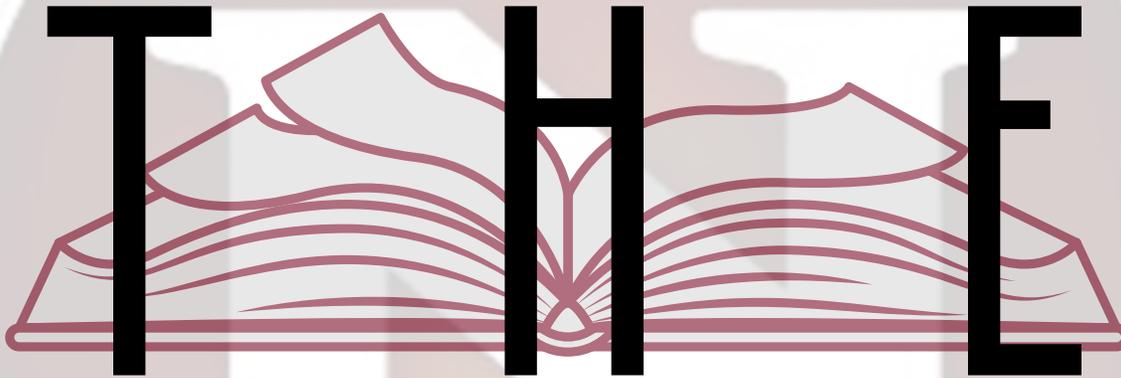


Between

THE

Pages

THOUGHTS ABOUT SCRIPTURE AND OTHER BIBLICAL CONCEPTS
FROM THE MEMBERS OF
NORTH ALBEMARLE BAPTIST CHURCH

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Reflections
By: Jonathan Blaylock

2020 is a year that we will not soon forget. For many, 2020 will be remembered in infamy. However, infamy does not have to be the legacy of this year. Much good has happened this year that I think we should remember. Let's reminisce together for a moment.

I will always remember 2020 as the year that I moved my family to Albemarle, NC. It's the year that we began to plant our lives in this wonderful city. This is the year that we made many new friends and were warmly welcomed into a new church family!

More than that though, think about all the lessons we've learned:

- We learned the fragility of tomorrow, and specifically the plans that we make for tomorrow. I learned the importance of prefacing my plans with the phrase, "If the Lord wills... (James 4:15).
- We also learned the certainty of the Lord though. We learned that a global pandemic cannot stop the good news of the gospel of Jesus, nor can it stop his church.
- We learned the joy of rest. When all of our sports seasons were cancelled, we used the free time to read the Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. It is very unlikely that we would have taken on all seven books had we not found ourselves spending a little more time at home.
- 2020 has been the year that we have been able to teach our children that Jesus is King over diseases and viruses, over medicine and vaccines, over life and death.
- We have had opportunity to teach our children that human beings are beings created in the image of God; that each and every ethnicity are image bearers.
- We learned that though political parties are important, Jesus is supreme over every political party. We learned that our hope is not in a mere man, but in the God-man.
- When fright overcame the world because of a lethal insect on a mission to

wipe out the human race, we took the opportunity to remind ourselves that Jesus is authoritative over every animal no matter how small, or how big, or how murderous.

- This year we learned that God is sovereign over the clock and the calendar. I shudder to think of some of the decisions that I may have made had I known what 2020 held in store. I learned that God gives us just as much of the picture as He wants us to have at that particular moment in history.

Yes, this year is the year that I have become more confident than ever in the sovereign rule and reign of Christ, and for that I am very thankful for 2020. I pray that we all would view 2020 as the year that we will look back on when future trials come our way, and say “God’s got this.”

Pastor Jonathan

Free to Live for Christ
2 Corinthians 5:14-15
By: Jo Gray

Prayer: We worship You, God our Father, because You alone are worthy of our highest devotion. We owe our lives to You. We depend on Your grace—undeserved favor—to live above the demands of our selfish flesh. Teach us to listen to Your Word and apply it to our family life.

Explanation: Reconciliation is a contemporary buzz word, but reconciliation is not a new idea. Two thousand years ago Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about God reconciling mankind to Himself. In Jesus, God gave us a Savior who became sin for us and died for us so that He wouldn't have to count our sins against us. First God reconciled us to Himself, then He gave us the message and ministry of reconciliation.

Is true reconciliation possible if we live primarily for ourselves—making our own happiness our gauge and goal? Back in verse 9 Paul says our aim is to please God. Can we please God if we're focused on ourselves? Instead, a wholehearted embrace of God's Good News frees us from the me-first mentality. Adoration and love for the One who died our death inspires us to follow His command to love our neighbors.

Point: Anyone who trusts Christ's reconciling work on the cross is subsequently free from the bondage of Self, and therefore free to live for Christ instead of Self.

Application: Who are our closest neighbors? The people we live with—in a stew pot of personality, expectations, habits, beliefs, abilities, and backgrounds. Many couples know firsthand that “opposites attract.” They savor the differences that draw them to one another, like a savory blend of vegetables and beef. Left untended, however, delightful differences turn into a mush of troubling traits, boiling over into conflict. The mess exposes our own sins of self-righteousness, selfishness, impatience, lack of love, and pride. How will we respond? Will we stick with our simmering self-centered life on the my-way highway, or trust God's recipe for a godly marriage through repentance and love?

A new book by Paul Miller, *J Curve*, reminds us that Christians “go down to come up.” The author exhorts us to not run from the “customized dying God permits.” A husband and wife share meals, laughs, tears, children, toothpaste, a checkbook, and a bed, but that's not all. We share an abundance of customized opportunities to die to Self. Think of it as pursuing God through marriage.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Do you see family life as a school of faith? Children first learn about marriage in non-verbal ways by how they are loved and cared for by their parents, and next as they observe how Mom and Dad care for each other.

Attitudes about marriage are surely “caught” as well as “taught,” so setting godly examples for our children is essential. Teaching children to serve and consider others in the family is a great place to start. Parents who train their children to obey are preparing them to submit to God’s design for marriage.

Middle & High School Students: Adolescents and teens are forming ideas about marriage—positive and negative—as they observe parents and other adults. They’ve certainly been exposed to the larger culture’s messages about love and marriage which at best is confusing, and at worst, totally misleading.

An article from Focus on the Family, “4 Truths in a Culture of Lies,” offers anchor points for right now. These truths are essential for life in general and for gaining understanding of God’s plan for marriage:

1. Absolute truth does exist. (Look to Scripture. Pay attention to Pastor Jonathan’s sermons.)
2. Rules are designed to protect us. (This means from yourself and the foolishness of others. Keep in mind God’s Big Ten, especially #5. Also refer to God’s instructions about how to treat one another. Check out the book of Proverbs, Romans 12, I Corinthians 13, I Peter 3:8-18.)
3. Perseverance and commitment are essentials in life. (No relationship survives on feelings alone for long.)
4. Wisdom comes from God. (The Father knows best. Always.)

Young Adult: Take it from someone who’s been there—movies and celebrities are not great sources of information. Longing to “live happily ever after” is a godly longing, but fulfillment won’t come in this life. Here and now, through the realities of life on planet Earth, we learn about God’s love, our sin, and our need for a Savior. He blesses abundantly, but He must sanctify you in the long, slow process. If you’re considering marriage, or longing for a lasting relationship, practice serving others in everyday ways. Practice submitting to parents, employers, and to God’s commands. Consider whether you’re willing to enter marriage to become more like Christ? Or are you merely seeking your own happiness? Godly marriage is a beautiful thing, but to quote someone I know

very well, “It ain’t easy.” Even so, GO FOR IT! As part of your life with Christ, it is the adventure of a lifetime!

Adult (all ages and stages): To the never-married, divorced, married, separated, or widowed, God is at work in you and your circumstances for your good and His glory. If you desire a change of status, make sure you’re not seeking escape or looking for the fulfillment of a perfect dream. Instead, resolve to first accept where you are, and learn to pursue a closer relationship with God through His Son, Jesus.

Because my husband and I are close to marking 46 years of marriage, we can say there’s no such thing as a perfect marriage. Are you surprised? We’re **still learning** to lay down expectations, be quiet or speak up, to pray for one another, confess our sins and forgive one another, to serve one another, to give, to receive, and probably a million other things. Years ago, when Steve was tempted to despair about his job, the Lord impressed on him this thought, “I made you for the long haul.” That assurance has prompted both of us to hang in there on days when the going was rough, believing that God’s still at work in us and our marriage.

Husbands and wives: do you still wrestle over roles or hanker for equality? Try this: ask God to give you an “**equality of commitment to know God and to obey His voice (Hughes, 155).**” This shared desire brings unity, deep joy, and real peace as you walk together with Christ through your marriage, mirroring the mystery of Christ and His bride, the Church.

Prayer: Lord God, You are ruler of all things. Every moment, every mile, every molecule. We want to live for Jesus and not for ourselves. Be first in our hearts because You are our treasure in this life and the life to come.

Resources:

Focusonthefamily.com

Miller, Paul E. *J-Curve: Dying and rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*

Thomas, Gary. *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy.*

Hughes, Barbara. *Disciplines of a Godly Woman* (Wheaton, Illinois; Crossway, 2001).

Rightly Handle the Truth
2 Timothy 2:15
By: Krissy Cardwell

Prayer: Thank God for providing a way for us to have access to Him through Jesus. Ask Him to take away any hindrance from your life that would keep His truth from your heart. Invite Christ to speak to you today through His Word.

Explanation: Our culture puts emphasis on the idea that we all have a right to believe whatever we want. To believe something means to accept it as truth. As long as you don't impose on my rights, I won't impose on your rights, and we all will be just fine. But, it really does not work out all that well, does it? We choose to believe in lots of things, or not, depending on the situation. You may or may not believe in climate change. Whatever your stance, you have that right to your own truth, right? Well, not always, according to Paul. Imprisoned and awaiting his sentence, Paul is writing to Timothy, his friend and spiritual son. Paul writes to encourage Timothy in his ministry and his Christian life. Urging him to be strong in what he believes, Paul tells Timothy he must use the gifts that God has given to him. He must preach the gospel and teach the truth. But Paul was not referring to just any truth. Not Paul's truth, not Timothy's truth, not the popular truth of the day. He was referring to the one truth, God's truth. It is so easy to let our viewpoints, our knowledge, or our feelings direct our beliefs. I have a good friend who often says, "It's not about how you feel, it's about what is true. But in a world filled with lies, how do we know what is true?"

Paul gives Timothy some direction on this. First, he instructs Timothy to "do his best to present himself to God as one approved." Ephesians 1:13 tells us that "in Him, having heard and believed the word of truth--the gospel of your salvation--you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." Once we hear the word of truth, and believe that truth, a change takes place. We are no longer just our own. We delight in the things of God, and he delights in us. He no longer looks at us and sees the same person standing before him. He sees the Holy Spirit, he sees His Son. At that moment, you are no longer who you used to be. No longer are you judged by your sins. The labels this world puts on you no longer define you. God looks at you and sees the only one whom He could approve of, His Son. And through the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to go before the throne a new creation.

This is important, because only then can the next part of this verse hold true. Only with Jesus are we free to be unashamed. Only with his mercy can we walk

in assurance that, as James put it in chapter 2:5, that we are heirs to the kingdom of heaven, even if we don't always feel that way. Remember, it's not about how we feel, but about what is true.

And finally, this leads to a call to action. Paul continues on one step further and issues a challenge for Timothy to “rightly handle the truth.” How could any of us hold any claim to the ability to rightly handle anything as important as the word of God? We can't. We surely will mess this up. There is only One qualified to do such a thing, and that is Jesus. However, for us, if we have heard and accepted the truth of Christ, and the Holy Spirit seals us, then we don't have to rely on our own knowledge, talents, or abilities to spread the gospel of truth. Jesus takes care of that for us. How do we know what is true? We have the Bible. It is our guide. It is trustworthy. It does not cater to citizenship, selfish desire, or popular opinion. That's what Paul desires Timothy to understand. Paul is telling Timothy that he now possesses the knowledge of truth. He wants Timothy to wield that truth like a sword. Pressing forward, slicing away at falsehood, and confidently standing upon the rock of Christ.

The Point: Through Jesus God provided a way for us to come before him equipped with the calling He has set before us. We are called to filter every aspect of our lives through this truth, and to share that knowledge with the world.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Once starting school most kids become weary of report card time. We can all relate with the anxiety of feeling like we won't measure up. What if we don't make the grade? Grab your child's last report card, or if you are brave, one of your old ones and talk about what a report card is for. It's not just for parents to know where your child falls; it is also for the student to be aware of their progress.

Just as report card day comes at school, the Bible teaches us that each of us must answer to God for the kind of life we live. Thankfully, God has given us the Bible to tell us exactly what He expects of us. It teaches us what we should do and what we should not do. Just like we can study to prepare ourselves for the work that we have to do at school, we must study God's word and do our best to follow its teachings. We must do our best to prepare ourselves so that when the opportunity to share God's word with others, we know what we believe and why.

Middle & High School Students: At times talking to your kids about their beliefs can be difficult, especially when your beliefs may not line up. Despite the

challenge, these discussions are important to have with our teens. Because the truth is, if we don't, someone will. Take some time to speak to read scripture with your youth and discuss the text. Ask them what they believe and why. Ask them the hard questions; see what their worldview is without your telling them the answers. Together filter those beliefs with the words in the Bible. Help your teens learn how to make sure what they are investing in as truth falls in line with the desires of God. We can equip them with the tools to understand that truth is not "what a Bible verse means to me." Rather that truth is found in discovering the author's original intent with knowledge of how this intertwines with the whole message of the Bible, leading to the God-given meaning of the scripture. Just as Paul did for Timothy, let's strive to guide the next generation to be students of the Word who interpret Scripture correctly and submit their lives to Christ.

Young Adult: After high school and into college it is easy for us to find ourselves caught up in the fast pace of our day-to-day routines. Having the opportunity to slow down and spend time in scripture can become difficult. Take some time this week to devote some time pouring over the Word of God. Submit your time to Him and ask Him to examine your heart. What is the result of your "workmanship"? How would you describe the way you handle the truth of the Good News? If God brings areas of your life to your attention ask Him to help you grow closer to Him. Ask Him to help you to purposefully devote time studying his Word and to run after the truth that He reveals to us inside.

Adult: It is easy to say that we love God and desire to work for Him when life is going well. Our Christian walk is much smoother when the lumps and bumps of this world is out of our line of sight. It is important to be aware when we do find ourselves in the midst of trials that the God of our hills is also the God of our valleys. How do we react under pressure? How is our attitude toward others when stressful circumstances upon us? Do we run to the world for answers, or is our first reaction to run to the Words of God to provide comfort to our weary hearts? Within the last few weeks we all have felt the strain of COVID-19. This is no "normal" valley that any of us has experienced before. Let's take this week and prayerfully consider the words of Paul and apply them to how we allow trials to either distance us or draw closer to our God who loves us. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Prayer: Thank you Lord for being the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We praise you for the provision of your Word and the guidance it gives when we need it most. Remind us daily of your love for us. It is our prayer that you will consume our hearts. We pray that when we go out into the world others will not

see or hear us. We want to present ourselves as sons and daughters of God, approved and loved, speaking and sharing your truth in every aspect of our lives. Thank you for being our Good Father. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

The God-Breathed Word
2 Timothy 3:16
By: Krissy Cardwell

Prayer: Philippians 4:6 tells us to “...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Pray for the Lord to give you peace today. Take your worries and requests to Him. Praise Him for the blessings in your life. A Him to open your heart to hear His words and bring you close to Him.

Explanation: Can't you just see Paul sitting in a cold damp cell in Rome? He has spent many years in prison because of his faith, and within his sight, is the finishline to his race. He knows his fate. Soon, he will be sentenced to die. Even so, with this knowledge Paul picks up his pen and begins to write to Timothy. Timothy, who to Paul started as a companion and brother in Christ, is now as dear to Paul as a son. I can imagine Paul pouring all of his heart into this letter as he writes to his successor. You imagine that Paul would be fearful or discouraged as he begins writing to Timothy. We could understand if he frantically wrote for help or wished that his circumstances were different. However, this was not the case. No, because for Paul, to live was Christ, but he already knew that his dying was his gain (Phil. 1:21).

What we do see is a mentor writing to his beloved student, knowing it is time to pass on the torch. When we pick up in verse 16, Paul has reminded him to be strong in his faith, warned Timothy of future challenges and has reminded the younger pastor who he is in Christ. Right before Paul gives Timothy his marching orders for the last time, Paul arms him with a compass he will need to accomplish his goal: the scripture. He proclaims that all scripture is breathed out by God, and is useful in the disciple's walk. Notice that Paul didn't say some of the scripture was useful, or the scripture that applied to his circumstance, or the parts that Timothy agreed with. No, he says all. Not only does he say that all scripture is applicable to Timothy, he explains that the reason Timothy can put his trust in scripture is because it is God-breathed. Otherwise, wouldn't there be room for human error? The Greek word used here is theopneustos, which means “God-breathed, inspired by God, due to the inspiration of God.” This disproves the doubts that this world throws at us. The Bible is not full of man-made mistakes, with information added to or lost in translation over time. It specifically describes it as being inspired by God himself, not influenced by man. If one is to breathe out, one must first be able to breathe in. If this is true, then the only explanation is the Holy Spirit alive and working within each of the authors of the

scriptures, breathing out each word for our benefit. Because of this, Timothy had a reliable, unchanging, guide in all aspects in his life.

The good news is the same is true for us today. We have every letter and word that was breathed out by God. It is perfect, without error, and is the absolute authority over all things. How do we know this is true? Because the Bible tells us this is so. Holding tightly to the sword of the spirit we can walk confidently equipped with God's word to guide and direct us along the way. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

The Point: The Bible, including both Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, is perfect, and is complete. It is useful for teaching the truth, revealing error, and giving instruction in our Christian walk.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Use an instruction manual for a car or instructions for operating an object. Show your child how an owner's manual or care instructions explain what an item is, its purpose, how to use and care for it, how to set it up, etc. Ask your child if they know what the manual is used for. Is it something useful, or something to just toss to the side? No! Even though some things are fairly easy to figure out, we sometimes need a manual to help us assemble correctly and operate them correctly. A manual is a guide that helps people build and use things. For the not-so-simple items, it's important that we learn and follow what the manual says; because if we don't, we will probably wreck the machine or put together furniture, like a cabinet, the wrong way. For example: What will happen if I don't know how to make a cabinet and it turns out wobbly?

We also have our own personal manual. The Bible is the word of God! The Bible is filled with instructions that help us live and do right. The Bible helps keep us out of danger and helps us avoid wrong things. God's Word helps us figure life out as we grow and go through life. As we learn Bible truths, the Bible teaches us what is true and helps us realize the wrong things we do and have in our lives. When we learn from God's Word, it corrects us and teaches us to do what is right.

Middle & High School Students: Students will often begin to be challenged in their beliefs during the middle and high school years. It is important to not only speak to your teens about what they believe, but also why they believe it. Many may be confronted with the argument that the bible could not be perfect because it

was written and transcribed by man throughout the years, and therefore subject to man made mistakes. God didn't actually personally write the Bible, but instead used certain men throughout history to write down His Word for us so that we could read it today. Men like Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, John, Paul, and many others were spoken to by God and wrote down what He told them to write. In other words, the Bible is inspired by God. A good way to illustrate this is to ask your teen to take out a piece of paper and have them write down whatever you say. You can say anything, like "Chocolate ice cream is best." Then ask them who wrote those words? But whose words were they? So, even though God used certain men to write down His Word, it was HIS Word they were writing. And God saw to it that, however His servants wrote His messages, they all said just what God wanted to say. Now, for us today, God's Word is complete. There is nothing more to be said.

Young Adult: Timothy grew up in a home where he was taught the scriptures from an early age. As he matured, he helped Paul in his work to spread the gospel. He was more than a co-worker to Paul. He became like a son. Who influences you in your walk? Do they speak truth into your life? Do they encourage you to read God's Word to guide and equip you? God created us for community. He knew that we would need one another. Look for your "Paul" in your life. Look for the mentor who will pray for you, pour into your life and speak truth. If you do not have that person, ask God to show you who you can serve along with and learn from.

Adult: You know what they say about best-laid plans? Nevertheless, we live in a world that tells us to plan. And have a plan and a back up plan, just in case. We plan what career we want to have, what kind of spouse we want to marry, how many kids we will have, and so on. It is easy for our plans to change, either by our own decisions or because of circumstances beyond our control. What happens when our plans go array? Do we react angrily, upset that we didn't get what we wanted? Does anxiety creep in and we worry about what will happen next? Do we rush to get advice from a friend or family member on how to proceed? I am pretty sure that at no point in his life Paul had prison and death by beheading in his five-year plan. How did he react to the change of his circumstances? Right now with COVID- 19 we may be in the middle of the biggest examples of just how easily our plans may not always work out. Compare your reactions to unforeseen "bumps" to the truths found in scripture. The word of God is sharper than any two edged sword. Ask God to use His word to pierce our hearts and to open our eyes to help us submit and trust in Him.

Empty Nesters: Paul not only found contentment in his chains, he also used the

opportunity to reach out to those who he had influence to reassure, encourage, and challenge them in their walk. He made sure to help guide Timothy in his Christian walk. Speaking truth and reminding others of where the truth can be found during trials is a part of discipleship. Right now, as Satan is using the events of the last several weeks to uproot, confuse, and instill fear, the world needs to hear the

truth. God has given us his perfect, infallible Word to speak life into every situation. Find those who you can encourage, witness to, and disciple in the week ahead. Be somebody's Paul.

Prayer: Ask the Lord to give you a hunger and thirst for His Word. Ask Him to make it alive and active in your life, and for it to be a light to your path as we walk through this uncharted territory ahead of us. Thank Him for His love and mercy.

The Power to Share
Acts 1:8a
By: Heath LuQuire

Prayer: Father, we have gathered our family together to worship You. We thank You for Jesus and His work on the cross to make us right with You. Lord, we pray that what we do here glorifies You alone. We know that Your word does not return void. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see what You have given us through Your word. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Explanation: This verse can be the statement for the entire book of Acts. We see 2 main things in this verse:

- 1) We see the Holy Spirit enabling believers to share the Good News of Jesus. The Holy Spirit enables us to do so much more than we could do by ourselves. He gives us the ability to repent and believe, fight sin, worship in Spirit and truth, and in this verse we see specifically that He also gives us the ability to share our faith with others. This happens after the “Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Not before. The power to share our faith comes only by the power of the Holy Spirit inside us.
- 2) We see that we will be witnesses to all the earth. The great promise of the Gospel was not just that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of God to Israel but also that the kingdom would be offered to all the nations of the world. Through Jesus, even the Gentiles (which is us) will reap the benefits of God’s promises to Israel.

The Point: The Holy Spirit gives us the power to share the Gospel with those near and far.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: What did Jesus do on the cross? Why did Jesus die on the cross? Ask your children to tell you the Good News of Jesus and use the time to teach them if they don’t know. How can you share this Good News with your friends and family?

Middle & High School Students: What is the Gospel? How would you share the Gospel with someone? How can you share the Gospel with those around you under normal circumstances? (sports, school, family, neighborhood, social media) How can you share the gospel right now during the COVID-19 pandemic? Is there anything that keeps you from sharing the Gospel?

Young Adult: Who has God placed in your life for you to witness to? (Friends, co-workers, roommates, classmates in college, professors, people you encounter as you go about your life [restaurants, gym, grocery stores, coffee shop], social media). Is God calling you to go to the ends of earth to be His witness in far away places?

Adult: How are you being a witness for Christ where you are? If you have children, this is your primary mission field. But God has placed others around you that need to hear the Gospel as well. Think of co-workers, neighbors, family members, people you see regularly in your life (restaurants, gym, grocery stores, coffee shop). Pray and consider a short term mission trip with your spouse or family. Pray and consider if God is calling you to pick up your family and move to another country for the advancement of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Empty Nesters: Are you being a witness of Christ to your adult children, to your grandchildren, your co-workers, your neighbors, and the people you encounter regularly in stores, coffee shops, restaurants? How has God enabled you to share your faith and who needs to hear it? For those who have retired from a career, God has enabled you to have an abundance of time. How can you use that time to advance His Kingdom? Pray and consider short term and long term mission trips.

Prayer: Father, we thank You for sending Your Holy Spirit that enables us to witness to those near and far. The scriptures speak of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Lord, give us eyes to see and a heart that burns with passion for the people You have called us to. Give us opportunities this week to be Your witness. We love You and ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

To the Ends of the Earth
Acts 1:8b
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, please calm our minds and our hearts so that we can hear from you and learn from you tonight.

Explanation: Jesus tells us to be his witnesses. Our emphasis here though is on the location, and reach, of our witness efforts: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was their immediate context, their local neighborhood, their city. Judea is more of a regional area. The ends of the earth is international. Samaria though is more interesting. Samaritans were a race of people that the Jewish people clashed with. Racial tension was a major issue. Jews would often reroute their trip to avoid Samaria. Jesus is telling his followers that enemy territory should be a geographical location for their witness.

Also, pay attention to the conjunction, the connecting word. It is not “or,” but “and.” The command is not, “...Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, *or* the ends of the earth.” Rather, it is “...Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, *and* the ends of the earth.” Also, notice the lack of the “first, then” qualification. It is not “... *First* Jerusalem, *then* Judea, *then* Samaria, and *then* the ends of the earth.” Jesus does not expect us to treat this progressively, mastering one area before moving to the next. Instead, Jesus expects simultaneously being a witness in each geographical location.

The Point: Believers are called to go local, regionally, and internationally with the gospel, even to people we do not like!

Application: As Christians, your family should be on the mission field, locally, regionally, and internationally, and with enemies. How can you do this?

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Sing, Jesus Loves the Little Children. Get a globe out, or a map, or Google Maps, and spend some time looking at the world. Show your child your neighborhood, zoom out to NC, then the US, then the World. Google different international cultures.

Middle & High School Students: Discuss different cultures (Middle Eastern, Asian, Latino, etc.). Discuss God’s love for the world. Discuss mission possibilities as an option after high school. What are your life goals? Ambitions? How does bringing glory to God fit into your life plan? Have you ever been on a mission trip? Regionally or Internationally? Pray for other cultures, especially

those that would stereotypically be considered enemies. How can you be a witness locally? At school?

Young Adult: What are your life goals? Ambitions? How does bringing glory to God fit into your life plan? Have you ever been on a mission trip? Regionally or Internationally? Pray for other cultures, especially those that would stereotypically be considered enemies. How can you be a witness locally?

Adult: What is your outlook towards “Samaritan” type people? How do you view our nation’s enemies? Do you pray for them? Do you pray that the gospel would reach them? How are you teaching your children or grandchildren about missions? Have you ever been on a mission trip? Regionally or Internationally? Pray for other cultures, especially those that would stereotypically be considered enemies.

Empty Nesters: What is your outlook towards “Samaritan” type people? How do you view our nation’s enemies? Do you pray for them? Do you pray that the gospel would reach them? How are you teaching your children or grandchildren about missions? Have you ever been on a mission trip? Regionally or Internationally? Pray for other cultures, especially those that would stereotypically be considered enemies. How are you using your retirement and your empty nest to bring glory to God? Do you have some free time that you could commit to the mission field?

Prayer: Lord, you are sovereign! You have saved us for a purpose! Guide our family. Help us to be the witness you would have us to be. Give us opportunities to go.

The Only Name
Acts 4:12
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, teach us in this moment. Convict us of who you are. In Jesus' Name.

Explanation: Peter and John are on trial before the Jewish religious leaders. Their crime is the miraculous healing of a lame man (Acts 3:1-12). Their accusers ask them by what name they did this (Acts 4:7), and Peter essentially begins preaching. He concludes his response in verse 4:12.

The verse is rather self-explanatory. In theological terms, we call it the "Exclusivity of Christ." In other words, Jesus is exclusively the only way to be saved. There is no other means of salvation. Jesus is the only way. All roads do not lead to Rome.

The Point: Jesus is the only means of salvation.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Illustrate this truth with your child by mapping out some type of maze in your house or your yard. There can only be one way to accomplish it. Teach them about salvation this way. There are many wrong ways, but only one right way.

Middle & High School Students: The world teaches that there are many ways. You are faced with many other ways in school. History is filled with many who have denied the exclusivity of Christ. Talk about some of the other options, and demonstrate the distinctions of Christ. He is the only way.

Adult: What are some belief systems or worldviews that your friends and co-workers hold to? Do they think less of you for your beliefs? Most likely, they would be fine with you believing in Jesus, as long as you concede that Jesus is one option of many options. Their offense is when you declare that Jesus is the only way. Read this text. Read John 14:6. Be affirmed in your belief of Jesus's exclusivity.

Empty Nesters: Things have changed quite a bit from when you were growing up, haven't they? I know they have. People don't seem to know up from down anymore. Your grandchildren are being raised in a very confusing culture, where "right" is relative to each individual's understanding of right. Pray for your

grandchildren. Pray for your children as they raise your grandchildren. Don't write the culture off. Rather, prayerfully consider how you can embolden your family to face the culture. How can you strengthen their faith?

Prayer: Jesus, you are all we have. Thank you! Embolden us in our faith. May we stand strong like Peter and John did, and never waver on our faith in you!

The Bloody Seed of the Church

Acts 8:1

By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: God, teach us. Create us in a desire to show your glory, to spread your gospel to the ends of the earth.

Explanation: Acts 1:8 outlines the geographical spread of the gospel, "...Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth." However, the spread of the gospel was not happening. In Acts 7, Stephen becomes the first martyr of the church and persecution ensues. Normally, we think of persecution as a negative thing; we only see the terror and horror of it. However, God uses the persecution of the church to spread the gospel to the very places he initially said it would go, "Judea and Samaria." By the end of the Book of Acts, Paul has plans to go as far as Spain with the gospel (the ends of the earth). We must see how God uses the persecution of the church. Early in the 3rd century, Tertullian is credited with saying, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."

The Point: Persecution spreads the gospel.

Application: Pray for brothers and sisters in Christ around the world that are being persecuted. Pray that the gospel would go forth. Pray that they stand strong as gospel witnesses. Use your religious freedom to be a witness.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Teach your children about the reality of persecution.

Middle & High School Students: Following Jesus comes at a cost. Teach your teenagers the truth of the gospel. Teach them what it is to count the cost of discipleship. Check out Voice of the Martyrs website. Read some articles as a family. Find a way to engage the persecuted church. Perhaps you could write letters to imprisoned Christians.

Young Adult: Be thankful for your freedom to worship God. How are you using your freedom? Are you being a witness? Are you going to your Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, or the ends of the earth? Pray for the persecuted church. Check out Voice of the Martyrs website. Consider reading Foxe's Book of Martyrs .

Adult: Pray for the persecuted church. Use your religious freedom. Pray for the persecuted church. Check out Voice of the Martyrs website. Consider reading Foxe's Book of Martyrs .

Empty Nesters: Pray for the persecuted church. Check out Voice of the Martyrs

website. Consider reading Foxe's Book of Martyrs .

Prayer: Sovereign Lord. It is only by your grace that we are not persecuted. It is only by your grace that we were born into a free nation, free to worship you. Forgive us for squandering so many opportunities. God, show mercy and grace to our brothers and sisters around the world that are suffering. Be glorified in them. Be glorified in us. Amen.

Thank Him, Thank Him!
Ephesians 2:4-7
By: Jo Gray

Prayer: Lord, we have so much to be thankful for! Help us count our blessings and be grateful to you for each and everyone.

Explanation: Do you remember this simple chorus you learned in Sunday School as a preschooler?

“Thank Him, thank Him, all you little children! God is love; God is love.”

We may grow up, but we’ll never outgrow the need to thank God for His LOVE that won’t let us go. Use Paul’s message in Ephesians to consider the ways God’s LOVE reaches us and let thanksgiving arise in our hearts.

L – Look outside yourself to the cross of Christ to see how much God loves you.

O – Offer thanksgiving every day for God’s gift of salvation.

V – Visualize handing your stinking load of sin to Jesus on the cross as He hands you His royal robe of righteousness.

E – Expect a continual display of God’s grace and kindness going on forever and ever.

The Point: Never underestimate God’s great love for you in Christ.

Application:

Pre-K and Elementary Age: Everyone sing, “Jesus Loves Me,” and create some hand motions. Ask, “How do we know Jesus loves us?” For the Bible tells us so! Make a simple line drawing of the Bible (a rectangular book shape) and include a heart for the children to color. Share some hugs!

Middle and High School Students: Are you convinced God loves you? His love isn’t fickle like the world’s, and He will never “unfriend” you, because His love never depends on your performance. You cannot love Him as He deserves even on your best day, but God didn’t wait for you to get your act together, did He? Instead, He acted FOR you. Remember John 3:16?

“For God so loved the world (including you) that He gave His only Son, that

whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

You're probably not thinking about eternity right now, but God thinks of you every minute and He sees you when you feel like no one notices you. He gives trustworthy advice through His Word, unlike what you may hear from peers. Since God has solved your sin problem in real time and space, do yourself a favor. Believe Him, trust Him, thank Him.

Young Adult: So many choices in your life now. Big decisions about the present or the future may at times overwhelm. Added to those macro decisions about vocation, relationships, education, and finances are the endless micro choices related to eating, shopping, music, movies, social media, fitness, and which mask to wear (or not) just to name a few. Dizzying, isn't it? Above all, one decision is paramount. How will you respond to God's glorious invitation to come to Him in faith? Whether you need saving faith or faith for following Him more closely, He is the source, the initiator, the Giver of every good and perfect gift. His most perfect Gift is Jesus. Believe His Word. Thank Him. Bow before His love.

Adult: After several decades of living, God's attribute of mercy may mean more to you than it did in your teens or twenties. You see ways you've blown it with family, co-workers, and God. Things could be a lot worse, but you know they would be better if ego, pride, unforgiveness, anger, resentment, or ordinary complaining had been put away quicker. You know the truth about that "sin which clings so closely," and be assured, it's not too late for confession. But God, who is rich in mercy, is not the least bit stingy with His mercy or love for you. Aren't you glad? Spend time each morning thanking God for His faithfulness and mercies toward you and your family.

Empty Nester: At this stage of life, you may feel anxiety about the "what-ifs" and the "if-onlys." In both cases, your rocking chair of worry isn't getting you where you want to go. Even in the age of instant replay, do-overs in life aren't doable. Given your original sin nature, perfection was never an option even in the good old days, and Almighty God still isn't asking your advice about future days. However, will you surrender your regrets about the past and turn over your fears about the future to your faithful, merciful God? His peace will come. You can count on it, along with His mercy, His love, and His presence in every circumstance. Just thank Him and go do the next good thing.

Prayer: You can do abundantly more than we can ask or even imagine. Work in us by the gentle, persistent action of Your Spirit so that we can choose to love our families, friends, and people different from us with Your kind of love. To You

be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations!

By Grace Alone
Ephesians 2:8-9
By: Mandy Emerson

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we come to You as humbly as we know how because we know that You are worthy of all praise! Open our hearts and minds to receive what You want to show us through Your word. Bring us nearer to You so that we may experience every good gift of grace and kindness today. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Explanation: I have a friend who is always talking about Karma; how things come full circle and people get what they deserve whether good or bad. Dear family, we all know this is rubbish! God's grace is proof of that! In Ephesians we see that God's grace was given to us freely; we didn't do anything to deserve it. In fact, it's quite the opposite of Karma; at the cross, Jesus offered His life in exchange for our sin. We received an amazing gift of life when we deserved death! There is absolutely nothing that we have done or can do to justify this gift. God's grace to us didn't stop at the cross though; He continues to give it over and over on a daily basis. In the midst of our brokenness and failures, our triumphs and accomplishments, He continues to freely and generously give. As children of God we should see God's grace behind everything we do! That same gift is there with us day in and day out, but are we recognizing it? This week let's find ways to recognize grace and give God the glory for it.

The Point: It is by grace alone that we are able to get through every day. The gift is still there, even though we don't deserve it.

Application:

Pre-K and Elementary: By Grace Alone we can wear a robe and crown of royalty forever! Do you have the child that doesn't want to ever take off the princess dress or superhero costume? Do they want to wear it 24/7? Tell them the story of God's grace and how it makes us sons and daughters of a King. Once we're clothed in this grace, we are royalty forever!

Middle and High School Students: By Grace Alone we can "grow" in faith and maturity. Do you find yourself doing what you don't want to do and not doing what you do want to do? You're not alone! Even the apostle Paul struggled with this (Romans 7:15-20)! 2 Peter 3:17-18 says that we can "grow in the grace" of Jesus. Keep asking God to help you, keep seeking His face in everyday situations, be on your guard....you'll soon find yourself "growing" in His grace!

Young Adult: By Grace Alone we can be confident God will establish us on the right path. At your phase of life you may find yourself at a crossroads, maybe several at once, whether it's a career or a relationship. Psalm 84:11 says that God is your Shield; He gives grace and glory. If you continue to walk uprightly and seek His will in every decision you need to make, He will not withhold any good thing from you. Through His grace He will point you in the right direction!

Adult: By Grace Alone we can react to difficult people and situations with love and peace. It may seem like this year you are surrounded by difficult situations or people, it is increasingly more often that we have the opportunity to respond in grace amid hard situations, hostile topics, and difficult people. Because God has shown us grace, we can then be gracious to others! Romans 5:20 teaches us, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Praise Jesus! This week pray that this grace will abound more and more in our reactions to those around us.

Empty Nesters: By Grace Alone we can be content in this time of isolation and social distancing. This social distancing stuff is hard, especially if it's just you or you and a spouse in the home day in and day out. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says that God's grace is sufficient. In fact, when we are feeling weak and cast down that's when His power is perfected. Try to find ways to recognize God's grace all around you and ask God to allow these graces to fill your heart and mind so that all of your needs are met in Him. Be completely satisfied and content in His presence!

Prayer: We praise You Lord for the grace that sought us out and saved us! But please forgive us God for not recognizing Your grace in our everyday lives. Open our eyes to see that it is the same grace from the cross that sees us through every single day. We boast only in You. In Your Son's name we pray, Amen.

A Christian Family
Ephesians 5:22-6:4
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Father, thank you that we can worship today as a family. Thank you that we are healthy. Thank you for our groceries. Thank you for our home. Help us to listen and learn and worship you today. In Jesus name, Amen.

Explanation: Paul, the Apostle, is going into detail on how family relationships should be shaped. Wives should follow the leadership of their loving and self-sacrificing husbands. Husbands should lead their wives to be more like Christ. Children should obey their parents. Fathers should be active in their children's lives with respect, not provoking them to anger, but disciplining them and instructing them.

The Point: Jesus changes family relationships. Your family should look like Christ.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: How can you obey Mommy & Daddy this week? How do you see Mommy following Daddy? How do you see Daddy loving Mommy like Jesus loves his church?

Middle & High School Students: Why should you obey your parents? (The Bible commands it.) How do you see our marriage reflecting the gospel of Jesus? How do you see Dad loving Mom like Jesus loves the Church? - Help your child see biblical leadership in your marriage. If you're convicted yourself, make pledges before your children to love and lead better.

*If 6:4 is convicting (perhaps you have a teen that you are not seeing eye-to-eye with), now is a great time for an honest discussion about the relationship. Be prepared to be humble and patient. Listen to your teen. Hear their heart.

Young Adult: What do you want your marriage to look like? If you're in a dating relationship, have you had this conversation with your boyfriend or girlfriend? Be honest about what you desire your married relationship to look like.

Adult: How does your relationship reflect a biblical marriage as outlined in Ephesians? Discuss your roles in the relationship, any changes or convictions that you need or want to implement. Discuss where you need to seek some help or counseling in your relationship. Make plans and commitment to steer your

relationship towards a biblical marriage.

Empty Nesters: See the discussion above for adults. Are you praying for your children and their marriages? Are you still modeling a biblical marriage for them? How?

Prayer: Father, please help us to live our lives like you have taught us to. We clearly struggle in these areas: (fill in the blank). Please help us to conform to your word. Help us to keep the commitments that we are making before you right now.

Dressing for Battle
Ephesians 6:10-20
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, help us to worship you today. Teach us your Word. Quieten our minds and our hands, so that we may learn from you today.

Explanation: The Book of Ephesians to this point has given us great theology and practical life application. Paul has talked about the relationships amongst church members (ch.4) and family relationships (ch. 5). To live this biblical ideal is tough though. The Enemy will diligently fight against you living these kinds of relationships Paul intends. This is called spiritual warfare. Understand that it is war.

- **Belt of Truth** - Jesus is truth - Jn. 14:6
- **Breastplate of Righteousness** - Christ's Righteousness - Protects the Core
- **Shoes of Gospel Peace** - Think "good news" of Christ's death. Shoes are for protecting the feet to stand, and for traveling, going.
- **Shield of Faith** - Defends against attacks. Depend on your faith to protect you against the Enemy's attacks.
- **Helmet of Salvation** - A helmet is crucial when going into battle. Our salvation is where our assurance is.
- **Sword of the Spirit** - The Word of God is our sword. Swords are for defense and offense. You must be able to handle your weapon well. cf. Heb. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:15

The Point: Spiritual warfare is real. Prepare.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Grab your Bibles, and sing, I'm in the Lord's Army. Pray together. Memorize Heb. 4:12.

Middle & High School Students: Think through salvation with your teenagers. Don't force it, but be clear to share the gospel with them. Focus on the shield of faith and strengthening your child's faith. Ask for questions they have about salvation or faith. Be honest in answering. If you don't know, tell them you don't

know, and then ask for help. Ask Pastor Jonathan. Memorize Heb. 4:12.

Young Adult: As you think through each of the elements of the Armor of the Lord, focus in on the shoes of gospel peace. How are you engaging the world with the gospel? Check out the “3 Circles” gospel presentation on Youtube for training.

Adult: In your marriage, who’s righteousness are you depending on? Oftentimes, we justify ourselves in arguments. Justifying yourself is seeking out your own righteousness. Admit sin and trust in Christ’s righteousness. How are you teaching your children to engage in spiritual warfare? How are you modeling it? Are words like faith, salvation, gospel, and righteousness a regular part of your vocabulary at home? They should be. Recognize the enemy’s attack on your family, and commit to engaging in the battle. Commit to memorizing scripture together. Memorize Hebrews 4:12.

Empty Nesters: Your children may be out of the house now, but don’t relax! Satan is still out to get you. It may be that as empty nesters you feel disconnected to your spouse, and you feel like it is their fault; see how Satan is already attacking. Recognize that your marriage is a battleground for spiritual warfare. Commit to praying together, reading scripture together, and battling the Enemy. Memorize Hebrews 4:12.

Prayer: God we want to be prepared for spiritual attacks. Equip our family. Help us to do what we know you want us to do. Protect our family from the Enemy. Guard our hearts. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Living by Grace
Esther 6:14-7:10
By:Sylvia Hinson

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father you love righteousness and justice. You are loving and kind and forgiving. The Scripture claims this. Our soul waits for you, oh Lord, and your help is our shield.

Psalm 33:5 - "He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the lovingkindness of the Lord."

Explanation: The story of Esther is amazing, but imagine this: Imagine the moment when King Ahasuerus looked at Haman and said, "Take this man and crucify him now!" Imagine if in that moment, Esther walked over to Haman and said, " I forgive you and I love you, and King, I will take his place and I'll be crucified for him. That would have been amazing. That's what Jesus did for us. Of course, we know from scripture that did not happen with Esther, the King, and Haman.

Haman was crucified for his sin, but Jesus was crucified for our sin . Haman did not show God's people grace, and he endured wrath; but Jesus endured wrath for God's people and we receive his grace.

Romans 6:23 - "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord."

The Point : Grace. An acronym for grace is: GOD'S RICHES AT CHRIST'S EXPENSE. He did it all for you and me.

Application: Friends, you can either hang onto your cross for your own sin like Haman did, or hang on to Jesus. He paid it all.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Jesus loves you, this I Know for the Bible tells me so. Sing it and believe it.

Middle & High School Students: You are at a crucial age. You can choose your path. The bible states there is a narrow road and a wide road. Choose you this day whom you will serve. My advice to you is: always be a friend, listen more than you talk, seek out the lonely and help them to be a part of the crowd that follows Jesus.

Adult: Have compassion, forgiveness and love for all. Quit holding grudges. God

loves you and commands that we love as He loves.

Empty Nesters: God only speaks truth. He says what He means and He means what He says. Our Father's heart emanates with the purest of justice and compassion. As long as we have breath, we can pray and praise the Lord. Encourage those around us.

Prayer: Read a Psalm and or a Proverb every day and pray knowing that God is the Same today, yesterday and forever. HE'S GOT THIS!!!!

In the Beginning, God...
Genesis 1:1
By: Mandy Eudy

Prayer: Lord, Our Father and Creator, help us to set aside all of the day's distractions and focus on you. Open our minds and hearts so that as we share this moment, we may grow in connection to You, Your Word and one another.

Explanation: This simple sentence tells us so much. In fact, it tells us almost everything we need to know about everything. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Everything that is, everything that was and everything that ever will be was created, and it was created by God. Everything, EVERYTHING, was made by Him, through Him and for Him. This should leave us in awe and relieve so many of the things we worry about. Think about it.

Everything was created. Therefore, everything has a purpose, a design. There is a plan, a master plan and it is not our plan. We are merely a part of it. All we must do is look to the Creator and keep trudging along. He made the world and everything in and beyond it, with full knowledge of the future, our past and our present. He knew what needs and struggles there would be along the way and planned accordingly. He is our good, good Father and just like a good parent, He has everything taken care of. All we need to do is listen and obey, and we get the privilege of being in the presence of this glorious world around us.

The Point: Since God created the world, and the universe and all that is in it, He is in total control. He is the master of all.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: There are a multitude of songs that remind children that God is the Creator. I have two favorites:

The days of Creation - This song teaches kiddos the factual order of creation. It has a fun sing-song sort of rhythm that makes it easy to memorize and fun to sing. The Hippo Song - The second song that is great to do with and teach your kiddos is the Hippo Song. The lyrics are below the video. This song encourages the children to get up and get moving as well as teaches them the truth of

Romans 1:20, that all of creation points back to our great Creator.

Middle & High School Students: In school, on tv, in nearly every documentary ever, the scientific theory of evolution is presented as fact. Fact and theory are vastly different. Take some time this week and look at the difference between macro and micro evolution. Compare your findings to Genesis 1. Which one is truth, and which is merely science fiction? Why?

Young Adult: At this stage in life, you are making a lot of big decisions and you may feel like your entire life will depend on getting each decision correct. What if you were able to take a moment before you finalize each decision to rest in, pray about and focus on the fact that before the very foundations of the world, God planned for, and designed you. Read Ephesians 1:3-6 and trust that your Creator has you in his hands and heart.

Adult: Cheerios on the floor, dishes in the sink, laundry waiting to be washed and folded. Another day at work, another day with the same mess as yesterday. It can all get tedious. There is a method to the madness and purpose behind the chaos. You may be raising kids, planning meetings, or just trying to make it through each day. Sometimes it seems as if no one cares and nothing matters. That is not the case though. God knows each one of our thoughts, longings and needs. How? He made us, that is how. The things we do everyday matter, and they have purpose. What were most of the disciples doing when he called them? They were going about their daily tasks, doing their everyday jobs. When Jesus met the women who first saw the empty tomb, they were going about their everyday lives, doing the menial tasks everyday life required. It may be hard to see the purpose, to believe there is a point, but we can rest and have confidence in the fact that we are created. Being created means we were designed. No one puts the kind of thought, care, and effort, into something it takes to create and design something without it having a purpose. You do matter. Your life and the things you do are important. Step outside, watch the birds and the squirrels doing their everyday life. In all their beauty and simplicity God created them and knows each one. Look up at the night sky, God named each star. He knows every intimate detail of those things, small and grand. Yet He calls us His and chose us to rest in Him.

Empty Nesters: The world can seem like a hot mess. From the politicians trying

to run things, the scientists and doctors conflicting each other and themselves with their advice and recommendations, and even down to the people we see at our local Wal-Mart; it often seems as if everyone has lost their minds. None of this is a surprise to our God. Our Holy, All-Knowing, All-Powerful, Ever-Present, Creator, God is also our Abba, Father. He sees all of this from the turmoil of the world around us, to those in our very own homes and families. Not only does He see it, He knew it was coming and has planned it for good. This is all a part of His master plan to draw us to Him. Take some time to journal or pray about all the many things God has brought you and those you love through. You know, those things that seemed like they would be the end, the straw that broke the camel's back, but in the end brought you closer to God and who He created you to be. Thank Him for loving you and creating this world for us. Pray that all the chaos brings others to Him who may not know Him.

Prayer: Father, please help us to rest in our faith in You. Give us the desire to seek Your will above our own and the strength to persevere despite our challenges. Help us to see You and Your love for us reflected in every aspect of creation. You, God, are too awesome for description. Thank you, Lord for making me and each person here. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Salvation Now, and Then
Hebrews 9:27-28
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: God of our salvation, we praise you! You gave us your Son as a sacrifice, we exalt your name! We exalt the Name of Jesus!

Explanation: The writer to the Hebrews (we do not know who the author is) has written much about Christ fulfilling the Levitical law. At the end of chapter nine he presents a reality that is yet to come. It is a reality that many will not know or do not believe. The author says that each person has an appointment with death. Yes, the overwhelming majority of humanity believes in the reality of death, but many do not believe in the possibility of life after death. Christians though, believe not just in the possibility of life after death, but the certainty of life after death. The author deals with the reality of death by presenting a new reality after death.

Notice a few keywords in this passage. First, notice that judgment also awaits after death. Humanity must be judged. The Christian's hope is that Christ has been "offered once to bear the sins of many." Christ has been offered to suffer the judgement. The tense of this sentence is critical. It is past tense. Jesus has already suffered the judgment. He is not perpetually suffering. If you're a believer, your sin has already been atoned for.

Also, note the word, "many" . It is clearly not the word, "all." Who are the many? The many are the elect believers in Jesus, those who trust Him, who trust that his death is sufficient to appease the wrath of almighty God. The New Testament is clear that many will get to the judgment and will be left to suffer the eternal consequences of their sin on their own (Mt. 25:31-46). For believers though, Christ's death atoned their sin, and satisfied the judgment.

And here is the believer's hope. Tense has already been pointed out, but it must be noted again with the words, "not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." This phrase describes salvation in a future tense, meaning that the author anticipates the fulfillment of salvation in a future day. Believers are eagerly waiting for Jesus to appear a second time and to save them. Believers have been justified, meaning that the judgment has already occurred; but, on the day of judgment believers will be saved. What does all this mean? It means that as a Christian, you have been saved and it also means that you will be saved. Thus, you have hope in the face of certainty of death.

The Point: Believer, you have been saved and you will be saved.

Application: The knowledge of the reality that is presented in Hebrews 9:27-28 changes the way believers think about death, talk about death, prepare for death, and handle death. Christians need not fear death; they have hope.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Teach your children about the reality of life after death. Teach them about heaven. When loved ones pass away or death comes up on the evening news, or however they might be exposed to it, use that as an opportunity to talk about heaven. If you treat heaven as though it is a mythical fairy tale, they will believe it as such. If you talk about it as a real place, a literal place, your child will embrace it as such. Talk about the reality of heaven.

Middle & High School Students: Ask your teenager what they believe about heaven. Ask them what they think about death. Have an open and honest conversation about dying. It is a reality that every person will face. Your job as a parent is to teach them and prepare them, and this means talking about it.

Adult: Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe heaven is real? Do you believe hell is real? The Bible presents both heaven and hell as literal places, and the only two places where mankind will spend eternity. Do you know that Jesus has justified you, satisfying the judgment reserved for your sin? If you do not, you need to trust him today! Trust Jesus to save you!

Empty Nesters: The older we get the more real this reality seems. As each year passes by, it seems that friends, peers, and family seem to pass along with it more frequently. Brothers and sisters, where is your hope? It must be in Jesus. Do you trust that Jesus has been offered to bear your sins? Do you trust that Jesus has taken the judgment on your behalf? Do you trust that based on His work alone that you will be saved on the day of judgment? Now is the time to believe in Him. Do not wait another day. Put your trust in Jesus today!

Prayer: Jesus, may I always trust you. Lord, help me believe when I am tempted not to believe. Based on your work on the cross, Lord, save me. Save my family. Save my children and grandchildren.

Hope in Holiness
Isaiah 6:1-8
By: Jo Gray

Prayer: Heavenly Father, hallowed be Your Name. We worship you. Holy is Your Name.

Explanation: Even after reading the text several times I didn't get it. Not the way Isaiah did. Nothing in my daily experience helps me "see" what Isaiah saw. But I think his simple description gives weight to his account of the Lord sitting on a throne so high above that only the bottom of His robe filled the temple. Whatever else he saw, Isaiah saw the King, the LORD of hosts!

He had no words to portray the presence of such indescribable transcendent majesty. God's holiness is His alone. Yet, the Lord's most holy presence aroused trembling words of confession from Isaiah: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips..."

Isaiah was an unholy man living among unholy people. In the moment, did he wonder if the perfect, holy God, would spare his sin-filled life? Isaiah may have expected a consuming fire, but the Lord's seraph simply touched Isaiah's lips with a single burning coal and told Isaiah his guilt was removed and atoned for. Such undeserved mercy, such unmerited favor!

No wonder God's question, "Whom shall I send...?" stirred an immediate response in an awestruck Isaiah, "Here am I! Send me." Serving the Holy One of Israel would require consecration of Isaiah's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Isn't it the same for us?

The Point: Isaiah's story is a picture window into the unfathomable holiness of God who desires to commune with His people. When a sinner gazes at God's holiness, his own desperate condition looks hopeless, but in God's holy presence the unholy is made holy by the atoning work of Christ.

Application :

Pre-K and Elementary: Like an architect is separate from the skyscraper, or a baker is separate from the cake, God is separate from us, especially in His holiness. But since He is holy, He wants us to be holy. God's commandments give us a model to follow so we can rightly focus on God and keep our lives pure. Ask the children if they can name any of the Ten Commandments. (Look up

Exodus 20.) You've probably seen in your young children a desire to please you. This desire of their hearts leads them to obey. What father or mother isn't delighted in a child who wants to please?

It's the same with God. He delights in His children who want to please Him by obeying His commands and He promises blessings, the greatest of which is His presence. How can parents encourage and reward obedience?

Middle and High School Students: Have you ever felt like a worm? In Marine Corps boot camp, my husband says recruits are called "maggot." Ick!! But like it or not, those are good Biblical words. Check out Job 25:6 where both creepy crawlies are mentioned.

You may feel like a worm in comparison to someone in your peer group who has everything that seems important. You know, looks, brains, money, and the things money can buy. Instead of looking around, look up—at the Most High God. He is holy, majestic, infinite, all-powerful, perfect and pure. How do you come out in that comparison? Are you squirming?

Squirming comes naturally to "fallen" creatures who are separated from their Creator in every way—physically, mentally, morally, spiritually. Like Isaiah, when you gain a sense of the crushing truth of God's holiness, you'll want to confess your sins and repent. You'll also discover this holy God specializes in changing worms from bottom feeders burrowing in the dark to His sons and daughters who walk in the light of His holy love.

Young Adults: Have you lost sight of God's holiness? Familiarity can morph into presumption when God's holiness is forgotten. Like when God seems more like a weekend running buddy or a Facebook friend—easy to have around if He doesn't expect much. After all, He accepts you as you are, because He's all about love, right?

Have you ever read a Bible description of God as love, love, love, or wise, wise, wise? Why did one seraph call out, "holy, holy, holy?" Author Jerry Bridges says the Hebrew language uses repetition for emphasis, and this threefold repetition of "holy" refers to God's infinite transcendent majesty. The transcendent Holy One of Israel is separate from us and beyond our comprehension.

You may think of God's holiness as His perfect moral purity. It's in that respect that He calls us to an impossible task to "be holy as He is holy!" But as Isaiah shows us, we can bow our will to His. And as Pastor Jonathan suggested last Sunday, ask Jesus what He wants to drive out of your life, like He drove out the

moneychangers in the temple. Holiness begins with trust and obedience.

Adults: If there's one thing mature adults should know by now, holiness is not simply a matter of "being good" or obeying the rules. But one thing we may have forgotten is Who it is who calls us to be holy. Have we forgotten His holy hatred of sin? What about His power to rule and require obedience to His perfect moral law? What qualifies us to come into the presence of a holy God? Christian heroes are falling all around us—pastors, teachers, role models. Somewhere they lost sight of God's transcendent majesty and laid aside His call to holiness. Let's not follow blindly behind them. Take the first step toward holiness by spending time in adoration and confession of your most Holy God. Sit with Him, talk with Him, read His Word, pray earnestly. He will meet you there.

Prayer: God, we are a people of unclean lips and lives, living among people who are the same. Renew in us a sense of awe, for You are holy. Jesus paid the price for our sin, so may the Holy Spirit empower us to walk in obedience and faithfulness in this generation. Holy is Your Name!

A Costly Grace
Isaiah 53:6-12
By: Toby Thorpe

Prayer: Father God, as we begin a new year, we pray for your blessings and protection, and thank you for seeing us through a very challenging and trying past year. Please open our hearts and minds to your word and to your will as we seek you. Amen.

Explanation: In this passage, Isaiah, speaking over 700 years before Jesus' birth, delivers the prophecy of the "Suffering Servant," whom we now know is Jesus -- God's Son; the ultimate sin offering; the sacrificial Lamb that would provide redemption for all who repent and believe.

Because of our sinful nature, we (humanity) are unable to reach the bar set by God (perfection) and thus save ourselves. As a result, the Servant was sent by God to live this perfect life, and to serve as a substitutionary sacrifice, willingly bearing all the sins of all mankind (v. 6-7) and accepting the punishment that was actually meant for each of us (v. 8). And although the Servant was not honored by the people of his time (v. 8-9), he would live again (v.10) along with those who have and will receive salvation by acceptance of His sacrifice (v. 11), He would be rewarded by the Father "among the great" (v. 12).

In this passage, Isaiah provides an answer to the question, "How can a just God justify the ungodly? How can He declare innocent those who are guilty? How can He treat bad people as though they are good? How can He love people like us?" A just God can't just look the other way. He doesn't say, "Don't worry about it," or "No big deal." On the contrary, sin is a big deal. God didn't just forgive our sins, He dealt with them. And this grace was costly -- the price was His own Son.

The Point: We are sinful beings, and sin must be punished. God loved us so much that He sent Jesus to take that punishment in our place, so that we might be forgiven by accepting and believing in Him.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Adults, watch the following video/song "Fifty-Three Verse Six" with your children. Pay particular attention to the explanations within the song lyrics of "iniquity" and "laid on Him." Discuss with them what it means for our sin to be placed on Jesus

Middle and High School Students: Do you ever wish you could have someone else do your studying for you, yet you receive the knowledge to ace your tests? Do you ever wish you could get another person to do your chores around the house, yet you get credit for them? It would be nice, but life doesn't work that way.

However, there is one exception...Jesus lived a perfect life of obedience and laid down His life for you and you do get His credited righteousness and life! And Isaiah told us about how He would do this long before Jesus actually came to earth.

Read Isaiah 53: 6-12, and consider just how much Jesus sacrificed so that YOU might be saved from your sins! And consider just how much the Father loves YOU that He would allow His only Son to experience incredible pain and suffering in your place.

Adults: Have you ever got lost in an unfamiliar place? It is a sick, fearful feeling, and we usually seek some way to get back on track. We may open up a road map, use GPS, or stop and ask for directions. We don't accept remaining lost in these scenarios. So why would we allow ourselves to remain lost in our spiritual lives?

Isaiah compared the nation of Israel to sheep that have gone astray. They were a group seeking their own path instead of following the shepherd's lead. Isaiah 53:6 says all of us, like sheep, are lost. And through Isaiah's prophecy, we have the gift of seeing how Jesus' death and resurrection would cover the penalty of sin for all mankind -- not just Israel. We have the hindsight of knowing how God fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Jesus suffered, was pained, stricken, afflicted, pierced, and crushed on the cross. And He accepted this willingly -- for us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the love you have demonstrated for us by sending us your Son. And while the image of the baby Jesus in the manger is what we so often think of at this time of year, we pray that you never allow us to forget or overlook the image of the Son 33 years later, bearing our sins on the cross, willingly accepting the pain, suffering, and humiliation that should have been placed on us. We thank you for loving us and for saving us through your Son, and for guiding us now and always!

Strength by Trial
James 1:2-4
By: Beverly Bowden-Smith

Prayer: Begin your worship with prayer. Enter His courts with praise and thanksgiving. What are you praising Him for today? What are you thankful for? Ask Him to clear your heart and mind of distractions, and grant you insight into His word through the Holy Spirit.

Explanation: Good old James. Practical. Faithful. Tenacious. They say this esteemed leader of the church in Jerusalem had ‘camel knees’ from all of his hours spent kneeling in prayer. Though he was Jesus’ own brother, he calls himself instead a ‘slave to God’ as he pens this wisdom-filled letter to the Jewish Christians persecuted and dispersed throughout the Holy Land.

Have you ever had an experience that really shook your worldview and changed your perspective on what matters and what doesn’t? I know when Rocky first received his cancer diagnosis in 2012, all the other stress in our lives fell away. Dishes, bills, conference calls, homework- whatever. I was just grateful for my precious husband’s life, and getting him well was all that mattered!

You know, James didn’t actually follow Jesus during His earthly ministry. It was only after the resurrection that James understood his own flesh and blood brother to also be the Son of God. This makes his perspective on suffering for the Gospel unique among the early church fathers. He watched his own brother die and thought it was for foolishness. And then he understood. This trial, this awful trial of crucifixion, had a Kingdom purpose- one he couldn’t see while he was in the midst of it, but one that would literally save the world.

So, when James begins this letter by telling us that we should have joy in our trials, he knows. Like no other person, he knows. We are all experiencing a trial right now with the Covid-19 pandemic. While the particular challenges may be different for each of us, one truth stands for us all: In Christ, we are able to have joy in this trial because there is a Kingdom purpose. God will use it to increase our faith and Christlikeness, and that is a promise!

The Point: Trials exercise our faith, allowing the Holy Spirit to make us stronger, more mature, and more like Christ.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Did you know a caterpillar is pretty much liquified

inside its cocoon before it becomes a butterfly? Explore the metamorphosis of butterflies here: <https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-goes-on-inside-a-cocoon> and talk about how the caterpillar goes through a difficult trial in order to become what God has made it to be. Trials can be like that for people too. God is faithful and that means He will use difficult times to make us better- more like Jesus. For butterfly themed fun, draw butterfly wings with sidewalk chalk for driveway selfies or play the cocoon game ('burrito' your child in a big blanket and let them wriggle their way out.)

Middle & High School Students: Teenagers are facing a huge trial with social distancing guidelines right now. At a time when it is natural and healthy for them to be growing more independent, achieving major life milestones, and making cherished memories with friends, they have been confined at home. And unlike Mom and Dad, they don't have an adult's fully mature perspective or coping skills. Help your teens develop Biblical coping skills for these trials. Name one or two specific areas where their faith can mature during this season. Guide them in how to pray for these issues and help them choose a Bible verse 'mantra' that speaks truth into their particular trial.

Young Adult: Life. On. Hold. This Covid-19 trial has all of us putting plans on hold, but for this age group, it can feel like all of life is on hold. Twenty-somethings today are facing uncertainty in the midst of some of the most important life decisions they will make – choosing a career, getting married, buying a home, starting a family. Not knowing when (or if) these things will ever happen definitely doesn't inspire joy like James said! The thing about joy, though, is that it is always tied to hope. We can have joy in all things, even a worldwide pandemic, when our hope is properly placed in Christ. If the young adults in your life are feeling overly hopeless and discouraged at these disruptions, ask them to explore where they've entrusted their hope, in marriage/career/family/etc. or in Christ.

Adult: Many adults are not only responsible for finding their own way through this unprecedented time, but leading others through it as well. We are leading our families for sure. We may also be leading employees, students, co-workers, whole communities, and church congregations. And as Christians, we bear a general responsibility to lead everyone we meet, that is lead them to Christ! How do we lead others when we are confused, frustrated, or overwhelmed? We should look to Jesus as our ultimate example of leadership. He led others through unspeakable trials, leading them even as He hung on the cross. While He addressed the needs of each day, teaching His disciples, ministering to the masses, confronting the Pharisees, He never lost sight of His true focus, the one

thing that mattered most – the kingdom of Heaven. What are some tangible ways we can keep a “kingdom focus” as we lead others through trials right now?

Empty Nesters: This group represents a wide range of possible concerns – loneliness and disconnection from adult children and grandchildren, increased health risks, and increased financial vulnerability. Many in this age bracket are widowed and living alone. Social distancing for them may mean not seeing another person for days on end. Changes in their daily routines can lead to anxiety at the loss of control Covid-19 has brought. But here are two things we know for sure: Jesus brings us supernatural peace and God has a kingdom purpose for our lives. In Christ, we are never powerless, insignificant, or alone. James tells us that our endurance in Christ is ‘lacking nothing’. Search God’s word for both His promise and His definition of peace and purpose in our lives. How can you be intentional in seeking peace and purpose when life has been turned upside-down? How can we support the senior adults we know?

Prayer: Ask the Lord to increase your faith in trials, to give you proper perspective through His word, and to root your hope firmly in Christ. Pray for wisdom as you lead others during difficult times and for peace as you face change or vulnerability.

The Power of the Tongue

James 3:1-12

By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, may Your Word speak ever so loudly in our lives today. Teach us and challenge us.

Explanation: The epistle that James authored has long been recognized as a book full of practical biblical application. In chapter 3, James warns against the danger of an uncontrolled tongue. He identifies the tongue as one of the smallest members of the body, yet one of the most powerful members.

The tongue drives the rest of the body. If you have ever led a horse or even rode a horse, you know that James's example in 3:3 is accurate; an animal weighing several hundred pounds can be controlled by a very small piece of metal and a few leather straps all because the tool is positioned in his mouth. It's a fascinating thought. More than that though, James recognizes that a ship, weighing thousands of pounds, can be controlled by a very small rudder (4). How powerful is your tongue?

Think about fire. Fire is a natural element that has so much power. Think of all the good that fire can do. Fire can be used for warmth. The sun, we're told, is nothing more than a big ball of fire in the sky, and it provides warm sunny days! However, if it were any closer to earth, it would burn the earth up. If it were any further from earth, we would freeze to death. I enjoy a nice warm day, but I also know enough about the power of the sun to protect myself from its dangers with sunscreen. Fire can warm a cold house, but it can also burn down a house. Fire can light the path, but can also destroy the path. Fire can cook a delicious meal, but can also burn it so that it is inedible. As I write this, a small flicker burns producing a very pleasing aroma in my office, but I am mindful of the power the candle flame has to destroy.

This is the power of the tongue, for both good and evil. "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not be so (10)." Christian, by the Spirit of God living in you, through Christ who strengthens you, tame your tongue. James recognizes that no human can actually tame his tongue, but in the power of Christ we must strive to.

The Point: Recognize the power for both good and destruction that your tongue has, and strive to control it.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Show your child YouTube videos of how a bit controls a horse, or how a rudder steers a ship. Help your child think about the words that they say with their tongue. Talk about the way they respond to their siblings or their friends. Help them to identify the hurt that their words can cause. Challenge them to say something nice or encouraging to one another.

Middle & High School Students: Teenager, think about your words. Understand that your text messages and social media posts are the same as your tongue. There is a danger in what you post, text, or tweet. How can you use your posting or texting for good this week?

Young Adult: Consider your social media engagements. Are you a “Keyboard Warrior?” Do you post, or share, or retweet stuff that is hurtful? No? Do you not share posts blasting the other political party? When you share someone else’s words, they become your words. Think before you type.

Adult: Consider the power of your words with your children, or grandchildren. Think about your words with your employees or your co-workers. Think about your words with your spouse. Are you encouraging? Are you discouraging? Do you lift up? Or do you beat down? Maybe your words are good, but how’s your tone? What does your body language say? Perhaps there is a need for repentance.

Prayer: God, only you can tame my tongue. Only in the power of Jesus can my tongue be used for encouraging and building up. Do a transforming work in my tongue, that it might be used to bring you glory. Amen.

At Just the Right Time
James 5:7
By: Beverly Bowden-Smith

Prayer: Begin worship with prayer. Remember that we can go to our Father with all things in prayer and petition. What are you wanting/needing/worried about/frustrated by that you need to bring to Him? Bring it with a thankful and confident heart. He cares and He is able!

Explanation: Do you ever study a concept in theology and finish feeling like, “Well, that’s awesome, but what do I *do* with this information??” That is where our friend James really shines. James the Just, as he was called, might be the G.O.A.T. when it comes to applied theology (except, of course, Jesus). His epistle is jam packed full of practical, hands-on, everyday ways to glorify God in our behavior. And some of it really steps on some toes...

He is addressing all kinds of situations with early Jewish Christians in this book. In some ways, they are being oppressed and mistreated. Wealthy Romans and Jewish leaders bully and take advantage of these Christian converts who have less political and economic power. But also, some bad behavior wells up from within the Christian community. Gossip, selfishness, favoritism, false teaching, pandering and even murder- God’s people are pretty much acting like the rest of the world.

The sins on this list may seem different, but at their root, they are not. All sin, as James explains in v. 1:15, begins with desire. When we seek to get our desires (good or bad) met by any means other than God’s provision, we sin. If we desire to be uplifted, we gossip to put others down. If we desire to be influential, we pander to the powerful. If we desire to be rich, we indulge selfish ambition. God can meet these needs though, if only we ask with godly motives. In fact, He already has met them for all of eternity through Jesus Christ. He is coming again to right all wrongs. All we have to do is wait patiently- contentedly- until God’s fruit is in season. Our bellies will surely be filled and our every desire aligned to His will and met with abundance.

The Point: God’s way is always the right way and His time is always the right time.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Pick a fruit with visible seeds (preferably one your child likes to eat!) like an apple, orange or watermelon. Explain how every single

one of the building blocks for that fruit are inside the seed. Nothing else can ever grow from that seed. If it's planted, it *will* become an apple/orange/etc. So... if that's true, couldn't we just skip all the business of waiting for fruit to grow and eat the seeds right now? Of course not! The seed would taste awful and they would be dry and hard to chew. We would also miss out on all the healthy vitamins that are in a mature fruit. However, if we wait for the right time, and let the seed be nurtured in the ground by God's good rain and warm sun, we will get to enjoy juicy, sweet fruit that is not only delicious, but good for us too!

Middle & High School Students: The middle and high school years are notoriously difficult because of all the social pressure to conform and be liked. Teens can be vicious in their treatment of each other. Bullying, gossiping, judging, and social cliques can leave some nasty scars behind. Has your teen ever been the victim of any of these behaviors? Or perhaps the perpetrator? Ask them to explore the connection between waiting for God to meet our innermost desires and how we treat others. How do you treat people if you do wait for God to act? How do you treat people if you don't?

Young Adult: It can be a lot easier to *look* like an adult than to *become* an adult. When Rocky and I were first married, we probably charged a bajillion dollars' worth of bacon cheeseburgers at Chili's because plopping down that American Express card and going out to eat felt very 'adulty.' Trust me, it wasn't. As young adults, we have lots of freedom and power to make ourselves look like we've achieved more than what God has entrusted to us. Going into debt, marrying the wrong person, making poor career choices- all of these things can have long-term negative consequences. Where in your life are you trying to force a square peg in a round hole so to speak? What desire are you trying to meet outside of God's provision? What does His word say about how He can meet that desire?

Adult: In the daily grind, we sometimes lose sight of the big picture of Christ. Get up, breakfast, carpool, email, deadline, meeting, carpool, dinner, laundry, homework, go to sleep, get up, do it all over again.... These days don't leave much time for contemplating eternity. Not waiting for God does often look like us trying to force our will in life, but sometimes not waiting looks a lot like simply giving up hope. Does the reality of your inheritance in Christ still inspire you and bring you joy? If not, you may need to make time for Sabbath and remember just what it is that you wait for.

Empty Nesters: So, the kids are grown and gone. The grandchildren are busy with school and friends. You've retired from your career. You've built the house

and the nest egg. You bought the boat, took the trips, smelled the roses- so many good experiences to be thankful for, but there is more to come! James says that there will be early rains and late rains. What late rains are you looking forward to? What wisdom can you share with the younger generations as they wait for even the early rains?

Prayer: When longing and discontent invades your thoughts, let that be an instant prompt to pray. Ask God to cultivate contentment in you. Confess to Him that His provision is enough. Ask Him to teach you to trust in His sovereignty instead of trying to control things in your own strength. Thank Him for both the early rains and the late rains; they are both grace.

Bring Them to Jesus
John 1:40-42
By: Sylvia Hinson

Prayer: Father, Your Word tells us to go and teach all nations, to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and that You would be with us always. We love you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Explanation: We are to be soul winners. Andrew's name only appears 3 times in the Bible and each time he is bringing someone to Christ. He brought his brother, Peter, the little boy with the loaves and fishes, and the Greeks who would see Jesus. He is a great model to us. We should make witnessing our first priority in our Christian life. This is not an easy task when we are afraid of being criticized or ignored. Buddy and I had been married 13 years before he was saved. We had many friends and the majority of them left us because our choices had changed. In America, it is getting harder and harder to speak publicly for our Lord and Savior. This was not true a half a century ago. Our country is changing and not for the better. We need to stand strong in spite of fear of reprisal.

The Point: We are not only to be followers of Jesus but we are to bring others to Him.

Application: *Go. Witness. Love your neighbors!*

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Go tell a kid on the playground in the park or at school about Jesus. Teach them Jesus Loves Me. This I know. Why? Because the Bible tells me so.

Middle & High School Students: Prayerfully pick out one person at school that you can share Jesus with, and pray for that person. Stand for what's right. You will see you're not alone.

Young Adult: As you are beginning your adulthood, go to God before making major decisions. Choose friends wisely. Share the gospel and how Jesus helps you through the hardest times in life.

Empty Nesters: Now the house is empty except for occasional visits of the family. You can share the gospel by interacting with your neighbors, walking and praying for your neighbors on a regular basis. Send cards, make phone calls to lonely people or someone that just needs encouraging.

Prayer: Our Father, as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.” Give us the wisdom, the courage, and the words to tell others of your love and your salvation. Amen.

You Must Be Born Again!

John 3:1-15

By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Father, thank you for this day. Thank you for this time together as a family. Please help us to be still and listen to you today.

Explanation: Nicodemus is a religious leader, a Jew, that is secretly interested in the teachings of Jesus. Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night and asks questions. Jesus is very straight forward with Nicodemus, telling him that unless he is born again, born of the Spirit of God, he will never see the Kingdom of God. Only God can do this! Jesus is clearly associating our spiritual life with our physical life, something that we cannot create on our own. Only God can.

The Point: Our only hope is to be born again.

Application: Salvation is being born again, as a new spiritual being. It's a new life!

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Think about the wind. How can you demonstrate the unpredictability of the wind? This is how the Spirit of God moves and blows through our lives. Explain that they need to listen for the Spirit in their lives.

Middle & High School Students: Do you know this truth? Have you been born again? Talk about the gospel with your student.

Young Adult: Do you know this truth? Have you been born again? Talk about the gospel.

Adult: Think back on your own salvation. Think about how you came to faith. Meditate on your own conversion in light of Jesus' teaching.

Empty Nesters: Think back on your own salvation. Think about how you came to faith. Meditate on your own conversion in light of Jesus' teaching.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for saving me. Pray for your loved ones that are lost.

Whoever Believes
John 3:16
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Thank you Lord for saving me!

Explanation: After Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the regeneration, being born again, he makes this famous statement. This is an invitation to whoever will believe in him to in fact, believe in him. The one who believes in Jesus is the one who the Spirit of God has blown up. John 3:16 must be read in light of John 3:1-15, and Jesus' explanation of being born again. The other point to note is that Jesus' purpose for coming is to die so that we might live forever. This is the love of God.

The Point: God loves you and sent his son to die so that you wouldn't have to die. Believe in him.

Application: Believe on Jesus. Trust him.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: How much does God love you? What did God do to show his love for you? Sing Jesus Loves Me.

Middle & High School Students : Why did Jesus come to earth? Imagine the cost the Father paid to save you. What do you think about all of this? Give your teenager an opportunity to talk openly with you about salvation, but do not force a conversation. Leave an open door for conversation.

Young Adult : Think about the cost of your salvation, to the Father. He sent his only Son. Read the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Meditate on your own salvation and give thanks to God.

Adult: Think about the cost of your salvation, to the Father. He sent his only Son. Read the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Meditate on your own salvation and give thanks to God. Pray for you children, that they will come to know Jesus as Lord.

Empty Nesters: Think about the cost of your salvation, to the Father. He sent his only Son. Read the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Meditate on your own salvation and give thanks to God. Pray that your *grandchildren* will come to faith in Christ.

Prayer: God, thank you for loving me! Thank you for sending your Son to die as a punishment for my sin.

This Little Light of Mine

Matthew 5:14

By: Heath LuQuire

Prayer: Lord, we come before You in awe and humility, with hearts surrendered in worship. We gather before You fully confident that You are among us. May our worship be an offering, a sweet aroma, that is pleasing to You. We thank You for calling us out of darkness and into Your marvelous light. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to trust and obey, guide us in the truth of Your Word, soften our hearts. Open our eyes that we may see the wonderful truths in Your instructions. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Explanation: The “you” being addressed in the first part of this verse is the individual believer, which are those that believe by grace through faith in Christ. As followers of Jesus, we have the light of Christ. And that Light shines into the darkness of this world. We have been given a living testimony that will go forth like light into the darkness. When light enters a dark room, it will be seen and provides direction by illuminating the darkness. Light makes it possible to navigate the room without causing yourself or others harm. In the same way, a city set on top of a hill cannot be hidden; it is seen from a long way off. When a lot of little lights get together, it makes the light shine brighter. This is the combined “light” of individual believers gathering together. This is the church. Our faith WILL be seen by others because it shines brightly in this world. God promised in the book of Isaiah that the light of His glory would attract all nations (60:1-3). We shine light into the darkness by serving the least of these, feeding the hungry, caring for widows and orphans, loving our neighbors, but the greatest way we shine the light of Christ into the darkness is by sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Point: We shine the light of Christ into a dark world by sharing the Gospel.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: When you are afraid of the dark, what causes you to no longer be afraid? (nightlight, hall light, bathroom light, flashlight, etc.) Just like that light, Jesus is the Light in our world shining into the scary places. But not everyone has the Light to shine. Because we have that light, we make sure we share it with everyone around us. Sing “ This Little Light of Mine” together.

Middle & High School Students: What are some practical ways you can be light in the darkness? Think of friends, family, church members, neighbors you can serve. How can you be a light in the darkness right now during the

stay-at-home order?

Young Adult: Are you using this time to be a light in a dark world? You might still be attending college classes online or continuing to work right now. How can you shine the light of Christ as you do that? What are some things you can do or say that can encourage someone else? Are you using social media as a way to shine light into the darkness?

Adult: What are some ways you can be a light in your neighborhood, your family, your workplace, your community? Pray about serving those around you like your children, your parents, your siblings, widows and orphans, the homeless, and co-workers. Who around you needs the light of Christ right now? What are some ways you can shine light into the darkness of those who come to mind? (Ideas: reach out to a friend or church member and just check on them to see how they are doing. Ask how you can pray for them. Call friends, family, church members to see if they need anything or if you can help in some way. Pray with them and encourage them.)

Empty Nesters: How can you use this time to be a light to your adult children and your grandchildren, your neighbors, your friends, and church family? (Ideas: Dropping letters of encouragement or care packages in the mail; reach out to a younger church member and schedule a regular time of Bible study and prayer; familiarize yourself with technology like Facebook, Google Hangouts, Zoom, etc. to connect with family and friends.)

Prayer: Father we praise You for sending Your light into a dark world. Lord, You sent Jesus to take on flesh, to live the perfect life that we were supposed to live, and died the death that we deserve to die. And in Him alone we have life. God, we thank You for Your grace in giving us that which we didn't deserve. Lord, we pray that you give us the ability and the opportunity to be light in a dark world. Right now as we face this pandemic, Lord we pray, that You bring to mind ways that we can shine Your great light to those who live in darkness. And we also pray that those who see the Light of the world would respond and worship Your Son, Jesus Christ. In whose name we pray, Amen.

Count the Cost
Matthew 8:18-22
Heath LuQuire

Prayer: Lord, we come to You humbly and sit at your feet. We ask that You are magnified in our lives as we seek to follow You. Be with us in this time to learn what it means to follow after You, we ask in Jesus name, Amen.

Explanation: These two events give us a glimpse into the radical commitment we should have in following after Jesus. When we say we will follow Him wherever He goes, we must contemplate what that actually means. Jesus responded to the scribe's claims with a realistic picture of what following Him looked like. Jesus is communicating, through these two examples, that His disciples allegiance to Him was more important than any other thing in their lives. More important than their homes, more important than their careers, more important than even their family if it came to that. Anything that hinders our ability to follow Christ must be cast aside.

The Point: Cast off anything that holds you back from following after Christ.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Explain to your children that following Jesus is more important than anything else in their lives. Give examples from your life where following Christ has not been easy but was more important than whatever you faced.

Middle & High School Students: Ask your teenager if they have considered the cost of following Jesus. Ask them if they are willing to follow after Jesus even when things are difficult and may not improve. Ask them if they are willing to follow even if no one else will. Share a story about a time when it was difficult to follow Jesus and the result (both positive and negative - children can learn what NOT to do as well).

Young Adult: Consider the college and career you are pursuing. Does it cause you to follow after Christ more or less? Is there any area in your life that is holding you back from following after Christ with radical abandon? If so, what needs to change?

Adult: Are the areas where you spend the majority of your time following after Christ or following after something/someone else? Does your time and energy line up with following Christ? Is there any area that you need to submit to the

Lord and instead of trying to lead, you follow where He leads? Are you following after Christ in your career, in your finances, in your marriage, with your children, with your friends and extended family? Pray that if there is anything in your life that is not led by Jesus, that He would convict you by the Holy Spirit and walk in the newness of life found in Christ.

Empty Nesters: In what ways can you follow after Christ with a radical nature? Are you living your life as an offering unto the Lord? Ask the Lord to show ways that you can follow Him and rely on Him more. Is there any way in which you are trying to lead the Lord? If so, ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of those things and rest in Christ's redemption.

Prayer: Lord God, we pray that You would lead us and that we would follow. Let it not be I who lives, but Christ who lives in me. Let us rely on you with full dependence and trust in Your ways. Holy Spirit, we ask that You show us anything in our lives that hinders us from following after Jesus. You are the potter, we are the clay, Shape us and mold us to walk in your ways all the days of our lives. We ask these things in Jesus' Holy name, Amen.

Partners
Philippians 1:3-5
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, help us to be still as we sit and worship you for a few moments. Be pleased with our worship.

Explanation: Paul has just begun this letter to a local church, and he thanks them for their “partnership.” This is a greek word that we get our idea of fellowship from. It’s the idea of working together or associating for a common purpose. Paul specifies that their partnership is “in the gospel.” Oftentimes we think of the Apostle Paul as some super star in early Christianity, but the Church was partnered with him on the same mission. The church is just as much a part of the mission as the Apostle is.

The Point: Churches and missionaries are to partner together in gospel mission.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Play a game that illustrates the importance of being on a team and working together.

Middle & High School Students: Use a reference from a team sport that your child takes interest in to impress the point of partnership.

Young Adult: Consider the importance of partners in political military pursuits. Think about the allies during the world wars. Now, how are you partnering in the gospel? Who are your gospel partners? Missionaries you pray for? Church planters you support?

Adult: How are you partnering in the gospel? Are there organizations that you partner with? Can you sacrifice a little more to be more supportive of a missionary, church planter, or orphan care giver?

Empty Nesters: God has put you in a unique position in life to be able to serve him. Perhaps there are gospel partnerships that you put off while raising children because you either did not have time, or you could not afford? Now is the time!

Prayer: God, use us. Use our family! Show us who you want us to partner with. Amen.

Church Family
Philippians 1:7-8
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: God, teach us. Open your word to our hearts. Show us your glory.

Text: Philippians 1:7-8

Explanation: Paul is writing from prison. He has not been able to gather with the body of Christ corporately, and he finds himself yearning for fellow believers. Their connection to one another is their relationship to Jesus. Because Jesus has redeemed each believer, there is a longing to be with each other. He saves us, and brings us into his body, together. It's a right longing.

The Point: Believers should desire to be together as the church of Jesus.

Application: Do you yearn to gather with your church family?

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Who do you miss at church? Have your children think about and pray for different people at church. Maybe send them pictures, crafts, or cards they made.

Middle & High School Students: Teach the importance of the teenagers in the body of Christ. They are not just the "youth group" that's been pushed to the side, but they are actually a part of the church. Ask them who they miss? People from other generations. Explain why those relationships are so important.

Young Adult: How many close relationships, in the church, do you have with folks of other generations? IF you don't have many, you need to consciously work to develop some relationships. Consider who you might reach out to and encourage. Could you send flowers to a senior widow lady? Could you send lunch to them?

Adult: Do you have any relationships with the next generation in our church? You should. Pray about who God might knit your heart closer to. Consider reaching out to some younger adults, of the same gender, and encouraging them. It might be the beginning of a beautiful, biblical, relationship.

Empty Nesters: Sometimes your generation feels like it has nothing to contribute to a younger generation. They seem to have advanced so much that you feel inadequate. Believer, nothing could be further from the truth. You have so much biblical wisdom and experience to offer. Build a relationship with someone in the church that you invest godly wisdom into. Reach out and

encourage someone in the church. Call them. Text them. Send dinner (pizza maybe) to a younger family that is struggling to be at home so much.

Prayer: God, you have given us such a wonderful church family! Thank you! Thank you for _____. Lord, strengthen our relationships with one another. Bring us back together again soon, and may be ever so sweeter when we do get together.

Humble Servitude
Philippians 2:5-11
By: Gabrielle Hatley

Prayer: God today, and everyday, we thank you! We thank you for your unwavering and unconditional love. We thank you for your Son and the example he has set for us. We thank you for his servant's heart. As we move into a new year and a new chapter, open our hearts and our minds to growth and to change. We ask you to place within us a servant's heart like Christ's. Instill in us the desire to become more like Christ this year. Amen.

Explanation: As we read Philippians 2:5-11, we find Paul encouraging us to be like Christ- to have his mindset. Paul continues on to explain that Christ humbled himself in all things. He came to earth as a man and he served others his entire life-to the point of death upon the cross. Jesus consistently served others in everything he did. Period. He put the needs of others and obedience to his father over any need or desire of his own. And he did so with a mindset of humility and honor, not for self gain or recognition.

How appropriate for us to consider our mindset as we approach the new year? To be blunt, it's not about you. And to be fair, it's not about me either. If what Paul says is true, and we know it is, it's all about serving others and humbling ourselves like Christ did. Every single day. That is our purpose for 2021.

So how do we do that? I think it starts by recognizing that true humility is found in selfless serving. We don't serve to gain; we don't serve to show off; we don't serve to check a box; we don't serve just to serve. No. We serve because Christ did. We serve out of obedience. We serve out of love. We serve to show others Christ's love.

While understanding what selfless servitude is is important, it doesn't mean anything unless we act on that knowledge. We can't just talk about taking on the mindset and attitude of Christ, we must do it! People who serve like Christ sacrifice. They sacrifice their wants and needs to meet the wants and needs of others and desire to gain nothing in return. This can take shape in a variety of forms. It can be washing dishes, buying

food, praying for others, forgiving others, extending grace, feeding the hungry (and not posting about it on Social Media), being a listening ear, and so many other things. It's also sharing the Gospel. Humbly serving means doing all of these things and so many others regardless of your personal circumstance and even if it's uncomfortable.

My hope as I enter the new year is to adopt the mindset of Christ, faithfully and holding nothing back. My hope is to be a humble servant of God and of the people of Stanly County. My hope is to selflessly give all of myself in the big ways, in the little ways, in the things that everyone will see, and in the things no one will ever know. My hope is to be known as someone who serves. My hope is that my community will know Christ's love because I have consistently poured out love and have consistently served. My hope is that 2021 is the year that I experience God more fully through humble servitude.

Even more so, this is my hope for North. As we enter into a new year, I hope we adopt the mindset of Christ faithfully and hold nothing back. I hope we become humble servants of God and of the people of Stanly County. I hope we selflessly give all of ourselves- in the big ways, in the little ways, in the things that everyone will see, and in the things no one will ever know. I hope we become known as the church that serves. I hope that our community will know Christ's love because we have consistently poured out love and have consistently served. I hope 2021 is the year that we at North experience God more fully through humble servitude.

The Point: Embrace Christ's mindset of humble servitude. Actively look for ways to selflessly serve God and his people.

Application: Regardless of age, the application is the same: Embrace Christ's mindset of humble servitude. Actively look for ways to selflessly serve God and his people.

Pre-K and Elementary Age: You can't serve like Christ if you don't know how Christ served. I encourage you to define "servant" and "serve." Then explain to your little ones that Jesus was a servant. He helped others even when he could have helped himself, and he didn't get a prize or a reward. Explain that when they are helping others, they are serving Christ. Ask your kiddos how they can help others. Write this list down and put it somewhere they can see throughout the week. Help them choose one thing to do during the upcoming week.

Middle and High School Students: Have your kids and teenagers take ownership of their serving. At this age, you shouldn't be telling them to serve day in and day out. That doesn't mean you stop helping or guiding, but it does mean you take the back seat. Ask them to come up with a list of ways they can serve others and continue to add to it throughout the year. It isn't a bad idea to encourage them to keep a journal or a chart to keep track and to write down anything God reveals to them through their serving-not so they see how much they've done, but so they can see how much God has done through them!

Young Adult: It's so easy to get wrapped up in ourselves and in what we've got going on in our lives. We have needs. We have wants. We have problems. I challenge you to begin looking at others-really looking. What do people need? And how can God use you to fill that need? Maybe it's in a grocery store paying for someone's food or getting groceries into someone's car. Maybe it's being present so you're aware when someone isn't truly "okay." Maybe it's listening to the Holy Spirit when you're told to pick up the phone to call that person or delete that text/post and put away your phone. I challenge you to see opportunities to serve like Christ in everything everyday.

Adult: Don't narrow your focus and miss the opportunities to serve. No matter why you narrow your focus-raising your kids, becoming financially stable, getting the job promotion-it's important to recognize that those things are not your sole purpose in life. It's easy to make raising your kids your life. It's easy to make your job your life. What isn't easy is recognizing your job is to serve like Christ while you raise your kids and as you work for that job promotion. Don't spend all your energy focusing on the worldly things and miss those opportunities to serve like Christ. This doesn't mean that you don't strive to raise your kids well and in a Christ-centered home. It doesn't mean working for the job promotion is bad. It doesn't even mean working long hours is wrong. It simply means those things can't be your purpose. Paul was clear. Our purpose is to embrace Christ's mindset and attitude of humble servitude. And you should bring that mindset into every single thing you do.

Empty Nesters: Now is not the time to sit back and let the next generation take care of it. While it is important to allow the next generation to take their place and to lead when the timing is right, that doesn't mean you serve any less. Christ didn't grow out of humble serving, and neither should you. Continue to look for ways to serve others.

Prayer: God, I pray for North. I pray for my church family. And this year, I pray you radically change who we are as a church. I pray we adopt Christ's mindset faithfully and hold nothing back. I pray we become humble servants of God and of the people of Stanly County. I pray we selflessly give all of ourselves- in the big ways, in the little ways, in the things that everyone will see, and in the things no one will ever know. I pray we become known as the church that serves. I pray that our community will know your love because we have consistently poured out love and have consistently served. I pray 2021 is the year that we at North experience you more fully through humble servitude.

Faith in Christ
Philippians 3:9
By: Gabrielle Hatley

Prayer: God, open our hearts and minds to your word and the truth of the scriptures. Give us the peace and understanding to not only grow in your word but to also apply it to our lives each day.

Explanation: Right before this, Paul tells us that his ultimate desire is to know God—to gain him. Paul says it’s worth everything (Philippians 3:7-8). In verse nine, he continues this thought by stating he wants to be found in Christ. But how does he do that? How do we do that? Paul first tells us what NOT to do. He says being righteous from our own doings, based on the law-following rules, cannot and does not work. No amount of good works can lead us to be found in Christ. If we follow all of the rules, and do all of the good things, and check off every box, it still isn’t enough. We cannot be made righteous in God’s eyes through our works. Even the best of our best isn’t enough.

So what do we do? Paul says that righteousness comes from placing our faith in Christ. It isn’t faith plus something else. It’s just faith. Therefore, we are made righteous in God’s sight only through placing our faith in Christ. Paul is showing us that the only way to salvation is by trusting in Jesus.

When we don’t place our faith in Christ, our outcome is bleak. We cannot save ourselves. Without faith in Christ, we cannot overcome our sin. We cannot overcome the evil of the world. There’s nothing we can do to change the outcome. We can’t check off enough boxes or give enough or do enough. **But, with faith in God!** With faith in God, that sin is washed clean. We are made righteous and blameless not because of what we do but because we have placed our faith in him.

In Esther, the Jewish people’s outcome with anything other than Christ looks bleak. Haman’s plot seems insurmountable. After all, King Ahasuerus has already agreed to the genocide of the Jewish people. The plan is already in motion. What could they possibly do in their own strength to overcome the evil in front of them? Nothing. All hope seems to be lost, but we can trust that it’s not. We can trust that through God’s sovereign hand, evil and sin can be (and-spoiler alert-will be) defeated.

That’s what we will see in Esther and through her story. Even though it seems that evil will win, God and God alone will save his people. And that’s what we see in our own lives. Even when the enemy seems to be winning. Even though we

deserve death because of our sin. We place our faith in Christ, and then God and God alone saves us.

The Point: The only way to salvation is through placing our faith in Christ.

Application: Are you actually placing your faith in Christ for salvation? Or are you looking somewhere else?

Pre-K and Elementary Age: Ask your kids: How many ways can we be saved? Then explain that Jesus is the only way to salvation. You can also print or draw an easy (already made) maze. As your kids work through finding their way out of the maze, draw connections between the maze and salvation. If you get lost in the maze, it only brings dead ends and frustration. When we try to get salvation through anything other than placing our faith in Christ, the path leads to frustration and dead ends as well. Just like the maze only has one correct way to get out, we only have one way to “get” salvation.

Middle and High School Students: We live in a world of instant gratification and constant distractions. Ask your teenagers: What are you putting your trust in? Are they trusting in social media, friends, school, or their talents? Ask them to think about the things they place their faith in more than Jesus, and then challenge them to refocus that faith in Him.

Young Adult: You’re facing the time of life when things constantly change. You’re figuring out how to be on your own, trying to build a life or family, and deciding what “forever” looks like. Everywhere you look there are things that seem crucial and things that need to be handled immediately. Don’t lose sight of who you belong to and who to place your faith in each day. Stay focused on Christ! This doesn’t mean that those decisions get smaller and that changes are less impactful. Instead, it means you trust that God has his sovereign hand in it all.

Adult: More than likely, you already know that salvation comes through placing your faith in Christ alone. Do you really believe it? Or do you think that being the perfect mom, dad, friend, or do-gooder is what’s been asked of you? Repeat after me: I am more than my role. If you’re spending more time perfecting your Earthly role than living fruitfully in Christ, it’s’ time to refocus.

Empty Nesters: More than likely, you also already know that salvation comes through placing your faith in Christ alone. You’re at a time in life where you most likely don’t have to consistently make crucial and life-altering decisions. You’ve raised your kids according to God’s word. You’ve been financially responsible.

You truly trust in God. So, how does the scripture call you to refocus your life? How can you remain purposeful and not allow those things (financial peace, kids raised well, secure faith, comfortable in your walk) to cause you to forget what Christ has done for you? What can you do to become even more thankful for the simplicity of the gospel instead of riding in cruise control?

Prayer: Lord, show us our focus. Prick our hearts and draw attention to the things in our lives we place our faith in rather than placing our faith in you. Don't allow us to be complacent in our faith, but stir up in us the desire to refocus that faith and trust solely to you.

Don't Worry, Trust God
Philippians 4:5-7
By: Jo Gray

Prayer: Father, we praise You for You are righteous in all Your ways, mighty to save, and compassionate toward all You have made. You are near to all who call on You. We are Your people, the sheep of Your pasture, and we come because You call us. Have mercy on us and help us as we pray.

Explanation: Some of you haven't read past Paul's first sentence in verse five because you don't see yourselves as gentle. Can a gentle person have a vice-grip handshake or speak forcefully? Of course! But it's important to discern between words that uplift and words that crush, and to know how to ease up on your grandmother's frail fingers. Gentleness isn't weakness, but rather strength under control. Gentleness includes reasonableness, unselfishness, and graciousness. Pastor Paul is encouraging the beloved Philippians to seek the best for others by treating each other the way Christ treats them—reasonably, unselfishly, graciously, gently.

Anxious! Who's NOT anxious these days? Anybody? Who prays, who substitutes prayer for worry, who talks with God about everything? Every circumstance? Every situation? Every relationship? With a spirit of thanksgiving? God's Word promises God's peace to you. Never forget He is sovereign, gracious, patient, and that you can entrust yourself and your problems to Him. Cast your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

What is it that guards us? The government, the military, stone fences, smart home technology? All those things have a place, but they cannot touch our hearts and minds where discord and worry reside. They cannot relieve the internal pressure and insecurity we feel. Only peace with God Almighty through our Savior, Jesus Christ the Risen Lord, can flood our souls with that transcendent peace that puts us at rest. That peace reminds us who we belong to.

The Point: God's got *it*, and God's got *you!* And remember, He's coming back.

Application:

Pre-K and Elementary: Parents can't lead their children where they themselves haven't gone. If you've been living in that rocking chair of worry going no place, confess your sin of worry to the Lord and then to your children. Then when common difficulties and frustrations surface during the day for you or your

children, pause and pray about that specific concern. Praying with a child about the small things prepares them to take greater fears and troubles to the Holy Spirit who is as close as the air they breathe. Look for opportunities to point out the wonders of God's creation all around, especially the vastness of the sky or ocean. Then marvel (out loud) at God's greatness and together thank God for His abundant care.

Middle and High School Students: God is nearer than your cell phone, nearer than the pictures and people on Facebook and Instagram, but be honest, where do you turn when you're feeling anxious? If Jesus isn't your first thought, consider how well you know Him. Commit to studying one of the first four books in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Take a good look at the Savior, listen to His words, hear Him calling you, "Come to Me." He knows you inside and out. (Read Psalm 139)

Young Adult: Are you always thankful? Do you believe that God has your best interest at heart—no matter your circumstances? Is anything too small or too great for God to care about? Make your wants known to God in prayer but wait for Him to work and then trust His answer: yes, no, not now. This God who put the stars in place and set the world on its axis, is He not able to do all things well that concern you? (Read Proverbs 3:5-6)

Adults: In this time of global pandemic, political upheaval, and national elections, many adults are not only anxious, but also feeling powerless. How can we make a difference when the problems of the culture and the world loom very large? What difference does one vote make? Who can we trust? What if things get even worse? First, remember the Lord is near. Second, pray about everything and make specific requests to God, which, by the way, is more productive than moaning among ourselves or venting on social media. Third, be reminded that in Christ we have peace with God no matter what happens. What's the worst that can happen? We'll die, like all the saints before us. Then we'll live with God forever! Glory hallelujah! (Read Psalm 145)

Prayer: Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth. Help us speak of Your goodness, tell of your promises, and proclaim the saving name of Jesus. We look to You instead of to the world. We rest in Your unchanging love for Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations—even ours.

A Light in the Darkness

Psalm 18:28

By: Krissy Cardwell

Prayer: Lord, thank you for all the ways that you provide for us, even when we do not see what you are doing. Please help us to always look to you during any time of need. Let our faith rest in you and not in the circumstances we find ourselves in. Thank you for the gift of your Son, and the love that he bears for us. Help us to carry the light that we have in Jesus to those around us. Open our hearts, Lord. Amen.

Explanation: Remember last December when we were all anticipating the arrival of the New Year? We were ready for the end of 2019 and all the obstacles that year held for us. We loved the idea of having a clean slate, a new beginning, a fresh start. We excitedly declared that 2020 was going to be a great year full of vision, clear sight, and bright new opportunities. Little did we know what surprises the upcoming year would bring us.

Murder hornets, hurricanes, fires, a world wide pandemic, and political unrest has left us feeling that we might have judged 2019 a tad harshly. It did not take long for 2020 to introduce us to various unknowns leaving us feeling like we have been stumbling blindly through our days.

As we read Psalm 18 we are reading the words of a man that was no stranger to the unexpected. We first meet David as a young shepherd, who was fearless and brave. But his simple days as a shepherd are short lived. From there we watch as he is anointed the future king of Israel, later labeled a fugitive, and for a time lived his life on the run. The circumstances around him changed rapidly and unexpectedly. In what felt like a split second he lost his safety, his youth, his family, and his career. Without warning he lost his rights, he lost his connection to those close to him, his comforts, and at times he even lost his close relationship with God.

We can relate with David, can't we? This year has been a rapid upheaval of our norm, our expectations, and of our plans. All of our comforts and securities have been stripped away and left us feeling off course. Like David we can begin to wonder just what is going on. In Psalm 13:1 David desperately asks the Lord if he has forgotten him forever! Has God abandoned us and left us to ourselves?

It would be easy for that to be the end of David's story, but the good news is

that it is not the end. David was in a dark moment in his life. He felt the fears of the unknown, the loss of control, and even questioned what God could be planning. But, that's the thing! David called out for help from his Lord. Despite all, he remained steadfast to the faith he had in God, knowing that He was his only hope. As his world fell apart around him, he still held on to the One which he knew to be true. And, as a result, God delivered David from his obstacles and blessed him beyond David's expectations. But would you agree that for Psalm 18:28 to be a genuine statement, that the dark moments of David's life were unavoidable?

It was only by being required to walk through the darkness that the need for a light was necessary.

This, friends, is true for us as well. It would be easy for us to get caught up in our present circumstances and become discouraged. This world tells us this is all too much to handle. We are all walking blind and there is no hope. But that is just not true for those who trust in Christ. John 1:4-5 tells us why this is true:

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Simply said, our God is bigger than our current circumstances, no matter how we feel. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

Like David we have the light of Jesus to illuminate our path. When we receive Jesus, His light enters into our lives. That light, that hope, is stronger than any hopeless situation that this life can throw at us. We can suddenly look back at what we have experienced this year and see the moments that God has been at work amidst the chaos. We realize that we have not been walking this path alone; God has carried us through, one step at a time. It is within the darkness that the light that God provides for us shines the brightest.

My hope is that when I reflect back on this unprecedented year that my biggest takeaway is not that this was a bleak year full of havoc. I want to look back and see all the “God moments” shining. I want to be reminded how good the Lord was to me. The times when quarantine left me feeling alone and uneasy, I want to remember how God used that time to slow me down and to speak to my heart. I want the memories of how looming disappointment and loneliness was replaced with a church body pulling together to support and celebrate one another. I want to smile about His love for me when God sent just the right

person at just the right time who was willing to sit outside with me six feet away and pray with me. These and all of the other moments that shine so bright against a dark world. And the only reason they could be such profound moments is because God allowed me to experience a walk through the dark. My prayer is that as we celebrate this Christmas season and look toward a new year once again, we will all look back on 2020 and declare that this was the year we walked as Children of Light.

The Point: No matter what is happening around us, we have Jesus to guide us. There is no darkness that can take over the light of Jesus.

Application: Explanation leads to application. Now we know what the text means, but how does it apply to each listener.

Pre-K and Elementary Age: If your little ones are like mine, they often are afraid of the dark. Talk to them and ask them what makes the dark frightening. Is it not being able to see? Is it the fear that something may be hiding? Is it the loss of the known? Explain to them that God provided a way for us to be free from our fears of the darkness. He sent Jesus and he literally is the light for all of the world. Nothing can defeat the light of Jesus and when we trust our lives to Jesus that light then becomes part of us.

Middle and High School Students: This year has been full of the unexpected. Our students have lost the structure within the normal in the things that may have taken for granted like school, work, and holiday traditions. Our children are living in a world that we as parents do not have the answer for what is next. It is easy to forget just how much the changes going on around us has an impact on our youth. Talk to them about the events going on around us and what impact that has had on their world view. Ask them where they see God within all this and what helps them keep with going forward despite all the unknowns. Read Psalm 18:28 with them. Write it down and put it in a place that they will see that verse daily. Pray with them and remind them that no matter what changes in this world, God loves us and is in control. He never changes and nothing takes him by surprise.

Young Adult: It is quite possible that this year has changed the way many things look for you. Maybe you graduated from high school or college and did not get to walk across the stage in the way that you imagined this time last year. Perhaps you have had to change wedding plans, or your job situation is in limbo. It feels like a pause button has been pushed. Psalm 139:16 tells us that God has

our lives planned out before we take our first breath. Use this time to talk to God. Ask him to speak to you in a mighty way during this time of being still. Ask him to solidify in your heart the assurance that despite what happens to us, God is never taken off guard. He has a plan, a path for us and he illuminates that path through our relationship with Jesus.

Adult and Empty Nesters: We have come through a year unlike any of us has seen before. One way or another, this year has brought new experiences to us like never before. We all like our way of doing things. We hold fast to our traditions, our expectations, our “rights”. I easily find myself being unwilling to be flexible in a situation that requires us to have an open mind. It is hard to find ourselves as parents and spouses where we suddenly do not have the answers to the questions, to really not know what is coming next. The desire to grab hold to any control in a time when everything feels out of control is overwhelming. I find a lot of comfort that we are not the first generation to find ourselves leading our families into uncharted territory. Read about the Israelites when they were freed from Egypt. The year after they left did not look like anything they had lived before. Locations changed, traditions were put on the back burner, and they literally didn't know what their next turn would bring. Despite all of this, despite the fears that the situation produces, there was one unchanging theme that dominated their story. Over and over we see how God provides for his people in every aspect. He guided their path and remained faithful to them. I pray that we learn from the generations before us. I pray that we find hope as we read that the same God that protected those before us has not changed. He is all knowing, all powerful, and will lead us through our time in the wilderness.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for how you lead us. Thank you for your patience with us as we learn to follow you. Take our hearts, our ideas, our expectations and mold them to match yours. Help us to clearly see the moments that you shine brightly for us so that we may be a testimony of your love. Lord, we give our lives to you. Let our hearts find peace in you and who you are, not in any temporary comfort in this world. Thank you for loving us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Taste and See that the Lord is Good

Psalm 34:8

By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, still our hearts and minds from all the drama of the world, all the drama of the day, that we might hear from you through your word. God, encourage our hearts and our minds, give us hope.

Explanation: David wrote Psalm 34 to commemorate his close encounter with Abimelech of Gath. Read the account in 1 Samuel 21. David acted like he was insane to get away. This Psalm is a poetic means of David remembering the event.

Peter alludes to Ps. 34:8 in his first epistle, when he says, “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good (1 Peter 2:3).” Peter is arguing that Christians should be growing as believers, in spiritual maturity, if they are indeed believers. It’s a call to professing Christians to check their own spiritual conditions. If you are not growing it could be because you are not actually a believer; you haven’t actually “tasted” of the Lord. David’s point, and Peter’s point, is that faith must be personal and individual. You cannot have faith on behalf of someone else. Likewise, no one else may ride on the coattails of your faith. You must personally “taste and see.” These words refer to the idea of “try and experience.”

David goes on in Ps. 34:8 to say, “Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him [or, who trusts in him].” In the midst of turmoil and chaos (Both David’s situation, and Peter’s readers’ situation), trust in Jesus. He is the refuge. Our world often can be characterized by the words, turmoil and chaos. As a believer, who has experienced the Lord, seek refuge in him.

The Point: Believe in the Lord Jesus, and keep believing in times of trouble.

Application: Have you tasted? Is he your refuge?

Pre-K and Elementary Age: Sing Jesus Loves Me with your children. Teach them through song that Jesus loves them, personally, and that he can be trusted in difficult times. Carry this song into night time routines, especially as you deal with fear at bedtime (monsters under the bed, etc.). Teach them Jesus.

Middle and High School Students: You know how sometimes at dinner, you say, “I don’t like that.” And then I respond, “You haven’t tried that.” And when you actually do try it, you actually like it? - You must “taste” Jesus. Once you try him you will want more and more of him in your life. The cool thing about Jesus is you

will not not like him. It won't happen. Jesus can be trusted to not only satisfy you, but also protect you when you need a safe place. Let's talk about some times in your life when you need a safe place, and how Jesus can meet that need.

Young Adult: Are you confused about what to think about all that's going on in the world? Me too! It seems as though the world that we knew has all of sudden disappeared! It seems that the simplicity of life that we knew has vanished, and we're all wondering what to do! How do we respond? How do we move on? How do we protect and provide for our young families? Trust Jesus. Keep trusting Jesus. Spend some time writing your fears out. Write a letter to God expressing your fears. And then spend some time reading the Gospels, watching Jesus ease the fears of others who were uncertain about their world (Read Mark 1:16 - Mark 10).

Adult: You're trying to navigate your children and your teenagers through this new normal that we find ourselves in, and you're worried about whether or not you're doing a good job. Steer them towards Jesus. Lead them to his word. Pray.

Empty Nesters: Your children and grandchildren are probably as worried as everyone else about our circumstances. Think back on your life. What are some other instances that you can remember that were culturally chaotic? World War 2? Vietnam? The Cold War? 9/11? How did you see God move in that situation? How did you see Jesus reign sovereign? Write these experiences out and share them with your children as they lead their children. They will appreciate that godly legacy that you are leaving for them.

Prayer: God, you are sovereign. I pray that our family would fully lean on you during these times. I pray that you would bring peace to our hearts. Teach us to trust in you.

Made to Worship
Psalm 95
By: Rebekah Blaylock

Prayer: Thank you Lord for this day. God thank you for your creation and the beauty it displays. Everywhere we look, God we see evidence of your work. Thank you for your grace. Help us to see more of you.

Explanation: Why do we worship? In Genesis, from the very beginning, when creation took place its sole purpose was to bring glory to God. Just its being glorified God because it was fulfilling the purpose God intended. The crashing of waves, trees producing fruit, flowers blooming, the heat of the sun, the cool of the moon, the octopus swimming, birds sitting on their eggs, the roar of a lion, the croak of a frog. They are all praising the Lord. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the Glory of the Lord and the stars proclaim his handiwork.” ALL of creation worships!

Not long after God created his masterpiece, sin showed up. In one decision of disobedience sin tainted the perfection God created. Even today nature doesn't reflect what God created it to be in the beginning. After sin, things began to malfunction and worship was no longer as easy as it once was. For us many things desire our attention: meetings, ball practice, family, grocery shopping, toys, TV, friends, etc. None of these are bad things, but they demand our time. This makes it challenging for us to focus our attention on the Lord. As believers in Christ we have to be careful of how we prioritize our time. How much time do we spend worshipping versus other commitments?

We worship because we were created by a BIG, BIG God and he deserves our praise. One day every knee *will* bow and worship him.

The Point: We were made to worship!

Application: How do we worship? The definition of worship is, “the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity.” Our expression of worship occurs in many ways: singing, prayer, reading scripture, obedience, being in his presence, thankfulness. Do you worship everyday? He desires you to. Make that your goal this week; to spend time everyday in his presence, worshipping!

Pre-K and Elementary Age: ~Take a nature walk and find many of God's creations. As you find things, talk about what day of creation it was created. ~Spend a night star gazing and read Ps.19:1. ~Sing “My God is so Big”

Middle and High School Students: Take time to reflect on things that may be distracting you from worshiping the Lord. Where, or on what, do you spend most of your time? How can you better prioritize your relationship with the Lord more? Maybe it is as simple as you getting up 30 minutes early to have devotions.

Young Adult: As life comes fast and more challenging everyday it couldn't be more important to seek the Lord first. What does God say? It is so tempting to see what Facebook says or do what our friends are doing. God has a special plan for your life. Seek the Lord and he will reveal it to you! If you are struggling to make time for the Lord try to simplify your life. Take time for a spiritual retreat and immerse yourself at Jesus' feet.

Adult: How can you spend more time leading your family in worship? Maybe it's as simple as making comments in the car about the sunset or a beautiful flower. Maybe it's spending time a few nights a week reading scripture and singing together(family worship). Maybe it's making a greater effort for Sunday worship service.

Empty Nesters: Maybe, that as your kids have grown, you don't feel as much of a need to lead spiritually. You may not have as much authority in their lives but hopefully you are still leading by example. I promise, they are still watching. What will be your spiritual legacy? If you feel as though your kids don't need you, I know your spouse does! Iron sharpens iron. Keep prodding each other on to finish the race well. A couple that prays together stays together.

Prayer: God we love you. Help us to remove distractions from our life that keep us from you. All we need is you. Help us to worship you with our whole hearts.

Serve the Lord
Psalm 100:2
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, you are indeed good! You are the very definition of good! You have been so good to us. Lord, we worship you! Open your Word to our hearts today. Challenge us. Lead us.

Explanation: Psalm 100 is typically read near the time we celebrate Thanksgiving, and rightfully so. It is a psalm for giving thanks. However, I want to call your attention to the psalmist means of thanksgiving. The psalmist instructs the hearer to “Make a joyful noise (vs.1), which we would normally identify with singing praise to the Lord. Singing is certainly a way to give thanks. Then the psalmist instructs the reader to “serve the Lord (vs. 2),” and then he reverts back to the idea of singing. Notice that the idea of serving the Lord is surrounded by the idea of singing. They go together! It’s as if it is expected that those who sing joyful praise to the Lord also serve Him. Sometimes we come into worship and sing to the Lord, but we never give a second thought to the idea of actually serving Him.

The Bible calls us to serve our Lord. He is our Master. He has delivered us from Satan’s slavery, but transferred us to the Kingdom of His Beloved Son (Col. 1:13). We are never without a master! We are either in Satan’s dominion, or under Christ’s Lordship, but we always have a Master. Serve Him! This is why Jesus saved you! He saved you to serve Him and bring Him glory. And we do it joyfully!

It is our joy to serve the Lord. We are instructed not only to serve Him, but to serve Him with gladness! The psalmist is intentionally calling out the idea of serving the Lord with a begrudging spirit. It is a privilege and honor to serve God.

The Point: Serve the Lord!

Application: God saved you that you might serve Him. How are you doing that?

Pre-K & Elementary Age: What does it mean to serve someone? Practice serving other family members. Take water to dad while he is mowing the lawn. Set the table for dinner. Wash the dishes. If you have multiple children, consider having a “servant of the day,” in which one child gets to serve the family by doing the various tasks (setting the table, cleaning up after meals, taking out the trash, etc.).

Middle & High School Students: How can your students serve? How can they serve their neighbor in school? Think about ways that you might serve at church.

Adult: Are you serving anywhere in your local church? Consider rotating in the nursery or helping with a Sunday school class. Consider being a greeter or an usher. Consider volunteering with the media team. Maybe you could serve as a deacon if elected. Perhaps your ministry is praying for the church! This too is a huge act of service unto the Lord! Use your gift to serve the Lord. Talk to Pastor Jonathan if you need help finding a place to plug in and serve.

Empty Nesters: Your kids are out of the house now. You're retired. You are in a new position in life and now have new options for how you might serve the Lord. Is there something in the church that you have always wanted to do, but never had the time to do? Is there a mission trip or local community effort that you always wanted to participate in, but couldn't ever commit the time that it required! Now is the time! Serve the Lord!

Prayer: Lord, you are good! You are worthy of our service. You are worthy of all of our lives! God use us! Use our family! Show us Lord, how we are to serve you more.

A Heritage from the Lord

Psalm 127

By: Heath LuQuire

Prayer: Father, thank You for loving us in a way that only You can. You are the perfect example of a father. We look to You for Your continued faithfulness in our provision, our protection, and our salvation. Help us, by Your Holy Spirit, to read and understand the scriptures. Sanctify us in truth; Your word is truth.

Explanation: This Psalm has a theme common to other wisdom psalms; without the Lord's blessing, all human toil is worthless. Verses 1-2 show that human effort is useless apart from God, whether building a house, defending a city, or earning a living. This psalm calls for a balance between hard work and trusting God. Both are essential. Work without trust is self-sufficiency; trust without work is presumption. If manual labor and protection cannot succeed without the Lord, how much more do we need His grace to raise the children He has given to us? The theme in verses 3-5 teach us the same thing as verses 1-2; the fruitfulness of parenting well is only accompanied by God's blessing.

The psalm says, "Children are a heritage from the Lord...a reward." Children are the physical representation of God's blessing. Verse 5 says this explicitly, "blessed is the man" who has many children. This does not remove human responsibility as we see in the first two verses of the psalm. A husband and wife are active in bringing a child into the world and likewise are active in raising them to be faithful members of God's people.

As Christians, we must recognize that nothing in life can succeed, whether business or family, without the Lord. Trusting God should not make us passive or inactive. On the contrary, it should make us faithful, diligent, and hopeful in the work He has given us.

The Point: Children are a gift from God and parents are stewards of that good gift.

Application: No matter your age or life-stage, ask your parents to be patient with you as you learn from their instruction, to pray for you each day, to mentor you and set an example worthy of imitating, to be present with you, to teach you what it means to be a Christian, to help you be an active member in the body of Christ, to teach you to be a grown-up, to show you how to be a family, to show you what it looks like to love their spouse and their children, ask them how to take sin seriously, and ask them to show you how to finish well. If you are a parent or grandparent, think of ways to show your children these things.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: The Bible says you are a reward and gift from the Lord, a blessing for your parents. What are some ways that you can actively bless and serve your parents this week? What are some ways that you can show that you are thankful for your parents?

Middle & High School Students: In our society and world, parents are depicted as enemies to their children. We know this is not true based on the psalm we just read together. Think of ways that you can connect with your parents and serve them this week, not out of obligation, but out of love and respect. Example: lend an extra helpful hand around the house with chores; talk to your parents and let them know that you love and appreciate them. If there is any tension, bitterness, or animosity in your relationship with your parents, use this as an opportunity to be reconciled to one another.

Young Adult: Only after leaving home did I realize just how much my father did for my family. I assume you have come to this same realization as a young adult. Use this week to call or visit your parents and tell them how much you have learned from them and appreciate their guidance. Ask to spend time with them doing something that they would like to do. If there is any tension, bitterness, or animosity in your relationship with your parents, use this as an opportunity to be reconciled to each other.

Adult: Sometimes in the messiness of life, and the day-to-day, we can lose sight of the blessings right in front of us. As you consider this psalm this week, think of ways to tell your children and show them that being their father or mother is a blessing to you from God. Some examples: set apart time from your week to do something with your kids that they enjoy doing. Spend time reading the word together and talking about the love of Christ. Explain that they are a blessing and a gift, but Jesus gave us the perfect gift of salvation.

Empty Nesters: Think of ways to let your children and grandchildren know that they are a blessing to you from God. If there is tension, bitterness, or animosity in your relationships with your children and grandchildren, use this as an opportunity to seek reconciliation. Example: offer to keep the grandkids if possible, take them a meal or invite them over for dinner, or send them a notecard encouraging them in their walk with the Lord.

Prayer: Father, You are the fount of every blessing. And some of those blessings come in the form of children and grandchildren. If we toil without You, we toil in vain. We cannot raise our children in the way that they should go without Your blessing. So Lord, we ask that You bless us and uphold us with Your righteous

right hand. And we ask that You keep us there all the days of our lives. Sanctify us with this psalm of scripture. Keep this on our minds and hearts this week to meditate on Your blessings. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Praise the Lord!
Psalm 149
By: Yvette Misenhimer

Prayer: Lord as we come to You we praise You for saving us. We praise You for always having us on your mind and loving us in a way that we could never understand. You are the only one worthy of our praise. We ask You to draw us near that we might remember Your ultimate sacrifice. Help us live a life that will bring You glory. In Your precious Son's name, Amen.

Explanation: I enjoy college football. I think about the days that we would go to games, riding hours after working all day to get up and be at the stadium by 4:30 or 5:00 the next morning. I remember getting so excited when the band would do their march before the game, the excitement of going into the stadium, and the hundred thousand people just as excited as me. Some would leave happy, some not so happy. But — we all gathered together with one hope — our team would win. *All of this hype was for a football game.* Those players did not know I was there. The coaches did not know I was there. Only the few that were right around me knew I was there. I would scream and yell for my team to the point that at times I could not talk for a day or two. My hope was walking out of that stadium with a win. Really, my hope was in a team. My hope was in people that I had never met, never even had a conversation with, much less a relationship.

The Point: He is almighty. He is everything. He delights in our wanting a relationship with Him and living a life to bring glory and honor to Him. We should be deeply humbled to know that He desires us, we are always on His mind.

Application: David said in Psalm 149:6 to let the high praises of God be in their throats. The Lord takes pleasure in his people. He wants that relationship. God wants us to come into his house singing praises to Him. Our excitement on Sunday morning should be heard and felt throughout our city. What if we would leave our church building on Sunday not being able to talk for a day or two because we were excited to be in God's House? Our hope, our peace, our security is in Christ alone. No one else knows us and loves us as He does.

Children & Youth: Children will follow in the footsteps and patterns of their parents. What are you leading them to? Let them see your excitement and desire to worship God. Sing a simple chorus with them. Ever Be is a favorite

that all children will enjoy singing.

Adults: You set the tone for your children and grandchildren's future. Do they see worship in your lives? Do you prioritize gathering with other believers and worshipping God? We have been, and currently still are blessed, to live in a nation with the freedom to worship, but do you exercise that freedom? Or Do you live in fear of what others might think of your singing ability, and therefore, keep your mouth closed? Jesus is worthy of your praise! Praise Him! Consider beginning by writing your heart of worship and praise out to the Lord. Then sing it to Him privately. Maybe on the Lord's Day, you can gather with His people and sing it to Him freely.

Prayer: Jesus you are worthy of all our praise. You are worthy of everything we have. Forgive us for putting other things in front of You when there is nothing as important to You as Your children. Set our minds on the things above, not what we see but the unseen. Let us strive harder every day to bring You glory. Let us remember You as You have remembered us. We love You Lord, Amen.

The Bride of Christ
Revelation 21:2 and Ephesians 5:25-30
By: Mandy Eudy

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for this opportunity to worship and focus on you. Help us to open our hearts fully to you and to always seek and follow your guidance.

Explanation: What does it mean to be the Church? We are all very familiar with the idea that we are all supposed to be one big family, love and help each other, and that we are all members of the same body with different roles, strengths, weaknesses, talents and abilities. We all know we are supposed to work together to be united in our love for Christ and in doing His will. But what if it is more than that? Because it is. Being the church is more than the here and the now. It is more than this moment in time together. It is more than those great leaders, teachers, missionaries, and preachers who have gone before like Corrie Ten Boom, Lottie Moon, Billy Graham and Charles Spurgeon. It is more than getting together once or twice a week and learning about our Lord. A big part of being the Church is being loved by Christ.

One day, when all is said and done, we – all of us who are now, who ever were and who ever will be- will be presented, as one, a united object of God's love, to Christ Jesus. Revelation 21:2 says that we will be a new and holy Jerusalem, a new and holy city! Cities are busy and bustling, loud, and full; that is what we will be, loud with songs of praise and joyfully busy doing whatever task He has assigned us. Joy will abound and His Glory will overflow. We will be different than the cities we know here on earth, full of smog and clutter. Ephesians says the Church, the bride of Christ, will be presented without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, that we will be holy and without blemish. We will be full of splendor. We, as the Church, get to be loved by Christ! Not just loved as an emotion, but as an action! Jesus, in obedience to the Father, through the work of the Holy Spirit is refining us and making us perfectly His. His love for us is not about us, but what He can and wants to do through us, to us, with us and for us!!

The Point: Being the Church is getting to be the Bride of Christ!

Application: Explanation leads to application. Now we know what the text means, but how does it apply to each listener? The text will likely have a general application, but will apply a bit differently with specific demographics.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: How many young children dream about their wedding day and the beautiful white gowns? I imagine a lot of little girls do, and a lot of little boys probably think about the home and land they will get to provide. Check

out the description of the city/home Jesus is preparing for us found in Revelation 21:10-27. Heaven is a wonderful place! Try to draw what you read.

Middle & High School Students: The world says that love is an emotion, a feeling. The world says that we can love those who are nice to us and good. The world says that when we feel something we need to go after our desire. Our scriptures today show us that true love is about action and patience and what you can do for the other person. Real love does not rush; think about how long Jesus has been patiently waiting and giving to his future bride. Take some time to think about the things and people you love. In what ways are you loving like the world and how can you love more like Jesus? How can you just live with joy in this moment without rushing to the next stage?

Young Adult: We can spend a lot of time trying hard to better ourselves and prepare ourselves for the future. Rightfully so. Building a life takes a lot of planning and effort and doing so is a wise thing to do. However, it is easy to get lost in our own abilities and our own visions for our future. Remember that God has a plan for you and your life, and it may not match up exactly with your own. His goals for you will always be better than your goals for you. Spend time with the Lord and seek His will for your life. Patiently try to follow His lead and He will make your path clear. You can bet that it will lead straight to Him!

Adult: Day in and day out, the same pile of laundry, the same squeaky hinge that needs oil, the same arguments from children and co-workers. Life gets tiring and heavy. Sometimes it seems as if it will never end and we wonder if it even really matters. I mean seriously, how many times has this same long sleeve sweatshirt, no one has worn gone through the wash this summer or how many times have you had to look for, find and put back in its proper place that thing at work. Though it may seem unending and pointless at times, everything does matter. He is using this season to refine us and make us into His perfect Bride. Take some time to reflect on how you have grown through the mundane and challenging things the season presents.

Empty Nesters: Do you feel the joy of a young and energetic, excited newlywed? Does each new day feel like a gift? Are you still seeking and growing in Christ? When we look around us and see all the wonder, it is easy to share in the joys. But what about all the hurt? When we see those we love struggling, it can be hard to know when to step in and help and when to let them work through the process and situations on their own. One thing we can trust is that God is using every single part of this for their betterment and ours because He wants all of us to be His and He does love each of us. Take some time to be grateful for

the process He is using to make us, and those we love, His bride.

Prayer: Lord, help me/us to realize that you are in control of all things and that you will use all things to the good of those that love you for your glory. Lord, you love us and use all things to mold us into your perfect bride. Help us to rest in that love and walk confidently towards you in it.

According to His Purpose
Romans 8:28
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, thank you for our family! Thank you for this time to worship you together.

Explanation: Divine providence is generally used to denote God's preserving and governing all things by means of second causes (Easton's Bible Dictionary). Providence is the sovereignty of God in action even when one doesn't immediately see it in action. Providence is most often viewed with a "rear-view mirror" perspective. In other words, providence is usually seen and understood after the fact.

Think about the story of Joseph (Gen. 37-50). Joseph was a good kid, loved by his parents, but hated by his jealous brothers. They abused him and abandoned him, only to later come back and sell him to slave traders. Still, Joseph continued to do the right thing, and as a slave, he was good to his master. His righteousness earned him a two-year prison sentence where he became known for his ability to accurately interpret dreams, which eventually afforded him the opportunity to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh. Ultimately, Joseph, a foreigner, slave, and inmate, would be promoted to the second most powerful person in Egypt. Years later his initial betrayers, his brothers, would be forced to seek the welfare of Egypt, totally under the lock and key of Joseph. When they discover who Joseph actually is, they rightly fear for their lives. Fortunately, Joseph understood divine providence. He simply, yet profoundly, told them, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Gen. 50:20). Joseph was able to look back on his life and the various trials and struggles that he walked through, and realize that God never once removed his hand of provision. This is Romans 8:28 in action. God often works the extraordinary through the ordinary. This is Joseph's story. This is Esther's story. This is my story and your story.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Ask these questions to your child: How do plants and trees grow? Who makes it rain? How do birds get fed? [Add your own follow-up questions]. God provides for his own, and they do not worry about things (Mt. 6:26). You can always trust God to take care of you.

Middle & High School Students: Write out a list of things that you are currently worried about. Make a second list of the things that God has provided for you

throughout your life. Is there really anything on the first list that is too big for God? Trust him to meet your needs.

Adult: It's time to start looking in the rear-view mirror. You're probably not working your childhood dream job, but can you see yet why God has you doing what you're doing? Can you see how various pieces of the puzzle fell in place to put you exactly where you are now? Highschool? College? Various work experiences? Relationships? Marriage? Do you see why God allowed certain things to happen, and how he used each and every decision to bring you to this point? He's the grand designer, and He wastes nothing.

Empty Nesters: You've certainly had opportunities throughout the years to look back and see how God has worked things for good. Now, you're at the age where you begin to have new worries and new fears. It seems like medical issues are occurring far more frequently than they used to. Perhaps you're worried about your children or grandchildren, and some of the choices they are making. Perhaps there is a fear of the end of life. God has been faithful to provide for you to this point. Praise Him, and trust Him to continue to meet your needs!

Prayer: Lord, You are good! You are a good Father. I believe, but help me when I doubt.

The Heart of Man
Jeremiah 17:9
By: Jonathan Blaylock

The heart of man. Who can understand it? That's the question that Jeremiah asked (Jer. 17:9).

The human heart is such a difficult subject for American Christians to delve into. The Biblical teaching on the heart flies in the face of the American concept of the heart, and American Christians are usually caught somewhere in the middle.

The "heart" is not referring to the physical, blood pumping organ in the human body. There are striking similarities though. The organ is the central organ that every other organ is dependent upon; likewise, the "heart" that Scripture speaks of is the central core of the human being that every other human element is dependent upon. The "heart" drives the will, the emotions, the motivations, the purpose, the desires, and more. The "heart" of a man is who he is at his core. It is the "inner self" of a man. And Jeremiah asks the question, "Who can understand it?"

The American attitude is a trust in self, a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality. It is the entire idea behind the word we so often celebrate, independence. To be "independent" is to not depend on anyone but self. While politically, independence should be celebrated and defended, it is a major failure spiritually. This is this tension that Christians so often find themselves wrestling. Earlier in Jeremiah 17, The Lord says, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man (17:5)," and He is specifically referring to trusting in his own self. The Lord compares him to an isolated shrub in the desert that will never produce any good (17:6).

On the contrary though, The Lord compares the man who trusts in Him to a tree planted by water, rooted deep and producing much fruit (17:8). The imagery used in Jeremiah 17 is the same imagery used in Psalm 1 to describe the man who trusts in the Lord.

King David knew of the deceit of the human heart. He knew what it was to follow his desires and passions into a spiral of sin and disgust. Thus, he prays in Psalm 51:10 as he is confessing his sin, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." David is fully aware of just how "desperately sick (Jer. 17:9)" his heart is, and he pleads with the Lord to cleanse his heart. Notice though, that David trusts that God will not just clean his old dirty heart, but that He will create a clean heart. Paul picks up this same theology in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

What have you trusted in? Where has your heart led you? What sin and shame has your heart led you to? To trust in Jesus is to not trust in yourself or your ideals. To trust in Jesus is to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart , and [to] not lean on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5).” The greatest commandment, Jesus informed the religious leaders, is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart... (Matthew 22:37).” Believer, if your heart has led you to sin, ask Jesus to cleanse your heart as David did. Perhaps, like God promised Ezekiel, you simply need a new heart altogether (Ez. 36:26).” Whatever you do though, do not trust your own heart, for who can understand it?

The Work of the Shepherd

Titus 1:9

By: Heath LuQuire

Prayer: Our Father, we come to You and ask that You give us ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts that cling to the Truth of Your Word. We pray that You enable us by Your Holy Spirit to hold fast to the things we learn here today. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

Explanation: One of the qualifications for elders (pastors) is the ability to teach the Word of God. Paul in the letter written to Titus gives the reason why this is so important. We see that the elders are called to “hold firm” to the “word as taught” SO THAT they can first teach “sound doctrine”. This is vital to the well-being of the Church, which is the Bride of Christ. Elders as shepherds are to present the Bride of Christ to her Groom without blemish. That means they must teach what God has spoken to His people. Secondly, we see in this verse that elders are to speak against anyone that teaches against the truth of the Word. To think of the analogy of a shepherd and flock, this would be like chasing away the wolves that lurk to draw some of the flock away. This is a protective calling to guard church members and keep them from harm.

The Point: Elders are called to faithfully teach the Word of God and protect against false teachings.

Application:

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Ask your child what they think a pastor does. After hearing their answers, use the analogy of a shepherd and sheep to explain that pastors lead a church to “good pastures, clean waters, and chase off wolves”. Lead your child or ask them to pray for our pastor. Ask God to bless him and his family and enable him to do the work of a shepherd.

Middle & High School Students: Ask your child to consider the work of their pastor. Ask them to think through teaching the Bible and what they think it requires. Ask them if they have ever considered being a pastor or teaching the scriptures. If they answer yes, encourage them to teach you a passage of scripture this week. Challenge your teenager. Ask them to pray for our pastor and his family.

Young Adult: Think about what is needed to be a pastor and all that it takes in today's climate. Think specifically on teaching the scriptures and chasing away those who teach something contrary to it. Have you considered teaching the

scriptures? What about chasing off those that teach false doctrines? Pray for our pastor and ask God to enable him to be faithful to the Word and also willing to speak against false teachers.

Adult: As you think through what it requires our pastor to teach the truth of God's Word each week, also consider the more difficult texts that aren't commonly held in our culture today. Pray that God would speak through our pastor each week as he leads our congregation. Ask God to bless our pastor and his family. Pray that the Word would ring true from the pulpit every week. Lastly, pray that God would enable our pastor to speak against any false doctrines.

Empty Nesters: Pray for our pastor and ask God to speak through His word as our pastor preaches each week. Pray for the pastor's family as well. Pray that the Holy Spirit enables him to be faithful to the Word and rebuke anyone that isn't. Find opportunities to encourage our pastor when he does the hard task of preaching the truth and rebuking those that do not.

Prayer: Father, thank You for a pastor who is faithful to Your Word. We pray that You bless him and the ministry that You have given him at North. We ask that you give us a deep desire for Your Word as a church. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

A Call to Submission
Titus 3:1-2
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, will you teach us today? Challenge us. Convict us. Lead us to repent and to turn our lives more towards you. Open our hearts to your Word and open your Word to our hearts.

Explanation: The Apostle Paul writes to Titus, a young pastor. This is one of Paul's pastoral epistles, in which he gives instruction to the pastor. In chapter 3, he begins the end of the letter by telling Titus to "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities." I think it's interesting that Paul uses the words "Remind them (ESV)." This implies that the people should have already known to be submissive to governing authorities. It is a common idea in the New Testament that believers will be submissive to the governing authority that God has sovereignly placed over them (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17); they just need to be reminded from time to time. This is all understood in the context of the next few phrases in verse 2 and following, and this reminder is understood with the qualification that submitting to government does not require the believer to blaspheme or deny Christ.

The Point: Because you are a follower of Christ, submit your life to the governing authorities.

Application: Explanation leads to application. Now we know what the text means, but how does it apply to each listener? This text is so plain and simple that the application just flows: submit to governing authorities.

Pre-K & Elementary Age: Mom and Dad are the governing institution in authority over young children. Teach them what it is to obey, even though sometimes they may not agree with or understand the logic behind the instruction. Use a recent example of correction or discipline in the child's life to prove the point, and then relate it to the governing authorities in our world.

Middle & High School Students: Teenagers often dream of total liberty, from all authorities: parents, teachers, government, etc. Use this opportunity to teach how God has sovereignly placed authority in our lives for our own good. Explain how the Christian's normal response should be submission and cooperation. Teach respect and honor of authority to your teen.

Young Adult: There is a time and place for civil protest and civil disobedience. Our nation is founded on revolt. However, the popular culture seems to desire

protest and rebellion. Be wise. Discern. Ask the Lord for wisdom and guidance on what sort of protest you might engage in. For the believer, protest might be a protest against the culture, by submitting to the governing authorities. Spend time praying that God would bend your will so that you can yield to the authority.

Adult: You've seen protests before. You've seen it done well and not so well. You've seen protest be fruitful and you've seen it shamefully done. You're setting an example to your children and grandchildren. Is your protest right? Is it God-honoring? The kids at your church are watching you. The neighbor's children are listening. Are you setting an example that is following Christ? Can you say, as Paul said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)?" Be mindful of the young eyes that are watching and listening. Model Christian submission for them.

Prayer: We don't always understand the law, and often, we understand but we do not agree. Lord, for your sake, help us to submit. Lord, help us to see our freedom in Christ as a freedom from the cultural pressure to resist authority. Lord, help us to see that our allegiance to you as the ultimate authority will lead us to obey the earthly authorities you have placed in our lives.

A Theology of Life with Christ
Colossians 3:1-11
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Prayer: Lord, we have come to worship You for You alone are worthy of our praise. Our family has gathered to worship You in Spirit and in truth. We seek to make much of You in this time together. We ask that You hear us and are pleased with our prayers, our songs, and our worship. We call out to You, O God in this time together. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Explanation: We see 4 commands from this passage on what our life with Christ looks like.

1. Seek the things above

Verse 1: It's an "if, then" statement. If you have been raised with Christ, then seek things that are above.

The meaning of seek is to look for, to desire, to want, to try to obtain.

The expectation is that if we have been raised with Christ, our priorities have been transformed.

The things we seek are now different. Our flesh seeks: fame, childhood dreams, movie star, singer, pro athlete, power, money, career, better opportunities, education, the "American dream." If you have been raised with Christ, you should seek the things that are above: God, heavenly things, His kingdom, His glory, eternity, advancing the gospel.

Read Matthew 6:19-21

2. Set your minds

Verses 2-3: Cause and effect as in verse 1

If you have died, then your life is now hidden with Christ.

Read Galatians 2:19-20 The meaning of set is to fix one's attention, to ponder on, to think about, to focus on. This means you have control over your mind.

Read Galatians 5:22-23 - self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

Read Romans 12:2 - the renewal of your mind

Read Matthew 22:37 - Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind

Some of us have set our minds on the media of this world and we are consumed by it. Some of us thought the world was ending in 2008 and others in 2016. Some think the world is ending with this virus. Some live their lives in a state of doom and gloom, because you have set your mind on the things of this world. This should not be. Set your mind on the hope of tomorrow.

Read Revelation 21:1-5

Read James 1:2-4

Be encouraged that our Hope is not in this world, but in Christ alone.

3. Be Killing Sin

Verses 5-6: Another “if, then” statement.

If you really are “seeking things above” you must put to death what is earthly in you.

Read Matthew 6:24. We can't have it both ways. Notice the force of Paul's words, “put to death” - means to kill, execute, take the life from. You must be violent with the sin in your life. Take drastic measures. The sins in verse 5 are blatantly obvious sins: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, and idolatry These things must die - the wrath of God is coming. 17th Century Puritan, John Owen said, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”

4. Put off the old self

Verses 8-11: What about the sin that we may be able to hide a bit better? i.e Anger, slander, obscene talk? Paul says, “put them away” He is talking about “practices” of the old self - habitual acts. You have a new self (verse 10). Take off/put on like clothing

Verse 10 - “being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”

Read Genesis 1:27 God created us in His image and sin has ruined that image. Through Christ, we are being renewed back to the image of our Creator. If you live in Christ, you should be more and more like God, and

less and less like the world.

Prayer: Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank you that we can be reconciled to a Holy God through Jesus and live our lives in Him. Lord, we ask that You help us to seek the things above rather than the things of this world. We pray that you enable us to set our minds on You and as we do that we begin to look more and more like Christ and less and less like the world. It is only by Your power and Spirit that we are able to kill sin and put off our old selves. Lord, we ask that you do this work that we seek today.

We pray for our nation and the nations around the world as we face this virus that continues to spread. We know that you hold all things and have power and dominion over all things; God, You alone are sovereign over the world. We ask that you would bring an end to this epidemic quickly while protecting all the health care workers and first responders as they fight this battle on the front lines risking their own health and the health of their families so that others might live. We pray for our nation and its leaders as they make difficult decisions on how to respond to this crisis. Give them direction and people around them to advise them with godly counsel.

God, we lift up our church family - for their health and safety and protection and our leaders as they make decisions on how to deal with this crisis. We ask that You allow us to gather together again when it is safe and when our government allows. While we are apart corporately, we ask that you draw us together in other ways as we love one another, check on one another, and serve one another as needs arise.

God, You are our refuge and our strength. You are our shepherd and our guide. Lead us in the paths of righteousness. Never leave us or forsake us, even as You promise to be with us always even to the end of the age. We pray as Jesus taught us to pray, saying together:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

A Music Director or a Worship Leader?

By: Cole Young

Is there a difference between being a music director and leading worship? I have experience doing both and I believe there is a difference. What is a worship leader? Is it somebody who sings? Someone who plays a musical instrument? Picks out music for Sunday service? The thing is, all of those, & so much more, are correct! If you are leading people in deep biblical worship of the one true sovereign God of the Universe, you are a worship leader. As Bob Kauflin, so eloquently put, “A faithful worship leader magnifies the greatness of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit by skillfully combining God’s Word with music, thereby motivating the gathered church to proclaim the gospel, to cherish God’s presence, and to live for God’s glory (Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters*) .” What does that quote mean? Let’s break it down a little more:

“A faithful worship leader magnifies the greatness of God...” It’s very easy, to sometimes bring God down to our level; to make Him seem accessible to the everyday man. Now, there’s nothing wrong with that in principle. God is accessible. He’s always intimately available to us at any and all times. Sometimes though, we forget the greatness or bigness of God. He’s the creator of the universe! We cannot diminish Him down nor forget about that in our worship.

“...in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit...” Along with not forgetting the bigness of our God, we cannot forget the other two parts of God. God is a Holy Trinity, the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. God, the Father gives His grace through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the crux that our evangelical faith is built on! God gave His son, Jesus, for the wages of sin, through grace on the cross for us! We’ve got to sing, not only praises but thankfulness for that. What’s the role of the Holy Spirit in worship? John 14:26 says, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The Holy Spirit fills us up in spirit and truth of the Word! Which is what we should be singing in our churches... The Word... Which leads us to the end of the quote:

“...by skillfully combining God’s Word with music, thereby motivating the gathered church to proclaim the gospel, to cherish God’s presence, and to live for God’s glory...” This is it leaders, this is why & how we do what we do. We combine God’s word with music, leading the Church in teaching through the lyrics, proclaiming the gospel, to ultimately, live out God’s glory in their lives. That’s it, it’s why we lead worship. We don’t do it for us alone, and we absolutely

don't do it to show off. My prayer every Sunday morning with our team is that the people that enter the building do not see us, they see the Lord in all of His glory. It is such a joy to be a part of what God is doing!

Kaulflin, Bob. *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2008.

Narnia on Exclusivity
The Chronicles of Narnia
By: Jonathan Blaylock

Narnia is quite fascinating: talking beasts, dwarfs, trees that come to life, centaurs and fawns, kings and queens, and more! C.S. Lewis wrote seven books in the 1950's that comprise *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Perhaps you have seen the movie, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005). That movie was simply the story of Book 2 of the series. Two of the other books were also turned into movies. These children's fiction books are known throughout the evangelical world because of Lewis's faith and the numerous biblical overtones throughout the series. Time and time again, Lewis points to the Messiah. However, not every single overtone lines up just right with orthodox protestant doctrine.

Recently, I finished the final book with my children, and I was caught in disbelief when I came to Lewis's inclusivity. It was the second time I had read the series but was still dumbfounded. Even more recently, I used Lewis' inclusivity as an illustration in a sermon and I mislabeled him a universalist. He was not a universalist, but he does seem to be an inclusivist. This article is not a complete or exhaustive look at Lewis' theology, but it is simply meant to clarify the distinction between a universalist, a pluralist, an inclusivist, and an exclusivist.

Defining Terms:

“**Universalism** is teaching that every person to live on planet Earth will ultimately be eternally saved.”¹ Proponents typically cannot imagine a loving God that would create human beings and then send them to Hell.

“**Strong Pluralism** views all religions as effective in attaining their own ends... According to this view, all religions are more or less equally valid, and perhaps even equally true. Christianity is true, and faithful Christians will go to heaven when they die; but Buddhism is also true, and faithful Buddhists will achieve nirvana, just as Hindus will attain moksa and Muslims will be rewarded in paradise.”²

“**Moderate Pluralism** views most or all religions as culturally mediated attempts to grasp the same ultimate reality. It sees all religions as soteriologically efficacious I attaining the same end.”³

“Inclusivism views only one religion as true, and views the other religions of the world as soteriologically efficacious paths towards the God of the one true religion.”⁴

“Exclusivism views only one religion as soteriologically efficacious [effective for salvation] and the adherents of all other religions as lost. According to Christians who are exclusivists, Christianity is the only religion that is true, and although there may be some truths in other religions, these truths are not adequate to bring about salvation.”⁵

What is the problematic theology of Narnia?

In *The Last Battle*, Lewis clearly demonstrates that certain characters did not enter into the newly re-created Narnia, the allegorical new heavens and new earth. Certain characters met doom and destruction, ruling out that Lewis was promoting universalism. However, Aslan (the Christ figure) in the fiction series, does allow a servant of Tash (the evil deified being) into the new Narnia. Here is an excerpt of the scene, as recorded by Emeth, the servant of Tash:

“But the Glorious One [Aslan] bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome. But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou has done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him... But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.”⁶

So what does this scene depict? A self-proclaimed, life-long, faithful servant of Tash, the evil one, is granted access into the re-created Narnia based on his sincere service to Tash.

1. This is inclusivism. Lewis depicts only one way into the New Narnia, and it is by Aslan, but service to another deity is of equal value and merit to Aslan. One religion is correct, but those who live in and under other belief systems will have their genuine efforts applied toward the correct system of belief.
 - o He goes on to say that “all find what they truly seek,” teaching that Emeth’s sincerity of heart excused his ignorance of the one true God.
2. This is a works-based salvation. Aslan credits the work and service and seeking that Emeth performed towards Tash as that which gets him into New Narnia.
3. It is not pluralism, at least not a strong pluralism. The Ape had taught and persuaded many of the servants of Tash and many of the Narnians that Tash and Aslan were actually the same deity, to the point that many began calling upon “Tashlan.” This might be similar to the way some argue that God and Allah are the same deity. In the excerpt above, Aslan is quick to dismiss this idea though. He is clear that He and Tash are not one in the same.

What’s the problem?

Evangelical Christians traditionally hold to a view of exclusivity. We hold to exclusivity because we also hold to the inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. The Scriptures teach exclusivity:

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).”

“Unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).”

“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7).”

Furthermore, the exclusivity of the gospel of Jesus is why protestant evangelicals are missionaries. **Exclusivity drives evangelism.** If we held to a view of inclusivism, mission endeavors would be a pointless, unnecessary danger. We believe that if people are not born again, if they do not confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 10:9), then they will not be saved and will be eternally lost. We believe that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).” The Apostle Paul goes on to say, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never

heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching (Rom. 10:14)?” Paul fully expected that people would need to go and tell the lost about Jesus so that they would believe!

In Romans 1, Paul felt an obligation and an excitement to preach the gospel of Jesus, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome (Rom. 1:14-15).” Why would a man be so eager to do something that at best is culturally unwelcomed, and at worst, is illegal? Why would a person be jailed, beaten countless times, stoned, shipwrecked, homeless, starved, and more (2 Cor. 11:23-28)? A rational man that believed in inclusivism or pluralism would be content to stay in the comforts of his own home knowing that on the last day God will work all genuine faiths out for salvation.

So how do we respond?

Every now and again we come across something that one of our evangelical heroes said or did that shock us. C.S. Lewis is one of those heroes of Christianity. It hurts to find out that he did not interpret the Scriptures exactly like you or I might, but it’s okay! I totally disagree with the way that servants of Tash were admitted into the New Narnia, but I still enjoyed the fictional series, and my children still learned so much of a biblical view of Christ through the series.

1. **Relax.** One doctrinal difference does not necessarily negate the entire corpus of this author. The truth that he taught is still true. You do not have to throw out everything he said or taught because one idea is incorrect.
2. **Test.** You should make a normal practice to test what preachers, teachers, and authors say or write (1 John 4:1). Test doctrine against the Scriptures.
3. **Grace.** Show grace to authors, teachers, and preachers, realizing that they too are sinful, fallible human beings. Men are men, and as such they are not without error. They make mistakes, and they misinterpret. Keep reading, keep listening, and keep learning!

History has given us numerous theologians throughout the centuries that have been hailed as heroes, but every single one is flawed. Some took views of communion or baptism that I do not take. Others were slave owners, which is abhorrent and repudiable. Some were influential in the death sentencing of heretics. Some were far more ecumenical than I could be in good conscience. Some took differing views of hell than I could take. Many preachers and teachers of today that I enjoy listening to and reading, practice different styles of worship or have different theological understandings, but I still learn from them.

I totally disagree with Lewis' decision to include Emeth, a servant of Tash, in the New Narnia; but I really enjoyed this series! This is the second time that I have read through this series as an adult and I've enjoyed every book both times. I enjoyed pointing out to my children all of the elements that show so much of Christ. And, I was thankful to be able to point out why Lewis' inclusion of Emeth is not biblical.

I am most grateful to Lewis for so elegantly causing me to meditate on the nature of Christ. Aslan is a ferocious lion, yet he is so gentle when children hug him and play with him, almost like a lamb. Lewis masterfully describes fear, reverence, wonder, and awe in those that approach Aslan. At times, Aslan seems to not be anywhere near, but he always shows up at just the right time. My heart would leap with excitement when Lucy would catch a glimpse of what she thought was Aslan. Her certainty of Aslan's presence is often doubted, even by her believing siblings. Aslan's providence and provision though, is worthy of mention. Yes, I may not totally agree with all of Lewis, but I am very thankful for Narnia, and I will continue to learn from the brilliant mind of C.S.Lewis!

Pastor Jonathan

1 Preston Condra, "Universalism," *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics.*, Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, eds. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 487.

2 Michael Jones, "Pluralism," *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics.*, Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, eds. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 393.

3 Jones, 394.

4 Jones, 394.

5 Jones, 395.

6 C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Children's Books, 1956, 1984), 204-206.