is what will enable us to increasingly trust that God will, in His own time and in His own way, bring perfect order out of seeming confusion. He will use all of our circumstances to complete all of His purposes for all of eternity.

ECCLESIASTES 8

⁶ William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1774).