

Defeat Decay

Redeem a Coke for Eternal Rewards . . .

...He whom God raised did not undergo decay. – Acts 13:37

If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded. – Mark 9:41 NLT

I once had a friend who worked in the home of one of the wealthiest families on the planet. He recounted to me that the property was a sort of "crown jewel" for these folks, and they treated its upkeep and appearance with the utmost attention to detail. No expense was too great for the maintenance, operation, and improvement of the house, grounds, and various outbuildings.

Last summer I embarked on a goal of being more proactive to meet and introduce myself and our church to the neighborhood in Parker where we meet. Practically this translated into knocking on several hundred doors over several weeks. God graciously caused this to lead to a lot of good conversations, many flyers and gospel booklets handed out, several opportunities to pray for neighbors, and hopefully some seeds planted to come visit our church when the time is right.

Thus, a constant stream of contractors, laborers, and repairmen were crawling over every nook and cranny. Why? Because there was a constant—losing—battle against decay. A little rust here, weeds there, scuff marks all over. To keep everything new and fresh required a limitless stream of money. And yet, as my friend recounted, even when no expense was too great, nothing could truly stop the rot and disintegration brought on by rain, wind, sun, snow, dust, and the freeze-thaw cycle.

Along the way it also led to getting tired and thirsty on several hot summer afternoons. But on a few occasions, God blessed me through other believers in the neighborhood who already have good church homes. One man I talked to saw me an hour and a half later, knocking on doors on the other side of his street. He drove somewhere to run an errand and came back to offer me an ice-cold can of Coke. I was hot and discouraged, and it was like a God-sent gift, and I teared up (seriously).

Similarly, nothing on earth can stop decay. Not a state-of-the-art refrigeration system. Not highly-advanced preservation techniques, nor any cost-is-no-object approach. Not even botox. *Decay is an unstoppable freight train, propelled down the track by the sin that entered the world at the fall of man.*

Another lady offered to get me some water that I gladly accepted. When she returned from inside her house, she had a small bottle of water and a 32-ounce bottle of Gatorade and asked which one I wanted. I opted for the ice-cold, fruit punch-flavored Gatorade. After both of these experiences, I felt like I had received a personal blessing from the Lord. I also prayed that God would "bless their socks off" for their acts of kindness to me. The verse above promises that God will bless anyone who gives even just a cup of water to another believer!

So when the Apostle Paul remarks that Jesus Christ experienced death but not decay, we should each sit up and take note! This runs absolutely counter to the reality we observe all around us. We must conclude: only the power of the Almighty Creator can defeat decay!

Anyway, my encouragement to each of us is to watch for little opportunities like these because they can prove to be big blessings and earn God's eternal reward!

While we watch the world and our own bodies lose the battle against decay, let's fix our eyes on the hope of Jesus: that we will ultimately see decay defeated and our lives renewed as we enter eternity at Christ's side!

Submitted by: Greg Miller
The Firehouse Church
Denver, Colorado

One-Year Bible Reading
Exodus 13:17-15:18
Matthew 21:23-46
Psalm 26:1-12
Proverbs 6:16-19

Submitted by: Rich Thatcher
The Firehouse Church
Parker, Colorado

One-Year Bible Reading
Exodus 15:19-17:7
Matthew 22:1-33
Psalm 27:1-6
Proverbs 6:20-26

Coexist?

Re-Exist – 2

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. – James 4:1,3

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. – Romans 12:1-2

You might have seen a bumper sticker or sign like the one above using the symbols of several religions to spell out the word "Coexist." The intent of this message is to promote peace between conflicting ideas and philosophies. Because disagreement breeds conflict, right? Not necessarily.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Romans 12:17-18

Most conflicts are not religiously based. They happen because we are selfish, as the verse above states. If you look at the organizations on the Coexist sign, each of these beliefs has different stances on peace and conflict. But that does not mean they are the source. Disagreement is not necessarily a source of conflict. How we handle disagreement is.

The CoExist idea is the acceptance that all beliefs and practices are equally true and valid; thus it promotes giving up our intellectual and religious freedom for perceived overall peace. I don't think that was the original intent of the concept on an individual scale, but on a global scale that's what it must mean in order to implement it practically. So how do we respond?

How many of us work or go to school with somebody who is Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or secular? Do we daily have conflicts about religion with them? I don't—ever. In fact, all my conversations are pretty pleasant.

When we are transformed by Christ we die to ourselves and are born again as a new person. We existed in this world, died, and exist again as a new creature in Jesus. We Re-Exist. In that transformation we have a different worldview: we believe that all people are fallen, separated from God and salvation, and destined for hell (as we once were) but can avoid all that through the salvation of Jesus Christ.

We already coexist. But if, in order to avoid conflict, I am forced to accept the idea that everyone's idea is equally true, I must give up what I truly believe to accept it. I cannot believe Christ is "the way and the truth and the life," and everything else is "a path" at the same time.

Thus we want to be at peace with everyone, speaking the truth in love, and showing the reality of a changed life by revealing the power of Jesus through our lives. We die to ourselves and show the world a different way that is much better than just coexisting: a new and real life in Christ.

There is a fundamental difference between saying that everyone has value, and that everyone is right. We all agree everyone has value, but I don't value them less to say I don't agree with their choices. I must have the ability to love and be at peace with people that I don't agree with and be able to express that disagreement—otherwise I cease to be a unique individual. I am no longer one with the Body of Christ, I am one with a rainbow that is turning all one shade of gray. So what do we do?

Because Christ died for us, we don't attack, hurt, or maim others for our cause. Instead we die for those who want to kill us. We love them more than they love themselves, because they have inherent value above merely coexisting. Coexisting until we die is not life. Living for others until we die, that is life.

Submitted by: Greg Standinger
Glen Arbor Community Church
West Chicago, Illinois

One-Year Bible Reading
Exodus 17:8-19:15
Matthew 22:34-23:12
Psalm 27:7-14
Proverbs 6:27-35

Submitted by: Greg Standinger
Glen Arbor Community Church
West Chicago, Illinois

One-Year Bible Reading
Exodus 19:16-21:21
Matthew 23:13-39
Psalm 28:1-9
Proverbs 7:1-5

Win More of Them

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them . . . I do it all for the sake of the gospel. – 1 Corinthians 9:19,23 ESV

The gospel compels us to live sacrificially. In reading this verse, it is easy to think about the big picture as it pertains to our choices, but I believe that Paul's call to become "a servant" is manifested in the minutiae, in decisions each of which might not affect my overall life story but can certainly impact my day.

I have participated in activities such as moving household belongings, raking leaves in yards, and painting houses (helpful but highly tedious). I have done babysitting, been to Halloween parties, and sung in a choir (all things that are terrifying in their own ways). I have played disc golf (I'm dismal at it), tried to join a cricket match (they politely declined...), and attended a summer solstice parade (did have to cover my eyes several times on that one). I have peeled apples, roasted turkeys, and eaten the same food for 15 straight meals (nope, it wasn't steak and lobster). And I did all of these things **not** for the fun of the experience, but for the purpose of taking the gospel into the lives of others.

Now, I don't mention any of this as a means of exalting the things I've done. In fact, I desperately need to grow in being willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of serving others. Instead, I hope that you are encouraged today to consider how you can be sacrificial for the sake of the gospel in the little things, that you "might win more of them."

Submitted by:

Greg Miller
The Firehouse Church
Denver, Colorado

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 21:22-23:13
Matthew 24:1-28
Psalm 29:1-11
Proverbs 7:6-23

It Started with a Small Prayer

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls. – Proverbs 11:30

At the hair salon, I mentioned to my hairdresser (who is a newer believer) that the friend I had brought around for a haircut last time had since gotten saved. She paused, asking, "And you succeeded in leading her?" I nodded, but explained how it was God's work through many of us witnessing. "I've never had the chance to lead someone to Christ, but I would like to," she said. I told her it was a good thing to pray about, thinking of what happened to Adi.

About a year ago, a team from South Ridge Church in West Virginia came to Romania to reach out to an underprivileged Roma community with a soccer camp and a playground construction. During the week, one of our church leaders, Adi, was digging for the playground and asked a school security guard if he wanted to help. As they worked together, they talked, and Adi asked the man, Viorel, if he was interested in God. Viorel said he was interested, but then related his limited and uncomfortable experiences with church. Adi asked, "Would you like to study the Bible together? Would you let me come visit you at your house?" Viorel was shocked: "You would come to **my** house?" (Usually the racial and economic differences cause Romanians and Roma not to mix.) But Viorel and his wife and boys eagerly received Adi and his wife Violeta into their home and invited family and friends to join them. This began a weekly Bible study that has blossomed, sometimes being too big for the house to hold. This summer, Viorel and Mirabela got baptized in the nearby river. Before meeting Viorel, Adi had been praying for a year to meet a "man of peace" he could share Christ with.

It all started with a small prayer.

Submitted by:

Amy Cato
Coram Deo
Brasov, Romania

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 23:14-25:40
Matthew 24:29-51
Psalm 30:1-12
Proverbs 7:24-27

Grace at its Ultimate Best

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). – Ephesians 2: 4-5

Ephesians talks about God's grace several times. Ephesians 1 talks about the riches of God's grace lavished on us. I love that Paul uses the word *lavish*. *Lavish* speaks of overflowing, of an overabundance.

The biggest example of God's glorious grace lavishly and freely given is found in Jesus' death. Even when we were dead in sin, God made us alive in Him. That is God's grace at its ultimate best. Our utter helplessness meets His love and power provided without us earning it. We *can't* earn it! It is a gift of God, so that no one can boast.

God's grace is incomparably rich. Nothing can compare to it—it's lavish! We see this in salvation, God's gift of Jesus to us. We see it in His kindness: "in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7).

Once again, salvation is God's gift. We don't deserve it and can't do anything to earn it. It is the ultimate form of God's glorious grace, and it is so lavishly, freely given. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8; italics mine).

Thank You, God, for Your grace, Your salvation which You have freely and lavishly given us. Let my life continually be changed because of Your grace. Let my life be poured out for You as a thank offering for all You have done.

Submitted by:

Shirley Ferguson
Oakridge Community Church
Clarksville, Maryland

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 26:1-27:21
Matthew 25:1-30
Psalm 31:1-8
Proverbs 8:1-11

Grace in Ephesians – 2

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ. – Ephesians 3:8

This verse really struck me. Paul considers it grace to be able to share the gospel—his privilege. God showed grace to Paul. Now Paul has grace to share grace. Think about that for a moment. He doesn't think of it as a burden, but as a privilege. Too often when I think of sharing my faith I cringe, shrink away, and hide. But to Paul, the opportunity is God's grace. It boggles my mind.

Lord, I so want to look at sharing Your gospel as a privilege, an honor. Change my thoughts. Give me Your eyes, Your heart, Your love. Let me be so full of Your love for people that my insecurities are swallowed up in love for them. Father, let me realize that, like Paul, I already have grace: Your power, Your pleasure, and Your riches enable me to share. Give me the desire, the yearning, and the excitement to share You with others. Let my life as well as my words speak of You. Help me to comprehend how truly it is a privilege and an honor to share Your gospel. It is Your grace. Thank You, Lord, for Your glorious grace. I so need it every day.

Submitted by:

Shirley Ferguson
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Clarksville, Maryland

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 28:1-43
Matthew 25:31-26:13
Psalm 31:9-18
Proverbs 8:12-13

Seriously, What Can We Do?

Heal the sick who are there and tell them, "The Kingdom of God is near you." – Luke 10:9

On a recent medical mission trip, our team of four men were overwhelmed to be working with the most damaged sex workers in the country of Costa Rica. ("Sex workers" is the local term for prostitutes there.) When sex workers reach age 40 and their faces and minds are so scarred that they can only earn about \$12 per day, they literally move to the bottom of the hill. It was on this street that we set up our clinic.

Frankly, we didn't think that we had the correct team, nor any chance of making a dent in the depth of brokenness being suffered by these men and women at the very bottom of the social structure. When we showed up with three young men (and myself) who would be the evangelism team for the week, the local pastor disheartened us even more with the reality that ladies who had come "out of the life" themselves were taking more than four months to earn enough trust to share the gospel with these sex workers.

So I told my team to pray. No matter what happened, pray. If someone pulls a knife, pray. Therefore on the last day when someone pulled a knife, that is exactly what our team did—we prayed. That was the street to which God had taken us.

When we set up the clinic on Monday morning, the spiritual battle raged from the first minute. One battle after another drove us to prayer clusters all morning. After an hour it felt like we were literally wasting our time being there.

But it was about that time that the demons and darkness of that place started to head outside. God was answering our prayers. More on that tomorrow . . .

Submitted by:

Tony Pierson
Blacksburg Ablaze Church
Blacksburg, Virginia

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 29:1-30:10
Matthew 26:14-46
Psalm 31:19-24
Proverbs 8:14-26

Seriously, What Can We Do? – 2

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. – Acts 16:25

Yesterday I set the stage for the account of our experience when four men started up a mobile clinic on the street in Costa Rica where the lowest-tier sex workers, addicts, and homeless were living. The spiritual battle was raging full force, and our team was praying like crazy.

But we had done many medical missions together, so we decided to trust our verse, Luke 10:9, and just share the Gospel with the patients once they had seen the doctors. Our model has always been to say, "We are glad you were able to see the doctor today to take care of your medical health, but we also want to talk with you today about your spiritual health. When you die, do you know what will happen to you?" And lo and behold, that same model worked here too!

With our team praying, in dribs and drabs to begin with, people started breaking down and accepting Jesus "with glad and sincere hearts." They would come back the next day and look and speak totally differently. It was unbelievable to see this pattern be so effective in such a broken place and in such a short period of time.

But the spiritual battle only raged greater. So on Day Two our youngest team member was given a guitar to play worship music in the center of the room. The place of light that his playing and singing created allowed others of us to share the Gospel more clearly and in more peace.

I have always known worship was a good way to fill your mind with the things of God, but I never knew it was such a powerful offensive weapon in the spiritual battle. When this young man said, "All I can do is pray and sing," we quickly reminded him that he was holding back the gates of hell itself with his efforts. "Please don't stop!" we told him.

Submitted by:

Tony Pierson
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Blacksburg, Virginia

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 30:11-31:18
Matthew 26:47-68
Psalm 32:1-11
Proverbs 8:27-32

Seriously, What Can We Do? – 3

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. – 2 Timothy 1:7

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. – James 4:7

What if you could only give someone in a desperate situation two things to take back with him or her after salvation? That is the situation we found ourselves in when working with the lowest-tier of sex workers on a recent medical mission trip to Costa Rica.

So you need to get out of 25 plus years of selling your body, doing drugs, and extreme post-traumatic stress disorder. And the only thing you have access to is the Holy Spirit and this prayer: "Satan, in the name of Jesus and the blood that He shed on the cross for me, I resist you!" Is the Holy Spirit really that powerful? Do you really believe that?

Certainly these women need jobs and a safe place to sleep. But they also need healing. Something drove them onto the streets in the first place. Not only does Satan have the debasement and shame of selling one's body and decades of drug abuse to use against them, he also has whatever drove them to the streets originally. This was usually some sort of major abuse, abandonment, or in some cases greed for "easy money."

So we started that counseling—we began getting them to forgive parents, abusers, rapists, and whoever had injured them decades earlier. The power of the Holy Spirit to heal such wounds always amazes me.

Do you believe the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to help these women overcome their sin and addictions? If you say yes, as the Bible claims, isn't He powerful enough to help us overcome the sin that so easily entangles us, we who have so many fewer and more shallow wounds?

Ponder this as you pray for the 27 souls who gave their lives to Christ in the worst conditions. Pray they resist the devil and unite with Christians.

Submitted by:

Tony Pierson
Blacksburg Ablaze Church
Blacksburg, Virginia

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 32:1-33:23
Matthew 26:69-27:14
Psalm 33:1-11
Proverbs 8:33-36

With Christians

Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. – Matthew 19:14

I fear that far too much ministry operates from an *at* rather than a *with* mentality. We Christians, in our desire to communicate biblical truth, talk *at* people. We spend our time crafting arguments and learning the Bible so we can give people all of the information they need to choose Jesus. There seems to be an assumption that if I just communicate the right information in the right way, then everyone will turn to Christ.

And indeed, proclamation is essential, but we mustn't stop there. We must purpose in ourselves to roll up our sleeves and join people, not simply instruct them. In other words, we must be *with* people.

I fear that too much ministry is unbalanced in favor of imparting information; I wonder if that is especially true of youth ministry. We operate from a mindset that says, "If I can just get them to be quiet and listen, I can get these Bible facts in their heads!" When real life issues disrupt our teaching, we can get irritated.

But what if we treated the disruptions, digressions, and distractions as the heart of ministry? What would it look like to follow the questions and conversations where they lead? What sort of transformation would we observe if we entered the mess and confusion of people's lives with the love of Christ, not just teaching them, but actually apprenticing them? What would be the effect upon people to hear and experience that they matter and that they are valuable? What would our churches look like if we recognized that the Bible is ultimately relational, rather than merely informational?

Proclamation of the good news is a must, but without love we are just clanging symbols. Let's become "*with* Christians."

Submitted by:

Jason Kanz
Cedar Creek Community Church
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 34:1-35:9
Matthew 27:15-31
Psalm 33:12-22
Proverbs 9:1-6

Lavish Love

... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. — Ephesians 3:17-19

God really loves us. Reading Ephesians, I have been struck by the words and phrases Paul uses to describe God’s love and grace: *lavished* (1:8); *incomparable* (2:7); *unsearchable riches* (3:8); *breadth and length and height and depth* of His love (3:18); *love which surpasses knowledge* (3:19).

You can’t read Ephesians and not know that God loves you. Ephesians drips and overflows with God’s love for us. This love isn’t the “ooey-gooney, feel good” kind of love. It is hard-core, the kind that can hold you through rough times. It’s the kind of love that says, “I want what’s best for you. No, this isn’t going to be easy. But you will be a better, stronger person for it. I will be holding you through the storm. You will never be alone.” That’s the kind of love God has for us. That kind of love is worth dying for. Ask the disciples. Ask Paul. Ask all the martyrs through the ages and even today.

Lord, make Your love so real to me that I can’t help but speak and share it with others. Let my life be living proof of Your love.

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Shirley Ferguson	Exodus 35:10-36:38
Oakridge Community Church	Matthew 27:32-66
Clarksville, Maryland	Psalms 34:1-10
	Proverbs 9:7-8

Transformed....Truly!

But we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. — Romans 8:23 NIV

Recently my husband Dave and I watched the latest rendition of the movie, *Beauty and the Beast*, one of Disney’s all-time classics.

As the story goes, a selfish prince and the whole of his staff are enslaved by an enchantress to a spell that turns them into household objects and the prince himself into a repulsive beast. The only way the spell can be broken is by the beast learning to love and to win another with that love.

The movie depicts the castle staff desperately doing all they can to promote romance between their enchanted prince and Belle, the beautiful and adventurous village girl. At the story’s ending, the beast has seemingly been slain by a villain, all hopes dashed. Yet at Belle’s passionate “I love you,” things start to magically change. The beast and all the staff who have longed for this day are suddenly transformed into who they really were all along. There are shouts of joy, broad smiles, cartwheels, hugs . . . the curse is lifted!

As Christians we in many ways can relate to this story. Under the curse of the Fall and sin in this age, we have been rescued from our sins by a true Hero, Jesus Christ. Yet, as long as we live in this fallen world, our “true identity” is disguised, and we appear no different from others around us.

But the rescue story is not finished. We are patiently and eagerly awaiting the day when He will come again and we will be joyfully and obviously transformed into who we truly are—sons and daughters of the King!

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Dawn Bovenmyer	Exodus 37:1-38:31
Stonecreek Community Church	Matthew 28:1-20
Ames, Iowa	Psalms 34:11-22
	Proverbs 9:9-10

Crying Out

With every bone in my body I will praise Him: “LORD, who can compare with you? Who else rescues the helpless from the strong? Who else protects the helpless and poor from those who rob them?” — Psalm 35:10 NLT

This verse is amazing. I love how it speaks directly to our hearts. David cries out, “With every bone in body, I will praise Him . . .” Wow, that’s a noble statement. David praises Him with every bone! How often do we truly love the Lord? How much do we actually praise Him? Is it with every fiber in our beings?! This is a heart check for us. We need to ask ourselves: What is it that I am longing for in my heart? What am I saying “yes” to with my time?

That idea of praising Him with “every bone in my body” is a pretty heavy one. We need to change our thinking if we’re to have that kind of longing in our relationship with Jesus. Every fiber of our being needs to cry out to the Lord for help, with praise, with thanksgiving, with everything! When we do, Jesus is able to completely fill our lives with who He is.

David goes on to say, “Who else rescues the helpless from the strong?” You know, God’s love for people is amazing. He wants us to have the same kind of love—to help and protect those who need it. We need to ask God to give us a heart like His, one that looks at people and protects and loves them. He alone is the one who knows hearts and can change them. But He can use us in the process. We can love and help others for Him. How are we doing with these heart issues, Christian?

My prayer is this: *I ask that You, Jesus, help and instruct all of us to follow you wholeheartedly! I pray that we would live for you with every fiber of our being. Help us, Jesus, to be a people who protect those who need it! To your name alone be the glory. Amen.*

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Tony D’Amico	Exodus 39:1-40:38
The Rock Church	Mark 1:1-28
Draper, Utah	Psalms 35:1-16
	Proverbs 9:11-12

Why the Father Threw the Party

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. — Luke 15:20

We have all heard the story of the prodigal son, the one who wasted all his father gave him. There’s an angle of this story, though, you may not have thought of.

The father explains to his older son the reason for the party: “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32). The father is focusing on a physical reality that mirrors a spiritual reality. The missing son has come back into relationship with his father—“He’s alive, and he wants to be here!” The father-son relationship can picture the God-sinner relationship, the vertical one. But I think the father also threw the party to help bring his prodigal back into right relationships in his community.

A repentant sinner needs a support group. The son confesses sin to his father and intends to ask for a place in the community as a worker. He is seeking to intertwine his life with those he previously knew. He wants back in, although word seems to have gotten out about his disastrous decisions, judging by how his older brother condemns him.

Unlike the older son, the father in the story exudes welcome. By throwing a party, the father accomplishes several things all at once. The father is making his response to his son’s return clear. The guests then become an instant support group. In following the father’s lead, they reaffirm their love for the returning son; they receive him again as one of them. Also gossip is avoided—people come and get the good news firsthand.

Do we make the way back difficult or easy for those who want to return to Christian community? Is my face toward the prodigal—or my back?

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Dotty Vanderhorst	Leviticus 1:1-3:17
Cornerstone Community Church	Mark 1:29-2:12
Lenexa, Kansas	Psalms 35:17-28
	Proverbs 9:13-18

Why the Father Threw the Party – 2

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. Luke 15:16

There are many roadblocks before a person comes to the Lord, and perhaps more for one to return to the Lord whom he already knew or knew about. Walking through a valley of deep darkness like in Psalm 23:4 may describe how he feels about his whole life, and coming (or coming back) to believe that “You are with me” is no small change.

One set of roadblocks is how a person thinks about herself. She may constantly think of herself as worthless, hopeless; one who can’t change, who has ruined everything, for whom there is no good future, no more chances; one about whom no one cares, one who has hurt others too badly. These are all Satan’s lies, but there’s no way to know that until one comes out of the deep darkness.

Another set of roadblocks is how others think of a person, or how he thinks they think. “They think I’m just a jerk.” “They think I’m rotten.” “They think I’m a bad influence.” “They think I have no morals.” “They just label me as a failure.” An expectation of contempt, rejection, or condemnation keeps many away from Christians ready to forgive.

Then there’s the roadblock of expecting God’s judgment. God is seen as a stern, frowning Judge. This is a very real dilemma, for our God is righteous and good and holy. However, He also says, “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him. I will lead him, and restore comfort to him and his mourners” (Isaiah 57:18). That’s the heart of the gospel—Jesus takes our judgment so His Father can receive us. “Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face,” says an old hymn.

There are many roadblocks to a prodigal returning. How did the father in the story remove them? Let’s learn from him and join the party!

Submitted by:

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Lenexa, Kansas

One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 4:1-5:19
Mark 2:13-3:6
Psalm 36:1-12
Proverbs 10:1-2

Why the Father Threw the Party – 3

For this my son was dead, and is alive again – Luke 15:24

In the distant country when famine struck, the playboy found that he had to go to work. But by then any relationships that he had enjoyed in his period of wealth were gone. The summary is short: “no one gave him anything.” This is a period of total isolation—no human extends any help or sympathy to this outsider. Satan means it for destruction, but God uses it for good. As a result, the son “came to himself” and headed for home. And how did the father receive him?

The father runs to meet his son, and he also removes the many roadblocks in the way of the younger son’s repentance, reconciliation, and reintegration with his community. Rather than a judgmental father asking what happened to the fortune he entrusted to his son, *there is a father with a heart hungry to embrace his son and to re-open relationship.* He had missed his son, not his money! Love pours out of this man as he runs, embraces, and kisses his boy.

The father also shows the son the value he sets on him, changing the labels he had probably put on himself. He is not received grudgingly and assigned a place with the lowest of the servants. The father affirms *the true identity and place the prodigal has in the father’s heart: precious, deeply loved, forgiven, celebrated, given a future.* The best robe, the valuable ring, and the new Nikes are none too good for “this my son”!

And then the father resolves the roadblock of other people’s judgments against his son: he honors him with a lavish party with the best meat and music he can provide and invites friends and servants to see how his father is treating him, *publicly giving him his identity as a beloved son restored to the community.*

And that’s why the father threw the party. Let’s be like him.

Submitted by:

Dotty Vanderhorst
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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 6:1-7:27
Mark 3:7-30
Psalm 37:1-11
Proverbs 10:3-4

Thoughts on the Third Commandment

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. – Exodus 20:7

When I was growing up, I believed that the Third Commandment principally had something to do with saying bad words. There were a couple of expressions that specifically included the words “God” or “Jesus” that I was pretty sure broke the commandment, but I felt less clear about other cuss words. What did I know? But taking the Lord’s name in vain refers to claiming God’s name in support of a dishonest vow, as well as not treating His name reverently or respectfully.

When I read the Bible, I try to approach each passage to understand what it says about relationships, with God and with one another. What if one of the ways we take the Lord’s name in vain has to do with how Christians speak about one another? Too often, our words about other believers fail to honor God. We speak poorly about others who bear the name of Christ when they disappoint us or even when they disagree with us. We tear down rather than build up. We reject biblical principles for relationship while still claiming Christ as Savior. I wonder, if Christ can save us from God’s justice by His grace, can He not also save our relationships? If He is able to reconcile us to Himself, can He not also reconcile us to one another?

As Christians, let us not take Christ’s name in vain in our relationships. Let us believe that He has the power to heal broken relationships, and especially with those who are brothers and sisters in Jesus. Let us practice other-centeredness, always with an eye toward forgiveness, just as we have been forgiven.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 7:28-9:6
Mark 3:31-4:25
Psalm 37:12-29
Proverbs 10:5

Recidivism

Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his folly will not depart from him. – Proverbs 27:22 ESV

Recidivism is the rate at which a criminal offender returns to prison. One study found that within five years of release, 77% of released prisoners were rearrested. I recently had a conversation with a corrections officer who told me a similar statistic. He estimated the recidivism rate at the place he worked was 90%! The annual cost of incarcerating a prisoner in Utah is nearly \$30,000. So this is a big deal. This corrections officer said that the sad joke as the released prisoners left was that they would see them again!

Proverbs 27:22 tells us that folly is not easily removed from a fool. Do you know what a mortar and pestle are? A small bowl and a blunt, club-shaped object. You put the substance you want to grind into the mortar and crush and grind it with the pestle. This verse in Proverbs teaches you that you can’t remove a fool’s foolishness. You can grind and crush grain into powder and remove the various components. But you can’t remove a fool’s foolishness. One author said, “You can separate the wheat from the chaff, but folly is too much a part of a fool to take it from him.”

Obviously, as Christians, we believe that God’s grace is powerful enough to save and transform anybody. But Proverbs repeats this theme over and over again. The fool is intractable, or unteachable. A wise man or woman is one who is teachable. In your own life, are *you* teachable?

Proverbs repeatedly tells us you can teach a wise person. But with a fool, you are just wasting your breath. Would your family call you teachable? Does your spouse? Do your co-workers or people at church consider you humble and open to correction? Does God?

Submitted by:

Josh Whitney
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Draper, Utah

One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 9:7-10:20
Mark 4:26-5:20
Psalm 37:30-40
Proverbs 10:6-7

Our Evil Way

After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way. – 1 Kings 13:33 ESV

This verse follows a story about Jeroboam, a king of Israel, who had twice seen the power of God demonstrated in response to disobedience. First, as a godly prophet reprimanded Jeroboam's unrighteousness, the king's hand shriveled as he sought punishment of the seer for speaking out. Later, after being healed from that debilitation, Jeroboam would have heard that the prophet was killed by a lion for violating the command of the Lord.

Initially, one might think that a double encounter with the power of God expressed towards disobedient unrighteousness would be enough to make Jeroboam "walk right" and repent of his sin. But no, we see instead that he "did not turn from his evil way."

Isn't this consistent with our own observation? Think of the high rate of recidivism of those who spend time in our "correctional facilities." Or, of substance abuse relapses even after hospitalization or intense addiction therapies. At a spiritual level, we can all certainly recall individuals who have had a clear encounter with Jesus but who (either quickly or later on) return to their old broken habits. And even our own lives demonstrate the repetitive nature of our disobedience towards God's commands.

First John 1:9 tells us that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." What power there is in the blood of Christ! Jesus paid the penalty on our behalf so that we would be free from the eternal consequences of our sin, and so that we could freely make new choices. Today, let's walk in paths of righteousness as a response to God's forgiveness of our "evil way."

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Greg Miller	Leviticus 11:1-12:8
The Firehouse Church	Mark 5:21-43
Denver, Colorado	Psalms 38:1-22
	Proverbs 10:8-9

Guilt — That Awful Neighbor

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. – Romans 8:1-2 ESV

What do you do with your guilt? With the feelings of remorse over sin? With lingering thoughts of sorrow and shame? Guilt is like that awful neighbor who's always poking his head up over the fence to tell us how terrible our garden looks.

Where do you turn when you feel burdened with guilt or shame?

The world has several options. Many people have tried to shut out feelings of guilt by lowering their own moral standards. Some will flat out deny the existence of God and the belief that there is a right and wrong. Another route takes people to drugs, religion, and therapy. We will try anything that offers us help! Yet none of these paths actually has the ability to relieve us of our guilt. The good news, though, is that Jesus can.

God gave us the solution for all of our guilt, all of our sin, and all of our shame by giving us a Perfect Savior, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:1-2 above assures us of our freedom from condemnation.

These are not my words, but the very words of God Himself. He has taken extreme measures to relieve us from the bondage of our sin. God has declared us forgiven because of the perfect righteousness of Christ. There is no sin that Christ can't atone for, no guilt that can condemn us, and no shame that God doesn't cover.

Whenever you have those feelings of guilt that won't relent, cry out to Jesus to deliver you. Confess your sin, and give it to the One who has set you free. Cling to this precious Savior, and rest in His promise that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). Guilt is an awful neighbor. Don't invite him in.

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Bryan D. Edwards	Leviticus 14:1-57
The Rock Church	Mark 6:30-56
Draper, Utah	Psalms 40:1-10
	Proverbs 10:11-12

An Invitation Out of the "Kingdom of Me"

So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. – Matthew 6:31-33 NLT

Jesus invites us to leave the kingdom of "me" and live in a better Kingdom. How do we know when we are living in the "me" kingdom? *Worry.*

Last week, I had to replace the water pump in one of our cars. The water pump? Really? What's a water pump? All I know is it cost more than I wanted to pay. It triggered the "Will I have enough?" worry in my heart. I was living in the kingdom of "me." But where's the exit?

Seek the Kingdom of God. Instead of obsessing over "How do I pay for the water pump?", give thought to God's mission in this world. How can we make the gospel known? How can we better bless and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Live Righteously. Living righteously means living rightly because of what Jesus has done. It's where the rubber meets the road. It means keeping promises when it's difficult. Or being a peacemaker when it's tempting to argue. Living righteously means compassion for people in need. It means generosity. It means forgiveness. It means love.

Live by Faith. Jesus promises that if we concern ourselves with His Kingdom instead of our own, He will be sure we have what we need. (The Lord's definition of "need" may be different from ours.) Our faith may be tested, but that's good. Faith pleases God and is essential for "Kingdom of God" living. Without faith, we are right back in the "me" kingdom.

So if you're living in the "me" kingdom, take heart. There's something better waiting for you. And you're invited.

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Spencer Bernard	Leviticus 13:1-59
Evergreen Churches	Mark 6:1-29
Bloomington, Minnesota	Psalms 39:1-13
	Proverbs 10:10

Faith Can Overcome Your "Facts"!

Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. – Romans 4:29 NIV

Abraham gives us a great example of how to have faith while at the same time facing the "facts." It's common that people let go of one or the other, instead of holding on to both.

Sometimes people will let go of what our faith in a miracle-working God can bring into our finite equations, and they will only operate in what they see as the "hard facts." Other times people will let go of reality and have some sort of happy-go-lucky, semi-delusional attitude that pretends like the huge challenges or overwhelming odds that we face aren't actually a big deal at all. That disconnect is *not* the same thing as faith that glorifies God. The reality is that your faith can engage God to supernaturally overcome the facts that you might be facing.

In Abraham's story, the fact was that he was a hundred years old and his wife was ninety, and people don't normally bear children at that age! (That's kind of laughable, right?) But Abraham believed that our Creator, "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Romans 4:18), was not limited to the natural laws that normally constrain you and me (and the rest of creation). He believed that God was able to do anything and everything that He had promised. The rest is literally history—Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, Israel.

Are you currently facing any challenging facts or laughable odds in your life? Mountains of debt? Relational show-stoppers? Biological barriers? Health hardships? Abraham's example should give us all reason for high hopes! Your faith in God can be an exponential equation-changer, a monumental game-changer, or even a radical life-changer!

Submitted by:	One-Year Bible Reading
Rich Thatcher	Leviticus 15:1-16:28
The Firehouse Church,	Mark 7:1-23
Parker, Colorado	Psalms 40:11-17
	Proverbs 10:13-14

Moses is Dead

"Moses, My servant, is dead." – Joshua 1:2

God is talking with Joshua and making a matter-of-fact statement. Moses, His servant, is dead. He then proceeds to give Joshua instructions on going into the Promised Land. However, so much history is tied up in the two words "My Servant"!

Look at Moses' life: plucked from the Nile, brought up in royalty, out-cast from his own people. Those things happened to Moses. But then he fled to Midian, met God at a burning bush, talked to Him personally, went back to Egypt, challenged Pharaoh with God's miracles, led millions of Israelites across the Red Sea and toward the Promised Land, met God on Mt. Sinai, and brought back the Ten Commandments. So much happened while wandering in the desert, but Moses stayed true to his leadership role and did as God commanded him to do.

This resumé is quite impressive! If Moses were living today, no doubt he would be internationally known and sought out by many governments to come and do courageous work in their country. He would have the ear of world leaders and perhaps the opportunity to work for world peace.

But Matthew 20:26 says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant." In God's phrase "My servant" is wrapped up so much: someone with a character of extreme humility who desired to honor and bring glory to the Almighty God. In today's world, that kind of character is not equated with greatness. But who are you trying to impress? Someone in this world or God Almighty? God's standards for greatness are not of this world, but the rewards are out of this world. When thinking of what I want on my tombstone, I think it would be awesome to read, "Barbara, My servant, is dead."

Submitted by:

Barbara Wilson
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Raleigh, North Carolina

One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 16:29-18:30
Mark 7:24-8:10
Psalm 41:1-13
Proverbs 10:15-16

The Bike Wagon

...those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. – Proverbs 11:25

It was a long day. A lousy day. A day filled with the clutter of a long to-do list making my head pound with a dull pain. And then came the meeting. At two in the afternoon I met with someone who had complicated issues and complaints about our church. Two hours later I left the meeting a wreck. I felt exhausted. I felt wound up. My head hurt worse.

I went home at about 6:00. Lacing up my tennis shoes, I went for a walk. I walked fast and long, reliving the painful day in my thoughts. I prayed, but stayed miserable. After a few miles I turned around and walked back. When I got home, my feet ached, and my head still throbbed. The next morning was garbage day, so I opened the garage door to put the trash on the corner. And then I saw it . . . the bike wagon.

It was one of those wagons you hook behind your bike to take your kids for a ride. I remember both my kids fitting in as youngsters, but that was years ago. We had used it a lot, but it looked almost new. I pulled the bike wagon out of the garage and brought it over to our neighbors.

"You guys want a bike wagon?"

"Sure! How much?"

"Nothing. It's yours."

"Wow . . . you sure? Thanks . . ."

I sat on my front steps and watched as they hooked up the wagon to one of their bikes. Smiling, I watched as their kids, in oversized bike helmets, circled around Dad as he pumped up the tires and tightened the connections. And then I watched as their family took their first bike ride together. The weather was beautiful that night, sunny with a slight breeze. As they turned the corner and pedaled out of sight, I realized something. No more headache. "Those who refresh others . . ."

Submitted by:

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Bloomington, Minnesota

One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 19:1-20:21
Mark 8:11-38
Psalm 42:1-11
Proverbs 10:17

God's Love?

Fill their faces with dishonor, that they may seek Thy name, O Lord. – Psalm 83:16

God will use whatever it takes to draw His chosen to Himself. Whatever. Look at God's treatment of the children of Israel. Again and again, they would be conquered by the enemy. Why? Didn't God love them?

Of course, God loved them. He still does. But God knew that when the enemy came, the Israelites would turn their hearts back to God. God's desire for them to live for Him was greater than His desire for them to live "happy" lives by doing whatever they wanted. God knows that the world's "happiness" **always** leads to despair and ultimately to separation from God.

The darkest time in my life was when my sister died. She was my best friend. At the same time I was having difficulties with the student group I was with, and my writing stank. Everything that was important was taken away. What I was left with—the only thing I was certain of—was that God loved me. I said that was the darkest time, but spiritually it was a time of cementing my faith. God used that dark time to draw me closer and make me stronger in Him.

What things in your life has God allowed, or is God presently allowing in order to draw you back or closer to Him? Thank God for those things. He loves you enough to draw you to Him.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 20:22-22:16
Mark 9:1-29
Psalm 43:1-5
Proverbs 10:18

Give Thanks

He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me. – Psalm 50:23 NIV

I really love serving God. I mean it—my heart, through and through, longs to do more for Him. I love serving God's people; I love playing music for Him, and I love knowing Him more and more. Each day I seek to bring honor to God by serving Him.

That being said, this verse in Psalm 50 recently really impacted me. Prior to verse 23, God had been reminding His people that though they "sacrifice" to Him, what really brings Him honor is giving thanks to Him.

WOW! What an amazing God! In other words, though God is pleased with our "service" to Him, what honors Him, what brings a smile to His face all the more, is our heartfelt thanks to Him.

When was the last time you really thanked God? This came as a challenge to me when I read this verse. I mean, I thank God often, but it had been a while since I *really* thanked Him. After reading this verse, I decided to spend my morning's prayer time *only* thanking God. At first, I thanked Him for the obvious stuff like His salvation and my family. After a few minutes, however, I found myself even thanking Him for the coffee I was drinking.

Through thanksgiving, God drew me out. Through thanksgiving, God reminded me that *everything* I have is truly a gift from Him. Through thanksgiving, God reminded me that He is worthy of my worship and praise (beyond the gifts that He gives). He is worthy because He is God!

This week, spend some time thanking God—it honors Him and it will bless you!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 22:17-23:44
Mark 9:30-10:12
Psalm 44:1-8
Proverbs 10:19