

## A Heart Captured

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. 1 John 4:18*

We humans have become quite adept at manipulating and coercing others to do what we want them to do. We know how to pile on fear and guilt to force people to act. Many religions use guilt for their nefarious purposes. Peer pressure and pride also work well to get others to join the movement or conform to our values. Dangerous indeed!

We Christians are not exempt from motivating others in these ways. We may start with good intentions, but our methods can slip into operating in the flesh.

How can we tell the difference? One of our adult daughters asked me this week, "How can we sincerely love God? What does it look like?" All of us know how to go through the motions of "loving God" while not having a sincere heart to know and love Him. How can we have a "heart for God" like King David? Paul spoke of him in Acts, "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will'" (13:22).

The Creator of the universe wants to capture your heart with His amazing love! The Lord Jesus brought freedom from guilt and fear when He took your punishment on the cross. When He has captured your heart with His love, you will be able to motivate others in the same way. Fantastic!

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Ezekiel 1:1-3:15  
 Hebrews 3:1-19  
 Psalm 104:1-23  
 Proverbs 26:24-26

## A Heart Captured – 2

*Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:1-3*

We noticed yesterday how God's way of motivating others is the opposite of the fear, guilt, peer pressure, and pride we may employ. God wants to capture our hearts with His love. He longs for us serve others from a heart filled with pure love, not from obligation. Paul admonished his fellow elders to love others voluntarily from the heart. He instructed them to serve others gladly and "not under compulsion." Let's follow the example of Christ who motivated others by loving them first.

Trying to make someone do something, even something noble, is never a good idea. Instead, God says, "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Ask God to motivate you by His love so that in turn you can motivate others by His love and grace. How have you attempted to motivate your friends, co-workers, spouse, fellow elders, or children? Has it been with Christ's love or something else? Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit to love this way, "for the love of Christ controls us."

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Ezekiel 3:16-6:14  
 Hebrews 4:1-16  
 Psalm 104:24-35  
 Proverbs 26:27

## Messy People – 3

*Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart. 1 Peter 1:22*

Have you noticed that working with people is messy? Whether it's working with fellow employees, working alongside your classmates, raising your children, or making disciples, it's always messy! How does one motivate these messy people with all their issues? The past two days we have seen how not to force them, but to help them to live loved instead. As they experience Christ's love, they will act with a holy motivation. The last thing these folks want is to be treated as a project. Instead, they want to be respected, honored, and treated with dignity and kindness. Nobody likes to be seen as a number or an inanimate object without feelings or personality. It is in direct opposition to who God created us to be: special and unique relational beings. Therefore, we who seek to motivate need to see these folks as Christ does—as precious people and not as projects!

Another pitfall to healthy motivation is when programs take priority over the people in them. Programs start and stop. People never stop needing help to grow in their relationship with God and others. Have you noticed the conspicuous absence of programs Jesus used in His ministry? Have you ever wondered why?

God knows that we tend to latch onto programs and promote them, often as the latest solution to the needs in our church, family, or personal life. We must be careful not to depend on a program above the Lord Himself. We don't want a program to bind us and inhibit our creativity, spontaneity, or faith in God. Remember, it's all about your relationship with God and with people! Live with your heart captured by Christ's love, so that you can love those messy people!

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Ezekiel 7:1-9:11  
 Hebrews 5:1-14  
 Psalm 105:1-15  
 Proverbs 26:28

## How Living Loved Affects Your Giving

*Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5*

Being asked for money is one of the reasons many say they avoid church. They say churches are always asking for money. To make it more comfortable, our church used to tell visitors not to feel obligated to give when the offering plate was passed. Later we put the offering boxes in the back of the room.

What is God actually looking for when it comes to giving to His work on earth? These believers in Macedonia were fantastic examples of giving from a place of love. They knew (experientially) the love which God had for them, and that love motivated them to give sacrificially to others. Paul described them like this: "For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will" (2 Corinthians 8:3 NLT).

There was no manipulation, guilt, or pressure by Paul or others to make these Christians give. They were simply living loved, and this is how it was manifested.

Are you giving out of obligation or from a place of feeling loved?

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Ezekiel 10:1-11:25  
 Hebrews 6:1-20  
 Psalm 105:16-36  
 Proverbs 27:1-2

## MAGA Hats and “Never Trumpers”

*[Jesus] appointed the twelve . . . Matthew . . . and Simon the Zealot. Mark 3:16-18*

Jesus selected twelve young men to be His closest followers. They were mostly uneducated, “blue collar worker” types. God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. I want to focus on two disciples, Matthew and Simon, to see the incredible unity that can be found in Christ.

First, notice that Jesus called Matthew (or Levi) the tax collector. Tax collection would have been seen as a job traitorous to the nation. The Romans had conquered Israel around 63 B.C. Tax collectors were often corrupt, taking more money than necessary from the people. So Matthew worked for the oppressive conquerors, possibly taking too much money from his own countrymen. Jesus called Matthew to leave that old life behind and be His follower.

Second, notice Jesus called Simon the Zealot. Zealots were Zionist radicals. Radicals killed traitors. In fact, there are stories of zealots murdering Roman soldiers, stabbing them as they walked through a crowd. Zealots were fanatical patriots who were in favor of the immediate revolt against Rome. Jesus called Simon to leave that old life behind and be His follower.

Jesus called a traitorous tax collector and a fanatical revolutionary. To modernize this, it would be like Jesus picking a MAGA hat-wearing President Trump fan and a “Never Trump” President Trump hater to be His followers. Jesus can take a radical zealot and a sell-out traitor and unite them to follow Him. Matthew and Simon had to change their previous, primary identities and make following Christ their primary identity.

Jesus provides the hope for the divides in our country as well. If we will follow Him. If we are willing to unite behind Jesus. If we are willing to make Christ our primary identity. Healing is found in following Jesus.

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Ezekiel 12:1-14:11  
 Hebrews 7:1-17  
 Psalm 105:37-45  
 Proverbs 27:3

Thursday, November 7

## A Savior for Those in Need of Saving

*[God our Savior] wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.*

*1 Timothy 2:3-4 NLT*

When my 15-year-old son and I set out to climb a mountain, we brought along water for what we thought was a three-hour hike. It was 101 and we were in the desert. After four hours I knew I didn't have enough energy to make it back to the car. After 4 ½ hours I called my wife to meet up with us. At five hours we were rescued and were gulping down the Gatorade she had brought. About ten minutes later I started blacking out. After a trip to the hospital I felt better, but I was embarrassed that I had gotten myself into such a desperate situation.

Here's my question: what did I do wrong? I didn't bring enough water. I didn't estimate the length of the hike well. I didn't turn back when I realized the hike was too long.

What did I do right? I called for help when I needed it. I knew that I couldn't get out on my own, and I swallowed my pride and made the call.

Some people think that religion is a crutch. They think it is for people who are weak and helpless. I've never really understood that. If you can make it without God, then great! Go for it! But if you can't be perfect or holy or heaven-worthy on your own (and you can't), then I don't see the problem with crying out for help.

I'll admit it. I need a rescuer. I need a Savior. There may be shame in my need and brokenness, but there is no shame in calling out for help when I can't make it on my own. It's not that I need a spiritual crutch. I need a stretcher.

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Ezekiel 16:42-17:24  
 Hebrews 8:1-13  
 Psalm 106:13-31  
 Proverbs 27:7-9

## Join Me

*Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. Philippians 3:17 NIV*

Jesus said He did not come to call the righteous, those who don't think they need a Savior, but He came to call sinners, those who know they need a Savior. To that end, Jesus approached a public figure, Matthew, and said, “Follow Me.” Jesus may have known that in following Him, Matthew would one day be put to death. According to legend, he was stabbed to death during his Ethiopian ministry. Still Jesus did not hesitate to challenge Matthew to follow Him. We too should not hesitate to call people into faith in Jesus and to following Him. This will impact a new believer's family, career, friends . . . yes, one could even be called to die. Still we must challenge them to the high calling of following Christ.

Matthew, in response, left everything . . . and he was a rich man, a tax collector. He followed Jesus on the path to reach sinners. In fact, the first thing Matthew did, after leaving everything behind, was to throw a party at his home. He invited the disciples, Jesus, and plenty of sinners. He also faced the first opposition in following Jesus. The Pharisees and Sadducees grumbled against Jesus eating with the likes of Matthew and his tax collector friends.

We're not sure who those Pharisees and Sadducees were, at least by name. We do know, however, who Matthew was, what he did and how he died. We know that for following Jesus he became someone “for whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38).

And now, two thousand years later, Jesus is still asking people to follow Him and to call others to follow Him: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2). We need to pray for laborers.

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Ezekiel 14:12-16:41  
 Hebrews 7:18-28  
 Psalm 106:1-12  
 Proverbs 27:4-6

Friday, November 8

## A Rough Row to Hoe

*. . . in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:8*

“Walking Beans” is a term Iowa farm kids my age would well remember. Standing at one end of half-mile long, weedy bean rows and knowing you had to pull all the weeds in your assigned rows was sometimes daunting. Bean rows straddling cornfields, where corn encroached into the neighboring bean rows, were the “rough rows to hoe.”

Jesus called His twelve disciples and empowered them to fulfill an assignment He had given them. Their names are listed in Matthew 10:2-4. Their life assignment meant they would not be above their teacher but would become like their teacher (10:25) and assigned “rough rows.”

Having given them their assignment, Jesus underscored just how tough the “rows” ahead of them would be. They would become financially dependent upon those they served (10:9-10), they would be living out of a “suitcase” (10:11-13), some they sought to help would reject them (10:14), they would be surrounded by enemies (10:16), they would need to pursue personal integrity and wisdom in the midst of an unholy world (10:16), they would be physically tortured (10:17), they would be betrayed even by family members (10:21), they would be hated by all (10:22), they would be persecuted (10:23). For some, life may be easy, but not for them. Jesus' followers would be assigned the “rough rows.”

But these were men who came to love God's appearing. They came to believe life's challenges were “momentary light afflictions” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18), and one day there would be an “eternal weight of glory,” a reward unsurpassed. Suffering loss *will* follow those following Jesus. Never forget, however, the promised reward.

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 Hebrews 9:1-10  
 Psalm 106:32-48  
 Proverbs 27:10

## Keep Going!

*We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*  
 1 John 3:2-3

On August 27, 1776, George Washington lost the battle of Long Island, also known as the Battle of Brooklyn. It was the largest battle of the Revolutionary War. However, Washington was outmaneuvered by General William Howe, and his troops were eventually driven completely out of New York through New Jersey into Pennsylvania. Never again during the war would the American troops occupy New York. After the defeat, Washington lost several thousand troops. They quit. They lost sight of the goal and gave up and went home. Their commander, however, never considered surrender because he knew that what he was fighting for was too great. Thus, Washington inspired his remaining men to continue fighting by reminding them that freedom from tyranny for them and their families was worth the battle.

1 John 3:3 reminds us of the reason we are fighting this fight of faith – a great reward awaits us in Heaven. No doubt, we may want to throw in the towel when trials mount. Life is too hard. But as we fix our hope on the return of Christ, as we look full in His wonderful face, “the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” Keeping our hope fixed on Christ’s return purifies us. This keeps us from quitting, from giving up.

One day this difficult life for us will end and glory will begin. Just as George Washington knew the end victory was worth staying in the fight, so should we.

Heaven awaits. Stay strong, my friend.

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Ezekiel 20:1-49  
 Hebrews 9:11-28  
 Psalm 107:1-43  
 Proverbs 27:11

Monday, November 11

## Honor to whom Honor Is Due

*Give everyone what you owe him . . . if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*  
 Romans 13:7 NIV

I grew up in a veteran’s family. My dad was one of the few in his company who survived the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. Although he had bragging rights due to his experience, I seldom heard war stories growing up, and it wasn’t until I was an adult that I began to truly understand the sacrifice and amazing amount of courage and loyalty that Dad had displayed as a soldier. The stories that had lain dormant for so many years began to emerge, and my appreciation for Dad and what he had endured soared. He became my hero!

This past spring I attended the burial of my brother-in-law Tom, a navy veteran of Viet Nam and a career officer. He too, had his own stories of service in the military, and he too was respected deeply by our family and his military family. Veterans who had never met Tom lined the cemetery pavilion, standing at attention and bearing flags throughout the burial service. “It is my privilege and honor, Ma’am,” they answered as they responded to my sister’s thank yous for their attendance that day.

These two men in my family shared a common bond, that of military service. Each gave up years of his life, laying down privileges and freedoms, to serve and protect the American people. They stood in my place to keep me safe. I honor them and all veterans like them for their loyalty and commitment.

God, to whom all honor belongs, instructs us to be people who honor others: children their parents, churches their hard-working leaders, citizens their king. The above verse states, “Honor those to whom it’s due.” Start by honoring a veteran today.

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Ezekiel 23:1-49  
 Hebrews 10:18-39  
 Psalm 109:1-31  
 Proverbs 27:13

## How to Win an Argument

*And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.* Acts 15:12

It was a pivotal moment in the history of Christianity. The gospel had spread out of Jerusalem and Israel into Gentile nations. Many of these non-Jews had come to a living faith in Jesus Christ, and God was working in their lives in wonderful ways. But a problem arose. There were those in the Jewish community that maintained that these new converts needed to be circumcised and needed also to follow the laws of Moses in order to be saved. This was horrifying to Paul and Barnabas. So they were off to Jerusalem to “state their case.”

What happens in Acts 15 is a wonderful example on how to win an argument. After hearing from the antagonists on this issue, and also from Peter, the “jury” hears from Barnabas and Paul. What is striking is not only what they say but also what they do not say. There is no indication that Paul and Barnabas present theological arguments to defend their cause. Instead of presenting “their words,” their arguments, Paul and Barnabas present “God’s works.” They devote their time on the “witness stand” to giving an account of all the great things that God was doing among the Gentiles. That is, they let God do the “arguing” for them!

Paul and Barnabas understood something: They realized that God was with them! It wasn’t Paul and Barnabas’ idea to preach to the Gentiles. And Paul and Barnabas didn’t save the Gentiles. God did. And just as God did the saving work with these new believers, it was up to God to “win the argument.”

Are you letting God win your arguments today?

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Ezekiel 21:1-22:31  
 Hebrews 10:1-17  
 Psalm 108:1-13  
 Proverbs 27:12

Tuesday, November 12

## No Pawns

*And He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.”* Luke 21:3-4

Have you ever felt used by people, like a pawn, perhaps even spiritual leaders? Have you felt demeaned or put down? Have you ever felt out-classed? “I’m a nobody!” “My gifts are not very important, in fact, I’m not sure if I have gifts, certainly not like so and so!” “They’re smart, I’m dumb; they’re spiritual, I’m carnal; they’re pretty, I’m ugly; they’re better, I’m worse!” Sometimes it’s our low self-esteem, but sometimes it’s the pride of others, and they actually do make us feel that way. I have been in many leaders’ meetings over the course of my life; there were times I walked away feeling badly, feeling disrespected, unheard. Sometimes those feelings were on me for comparing myself, but sometimes those leaders were about themselves (I’m no exception). Today’s passage is a reminder that there are no pawns in God’s kingdom.

Jesus watched people putting their gifts into the temple treasury, for the receptacle was in plain view. He was struck by the contrast of gifts given by the rich and a gift given by a poor widow. The rich gave some, the widow gave all—in God’s eyes, that meant she gave the most. They gave out of their abundance and what cost them little. She gave out of her need and from her very livelihood.

Jesus had just sent a message to Herod that He had a few more days of performing His ministry (casting out demons and healing people) before it would be over, and He would face death in Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-33). The last public lesson of His ministry given before His crucifixion is the story of the widow with her two copper coins. Jesus gave His all. He values those who give their all, no matter how small.

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 Hebrews 11:1-16  
 Psalm 110:1-7  
 Proverbs 27:14

## What Is Your Worth?

*This is how God showed his love to us: He sent his one and only Son into the world so that we could have life through him. This is what real love is: It is not our love for God; it is God's love for us. He sent his Son to die in our place to take away our sins.*

1 John 4:9-10 NCV

What is a buffalo nickel worth? Many of these coins can be bought online for about a buck, but a few rare ones can be worth thousands of dollars. The rarity and condition of the coin greatly affect the price. However, on the coin it says, "FIVE CENTS." So what is it *really* worth? The answer is simple; it is worth whatever somebody is willing to pay for it.

Do you ever feel worthless? At times it may seem like no one cares. No one notices. You may feel like just one average person among billions. Imagine if someone came along and said, "I see so much potential in you that I am going to pay for your college." Or if they said, "I will give you a million dollars to play basketball for our team." The amount they were willing to pay would help you see your worth in their eyes.

The following should help you see your *true* worth: God loves you so much that He sent His much loved Son to die on the cross as a payment for your sins. He did this because He loves you deeply, and sin was standing in the way of Him having a relationship with you. He paid an unimaginable price for your sins and to get to you. You may not feel like much at face value, but you are priceless to God.

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Ezekiel 27:1-28:26

Hebrews 11:17-31

Psalms 111:1-10

Proverbs 27:15-16

## Pennies From Heaven

*What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.*

Luke 12:6-7 NLT

You have probably heard the adage, "See a penny, pick it up, all day long you'll have good luck." I am definitely a penny picker-upper. I love finding those little copper coins on the street, and I collect them in a jar. But pennies have gotten bad press lately. It costs the U.S. Mint two cents to make each one-cent coin. Many argue that they are not worthwhile to produce and should be eliminated.

I think we can learn some good spiritual lessons from the penny. Sometimes the little things that are overlooked have the greatest value to God. Proverbs 20:15 tells us, "*Wise words are more valuable than much gold and many rubies*" (NLT).

Another lesson is that little things matter. Every act of faithfulness and every kind deed might seem insignificant by itself, but they add up and make a difference to a watching world. As Luke 16:10 puts it, "If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones" (NLT).

Lastly, we may feel like we can't make a difference by ourselves, but when we join with others we can have a big impact. In Ecclesiastes 4:9, God tells us, "Two people are better than one, because they get more done by working together" (NCV). Recently I rolled my pennies and had \$8.50. That is enough to take a friend out for ice cream or for a nice shopping spree at a thrift store!

So the next time you see a penny on the sidewalk, take a moment to think of the value of little things.

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Ezekiel 29:1-30:26

Hebrews 11:32-12:13

Psalms 112:1-10

Proverbs 27:17

## Hope from Habakkuk

*I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guardpost. There I will wait to see what the Lord says and how he will answer my complaint. Habakkuk 2:1 NLT*

Habakkuk lived in perilous times politically, morally, spiritually. Everywhere he looked, he saw injustice. His question to God was "How long?" (1:2). *How long will this go on, God? When will you intervene?*

Does this remind you of our country and our times today?

How do we move from complaining to rejoicing in the midst of unresolved trouble at both the national and personal level, as Habakkuk did? We can learn some valuable lessons from him.

First, hold on. Stay at your watchtower. In faith Habakkuk questions God: *Will you wipe us out by those who do not acknowledge You?* "We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof." *But why would You use wicked people to hurt those more righteous than they?* Habakkuk questions God: "Why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" (1:13). Habakkuk asked these questions from his vantage point in history. He could not know that God would use the Babylonian Dispersion to spread Jews all around the Mediterranean Sea, Jews who built synagogues in every city, places where the gospel was first preached after Christ's advent here.

Second, rest in God's timing. God has a time and season for all His plans, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. But He tells Habakkuk, "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (2:2-3). Our instructions are both to run and to wait patiently! Because the vision *will* be fulfilled. God's plans *will* come to pass.

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Hebrews 12:14-29

Psalms 113:1-114:8

Proverbs 27:18-20

## Hope from Habakkuk – 2

*... yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights. Habakkuk 3:18-19 NLT*

Yesterday we talked about staying at your watchtower, waiting on a word from God, and also resting in God's timing. When our circumstances are hard and we have a lot of unanswered questions, neither of these comes naturally—they are acts of faith. And faith pleases God.

We also learn from Habakkuk to rest in hope. This is the third lesson. As Christians we look forward finally to the renewal of *all* things. We know from the Word that first sin must be eradicated. That is God's work. Then Jesus will return. Habakkuk says, "I will yet rejoice in the Lord!" He says this just after he lists the things that can go wrong. His is a faith that looks beyond the disappointing present. It also looks back. Scripture tells us Habakkuk sang the following words as a prayer: "I have heard all about you, Lord. I am filled with awe by your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, help us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy" (3:2 NLT). Anchor your hope in God.

Finally, we are to rest in the Gospel. Our leaders are to remain Christ-centered preachers, teaching the cross as the goodness and love of God. We go to the cross for our salvation; we grow only as we remember what Christ did for us on the cross. We say with Habakkuk, "I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!"

China in the 30s and 40s kicked out all the Christian missionaries and began persecuting the Chinese Christians. Churches were closed. All seemed lost. But when the churches closed, house churches began. Now China has one of the most viable, fast-growing branches of Christianity in the world. God has a way of bringing victory out of defeat.

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Bloomington, Minnesota

### One-Year Bible Reading

Ezekiel 33:1-34:31

Hebrews 13:1-25

Psalms 115:1-18

Proverbs 27:21-22

## A Time for Every Matter

*There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven . . . Ecclesiastes 3:1*

Do you believe God knows every detail of your daily life? And that He “superintends” your comings and goings? I do. I say with Job, “But He knows the way I take” (Job 23:10). In September I experienced His supernatural, tender care in the events of two days. “God is so good!” I can stand and shout, as the children did in our Good News Club yesterday (the *Word Up* for the day).

For two days John and I had been on standby to collect our grandson Amos so his parents could go to a birthing center to meet Amos’s baby brother. Two nights of intermittent labor had not resulted in a birth, but on September 11<sup>th</sup> we got a 4 a.m. call and then the news of Henry Isaac’s arrival just after 6:00. We rejoiced and drove to get Amos out of his crib (with his uncle’s presence until we got there). After I put Amos down for his afternoon nap, I caught up on texts and emails on my phone. I discovered that about two hours earlier my stepmother Carol had written to say that my dad took a fall two mornings earlier and was not expected to survive. Did I want to come to New Mexico to see him?

Yes, I did. John drove back from out of town, and we met at Amos’s house to see his parents and Henry Isaac and watch Amos meet him. Great joy! Later that night I found the only non-stop flight from KC out to New Mexico for the next day, buying one of two remaining tickets.

The Retreat was a half-hour Uber ride from the airport. I walked straight to Dad’s room and was able to be at his side with Carol when he died three hours later. Great sorrow. . . . God’s faithful and kind hand was in both days’ events. Through many prayers I was supplied with His grace and peace. “A time to be born, and a time to die,” both from God.

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**One-Year Bible Reading**  
 Ezekiel 35:1-36:38  
 James 1:1-18  
 Psalm 116:1-19  
 Proverbs 27:23-27

Tuesday, November 19

## “But God . . .”

*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*

At our Life Group, we did a geneograph, looking back at our family tree to see what traits we have inherited from our family. It can explain some of why we are who we are. As I looked at my grandparents, I saw so much hurt and brokenness. So much of their lives without God. Both my parents grew up mostly without God, but became thriving, growing Christians by the time I was born. It was them turning to God that has made the difference in my life. My parent’s “But God” is what gave me my stable, loving childhood.

My dad was in an orphanage until he was five. He could barely speak when his mother took him out. He had a rough upbringing. On my mom’s side, her dad was a secret alcoholic. That affected her childhood. When my parents married, my dad wasn’t a Christian, and my mom wasn’t living for God. But God turned their lives around. Because of their “But God,” I grew up in a loving, stable home. Yes, there were many hard things, especially because my parents’ “But God” happened after their marriage. However, I see God’s hand so clearly in my parents’ lives. I know that without God’s influence, my life would have been so much worse. My parents’ “But God” changed the family’s character. Their “But God” played a huge part in who I am today.

Thank You, Lord, for my parents’ “But God.” All praise goes to You.

Thanksgiving is coming soon. Often families gather for this time. What are you thankful for that you can share in that setting? What is your “But God” story?

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 James 2:18-3:18  
 Psalm 118:1-18  
 Proverbs 28:2

## Take Hold

*Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*

*1 Timothy 6:12*

People don’t realize the value of safety features in buildings that have been required by law until they become disabled. I received a permanent leg injury in an auto accident a few years ago. I notice it most when going down stairs. I look for a stout railing to grab onto so I don’t stumble, fall, and reinjure myself. I am so thankful for strong railings which help me to navigate the potential hazard of a stairway.

In the above verse, Paul was challenging Timothy, to “fight the good fight of faith.” Living the life of faith is a fight. We have an enemy who opposes us. There are dangers to be avoided and spiritual wounds to be protected from. One of Paul’s practical suggestions for Timothy to fight this fight was for him to “grab hold” of eternal life.

What does this mean? We have been called by Jesus Christ to live with Him in a loving relationship for all eternity. He has, at great cost, bought and paid for our redemption and forgiveness. He has chosen us in order to bestow His love, mercy and kindness on us. This is our glorious destiny. Reminding ourselves of these facts enables us to persevere through the hardships and disappointments in a life of faith.

Do you want to “fight the good fight of faith”? Do you want to persevere while others fall by the wayside? Take hold of eternal life! One way for me to remember to do this is I asked the Lord to prompt me whenever I firmly grip a stairway rail to remind me to “grab hold” of eternal life.

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**One-Year Bible Reading**  
 Ezekiel 37:1-38:23  
 James 1:19-2:17  
 Psalm 117:1-2  
 Proverbs 28:1

Wednesday, November 20

## Conflict for Conflict Avoiders

*But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. Galatians 2:11 NLT*

Years ago I biked to a nearby store and locked up my bike. When I tried to leave, I found my combination lock had jammed, holding my bike prisoner. I rented a bolt cutter and came back later to jailbreak my Trek. As I walked up, a thought occurred to me. I was about to cut off a lock and walk away with a nice bike.

It would look like I was stealing it.

What would I say if someone stopped me and accused me of stealing? I had no way to prove the bike was mine. There were people all around. What if someone thinks he’s batman?

I cut the lock off and took my bike. Lots of people around, no one said a word. Bunch of conflict avoiders, I guess.

In Galatians 2, we see Paul in conflict with Peter. Here’s what he writes: “*But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong*” (Galatians 2:11 NLT).

A bid was move. Peter was a well-known and respected pillar of the church, as Paul himself acknowledged (verse 9). What made Paul fearless? Was he Batman? We find his secret in an earlier verse. Referring to Peter, James and John, he writes: “*their reputation as great leaders made no difference to me, for God has no favorites*” (Galatians 2:6 NLT).

There it is. Paul had a “big” view of God, which gave him a healthy view of people. The more we fear our Lord, the less we fear people. When we don’t fear people, we can move towards needed confrontation in love, even at the risk of losing their approval.

If you struggle with avoiding confrontation, consider this. Are people too big in your life because God is too small?

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 Ezekiel 40:28-41:26  
 James 4:1-17  
 Psalm 118:19-29  
 Proverbs 28:3-5

### Conflict for Conflict Avoiders – 2

*When he [Peter] first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. Galatians 2:12 NLT*

Back in the gos we lived in Nashville. Beautiful town, great people, horrible bugs—especially the dreaded camelback crickets. If you’ve never seen one of these, imagine finding a large spider on the wall. And when you approach it, it jumps.

Shudder . . .

Everyone once in a while we’d find one of these little beasts in our town-home. I couldn’t figure out how they got in the house, until one day I looked in our storage closet. The closet was outside, but connected to the house. I opened the door looking for a suitcase and . . . Behold. Dozens of the little monsters. Maybe millions.

Stunned, I closed the door and did the smart thing. The practical thing. The heroic thing. I ignored them and hoped they would go away.

They didn’t. Conflict can be like that.

In Galatians 2, Peter is a conflict avoider. Some Jewish Christians visit the Antioch church and pressure Peter to stop eating with the Gentile Christians. Peter avoids the conflict. Here’s how Paul tells it: “But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision” (Galatians 2:12 NLT).

Peter avoids conflict. Does the problem go away? Let’s look: “As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter’s hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Galatians 2:13 NLT). Things get worse.

Conflict avoiders, take this lesson to heart. When you need to have a difficult conversation with someone, avoidance isn’t a good strategy. *Problems left on their own often get worse.*

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James 5:1-20

Psalms 119:1-16

Proverbs 28:6-7

### Conflict for Conflict Avoiders – 3

*. . . are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?*

*Galatians 2:14 NLT*

Ever have a conversation blow up? I have.

As a pastor and former music director, I would occasionally have difficult conversations with people. Usually they went well, but every once in a while . . . Kaboom!

If I could re-do those conversations, I think they’d go better today. Why? I’ve learned something over the years, and Paul will show us the same principal. In Galatians 2, Peter has caved into pressure to shun the Gentile Christians. Paul ain’t having it. He confronts Peter: “When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, “Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?” (Galatians 2:14 NLT).

What does Paul begin with? A question. What if Paul would have instead used statements?

“Peter, you’re a hypocrite and are leading others into the same hypocrisy.” That would put Peter on the defensive more than a question. Even rhetorical questions (like Paul’s) are less inflammatory than throwing out statements. Notice how often Jesus confronted with questions:

*If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? . . . And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? . . . Do wedding guests mourn while celebrating with the groom?*

Ok, conflict avoiders. Take a lesson. When engaged in a tough conversation, be careful with statements. Instead, ask questions. Questions encourage communication. They encourage thought. Maybe you’ll find out details you didn’t know. Your best friend in conflict? Questions.

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1 Peter 1:1-12

Psalms 119:17-32

Proverbs 28:8-10

### Conflict for Conflict Avoiders – 4

*So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.*

*Galatians 2:20-21 NLT*

When I was fourteen, I got into a scuffle with the school bully. I didn’t do it because I was Mike Tyson. I did it because he made me mad enough to not care. He teased me until I took a wild swing at him. Somehow I connected and gave him a black eye. Soon my lip was bloody, and later we were both suspended from school for a day.

I brought my fists into the conflict. Paul brings something better.

In Galatians 2, Peter refuses to eat with the Gentile Christians even though God has showed him (Acts 10) that no one is unclean or inferior. Paul confronts Peter. Paul begins with asking Peter why he’s making the Gentiles obey Jewish laws. But soon he says this: “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die” (Galatians 2:20-21 NLT).

He confesses how Christ saved him and has freed him from the Old Testament law. Christ died to free us.

Jesus faced the ultimate conflict for us. He faced sin and death.

So we can live in peace.

What did Paul bring to the conflict? The Gospel.

Conflict avoiders, that’s the lesson. Let the power of the Gospel help heal your conflicts. Bring it into the conversation. We can live in unity and peace because Jesus has already won the ultimate conflict for us.

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Ezekiel 45:13-46:24

1 Peter 1:13-2:10

Psalms 119:33-48

Proverbs 28:11

### Store It Up!

*I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*

*Psalms 119:11 ESV*

When we first moved into our home (now almost eighteen years ago), storage space in our kitchen was tight. Cupboards were limited, and back then with four kids in our home, we needed lots of food. To solve our storage problem, we built shelves at the bottom of our basement stairs. There was even a small alcove there to house our second refrigerator and upright freezer. Voila, a super pantry!

Granted, this was not ideal for storage. It involved added steps (thirteen to be exact) to get to our food stash—especially challenging on grocery shopping days! But this extra space was priceless. And in fact, even after remodeling our kitchen and adding cupboard space, we continue to make use of our beloved basement pantry for overflow and storage.

What makes this pantry so valuable? It allows me to have things on hand. When I need an item for cooking or baking, I can turn to my pantry, look over my organized shelves, and usually find what I need to complete my cooking project and so satisfy the appetites of family and friends.

In a similar way, I have come to realize that God’s Word is much like food for my soul and that the more I store it up in my heart, the more I have it on hand for God’s use. Every time I crack open my Bible and not only read it, but journal it, meditate on it, memorize it, and share it with others, I am “stocking my pantry.” I am giving God’s Holy Spirit “ingredients” to reach for when He needs them to nourish my soul and others as well. It takes effort to stock the shelves, but the dividends are priceless.

As you stock your shelves for Thanksgiving, don’t forget to stock your soul!

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1 Peter 2:11-3:7

Psalms 119:49-64

Proverbs 28:12-13

## Great Leaders Are Great Followers

*Then David came to Saul and attended him; and Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor bearer. 1 Samuel 16:21*

Do you consider yourself to be a leader or a follower? Followers, you can learn from some of the heroic followers in the Bible. Leaders, guess what? To become a great leader, you must also be a great follower.

Before David became King of Israel, he was Saul's armor bearer. An armor bearer's mission is to protect at all costs the person that he is guarding, even to the point of his own death, if necessary. I think that's one reason why David thought twice when he had the opportunity to kill King Saul, who was pursuing his life. Why? Perhaps because in the past David was Saul's armor bearer. It was his job to protect his life at all costs. He says, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6 NIV).

Esther followed Uncle Mordecai. She was a heroic follower. Peter was a leader in the early church, and he was Jesus Christ's right hand man. A follower. You never graduate from following to leading. Great leaders are always great followers.

I think about how God has designed the church. In the church He has given spiritual authority. He encourages each one of us: follow your spiritual leaders. Follow your pastors. Understand their direction for you and the church, and follow them wholeheartedly. The pastors who are a part of Great Commission Churches have chosen to be submitted to one another, even though we've established our local churches autonomously. It's really a beautiful thing to see. Follow their lead.

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 1:1-2:23  
 1 Peter 3:8-4:6  
 Psalm 119:65-80  
 Proverbs 28:14

## Follow Closely

*His armor bearer said to him, "Do all that is in your heart; turn yourself, and here I am with you according to your desire." 1 Samuel 14:7*

In today's verse we see the response Jonathan's armor bearer gives to Jonathan. The encouragement I find from this passage is to follow your leaders closely. You may say, "I don't even know what my leader really desires to do. How can I follow closely?" Here's a simple, practical step to take: just ask him. Ask someone who is leading you, "Hey what is on your heart? What does God want you to do?" And then figure out how you can get behind that. Can you encourage your leader in whatever God desires him or her to accomplish, using your time, energy, and resources? Be involved in seeing that accomplished.

We echo that old adage, "I'm behind you all the way." But then do you tend to stand off at a distance? Are you following but only following closely if it is convenient?

I think a defining point in growing up for me was when I was about 12 years old. One Thanksgiving my family was heading out to my grandparents' house. But my dad said he needed to stay home. We had a farm and had an acre that needed irrigation work. There was a lot of PVC pipe and a lot of holes to dig.

I said, "Dad, I'll stay back and help you do that." He tried to convince me to head off and have fun. I said, "No, I'm staying." So for the next several days we worked together, sunup to sundown, getting this irrigation in. And for me that was a real defining moment. It really meant sacrifice to follow my dad closely. To do what he needed to get done, I was behind him. Who can you follow closely?

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Daniel 4:1-37  
 2 Peter 1:1-21  
 Psalm 119:97-112  
 Proverbs 28:17-18

## God Works through Flawed Men

*Then Jonathan said to the young man who was carrying his armor, "Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few." 1 Samuel 14:6*

Jonathan and his armor bearer are going down a steep, thorny cliff. After they get down the cliff, they're looking up at another cliff that they have to scale, and that cliff is slippery. They're going from thorny to slippery. How can it get any worse? It does. At the top is the camp of the enemy Philistines, and Jonathan plans to attack.

In today's verse Jonathan gives the charge to the armor bearer, and we understand something of what it means to be a heroic follower. One way to be a heroic follower is to trust in God working through imperfect, flawed men.

Jonathan says, "Perhaps the Lord will work for us." That is not convincing vision-casting in my book. We're going to go up against this army, just the two of us, and maybe God will work for us? I don't know if I'd be that inspired by this guy Jonathan that I was following, if I were carrying his armor!

Jonathan and his armor bearer were from God's chosen people, and the enemy was in the land God had promised to them. The armor bearer knew that. He was trusting in God, the one who gave that promise.

Jonathan goes on to say, "God can deliver by many or by few." The armor bearer had to keep that in mind. He had to put his trust in this man Jonathan. But no matter how skillful he was, they were going up against a huge army, seemingly bigger than the sands on the seashore. How were they ever going to do it? Only by trusting in God.

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 2:24-3:30  
 1 Peter 4:7-5:14  
 Psalm 119:81-96  
 Proverbs 28:15-16

## Seek Pleasure or Take Pleasure?

*... also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. Ecclesiastes 3:13*

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a puzzle to many believers. Solomon set out to find satisfaction and fulfillment in life. He sought to find out and experience all that life has to give. He first did this by applying his great wisdom, intellect, and understanding to life situations. When this left him empty, he tried accomplishing great building projects. Yet this did not fulfill him. He then turned toward pleasure seeking.

He, like people today, pursued a course in life based on a philosophy called "hedonism." In essence, hedonism is the personal pursuit of pleasure as the highest aim of mankind. The person who seeks pleasure says in his heart, "I want to avoid as much as possible unpleasant or hard tasks." Hedonists want to free up as much time for the fun, pleasurable things of life such as boating, kayaking, swimming skiing, camping, golf, gardening, and partying. But what Solomon discerned in his wisdom and experience was that pursuing a course of "pleasure seeking" also ends up leaving a person unfulfilled, unsatisfied and hollow.

Instead of seeking pleasure, let's approach life by "taking pleasure" in the tasks that God brings our way. Whether they are mundane, hard work tasks—like scrubbing, floors, vacuuming, changing diapers, mowing the lawn, or doing dishes and laundry—or spiritual or recreational opportunities, take pleasure in them! The key to pleasure and joy is being mindful of God's presence in the midst of our tasks *and* our pastimes. If we go through life with God, any activity can be filled with joy. With this mindset, Mondays can be as enjoyable as the weekends. What is on your list for today? Try taking pleasure in these tasks and activities. I am willing to bet that you will find great joy.

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 5:1-31  
 2 Peter 2:1-22  
 Psalm 119:113-128  
 Proverbs 28:19-20

## The Sign of True Holiness

*All the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood [God's] words that were declared to them. Nehemiah 8:12*

Holiness is often equated with being grim. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The Israelites had rebelled against God, and God sent the Babylonians to defeat them and to carry them off into exile around 586 BC. Then, about 70 years later, God, in His awesome grace and mercy, led some of the Israelites back to Jerusalem to rebuild the destroyed temple and then the walls of the city.

After the walls around Jerusalem were completed by God's gracious provision of wisdom, strength, protection, and resources, the Jews who had returned gathered to hear the reading of God's Word to them. The reading of the law of God exposed the rebellion and foolishness of their hearts. The immediate effect was that they were overcome with sorrow and weeping because they realized they had rebelled against such a good, wise, and gracious God.

Yet the leaders of the people, Nehemiah and Ezra, said, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep . . . do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:9-10). Mourning over our sin and grieving over our unholiness is only a doorway, but the destination of repentance and faith in Jesus as our Redeemer and resurrected King is great joy!

The simple test of true holiness is whether or not I have great joy in God. Do I experience deep joy in the Savior and King God has so graciously provided for His glory and our good?

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 6:1-28  
 2 Peter 3:1-18  
 Psalm 119:129-152  
 Proverbs 28:21-22

## Jesus, Son of David, Son of Abraham

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew 1:1*

Are you tempted to skim the first line or two of letters? I am, because these are just greetings or introductions and I want to hurry on to the good stuff. For example, writers of the New Testament epistles usually begin with "grace and peace to you," much like we begin letters, emails, or texts with "Hey there" (I am southern, so "hey" is a significant part of my vocabulary!).

How much we miss if we do skim! "Grace and peace" in the beginning of the epistles point us right to the gospel and who wants to rush past the gospel? Matthew begins with what I thought were mundane words, "the book of the genealogy . . ." C'mon, let's get on to the good stuff!

But hold on. Re-read the above verse again. Any questions come to your mind? Questions like "Why did Matthew begin this way?" I thought Jesus was the "Son of God" or "Son of Man." Or, isn't He the son of Joseph, husband of Mary? What is Matthew wanting us to see right here in the beginning of His book?

Jesus is the "son of David." Matthew refers to this title because it speaks to the promise given to David and to Israel that a descendant of David would sit on his throne as king forever (2 Samuel 7:16).

Jesus is the "son of Abraham." This name speaks to the promises given to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 17:5-7 that through Abraham and his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Right in the opening words of Matthew's gospel we learn much about Jesus. He is the promised King who blesses all the nations! But wait—there's more: He came to be *with* us! More on this tomorrow.

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### One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 7:1-28  
 1 John 1:1-10  
 Psalm 119:153-176  
 Proverbs 28:23-24