

# My Covenant

With the help of God, I commit the next 40 days to discovering God's Cross-Driven Purpose for my life.

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Your name

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Your Partner's name

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Other study group members

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Pastor Luke Biggs

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Pastor Mike Neidow

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Pastor John Kunze

*"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Matthew 18:20 (NIV)*

## The Beginning of Your Journey

This new devotional series is specifically designed to offer a Lutheran perspective on the runaway bestseller, The Purpose-Driven Life by Rick Warren. Although the authors of this series agree there are many sound principles contained in Pastor Warren's material, there are also many questionable principles as well. Among them are: (1) the use of the words *choice* in reference to a Christian coming to faith. As confessional Lutherans we believe that coming to faith is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit within us and has nothing whatsoever to do with any choice we make to follow Jesus Christ. (2) Pastor Warren's condemnation of infant baptism, a practice Lutherans know has very solid Biblical roots. (3) The continual references made to *rewards* in heaven which we earn by our works on earth. In his writings Martin Luther attacks this very notion by stating that the *rewards* in heaven is eternal life. (4) There are several instances where Pastor Warren shortchanges the work of the Holy Spirit; attributing to man a deed or action that can only be done through God's Spirit working in us. (5) Last, we question Pastor Warren's continual shifting from one Bible translation to another and taking verses out of context. As Lutherans, we believe that scripture interprets scripture and contextual integrity is essential to understanding what God's word *really* says instead of what some author wants it to say.

The authors encourage you to spend the next 40 days in God's Word by attending worship regularly, attending all-church Bible studies, and reading and studying the devotional material in this packet. It is recommended that you find a time when all family members can gather together to read the devotions and answer the questions. We also ask that you fill in the commitment sheet on the next page. Like many things worth doing, this process may require you to specifically and purposely set aside time on a daily basis. In so doing you'll actually be doing what members of the earliest Christian churches did. It is Luke who records these words "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47). It is our sincere hope that the Lord bless you as you gather to seek His will for your life...His Cross-Driven Will.

Day 1  
**God's Purpose**

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1 (NIV)**

Ponder the impact of the above words for a moment. From the day God spoke "Let there be . . ." and at each utterance things that had never been were called into being. No evolution. No help from man. In fact our most ancient ancestors were not created until the sixth day. As we set out on our journey to discover our purpose, perhaps we should take a moment to discover God's. From the beginning, God's purpose is to provide man with a perfect environment in which to live. Not merely to exist, but to love God and his fellow man. This environment God describes as "very good."

So, if everything was so perfect at the end of the sixth day, what happened? A one-word answer will suffice: sin. From the very moment Adam and Eve corporately rebelled against God, biting into the fruit God forbade them to eat, every purpose changed. Every purpose except God's. Man's purpose became forevermore diametrically opposed to his Creator's. Luther calls it a "bound will". Clothed in selfishness, we are no longer capable of loving God as we did so very long ago in a place called Eden. Yet, the Bible tells us that God's purpose is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. His love never changes. He loves us as He did Adam and Eve. He desires to spend an eternity with us. In love, God's purpose is revealed through a Savior promised to restore a broken relationship (Genesis 3: 15), a Savior whose death is foretold by prophets and a promise fulfilled in the cross. God's purpose (1 Timothy 2:3, 4) is Cross Driven.

Over the next 40 days, we'll examine our purpose to learn ways the Holy Spirit leads us back into harmony with God's purpose. No doubt life is a struggle; for as, C. S. Lewis wrote, "There is no neutral ground in the universe" for "every inch is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan." Yet, God has a purpose for you and me. This is a time of discovery.

**Point to Ponder:** God's purpose is for all men to be saved and come to believe in His Son.

**Discuss:** Does God's purpose cross religious boundaries?

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, we thank You for Your marvelous creation. We stand in awe as we survey each new day. Golden vistas meet our eye in the rising and setting sun. Father, it is hard for us to understand Your Cross-Driven purpose so we ask You to send Your Holy Spirit to deepen our understanding. Amen.

## You are Uniquely You

**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)**

Jeremiah speaks of a special relationship with God. He says that even before Jeremiah entered the world, God knew him in intimate detail. God's words apply to us as well. The Bible says we are "wonderfully made" and indeed we are. Before we entered the world God knew us. He knew the day and hour of our birth, where we would live, whom we would marry, and even whether or not we would have children. God stands beside each mother. He marks the passing of each day from the time our journey begins, even before our mothers knew they were pregnant, until we entered the world. Although our purpose may not carry with it the ability to prophesy, as Jeremiah was called to do, we are no accident. As Christians we called to be "set apart."

What is there about the family of man which makes us so unique? True, God created unique creatures of every size and variety from aardvark to zebra; so what makes us unique among the animals that roam the earth or swim in the sea? It's certainly more than physical appearance. Moses identified our uniqueness in Genesis 2:7 saying God Himself breathed life into Adam and made Adam a living soul. Much more than a living being as found in some translations, man's uniqueness is found in his soul, not in his existence. If this were not the case, why would the creation saga only mention *soul* while referring to Adam's birth? No lemur, walrus, or whale is given such a birthright. No tree, cow, or hippo can boast such a feature. Yet, there are those who would rob us of this uniqueness. Practitioners of New Age cults claim to possess a deeper understanding of God. In their minds, man is nothing more than another piece in the unending evolutionary cycle. By randomly assigning souls to the least among God's creation, New Agers worship the creation instead of the Creator.

Tomorrow morning take a good look at yourself in the mirror. You can be assured no other person on earth is exactly like you. No one else possesses your physical characteristics. No one has your fingerprints or DNA. You are truly one-of-a-kind. You have a soul given by God, the same God who knew you before you were born.

**Point to Ponder:** God made you a truly unique individual.

**Discuss** ways God can use your uniqueness?

**Closing Prayer:** God of Creation, we thank You for creating us so wonderfully. You alone knew us before we were born. We thank You for the exclusive gift given freely to the human race, the gift of our souls. Forgive us our faults, Lord, and see us through the Cross. Amen.

## What is Your Purpose?

### **If we live, we live to the Lord. Romans 14:8 (NIV)**

Have you ever thought about why God created you? In moments of self-doubt, have you wondered if He created you as a wandering generality? Have you doubted God could ever make use of you? What is God's plan anyway, or is there a plan? In moments of self-doubt read these words again *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* Jeremiah 29:11. While thousands flock to the false security of self-help books, God calls Christians to take hold of life's *blueprint*, the Bible.

Blueprints for a home call for the talents of many individuals: masons, framers, finishers, drywallers, electricians, plumbers and the like. Likewise, God calls Christians into His service one by one. To be sure, most of us fill multiple positions in three relational groups: family, work, and church. Family and work relationships are easily identified; however, roles in the church are a bit more difficult. The Bible says everyone is called to perform various functions in a congregation's life. Observe your congregation and you'll see God's plan in action. You'll find that some are called as pastors, some as DCEs, business administrators, Elders, teachers, small group leaders, choir leaders, and the list goes on. Congregations also need workers in support or auxiliary roles: nurses, cooks, office staff, maintenance, etc. There are numerous other roles, such as those who fold church bulletins each week, those who bake cookies, and those who deliver them on outreach calls.

God created you with individual talents and characteristics He desires to use to further His Kingdom. Discovering God's plan for your life requires prayer. Sometimes a discussion with your pastor, a friend, or a mentor can be helpful in the discovery process. Sometimes simply thinking about your life interests is helpful. Anything short of the Holy Spirit working in our lives puts us at cross purposes with God's Cross Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** God has specific plans for your life.

**Discuss** ways you can serve God and your fellow man.

**Closing Prayer:** Father in Heaven, You provided us with talents we take for granted. Selfishly we use them in our own service, denying their use in Your plan of salvation for all mankind. Forgive us, Lord. Send Your Holy Spirit to make us better stewards of our time and talents. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

## The Spirit Brings Eternal Life

**"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." John 5:24 (NIV)**

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, one panel dramatically portrays Michelangelo's concept of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In their shame Adam and Eve are shown leaving the garden, while an angel, with sword in hand, points the way. As sad as this scene is, it magnificently symbolizes God's grace to all mankind. Our ancestors were removed from the garden so they would not live forever in their sin. The Bible speaks of a centerpiece of two trees in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Only the fruit of the later was forbidden to eat. This invites a question: Without the tree of life, how can sinful man (you and me included) expect to live forever? Paul puts it this way *"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Put another way, we are simply incapable of doing anything whatsoever to merit eternal life.

Some Christians would have you believe that eternal life requires some action on your part, a choice you must make to follow Christ. In so doing, they cheapen God's grace, for God clearly states that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3). Conversion requires nothing on our part. It is God's Spirit welling up within us which busts forth in the wonderful confession "Jesus is Lord." If the Spirit has led you to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, eternal life is already yours. If you have yet to reach that point in your life, know that the Holy Spirit comes to you through God's Word and the precious sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Your conversion, in reality, is akin to the wonderful stained glass window some churches have of Christ knocking at the door. It is the Holy Spirit that gently guides your hand to the doorknob to let Him in. Man was originally created to live forever. Through belief in Jesus Christ, whose life was Cross-Driven, we still do.

**Point to Ponder:** Eternal life is a gift from God.

**Discuss** ways your life might reflect the precious gift of eternal life to those around you.

**Closing Prayer:** Father, we thank You for sending Your Spirit into our lives. It is only because Your Spirit is leading us that we are able to take hold of the gift of eternal life. May our lives reflect the Cross-Driven life of Your Son. Help us, O Lord, we pray. Amen.

## Christianity Isn't Immunity

**In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2 Timothy 3:12 (NIV)**

Why would anyone join an organization that guaranteed persecution? Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Yet thousands of first-century Christians did. Despite the large numbers martyred by Rome, there were many who remained faithful and brought others to faith. John, the apostle Jesus loved, is counted among them. A church legend of the day says that after his exile on Patmos under the tyrannical Emperor Domitian, John returned the Ephesus. There in his last days John was carried about on a stretcher, his legs too weak to carry him. Though his voice wavered, he kept repeating the words "Little children, love one another." When asked why he did so, John replied, "The Lord commanded it, and that is sufficient," a bold witness in hostile times.

Following Jesus is no panacea. It's important that you understand this concept from the outset. Our Lord knew that persecution would follow conversion, and John records about half a chapter on persecution writing "If they persecute me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20) You may also wish to spend a few minutes reading John 16: 18-26. If you realize that the world is comprised to two ideological points of view, those who are for and those who are against God, the reason for persecution becomes clear. Paul says it this way, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil." (Ephesians 6:12) As Satan sees his hold on you slipping away, he unleashes his ungodly barrage against you. With God's help we can stand firm against this barrage for God as Martin Luther records in "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," one of the most power hymns of the Reformation. You'll find Luther's words recorded in the Lutheran Worship Hymnal, hymn 297. Being Cross-Driven means facing trials and persecution knowing God is already victorious through the cross.

**Point to Ponder:** Persecution is part of a Christian's life.

**Discuss** times you have suffered persecution because of your faith in Jesus Christ. How has God helped you stand up under that persecution?

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, sometimes being a Christian means being unpopular. In fact, sometimes it means persecution. During those times, remind us that You promised never to leave us or forsake us. Clothe us in the righteousness of Jesus so that we may stand up under the flaming arrows shot by Satan. We pray in the precious name of Jesus, Our Savior. Amen.

## Heaven is Our Home

### **But our citizenship is in heaven. Philippians 3:20 (NIV)**

God has the power to change things. Nowhere is this more evident than in the life of a Christian. When the Holy Spirit enters our lives our priorities change. Christians look beyond themselves to a time when they will spend an eternity with their Creator and Redeemer. Take a moment to read the dynamic conversion of the blind man found in John 9. Note how the Spirit led the blind man to confess Jesus first as being "a man," then "a prophet," ultimately to "the Son of Man" (the Messiah). The same happens in our lives as our faith grows stronger.

For Christians, there appears to be a time when reality sets in, when what they hold dear on earth seems of little importance. God, family, friends, and the Great Commission take precedents over earthy pursuits. Power and prestige are no longer a priority. The words "*What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*" (Ecclesiastes 1:3) plays over and over in their heads. As the Spirit takes hold, they grieve for those who have yet to come to Christ. They witness attacks on marriage, the defamation of the Ten Commandment, and abortion on demand with heavy hearts. They weep when God is removed from school and those who pray are persecuted. They mourn. Jesus felt sorry for the lost (Luke 13:34-35). Paul did too (Philippians 3:17-21). These same Christians know that their home is no longer on earth, and their heart cries out for the souls lost in an eternity without God. There is a different purpose to their lives, a Cross-Driven Purpose. Their joy comes from winning one more soul for Christ, not from some reward they may merit in heaven, and their actions come as instinctively as breathing (Matthew 25:44-46).

Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame provided the music for a hymn that sums up the mature Christian outlook:

*I'm but a stranger here, Heav'n is my home.*

*Earth is a dessert drear, Heav'n is my home.*

*Danger and sorrow stand, Round me on every hand.*

*Heav'n is my fatherland, Heav'n is my home. (L.W. 515)*

**Point to Ponder:** The Christian world-view is different from that of non-Christians.

**Discuss** how knowing your life on earth is temporary changes your view of the world?

**Closing Prayer:** Father in Heaven, we thank You for the time You give us. May we use it wisely in furthering of Your Kingdom. May we be used as instruments of Your plan of salvation . . . make our purposes Cross-Driven. Amen.

Day 7

## Living for God

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Your name, Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:9 (NIV)**

No matter how hard we struggle, it's difficult to wrap our arms around the concept of turning our lives over to God. On this issue alone Satan causes many to stumble. Our human nature constantly struggles. In fact, we will continue to struggle as long as we live. David, Israel's greatest king, often fell short of the mark. His extramarital affair with Bathsheba is but one example. A hot night and a rooftop stroll were all it took to tempt him away. Temptation gave birth to sin, and sin grew in adulthood in lies, deceptions, and murder. This is not a king to admire, is it? Although God could have easily turned David over to his lusts, He didn't. Instead God sent Nathan to take David's hand and lead him through the dark valley of sin into His magnificent light of forgiveness. God knows we'll sin. It's impossible not too, but God sees David, and you, and me as well, through the Cross. Psalm 61 is worth reading right now. These are the words of a king humbled by God. Words of deep remorse form the nucleus of this reading. It's the power of the Holy Spirit at work shaping David's will to God's will. As a child, I remember watching my grandfather, a blacksmith, use a forge to heat metal and apply hammer blows to bend hot metal into the shape he needed. Sparks flew everywhere. I envision God working on our lives in much the same fashion.

By contrast, the earthly ministry of Jesus provides the ideal example of submitting to God's will. Every miracle, every parable, every prayer an endorsement of selfless devotion, none more evident than His struggle in Gethsemane. His own death just hours away, the gospel of Matthew presents Jesus filled with sorrow, on His knees in prayer. Solemnly He asked God if it's possible for God's plan of salvation to be achieved another way. Without waiting for a reply Jesus added "yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). There being no other way, Jesus willingly submitted Himself to the ridicule of nonbelievers, the whips of Roman soldiers, the weight of the cross, the nails, the thorns, and His own death. Struggling for air, no words of hatred leave His lips. Instead, a request for mankind's forgiveness, and the words "It is finished." Doing God's will is the Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** God wants your purpose in harmony with His.

**Discuss** ways your life can better reflect God's Cross-Driven purpose.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, the perfect submission to Your will is found in Your Son Jesus Christ. We realize that only through the power of the Holy Spirit may we live in harmony with Your purpose. Father, we stand in need of Your forgiveness and grace, for we desire to be shaped into a vessel You can use. Help us, O Lord. Amen.

## The Real Heart of Worship

**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Colossians 4:2**

In his letter to the early church at Colosse, Paul meticulously sets down reasons why Christians should be thankful, the underlying motivation behind worship. Truthfully, Colossians could be rightfully subtitled "An attitude of gratitude." In only four quick chapters we learn of deceptive philosophies who were leading many away from the faith. These Paul calls *basic principles of the world* (Colossians 2:8). These worldly principles are any that focus worship on self and away from Jesus. It's easy for worship to become a work, a rite performed for our salvation, isn't it? Worship is not a work; it's a response. Worship in and of itself does not guarantee salvation. That's God's work, not ours. So, what then is the real heart of worship?

To be sure, worship contains singing. Paul specifically identified the singing of *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* in Colossians 3:16, along with teaching and admonishing (sermons). Worship also means coming together with a thankful heart. Okay, but thankful for what? For His hand of protection in our lives when we weren't aware of it, or deserving of such grace? Absolutely! Yet, the heart of worship escapes us should we say that's all there is. Thankfulness, after all, is a response generated by the Holy Spirit. To what is the Spirit responding? Luther tells us that seeking forgiveness is the highest form of worship. John put it this way, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). Since Jesus called Himself *the way, the truth and the life*, what John is concluding is that if we say we are sinless, Jesus does not dwell within us. John goes on to say that "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

The heart of worship is the forgiveness of sins achieved at a tremendous price . . . our sinful life in exchange for His sinless one. A reconciliation between heaven and earth achieved through His blood on the cross. Without His blood, our worship services are less than half-hearted, they're no hearted.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> The forgiveness of our sins is at the heart of worship. <b>Discuss</b> ways knowing this true heart of worship will affect your life.</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Lord, we often sing about getting back to the heart of worship, but do we really understand that the real heart of worship is Your forgiveness? It's easy to offer praise and never know what we're praising You for; we're so quick to forget. Father, lead us back to the cross so we may be Cross-Driven, not self-driven. Amen.

## Pleasing God

### **The prayer of the upright pleases Him. Proverbs 15:8 (NIV)**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we knew our actions pleased God? The Bible provides a few places where God specifically spells out what pleases Him. We're going to search out two in this devotion. Remarkably, both have to do with prayer. The first reference is printed above while the second is in 1 Timothy 2:1-3. Solomon is the author of our first passage, and while the Spirit may lead us to specific works that please God, prayer is right up there. Not just any prayer, however. This is the prayer of an upright person. Who are the upright or righteous, you might ask. Let's see if we can find some characteristics for such an individual. The righteous are living by faith (Romans 1: 17), obedient to God (Romans 6:16), and no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:20). The righteous are those who put their trust in God, as exemplified in Abraham written out for us in Romans 4. Abraham trusted God to do all He promised including (1) making Abraham into a great nation, (2) blessing him, (3) making his name great, (4) making Abraham a blessing to others, (5) blessing those who bless him, (6) cursing those who cursed him, and most importantly (7) all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham. It is this last promise that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Solomon tells us that prayers from such individuals please God.

Years later Paul approached the subject of what pleases God and penned these words "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" 1 Timothy 2: 1-5 (NIV). Paul says God is pleased when we pray, intercede, and offer thanksgiving for those in authority over us. When we want these men and women to help us live peaceful, quiet lives where we can freely profess our faith. The goal in this case is so that we may be used by the Holy Spirit to bring others to faith. This writing is addressed to Timothy, *a true son in the faith* (1 Timothy 1:2), himself a righteous man. My Christian friends, we please God when we are Spirit-led to a righteousness not of our own making, then through faith, offer prayers that others may come to a saving faith available only through Jesus Christ. Then and only then will our purpose become synchronized with God's. It's God's own righteousness that makes our lives Cross-Driven.

**Point to Ponder:** Prayer is an integral part of a Cross-Driven Life.

**Discuss** how your prayer life might change now that you realize its importance to God.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, You desire all men to be saved. Help me to pray for the salvation of everyone, not just those I like or like me, but everyone regardless of race, nationality, or world-view. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Dying to Self

**We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Romans 6:4 (NIV)**

Have you ever thought of baptism as dying? Do you think of death when a baby is presented at the baptismal font? A child so swaddled and cradled in loving arms that you know God is saying "Life should go on." Death is out of place here. Or is it?

As out of place as Paul's comment seems, he has a very valid point. Out of baptism, a new life comes forth. A life rife with God's rich blessings of salvation. Luther would say that the old Adam has drowned and a new Adam born. The old Adam being our sinful self, the new Adam a resurrected self. Sure, we'll sin again, but this new self is forgiven by the blood of Jesus. God gives us a snapshot of this metamorphosis in the life of a caterpillar. While inside its pupa a remarkable transformation takes place, culminating when a beautiful butterfly emerges. No wonder it is the butterfly that has come to symbolize the resurrection.

Later in Romans 6, Paul goes on to explain that our old self was crucified with Jesus on Golgotha. He took our sin upon Himself, and not just ours but the sins of each person from the beginning time and into forever. If you've ever doubted your worth, lay it to rest right here at Jesus' feet. He loved you so much he took your sinful life and exchanged it for His sinless one. We call this grace . . . God's Riches at Christ's Expense. Let's close this devotional time together with an exhortation from Paul that follows all the wonderful symbolism in chapter six. Paul says, ". . . count yourself dead to sin, but alive in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness but rather offer yourself to God (Romans 6:12-13).

You were purchased at a terrible price not to be enslaved again to sin, but to be set free from sin. Your life is designed to reflect the Creator's as a pond reflects the sun. In a dark dreary world, you are the lighthouse, lighting the way to Christ. No longer do we live to self, for our old self is dead and buried. Our new self, alive in Christ, has burst forth into a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** Coming to Christ means the drowning of our old self.

**Discuss** the difference Jesus has made in your life. What are some differences between your old self and your new self?

**Closing Prayer:** Heavenly Lord, we want a transformation in our lives. We ask You to continually craft us into useful vessels. Use us as instruments of Your salvation in the lives of those around us. We pray that all would receive their metamorphosis in You. Amen.

Day 11

## God's Heirs

**If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:29 (NIV)**

It seems we are spending a good deal of time in devotions taken from the writings of Paul. Perhaps it's Paul's training under Gamaliel, a renowned Doctor of the Law revered by Jews to this day, that enabled him to write with such directness. Be assured, everything Paul learned was used for God's benefit after Paul's conversion. We note Paul's directness in the above verse as well. In a previous devotion we learned of the seven-fold promise God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12. Here in his letter to the first-century church at Galatia, Paul weaves God's grace into the tapestry of our salvation. The common thread of this tapestry is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, especially the promise that "all peoples on earth will be blessed" through him. Because the Galatians (and you and me today) "belong to Christ" we are the ingrafted descendants of Abraham and heirs to God's blessing of eternal life.

I've watched as my wife stitched a scene of a pair of ducks. Matted and framed, they make a wonderful wall decor. Turn the stitchery around and it's a different story entirely. Colored thread weaves in and out with knots and frayed pieces offering no vision at all of the scene on the other side. Our lives are the messy side. Sin weaves in and out of our portrait. A close examination shows our lies, deceptions, good intentions never carried out, the evil intentions carried out, and our mistreatment of God and our fellow man. That's the back. But God is looking at the front where the thread of Christ's forgiveness shows the masterpiece He created. Some religious leaders today exhort us to become God's friend, yet being God's friend means we are capable of doing something to merit His friendship. We're not! Isn't it far better to have faith in Jesus and be called God's heir? Isn't it the sons and daughters who inherit a father's legacy and not his friends? God wants you to know that no matter who we are, we are loved. His love gives our lives purpose. His Cross-Driven Life provides us with the greatest inheritance of all . . . eternal life.

**Point to Ponder:** By faith in Jesus you are already an heir to eternal life.

**Discuss** the back side of your self-portrait. Now turn the portrait over and discuss what God sees because of His Son.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord of my life, I come before You humbled by the portrait of me You are creating. The back side is a mess, Lord. I continue to sin. Help me, I pray. Weave the thread of forgiveness through my life. It is only because of the Cross-Driven Life of Your Son that my portrait will be acceptable in Your sight. Amen.

## Heirs are Disciplined

**The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Hebrews 12:6 (NIV)**

All good parents are familiar with the words *discipline* and *punishment*. Both must be applied judiciously in child rearing. Indeed, they're opposite sides of the same coin. When God commands parents to "*train up a child in the way he should go*" (Proverbs 22:6) our first thought turns to disciplining the child since training, educating, teaching, and instructing are indeed the first meaning of the word discipline. But, like a good novel, there's more to understanding *discipline* than just the first chapter. *Discipline* also means to punish, and sometimes that's an important step in the learning process for a child.

Psychologists will tell you that children need discipline to know they're loved by their parents or guardians. Without discipline, the boundaries between right and wrong are blurred. A perfect example of blurred boundaries is seen in *The Outsiders*, a novel by S.E. Hinton, where rival gangs of differing social/economic classes clash over the same turf, neither gang realizing their commonality—a lack of discipline as they grew up.

God, in all His wisdom, understands the importance of discipline in the lives of His adopted children. The writer of Hebrews explains that God treats us as we treat our own children. The major difference is that He knows exactly which to apply and when. This might be a great place to stop and read all of God's words recorded for us in Hebrews 12: 6-11. Did you note the reason God interjects discipline into the life of each Christian? It's love. Yes, discipline often produces pain (your children will tell you that), but later discipline grows into righteousness and peace. Consider this important truth: God wants to spend an eternity with us, and His discipline and, yes, punishment lead us to spiritual maturity. It's God's way of letting us know that we are His children, and he's refining us just as a refiner does gold, readying us to live a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** God disciplines and punishes those He loves.

**Discuss** how reflecting on your life shows God's hand in it.

**Closing Prayer:** It's hard for us to comprehend how Your hand continually shapes us, Lord. Often we mistakenly think You hate us when You apply Your discipline, when in fact just the opposite is true. In reality You discipline in love desiring to spend an eternity with us. Please send Your Holy Spirit to lead and guide us back to You. Father, Your good and perfect will be done in our lives. Amen.

## God Wants Our All

**'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**

**Mark 12:29-31 (NIV)**

The opening words of Jesus in our passage provide a wonderful link between the Old and New Testaments. When Jesus spoke these words so many years ago, the Jews of His day recalled the days of Moses. Pious Jews recited these very words every morning and evening, many still do at the beginning of their synagogue service. For them Jesus is repeating the Jewish confession of faith known as the Shema. Jesus spoke of only one God at a time when Israel was inundated by a plethora of multi-deity religions forced on them by Greece, Rome, Babylon, and Assyria and others springing up like weeds within their own borders. This One True God desires devotion from every fiber of their being. It is He who brought them out of the land of Egypt, gave them rules to live by in order that they may live at peace with God and their fellow man, and provided them with a homeland. This is also the same God who would soon reconcile a sinful world to Himself, His own Son providing the needed blood sacrifice.

How often do we stop to apply the above words to our nation? Just as Israel reluctantly hosted false religions, don't we do likewise? Under the guise of tolerance don't we fail to stand up for what is right and true? Hasn't religion become a buffet where plates are filled with tenets we personally decide to believe? It's the modern equivalent to the story of Emperor's New Clothes, except no one rises to say, "The king is naked." Is this what "Loving the Lord" has become? In [The Purpose Driven Life](#), Rick Warren writes that "God wants you to be a living sacrifice. He wants you to live for him! However, the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar, and we often do that." It's time to ask ourselves three questions: How can we live for God if we don't know Him? How can we understand God's Cross-Driven Purpose if we don't pray to Him? And how can we expect God to continually bless us if we turn our back on Him? God doesn't want part of us; he wants all of us.

**Point to Ponder:** God wants all of me.

**Discuss** ways the Holy Spirit can work through you to God's glory.

**Closing Prayer:** Almighty God, salvation is found only in Your nail scarred hands. All other gods are false gods offering no hope of salvation. Send Your Holy Spirit that we may truly worship You with every fiber of our being, willingly testifying to those who put their allegiance in beliefs their itching ears want to hear, and not the gospel of Your Risen Son. Amen.

## God is Faithful

### I will never leave you nor forsake you. Joshua 1:5

The story is told of an advertising campaign that featured two men. The first says, "Ya know, I really don't feel as close to God as I used to." After a short pause the second answers, "So, who moved?" As short as this commercial is, it certainly touches very close to home. We have all had times when we didn't feel as close to God as we do at other times. In times of crisis it is perfectly normal to feel as though God has abandoned us. David certainly felt it when King Saul turned against him. Job must have felt it at times when his whole family and everything he owned was taken from him in an instant. The apostles had their time of crisis between the death of Jesus and that first Easter morning.

What about you? Reflect on a time when you felt abandoned by God. It might be at the death of a loved one, the loss of your job, the rebellion of a child, the diagnosis of a critical illness, or even a divorce. Feeling abandoned by God during these times is normal. When our lives are turned completely inside-out, and upside-down, God anticipates such a response from us. That's precisely why God constantly provides reminders of His love and faithfulness throughout the Bible. He knows we'll be disheartened by life. He knows we'll be despondent from time to time. Then, just as parents continually remind their children of their love for them, God gently reminds us of His dependability. He will never leave us nor forsake us. In spite of how we feel, God remains only a prayer away. Seven times the Bible records God's reminder that He will not forsake His people, and there are other examples where the words may be different, yet the meaning is the same like Matthew 28:20. Satan would have us believe we are abandoned by God during times of tribulation. He'd have us doubt God's word and not place a 911 call to God when we're hurting. Jesus calls Satan the father of lies (John 8:44) so that we might see through his deceptions and return to God who loves us so much that He sent His Son into the world to die on our behalf. It's God's Cross-Driven Purpose. So, the next time you hear the words, "No one knows what I'm going through," you can softly reply, "You're right, but God knows."

**Point to Ponder:** God wants you to call on Him when troubled (Psalm 50:15).  
**Discuss** a time when all you had left in life was God. How did God reveal His involvement to you?

**Closing Prayer:** Merciful God, there are times in my life when I feel abandoned. Help me to know that You are with me through the reassurance offered through Your Holy Spirit. Surround me with godly men and women to help me regain my footing, so I may live again to Your glory. Amen.

## Baptism's Power

**Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matthew 19:14 (NIV)**

I fondly remember the Bible I received on my Confirmation Sunday years ago. It contained wonderful color portraits depicting Bible characters. Near the words of Matthew 19:14 was the image of Jesus sitting beneath a tree with little children on either side. The look on His face still brings warmth to my heart. "Jesus wants me!", I remember thinking. He still does although I'm now much too old to be called a child.

For Lutherans the words Jesus spoke form a key argument in favor of infant baptism along with Christ's command to baptize "all nations" in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28: 19). Although faith may come ahead of baptism, as in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 26-38), our Lord places no such command of faith ahead of baptism. He never commands that one must know the hour and day of their salvation before baptism is effective. He never commands, as some do, that although you were baptized as a child, you must be rebaptized as an adult. Subscribing to such theories negates the power of God's word. St. Paul puts it this way, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7). If faith must come before baptism we make faith a work, a matter St. Paul clearly condemns. Martin Luther adds, "We bring the child with the purpose and hope that he may believe, and we pray God to grant him faith." For Lutherans, baptism signifies the drowning of the old Adam and the resurrection of a new child of God. Luther says, "In baptism we are given the grace, Spirit, and power to suppress the old man so that the new may come forth and grow strong." In baptism God claims you as His own just as Jesus welcomed the little children. You might say it is here that God gives us a hard hat and a sign that reads UNDER CONSTRUCTION, here He joins us to His family and plugs us in to His Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** Baptism is the washing of regeneration.

**Discuss** the significance of God personally welcoming you into His family through baptism.

**Closing Prayer:** Gracious Lord, what a joy it is to know that You brought us to the waters of baptism. How wonderful it is to know that at baptism You sent Your Holy Spirit into our lives to start the regeneration process. May our lives reflect Your love and grace. Amen.

Day 16

## No Greater Love

**Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.**

**John 15:13-14 NIV**

Jesus commands us to “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39). Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of CrossWays International, puts it this way, we are to love God and our fellow man. What does loving our fellow man look like? It might take the form of volunteering to serve meals at a local homeless shelter. It might mean donating food for needy families at the holidays. It might even mean housing a pregnant teen. There are many other ways we can serve. But what about ministering to spiritual needs of those we serve? To what purpose is serving if not to bring others to faith? Have you considered prayer as a means to serve your fellow man?

Eusebius, an early Church historian, records a wonderful example of servanthood. It's a glimpse of James the Just, the brother of our Lord. Eusebius writes, "He [James] used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel's from his continual kneeling in worship of God and in prayer for the people" (Book 5 of his *Memoirs*). James continually prayed. Not because the Law required it, but in response to God's love for him. The love James possessed for God and his fellow man came at a terrible price. The price was his life. The Jews killed James. Eusebius says that James was taken to a temple parapet where his witness converted many. In response, the scribes and Pharisees pushed him over the side and clubbed him to death. Are you prepared to give such witness? Is your service only lip service? Serving our fellow man is more than assuring their personal well-being, it involves their spiritual well-being. Jesus abundantly provides our example. His entire life was spent in service to God and His fellow man. Among His final words from the cross were words of salvation, not condemnation, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:31). His life is Cross-Driven; is yours?

**Point to Ponder:** Service involves the soul.

**Discuss** ways you might serve your fellow man's body and soul.

**Closing Prayer:** Father, You have given us an assignment to serve You and our fellow man. In our service let us never forget the reason for that service. You desire the salvation of souls, not just the doing of service. Empower us with Your Spirit to carry forth the banner of Your Son. Amen.

Day 17

## Why the Church

**Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

**Hebrews 10:25 (NIV)**

In the epistle to the Hebrews, an unknown author wonderfully answers the question of why the Christian Church exists. The church exists for the expressed purpose of spurring one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). Both are natural outgrowths of the Holy Spirit's involvement in our lives. How can this same Spirit work if you're missing-in-action? The Christian body needs each other as Paul points out when he says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' Or the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem the weaker are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:21-22). God has placed you in your church home for a purpose—His purpose. It is God's desire that you attend worship regularly, not because of any requirement to do so, but in response to His great love for you. Regular church attendance means you are available for a spiritual feeding, and to uplift and encourage those around you. Have you considered that your kind word to a fellow believer may mean everything to their salvation? Making yourself available for God's purpose is vital.

Christians assemble in response to the Spirit's call to do so. It is God's desire that we gather to encourage one another (Hebrews 12:25). Ignatius writes, "When ye frequently and in numbers meet together, the powers of Satan are overthrown, and his mischief is neutralized by your like-mindedness in the faith." Ignatius is telling us that failing to gather together may cause us or others to fall away from the faith. Christianity, then, is much like this phrase borrowed from Alexandre Dumas, "All for One, and one for all!" Christians are independent, yet dependent. We are created to work independently, but we're totally dependent on God's grace and our relationships with fellow Christians to survive. God wired us that way. Unplugging ourselves from the source of our power is spiritual suicide and contrary to God's Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** As far as God's family is concerned there truly is strength in numbers.

**Discuss** a time when other Church members helped you through a crisis.

**Closing Prayer:** God of Love, Your words provide sound advice for our lives. We pray that we never forsake meeting together for time in Your word and fellowship is deliberately provided by Your hand. Our salvation and that of others may depend on it. Amen.

## Why Small Groups

**Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47 (NIV)**

Early in Acts we discover a profound dynamic of the first-century Church; the dynamic of small groups. For early Christians there were no lavish structures set aside for worship. Open worship of Jesus was forbidden. Those caught were often subjected to the cruel torture of the Roman authorities who began their persecution under Nero. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that Nero blamed the Christians for the Great Fire of Rome, lashing out against them to hide his own culpability. His persecution drove the early Christians to worship in the catacombs beneath the city. Luke shares with us that the Christians in Jerusalem gathered in small groups on a daily basis, gathering in the temple courts and in their homes. Despite persecution, these early followers of Our Lord met with "glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." In other words, they were well liked by those who knew them. Acts 2:42 allows us to see the activities of the Holy Spirit at work. These believers devoted themselves to the teachings of Jesus, to fellowship with one another, Holy Communion, and to prayer. Their gathering together was effective for "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The dynamic of the first-century church is one the twenty-first century church is only now rediscovering. Congregations are reestablishing groups of ten to twelve for the purpose of learning about Jesus, to fellowship with one another, and to pray for one another. Lutheran Pastor Burt Garwood says the process of establishing small groups within a congregation does several things: it allows personal mentoring, establishing accountability, streamlines the ministry, and frees pastors to "concentrate on the big picture." In small group ministry we see big things happening; foremost is the Holy Spirit bringing people into a loving relationship with their Savior. Small group ministries are a new, old-fashioned way of aligning ourselves with God's Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** Individuals learn more effectively in small groups.

**Discuss** how small groups unite individuals in the body of Christ.

**Closing Prayer:** Father, You have led us to rediscover the effectiveness of small group ministries. We ask that You make these ministries a powerful tool to strengthen our faith so we may live our lives fulfilling Your Cross-Driven Purpose. We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

## The Fellowship of Believers

**There is one body and one Spirit-just as you were called to one hope when you were called-one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6 (NIV)**

Again we turn to the words of Paul whose correspondence with the early church in Ephesus is so wonderfully preserved. As Christians, he writes, we have much in common. The Holy Spirit has called each in fellowship with others of a common belief. Regardless of who we are spiritually, physically, financially, or emotionally we all share the same Lord and Savior. Think about that the next time you prepare to take communion. In my congregation, parishioners filter down the center aisle and await their turn at the "table." As they do so, I sit in humble silence remembering that each individual is called by God to this place and time in history. All are united by a common faith; the elderly gentleman leaning on his cane, the single mom with two children, the doctor, the divorcee, the salesman, the widow(er), the young family, and the teen. Although we look and act differently, have different occupations, and possess different talents given by Almighty God, we share a commonality of faith. The ancient Greeks called it *koinos*.

Living in communion with fellow believers is not always easy. Sometimes misunderstandings lead to friction even among the closest friends. In anticipation of our sinful nature, Paul peppers the remainder of chapter four with antidotes and warnings commanding us to "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25), in our anger "do not sin", "do not let the sun go down on your anger" (4:26) and "do not give the devil a foothold" (4:27). We must put away "unwholesome talk" and only say things that are useful in "building others up according to their needs" (4:29). Now for the hardest part, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (4:32). As a Christian community we are additionally instructed to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6: 10). There is a special bond between family members. So too in the family of believers, a commonality we must never forget as we stay in tune with God's Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** Christians are united by their faith in Christ.

**Discuss** ways you can promote unity within your congregation.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, You provided instructions on living in community with our fellow Christians. May we follow Your will for our lives, thereby preventing Satan from getting a foothold. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## When Conflict Occurs

**"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."**

**Matthew 18:15 (NIV)**

Have you noticed that the last place conflict should occur is often the first place it does? How can individuals holding common beliefs bicker? It's because of sin. No matter where you live or the size and shape of your congregation, conflict inevitably creeps in. Satan works overtime in church. What was once a small rift can ripen into open, faith-killing warfare. In His infinite wisdom, God knows all about our selfish quarrels. Through the ministry of His Son, He established standards for conflict resolution applicable to church and family as well. Instead of allowing a small wound to be gangrenous, we are to go directly to our brother and work out our differences.

I'm sure you know of instances where a statement was taken out of context. Then, fueled by gossip, a forest fire is kindled. Christ commands us to go directly to the source and "show him his fault." He doesn't mean brow-beat the offender into submission, but state your case and reason with him to resolve the conflict. If that doesn't work, return with one or two others. Then, and only then, is the matter taken to the church. In Christ's words, the offending party is never attacked or their ancestry called into question. They are always dealt with in love. When reconciliation is reached, it's time to apply the healing balm of forgiveness not only seven times as Peter offers, but seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:21-22). Lest we think Jesus is indicating forgiveness stops after seventy-seven times, remember we are also sinners. If Jesus drew the line of demarcation at seventy-seven, I don't know about you, but I would certainly be beyond forgiveness.

Conflict infects the church; no church is immune from Satan's wiles. Thankfully, Jesus provides ways to restore broken relationships and heal the wounds of adversity. By His Spirit we are tugged back into line with His Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** Conflict in the church is inevitable.

**Discuss** ways you can head-off conflict between two Christians.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, we thank You for providing the means of conflict resolution. Disagreements will occur. It's how we handle them that makes the difference. Send Your Holy Spirit to bring unity and healing where now there may be disunity and hatred. We ask it in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

## Keeping Unity in the Church

**Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

**Ephesians 4:3 NIV**

In today's Bible verse Paul offers easy words to read but difficult ones to put into practice. Seldom do we think of unity in the midst of turmoil. Evil tongues lash out and wound as readily as any club could ever do. It is against such behavior that James writes, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be" (James 3:9-10). Should there be disunity among congregation members; a time when harsh words bring sharp replies? No, Paul reminds us to be "humble and gentle" (Ephesians 4:2). When our sinful reaction is to rebuke the offender, the writer of Proverbs cautions us to remember "A gentle answers turns away wrath, but harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). Harsh words are an open invitation to Satan.

Paul goes on to say that the Church is God's workmanship. It is He who calls men into their positions within each congregation so that the body of Christ might be built up. Peace and love build up God's Church. Hate, deceit, and disunity can only destroy. The necessity for congregational unity is evident a few verses later when Paul speaks of reaching a level of spiritual maturity and "attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Those placed in positions of authority in the Church are there at God's command to guide us into a deeper relationship with Christ. In turn, we are used by the Holy Spirit to reach out to bring others into a faith relationship with God who has reconciled the world to Himself. Unity is maintained when we're patient with one another, "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). Such forbearance is certainly difficult at times, but completely in line with God's Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1).

**Discuss** a time when your tongue caused a wound instead of a healing.

**Closing Prayer:** God of Mercy, keep our tongues at bay. Use our lives to build up Your church instead of destroying it. Father, we know we can't do this of our own accord, so we ask You to send Your Holy Spirit to guide us. Amen.

## On Becoming Christ-like

**And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)**

On Day 15 we mentioned that at baptism God gives us a hard hat and a sign reading UNDER CONSTRUCTION. Let's talk about that great construction project called your life. As with any construction project whether a bridge, a home, or a skyscraper, someone must be in charge; someone who can read the blueprints and translate them into job assignments. In all who are baptized, our job superintendent is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit's job to daily transform us back into the image of God, an image lost centuries ago in the Garden of Eden.

Just what does this image of God look like? What is the characteristic that best describes Him? John tells us that "God is Love" (1 John 4:16). About love, Paul writes "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). These attributes are best exemplified in the life of Jesus, attributes God plants and waters in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. By our own command we are unable to foster any of these characteristics. Sin gets in the way. Try as we might, we cannot, by our own will, love as Jesus did. A love so profound the Greeks gave it its own name-agape. You can call this sacrificial love. It's the love that puts the needs of others before our own. Throughout His earthly mission, the needs of others were foremost on the heart of Jesus. As He ministered to the spiritual needs of those who would hear Him; He also healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, helped the lame walk, and raised the dead. Sacrificially He died, and His words of forgiveness still provide warmth to us through the cold of sin two centuries later. Today the Holy Spirit calls, prods, shapes, urges, guides, cajoles, and beckons us to be more like Christ. It's part of God's Purpose for our lives.

**Point to Ponder:** God is at work transforming your life.

**Discuss** changes the Holy Spirit has already accomplished in you.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, by the power of Your Holy Spirit my life is transformed daily. Make me more and more like Your Son. Grant me a willing heart to put the needs of others before my own. Amen.

## Growing in Christ

**Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:2 (NIV)**

One of the greatest accomplishments in the life of a Christian is the ability to determine God's will for their life. You can't accomplish this feat if you're not plugged into God's word. Romans 12:2 speaks to a transformation and a renewal of our minds. This, too, is impossible without hearing and knowing God's word. Such a transformation and renewal is only possible when the Holy Spirit comes to us through the hearing and reading of God's word and through the sacraments of baptism and communion.

Let's examine God's word. What do we know about it apart from the fact that Lutherans process it as a *means of grace*? In his second letter to a young pastor named Timothy, St. Paul addresses the power of God's word and its purpose. Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Some translations go something like this: *All scripture is inspired by God*. While this is true, a better translation of the Greek word *theopneustos* would be "God's breath." Not only is scripture *inspired by God*, it is God's very breath. Paul goes on to reveal that God's word is useful for rebuking, correcting and training us in righteousness. Since this righteousness comes from God, God's word is useful in teaching, rebuking, and correcting us in our understanding of Him. This is the "food" to which the writer of Hebrews refers (Hebrews 6:11-14). Notice how Hebrews 6:1-3 addresses the issue of spiritual growth; an understanding of repentance from sin, about faith in God, the power of baptism, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. An understanding of each of these matters is a sign the Holy Spirit is alive and working within you. It is this Spirit, a great gift from God, who gently leads us to spiritual maturity and aligns us fully with God's Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** The Bible is God's very breath.

**Discuss** ways you and your family might spiritually mature in Christ.

**Closing Prayer:** Oh Lord God, too often we fail to comprehend the importance of staying in Your Word. We ask that You send Your Spirit to rededicate our lives to You that You may lead us into spiritual maturity aligning us again with Your Cross-Driven Purpose. Amen.

## God's Word Sanctifies

**Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. John 17:17 (NIV)**

Only hours remain. Soon the eyes of Jesus will close in death. In the ultimate act of servanthood, Jesus takes His disciples with Him to a quiet place to pray. The garden of Gethsemane is the scene. Located on the Mount of Olives, so named because an olive press was once found there, Gethsemane furnishes the backdrop to what scholars call Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. The Bible verse above is a small but integral part of that prayer. Here Jesus unveils God's gift of sanctification and the font from which it springs.

What is this sanctification? Thomas Nelson defines it as "the process of God's grace by which the believer is separated from sin and becomes dedicated to God's righteousness. Accomplished by the Word of God (John 17:7) and the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:3-4), sanctification results in holiness, or purification from the guilt and power of sin." In sanctification our old self with all its unholiness is made holy; set apart for God's purposes. As confessional Lutheran's, we devoutly cling to God's Word as a means of grace. Through His Word, hearts are touched, faith produced, and souls turned back to God. No longer does sin separate, for God has torn down the wall block by block. The truthfulness of His word provides our victory over sin. Jesus fulfilled God's Old Testament promise of reconciliation made to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15); promised again through covenants made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 12:3, 26:3-4, 28:13, 14); and referred to by prophets such as Isaiah (Isaiah 9:6-7). The unifying link between the Old and New Testaments is found in Jesus. Those who know Him as their Lord and Savior are sanctified regardless of whether they lived prior to His coming or after. Isn't it reassuring to know that only hours before His gruesome death Jesus prayed that the Holy Spirit would reach across time to touch you with the truth of God's Word? You are set apart for His Cross-Driven Purpose.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> When Jesus was on the cross, your salvation was on His mind. <b>Discuss</b> the truthfulness of God's Word.</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Almighty God, how wonderful it is to know that You prayed for my soul only hours before Your death. Use me now as an instrument of salvation for those around me. I pray this prayer as a thank offering for Your wonderful grace. Amen.

## Everything for God's Purpose

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Roman 8:28-29 (NIV)**

A friend recently lost his son in a tragic accident. Certainly it is difficult for him to see anything good in such a situation. All he can see right now is the loss of his only son. What good can possibly come from such a loss? How can God work any good out of it? Is Paul writing down a bunch of psycho-babble? No! The source for these words is God Himself, not Paul. Paul is only the instrument through which God reveals truths about Himself. What then is the truth hidden in these words?

That my friend loves God is beyond doubting. We've prayed together. He's shared his faith numerous times. Faith is the key to God's working good in our lives according to what St. Paul tells us. That means the young man's death is part of God's purpose. We know from a previous devotional that God's purpose is to bring salvation to all mankind. Then just where does this death fit in with God's purpose? Since the young man's funeral, stories are told about how the services that day impacted lives. Young men and women whose lives walked the tightrope between reality and drug addiction were led by the Spirit to return to their faith. The hearse driver wanted to know more about Jesus and His promise of eternal life after seeing the witness of those who came to the grave site. While my friend and his wife struggle for a reason their son was taken, the souls coming to faith climb. Each of us will struggle, but it is important to remember the good God is about to bring from it. (And that's hard to do when surrounded by grief, isn't it?) In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of hardships and God's purpose, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). God is faithful. God is love. God gives every life a purpose . . . a Cross-Driven Purpose.

**Point to Ponder:** God has a plan for each and every life He creates.

**Discuss** ways God might use you in ministering to others in their time of need.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, bring comfort to those who grieve. We pray that those who have lost loved ones may see Your hand in their lives. Father, lead us back to You in times of stress and turmoil in our own lives. Amen.

## How Satan Operates

**Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden.” Genesis 3:1 (NIV)**

God wants us to know how Satan works so that we might be prepared for the strategy behind his temptations. Take a good look at Satan's approach recorded in Genesis 3. In particular, notice his first four words. "Did God really say?" What is Satan's modus operandi? It's to get inside Eve's mind and create doubt. Think about it for a moment. Isn't that a masterful stroke? Just get Adam and Eve to question God's authority, and soon they won't believe God anymore. It's a strategy Satan still employs today? "Did God really say that homosexuality is a sin?" "Surely, God wouldn't sentence His own Son to death?" "You've sinned too much. God couldn't possibly love someone like you." These are temptations. It's certainly not a sin to be tempted. Sin only appears when we give in to temptation. Speaking of Satan Jesus said, "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Because of Satan, all mankind is under a death sentence. In the Garden of Eden, God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil under penalty of death. According to Luther, this was Adam's spiritual act of worship. Disobeying God is not without consequences.

One of Satan's biggest deceptions is making us think we can handle temptation on our own. We can't. Paul's letter says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Satan is stronger than man, but weaker than God. In a battle fought in Heaven, the archangel Michael and his army of angels defeated Satan, throwing him and his minions to earth (Revelation 12:7-9). For Christians today it's important to know the battle over sin is won in Christ's death and resurrection, but there are still skirmishes to be fought. All of which are part of God's Cross-Driven Purpose for our lives.

**Point to Ponder:** Although Satan is defeated, he struggles on, taking souls with him.

**Discuss** a time when you were tempted.

**Closing Prayer:** Almighty God, we realize the forces of Satan are all around us, a battle is going on, and souls are to be won. Your Holy Spirit provides the courage we need to join in the fight. Help us, O Lord, when our temptation to sin is great. Amen.

## Defeating Satan

**Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. Ephesians 6:11 (NIV)**

I am always amazed at authors who suggest that we are able to defeat Satan by our own will. They may not come right out and say it, but they imply it. Run away from books that say such things as "God will never let you be tempted beyond what you can handle." (True.) Then adds, "But you must do your part as well." (False.) What part do we play? Such foolishness is comparable to serving as our own defense attorney while on trial for murder. What then shall we do? Since we are engaged in a battle against Satan, isn't it a good idea to arm ourselves? What better armaments than those provided by God? Paul speaks of God's armaments in his letter to the Ephesians. In Paul's time, the Roman army was the best fighting force around, so Paul draws upon his knowledge of their equipment as he writes Ephesians 6:13-18. Paul *says, put on the full armor of God*, not the full armor of man. Against Satan we are defenseless. Only by God's grace, using His armaments, can we face our adversary. Notice also that the only offensive weapon God provides is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

Sometimes the best defense is a good offense. Using the sword of the Spirit, Jesus meets Satan head-on (Luke 4:1-13). What a wonderful example to follow. By ourselves we are no match for Satan; with God at our side we are invincible. Consider this point as well. The stronger you are in the knowledge of God's word, the more the Spirit leads you to do God's will, the harder Satan will come against you. Satan can easily steal young Christians. Oh, but if he can lead into sin someone in authority . . . a pastor, a teacher, an elder, a choir leader, or a day-school principal . . . what hell-raising there'll be. When the time comes and you're tempted, and you will be tempted, remember these reassuring words, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, *he will* also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

**Point to Ponder:** We are at war and souls are in the balance.

**Discuss** a time when you used the sword of the Spirit.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, on our own we have no defenses to withstand the cavalry charge of Satan. Please provide us with Your armaments that we might join in the battle and fulfill Your Cross-Driven Purpose. Amen.

## Spiritual Maturity Takes Time

**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Ephesians 4:14 (NIV)**

Do you consider yourself a child? Probably not. If you're like me, the grey hair and wrinkles are a dead giveaway that you're no longer young. (Stamina and physique are against us as well.) Now consider this question: When it comes to your spiritual maturity, are you still an infant? Paul tells us that as spiritual infants we are tossed about from one scheme to another. Does that fit you? Not surprisingly, there are churches today which cater to spiritual immaturity. Perhaps you've seen them. Not wishing to offend the faith of anyone, they incorporate the beliefs of everyone. Hindu, Muslim, the teachings of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, New Age, selected teachings of Jesus, and others all form a religion of non-commitment. Uncertain about the way to eternal life, they hedge their bets. They call it "spiritual maturity" when it's really the opposite.

If an alphabet soup of the world's religions isn't a sign of spiritual maturity, just what is spiritual maturity? Simply put, spiritual maturity is a total reliance on God for everything. Augustine says that faith (spiritual maturity) means confidence in God and an assurance that God is gracious." Spiritual maturity isn't something we're born with, it begins at baptism when God begins a good work in us (Philippians 1:6.). Then, over time, through trials and tribulations, temptations and heartbreaks, the Holy Spirit instills a confidence we didn't possess before. We don't, by our own will, open a door for God to enter in. It is the Spirit who takes our hand and opens the door, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10). Spend some time today reading Hebrews 11, one of God's greatest faith chapters. There you'll find many examples of lives lived out for God's Cross-Driven Purpose.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> God grows us to spiritual maturity through His means of grace. <b>Discuss</b> the faith of an individual named in Hebrews 11.</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Father of all Creation, we thank You for beginning a good work in us at baptism. Please lead us on to a more mature faith, including a confidence that Your will is being done through our lives. Amen.

## My Brother's Keeper

**Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Genesis 4:9 (NIV)**

The commentary on this verse found in the Concordia Self-Study Bible is very revealing. It calls Cain's reply "A statement of callous indifference-all too common through the whole course of human history." This statement is undoubtedly true when you give history more than a cursory glance. Over the course of time, thousands of individuals have found favor in their own eyes while ignoring the spiritual and physical well-being of their fellow man. When God called His people around Him at Mt. Sinai, He outlined the plan He intended mankind to follow from the beginning of time. That is, before sin. Take a moment to read the historic words of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:1-17. Notice how the first three commandments (Exodus 20:1-11) concentrate on a right relationship with God. The remaining seven concentrate on a right relationship with our fellow man (Exodus 20:12-17). From these seven commands alone we can conclude that God wants us to be our brother's keeper.

Martin Luther once wrote, "We are commanded to promote and further our neighbor's interests, and when he suffers want we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes." Would our world be different if we followed God's command?

Most assuredly it would be. Attacking an oral tradition of His day, Jesus said, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven'" (Matthew 5:43-46). Is there a purpose behind loving our neighbors? Absolutely. In so doing we are showing God's love. Not as a work to merit our salvation, but instead as a response to God's love demonstrated through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christians we are called to care for all; we desire the whole world to spend eternity with God, not apart from Him. His Cross-Driven Purpose becomes our purpose.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> God wants us to be concerned for our brother's soul. <b>Discuss</b> the meaning of the words "love your enemies."</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Father, we desire to make Your love for all mankind our mission. Please, Lord, make Your Cross-Driven Purpose our purpose as well. Amen.

## Answering God's Call

**Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8 (NIV)**

In his inaugural address as new president of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick offered these words, "God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called." What profound words. It's certainly the case for Isaiah who was called into God's service about 750 years before the birth of Jesus. His calling was a humbling event. In a vision, Isaiah was transported into God's presence and realized how woefully inadequate he was (take the time now to read Isaiah's own account of this event in Isaiah 6:1-8). It's obvious that God had a plan for Isaiah for an angel touched his lips with a glowing coal and God pronounced the forgiveness of Isaiah's sins. Armed with this forgiveness Isaiah was equipped to become Israel's greatest prophet, preaching salvation by faith with such furor that some call him the Paul of the Old Testament.

What about you? Aren't you called? Isn't the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) your call? If you have been called, and certainly the Great Commission is proof, then it stands to reason that you are already equipped. When did this equipping occur? Did you miss it? Were you looking for something on the grand scale of the calling of Isaiah? If so, look again at the still waters of baptism, at God's Holy Word, and at the Lord's Table. God comes to you through His Word and Sacrament to burn away your sin, just as the hot coals did Isaiah's, and then to equip you for His service. The letter to the Hebrews contains a wonderful benediction that encapsulates what this devotion is all about "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Hebrew 13:20-21). God has already given you gifts for His service. Are you allowing the Spirit to make your life a Cross-Driven Life?

**Point to Ponder:** God equips those he calls. You are called.

**Discuss** what God has called you to do?

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, You alone provide us with all we need to do Your Great Commission. Strengthen us and equip us for Your mighty purpose. Amen.

## God Provides Your Gifts

**All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. 1 Corinthians 12:11 (NIV)**

Do you remember the old military posters with Uncle Sam pointing beneath the words I WANT YOU? If I may use a rather loose analogy, God would be Uncle Sam on this poster. God has done everything he can by sending His Holy Spirit into your life to encourage you to enlist. He's sent His Word and precious sacraments to shape you through boot camp. Now, you're ready to move into the front lines in the battle for souls, you're a soldier for God. In warfare not everyone has the same assignment. Some soldiers are trained as Delta Force members who parachute behind enemy lines to disrupt the enemy communications. Some are foot soldiers trained to fight from street-to-street. Still others fly planes over enemy territory to soften strategic targets. The same is true with you and me. In the life of Christians, God provides His great gifts for His predetermined purposes. Paul teaches that there are "different kinds of workings, but the same God works all of them in all men" (1 Corinthians 12:6).

No one gift is more important than another. Sometimes it's easy to look around and notice the tremendous gifts of congregation members and see them through jealous eyes. You wonder about your own gifts when you see that God gave some the ability to lead small groups. To others He gave the gift of playing a musical instrument or singing. Others act in dramas or design and sew paraments. While you're looking longingly at the gifts of others, have you stopped to consider your own? Even the ability to help others or greet guests and make them feel welcome when they visit is gifts from God. Compassion and caring are as important in God's service as any other gift, even more so. St. Paul puts it this way, "God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18). Your abilities and talents are not of your own making, they are from God to be used in a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** All gifts are given through God's grace.

**Discuss** some of the gifts God gave you.

**Closing Prayer:** From You, O Lord, all good gifts are given. We praise and honor You for Your faithfulness. Father, we rejoice that You so lovingly administer Your gifts so Your kingdom is furthered. Amen.

## Using God's Gifts

**We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. Roman 12:6 (NIV)**

When I was growing up I sometimes heard my mother and father says things like "Isn't it too bad that \_\_\_\_\_ is not living up to his/her potential?" Did you ever hear that from your parents? Was it ever said about you? Wouldn't it be a shame if, as Christians, these words were ever said about us. God, you see, gave us each a wealth of gifts to use in His service. What a shame to waste them. A striking example of wasted talents is seen in the Parable of the Talents found in Matthew's gospel. The talent in this parable is actually a unit of money, but the present-day view of a talent being a gift or ability is derived from this profound lesson (Matthew 25:14-30). Here the master gives talents to his servants and clearly expects a return on his investment. He wants the servants to put these talents to work. When one servant hid his talent, the master's chastisement followed. If God entrusts us with talents, He fully expects their use on His behalf.

St. Paul encourages us to follow the Parable of the Talents lesson. If God gifted us to serve, we should serve; if our gift is teaching, we should teach; if we possess the gift to encourage, we should encourage, the same for leadership and contributing to the needs of others (Romans 12:7-8). If we possess talents, God wants the Spirit that dwells within us to be set free to use them. The world around us is a scary place. Satan waits to lead us into captivity with fish hooks in our noses as the Assyrians did the Northern Kingdom (Habakkuk 1:15). Perhaps it is our talents which God will use to free the captives' souls. No wonder God looks with displeasure on those who fail to use the gifts He provided. Using talents to serve God and our fellow man is an important part of living a Cross-Driven Life.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> Talents are best invested in service of God and our fellow man. <b>Discuss</b> service projects you can do that use your talents.</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Find a way to use our talents, Lord. We desire to faithfully follow the example of Your Son who freely gave away His life in service of others. The saving of souls is equally important to us. Amen.

## Being a Servant

**"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:28 (NIV)**

The request was a simple one. "Jesus when you come to power I'd like to ask that you put my sons in positions of power," she said (Matthew 20:21). Jesus' answer probably caught everyone completely off guard. "I Am God, but unlike other gods, I don't expect people to serve me, to bow down to me, or to bring me this or that to appease my moods. Instead, I've come to serve mankind even to the point of my own death." The words of Rick Warren, pastor at Saddleback Church, are true when he writes, "The disciples argued about who deserved the most prominent position, and 2,000 years later, Christian leaders still jockey for position and prominence in churches, denominations, and para-church ministries." It's true, isn't it?

Contrary to what Jesus' ministry is, at times our sinful self takes over and we become more interested in power and prestige than in doing God's work. Sometimes we watch from positions of power as those around us suffer spiritual starvation. Instead of rolling up our sleeves, don't we turn up our noses? Now, consider Christ. Hours before His death we find him stripped down to a loin cloth and on His knees. Taking a basin and towel He washes His disciples' feet, a menial job usually assigned to a servant (John 13:1-5). Do you understand the significance? This is God incarnate, and what's He doing? Instead of asking the disciples to kneel before Him, He's on His knees before them doing the menial task of a servant. Since Christ served us, isn't it logical that we should serve others. Instead of jockeying for position, isn't it time to assume a new position, on our knees. In the real world there are those who still don't know the love of God, how He took the form of a humble servant and reconciled the world to Himself. Serving others was Christ's purpose. It's about time that serving became our Cross-Driven Purpose as well.

**Point to Ponder:** Jesus came to serve, not be served.

**Discuss** ways you can serve from within your own congregation.

**Closing Prayer:** By Your example, Lord, we understand the need to be a servant. It's not easy because we want to elevate ourselves into positions of power and prestige. Humbly make us a servant, willing to go to the cross to defend You. Amen.

## The Servant Mind-Set

**"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."**

**Galatians 5:24-26 (NIV)**

What would a servant mind-set look like? Joy provides an excellent anagram: Jesus first, yourself last, and others in between. Sounds very simplistic, doesn't it? By putting Jesus and others ahead of ourselves we race along life's highway contrary to our sinful nature. Our old Adam always wants us to "look out for #1". Paul tells us that the result of this "me first" attitude is sexual immorality, impurity, drinking too much, idolatry, witchcraft, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, orgies, and the like (Galatians 5: 19-22). The flip side of this coin is the result of the Holy Spirit working within us to produce the new Adam. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-25).

How important is the word *servant* in God's vocabulary? With over five hundred references between the Old and New Testaments, God emphasizes its importance very dramatically. In the New Testament, one of the words translated as servant can also be translated slave. Certainly slaves do what their master commands of them because serving others is their job. As Christians, we should consider ourselves slaves to Christ. The difference is that the Holy Spirit works faith in us that causes us to voluntarily subject ourselves to servanthood. It's a different mind-set. We put ourselves under the control of Christ in response to His great love for us, a love so great that He carried His servanthood all the way to the cross. Through His Spirit we live the joy of the Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** God calls us to a life in service to others.

**Discuss** times when your Old Adam sought praise and reward.

**Closing Prayer:** Father, we ask for a servant's heart. Lead us by the hand into a life of submission because of what You have done for us through Your Son. May we experience the joy of serving You and our fellow man. Amen.

## The Treasure in Clay Jars

**But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NIV)**

In St. Paul's time it was common for the wealthy to store treasure in inconspicuous clay jars instead of something elaborate. The idea was that in their haste a robber might take something that simply looked expensive and leave behind items of real value. While describing this early form of home security, Paul speaks allegorically. These clay jars actually symbolize our frail human bodies. As our bodies age we realize how fragile they really are. The wonderful thing is that God wants to use these fragile clay jars in His service. Paul says, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-and the things that are not-to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:27-31).

By selecting to work through you and me in our frailties, God is manifested. Of ourselves we are unable to do anything. We are nothing; God is everything. In our weakness He is exalted. Some of our Christian brethren would have us believe that by doing good works we "merit" a special "reward" in heaven. Works by these clay jars merit nothing except the "reward" promised in eternal life. Luther writes, counter to the Anabaptists of his day, "We grant that eternal life is a reward because it is something owed-not because of our merits but because of the promise . . . justification is strictly a gift of God; it is a thing promised." Good works flow from us as freely as water flows down a mountainside when God leads the way to a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** God uses us in spite of our human frailties.

**Discuss** Luther's comments on the "reward" earned by our good works.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, each time I look at myself in the mirror, I face a grim reality. I am but a clay jar empty of all purpose lest You pour Your Spirit within. Use me now for Your Cross-Driven Purpose. Amen.

## Our Mission

**Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)**

If you consider the Bible an important book of commonalities, there is good reason to support that claim. Look for a moment at God's call to Israel recorded in Deuteronomy 4:6. These words sound a lot like the Great Commission found above. "Observe them [the Law] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" At God's command, Israel is to serve as a light to the nations. The blood sacrifices commanded in Leviticus visibly illustrate the gap between God and His people, a gap caused by sin. With each sacrifice, God's Old Testament people anticipated the coming Messiah who would bridge the gap of sin and reconcile them. They didn't know how this feat would come to pass; they just believed.

They had no idea that God's plan of salvation included the cross. And the timing of God's redemption was perfect. Listen to St. Paul, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6-7). After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples an assignment that clasps the hands of present-day disciples and unites us all with God's chosen people. We, too, are to carry God's message to all nations, beginning in our own homes. Luther writes, "if we want qualified and capable men [applies to women, too] for both civil and spiritual leadership, we must spare no effort, time, and expense teaching and educating our children to serve God and mankind." This task begins with baptizing them into the family of the Triune God. We must also teach the twin tenets of repentance and reconciliation found only in the cross. Since the fall into sin, it is God's purpose is to lead others to a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** There is a commonality between the Old and New Testaments. **Discuss** the reason Christians should feel a sense of urgency in spreading the gospel,

**Closing Prayer:** Father, we beseech You to unite us with all believers throughout history who lived knowing Your Son would come or who know for certain Your promised Savior is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Make us aware of Your sacrifice on our behalf and embolden us with a new zeal to carry out His Cross-Driven Mission. Amen.

## Ambassadors for Christ

**We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NIV)**

Have you ever thought of yourself as an ambassador? You're probably familiar with the term, but don't consider yourself an ambassador. A definition is in order. Webster defines *ambassador* as *a diplomatic official of the highest rank sent by one sovereign or state to another as its resident representative*. Perhaps you've never considered yourself *a diplomatic official* before. Yet, that's exactly what Paul says you are; and the sovereign you represent is Christ Jesus. That certainly is a weighty task. Paul adds that *God makes His appeal* through us. In a previous devotional we agreed that God equips those He sends. So if we are serving as Christ's ambassadors, the Spirit is at work equipping us for the task.

Since we are ambassadors for Christ, shouldn't our lives reflect Him whom we represent? What should an ambassador for Christ look like? Peter says, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:11-12). Ambassadors glorify their sovereign Lord in the way they live. They also are prepared at a moment's notice to speak on behalf of their sovereign as Peter points out, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15-16). God calls us Christ's ambassador. It's a mighty task to represent Jesus in word and deed, but it's part of our calling to live a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** We are Christ's ambassadors.

**Discuss** ways your life can reflect your ambassadorship.

**Closing Prayer:** Father in Heaven, we are unworthy to be called Your ambassadors, yet that is what You desire. Help us live lives that reflect Your love and give us the words to minister to those around us. Amen.

Day 38

## To All Nations

**May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.**

**Psalm 67:1-2 (NIV)**

You've heard the blessings part of this psalm many times. It comes from Numbers 6:24, and just as Aaron requested years earlier, David does in our text. Without God's face shining on us, the rest of the verse is impossible to accomplish. Notice again the similarity between Matthew 28:19-20 regarding the carrying of God's salvation to all nations. For that to happen we can not remain self-centered; we must willingly share God's plan of salvation with everyone we meet. This also means supporting missionaries.

Around the world right now there are hundreds of missionaries spreading the gospel as Christ commanded. Each left the security of families to journey where God directs carrying His message of reconciliation. Crude huts, sometimes hours from civilization, provide their shelter as they struggle to improve the spiritual well-being of impoverished people, people now living without hope. For these missionaries, their lives stand as a living testament to the hope offered only through Jesus Christ. What can money buy in lands where little is offered for sale? Money buys food, medical supplies, Bibles translated into their native language, Sunday school material, and text books. Money trains missionaries and transports them to areas where many eagerly crave to hear the sweet, sweet sound of the gospel. Hungry ears still need the hope only possible through Christ. This is what David realizes and expresses in Psalm 67, what Jesus expresses in Matthew 28, and what God means when He calls us to a Cross-Driven Life.

**Point to Ponder:** God calls us to carry the gospel to all nations.

**Discuss** missionary projects you can support.

**Closing Prayer:** Sovereign Lord, You have called each of us to missionary work through the Great Commission. We are missionaries whether we realize it or not. Today we offer ourselves into Your service. Reveal Your will to us, then guide us and encourage us to walk boldly where You lead, no matter the hardships. Amen.

## Honoring God

**Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops.**

**Proverbs 3:9 (NIV)**

Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt offers a unique perspective on honoring God when he says frankly that "the need is not to get people to give more, but to hang on to less." Today's reading from Proverbs also addresses that issue. How do we honor God? What is our wealth? In God's eyes our wealth is everything we have: our salary, talents, home, family, the whole works. In Proverbs 3:9 God calls us to honor Him with our first fruits; the very best of everything He has provided.

Let's look at an example of *first fruits* found in the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:15). The Bible says both boys brought their offering to God. God accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Why? Abel brought the best of what he had, his first fruits, while Cain brought leftovers. God wants and deserves our very best. He longs for us to come to Him in prayers of thanksgiving, in prayers of worship, and yes, in tearful, hurting prayers. He wants to hear words of confession so He can offer back in words of absolution. You might think of it this way: God wants us to turn over our lives to Him. He wants the Holy Spirit to lead us to place our sinful lives in the sinless hands of His Son. That's a lesson Cain never learned, but his younger brother did. With pride Cain offered his offering to God. Then Abel humbly brought his. The humble offering of first fruits is accepted; the prideful offering of leftovers is not. No, our salvation doesn't depend on our works . . . our salvation is already paid for in Jesus, but the salvation of those who are yet to know Jesus may. Let's answer His call with grateful hearts. The offering of first fruits is a wonderful sign that the Spirit is at work leading us to live Cross-Driven Lives.

**Point to Ponder:** God asks us to return our first fruits into His service.

**Discuss** things that might stand in the way of giving God your first fruits.

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, we understand that You want our souls in service to You. Please send Your Holy Spirit to work in us a Cross-Driven Purpose. May we always realize that You graciously provide all we have. Forgive us our sins and renew a right Spirit within us. Amen.

## Putting God First

**Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. Malachi 3:10 (NIV)**

Can you recall the panic when a teacher announced a pop quiz? Today's Bible verse brings such quizzes to my mind. It's the only passage where God specifically gives us permission to test Him. But, a tithe? Ten percent of everything I have placed into God's hands? Now that's tough. For most of us the tithe seems like a giant boulder in a one-lane road; we just cannot get around it. Trusting God is hard. God wants to be our pilot. We want Him to be our co-pilot, and conflict ensues.

Not surprisingly, some people also think the blessings tied to this verse in Malachi pertain exclusively to money doled out in return for our gifts to God. They think God will make them rich if they tithe. These men and women see God as a slot machine. All they need to do is feed in their tithes, and gold and silver will flow into their hands. If you doubt the truthfulness of this statement just tune in some televangelist and watch as they plead for money, all the while promising God's monetary blessings in return. Paul attacks such false beliefs (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

Understanding the truth that God's blessings take many forms is an important concept for Christians. His blessings are those that provide faith in Jesus (1 Timothy 2:34). For Christians, tithing is not something done to curry God's favor; it is something done in response to His love for us. As we conclude our 40 days of meditation in God's word, it is my hope that He will do a mighty work in you and that your purpose will match His Cross-Driven Purpose.

<p><b>Point to Ponder:</b> Tithing is a hard concept to understand and even harder to apply. <b>Discuss</b> what could be accomplished for Christ if everyone tithed.</p>
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**Closing Prayer:** Gracious Father, You daily pour out Your blessing on me. Yet, in my pride I fail to acknowledge You as the font and source of all I have. Teach me now the joy of living a Cross-Driven Life humbly responding to Jesus' rich gift of eternal life. Amen.