

INTRODUCTION

These devotional readings reflect my conviction that from beginning to end the Bible is concerned with God's plan and purpose for humankind and all creation – with God's mission. I have been tutored in this conviction by colleagues, teachers, and especially by the example of Jesus-followers around the world who believe that there is only one thing to do with good news and that is to share it. Moreover, they know that the good news of the Gospel is the very best news of all.

It is important to hold in mind the background of and the connections between the verses upon which these devotions are framed. I encourage you to keep a good study Bible at hand in order to understand more broadly the context of the verses.

As you share in this devotional, I trust that you will discover that reading the Bible as an unfolding of God's mission flows naturally out of Scripture itself. As you read, reflect, pray and discuss, I pray that your understanding of what God wants his people to be and do will be renewed and focused.

Rob Weingartner

DAY 1

I was naked; and I hid myself

READ: Genesis 3:1-10

If you read the morning newspaper or watch the evening news, it becomes quickly apparent that the world is not the way it should be. In Genesis 1-2 we find two different creation stories that assert God's role as creator, the goodness of creation, and the responsibility of humankind. But something turns. Something falls.

Did you know that the numbering of the chapters and verses came long after the Scriptures were first put down in writing? So this lesson flows directly from "and the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" to "now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal the Lord God had made." You know how the story runs. The serpent tempts Eve, questioning God's instructions. Eve tempts Adam, and he eats. God calls out to the man, "Where are you?" Adam answers not with his location but with a description of the state of his heart, "I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself."

The man and the woman have rejected God's authority and provision. The relationships that God intended are broken. We see this in the hiding and in the blaming, and that is just the beginning. In Genesis 4, Cain murders Abel. Things continue to unspool.

Adam's willful disobedience resulted in paradise lost with the introduction of pain, suffering and death. One might observe that the entire biblical story that follows is a story of God taking the initiative to set things right, to redeem what has been lost and to restore what has been broken. We see this mirrored in the Apostle Paul who writes, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (I Corinthians 15:21-22).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How do you see the broken relationships in this story reflected in your own life and in the world?

Do you find yourself trying to hide from others? From God?

PRAYER

Dear God, help me to believe your words and to reflect in my life what you intend for humankind. Thank you for the gift of your Son who enables me to see the truth about myself and about your initiating love. Amen.

DAY 2

In you all the peoples will be blessed

READ: Genesis 12:1-3

What an amazing call God sets before Abram! What promises! Abram is to take his family to a place he knows not where – but God will show him the place. Abram and his family will become a great nation, a people who are in a special relationship with God. Yet this blessing is not something that is only for the sake of Abram and his tribe. God makes it clear that in (or through) Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Perhaps you can remember a time when you had a clear sense of calling from God without a clear sense of direction, a conviction that it was time to act but you were not sure what to do, time to make a change but you were not sure where to go.

We can discern some principles from Abram's story that will guide us as we seek to follow the Lord. In the first place, God will lead us in ways that deepen our dependence upon him. God does not lead us in ways that make us less reliant upon him. Secondly, God's blessings are always to be shared. We are blessed to be a blessing.

I love the first sentence in Rick Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Life." He writes, "It is not about you." Just so, as we seek to live for God in this broken world, God's blessings are not to be held close and hoarded. We are to have a heart for all the peoples of the world and to seek to bless others freely.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of a time when you had a sense that God was calling you to something new, but you were not sure what it was? Is God calling you to something new now?

How might God want to work through you to be a blessing to others?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank you for inviting me into your work of blessing. Forgive me when I get stuck focusing on myself and miss how you desire to work through me for your glory and the blessing of others. Amen.

DAY 3

Then God spoke all these words

READ: Exodus 20:1-21

The story is told of a student away at college who asked his mother to mail his Bible to him. When the clerk at the mail counter asked if the package contained anything breakable, the mom replied, "Only the ten commandments!"

Many Christians have a somewhat awkward relationship with the commandments, thinking that they are too legalistic for believers who are saved by faith and freed from the burden of the law.

But these "ten words," as they are called in the Hebrew, are not a strategy for trying to save ourselves by our works. Remember, when Moses delivers the commandments, the people have already been delivered from their bondage in Egypt. God has saved them, and now even more they belong to him. This dynamic is reflected in the injunction we find in I Corinthians 6:20 where Paul writes, "You were purchased with a price; therefore, glorify God in your bodies."

In the Heidelberg Catechism, which dates from 1563, the Ten Commandments are included in the section entitled "On Gratitude." The authors understood that these commandments become for us an expression of gratitude to the God who has saved us and cares for his people so much that he won't leave them to their own devices. Keeping the commandments won't save us because we cannot keep them perfectly. No, these decisions and actions don't save us, but they can help us to understand and live the kind of life that will enable us to flourish and to express our gratitude to God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are you comfortable thinking about the Ten Commandments as a gift from a loving God?

Is there a commandment that you find particularly difficult to keep?

Can you ask God to do in you what you have not been able to do on your own?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help me understand what it means to belong to you, and in a world of competing authorities, deepen my confidence in your word's instructions about the kind of living that brings us life as you intend for it to be. Amen.

DAY 4

Who loves the strangers

READ: Deuteronomy 10:17-22

In this powerful text from Deuteronomy, God asserts that he executes justice for the orphan and widow and loves strangers. It is God “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.”

Isn't it interesting that amidst the giving and restating of the Law (the word Torah might better be translated “instruction”), God reveals that he has a special concern for those in society who are particularly vulnerable? Amidst the exhortations to fear the Lord God and to worship him alone comes this practical, one might even say mundane, reminder. Or is it mundane? Moses reminds the people of their dependence upon the Lord. In fact, they depended daily upon God for food. They had lived as strangers in the land of Egypt and prayed for daily bread as they wandered in the wilderness. Moses calls them to remember what that was like as they care for the strangers in their midst.

There is a tendency in the church today to falsely divide mission into a focus on proclamation or on caring for those in need at the margins of society. We will see more of this false division in the cries of the prophets who understand the crucial connection between right-believing and right-acting.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The teaching about strangers suggests that things that are important to God should be important to us, too. How is your congregation discerning how to serve others in need?

Has God given you a special “burden” for a group that is struggling with life on the edges of our society? How are you discerning ways that you can help?

PRAYER

Dear God, give me eyes to see the last and the least and the lost around me. Help me to remember your special concern for those who are weak and taken for granted. Show me how I can serve them. Amen.

DAY 5

Let all the peoples praise you

READ: Psalm 67

Psalm 67 is a beautiful reminder of our dependence upon God and of how God's faithfulness in our lives can make God's saving power known to others. You may have noticed that there is not much in the Old Testament that looks like our conception of mission. The word *mission* comes from the Latin root meaning "to send." There is not a lot of sending going on.

What we find in the Old Testament is not so much centrifugal movement, a going *out*, as it is centripetal movement, a drawing *in*. In this psalm the nations are called to praise God. The psalmist prays that God will be gracious to his people and bless them in order that God's way may be known on earth, that his saving power will attract the nations to join in praising God. God has chosen the people of Israel to be his covenant people, but too often they forget that they have been elected for a purpose. The entire history of Israel describes God's continuing engagement with the nations, yet too often Israel seems content to enjoy the blessing without accepting the responsibility of bearing the blessing.

In our own experience, we often face the same challenge, remembering that we are not called into a kind of "holy huddle." We do not exist as the church for the sake of ourselves but for the glory of God and his design to bless all peoples.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of a time in your church's life when it seemed that the congregation was content to enjoy the benefits of salvation without accepting the call to bless others?

What do you think makes it hard for us to focus outwards in our life of faith?

How might you encourage your church not to hold God's blessings for themselves? How might you encourage your own family?

PRAYER

Gracious Lord help me to understand that you bless me in order that I might demonstrate your goodness and draw others to you. May I walk in ways that disclose your glory and grace. Amen.

DAY 6

It is too light a thing

READ: Isaiah 49:6-7

David Bosch, a famous South African mission scholar, points out, "There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh." Yet in Isaiah 42 and 49, we read of Israel's call to be "a light to the nations." It is an echo of God's covenant with Abram in which God said He would bless Abram and that in him all of the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

Practically speaking, what does a light do? It provides illumination that enables one to see where one is and what is happening, to have a proper understanding of a situation.

In Isaiah, God says through the prophet, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Israel struggled with the truth that God's salvation was for all people. And they struggled to understand the obligation and opportunity that they had. But glimpses of God's plan for redeeming all that he has made breaks through from time to time. God gives to the world not only Israel but us (the church) in order that his salvation may reach the ends of the earth.

Whether we are the people of Israel, a Presbyterian congregation, or simply an individual seeking to follow Christ, it is easy to focus on ourselves and miss how God has blessed us in order to be a blessing to others. Especially in days that are filled with threat and uncertainty, it is easy to hunker-down and turn inward, to settle with being preoccupied with our own needs and comfort.

Yet the broken, frightened and frightening world is where Jesus invites us to join with Him in His redemptive work. Alongside partners in mission, we have the privilege of sharing and showing the love of God. And our confidence? It does not come from relying on our own ability and strength. It comes from trusting in the One whose strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus says that "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." If that is part of our future, what does that tell us about the focus of our lives now?

It seems to be a part of our fallen nature that we are more comfortable with folks who are like us. How might this be an obstacle to our being a "light to the nations?"

PRAYER

Almighty God, you have a love for the world that is bigger than we can know or imagine. Help me reach out to one person today whose background is different than mine, with an encouraging word, a reminder of God's love or an offer to pray for them. Amen.

DAY 7

Wounded for our transgressions

READ: Isaiah 53

This portion of the book of the prophet Isaiah functions at different levels of meaning. Some see Israel as the suffering servant. Others identify the servant with the prophet. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand how the early Christians understood this text as pointing ahead to the Messiah, to Jesus. In fact, it is one of the Old Testament texts that the New Testament most often references.

The Bible uses different images or metaphors to describe how God in Christ acted to restore a right relationship between people and their creator. One of the most powerful metaphors of the atonement asserts that Jesus died in our place, taking upon himself the punishment that we as sinners who have turned from God deserve. In Romans 3:23-26, the Apostle Paul sets it out in this way: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."

John Calvin especially sees the reference to Christ in Isaiah 53:5-6: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

In this chapter we see many other correspondences with the life of Christ as recorded in the gospels. We see the good news in a God who acts out of love to save us, not because we deserve it but because his very nature is love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Paul writes that we are justified by God's grace as a gift. Do you find yourself at times trying to justify or save yourself? If so, to what do you attribute that impulse?

Isaiah 53:11 states, "Through him the will of the Lord will prosper." How does Chapter 53 describe the will of the Lord? In what terms?

PRAYER

Loving God, at times it is hard for us to believe what we have been told about your love. As you spoke through the prophets to prepare your people for your gracious action, help us to be prepared to share with others your sacrificial love. Amen.

DAY 8

The fast that I choose

READ: Isaiah 58

In this chapter, the prophet Isaiah speaks plainly about the disconnect between the religious actions of the people and their social responsibility. The people question why God has not paid attention to their fasting. Why has God not taken notice? Simply stated, God tells them that it is because they are not seeking him. They are seeking their own interest. As Jesus says of those who parade their piety before others, they have their reward.

The fast that God “chooses” is not an exercise in public piety. It is not a finely practiced self-humility. No! It is concrete action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

God says, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

A few decades ago, in his widely read “Celebration of Discipline,” Richard Foster wrote that we do not fast or adopt other spiritual disciplines and practices in order to earn God’s love. Rather, the disciplines open our lives up to God so that he can do in us what we cannot do for ourselves.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever found yourself wondering why God is seemingly not paying attention to you, despite your best efforts to show that you are serious about your faith?

Might it be that you have been focused on yourself rather than seeking to serve those suffering from injustice, the hungry and the naked?

PRAYER

Lord, help me to order my life in ways that reflect the heart that you have for the world. May I not focus on my spiritual position, except that I may be in a posture to serve. You have called me to glorify you through my service to others. Free me from a preoccupation with myself that causes me to overlook those whom you would have me serve. Amen.

DAY 9

By the rivers of Babylon—we sat down and wept

READ: Psalm 137

When the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army in 586 B.C. and the people were taken as hostages to Babylon, they faced a tremendous crisis of faith. How could God have allowed this to happen to them? Well, they sort of knew what had transpired because the prophets had foretold their coming judgment. But how could they worship God in a strange land? How could they practice their faith without the temple?

During the years that followed, the Jews began to develop a tradition of worship that was centered on the synagogue rather than the temple. They sought to put in place expositions of their laws which might help them to be obedient in the future. These would eventually develop an outward religious appearance of which Jesus would be critical in his day.

Increasingly in our own day, the experience of Christians in the world is somewhat like that of these Jewish believers. Many in the church find themselves facing persecution and exile. Many find themselves removed from sacred spaces and from other believers.

We have learned that God can be worshiped in any place and that Jesus is present wherever two or more gather together in his name. So, while we may lament over things in our lives that are lost, it is important to remember that Jesus promised never to leave us or forsake us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever lost a church building to fire, flood or earthquake? How did that experience feel?

Did the loss that you experienced teach you new things about God's presence and promise?

PRAAYER

Dear Lord, we are grateful that you are not limited to geographical locations and that you do respond whenever people call upon you. Help us to remember to pray for those who are persecuted and isolated because of their faith. Show us how we can both learn from them and stand with them. Amen.

DAY 10

The welfare of the city where I have sent you

READ: Jeremiah 29:7

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

It takes some imagination for the people to pray for their captors in Babylon, to pray for the welfare of this pagan city whose leaders are responsible for Judah's exile. But that is what God calls them to do. Their obedience begins with the realization that their exile was God's doing; He sent them. It is sometimes hard for God's people to see how the Lord works through the nations and leaders who are hostile to them, but in this text God assures his people that he is still at work despite their being in exile.

God has promised that he will take care of Judah and Israel. In Jeremiah 29:11 we read, “ ‘For surely I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.’ ” It will not come for seventy years, but in that day God will restore his people to their land.

So how shall they spend these years? It will come by seeking to be a blessing to those who are God's instrument of judgment. It will come by seeking the welfare of the city where God has placed them. It will come by continuing to love and serve in God's name those who do not respond as we think they ought to.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Sometimes we struggle to understand what God is doing and why he has placed us in certain circumstances. Can you think of a time when you looked back and were able to discern how God was working in ways that, at the time, you did not perceive?

If God is calling us to participate in his mission, does it make sense that wherever we are, God wants us to be a blessing to those around us?

In his Book of Acts, Luke tells the story of Paul and Silas being jailed in Philippi (Acts 16:16ff.). How does their care for the jailer reflect the spirit of what God is saying to the exiles in Babylon?

PRAAYER

God, sometimes it feels as though we are in exile far from home. Please help me see how I can reflect your glory and grace right where I am rather than seeing my circumstances as a barrier to ministry with those around me. Amen.

DAY 11

I knew that you were a gracious God

READ: Jonah 1-4

In the brief book of Jonah, we read the story of a reluctant prophet. God appointed Jonah to call the people of Nineveh to repent, but Jonah runs in the other direction. It becomes clear that God loves the Ninevites much more than Jonah does.

The concerns explored in this powerful tale are not the concerns of the usual missionary story. The focus is on Jonah's heart. One might even say that the emphasis of the story is not upon the conversion of Nineveh but the possible conversion of Jonah. Will he continue to try to defy God's plan, or will Jonah (who represents Israel in this story) accept his responsibility to proclaim God's grace wherever God sends him?

There are lots of historical and cultural reasons for Jonah not to preach to the Ninevites. Perhaps the only reason for Jonah to preach to them is that God told him to.

There is the tendency on all our parts to imagine and act as though recipients of God's grace should be like us, should look like us. Jonah understands the gracious character of God, but his prejudice stands in the way of his obedience.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of an example in your own life when you perceived that God was calling you to express his concern for someone whom you would rather not care for?

When the people and the king respond to Jonah's preaching with repentance, he tells God that he knew this was going to happen. The story of Jonah concludes with God's reproof of the reluctant prophet. Do you think that Jonah had a change of heart?

PRAYER

Lord, I confess that there are people with whom I struggle and who I assume are beyond the reach of your grace. Soften my heart and stir my understanding of your deep love so that I might be open to going to whomever you would send me. Amen.

DAY 12

What does the Lord require?

READ: Micah 6:8

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” God’s justice is his saving action on behalf of his people. Human justice is the effort that we make in response to God’s goodness as we carry out his will.

This familiar text from Micah does not intend to map out what we must do to be saved. Rather, it reminds us what a life that is captivated by the grace of God looks like. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

In our Presbyterian tradition we find, “Truth is in order to goodness.” In other words, right belief should issue forth in right living. Too often, in our consumer-driven culture in which even religion can function as a kind of marketplace, we imagine that life and faith are primarily about us, about getting ourselves saved, about getting our needs met. But the life of faith is not centered upon us. The text from Micah reminds us that the faith to which we are called is highly relational but not self-centered, personal but not private. We are blessed to be a blessing.

When we follow Jesus, he leads us out into the broken world to display his glory and grace through the witness of our lives as we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Try putting into your own words the prophet’s call to “do justice?” Where do we learn what constitutes just action?

There is much in the Scriptures about how we treat the poor and about Jesus’ identification with those who are marginalized in human society. What relationship do you see between God’s concern for the poor and the petitions from the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”?

PRAAYER

Dear Lord, amidst the clamor of voices seeking attention and making demands, please help me to focus on that which is important to you. May I love kindness, do justly and walk humbly with you. Amen.

DAY 13

The word became flesh

READ: John 1:1-18

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy. Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke begins his gospel with a dedication to Theophilus. John begins in eternity – “in the beginning.” His soaring theology is reflected in the traditional symbol for John, the eagle. But it doesn’t take long for John, as the other gospel writers do, to ground his telling of the gospel story in history. He writes in verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The Greek text could be translated “tabernacled” or “pitched his tent.” I love how Eugene Petersen renders this text: “And the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

The doctrine that is informed by and shaped in this verse is the Incarnation.

Authentic mission is incarnational. The church is called to be a provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God, standing amidst the death and decay of the world as an alternate reality. We are called to witness to the reality of God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus who took on flesh and moved into this world. The church bears witness by means of the church’s own transformed life, its proclamation of the gospel, and its demonstration of the gospel as it plunges into the realities of a broken creation. Such an incarnational witness has both personal and social implications. The gospel is about the new life that comes to individuals as they place their faith in Jesus Christ. It offers authentic hope for the age to come. It is also about the work of God’s covenant community as they serve others in Christ in this age, seeking to promote social righteousness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Verse 12 affirms that “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” To fulfill this promise, why was it necessary that the word became flesh?

Is there a correlation between John the baptizer’s role and our own role? How would you describe it?

PRAAYER

Thank you for the gift of your son, the true light. We have received from him grace upon grace. He has made you known and welcomed us into your family. May the lives we live reflect your grace to all. Amen.

DAY 14

God loved the world so much

READ: John 3:16

God loved the world so much! David Bosch writes, "Mission has its origins in the *fatherly heart of God*. He is the fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is not possible to penetrate any deeper: there is mission because God loves [people]." Forty-six times in the Gospel of John alone Jesus says that the Father has sent him, often adding that it is for the sake of the salvation of the world.

For many of us, John 3:16 was the first portion of Scripture that we memorized. Martin Luther called this verse "the gospel in miniature." It shows us love in action.

This well-known verse comes during an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. He was curious about Jesus, but as a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, he was afraid to visit Jesus except under cover of night. I can imagine that he headed home after this meeting both excited and fearful. What was this strange talk about being born from above? (a better translation than born again). How Jesus' words must have sent Nicodemus' heart racing - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

In John 7, Nicodemus appears in the story again, arguing with the other leaders that those who would judge Jesus should first hear him out. Then in Chapter 19, he is assisting with Jesus' burial.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus affirms that God gave his Son in order that those who believe in him might have everlasting life. Are we simply saved from perishing, or do you think that there is more to salvation? Are we saved for something, or just from something?

Bosch states that there is mission because God loves people. How does this connect with the fall that we read about in Genesis 3?

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for the gift of your Son in whom we find eternal life and abundant life. Fill us with your love that it might overflow in our lives and bring new life to others. Amen.

DAY 15

One does not live by bread alone

READ: Luke 4:1-15

Matthew, Mark and Luke are often referred to as the synoptic gospels because they offer similar synopses of Jesus' life and teaching. Probably the basic outline was provided by Mark's gospel. The three synoptics each record that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit for a time of testing or tempting by the evil one after he was baptized by John.

At stake was Jesus' identity as the "anointed one" or messiah. What kind of messiah would he be? Would he use his power as the son of God?

Jesus is tempted to use his power to address his physical hunger, to take the easy path to gain worldly authority and glory, and to gain a following by spectacular demonstrations of God's power. In each test, Jesus responds by quoting Scripture resisting the devil's temptations. He understands that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Note that it is not only Jesus who quotes Scripture. The evil one weaves Scripture into the temptations that he sets before Jesus. Do you find occasion to turn to God's word to help you be the person whom you believe God is calling you to be? What Scriptures have you committed to memory?

Physical hunger, a longing for Jesus' authority to be recognized and miraculous action are, in a sense, good things, but they are offered at the price of compromise. Can you think of circumstances where the church may seek to take the easy way in mission? Are there times when we are drawn to the spectacular instead of to the way of suffering and the cross?

PRAAYER

Dear God, thank you for the example that Jesus gives us of turning to your word in remaining steadfast in his calling. Give us strength to avoid seeking our own glory in order that we might direct others' attention to your gracious purposes. Amen.

DAY 16

So that they might hurl him off the cliff

READ: Luke 4:16-30

Much of Jesus' ministry took place in the region of Galilee in northern Israel not far from his boyhood home in Nazareth. Capernaum, which served as a kind of home base for the disciples after Jesus' public ministry began, was only about 20 miles from Nazareth. Towns dotted the landscape and it is easy to see how word of his extraordinary teaching could quickly spread.

In today's passage, Jesus returns to Nazareth on a Sabbath and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. One can imagine that the people had great expectations. The hometown boy has become a rabbi of some repute. We are more familiar with the text because Jesus reads it, from Isaiah 61.

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus claims this mission as his own. The crowd seems content with this, even when he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." They were amazed at his gracious words. But then something goes awry, and they are filled with rage. What was it that so upset the people who had welcomed Jesus approvingly?

I think that it was simply the fact that he projects a broader vision for God's mission than was commonly accepted by the Jews. He reminds them of stories from their past in which God's grace is shown to non-Jews, to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon and to Naaman the Syrian. They cannot accept it, and they angrily seek to do him in.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you think that Jesus intentionally incites the worshippers? If so, what might he have sought to gain?

What do you think of the text from Isaiah serving as a description of Jesus ministry?

PRAYER

Dear God, it seems once again that your people are clinging to a vision of your mission that only includes people like themselves. Save us from the narrowness that comes when we seek to set the limits of your grace. Amen.

DAY 17

You shall love the Lord your God

READ: Matthew 22:34-39

The gospel of Matthew is known for its extended teaching passages, and some scholars see five major sections in Matthew that correspond to the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Certainly, Matthew's is the most Jewish of the gospels. Matthew records Jesus summarizing his instruction in the Great Commandment, the Great Judgment and the Great Commission.

In Matthew's account, it is during a religious debate that a Pharisee asks Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" One gets the sense that the Pharisee is seeking to lay a trap rather than genuinely seeking the truth. In replying, Jesus refers to the great Hebrew prayer, the Shema. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And he says that the second, from Leviticus is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

How do these verses inform us as we seek to participate in God's work of bringing good news and binding up the brokenhearted?

Perhaps we can say this: If we do not get these right, then all else that we do and say will be on a shaky foundation. Are we expressing our love for God in the ways we live for him? Are we reaching out to our neighbors in love, or is there some other motivation behind our behavior?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus tells his listeners, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Can you think of times when you realized that despite your efforts to do good, you were not acting out of love for God and neighbor?

Can you think of a time when doing the loving thing for a neighbor may not have been perceived by them as loving?

PRAYER

Gracious God, your word teaches us that we love because you first loved us. Is it because of your love that we even know what genuine love is? Help us to align our heart, soul and might in love for you. Amen.

DAY 18

When was it that we saw you?

READ: Matthew 25:31-46

There are several things that I find remarkable about this story Jesus tells. In the first place, there is the way that Jesus identifies with the last, the least and the lost. In the second place, I find it significant that everyone is surprised. Those who didn't reach out to the poor or are surprised, and those who did reach out are also surprised. Since everyone is surprised, I suppose that were we to place ourselves in the story, we'd likely be surprised, too.

If we make this story into a description of how people are saved, we end up with an explanation that is inconsistent with the balance of Scripture's teaching. Jesus is not trying to teach a new form of works righteousness. He understands the sin and frailty of every human being.

Yet he does seem to be suggesting that there is a kind of a line that runs through the human family. On the one side are those who have spent their lives for the sake of others, and in so doing have unwittingly served the Lord. There are others who have spent their lives on themselves without realizing that they were ignoring the very needs of Jesus himself.

This Christ-centered nexus is at the point where faith and works intersect. It is what the Apostle Paul has in mind in Romans 12 where he states, "Therefore!" When our lives truly belong to the Lord, we will live differently. We are not called to self-righteousness but to putting on the righteousness of Christ. And this new life is not about an escape from this world but an entering into the concrete brokenness of others with whom Jesus identifies.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Who are "the least of these my brothers and sisters" whom Jesus may be calling you to serve?"

Is Jesus' identification with the poor compelling or convicting for you?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, as I reflect about my own role in your mission, help me to see what it means that you identify with the poor and the lost. Show me how I can serve you by serving them. Amen.

DAY 19

Remember, I am with you always

READ: Matthew 28:16-20

This passage is known as the Great Commission, and it is Matthew's statement of Jesus sending the disciples out into the world to continue his work. Note the "all's" that fill this section: all authority, all of the nations, all that I have commanded you, I'll all-ways be with you. One of the things that I find encouraging about this passage is that Matthew writes honestly about the disciples' doubt. They are clearly still trying to figure out what all this means - Jesus actions and his words, his crucifixion and resurrection. This one thing is clear: He says to them, "Go!"

It may surprise you that down through the years there has been much debate about this passage and whether or not it is still applicable to the church. I believe that it is, that followers of Jesus are still sent out into the world in Jesus' authority, to make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all that Jesus has commanded.

Yet what a challenging Commission this is! What an awesome responsibility! How good it is to know that we don't go out on our own. We go together, and Jesus has promised to be with us always, even to the close of the age.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ? Who shared the good news with you? If they are living, consider writing a note expressing your gratitude for their obedience to Christ's call.

To whom might Jesus be sending you with his good news?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank you for the privilege of sharing the news of Jesus with others. Help me to be aware of people to whom you want to send me with this good news of God's love revealed in his Son. Amen.

DAY 20

I will make you fish for people

READ: Mark 1:16-20

Jesus' first encounter with the disciples in Mark's gospel occurs along the shore of Galilee where they are tending their fishing nets. Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Those are his first words. In his last words to the disciples, he tells them that they shall be his "witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

From his first words to his last Jesus makes clear the critical connection between discipleship and mission, between following him and living for God's glory and for the sake of others.

John Donne, the English metaphysical poet, writes that upon our conversion our passion does not change, but the object of that passion does.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

It is easy to conceive of faith as having to do with just me, or just me and Jesus. Why do you think that it is often acceptable to enjoy the benefits of salvation without embracing the responsibilities?

If the gospel is good news, why do you think we are so reluctant to tell others about Jesus?

PRAYER

Lord fill my mind and heart with the things that matter to you. Save me from a concern about myself that stands in the way of my welcoming others into your presence. Amen.

DAY 21***As the Father has sent me, so I send you*****READ: John 20:19-21**

Each of the gospels have a section in which Jesus makes it clear that his followers are sent out into the world to continue his redeeming work. There is in the gospels an unmistakable agreement about the work of witness being the foundation of Christian mission.

In John's gospel, the "commission" to the disciples comes in the upper room on the day of resurrection. Jesus breathes a word of peace upon the disciples, and he tells them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." In Jesus' statement we see two things - first, the reality of being sent, and second, the fact that we are to go in the way of Jesus. He is both our message and our model.

If we allow Jesus to be our model, we will always have the well-being of others in mind. We will not be dishonest or manipulative in our work of bearing witness. We will seek always to demonstrate the love about which we are speaking.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom in word and deed, balancing proclamation and demonstration. Which do you find to be harder?

Notice that Jesus says twice to the disciples, "Peace to you." Where in your life do you need his peace in order to follow his example of serving love?

PRAYER

Lord, you send us out into the world to live in ways that invite others to open up to your love. Breathe your Spirit upon me and my congregation. In your mercy, grant us the humility to live in ways that point others to you. Amen.

DAY 22

To the ends of the earth

READ: Acts 1:6-11

Why should we be so concerned about the world?

Not only does Jesus tell us, "For God so loved the world," but in his last words to the disciples he tells them that they shall be his witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth. As some have put it, Jesus sends his followers around the corner and around the world.

Which, then, is more important, our neighborhood or the ends of the earth? They are both important, and to set them up in opposition to each other is to falsely divide God's mission. I find it encouraging that some people feel a special burden for their near neighbors, and others feel called to serve their neighbors far away. And in these days, when people from all over the world have come here to our shores, the distinction between local mission and global mission blurs.

Jesus promised to send his Spirit upon the disciples to empower them for this work of bearing witness, and we see that happening on Pentecost. Jesus has promised to return someday, and he has made clear what we should be busy about during these days.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you feel a particular burden to share Jesus' love with those close by or far away?

The word for "witness" in Greek is *martyria* from which we get our English word "martyr." What did Jesus say about suffering that his disciples might face? (Matthew 5:10)

PRAAYER

Gracious Lord, you send the disciples to bear witness to you in all the world. Help me to see how I can best be a witness to you right where I am and wherever you send me. Amen.

DAY 23

I truly understand that God shows no partiality

READ: Acts 10

In this long story about Peter and the centurion named Cornelius, Luke describes the early church's struggle to understand whether or not one first had to become a follower of Moses in order to follow Jesus. In other words, "Could a non-Jew become a Christian?" We know from Acts 9 that God is doing something new in his mission because Paul has been appointed an apostle to the gentiles. Still, this was something that the church struggled with. After Cornelius' encounter at Caesarea shakes him to the core of all that he held dear, Peter concludes, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." When the Holy Spirit is poured out upon Cornelius and the others, Peter understands that there is nothing to prevent them from being baptized. Peter certainly is not going to stand in the way!

But widespread change came slowly. We read in Acts 15 that a council of the church convened in Jerusalem to address this issue because some still struggled. This council took place in 50 AD, 20 years after the resurrection.

Down through the centuries, the church has often wrestled with what should be required of those who want to become followers of Christ. The church has tended to make itself a kind of gatekeeper, adding its own peripheral requirements to the foundational confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. At times, the church has required of people faith in Jesus and "something else." It might be particular theology, some moral practice or a pattern of behavior. But Peter's experience would inform the discernment of the church. There wasn't room for requiring people to give themselves to Moses in order to follow Jesus. Jesus was sufficient and people of any tribe and tongue and background were welcome if they placed their faith and trust in him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of an example of an instance where the church imposed additional requirements upon those who desired to profess their faith in Christ and become part of his visible body?

Why do you suppose that Christians at times have asked or even demanded more of those who wish to declare their faith in Christ than Jesus himself does?

PRAYER

I thank you, Lord, that your grace is for all people. Help me to welcome any and all into your presence. Free me from the temptation of trying to manage others life in you. Amen.

DAY 24

Just as the body is one and has many members

READ: I Corinthians 12

In this well-known chapter, the Apostle Paul uses the body as a metaphor for the church. I have to admit that in the past I usually applied this metaphor to particular congregations. It was natural to think about different church members and the gifts that they bring to the life of the body of Christ.

Increasingly though, I am thinking about the rich meaning this metaphor can carry when thinking about the church around the world. Certainly, it is the case that the different parts of the church in different places, cultures and contexts add to the life of the body. Put another way, there are gifts that we need to receive just as there are gifts that we need share in the global church.

I think of how we can learn from the church in India about what it means to sit at Jesus' feet as our teacher, how we can learn about suffering from the churches facing persecution, how those who are poor can help us deal with the burden of our affluence and how churches that don't have power can help us face our marginalization in our own society.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In writing about the body, Paul states, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." How have you experienced this kind of solidarity in your congregation or the larger church?

Are your mission relationships an expression of mutuality? Are you and your partners both giving and receiving?

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for the wonderful diversity of the church in the world, the global body of Christ. Help me to see the gifts that I have to share as well as the gifts that others can share with my church, in order that the church would be built up for your mission in the world. Amen.

DAY 25

Ambassadors for Christ

READ: II Corinthians 5:16-21

In this marvelous statement of God's mission, Paul describes how in Christ, God was reconciling the world unto himself, and he has entrusted to us a ministry of reconciliation. In Ephesians, Paul writes of how God is gathering up all things in Christ.

Imagine that each Christian church is an embassy, an outpost for the kingdom. Your role and mine is to serve as an ambassador. Our authority comes from the one who sent us. Our priorities come from the one who sent us. We take our instructions from the one who sent us.

We are, Paul writes, ambassadors for Christ. God is making his appeal through us. This is an awesome responsibility. This is a joyful privilege. We are entrusted with the good news that "for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In Matthew's Great Commission, Jesus makes the point that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. In this text, Paul clearly understands that we go in Jesus' authority to participate in his mission. What does that mean to you?

An embassy is built on land that is owned by the nation or king who sent the ambassador. What would it mean to think of our churches as places where God's rule and reign are acknowledged?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, as we think about what it means to live as your ambassadors, we pray that your kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven. Help us to live lives that reflect your reign and that disclose your priorities for this world. Amen.

DAY 26

Because of your sharing in the gospel

READ: Philippians 1:1-6

Sometimes we forget that each of Paul's letters was written to a church on the mission field. Paul writes then to remind them of their calling and to encourage them to be faithful witnesses. One thing that Paul makes clear is that the Christians' life together becomes their first act of witness to the world. That is what Leslie Newbigin has in mind when he talks about the church being the hermeneutic of the gospel.

In this letter, Paul identifies three components of engagement in God's mission: the pattern is comprised of prayer, partnership and promise.

Paul begins his letters by reminding the believers that he is praying for them. He asks them to pray for him, that doors will be open for the gospel. Secondly, he gives things for their partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. The word that he uses, "partnership," could also be translated communion or fellowship. Paul is not describing a business relationship but their deep connection in Christ. Finally, Paul is confident that God's will shall be accomplished, not because Paul himself is so great or because the Philippians are so great, but because God who has begun a good work in them has promised to bring all things to completion.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you enjoy a special partnership with someone in the life of faith and God's mission?

What characterizes your relationship?

PRAYER

Dear God, as Paul longed and worked for the unity of the church, help me to see how I can contribute towards relationships that bring glory and honor to you. Amen.

DAY 27

But emptied himself

READ: Philippians 2:1-11

In calling the Philippian Christians to unity, Paul offers us an example. He writes that we are to have the mind among ourselves which we have in Christ Jesus. The verses that follow are a powerful description of Jesus' self-emptying, being born as a man and being obedient unto death. These lines, some scholars believe, are evidence of an early hymn of the church.

These verses invite us to think again about Jesus as our model for mission. His way was not the way of power and coercion, but rather of a servant's heart and obedience. We remember Jesus saying that if anyone wishes to be great, they must be the servant of all.

What does it mean to be a servant in God's mission? It means that we have relinquished control, that we go where Jesus leads us and that we dare to love with his love. Jesus was exalted because he humbled himself and was obedient unto death. Just so, we are invited to take up our cross and follow him.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Paul draws upon sublime theology to address practical relationships in the church. Which of these verses draws your attention?

Are you more comfortable trying to serve God from a position of power or weakness? What must you yield in order to be weak in the manner of Christ?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you consistently acted for the well-being of others and the glory of your heavenly Father. Grant me grace to follow your example in the manner in which I treat others. Amen.

DAY 28

A plan for the fullness of time

READ: Ephesians 1:3-14

These eleven verses (1:3-14) from Paul are just one sentence in Greek. He is packing in a lot! At the center of this long sentence, we read this: "He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Sometimes, I feel like asking God, "What are you doing?" Here is our answer. This always is our answer. God is gathering up all things in Christ Jesus. It is his mysterious will, an expression of his good pleasure, his plan for the fullness of time. Fullness that awaits consummation.

Paul goes on to speak about an inheritance that comes to us in Christ. Our believing is not simply a solitary commitment, for we have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. In these verses, we find a clear statement of our shared purpose, that is, participating in God's work of gathering up.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Paul uses a lot of religious ideas and words, and some of it is a bit hard to work through. Read verses 3-14 again and mark the words that you need to clarify. If you do not have the bible dictionary at home, you can find one online. What do you suppose Paul intends to assert when he writes that we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?

PRAYER

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I bless you and thank you for choosing me. Thank you for the lavish grace you have shown me. Help me live as a blessing to others and for the praise of your Glory. Amen.

DAY 29

It is the gift of God

READ: Ephesians 2:8-10

These verses from the Letter to the Ephesians have had a great impact upon many people, including John Calvin and John Wesley.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

These verses express the heart of the gospel and reflect the foundational principles held by the Reformers to be central to the doctrine of salvation:

Sola scriptura	"by Scripture alone"
Sola fide	"by faith alone"
Sola gratia	"by grace alone"
Solus Christus	"Christ alone"
Soli Deo gloria	"glory to God alone"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are there times when you are especially aware that our salvation is a gift and not something that we earn? Is there someone in your life who needs to hear that good news?

To show our gratitude to God, how can we seek to better understand the way of life which God prepared for us?

PRAYER

Dear God, you have done for me what I could not do for myself. Thank you for the grace you have shown me and for the gift of faith. Help me see how I can share the good news of your love with others. Amen.

DAY 30

Hearing and doing the word

READ: James 1:19-27

One of the unfortunate developments in mission during the last century was the false division of the gospel into words or deeds. Groups of believers who emphasized proclamation as the key dimension of witnessing to the gospel often neglected compassionate action and work for justice. Those who emphasized compassion and justice often did not embrace inviting others to give their lives to the Lord.

I once heard the late Sam Moffett, retired missionary and mission professor, frame the false division this way: "Our evangelists seem to be calling us to accept the King without his Kingdom. While our prophets, just as narrow in their own way, seem to be trying to build the Kingdom without the saving King." As to the connection between words and deeds, Moffett observed, "Without deeds the good news is scarcely credible. Without the word, the news is not even comprehensible."

It is said that actions speak louder than words. That notwithstanding, an extensive study of the PC(USA) a few decades ago found that Presbyterians were doing good things for others but had lost their ability to explain why they were doing what they were doing.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What examples of the integral relationship between words and deeds do you see in Jesus' life?

James 1:26 offers a straightforward description of true religion. How does James describe the importance of living for the sake of others?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, when I am tempted to allow words or deeds to stand alone rather than existing in my life in a dynamic way together, give me wisdom and strength. Help me to speak the good news and to reflect the good news in the way I live my life. Amen.

DAY 31

A multitude that no one could count

READ: Revelation 7:9-12

The Scottish mission historian Andrew Walls writes, "Perhaps the most striking single feature of Christianity today is the fact that the church now looks more like that great multitude whom none can number, drawn from all tribes and kindreds, peoples and tongues, than ever before in its history." Walls of course is referring to this text from Revelation.

I am a bit wary of folks who contend that they've got the Book of Revelation all figured out, but even among such reluctant interpreters as me there are places where the significance of the verses comes breaking through with clarity. What we see here is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram that through him all the peoples of the world would be blessed! And in this glimpse of heaven, John describes how all peoples are gathered around the throne shouting, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Gardner Taylor, a famous Black Baptist pastor in Brooklyn who died in 2015 used to say that the message of Revelation is "God wins." One could also say "God's mission is fulfilled." Thinking back over the texts and themes we have covered, how would you describe in your own words what God's mission is?

PRAYER

Dear Lord, I have to confess that sometimes I am very concerned about things going on in the world. Remind me of the promises in your word. Deepen my trust and faith in you. Grant me peace and enable me to share with others the good news of your love and to show your justice through the way that I live. Through Christ the Lord, Amen.