

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

A NEW START

Celebrating Our New Life in Christ



JANUARY 2021

New Year, New You

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“No one is too old or too sinful to experience a new life in Jesus.”



What are you asking God for in 2021? I know we are all praying for an end to the pandemic and for God's peace to prevail. And

perhaps, individually, you are ready for a fresh start.

During His time on earth, Jesus met many people who longed for new beginnings. To the blind, the lame, and the lepers, He gave physical healing. Through a word or a touch, they were suddenly able to see, walk, and live. He brought spiritual healing as well. To the Samaritan woman at the well, with a history of broken relationships, Jesus offered “living water” (John 4:13, 14). To Nicodemus, the religious leader, Jesus explained how to be “born again” (John 3:3). To His disciples, Jesus offered a new identity, asking them to put down their nets and become fishers of people (Matt. 4:19).

Jesus extends this invitation for a new beginning to you and to me. Through His sacrificial death and resurrection, we are given a new identity and a new life. Romans 6:4 explains, “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.” Because Christ died for our sins and conquered the grave, we are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). I am deeply thankful that the life-changing transformation of the gospel does not depend on who we are or what we have done. Instead, Jesus offers us complete transformation from the inside out. He invites us to come as we are and to accept His divine grace, allowing God to change our hearts and minds. No one is too old or too sinful to experience a new life in Jesus. Acts 9 introduces us to Saul, a man driven by hate, actively persecuting Christians. God transformed him into Paul, who would become a pillar of the early church. Paul later wrote, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners— of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Friend, are you hungering for a fresh start? You can be assured that true and lasting change is available to all at the feet of Jesus. Start this new year by accepting His gift of salvation, a decision that will give you a new life, a new identity, and a new purpose in Jesus. ■

The Secret to Strength

by Dr. John Koessler

“While there is a place for discipline in the Christian life, discipline alone is not the secret to spiritual strength.”

After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples the secret to spiritual strength. He had spent forty days speaking to them about the kingdom of God. He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:3–5). Hearing this, the disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They hoped Jesus was about to establish a political kingdom, one in which they would become powerful (Luke 22:24–30).

Jesus told them to expect a different kind of power (Acts 1:5). The Holy Spirit would come upon them, and they would be His “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). While they had hoped for political authority, they received the power to act on Christ’s behalf. The Greek word for *power* in verse 8 also means *strength* or *might*. Jesus told His disciples to focus on God’s dominion over their lives. Controlled by God’s empowering Spirit, they would be strengthened to bear

testimony to the truth about Christ.

We usually think of witnessing as telling others the gospel. It does include this, but being a witness involves more. Instead of merely being salespeople for Jesus, we validate the gospel’s promise of new life through the Holy Spirit’s transformation of our lives. In other words, the power Jesus promised was not just the opportunity to share Christ, but the ability to live the Christian life. The rest of the New Testament reveals what it means to live under the dominion of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to say *no* to sin and *yes* to God.

If you engage in strength training, you might lift weights or use resistance bands. Hard work and discipline are required to grow strong. While there is a place for discipline in the Christian life, discipline alone is not the secret to spiritual strength. As Christians, our power comes from the Holy Spirit. Do you want to be a witness for Christ? Expect the Holy Spirit not only to help you to know what to say but also to grant you the strength to live the Christian life. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Transforming Presence: How the Holy Spirit Changes Everything—From the Inside Out* by Daniel Henderson (Moody Publishers).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: What is one area God might be urging you to "make new" in the year ahead?

WEEK 2: What does Paul mean when he says that "in Christ" we are a new creation? (see January 2)

WEEK 3: We often place our hope in things and people. How does your "noun" hope in Christ compare to your "verb" hope for things in this world?

WEEK 4: How can you "put to death" some old habits this year that are keeping you from fully following Jesus?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A New Start

I am making everything new.—Revelation 21:5

When my family of five moved from Texas to Indiana last year, we were exhausted, but also excited. We were beginning a brand new chapter in our lives. And, as we begin 2021, I am sure you too are ready for a fresh start. In this study, we will read what the Bible says about our new life in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17). It is my hope that, through this month’s study, we will:

- Understand why we matter to God and are given a new identity in Him
- Be energized to start something new in our lives that will bring us closer to God
- Know that our future with Christ far surpasses any failure we may experience

Your devotional author,



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A New Start

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:1–10

Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God.—2 Corinthians 5:5

Years ago, I led skiing and backpacking trips with college students near the Canadian border. We pitched our tents in the snow and spent the short days and long nights enjoying God’s presence in a winter wonderland. As peaceful as it was, it was also quite challenging. By the end of the trip, we were all ready to eat a warm meal, take a hot shower, and put on dry clothes. Camping in the sub-freezing wilderness was manageable for a time, but eventually we yearned for the comforts of home.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul paints a picture of the glorious home that is waiting for all who believe: our heavenly dwelling. Fourteen years before Paul penned this letter, he “was caught up” with Christ into Paradise (2 Cor. 12:2–4). And in our text today, he gives the Corinthians a glimpse of what he experienced in the midst of the present reality (5:1–4). First, Paul acknowledges the suffering, groaning, and brokenness that exists in our

world (vv. 2, 4). He does not deny it, overlook it, or explain it away. Rather he embraces the fallenness of humanity and recognizes that God has something much better in store for us (v. 1).

This past year stretched and challenged us. It taught us a lot about ourselves, one another, and God. It also displayed, perhaps more clearly than ever, the depravity of our world and the utter need for the ultimate healer, rescuer, and peacemaker: our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not guaranteed that this year will be easier, but we can rest assured that He has made us “for this very purpose” (v. 5). What awaits is something brand new and He will be with us all the way home.

► The New Year offers each of us a fresh new start. Probably more than ever, you are longing for something new. Allow the Lord to show you which areas of your life need a new beginning and choose to begin each day in His Word.

Pray with Us

Father, as we enter a new year, we thank you that you have chosen to place us at this specific point in history and we take comfort in your care, wisdom, and lovingkindness.

A New You

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–21

The old has gone, the new is here!—2 Corinthians 5:17

American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, “It’s never too late, or in my case too early, to be whoever you want to be . . . and if you find that you’re not, I hope you have the courage to start over again.” Over the past year, our lives have changed in countless ways. We learned to shop differently, socialize differently, and travel differently. We were forced to try new technology and create new routines. While starting something new can be *scary* it can also be *sacred*, especially when we allow God to create something new in us.

Our text today reminds us that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a *new* creation (v. 17). Notice Paul uses the word *anyone*. The city of Corinth was a large trading post with people coming and going from various nations and cultures. However, Paul wants his readers to know that regardless of where each individual came from, everyone is welcome to be “in Christ” (v. 17). When we are

“in Christ,” we are transformed into a new creation. Paul wants his readers to know that followers of Jesus are not *just* forgiven of their sins; they are made into someone completely new. Did you know that the moment you put your trust in Christ, you became a new person with a new purpose and a new future?

“What is my new purpose?” you may be asking. Paul says it is to be an ambassador of Christ (v. 20). You are to represent Him with your life. However, being a new creation and His ambassador doesn’t mean that we are perfect. Rather, it means we have been changed and we continue to be changed. Through the power of God alone, you are continually being made into a new you.

► This New Year can give *you* a new start. Begin by submitting your old life to God and become someone new. Commit to being in His Word daily as a new creation and new ambassador for Christ.

Pray with Us

Dear God, we rejoice that we have been made new. Lead us in your will for our lives and give us single-minded purpose as your ambassadors. Please use the gifts you have given us to attract others to you.

A New Way to Live

Read **John 15:9–17**

Love each other as I have loved you.—John 15:12

At Christmas, our young children love to unwrap presents. To say they are excited to discover what is inside the colorful packages would be a huge understatement. It is almost as if these new clothes will give them a brand-new identity and their new toys will launch them on an exciting new journey. Of course, as parents, we know that their initial delight at these new possessions will eventually fade. In contrast, the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, is something extraordinary that will never wear out or fade away. When we believe in Jesus as our Savior, we begin a new journey with a new purpose. And, Jesus gives us a new way to live. Hours before he died, Jesus Christ gave his closest followers a new command: “Love each other” (v. 12). As easy as that may sound, Jesus knew this would be extremely difficult for His disciples and for us.

Living and loving as Christ loved us will ultimately bring delight and joy to our heavenly Father and have

a transforming effect on us as well. In verse 11, Jesus reveals that as we love Him, His joy will take root in our lives. Joy is not the same as mere happiness or excitement, but rather a deep satisfaction that comes from being in step with God and His perfect will. Thankfully, we are given Christ’s life as an example (vv. 12–13). Just as He surrendered His life, we are to lay down our lives for Him.

Jesus also gave His disciples a new title. They were no longer referred to as servants, but as friends (vv. 14–16). This distinction was given because Jesus wanted them to understand that their lives were to be lived for God and for one another. Christ gave them, and us, a new way to live which is centered around loving one another (v. 17).

► Starting something new can be intimidating. But with Christ as our guide, the new journey is worth it. Make it a point to start each day this week with us, as we grow in living new lives for Jesus.

Pray with Us

You know the limits of our human hearts, yet you have told us to love one another in the same way you love us. Fill us with your love for one another as we live our lives for you.

A New Way to Love

Read John 13:1–17

He now showed them the full extent of his love.—John 13:1

Imagine you have been invited to a meal at a table, but not just *any* table. You are a guest at the table where Jesus and His friends gathered for the Passover Feast. You anxiously wait for the festivities to begin when you notice Jesus stand, get a towel and water, and begin washing everyone's feet. Traditionally, this was a job done by a servant, not the master. At the very least, it should be your job. He shouldn't be washing your feet! But with this simple act, Jesus taught His disciples, as well as you and me, that being a disciple means getting into the foot-washing business. Christ gives us a new way to live by showing us a new way to love.

One interesting thing to note is the timing of Jesus' act of service. Jesus knew His death was quickly approaching. He knew the pain, torture, mockery, and betrayal He would endure. Nevertheless, He

used this opportunity to teach His disciples to love one another through selfless service.

John uses verse one as a catalyst for the remainder of his book. The washing of the disciples' feet was the first of many ways Jesus would display the full extent of His love (v. 1) in his waning hours. His selfless act of serving others, in particular those who had nothing to give back in return, gives us an example to live by (v. 15). He demonstrates a new way to love: selflessly, serving those in our circle of influence. It is impossible to say what you or I would do if we had sat at *that* table many years ago, but today we are called to show others the kind of love that Jesus showed His friends.

► You and I are called to show a new kind of love. Who is at your "table" that you can serve with love today? How can you show Christ's love to someone else?

Pray with Us

Father, help us emulate your son's humility as we reach out to the people you have placed in our lives. Teach us to show others by our actions the love you have for them.

A New Way to Forgive

Read Matthew 18:21–35

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.—Ephesians 4:32

How many times should we let someone off the hook before a punishment is enforced? Peter asked Jesus this logical question, whose answer was probably not what we might expect. “Seventy-seven times,” Jesus responded. Or more literally translated, “seventy times seven times” (v. 22). Jesus was not teaching Peter a quick math lesson; rather, He was teaching him what a new way to forgive looks like in the kingdom of God.

Before Peter could respond, Jesus launched into a parable to shed light on His answer. In this parable, the servant owed his master the equivalent of 20 years of wages (v. 24). Yet, he was forgiven. However, when his co-worker owed the forgiven servant just a small sum, he was unwilling to forgive (vv. 28–30). Jesus’ point was *not* that a severe punishment comes from the master when he is crossed. That would be contrary to Jesus’ teaching in the prior

verses. Rather, Jesus was teaching that because we have been forgiven beyond comprehension, we are to forgive others. This was a new concept for people in the first century, and it can be a difficult one for us today.

In a culture where the custom was “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” (Ex. 21:24), Jesus taught that forgiveness is a new way, a better way. It is never easy, but it is what we have been called to do. Christ’s words to His oppressors from the cross, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34), remind us that even while we wait for justice to come in this world, we have been called to forgive. Not just once, or twice, but unconditionally and unendingly.

► Who do you need to forgive? Maybe it is a neighbor, co-worker, old friend, or family member? Maybe you need help forgiving yourself? Remember that God unconditionally and unendingly forgives, and so should we.

Pray with Us

In this fallen world where wrongdoing abounds, we ask for the ability to forgive those who have injured us. We rejoice in your forgiveness of our own unpayable debts. Thank you, dear God!

A New Attitude

Read Matthew 6:25–34

*Do not worry about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will worry about itself. — Matthew 6:34*

What do you worry about? What is pressing on your heart today? As Jesus preached on the hillside, He must have sensed that people had concerns about their next meal or providing for their household's daily needs. Our text comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but it was most likely a message He had often communicated. Jesus implored His listeners to shift their thinking when it came to anxiety and worry. He wanted His followers to have a new type of attitude and perspective.

In this short section of His sermon He uses the word "worry" or "anxious" six times. We know from reading other portions of Scripture that it is good to remember the past and prepare for the future, but Jesus reminds us here, that our attitude needs to be one of reliance on God in the present. In His sermon, he uses visual aids to get His message across to His listeners. First, while most likely pointing to the birds flying on the

shoreline, Jesus reminds His listeners of the ease at which the birds were able to find food and how much more valuable people are to God than the birds (v. 26).

Then Jesus points to the flowers growing in the fields off in the distance (v. 28). Just as flowers grow with beauty and simplicity, Jesus teaches that His followers should not worry about the past or the future. Instead, seeking first the kingdom of God ought to be on the forefront of our minds. While it is challenging not to worry, especially after a year like 2020, we can follow Jesus' reminder to rely on God's provision and protection every day and to live for Him.

► This passage doesn't say that we will never worry, it does reframe our worries as children of God. God is our provider. He knows our past, our present, and our future. Nothing escapes His control. Write down your worries today and bring them to God in prayer.

Pray with Us

We confess that we often allow yesterday's regrets and tomorrow's worries to rule our thoughts. Lord, today we submit our anxieties to you, remembering that you are the one who gives us our daily bread.

A New Generosity

Read 1 Timothy 6:17–19

Be generous and willing to share.—1 Timothy 6:18

Over the last year, the economy was often on our minds. Debates raged on whether or not businesses should reopen at the risk of more COVID-19 cases. The stock market fluctuated and people's retirement funds went for a series of roller coaster rides. But no matter what economic situation we may face in the days ahead, the principle from our text today never changes: Be committed to being content, and be generous with your deeds.

As we follow Jesus, we begin to look at money and wealth differently. The apostle Paul reminded his protégé, Timothy, to instruct the Ephesian Christians to become rich not in material goods, but in good works, and to be content with all the Lord had provided them. He writes, "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (1 Tim. 6:7). Paul urges Timothy to teach followers of Christ about living with a new perspective on generosity. Paul commands his readers to put

their hope in God and not in worldly possessions (v. 17). Instead of hoarding wealth, Christ-followers are to be open-handed and willing to share (v. 18). Paul knew that being generous with one's life and resources would guard our hearts from materialism and misplaced hope. But why is being generous worth it?

Paul answers, "So that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (v. 19). In the original language, this could also be translated, "to seize with one's own hands, life, indeed." Being generous no doubt helps others, but the main reason you and I are commanded to be generous is that we need to be givers. When we become generous with our lives, we reflect our Savior Jesus Christ, who was most generous with His life.

► How can you be more generous with your life and resources? What are you currently giving, including both finances and time? Find a ministry you are passionate about and decide how you can invest in it.

Pray with Us

Heavenly Father, you have bestowed each of us with gifts to use in your service. Guide us as we seek to be generous with the time, talents, and physical resources you have given us for the glory of your name.

A New Respect

Read 1 Peter 2:11–17

Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. — 1 Peter 2:17

One of the problems with social media is that many people feel free to say whatever they think about everything. And, because they are posting online, they often express their opinions in harsher language than they would if they were talking to their opponent face to face. As believers, we may feel pulled into these conflicts and return harsh words to those who oppose us, but God's Word reminds us that we are to "show proper respect to everyone" (v. 17).

Peter reminds his readers in our text today that while we may have some say in the affairs of this world, we must remember that we are really just foreigners, passing through (v. 11). Even though our sinful desires push and pull us in directions that oppose God, Peter says we are to live such radical lives that when the outside world sees us, God will be glorified because of our good deeds (v. 12). One of the most drastic ways, our lives can stand out among nonbelievers

is by submitting ourselves to "every human authority" (v. 13). Peter says it is the Lord's will that "by doing good" we would put to silence the talk of those who are contrary to the gospel (v. 15). However, this begs the question, "How does one do good?" Where does one even start to do good when there seems to be so much conflict and division among people?

Peter says it *starts* with showing "proper respect" (v. 17). In the original language, this phrase is actually the same as "honor," like honoring a king. According to Peter, we are to treat everyone as if they have extreme value. The reality is that they do have value in God's eyes, a tremendous amount of worth. Treating others with respect and dignity, will help us navigate the waters of this world.

► How can you show Christ's love by demonstrating proper respect to others? Examine your own words and actions on social media. How can you better reflect the One you serve?

Pray with Us

Lord, forgive us when we reduce people to the political views they espouse or the irritating things they do. Help us to see each person for who they are: your image-bearer with inherent value.

A New Family

Read 1 John 3:1–3

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!—1 John 3:1

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with a friend about God and Heaven. In the midst of our conversation, he told me he believed that everyone is a “child of God.” I explained that while it is true that we are all created by God and made in His image (Gen. 1:26–27), being part of God’s family is different.

In John’s account of Jesus’ life, he states that the world did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, nor did they receive Him as their Rescuer (John 1:10–11). However, to those who do believe in Jesus and His resurrection, “he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). When God the Father looked at a depraved humanity, it would have been astounding if He only had pity or charitable compassion for the lost souls. It would have been extremely generous if He merely set forth a plan to save them from eternal punishment. But God went

well beyond that. He called them His children.

Our text highlights that it is only because of God’s love that believers *can* be called His children (v. 1). The word for “love” John used here is *agape*, a never-ending, unconditional love. He states that God “lavished” or “bestowed as a gift” this love on us (v. 1) and therefore we are included as part of His family. When you and I believe in Jesus, we become part of a new family, the family of God. As His children, we bear His name and His reputation. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we carry the name of Christ. Being in Him makes us part of a new family.

► Do people know you are part of God’s family? The early believers did not keep it a secret they were part of the household of God. Their lives were testimonies of who they belonged to and the same should be known about us.

Pray with Us

We rejoice in our status as children of God! Father, let the joy we have in our identity be evident to all around us, drawing them into your family of faith.

A New Message

Read John 14:1–7

*I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me. — John 14:6*

If you were given life-changing news, how would you share it? Would you post on Facebook or perhaps text a friend? Because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and His bodily resurrection, we have a wonderful and important message to share. It is a message of hope, encouragement, thankfulness, and love. It is the simple message that Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life" (v. 6). How will you share this message?

Last week, we focused on the new ways we live because of Christ's transformative work in us. This week we'll study the new message we have to share with a world that desperately needs Him. Hours before His arrest, Jesus prepared His friends for what was going to happen. It must have been difficult for them to fully grasp. They were worried on His behalf, and probably concerned about their own welfare too. In the midst of this uncertainty, Jesus comforted them, saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (v. 1). How

could they not be distressed?! Not only were the authorities looking for Jesus and His friends, but Jesus had just told Peter that the disciple would disown Him three times before sunrise (John 13:38).

Jesus described His return to His Father and His mission to prepare a place for all who believe. Then, He dropped a bombshell of a message that continues to shake the world today. After Thomas's inquiry as to where Jesus was going and how they could follow Him there, Jesus proclaims, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). What was only pictured in the Old Testament sacrifices of the law was now revealed in flesh and blood. Eternal life comes through Jesus Christ alone.

► Is there someone in your life who needs to hear this message? Begin to pray that God will create opportunities for you and others to share this good news with them.

Pray with Us

Dear God, please grant us opportunities and words of grace to share the vital truth that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We want everyone to know you!

Message of Hope

Read 1 Peter 1:3–9

*He has given us new birth
into a living hope.—1 Peter 1:3*

Most sports fans hope their favorite team will win the championship. But they also realize that only one team can actually bring home the trophy. The word *hope* can be a noun or a verb. When fans “verb-hope” for their team to win, they want something to happen. However, when we have “noun-hope,” we have the *assured expectation* that something *will* happen. For Christians, the hope Christ gives us through His resurrection is not a wanting or wishful hope, but an assured expectation of what we know is to come.

Peter explains that believers in Christ are given a “new birth into a living hope” (v. 3). It’s similar to Paul’s idea in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that when one trusts in Jesus, he or she becomes a “new creature.” We are given a new life and a new identity. In verse three, Peter uses *hope* as a noun. This message of hope is more than just a want or a desire. Peter assures us that this living hope is a joyful and confident expectation.

Peter continues in verse four to say that the new birth also gives us an eternal inheritance. This assures us that we will be united with Christ forever. Unlike any earthly inheritance we might receive, this eternal inheritance can “never perish, spoil or fade” because of God’s omnipotence and supremacy (vv. 4–7). Christ’s resurrection from the dead gives us complete confidence that this hope will last for all eternity. The idea of a living hope and inheritance was a brand-new message for those early believers (vv. 8–9). Now, we have the honor of receiving that same hope and sharing our living hope with others. Remember, that your hope in Christ is not wishful thinking, but an assured expectation of what is to come.

► When we place hope in things and people, we are often disappointed. How does your “noun-hope” in Christ compare to your “verb-hope” for things in this world?

Pray with Us

Thank you, Father, for the assured expectation that is our hope in Christ. Help us to live with conviction, knowing that the things you have promised will come to pass.

Eternal Encouragement

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you.—2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

If you were a believer in the first century you would be faced with many difficult experiences. We know that these men and women, who publicly followed Christ, were challenged and tested. In one of Paul's last letters to the believers in Thessalonica, he gave them some advice and encouragement on how to handle difficult times.

Paul begins today's text by giving thanks for the work God had already done in their lives. Their lives were a testament to God! Anything they had done or accomplished was evidence that God had brought them to this point (vv. 13–14). As a result, Paul encouraged them to “stand firm and hold to the teachings” they had received (v. 15). He knew that in difficult times it is easy to allow the Word of God to slip out of our lives. It is crucial that we hold firm so we can withstand the roller coasters life can bring.

Finally, Paul prays for the Thessalonians by first recalling what

God had done for them (v. 16). The Lord's encouragement and comfort in the past reassured them of the promise that He would be faithful and comfort them in the future. He does the same for us today. When we remember what God has done for us it gives us strength and encouragement for the future. The word Paul uses for *encouragement* could also be translated *comfort*. Paul's big idea is that during difficult times, the God of eternal comfort and encouragement comes alongside us and gives us exactly what we need. The result of God's eternal encouragement is that we can glorify Him through “every good deed and word” (v. 17). This message is one that everyone in 2021 needs.

► This New Year may be a difficult start for you. However, instead of dwelling on the negative, remember what God has done for you in the past. Let Him strengthen and encourage you to stand firm regardless of what comes your way.

Pray with Us

Today, dear God, we recount the endless ways you have proven faithful throughout our lives. We take comfort in who you are, believing that you will continue to guide us, whatever lies ahead.

Message of Perspective

Read Luke 6:37–42

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?—Luke 6:41

Nine years ago today, a cruise ship ran aground after hitting rocks and a sandbar off a small Italian island. According to the vessel's owner, the captain "made an unapproved, unauthorized deviation in course." Sadly, many people lost their lives, and the captain was found guilty of manslaughter because of his negligence. While it may seem obvious to us that the captain was at fault, we too often fail to see the dangers in front of us. We can all benefit from a new way to see.

Our text today is a parable we often learn as children in Sunday School. Jesus was teaching His listeners that they are to look to the Lord for direction and not to one another (v. 39). Then he tackled a sticky issue that is also prevalent today: hypocrisy. How do we judge others? To illustrate His point, Jesus used first-century humor, painting a picture of someone who points out

a small piece of sawdust in another person's eye, while having a large plank in his own eye (v. 41). In other words, we are far more tolerant and accepting about our own sin than we are of others.

When we dismiss our own sins and are quick to call out the sins in other people, Jesus calls us a "hypocrite" (v. 42). While it can be good to help our neighbor recognize the sin in his or her life, Jesus challenges us to deal with our sin first. This calls for a time of self-examination, confessing our own sins before God. When we are able to see clearly, it will help us traverse the waters of this world, and help us save other lost souls along the way.

► Spend some time today examining your life. Do you have a "plank" in your eye that you are disregarding? Ask God to give you the strength to see your own sins clearly so you can help others.

Pray with Us

Lord, we who so easily recognize others' failings are often willfully blind to our own. Please convict us of our sins so we can enjoy your gift of repentance.

Message of Thankfulness

Read Luke 17:11–19

*I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.—Psalm 9:1*

True thankfulness can stop us in our tracks and motivate us to action. That's what happened to a leper whose life was forever changed by Jesus. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee, an ethnically diverse and tense region (v. 11). After hearing cries from a group of men with leprosy, Jesus instructed them to go show themselves to the priests (vv. 12–14). Once the priests declared them healed, they would be allowed to rejoin society.

While on the journey to receive medical clearance, the lepers began to notice that evidence of their skin disease was supernaturally disappearing. We can imagine their pace quickening as their hopes of being reunited with loved ones intensified. Suddenly, one of them stopped and turned around, deciding to take a moment to thank Jesus. The actions of this one leper should teach us something as well. When Jesus gives us new life, He also gives us a message of profound thankfulness.

A detail often overlooked in this narrative is that this man was a Samaritan, a foreigner (vv. 16, 18). Not only was he an outsider because of his leprosy, but he was also an outcast to the outcasts because he was from Samaria. Nonetheless, because of what Jesus did, he was drastically moved to an attitude of thankfulness. This man was healed both physically and, more importantly, spiritually. His faith in Christ's authority over the powers of this world made him well (v. 19). This thankfulness to God would travel with him for the rest of his life. And thankfulness is a part of our new life in Christ also. This new message of thankfulness for what the Lord has done in our lives ought to travel with us wherever we go. Be someone who is quick to thank God, even if you are standing alone.

► When you thank the Lord for His work in your life, don't forget to thank those around you who have helped and supported you along the way.

Pray with Us

Lord, you meet our material, emotional, relational, and spiritual needs. You shower us with blessings. Our sufferings shrink in comparison to your mercies. May we meditate today on your gifts!

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Eric C. Redmond, Professor of Bible

Q Do we need to follow or obey church traditions that aren't found in the Bible?

A Churches observe two kinds of traditions. Some are practices commanded by Scripture. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you" and "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you" (1 Cor. 11:2, 23). These have sometimes been called "great" traditions. The Lord's Supper would be considered one of these great traditions that is an integral part of the church.

The other kind of traditions are practices that are a matter of local custom. They might be described as "little" traditions. Adopted by local churches or denominations, little traditions may vary based on ethnicity, culture, and geography. They may influence which days we meet, such as Good Friday or Maundy Thursday, whether we have one or multiple Sunday School hours or have an evening Sunday service. Sometimes the church's great traditions are personalized by a congregation's local customs which shape how the Lord's Supper is arranged and served, whether we sing only hymns or only Psalms, and if we

repeat a confession or creed during the service. A church's little traditions or local customs have value, but they are not practices that every church must follow in the same manner.

Whether or not we follow a church's traditions is a matter of conscience. What Scripture commands must be obeyed. When a practice is not prescribed by Scripture, believers are free to follow, as long as it does not conflict with what God has commanded elsewhere (Rom. 12:10; Eph. 4:2; Heb. 13:17).

Q I often pray Scriptures like John 6:44 and 2 Timothy 2:25–26 over my lost children who are far from God. Is there a point in praying to the Lord for them if God chooses who He draws to Himself?

A The salvation of our children is near and dear to the heart of every Christian parent. We all hope to see our children, and all our loved ones, knowing Jesus and thriving in the power of the Holy Spirit. We want them to enjoy the assurance of salvation and a relationship with Christ. The deepest cry of a parent's heart is that the Lord would show our children His salvation.

The Bible does teach that God draws people to Himself in salvation

“Praying for the salvation of our children, we ask the God of mercy to draw our unsaved children to Himself. But we must also remember to leave the how and when of their salvation to God alone.”

(John 6:37). Scripture also teaches that those who hear the gospel are responsible for their reaction (John 3:18). “In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies,” theologian J. I. Packer explains. “They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*, and they work together.”

It is a comfort to know that God has invited us to bring all of our concerns to Him (1 Peter 5:17). Praying for the salvation of our children, we ask the God of mercy to draw our unsaved children to Himself. But we must also remember to leave the how and when of their salvation to God alone.

Q If God unconditionally loves everyone, how could He kill so many people in the Old Testament?

A As Creator, God has power over the life and death of all He has created. From all eternity God has marked out every day each person will live (Ps. 139:16). As humanity’s Judge, He has the authority to call us to account for our actions. He is the “judge of all the earth” and His decisions are always right (Gen. 18:25).

In the Old Testament, the Lord did command Israel to destroy people

whose idolatrous practices showed that they did not know or follow God. As a righteous Judge, God deemed them deserving of death just like every sinner is deserving of death (Rom. 3:23). “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). The punishment for sin is death, and these deaths came at the hands of Israel so that the idolatrous practices of these nations would not ensnare God’s people (Deut. 7:4, 25).

This may seem difficult for us to reconcile with our understanding that God is a God of love (1 John 4:16). But God’s love is clearly evident throughout both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 36:7; Jer. 32:18; Zeph. 3:17; John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). God’s freedom to remove people from this world by death reveals His power as our Righteous Judge, but it is not an indication of His lack of love which provided the only way for our salvation (John 3:16). ■

A New Heart and Mouth

Read Matthew 15:1–20

What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.—Matthew 15:11

Several years ago, my friend called with a frantic voice. Muddy water was coming out of his faucets. Upon further inspection from professionals, he discovered that an underground pipe had cracked and dirt was seeping its way into his house. Workers needed to dig up large sections of his yard to fix the problem. As believers, we can be guilty of allowing filth to come out of our mouths because it has unconsciously seeped into our hearts. Thankfully, God is in the business of digging into our lives to fix our damaged hearts.

In our text, the Pharisees were reaching a boiling point. The masses were beginning to follow Jesus, listen to His teachings, and experience healing by His power. In an attempt to undermine this rapidly growing movement, they sent a delegation from Jerusalem to expose Jesus as a heretic (vv. 1–2). For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, tradition was their mission. So when they tried to call

out Jesus' disciples on a technicality of living defiled lives because they were not washing their hands before meals, Jesus responded in brilliant fashion. He argued that they were honoring God only by their mouths and not by their lives (vv. 3–9).

The Pharisees were obsessed with keeping rituals. However, when Jesus stepped onto the scene, He began teaching something altogether different. He said that what makes you unclean comes from within. For Him, it was not a mouth issue as much as it was a heart issue. What comes out of the mouth is actually coming from the heart (v. 19). Jesus' new message required them, and us, to check not only their mouths but also their hearts.

► Do you ever find yourself saying something that later you are ashamed of? Perhaps a comment to a friend or even a subtle remark under your breath? Allow the Lord to work on your heart so that you can honor Him with both your mouth and your life.

Pray with Us

Father, we often undermine the importance of our words, excusing vulgarity as humor and irreverence as authenticity. Today, make us aware of our words and what they say about our hearts.

A New Task

Read John 1:19–28

*I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness,
“Make straight the way for the Lord.”—John 1:23*

One of the most interesting characters in the Bible has to be John the Baptist. This hairy man, wearing camel’s skin and eating locust and honey, had a very important job. His focus was never on himself, but rather he strived to shine the spotlight on Christ. God gave this man the responsibility to prepare the way for Jesus.

In today’s text, the curious Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites on a mission to discover more about this man in the wilderness who was teaching people something new about God. When questioned about his identity, at first, John was reluctant to say much. Perhaps he was still wondering what his role would be in the coming of the Messiah. However, when pressed, John unequivocally stated that he was not the Messiah, but rather a “voice of one calling in the wilderness” (v. 23). John was a messenger who would help people prepare their hearts and lives for something brand new.

Some Pharisees pushed back

and questioned John about why he was baptizing people at all (v. 25). But John responded by stating that he was simply preparing people for not just someone, but the One. The one, “whose sandals I am not worthy to untie,” John says (v. 27). His dedication to the Lord and his new task consumed him. John’s new task was getting everything, and everyone, ready for someone they had long awaited.

As followers of Christ, our new task is similar to John’s mission. We are called to turn the spotlight off ourselves and shine it on Christ. We have been called to be a voice in our own wilderness and help people prepare themselves for an encounter with the Lord.

► What areas are you in that seem like a wilderness and are in desperate need of Christ? Begin praying for opportunities, wisdom, and the courage for your new task of being a voice pointing people to Him.

Pray with Us

Lord, let us not forget that you are our reason for living. Teach us to walk in such close step with you that all who know us can’t help but see you.

A New Identity

Read Colossians 3:1–11

Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.—Colossians 3:10

Do you have a hard time throwing away old shoes? I do. Whether it is hiking boots, dress shoes, or sandals, I usually feel a bit apprehensive about letting go of what is familiar and comfortable. Getting rid of the past is hard for many of us. The past is where we used to live and where our memories reside. But our Scripture today reminds us that while we remember and even treasure the past, when we become a follower of Christ, we have a new identity in Him.

Paul reminds the Christians in Colossae that Jesus' resurrection changed everything. Because Christ was raised, those who believe in Him have a new life and new identity. Paul urges followers to set their hearts and minds on things above and not on earthly desires and passions (vv. 1–2). Paul is obviously not referring to a physical death in verse three when he states, "For you died," but rather the fact that they have put their old life

and former ways behind them. Their new life is now concealed or "hidden" with Christ (v. 3). Paul repeats this truth in verse four by stating that when Christ appears, believers will also appear with Him in glory which is only possible by being found in Him.

In the original language, Paul begins verse five with the word "therefore," but the active imperative Paul stresses is "put to death" anything and everything that belongs to worldly ways. Because of their new identity in Christ, believers are to abandon their old lives and be renewed into the image and likeness of God our Creator (v. 10). Holding on to the past is easy, but living for Christ is so much better.

► What are some old ways of living that have either crept back into your life or have been hiding from sight and need to be renewed? Even though it is hard to fully get rid of the past, your new identity in Christ is worth it.

Pray with Us

The past testifies to your work in our lives, reminding us of what you have delivered us from. Father, help us to move forward in your righteousness, looking back only to praise you.

You Are Valuable

Read Luke 7:36–50

*Your faith has saved you;
go in peace.—Luke 7:50*

Martin Luther King Jr. often gave this advice, “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” For the woman in today’s narrative, her first step must have seemed like a giant leap. The Pharisees referred to her as a “sinner,” and so it was likely that she was one of the town’s known prostitutes (vv. 37, 39).

While she may have felt unwelcome in this gathering of the religious elites and Jesus, she did not let a lack of invitation stop her. Nothing could prevent her from worshipping at the feet of Jesus. For most of her life, she had found her value from men who took advantage of her, using and abusing her. But now, perhaps for the first time ever, she found someone who showed her that she was valuable to God. Our text doesn’t record a word she says, but her actions speak volumes (vv. 37, 38).

The appearance and bold actions of this woman, frustrated

Simon the Pharisee. However, Jesus used the situation as a teaching moment for both Simon and the woman—and for us. He clearly demonstrated that all people are valuable to God. Therefore, our lives ought to be an outpouring of appreciation and service to Jesus (vv. 44–47) because only He is able to forgive us our sins (v. 48).

Regardless of your past, Jesus has the power to forgive you. We are all sinners saved by grace. The apostle Paul even says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15). We are all need of forgiveness and to be reminded that we are valuable to God.

► Where do you put your value and self-worth? Next time you look in the mirror, remind yourself that you are looking at someone who is valuable to God.

Pray with Us

Our value is not from ourselves or from anything we do or don’t do. Our worth is from you, O God. Thank you that we are your creation, your children, and the blessed recipients of your unconditional love.

A New Type of Belief

Read John 20:24–29

Stop doubting and believe.—John 20:27

Does doubting feel like part of your DNA? We all have doubts when an infomercial makes promises that seem too good to be true. We may doubt the commitments made by others and even by us. So it should not surprise us that we entertain doubts about God. It has been the enemy's plan from day one to plant seeds of doubts in our minds about our Creator (see Genesis 3). In today's Scripture, Thomas was fighting a logical and a supernatural battle. He wondered: *How is it possible that a person could die and return to life?*

Thomas wanted hard evidence to believe the claim of Jesus' resurrection. John tells us Thomas' struggle with unbelief lasted for days (v. 26). Jesus could have easily appeared to Thomas, but it is interesting that He allows Thomas to wrestle with unbelief. After some time, the resurrected Jesus did appear to Thomas, through a locked door, and implored him to believe (v. 27). Notice that Thomas didn't even need to put

his hands in Jesus' scars. Seeing the resurrected Jesus was all he needed, and he called Christ "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).

Jesus recognized that Thomas needed to see before he would believe. But then Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (v. 29). Jesus is talking about you and me. Shortly after this encounter with Thomas, Jesus ascended to heaven. The next time we see our Lord and Savior will be at His imminent return, but in the meantime we have Thomas's encounter as one of the many reasons to believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection. I have a feeling many of us can relate to Thomas. We need to see it to believe it. Thankfully, Jesus revealed Himself to doubters. Stop doubting and believe.

► Perhaps you believe in Jesus' resurrection, but still have doubts about God. I encourage you to dive into God's Word and get involved in a good Bible-based church as you continue on your journey for truth.

Pray with Us

Dear God, our salvation is secure in Christ's faithfulness, and not our own. Yet we often crave assurance that we have placed our faith in the right person. We ask that you would mercifully reassure us when we doubt.

A New Mediator

Read 1 Timothy 2:1–7

For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.—1 Timothy 2:5

In today's world, we have nearly instant communication with anyone, anywhere. Phones that fit in the palm of our hand let us connect with others quickly, easily, and accurately. That wasn't always the case. If you've ever seen depictions of early American small-town life, a local phone operator would manually push and pull cable plugs to connect callers to receivers. The operator was an important mediator, without whom communication would become impossible.

How do you and I connect with God? In his letter to Timothy, Paul gives the assurance that believers are given open access to God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. Paul begins by encouraging believers to pray for all people (v. 1). Notice that he includes kings and those in authority in this list. Paul gives a reason: so that "we may live peaceful and quiet lives" (v. 2) and because God "wants all people to be saved" (v. 4). The purpose is for the gospel to go forward!

Second, Paul reminds us that Jesus acts as the mediator between individuals and God. Our requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings go directly to Him. Paul details Jesus' work of mediation through the selfless and sacrificial act of giving of His own life as a "ransom for all people" (v. 6). A price was paid so we may be released from the bondage of sin, paid through the death of our mediator, Christ Jesus. Hebrews 4 calls Jesus our "great high priest who has ascended into heaven," giving us full access to God (v. 14). "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (v. 16)

► In some faith traditions, people do not speak directly to God, they depend on the intercession of a mediator—someone holier than themselves who addresses God on their behalf. Today, celebrate the fact that Jesus is your mediator, and you can speak to God any time you'd like.

Pray with Us

What a privilege to be able to take our sorrows, fears, doubts, and pleasures before you in prayer, Lord. Thank you for the unlimited access we have to you through your Son!

You Matter to Jesus

Read John 8:1–11

*Go now and leave your
life of sin.—John 8:11*

Imagine the scene: a woman is being forcibly dragged into the temple courts, shoved in front of this man who many were calling the Great Teacher. Jesus gazed at her, knowing she had been accused of adultery and also knowing everything else about her. Her life mattered. Jesus was also aware that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were trying to trap Him.

We can be sure that the woman felt shame and embarrassment for being caught in adultery and dragged in front of Jesus. What she thought she was doing in secret had now been exposed to the whole community. Her family would disown her and the religious leaders would turn their backs on her. Probably like most of her life, she was simply being used. This time, she was a pawn in the Pharisees' chess game with Jesus (v. 6). If He called for her stoning, He would be defying the Roman government.

And if He let her go, He would be disobeying the Mosaic law.

However, unlike the Pharisees, Jesus saw her for who she truly was: someone who mattered. His response to the crowd was simple, yet convicting: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). One by one, the crowd disappeared. According to the law, a person could be sentenced to death only with two or more witnesses, but now there were none. Jesus could now release her and still obey the Mosaic law. She was now free and walked away knowing her life mattered to Jesus.

► What about you? Do you feel shame at the thought of airing your private acts before a holy God? Regardless of the missteps and sin in your life, you matter to God. Just as Jesus declared to the woman, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (v. 11), He is reaching in the same way to us.

Pray with Us

Sometimes we run from you, Father, because we are ashamed. We forget that Christ died for our sins, both past and future. You love us even though you know the wrong we will do before we do it! Teach us to run to you when we sin.

A Healing Touch

Read Mark 5:21–43

*Don't be afraid;
just believe.—Mark 5:36*

When someone is skilled at caring for the needs of the sick or dying, we say they have the “healing touch.” But no one has ever shown the power to heal like Jesus. In his Gospel, Mark records Jesus’ power over many areas of life. First, in Mark 4:35–41, Jesus demonstrated His power over nature when He calmed the “furious squall” that arose on the water (v. 37). Then, in Mark 5:1–20, Jesus restored a demon-possessed man to health, displaying His power over the darkness. In today’s passage, Jesus exhibits authority over sickness and death.

The two stories within Mark 5:21–43 are meant to be compared and contrasted. At the same time Jairus’s daughter was born, a woman began hemorrhaging and could find no answer to her pain. According to the custom, this woman would have been considered unclean. She was a social outcast, unable to worship at the temple courts (vv. 25–26). Jairus’s daughter, by contrast, grew up happy and healthy, seeing her father come

and go regularly to the synagogue as one of the leaders (v. 22). Even though they came from different social standings, both Jairus and the woman showed a similar faith in Jesus. They both believed He had the healing touch.

It probably took courage for both individuals to reach out to Jesus for help. No doubt, a bit of timidity was running through their veins. However, they realized that nothing and no one else would be able to help them in their desperate time of need. Through their courageous act of reaching out, their faith in Jesus healed them (vv. 34, 36). Mark makes it clear that these narratives prove that the only one who has authority over nature, the powers of darkness, sickness, and death itself is God Himself.

► Are you struggling with a discouraging health issue? Do you have a loved one in need of healing? Don’t be afraid to reach out to the One with the healing touch. He will always hear you and receive you.

Pray with Us

We know you alone have the power to heal, and today we ask for physical healing. Whether we receive this now or at the Second Coming, we trust your wisdom, Lord. Thank you for your mercies that are new each day!

A Renewed Mind

Read Romans 12:1–3

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.—Romans 12:2

When you say you *love* God, what do you mean? For many of us, we express our love for the Lord through our emotions. We may feel especially loving toward God when we sing or pray. We also show our love for God through our actions, obeying His commands. But what does it mean to love God with your mind? Scripture is clear that our transformation through Christ means allowing our minds to be made new.

In today's text, Paul begins by referencing what he had been discussing in chapters 1–11 when he states, "in view of God's mercy" (v. 1). Paul is saying that in light of all that God has done, Christians in Rome should respond by offering their physical bodies as a living sacrifice to God (v. 1) and by renewing their minds (v. 2). Unlike animal sacrifices that had traditionally been presented to God on a daily basis, Paul says a Christian's life is to be presented

to God. When we offer our lives to serve one another because of what Christ has done for us, we are actually worshiping God.

Paul also knew that we can be easily deceived into the worldly patterns of service, expecting something in return. He urges his friends not to be conformed to the ways of the world, but rather to be transformed by a new way of thinking (v. 2). Instead of thinking "I will do, so I can get," Paul wants them to live a service-filled life with an attitude of "I will do, because of what God has done through Christ Jesus." When we are able to change our way of thinking and live this type of service-filled life, we are worshiping with all our heart, soul, *and* mind.

► Spend some time today thinking about how you express your love to God. Can you identify ways you love Him with your heart, soul, and mind? Worship Him with your renewed mind today.

Pray with Us

Father, sometimes we live as if some areas of life are spiritual and others purely secular. We desire to submit every aspect of our lives to you, worshiping you with our bodies, souls, and minds, and everything we do.

A New Future

Read Romans 8:18–25

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.—Romans 8:18

What do you believe your future holds? No matter what you may or may not expect, you can be assured that in Christ you have been given a new future! We have seen how Christ gives us a new way to live, a new message to share, and a new identity. Now, we will learn about our new future. In today's text, Paul acknowledged the sufferings of the Christians under the Roman rule of Emperor Nero. Tensions were rising, and persecution was imminent. Paul includes himself in verse 18 when he talks about "our present sufferings."

Regardless of the trials and hardships they were experiencing, Paul directed them to a future in Christ. He reminded them that at the Second Coming of Christ, believers will see the fullness of God's glory. Verses 19–21 is Paul's commentary on Genesis 3. As Jesus returns, the curse will be lifted and creation will be liberated and free. But this doesn't diminish the pain and suffering people experience in the meantime.

Not only do people "groan" for the Second Coming of Christ, but all of creation does as well (v. 22). The tragedies of nature and natural disasters remind us that our future is one when all of creation will be redeemed. Paul compares this misery to a woman giving birth. Immense pain will be followed by an overabundance of ecstasy and joy.

Perhaps the most challenging part of our new future is the fact that we have to wait for it patiently (v. 25). Waiting is never easy. Whether it is for a job callback, the end of COVID-19, or the birth of a child, waiting is difficult. But as we wait for things on this earth, we are reminded that ultimately we are waiting expectantly for Christ's return.

► What do you look forward to the most in your future with Christ? Is it the absence of consequences of the curse? Perhaps it is just being with Jesus? Waiting isn't easy, but it's worth it.

Pray with Us

Lord, we would be dishonest if we pretended that our present suffering doesn't matter. Yet today's pain can't compare with the future joy you have promised us. We look forward to spending eternity with you!

A New Mission

Read Matthew 28:16–20

You will be my witnesses.—Acts 1:8

Living for Jesus is like running a marathon. It is not a quick sprint to the finish line. Rather, it takes sacrifice, perseverance, and energy. This was also true for the first disciples of Jesus. They had no idea what their earthly future would hold, they just knew they had to keep going.

The Great Commission may be familiar to you, but one of the most interesting comments Matthew makes is that when the eleven disciples gathered to see Jesus, they worshiped Him, “but some doubted” (v. 17). Although we don’t know who, the word “some” connotes it was more than just one. This was not disbelief in the resurrection, for the resurrected Christ was now undeniable. Rather the word *doubt* here is more likely their general state of uncertainty and hesitation.

Jesus used these last moments to communicate their new mission (vv. 18–20). In the original language, the beginning of Jesus’ command in verse 19 is best understood as “Go!

And make disciples!” The language denotes urgency for them to leave this place, to go beyond Galilee. In Acts, Jesus challenged His disciples to be witnesses, literally “martyrs,” for Him throughout Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Wherever the Lord would lead, they were to be in the business of making disciples.

Jesus knew their future would not be easy. The Master Shepherd knew they were fallible, after all, sheep can sometimes be stubborn, run astray, and even bite back. But the disciples could rest assured, that no matter the challenges they might face, the Lord would be with them always (Matt. 28:20). The Great Commission is our mission, too. And wherever the Lord leads you during this new year, He will be with you every step of the way.

► Are you experiencing doubt about the year ahead? Ask God to direct your feet to go and share the message of Jesus. As you go, make disciples by pouring into people’s lives.

Pray with Us

Please strengthen our feeble hearts and quell our fears. Give us courage to live out our faith openly, to proclaim the gospel, and to win others to Christ.

Priorities in Life

Read Matthew 19:16–30

Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?—Matthew 19:16

If you stood face to face with the Savior of the world, what would you ask Him? Perhaps, you would ask a similar question as the young man in today's text: "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (v. 16). Jesus' initial response was what one would expect from a Jewish rabbi. However, Jesus was about to teach him, and also us, a lesson no money on earth could ever buy.

The young man explained that he kept all the laws that Jesus proposed. But notice that these commandments dealt with one's work and not with the heart. So when Jesus asked him to give up all his possessions and become His follower, the man could not do it. The text says, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (v. 22). The reality, however, is that his great wealth possessed *him*. Deep down, his heart and priorities were centered on his wealth, not on loving God.

The disciples were astonished at this exchange because in early Judaism, wealth was a clear indication of God's favor. If it was impossible for a rich man to enter heaven, they probably wondered how anyone could (vv. 23–25). Jesus responded by saying that it is only possible through the power of God (v. 26).

When we follow Christ, our priorities change. The things that used to be important, no longer hold our focus. For the rich young man, his possessions got in the way of his heart for God. By all earthly accounts, he was a moral man, but his morality could not save him. What he truly needed, only Jesus could provide.

► What are your priorities? What do you work toward or sacrifice for? Make a list and then examine it in light of today's passage. Are you depending on your morality or on Jesus for your righteousness?

Pray with Us

Open our eyes to our idols, Lord. We submit our priorities to you and ask that you make yourself the center of our lives and our schedules. Remind us that we live in you and for you.

A Future Family

Read Titus 2:1–15

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.—Titus 2:11

The island dwellers of Crete, otherwise known as Cretans, were notorious for lying, corruption, violence, and sexual sin. Located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, Crete's harbors were strategically placed to service cities all over the region. For these reasons, Paul saw the island of Crete as fertile soil for the gospel of Jesus, launching the message of Christ to the corners of the known world. To accomplish this, he sent his travel companion and trusted mentee, Titus, to the island. Titus would show them a better way of living: how to restore order to a number of house churches that were being deceived by the local leaders and how the family could be the first frontier for evangelism.

In our text today, Paul instructs Titus on how the Cretan Christian family ought to live with one another. He touches on every demographic: older men (v. 2), older women (v. 3), younger women (vv. 4–5), younger men (vv. 6–8), and even workers and

servants in the household (vv. 9–10). In a culture that paid homage to idols, dishonesty, and regarded Caesar as deity, having a family live above reproach was key. Paul believed that the gospel's supremacy must prove its redemptive power in the public square while all eyes were on the Christian family unit.

Like those on the island of Crete, many people today live on islands of sin and brokenness longing for a more hopeful future. If God can transform the lives of the Cretans to be a light for the Mediterranean world, the gospel message has the power to transform people today to be a light for our world. And, when evangelism starts with the family, it can have an impact that will last for generations.

► Just like the Cretan Christian families, the world is watching you. How can your family be more evangelistic? Start with looking at the way you treat one another. Compare your family life to what is taught here by the apostle Paul.

Pray with Us

Family is one of your most gracious gifts, but it can also be a source of immense pain. Reveal to us the ways our families fail to honor you and heal us so that we can help others discover the fullness of your design for family.

Treasures in Heaven

Read Matthew 6:19–24

*For where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also.—Matthew 6:21*

In the 18th century, the well-known preacher John Wesley preached a sermon urging believers to earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. He preached, “In the hands of God’s children, money is food for the hungry, clothing for the naked and shelter for the stranger. With money we can care for the widow and the fatherless, defend the oppressed, meet the need of those who are sick or in pain.” Wesley’s words and actions are an illustration of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 6.

When it comes to money and wealth, Jesus told His hearers to look to the future. At first glance, it might seem that Jesus was arguing in verses 19–20 that the reason they should store up their treasures in heaven was that there were no rodents that might destroy them. That wasn’t the real problem. For Jesus, the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. He says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (v. 21).

Jesus then used the example of a lamp to illustrate how the eyes are the pathway to the heart. People fix their hearts on where their treasure is and they fix their eyes on what they crave. Just as undiagnosed eye disease can force us to have a blurry vision, or even to become blind, unbridled lust for earthly possessions cloud our spiritual walk with the Lord.

Jesus concludes this idea in verse 24 by explaining that no one can serve two masters. It is impossible. During the 1990s it would have been unthinkable for someone to work for both Bill Gates’s Microsoft *and* Steve Job’s Apple Co. Each one demanded complete loyalty and devotion. So it is the case with both God and money. Which do we serve?

► How do you honor God with your treasure? How can you store up more treasures in heaven and less here on earth? Finally, who will *you* choose to serve: God or money?

Pray with Us

Today we examine our hearts. We repent of the materialism and greed that lures us away from you. Lord, forgive us and sanctify our desires. Help us to seek you above all else.

Begin with the End

Read Matthew 25:14–30

*You have been faithful with a few things;
I will put you in charge of many things.—Matthew 25:23*

When you're enduring a long trip, it can help to keep your final destination in mind. Just the thought of a relaxing view or a delicious meal can help you endure the journey. As Jesus taught His disciples about the end times, He told them a parable. Three servants were entrusted to care for their master's wealth while he was away. The word *entrusted* does not mean they should simply hold it and keep it safe. Rather, they were to manage their master's wealth. They should help nurture it so it could grow.

Jesus said that as soon as the master departed, two of the servants went right to work and invested their master's wealth. Knowing he would be returning, they began with that end in mind. After he returned, they showed their master how they had multiplied his wealth. He was pleased and responded, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and

share your master's happiness!" (vv. 21, 23). However, the remaining servant did nothing with his master's wealth. He accused the master of being a cut-throat man and wanted to do nothing except keep the treasure safe. Failing to utilize the opportunity given him, he earned a rebuke and was cast out of the inner circle.

As you look at the year ahead, you will be given many opportunities. The question is, what are you going to do with what God gives you? How will you leverage each opportunity for His glory? At some point, Jesus will return. He will come back to settle accounts and to see what we did with all the opportunities we were given. Will you be ready?

► It helps to begin with our end destination in mind—our heavenly future! Ask yourself, how will living with eternity in mind change what I choose to spend time on today? How will it affect my life? What opportunities should I spend the most time on?

Pray with Us

Eternity is not an abstraction: it is a reality that will endure when our present life is no more. Father, let the promise of eternity with you guide our every decision.

Our Forever Home

Read Revelation 21:1–5

I am making everything new.—Revelation 21:5

This past summer, my family moved from Texas to Indiana. We finally settled in after several long months of renovations. But even after we painted each room, filled the closets with our clothes, and hung décor on the walls, our new house didn't feel like home until we were able to invite a few family and friends over for meals and holidays. Doing life together made all the months and hassle of renovations worthwhile.

One day, all believers will reunite to live in the New Jerusalem. It will be unlike anything we have ever experienced (v. 2). This is the place Jesus has prepared for His followers, and its beauty will be unmatched (John 14:3). However, what will make our eternal future feel most like home is living in the presence of God (Rev. 21:3). What an amazing reunion that will be as we come face to face with our Savior. At last, we will be free from the emotional pain caused by sin and the curse (v. 4).

From His throne, God declares, "I am making everything new" (v. 5). This emphasizes that God is the One doing all the renovations. His declaration of making everything new is a reminder that throughout history, we have lived such wretched lives that renewal is necessary. It is easy to believe we are less sinful than we actually are. We fail to realize that we are completely fallen and deserve nothing but the consequences of sin. A redeemed person is thankful for forgiveness. As we live in our forever home with Him, we will be quick to give glory and praise to the One who makes all things new.

▶ Close your eyes for a moment and envision your future and eternal Home. What do you think it will be like to be present with your Creator? You have been chosen and redeemed by God. Out of all the people He could live with forever, He chose you!

Pray with Us

Praise to you, Lord, for you renew all things! Praise to you for your mercies! You have freed us from sin, given us your Holy Spirit, and promised us an eternal home in your presence.

The “New-er” You

Read 2 Corinthians 6:1–13

*Now is the time of God’s favor,
now is the day of salvation.—2 Corinthians 6:2*

As we conclude our study, we hope you are encouraged to make a new start in Christ this year. As believers, we are given a new way to live and a new message to share. In Christ, we are given a new identity and new future. Most importantly, we are transformed into a “new-er” version of ourselves. Paul concludes this message on newness, with a particular exhortation for those struggling with their new identity in Christ.

In verse one, Paul contends that grace is in vain when Christians do not live in harmony with one another. He stresses that “now is the time” because of the redeeming and reconciliatory work Christ did on the cross. Paul made it a point to live his life with integrity so the gospel message would not be discredited. Nevertheless, people opposed him and were offended by his message (v. 3). But that never stopped him, nor should it deter Christians today.

Paul lists a variety of difficulties he encountered while being an ambassador of the gospel (vv. 4–10). The Corinthians could have been encouraged or disheartened when reading Paul’s long list of hardships. But, Paul wanted them to know up front what he had endured for the gospel. He asks them to “open wide” their hearts as he has done (vv. 11–13). Sadly, they struggled to show their deep love for Paul because they loved the world and themselves too much. He wanted them to be honest with themselves just as he was honest with them. Similarly, God wants us to be honest with our “new-er” selves daily to make sure we abandon the cravings of this world and live for Him alone.

► What can you do this year, to make sure you are daily committing yourself to the Lord’s will for your life? Open your heart to follow God’s leading. And then, note a few takeaways from this month’s study that will impact you in the year ahead.

Pray with Us

Father, you have hidden us in Christ. Our salvation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing, eternal relationship with you. Let us live each day of 2021 knowing that we are joined to you, seeking your kingdom for your glory.

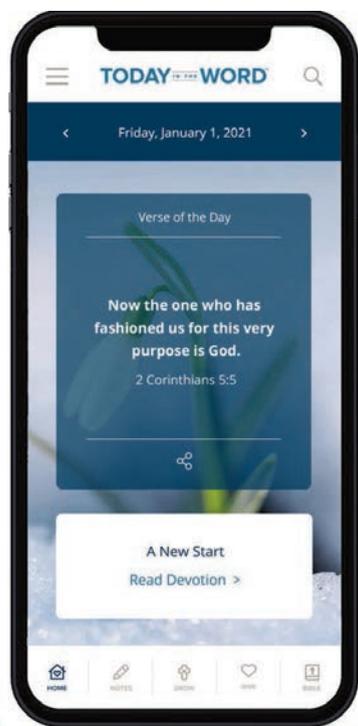
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WAITING AT THE AIRPORT.

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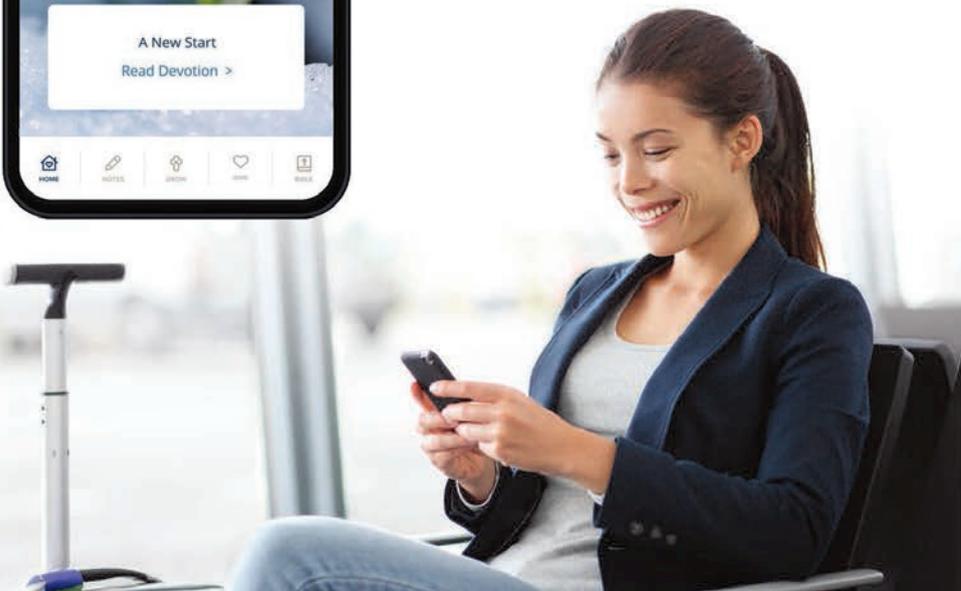


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