



A Celebration of Light  
For Advent & Epiphany

2021

Volume 2



## Dedications

This is dedicated to our God and Father who blesses us daily when we spend a portion of each day within quiet devotion. This is also dedicated to all those who will take the time to read each daily devotion, to all of those who have nurtured me in my growth as a follower of Jesus the Christ.

## Thank You

I want to thank Pastor Blair, Larry, Irene, and Sassenach for taking their time to edit this work. I also need to extend a thank you for their patience and understanding to Jill and Sara, our Office staff at Trinity.

## Acknowledgements/Sources

I cannot begin to acknowledge all the authors I have read over the forty-five years I have walked among some of the giants of our faith. Their names may not be written about in history, but they are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. To only name some would be a disservice to the ones I fail to mention.

Then there is the internet and the countless websites I have visited, read and from which I have taken notes. There are the good and then the not so good.

Lastly, and most importantly I want to acknowledge that my source was, is and will always be our Father who guides my thoughts. Thank you to all who have encouraged me to write a second edition. Your comments were and are inspiring.

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## Introduction

Let me begin by saying thank you to all who first thanked me for last year's Advent devotional booklet, and for those of you who encouraged me to write this year's.

Last year's devotional booklet covered a whole lot of historical data. It was fun to research and exciting to write. This year I have taken a different path. I am a huge prayer person. I like to read the prayers of others and I like to write my own. My day begins with prayer and so this Advent booklet is devoted to prayer. It is devoted to the prayers found in the Bible, and to the prayers of others. I have chosen, what I consider the most meaningful short prayers from the Bible and other writings. They are taken from the Lutheran Prayer Book, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Breaking Bread (a Catholic book), and various other Christian writings. Why such a diversity? Because I do not believe that one denomination has a monopoly on prayer.

After each prayer, I have written a little commentary on each. They are not to be taken as an in-depth study, but as food for thought, or as some may see it, opinions. I admit to owning them. They are mine and may not be yours. I ask you to read each with an open mind. I have always told my congregations and the classes I have taught, that what I say works for me and may not work for them. You alone must decide.

If you ask why I used the Breaking Bread from the Roman Catholic faith. Here is my answer. When Luther wrote his ninety-five thesis, he opposed the doctrine and theology of the Roman Catholic Church. The services stayed the same, as evidenced today. You can go to any liturgical church anywhere in the world and join in the service. You may not know the language, but you basically know and understand the service. For example, my wife and I were on a river cruise on the Danube. We stopped at a small town in Austria which had a monastery. Since it was Sunday, we went to the church service, and it was Catholic. We did not speak German and the service was not in English. However, we could join in the service and participate because we knew what to say and when to say it. It was to say the least, a memorable experience.

John Yates, the Pastor Emeritus of Falls Church Anglican Church has stated that worship styles come and go. However, the only one that has lasted for two thousand years is the one where we confess our sins, read the written word, receive the spoken word, and partake of the body and blood each week. John believes and I agree, this type of service is the one that we will attend in heaven.

Thanks for your time and energy and for your understanding.

Father Doug Mussey

## Sunday: November 28<sup>th</sup> -- Right Mind

Lord, thank you for waking us up in our right mind.

Nina Perry, Administrative Assistant, American Anglican Council

One of the most difficult challenges I have ever faced is picking a prayer to start this devotional booklet. Over the last four plus decades, what seems like a vast number of years, I have read hundreds and maybe thousands of prayers, plus I have written so many more, making it difficult to determine which one should take the lead off position. I ruled out mine right away, but then whose do I choose? And, yes, I did pray about it. The answer I received was, "It's your choice." My response, "Thanks a lot."

So what to do? After much thinking, I narrowed it down to two prayers that I thought would be good and appropriate to start the day off with. What should be the first prayer we as Christians need to pray each morning? When I asked that question of the two that I had chosen, neither one stood up to muster. Then what?

I thought, and then it came to me. As Thomas Magnum would say, "His little voice spoke to him." In the same manner my little voice came to me and reminded me about the sentence Nina would begin all her prayers with. It was simple yet profound and carried much more meaning than it seemed. The first meaning would, to me, be the obvious one, that being my physical mind. I, like so many others, awake each and every morning, so far, in what we can call our Right Mind. It means we have our cognitive thought processes in order. We function on the same high levels as we did the day before. We can remember who we are and whose we are. We can remember the names of our mate, the names of our grandchildren and the dates and times that are so important to us.

Now consider being impaired by at least two brain functions, such as memory loss and waking up with a brain disorder. Although not a disease, dementia is a group of conditions characterized by impaired judgment. Symptoms include forgetfulness, limited social skills, and thinking abilities so impaired that it interferes with daily functioning. Alzheimer's occurs when the brain cells themselves degenerate and die, eventually destroying memory and other important mental functions. Although I lose words from time to time, I still wake up in my right mind. For which I am extremely thankful.

The second and most important characteristic of Nina's prayer is that of the spiritual or worshipful aspect that is included. When we wake in our Right Minds, we can give thanks to the One whose providence makes it possible for us to do so. It is the best blessing you will receive today, and each and every day you awaken in your Right Mind. Psalm 46:10 states that today was made by the Maker of all creation, and that we will rejoice and be glad. If you find yourself searching for something to be grateful for, there you have it. And believe Nina and me, it does not get any better than this.

In conclusion, I know the some of you who will read this have family members that do not wake up each morning in their Right Mind, and you struggle alongside of them. I know it is not easy mentally and physically to prepare yourself each day for the battle ahead, but remember the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We went through this with both of my wife's parents. However, we thanked God each and every day that we woke up in our Right Mind to meet their challenges with them. That is something to be thankful for. Believe me it really is.

## Monday: November 29<sup>th</sup>-- My First Prayer Each Morning

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name. (BCP)*

For the longest time I thought this would be the prayer with which I opened the devotional booklet. Why? It is one of my favorites and the one I recite to myself each morning. Not only that, I am partial to this prayer as it is the opening prayer said in the Anglican Mass. According to the Book of Common Prayer, the presiding priest is to say the prayer, and the congregation may join in if the priest so desires. When I was in charge, I always had the people join me. The reason was to invite the worshippers to participate in the service. The word liturgical means the "work of the people," and worship is for the people of God.

Another reason I like this prayer is that it calls the worshipper to get their heart right with God before the service goes any further. I used to put this saying on the cover of our bulletin each week: "Before the service we talk to God. During the service God talks to us. After the service we talk to each other." Not only was it on the cover of the bulletin, but above the doors of the worship center. You see, I am a stickler for getting our hearts right with God before we start to worship. Although we say a confession during the service, it is my belief that each and every one of us, needs to confess our sins individually before we confess aloud to each other that we have sinned and are in need of forgiveness.

The above prayer also indicates that we acknowledge that our Father is all knowing, and that we are not able to hide any secrets from Him. In the booklet; "My Heart Christ's Home," we find the story of a Christian who wanted to have Christ live in his heart. In order for that to occur, the believer needed to get his house in order by cleaning out the garbage which had accumulated over the years. First was the living room, where everyone was welcome. That was easy enough to clean and so was the kitchen and the dining room. But when it came to the bedroom, it was a little more difficult. In order to clean the bedroom, our believer pushed everything in the closet where it would not be seen. When the closet was full, the only place left to hide stuff was under the bed. After a while, the bedroom and closet started to stink. Old stuff started to fester and smell. What to do? The Apostle Paul gave sound advice when he suggested that we lay down every weight that slows us down as we press toward the finish line. And that is what our believer did. If God knows everything, and I believe He does, trying to hide something, borders on insanity.

God wants us to know that He is able to cleanse us from all unrighteous when we openly confess our nature and ask for His cleansing given by the Holy Spirit. It is my belief that the Holy Spirit will help us clean the old stinky stuff from out of our closets and make room for more of God's favor in our lives. God tells us that He will bestow upon us great and marvelous things. Would it not be a pity if we had so much clutter that we did not have any more room to receive the goodness of God?

Please remember that our hearts cannot wait for Spring Cleaning each year, they need a daily dose of preventive maintenance to operate at maximum efficiency. Is it time to open the secret parts of your hearts? Check and see.

## Tuesday: November 30<sup>th</sup> -- Getting Started

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart,  
the actions of my feet and hands, be acceptable to you,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:4)*

For the longest time I thought this should be the opening prayer, or at least it should be my opening prayer. You see, there are times I have trouble restraining the "words of my mouth." I think of myself as pretty laid back, and that nothing much bothers me, except stupidity, which I find extremely hard to tolerate. I once saw a bumper sticker that would have been perfect on my father's car. It read, "Yes, I do own the road." He would often say that he paid his taxes and that gave him the right to drive as he pleased. So many would disagree.

I do not own the road, and am willing to share it with almost anyone. I do get annoyed at people who think they own the road, or are just plain rude. There have been many times; too many to count, that someone pulled out in front of me and just crept along. Then, after I have slowed down to a crawl, they will turn at the next road. What really gets me is that there was no one behind me, and all they had to do was wait until I passed. That is just one example of what gets my dander up, and I am so tempted to, well you know.

That is why, after I thank God for waking me with the facilities to make sound decisions, and after I have asked Him to cleanse the thoughts of my heart, that I need Him to guard the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart. I have added *the actions of my feet and hands* as they need to be controlled also. There are many times I want to jump on the car horn, and tell someone of my displeasure. But then my little voice reminds me that I am not perfect. Oh, how I wish that little voice would just go away.

When I was much younger, I implemented a vision for my life. It is simple and fully achievable each day. The reason I get out of bed each morning is to reshape the future. Now that may seem like an impossible task, but it is really easy. Here's how I do it. I achieve my goal each day by bringing joy and a smile to the faces of as many as I can. I love to complement people, and people love to be complemented. I enjoy finding something about each person I meet that when I tell them, it brings a smile to their face. Let me explain. I was teaching a class on self-esteem at a local church in Louisville, Ky. I was running late, and it seemed I had to stop at every stop light. At one light, this young lady crossed in front of me. She looked as if she had had a bad day, so when she looked at me I held up ten fingers to indicate I thought she was the cat's meow. When I arrived at the class I asked them how their day was and most of the individuals indicated that the day was so-so. Then a young lady in the back stood up and started to recount her day and how bad it was. I asked if nothing good had happened to her that day. She thought for a moment and then started to smile and finally started to laugh. She told the story of how she was crossing the street and just happened to look into a car and saw someone holding up ten fingers and pointing at her. No, I never told her it was me, we did not date, and we did not get married and live happily ever after.

That reshaped that young lady's future, at least for a moment and changed her outlook. That is what we are called to do each day as we interact with people. Reshape their future. Remember, the love of the Father reshaped yours. Right?

## Wednesday: December 1<sup>st</sup> -- The \$64,000 Question

### *Remember me*

Stop for an instant while you are transported back in time to a moment when you are a contestant on a game show where you may win the prize of your life. The year is in the late 1950's or early 60's and you are the last contestant standing. You have beat out all the others, and now all you have to do is answer one two part question, and you will win the grand prize. Until now, no one has ever made it this far. If you win, your name will go down in game show history.

If you do not want all that pressure, stay in the present and now the game show is Jeopardy. You made it through round one without making a mistake. You picked the Double Jeopardy question and scored big. In the second round, you did even better, but now it is Final Jeopardy, and if you hedge your bet carefully, you could walk away the winner. The Final Jeopardy category is, The Bible, something you should know all about, so you bet it all. The final Jeopardy answer: "What two people prayed, "Remember Me." The music begins, what is your answer? Do you walk away with all your winnings, or did you bet it all and go home with nothing?

The first part of the question, remember all Jeopardy answers must be in the form of a question, is "Who is Hannah." No, the answer is not Hannah Who, but Hannah the wife of Elkanah. As the story goes, Hannah had not given her husband any children, and due to custom, shame and disgrace was the burden she had to bear. On one occasion, Hannah went to the temple to pray. She lowered herself to her knees and began to pray. She prayed silently, but her lips moved (much like mine when I pray silently); however, Eli the priest, thought she was drunk and chided her. She looked at Eli and informed him that she was deep in prayer, and maybe if he moved his mouth during his prayers, he would not wake up an hour later.

The long and short of the story is that Hannah asked God to "remember me" in her barren state, and to provide a child which she would gladly provide to Him for His service. God provided and so did Hannah. In addition, God provided Hannah with an additional two sons and two daughters.

Now we do not know the name of the second individual, but we do know his circumstances. It is Friday afternoon just outside the city of Jerusalem on a hill overlooking the city. There, three executions are taking place. Two of the names we do not know, but the third is Jesus of Nazareth. The others we know as thieves, one on the right and one on the left. We are not so sure which one is which, but we do know this. One of the thieves realized who Jesus was and asked Jesus to "remember me" when His kingdom comes. A death bed confession? The point is he was in distress, and he called out to the One who could help.

Yes, the thief on the one cross died. And Hannah, well, God did remember her. Both were in distressing situations and asked God not to forget them, but to remember them. And He did. So often I hear people crying out in distress asking God to remember them. They begin by reciting a whole list of things they have done for Him and ask Him to remember their accomplishments. But what God wants is for us to remember Him in all we do and say, in all our actions and all our words. Will God ever forget us? Of course not, but the closer we are to Him, the closer He is to us, and the less likely we are to forget Him. Remember that.

## Thursday: December 2<sup>nd</sup> -- What Do You Mean

Bless me. (Genesis 32:26)

Probably the most common blessing heard is found in Numbers 6:24-26 and reads; "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." Is the blessing asked for in this benediction that God make His face shine upon you, that He lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace, or is that the result of God's blessing? If you have the answer, I am all ears.

In 1 Chronicles 4:10, Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked. In this case, does it mean that blessings are material possessions and protection from hurt and harm? Once again, I do not have the answer. However, I do know this, according to some television preachers; if you send them money, God will bless you with an abundance of material blessings. Here again I do not see it. It may work for some, but I am not sure it works for me.

But wait a minute, maybe it has. David said in the 37<sup>th</sup> Psalm "that I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." Now isn't that a blessing? I can remember so many times when I was single and in college that I did not know where my next meal was coming from. Yes, I worked, but most of the money went for rent, tuition and books, and gas to get to work and school. Oh yes, I did tithe. One Sunday I had enough money to put gas in the car and buy food for the week. What about God's share? I decided to put in my tithe and see what happened. After church, I was invited to a friend's home for lunch, and when I left, his mother gave me enough food for the week. A blessing? Good home cooked food, you bet it was.

Another blessing I have received is the companionship of a loving wife. She tells the story of how she prayed to meet someone who she could fall in love with and live happily ever after. There is an old saying that goes; "be careful what you pray for because God just might answer your prayer in the affirmative." Look what she got, me. But I must admit that she was an answer to prayer also. You see I always wanted a partner, someone to walk along side of me, and we would be each other's help mate. Did God answer my prayer in the affirmative? You bet He did.

Over the years, I have come to realize that the blessings of God come in many shapes, sizes and forms. They are not one size fits all, but they are tailored to the individual's need. I have also learned that they arrive at the appropriate time, never too early and never too late. Who else could deliver with such precision and accuracy? If you know, please tell me.

I do not pretend to know all the stuff that has gone on in your life; however, I do know that our Father does and wants to continually bless you with all of His spiritual blessings that are in His heavenly realm. If you have not seen God's blessings, look again. It may be time to refocus your understanding of what a blessing is. I know I had to, and when I did, a whole new understanding opened before my eyes. If you cannot remember all His blessings, just be thankful there are so many. I know I am.

Friday: December 3<sup>rd</sup> – Really

*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:214)*

I totally understand the first part of the prayer. Jesus told His followers to pray for those who hate them and persecute them. We are to have pity but not loathing for them. We are to forgive them, not for their sake, but for the sake of our mental health. I cannot imagine what it would be like if He carried around bitterness and anger for what we as individuals caused His Son to suffer because of our selfishness. That would be unfathomable, not to mention unbelievable.

On the other hand, I do not understand the second part of the prayer. And yes, I have read several commentaries on the passage. My problem is that I cannot believe they did not know what they were doing. In my mind they knew full well and understood completely. I can accept that they did not know the one they were doing it to. I can also accept that they did not want to know the one they were doing it to. And, to my way of thinking, there is not much difference.

To me, they did not want to know the person they had railroaded to the cross. They were happy in their religious system, and did not want anything or anyone to upset the apple cart. They were, as it were, on top of the world and woe to anyone who tried to upset or muscle in on their turf. All they knew was that this Nazarete was trying to cut in on their profits, and question the authority they had established for themselves. They had their standards, no matter how low, and they were to be upheld. In order to maintain their phony front, they had to trump up make believe charges that would only hold up in their kangaroo courts. And they did. Thank God we are not like that today, or are we?

Speaking about today, I wonder how many ministers have been run out of town because they upset someone's apple cart. As a priest for forty years, I can tell you that the answer is a lot. I have seen unbelievable cruelty directed at ministers because they did not keep the status quo. They wanted to move the Church of God forward. They wanted to bring hope to a hurting world and forgiveness to a sin sick society. But what place does that have in a country club church?

Jesus was hung on a cross to die in full public display. Many ministers face the same treatment. Jesus was whipped and His stripes showed. For many ministers the knife wounds in their backs are hidden from the world. What causes the children of God to do such things? Are we like those who crucified Christ? Of course not, we'd never crucify Christ, but his messengers. Now that is a different story all together.

I have watched many pastors leave and/or retire because a few thought they knew best. I will always remember the words of wisdom I received on my first assignment. It was from the head elder. He told me, "I was here when you came, and I will be here when you leave." In other words, I have the power, do not cross me. In a similar, but more polite way, God tells us this is His house and we are all welcome, but we must leave our pride at home. It has no place in His.

In Second Kings we read, "Who is it you have ridiculed and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel!" Have we as congregations also been guilty of raising our voices against God's shepherds? Never. Really?

Saturday: December 4<sup>th</sup> -- A Collect for Guidance

*Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being:  
We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in  
all cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but remember that  
we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (BCP)*

To my way of thinking, Nina Perry is and will always be one of my special people. She is an Administrative Assistant at the American Anglican Council. What makes her special is not that she is a sister in Christ, although that does make her special. What makes her so very special is the fact that she is a very positive person. When it was her time to lead our morning devotions she would always begin her prayers with, "thank you God for waking us up this morning in our right mind." I had never heard anybody thank God for such a thing and I have never heard it again from the heart of another. One of Nina's many gifts to me. Thank you.

Stop and think about it for a second or a minute. Each day when we pillow our heads and fall asleep, how many things could go wrong. There are probably too many to count. However, we open our eyes and arise without much change, and how fortunate are we for that? We laid down our head knowing that God is in control and that He will still be in control when we awake. The writer of the third Psalm writes, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety." How privileged we are to know that the Lord will keep us in safety during our nightly naps. After we awake in safety, it is extremely important that we give thanks to Him, as Nina says, who kept us safely during the night and to awaken to give Him praise.

I had a parishioner who was not in good health both physically and her mind was deteriorating from either dementia or Alzheimer's. However, she had a wonderful caretaker and a husband. Each and every day he would take care of all her needs. And I do mean all. On Sunday, he would bathe her, fix her hair, dress her and bring her to church. They would always sit on the back row, and she needed to have communion brought to her. After the service they would not leave until I came and sat with them for a while. Mary would always sit on her husband's left side. I would slide in next to her and she would hold my hand and start telling me what she had done that week. I once remarked that her husband might get jealous of us holding hands. Her remark was priceless. She said, "I'll take care of him when we get home." We all laughed. Although she was slipping fast, God always woke her up in good spirits and with a smile on her face. No matter how bad things got, she never wavered from her love for God and His Son. She is one of my heroines and I look forward to holding her hand once again in heaven.

My mother recently died at the age of ninety-seven. Her body just gave out, but her mind was still as sharp as it ever was. I am thankful to God for that and so was she. Over the years of my priesthood, I have seen so many whose mind has slowly slipped away. Today is a day of rejoicing, today is a day to be thankful and today is a day to thank God that you woke up in your right mind. None of us knows what the future holds for our mental processes, but while you still can, take every opportunity to give thanks to the One that keeps us in the palm of His hand, and always will. Other than the gift of forgiveness, there is no greater gift that you can receive than waking up in your right mind. Promise.

## Sunday: December 5<sup>th</sup> -- Ridged or Flexible

"Thy Will be Done." (Jesus, The Gospel of Matthew.)

There are basically two ways of looking at God's will. The first is to say that it is the "determined resolve" of God. Things happen the way they do because God has programmed the cosmos. This view places God in control and states that He makes all things happen according to a predetermined schedule which He laid out before the actual physical universe came into being. It does not allow for random chance because all will go according to the script which God has written. It also does not allow for human preference. We would have no say in the selection of our mate, the number of children we have, and how we treat those whom we are to love. It would also nullify our career preference, which house and automobile we purchase, and what we do with the gifts which we have been given. More important it would eliminate any hope for a large number of individuals. In this scenario, God is responsible for all that happens, both good and bad. We have no say in the decisions we make. We are nothing more than robots. If this is true it would invalidate any theory that states that humanity has free choice. If free choice is taken away then where is our responsibility? How could we be held accountable for our actions? If this is God's will, its name is fate.

The second way of looking at God's will is to say that it is His "longing" that humanity chooses a path in life that leads to what is best for them. This approach places on humanity the responsibility for the consequences of choice. It allows men and women the right to determine the course their life should take. It allows for random choice. It gives us the privilege to have a say in our present and our future. It allows for rebellion and rejection. It also allows for repentance and acceptance. If this is God's will, its name is choice.

The Greek word for will is "*thelema*." The first use of the word is "wish," or "purpose," and then "desire." It is not to be conceived as a demand or requirement. It is a preference and declaration of pleasure toward that which is liked, that which brings gratification, and that which brings joy. When it speaks of God's will it denotes a loving nature towards something. It is used to characterize what God does for His own enjoyment.

So what is God's will? If we took the Greek definition, it could be stated that God's will is whatever brings happiness in His heart. So, what makes God happy? There is one answer that is indisputable, it is when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our soul. This makes God joyful! If we were to do this one act, He would receive all the praise, all the adoration, and all the thanksgiving that true worship demands. This one behavior would provide sufficient proof that we have welcomed His reign into our lives and have set aside the desires of our heart and have replaced them with the purpose for which we were created. If this is God's will, its name is fulfillment.

In addition, it would please God if His thoughts became our thoughts and if His ways became our ways. If His purpose became our purpose and if His causes became our causes. If we became so much like Him that the world could not tell the difference between the two of us. That would please God. At least I think it would. What do you think? I'd love to hear from you.

## Monday: December 6<sup>th</sup> -- Father God

*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-7)*

Dan Yeary is the pastor emeritus at University Church in Coral Gables, Florida. I sat at Dan's feet learning from him for about five years. Whenever Dan began a prayer, it was always with the same opening line "Father, God." I spoke to Dan on several occasions about how He came to start all his prayers with the same words. He told me that for so long he would just announce himself to God and expect to be heard. It wasn't until later that he came to a richer understanding of who God was in his life. His theology changed from being casual in prayer to being more respectful. He told me that one day he just arrived at Father God, and it has stuck ever since.

When I went to seminary, the first class I took was systematic theology. I can say with one hundred percent certainty that I got nothing out of the class. However, I did walk away with one appreciation for my struggles. You see each student had to write a paper on what God was to them. I had to struggle through the names that I had heard God called, even the not so friendly ones. I found my starting point at Dan Yeary's, "Father God." My search began by looking at God as my father and all that that meant. Then I looked at all the names for God and the meaning of each and every title. After much inward reflection I came to the conclusion that my prayers should start not as Dan's but just the reverse, "God our Father."

My reasoning went something like this; before He became my Father, He was God, now and always. Once He became my God, then and only then could I know Him as my Father. Now that does not mean that I do not put an adjective to describe the one to whom I am praying. Like, in many prayers, there are times when I put Almighty before God, and there are times when I speak of my Creator King and God. In addition, there are times when I speak of God being the Father of all humanity, because He is. I do this to remind myself that praise is the first part of all my prayers. Ascribing qualities and characteristics of His character are ways I choose to add praises. In addition, I want God to know what I think of Him from the beginning.

Now, I do not know how you pray in your individual time of prayer. I can only hope that you have struggled and wrestled as I did and have an understanding of the God to whom you direct your prayers. If you have not been through this process, may I suggest you do so? I can assure you that God will appreciate your efforts and will guide you through the entire process. The benefit you will receive from your labors will far outweigh the work necessary to find out exactly who you believe God to be, and how God interacts in your life.

A final thought, this is not a quick and easy exercise. It is long and sometimes painful as I still grapple with the God of my salvation, as I try to come to the full knowledge of His being. I know that day will come when I see Him face to face, but for now I must be content to know that as I gain wisdom it will only be a small part of what will be revealed. I know I must have patience and when you undertake this pilgrimage, you will too. So let's take this process together. See you on the road.

Tuesday: December 7<sup>th</sup> --Thy Will be Done

*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:35)*

I have always heard, and I might add that I do not believe, that God has at least two wills. The first, of course, is His perfect will. We are reminded as Romans chapter twelve states, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Now I must confess that I do not know what the complete will of God is. I have a few clues and the one I refer to most often is found in Micah and reads, “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” In addition, James writes, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” For the life of me, I cannot think of anything that would please God more.

First Peter, the second chapter verse five states; “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” I would like for all who claim to be in the body of Christ to consider Peter’s statement and how important it is. We can claim to be part of the body, but our actions can say something else. I would rather be judged by my actions than by my words. Why? Words can be misunderstood, changed and given a whole different meaning. All you have to do is listen to the nightly news to know what I am talking about. Meeting the needs of those in need is an act that can be misconstrued, but I believe it is harder to do so. So, show me your works and I will listen to your words.

The second will of God, as I have heard it, is the permissive will of God. The reasoning behind this logic, if you can call it that, is that God could have stopped something, but if He does not, He let it happen and therefore, it must be in His will. To my way of thinking, that is a slippery slope that I do not want to wander down. It opens too many possibilities and removes the blame of human actions. Plus, ask yourself this question, “is God in the business of delivering pain to individuals?” The answer of course is “of course not.” God is in the business of healing not hurting. Most, if not all pain and suffering, is self-inflicted. Can and will God remove all our pain and suffering? Yes. But, only when we are at home with Him. If you think God is to blame for the tragedies in the world, think again.

I honestly believe when someone suffers great pain or loss there is a tendency to say it is God’s will, because we do not know what else to say. We might think our comments will bring some sort of comfort. I can tell you from firsthand experience it does not. What does bring comfort is just being there and showing our love and concern. As the Bible states, we are to be comforters. And being comforters, we provide by caring, whether it be delivering food to a shut-in, a glass of water to the thirsty, clothing to one in need, a hospital visit or just holding a hurting hand, that is how the will of God is demonstrated in this world. How do I know? Because that is how He did it in the Bible.

God has a divine plan that is wide and gracious. Prayer is essential for the proper working of that plan and His will on earth. We all must do our part. That includes you and me. So what are we waiting for? Your invitation came years ago.

Wednesday: December 8<sup>th</sup> -- Give me success today

*Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. (Joshua 1:7)*

Do you want to have success in everything? Of course, you do, and how stupid of me to ask. When given a task in life do you ever pray; "Lord, just let me get through this." I do. Sometimes the task seems so overwhelming, that we just want to have the strength to come out on the other side not having failed. If you ever do, you and I are in the group that contains the disciples of our Lord and Savior. Remember, He told the disciples that they were of little faith. Sometimes I do, and those are times when He has told me that my faith needed to be enlarged. What about you?

The prayer, "give me success," is found in the story of Eliezer who was given the task of finding a wife for the son of his master, Abraham. The son being, Isaac. How do you find a needle in a haystack? Well, Eliezer prayed; "give me success." God answered and Rebekah enters the story. How simple could the task have been? Oh, that everything was that easy.

I have heard sermons about Christians who never pray what is called a miracle prayer. A miracle is one where the person praying is asking God to do something so extraordinary that when answered, only a miracle, could be the explanation. Dave Early states that by asking God for a blessing, he may receive one that never would have happened if he did not ask. He further states that he would rather go to his grave being guilty of asking for more, than for missing out on blessings because he did not ask.

James tells us that we have not because we do not ask. But James also adds that we ask only to give ourselves pleasure. Yes, I do pray for myself. I pray for the forgiveness of my sins. I pray that the words of my mouth, the actions of my feet and hands, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in God's sight. I also pray for inspiration, but not much more. Why? I live my life believing that the vast majority of the prayers I pray are for the benefit of someone else. I also believe that when I meet the needs of others and do not focus on my needs, I am better off.

There is a key to praying for our needs and the needs of others that opens the heart of God. That key is called trustworthiness. Each time we pray, we must have the trust and faith that God will deliver on His promise to answer. If not, why are we praying? Trust the words of Jeremiah when God says, "call upon Me and I will answer you, and show you great and marvelous things." Like the song says, "trust and obey, for there is no other way.

When you pray for success, it should be specific. General prayers have their place, but when asking for success, give God a specific target. Eliezer did and God answered just the way he asked. The most important aspect about prayer is that you never give up. Be like the widow in Luke chapter eleven. She kept coming back day after day until the judge gave in to her wishes. I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that God will be waiting, plus He loves to hear the words; "I'm back." His response will be, "I've been waiting. What took you so long?" Matching wits with God is not something for the faint of heart. He'll get you every time.

Thursday: December 9<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 1

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Lk 18:13)*

Norman Greenbaum wrote and sang the one hit wonder; "Spirit in the Sky." There are two lines in the song that I take issue with. They are, "Never been a sinner," and two, "(I've) never sinned." Now, I do not know how Norman Greenbaum arrived at his theology, or who he had or has been listening to, but I believe him to be wrong. According to the book of Romans, we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. My understanding is that this includes Mr. Greenbaum, and you and me.

So, what is the big deal about being a sinner? Well, if you are a non-believer maybe nothing. To the believing Christian it is a very big deal. According to Millard Erickson, "Sin is any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law of God. This may be a matter of act, of thought, or of inner disposition or state." R.C. Sproul writes, "In the least transgression, I set myself above the authority of God, doing insult to His majesty, His holiness, and His sovereign right to govern me. Sin is a revolutionary act in which the sinner seeks to depose God from His throne. Sin is a presumption of supreme arrogance in that the creature vaunts his own wisdom above that of the Creator, challenges divine omnipotence with human impotence, and seeks to usurp the rightful authority of the cosmic Lord."

Ok, but let's bring it down to non-theological terms. The New Testament uses seven words to describe sin. They are, "Hemartia" which means to miss the mark and therefore fail to receive the prize or blessing. The second is "Hettema" and means diminishing what should have been given your full attention. The third, "Parapotoma" which translates into falling when you should have stood. It is actually an unintentional slip. Fourth, "Agnoeema," is defined as ignorance when one should have known better. Fifth, is "Parakoe," and expresses the refusal to hear God's word. The sixth, "Parabasis" conveys lawlessness and a willingness to break God's written rules. The seventh, and last is "Anomia" and carries the inclination to intentionally cross a line.

So, according to the above definitions, am I a sinner? Let's see. Have I missed the mark, maybe once or twice a day? Do I really do the important and necessary before I do the unnecessary and unimportant? Do I really keep the main thing the main thing, or do trivial matters take up most of my time during the day? Do I always keep first things first, or do I sometimes put things off until I feel like doing it? That means they do not get my full attention. Do I always do what is right, or do I do what I want to do and expect God to be happy with the results? Am I like the rich young ruler who has kept all of the law since I was a child? Am I willing to sell all I have and give it for the benefit of those less fortunate? And, do I ever step on the grass when the sign says not to, when no one is looking? Well, I guess according to the Bible, I am a sinner and in need of God's mercy.

It is beyond my understanding how anyone could say they have not sinned. I guess, if you do not read the Bible, you do not have any comprehension of what sin is. If you have read this far, you now know what it is. However, now that you do, just maybe it is time to ask for God's mercy as I have. Just maybe?

Friday: December 10<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 2

*But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. (Nehemiah 9:17)*

Unfortunately, there are those who view God as the Man Upstairs who is just waiting for each one of us to do something wrong so that he may zap us. I wonder how they came up with such an idea. Certainly not from the pages of the Bible. The Bible verse reads, "God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son." Why would He do that if He only had thoughts of harming us? If God was so intent on our destruction, He would, more than likely just leave us alone.

But He did not leave us alone, and will not leave us alone. In fact, Jeremiah tells us that God tells us to; "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it and find rest for our souls." But the world says, "We will not walk in it." Why? Is our way so much better? Are we so much wiser? Do we have all the answers? Of course not, so why are we so reluctant to repent and return to the ancient paths. Just maybe the world thinks it can solve its own problems. Just maybe, it believes that its wisdom is wiser than the One who created the universe. Just maybe, we as a people think that our power is greater than the One who spoke and there was light. Who told the light and the darkness to separate, and it did? Just maybe, we like to fool ourselves that we are the most important beings ever to walk the face of this planet. Just maybe.

But I have another opinion. I honestly believe that as a society, we either think there is not a God, or that if He ever existed at all, He is now dead, or that humankind has elevated itself above the level of God. Now, I am not saying that all individuals think this way, but with society moving to eliminate God from all walks of life, it just may be true. Look at what Christmas has become. Is it a time to celebrate the light coming into the world, or is it the day we gather to exchange gifts? What would it be like if the whole of Christendom stopped participating in the exchange of presents and focused on the one true gift given to us by our Father?

God discloses in the book of Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Maybe it's time that we elevate our thoughts to God's thoughts and our ways to His ways. And just how do we do that? We do as the tax collector did. We humble ourselves before the Almighty and announce to Him that we have strayed, that we have sinned and that we gladly confess and seek forgiveness. Not just once, but each and every day.

Where do you think this country would be if prayer was to be said in every classroom of every school, board room meeting, in the congress of the United States and the oval office? What do you think would happen if we prayed for God's direction and that all the words that leave our mouths would be like apples of gold in baskets of silver? Oh, what a wonderful world this would be. Oh, by the way, what are you to see each time you wander past your front door? You are to see the words of God so that you will remember His commandments that are bound on your heart. They are there aren't they?

## Saturday: December 11<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 3

*One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." (2 Samuel 11:2 &3)*

Let me begin by saying that I cannot prove that it happened this way. But the good news, to me anyway, you cannot prove that it did not.

Let's begin on a warm evening in late spring. The air is heavy and warm and there is no breeze to speak of. The king of the nation has just sent his army out to do battle with a neighboring host. His thoughts are on his troops and the upcoming fight. He tosses and turns in his bed, thinking of all that might and could go wrong. He has already had a couple glasses of cabernet and decides that is enough. He gets up and wanders around and walks outside on the balcony.

As was the custom in those days, a young woman goes outside on the roof of her dwelling to bathe. She is described as very beautiful of face and having a figure that would make all the other women in the land envious. She looks around to see if anyone is watching. Then she starts to take off her robe to bathe herself. She lingers, drawing every movement out as long as she can, since she knows the king is watching her. No words are spoken, but she knows he is enjoying the show. This is her way of communicating her desire for the king.

The king also has a desire for her, and sends his messenger to find out who she is. Once the king knows her identity, he sends for her. She arrives at the palace and is escorted to the king's bed chambers. For a few moments there is silence as they stand gazing at each other. Then very slowly, she drops her robe. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I doubt very seriously that either David or Bathsheba ever stopped to think that a moment of passion and pleasure could bring so much heartache and pain to so many. According to our Savior, the moment they looked at each other with desire, they had committed adultery. If they had stopped at a look, their request for forgiveness would have been so easy. However, they tried to cover it up and the results were disastrous.

Now there is a lesson to be learned, and I do believe it to be what Billy Graham said. I believe Mr. Graham stated that it is not the first look that causes us to sin, but the second. Yes, he might have meant a person of the opposite sex. However, I believe he was referring to something more. To me, he was referring to the things of this world that capture our attention, and take our gaze away from the face of the One who will make all things seem worthless compared to Him.

Eventually, David and Bathsheba repented and were forgiven. We do not know how long they carried their needless pain and sorrow with them. However, we do know that when they confessed their sin, God restored the joy of their salvation. Has the world stolen your joy? If so, there is One who is waiting to pardon and forgive. Just ask me, I know.

## Sunday: December 12<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 4

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. (PS 51:1&2)*

I have heard it said many times over, that if God is not answering your prayers, then you have unconfessed sin in your life. That I dispute. Jeremiah writes in the twenty ninth chapter; "when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." He also writes in the thirty third chapter; "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know." If you need more assurance, consider what Isaiah says; "It shall come to pass. That before they call, I will answer; And while they are still speaking, I will hear." The way I understand this is that even if you have unconfessed sin in your life, God will hear you and answer you. Consider the alternative. You have sin in your life and want to confess, but if God will not hear your confession, what good does it do to pray?

Many has been the time that I have needed to come to God in prayer and confess my sins. But then, I am faced with the reality that the sin I committed was deliberate. I willingly stepped over the line and disobeyed His written law. Now I am not going to explain what I did, but then neither would you. Why does my sin make me feel guilty and ashamed and make humbling myself and confessing a bit harder? I believe that is the way David felt after his affair with Bathsheba. In fact, I am sure of it.

In the second book of Samuel starting in the twelfth chapter and the seventh verse, David is confronted by the prophet Nathan. Now, he must face his sin and it is not pretty. How big did David feel? I think that if he could have sat on a dime there would still have been room for him to swing his legs. That's low. David did confess and is given absolution. Nevertheless, David was depressed, and his soul dried up. However, he recovered. How do I know? I have read the thirty second psalm so many times. David writes.

*"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.  
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones grew old  
Through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand  
was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.  
I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden.  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave  
the iniquity of my sin. "*

How is your soul surviving under the weight of unconfessed sin? Is it like David's? Weary and tired? Does your soul need to be refreshed and revitalized? I know where you can obtain such. It is called the well of salvation where the rivers of living water flow freely and continually. This water is always available and all you must do is ask. By the way, even if you're a confessing believer, the water is for you also. So what is stopping you from coming? Just jump off the dime. It really isn't that far down. Or maybe your fall will be greater. The water will break your fall.

## Monday: December 13<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 5

*For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. (PS 51:3-4)*

Moses was called by God to come to His office one morning on Mt. Sinai. Moses kept the appointment and he and God had their second recorded face to face. Before Moses departed and walked down to rejoin the partiers, God gave to Moses ten commandments or statues that all of humankind need to follow from then to eternity. To God, they are not suggestions or just good advice. They are far more than recommendations. They are instructions on how man is to interact with his creator God and others.

David writes in Psalm fifty-one that he has sinned against God. However, the recipients of his actions were both God and living beings. So why are all sins against God when they include both? I may not know the exact answer, but I have a theory. The theory states that since God formed man out of the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him, then it stands to reason that all negative actions against man are also negative actions against God. Let me put it in parental terms. We, who are fathers, are especially protective of our daughters. When she starts dating, we want to meet the young man who has found her charms something to be desired. We, as fathers, want to know what their intentions are. I told one of my daughter's suiters that I was in prison once and I am not afraid of going back. Any ill intentions against her, I will consider an ill intent against me also. He got the message.

You see, God is serious about how the people who claim to be His followers act. I have long told my congregations that if you want to know how we as believers are to act, read the book of Deuteronomy. In my way of thinking, Deuteronomy is a commentary on the Ten Commandments. It explains why we are to dress differently, how we are to treat sojourners in our land, how we are to address the widows and orphans, and most of all, what will happen if we live up to God's decrees and what will be the consequences if we do not. We cannot say we have not been warned.

Second Corinthians the fifth chapter states that we all will stand before God to give account of our actions on earth so that each may receive recompense, both good and not so good. At that time there will be no excuses accepted. We will not be able to say, "the devil made me do it." We will stand before God, naked as it were, laid bare to answer for what we have done. Is that scary? Yes, it is. That is the time to say, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." It will not be a time to brag about all the good we think we have done, all the money we contributed, all the time we visited the sick, how many meals we made and delivered. The only defense is that we have our advocate standing right next to us, telling the judge that He paid the price for all the sins I committed. As a defendant, I can rest assured that the sentence I receive will be exactly what is unfair and unjust, only because Jesus paid the price for me and you. Not exactly fair.

Remember we were chosen "in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure." (Eph. 1:4-5)

Tuesday: December 14<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 6

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Ps 51:10-12)*

There was a time, I am told, that believers in Christ should look like they were raised sucking persimmon juice. Or maybe it was sour grapes. No wait a minute, it was bitter lemons. Anyway, I am glad that that period of time has come and gone. Why? Because I would not like living if I could not demonstrate the joy that I experience by being a believer in Christ. Yes, it is like the song states, "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart." And, sometimes it just bubbles out.

There are those who would turn the most joyous person who ever lived, Jesus the Christ, into someone who never smiled, someone who was so serious and a person who never had any fun. That is not the Christ I know. I have learned to read between the lines of the Bible, and I see a man who had a heart full of gladness. Although He knew the painful death that awaited Him, He still chose to enjoy life.

If you have ever watched the series, "The Chosen" you might have observed what I mean. Let me give you an example. Jesus had just called the tax collector Matthew to be His disciple. Simon Peter looks at Jesus and says, "He's different." Jesus looks back at Peter with a smile and says, "I know. Get used to different." I am different than you and you are different than me. In most cases that is a good thing, in others I'm not so sure.

We've all heard the expression "laughter is the best medicine." Think it's just a pithy adage? Think again. In fact, a breadth and depth of research tells us that laughter has profound psychological and physiological benefits. How many times have you quietly chuckled to yourself while watching a movie or typed out "hahaha" into a text message in response to a friend? We hardly think about laughing before we do it, though it happens constantly through the day; and yet, it's helpful to us socially, physiologically, and emotionally. What is it about laughing that makes it the best medicine? There are a number of reasons why it's so beneficial, especially during times in our lives that prove to be challenging.

For starters, laughter is a powerful form of stress relief which works in a number of different ways, including increasing endorphins released by the brain; decreasing your stress response; and alleviating tension, according to the Mayo Clinic. And not just in the moment, either, but with long-term payoffs. From improving your mood and increasing personal satisfaction levels, to boosting the immune system and even relieving pain. Laughter is an easy, inexpensive, and efficient healing technique.

Is it any wonder why David wanted his joy restored? Have you let someone steal your joy and you want it back? Maybe it's not your joy that is lost, but your heart is broken, and no human cardiologists can make the pain go away? My heart physician can fix that, His name is Jesus. You can find His number in a book called the Bible. He will never put you on hold or make you wait months for a visit. He's always accepting new patients and He's waiting to hear from you.

Oh, by the way. When you arrive, you will be seen immediately. Promise.

Wednesday: December 15<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 7

*Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Ps 51; 14-17)*

While we believe God's forgiveness is unconditional, constant, and always available to us, we also need to realize that our own coming to forgiveness involves several stages as we let go and work through hurts, anger, resentments and desire for revenge. However, as we are healed, we are then able to accept God's merciful forgiveness and, in turn, offer such forgiveness to ourselves and others.

In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus insists that we are to make peace with others before we approach the altar of God. Facing this clear command we may ask, "So, how do I actually forgive?" We are aware that often we decide to forgive, and we still struggle with painful memories and feelings. From this experience, we learn that forgiveness is not only a simple act of will, but a process that takes time involving our memories and our feelings. In response to Jesus' command regarding offering our gift, perhaps the best we can do is to take the first step in making peace and then offer our gift or offering.

A further obstacle to forgiveness is in thinking that to forgive one must be automatically reconciled with the offender. The ideal is that forgiveness would lead to reconciliation, however, that may not always be possible, and in some circumstances, not even desirable. Instead, forgiveness is the work of God and His Spirit molding our heart and releasing us from the anguish that binds us to the offender. This inner work does not depend on whether the offender acknowledges the offense, seeks reconciliation, or is still alive or not. It depends on God and the work of His Spirit in our lives and heart.

In all this work of forgiveness, we remember that we are unconditionally loved by God. Trusting in this love we move forward, step by step, held in this merciful love, learning to forgive as we have been forgiven, knowing that reconciliation has been made possible by the birth, life, death and resurrection of His Son. It is His gift that makes it all possible. Although it may be a gift, we are still obligated to ask for the needed gift. Once we receive the gift it becomes mandatory, we must open it and use it for its intended use. It is not something to put in a curio cabinet to look at and admire as we walk by. It is best used on a daily basis.

So, what is our gift or offering to be? According to David, our gift is a broken spirit and a contrite heart. To Isaiah: God is the one who provides the contrite heart. Think it is important to have a heart that is contrite? Listen to the Father's words: "All things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word." Do you tremble at the word of God? If not, you might need to reconsider. I would if I were you. First Chronicles states, "Tremble before him, all the earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved." To stand before the Lord and tremble is a good thing, to stand before Him and not in pure arrogance. If you do not believe me, wait and see.

Thursday: December 16<sup>th</sup> -- Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner: Part 8

*Forgive, and you will be forgiven; (Luke 6:37)*

Abe Lincoln wrote: "For too long, every ounce of forgiveness I owned was locked away, hidden from view, waiting for me to bestow its precious presence upon some worthy person. Alas, I found most people to be singularly unworthy of my valuable forgiveness, and since they never asked for forgiveness, I kept it all myself. Now, the forgiveness that I hoarded has sprouted inside my heart like a crippled seed yielding bitter fruit.

No more! At this very moment, my life has taken on new hope and assurance. Of all the world's population, I am one of the few possessors of the secret of dissipating anger and resentment. I now understand that forgiveness has value only when it is given away. By the simple act of granting forgiveness, I release the demons of the past about which I can do nothing," and God can create a new heart, a new beginning within me by His grace.

Many are the times when I have seethed in anger at a word or deed thrown into my life by an unthinking or uncaring person. I have wasted valuable hours imagining revenge or confrontation. Now I see the truth revealed about the psychological rock inside my shoe. The rage I nurture is often one-sided, for my offender seldom gives thought to their offenses."

The secret of forgiveness is a secret that is hidden in plain sight. It cost Christ everything and is of endless worth. It is available to everyone and used by few. If you harness the power of forgiveness, you will be revered, sought after and wealthy. And not coincidentally, you will also be forgiven by others.

The unmistakable truth about forgiveness is that it is not a reward that must be earned; forgiveness is a gift to be given. When I forgive, God frees my own spirit to release the anger and hatred I harbor in my heart. By granting forgiveness, I am free to pursue Christ's example and I am unencumbered by the anchors of my days of long ago. And forgiveness, when granted to others, becomes a gift of God that I treasure most.

I know that slavery, in any form, is wrong. I also know that the person that lives their life according to the opinions of others is a slave. I am not a slave. I have chosen my counsel. I know the difference between right and wrong. I know what is best for my family, and neither misguided opinions nor unjust criticism will alter my course. Those who are critical of my goals and dreams simply do not understand the high purpose to which I am called. Therefore, their scorn does not affect my attitude or action. I forgive their lack of vision, and forge ahead. I know that criticism is part of the price that must be paid for leaping past mediocrity."

I believe our sixteenth president was spot on. Why do we let the negative opinions of others determine our outcome? Why do we let others with unforgiving hearts affect our happiness? When people do not understand us, maybe it is time to move on, as it were, shake the dust off our shoes. Please remember, the only person who has ever had a right to throw a stone chose not to. We are forgiven and we are to forgive. How many times? Jesus said seventy times seven. My interpretation is "always." Your cardiologist will thank you, so will your loved ones.

## Friday: December 17<sup>th</sup> – One: Part 1

*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe (John 17:21)*

Harry Nilsson wrote the song "One" (Is the Loneliest Number) which was recorded by the band "Three Dog Night." The song went to number five on the pop chart. It is about a person who was dumped by their significant other and is feeling the same way. Ever been there?

Harry Nilsson was right when he said that one is a very lonely number, especially when it comes to human relationships. Consider a husband or wife who has lost their lifelong partner and is now alone. Yes, there may be friends all around, but that is different. Where is the one you were intimate with for so many years? Who will be there to make new memories? How long will the emptiness last? Forever? Where is the one who held you and always told you that things would be all right? Where is the one who wiped away your tears and made you feel safe?

John writes in the Book of Revelation the twenty first chapter,

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away."

That is all well and good, and I look forward to that day when I am living in God's house. But that might be many years away. So, what am I supposed to do now?

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Ephesians we are told that; "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Now that is a lot of ones. But there is a progression here. The first one states that we as a church or congregation are to be one body. Or as it were, one family. When one part of the body is hurting, we are all to hurt. But how am I to know when someone is hurting and in need of a tender touch? How am I to know if they do not speak up and are willing to show their need? Good question, one that I as a priest have asked myself for a long time, and there is no easy answer. Then again, maybe it is time we respect our fellow brothers and sisters who open up to us about their pain and do something more than say, "I will pray for you." Is it time we opened our arms and provided a warm embrace? What would you want people to do for you? Would you want someone to check on you, say every day for a while? Would you want someone to talk to even for five minutes? Paul tells us in Romans that we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. It is a Biblical mandate. Remember, do to others as you want them to do to you. Not my words, but good advice.

I would like to end with a quote from Ecclesiastes the fourth chapter. It states, "For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help." That is why "one" is not the loneliest number but the most desired number in the Christian faith. Having the One hold you who holds the universe is far better than holding on to anything on this earth.

*And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11)*

In the Gospel of Matthew, he writes about the one crying out in the wilderness. Of course, Matthew meant John the Baptizer. But today there are voices crying out in the wilderness. They are called "whistle blowers." They are the ones who are not afraid to stand up in the face of what they know to be wrong and bring it to public attention. They are not fearful of the consequences or what others will think. They are the ones who are not intimidated at the prospect of reprisal. They are the ones who are the true leaders, because they are concerned more with what is correct and are willing to pay the cost.

On a recent visit with my youngest daughter, I discovered that I did not have a clue as to what "ONE" meant. She explained to me that in today's math, the students are taught to think of one as a concept. I asked her what she meant and was astonished at her answer. I did not understand her answer, and I am still trying to figure out just what she meant. I know what it means to be number one in the college football rankings. I also know what it means to be the number one ranked golfer in the world. But in modern math I do not have a clue.

Luke writes in the Book of Acts that: "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." It sounds like they had the correct concept of what the number meant. Now I was not there at that time, but I bet I can guess what one meant. First, it sounds like, although they did not agree on every issue, they had respect for each other, and they agreed to disagree.

Second, they agreed that no one individual had complete authority. There was a council where matters were brought before the church. However, we are not told how the council came into being or for that matter, what the qualifications were for being on the council. Paul writes to Timothy telling him; "I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, ... whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain." I know a lot of pastors and priests, including me, who would not qualify. Paul writes to the Philippians; "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you."

Lastly. Yes, we have differences of opinions in the church, not just Trinity, but every church I have ever served. So how do we come together in unity and forge ahead? Sometimes we do not, sometimes people leave the church because they do not get their way. Sometimes people stay but they refuse to be a part by not participating or withholding their tithes and offerings. If that happens, what the church has is a lose/ lose situation. Instead, if we listen to what God is telling us, not man or woman, we will surely have a win/win outcome. Which one do you believe our Father wants? Remember, in order to be one with God, we have to be one with our family members. Psalm one hundred twenty-two reads, "For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."

## Sunday: December 19<sup>th</sup> -- Save Us

*And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!"*  
(Matthew 8:23-25)

I forget what day it was. More than likely it was a Saturday. Joyce and I waited at the dock at Biscayne National Park for our friends to arrive. Tim and Bev have been our dear friends for some thirty years and we were looking forward to spending a day on the water with them and their daughter's family. The weather was perfect. A ten-knot breeze was blowing out of the southwest. Perfect for sailing.

When our friends arrived, we quickly stowed their gear, loosened the lines, started the engines, and headed out to Elliot Key for the day. Once we cleared the channel, we raised the sails and began our journey. The sail across the bay was uneventful, we arrived at our destination, dropped anchor, changed into our bathing suits, and spent hours enjoying the warm water.

Around mid-afternoon, I noticed storm clouds building over the mainland seven and a half miles away. The rain was traveling south to north. For more than an hour the rain stayed on course leaving us a bright sky. After about four hours of having fun, I decided we should sail south and come in behind the storm. We once again raised the sails and charted a compass course of one hundred and eighty degrees, due south for you non-mariners. The plan was solid. Then, suddenly, I felt a blast of very cold air. The front had shifted and was coming our way. We were sailing straight into a microburst. My next command was "bring in the sails." Joyce started on the Main Sail while Tim and I worked on the Jib (the most forward sail). The Main Sail was the easier to bring in and was inside the mast before too long.

The jib was another story. The strong winds, which we found out later were blowing sixty knots, made it extremely difficult to control the jib. The jib sheet (the line that allows control of the jib) had broken through its restraining cleat and the sail was flopping in the wind. Not the most desirable situation. Eventually, we heard a large bang indicating the sail had torn and was now in several pieces. Thank God for engines. Once the rain and wind stopped, we gathered the tattered sail and headed back to land, gazing at two beautiful rainbows.

Were we ever in danger of sinking? No. The water depth of Biscayne Bay is only about ten feet, the captain has many years of sailing experience, and the boat was able to handle larger seas and storms. Plus, we had a life boat and life vests.

Just in case you have not had the pleasure of being on the Sea of Galilee, let me draw you a picture. To the south, there are twin peaks that rise above the land. When the wind blows from the south it is funneled through the peaks causing the wind to increase in intensity. This increase in speed can and does cause the sea to become violent. This must have been one of those times when these experienced sailors feared for their lives. They did not have a lifeboat, but they had the giver and sustainer of life. They did not have life vests, but they had the One who rescues us in all kinds of danger. When should we pray, "save us?" Every morning as we journey through the storms and perils of life, it's a good way to start the day. Believe me, I know.

Monday: December 20<sup>th</sup> -- Send Me

*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)*

This may not be so much of a prayer, but a call to service. The first person to answer God's call to service was Adam. God called him to tend His garden and his reward was what pleasures the garden provided. Noah answered God's call to build an ark, bring in the animals two by two, and repopulate the earth. God called Moses to deliver His people from slavery in the land of Egypt. God called Joshua to lead His people into the Promised Land. While there, He called Debra and Gideon to deliver His people in times of distress.

Look down the line, and God called Saul to be the first king of the Hebrew people. Next God called David to take Saul's place. God called Daniel to be in His service while His people were in exile. God called Ester to be His spokesperson and arrange for his children to return home. The stories can go on and on of the people God has called and the duties they were to perform. But we are dealing with Isaiah. God did not put a specific call on the life of Isaiah. God put out a general call to see who would answer. Isaiah heard the request and said he would be willing to go. He might have wanted to rethink his answer when he heard the following,

*And God said, "Go and say to this people: Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull and stop their ears and shut their eyes so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed."*

*Then Isaiah said, "How long, O Lord?" And he (God) said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitants and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land." (Isaiah 6:9-11)*

I can only imagine what Isaiah's answer would have been. "Oh really, that long and you expect me to be popular?" I think God's answer would have been, "no, but I need you to tell my people how much danger they are in and what will happen if they refuse to repent and change their ways."

There is a rule in Christianity, it is called the 80/20 rule. It means that twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work, and twenty percent do eighty percent of the giving. I wonder why that is? God has called each of us to do a specific job in His kingdom. He did this to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ so that the church is fully equipped. When this occurs, each part will be working properly, thus promoting the body's growth and building itself up in love. The body of Christ cannot be, as the U. S. Marines say, "be all you (we) can be" without your service. Remember that we are all called and all given gifts. Why? So, as Paul writes in first Corinthians the twelfth chapter, "that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Isn't it time we all rejoiced as one body with one spirit? I think it is. I certainly hope you do too.

## Tuesday: December 21<sup>st</sup> -- Lord, Help Me

*But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." (Matthew 15:25)*

No one on earth has the power to break a parent's heart more than a child. Likewise, who can provide more pleasure and laughter than the antics of a child at play? Seeing our children having fun brings an enormous joy to our hearts and soul. Seeing them struggle and watching them get hurt brings pain and agony to our innermost being. We as parents feel their pain. Our children have the capability to bring ecstasy, sadness, and tears to our eyes in a split second. When they bring disappointment, it is like a knife cutting us to the core. When they are treated differently, an overwhelming sense of indignation and anger can fill us with rage. And when they hurt, we as parents would do anything to relieve their agony. Even take their place.

In the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, we find the prayer of a desperate parent. A mother is looking for a solution for her daughter's illness. Matthew tells us that her daughter was demon possessed. Just exactly what that meant, we do not know. More than likely it would imply impairment of physical and emotional expression. What we do know is that her mother was concerned for her safety and well-being. As a good parent should be.

What does the mother do? She cries out to Jesus for help. What does Jesus do? Unbelievably, Jesus remains silent. Should she have expected something different? Maybe. The woman was a Canaanite, and she never received a response from her gods. Not unusual, they were always silent. So, when Jesus was silent, she could have easily marked Him as just another person. But she did not, she came back a second time asking for relief and healing for her daughter. She forgot about her pride and remembered only her pain and the pain of the one she bore.

Jesus' answer must have been quite alarming. He told His disciples that He was only here to give aid to the lost sheep of Israel. This was not the answer she was looking for. I can just feel the wind being taken from her sails. She knew in her heart that she did not have the right to ask a Jewish rabbi to help her. Plus, she also knew she had no right to expect Him to answer in the affirmative. She was desperate and she pressed the issue and was rewarded when Jesus granted her request.

Her prayer was simple yet powerful, "Lord help me." She bowed before Him, she felt the weight of the need of her daughter, she was totally helpless, and she hurt with as much torture as any helpless person could, and Jesus mitigated her pain. It is important to understand that we were never meant to carry the pain of the world around on our shoulders. We have always been able to bring our worries and cares to the foot of the cross where we are to drop them, and leave them and let them go. Oh that sounds so easy, and yet it is so hard.

When have you reached your pressure point? What do you say when there is nothing else to say? What burdens are simply out of your control? Where do you need help? What words best describe the need of a broken hearted or frantic parent or caregiver? May I suggest, "Lord help me." Let Him see your empty hands and feel your broken heart. Let Him see the suffering soul of the one you love through your eyes. Bow down before Him and speak from your hurting heart. Your little prayer can produce huge results. Ask me, I know.

## Wednesday: December 22<sup>nd</sup> -- Help Us

*Asa cried to the LORD his God, "O LORD, there is no difference for you between helping the mighty and the weak. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude. O LORD, you are our God; let no mortal prevail against you." (2Chronicles 14:11)*

If you have not been there, you will be one day, when you cry out to the Lord like Asa. There will be a time in your life when all seems to go wrong and no matter how hard you try, it only seems to get worse. You need help and you need it immediately. You are swept away by the current of helplessness and hopelessness. You want to survive and be happy once again, but where do you turn and where do you go for such help? Who can you turn to, to fight your battles for you? Maybe you should do what Asa did.

For the first ten years of Asa's reign as King of Judah, all went well. The country was at peace and did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Asa removed the foreign altars from the land, smashed the sacred stones, and cut down the Asherah poles. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their forefathers. Asa also fortified the wall of the cities and towns. In addition, Asa had an army of three hundred thousand men with large shields and spears. He also had, from the tribe of Benjamin, two hundred and eighty thousand men armed with small shields and bows. The land was secure and prosperous. Life was good.

Asa and his fellow citizens assumed that peace and good fortune would be the norm for a long time. Then the dark cloud of despair rolled into Judah. An army from Egypt was rolling up to Judah with a massive army of over one million Ethiopians and three hundred chariots. Judah was outnumbered by four hundred thousand and had no defenses against the three hundred war machines, the most powerful weapon of mass destruction of that time. To engage in battle meant that Asa and Judah would have suffered one of the most devastating massacres in history. What to do?

Asa prayed one of the most successful prayers ever prayed. Short and powerful, only twenty-seven words, and highly effective. We are not told how God intervened on behalf of Asa, but we are told the outcome. Complete and utter destruction of their approaching enemy. Plus, it provided great wealth.

Is this an unusual story that only happens in the pages of the Old Testament in the Bible? I hope not. And I can assure you that it is not. I cannot recount the number of times I have seen a coming storm and knew that the only way out of a situation was to put it in God's hands. Did He always answer? Yes. Was it always on my time? No. Was it always the way I wanted it to be? Of course not. If your story is different than mine, please let me know.

The twenty-third Psalm reads, "even though I will walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff shall comfort me." Now we can say, with all certainty, that there are four events that will happen in our life. Taxes, death, walking through the darkest valley and knowing that God will always be by our sides. Truly, we can do all things through Christ who gives us the strength. All we need to do is ask. What are you waiting for? An invitation. Check your Bible I'm sure you will find it there.

Thursday: December 23<sup>rd</sup> -- Give Me Wisdom

*"Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?" (2 Chronicles 1:10)*

What would you ask for if God asked you the same question? Would it be a bank vault full of money (not that you would be selfish). Would you want to pay off your bills, help friends, make sure your children's future is secure, help support your church, support a few hundred missionaries, or pay for research to discover a cure for cancer or some other illness? It may even cross your mind to purchase a bigger house and a luxury automobile.

Or maybe you would go for the ultimate makeover. Would you desire a younger, healthier body, a sleeker slimmer version of what you are now? Or you might yearn for superpowers. Just think of all the people you could help. You could ask for healing powers and the ability to take away sickness and hunger.

Hearing God say that He would give you anything you asked for, would to most people be a mind-boggling prospect. Well, you say, God is not going to ask me that question. However, almost three thousand years ago He did ask that question to a person called Solomon. Solomon was the second son of an ill-advised union of David and Bathsheba, and lived in, what we would call today, a dysfunctional family. For example, he had five stepmothers and some misguided stepbrothers. One of his stepbrothers raped his half-sister, Tamar. Absalom made a violent effort to overthrow and take his father's throne, with a deadly outcome.

David was the action superhero of the year one thousand B.C. He was good looking, dashing, handsome, intelligent, highly talented and a larger than life living legend. He was a man's man, a ladies' man and a man after God's own heart. The reading of David's resume read like a fantasy. He was a shepherd, a military hero, a musician, wrote Psalms and recruited a band of merry men. In addition, he survived Bathsheba-gate, a military coup and planned to construct God's temple.

When his father, David, died the mantle of leadership fell on Solomon. Was he ready? Maybe, maybe not. But consider this, Solomon spent his early formative years growing up in the court of the king and was able to study with the greatest minds of the land. He collected the wisdom of the ages, and the parables of the sages. He must have understood that the road to wisdom leads through the doorway of knowledge. Consider the words from the Book of Proverbs; "Do not forsake her (wisdom), and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you."

So, when God asked Solomon what he wanted, it was an easy answer, "wisdom." Solomon asked for what he believed to be the greatest gift man could receive. God was pleased and granted him his request. A study of the Book of Proverbs reveals wisdom to be the diligently acquired art of skillful living and the path that leads to God. In the end, I'm not too sure he followed wisdom as he should have.

James tells us there are two forms wisdom, man's, "such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." However, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." Do you know which one you want? Choose wisely, your future depends on it.

## Friday: December 24<sup>th</sup> -- Give Me a Sign: Part 1

*Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith. (Joshua 2:12)*

*Then he said to him, "If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. (Judges 6:17)*

*So, they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? (John 6:30)*

As far as I know there is only one purpose for a sign and that is informational. If you know of any other, please let me know. Well there maybe a couple more. According to song "Signs," they also block out scenery and give you something to read as you travel down or up the highway. But signs can be very confusing. Such as the sign that reads; "Caution, water on road during rain." Really? Or what about this one; "Bottomless Pit, 65 feet deep?" This one I really do not understand; "Bridge Out, Open to Local Traffic Only." Or how about the sign at a McDonald's that read; "Parking for drive through only." These signs all convey information just not the kind that make any sense.

Since Joyce and I travel a lot, I am constantly reading road signs. If I need to purchase fuel for the truck I want to know if a station sells diesel. Plus, if I ever needed a personnel injury lawyer, I could choose from the myriad of billboard ads for the same. In addition, signs along the highway let me know how far it is to my destination.

There are certain deciding points in our life and in the life of every church when we wish we had, an undeniable and preferably clear sign, letting us know which direction to take. Of course, we have. Why? Because we are averse to making the wrong decisions. We want to be right, all the time. We do not want to go down the path that could lead to financial ruin, nor do we want our health destroyed by taking the wrong drug at the wrong time. We want to be sure, and who could blame us.

But do I ever ask God for a sign? I did when I was younger, but not now. I was like Gideon and wanted to be sure this or that was right for my life. I wanted to know that the call I heard on my life was from above. I wasn't called to do battle with swords and spears in which I could lose my life. But I was called to do battle against the forces of evil, as we all are. But I wanted God to direct me in battle so I would know which ones to fight. I learned that there was God, always on my side.

I believe the most famous verse about a sign is found in the book of Isaiah. It reads; "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." What kind of sign is this? Young women are giving birth all the time. What is so different? Well, his name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and all authority will rest upon his shoulders. If you want more signs, He will be the seed of a woman. He will save His people from their sins. But the best sign, He will be crucified and buried. However, on the third day after His death He will rise again. If that is not the best sign, I do not know what is.

## Saturday: December 25<sup>th</sup> – Give Me a Sign: Part 2

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, (Ephesians 1:17)*

I believe the most famous verse about a sign is found in the book of Isaiah. It reads; "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." Although really not a prayer it is an answer to one looking for answers and the coming of the Messiah.

I do not believe the shepherds were looking for a sign of the coming Messiah; however, they were the recipient of such when a host of heavenly beings suddenly came forth and announced that the king who would set them free was born that night and as a sign, they would find the babe wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a feed trough. Now I do not mean to be cynical, but back then all babies were wrapped in strips of cloth. Of course, not all would be found in a feed trough. But then think of the time and the setting. The city was overwhelmed with people registering for the tax census.

Once again not to be too cynical, back then young girls gave birth to babies all the time. So, what is the sign and why is it so important? There is a passage that explains the importance of the passage in Isaiah. When Jehoiakim was King over Judah, he showed contempt for the house of God. Instead of making sure that the House of God remained the glorious place that it should be, he let it become (in my words) a run down shack. On the other hand, Jehoiakim took care of his own house, making it desirable for all to see. Because of his disdain for God's temple, God placed a curse on the house of Jehoiakim. The curse being that none of his descendants would ascend to the throne and rule over Judah.

Now here is the catch, Joseph is a descendent of Jehoiakim, and he inherited the curse. If Joseph would have been the biological father of Jesus, then Jesus would also have inherited the curse. A catch twenty-two situation. Jesus had to be born of a virgin. No ifs, ands or buts. Plus, if Jesus were Joseph's son, He would have been a common ordinary person, just like you and me. He would be the son of a man and not The Son of Man. Big difference.

There is a lesson here and it is not hard to learn. The lesson is about how important it is to maintain the House of God. I have heard pilgrims who travel to Rome and see St. Peter's Basilica, marvel at how beautiful it is and how well it is maintained. Then there are others that come away thinking what a waste of resources. To me the House of God should reflect the God you worship. If His house is just a place you go to once a week for one hour and warm a pew, maybe the condition does not matter so much. If you go once a week and find your inspiration for the rest of the week, then I believe the condition should matter. If you come to God's house more than once a week, then I know the condition you want to find His house in. Now I am not saying that if God came to visit you in your home, He need to find a stately manner. But what I am saying is the place where we meet, and worship needs to be kept in a manner fitting for a king. Which He is.

Remember, His name is Emmanuel, God with us, and He is with us every time we meet. Where two or three are gathered, He is also there. He is always there. Always available. Always waiting. Always wondering why. Always looking and hoping we will look in the right place.

## Sunday: December 26<sup>th</sup> -- Teach Us to Pray: Part 1

*"Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1)*

I have often found it funny, not funny ha, ha, but funny that the disciples did not know how to pray. If they were good Jews they would have said the Shema at least three times a day. The Shema is, "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord is one." It was immediately followed by, "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever." It is like going to a Roman Catholic service. The opening statement by the priest is, "Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And then the congregation answers, "And blessed be His Kingdom, now and forever, Amen." The remainder of the prayer is found in the book of Deuteronomy.

In addition to the Jewish Shema, the disciples would have gone to Morning Prayer at the temple or synagogue. They, like many protestant religions had their prayer book. The Jewish prayer book (called a Siddur) is drawn from the writings of the Jewish people across the ages. It contains the wisdom of great thinkers, and some of the most beautiful Hebrew poetry. Spending time with these prayers enables a Jewish person to absorb the spiritual teachings of the Jewish people. This extract taken from the Morning Service, Jewish prayer book is an example of a profound lesson in the nature of God, as well as an act of worship.

*"Blessed be He who spoke and the world came into being; blessed be He. Blessed be He who maintains the creation. Blessed be He who speaks and performs. Blessed be He who decrees and fulfils. Blessed be He who has mercy on the earth. Blessed be He who has mercy upon His creation. Blessed be He who pays a good reward to those who fear Him. Blessed be He who lives forever and endures to eternity. Blessed be He who redeems and saves; blessed be His name."*

Jews, like other people of faith, pray in many different ways. They pray so that their hearts can reach out to God. They pray to express and exercise their beliefs. They pray to share in the life of a worshipping community. And they pray to obey God's commandments. So, you want to tell me again why the disciples needed to be taught how to pray. Maybe they were like so many of us who do not know how. There are times when I go to God in prayer and my mind is blank. I do not know what to say. I kneel before Him, and I am utterly empty. So, what is the problem? I must honestly say that I do not know. But I have an idea.

Sometimes I am so overwhelmed by God's grace and feel so insignificant because I do not know the right words to say. Or are there right words? Why can't I just say thank you and be done with it? Why do I have to use lofty words? Why do I feel that my short little prayer needs to be longer and more profound? Maybe I have been around the Pharisees who prayed on the street corners too long, and heard their pious words. Maybe, for some strange reason I have thought my prayers needed to be like theirs. Maybe I have been wrong. My prayers do not need to impress anyone but God, after all He is the only One that I am praying to, and He is the only One who can provide the correct answers.

So, I do know how to pray. Maybe, maybe not, but one day I will find out Do you? If you do please teach me, so that I may know also.

## Monday: December 27<sup>th</sup> -- Teach Us to Pray: Part 2

*"Many people shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:3)*

Prayer builds the relationship between God and human beings. When people pray, they spend time with God. To pray is to serve God with your heart, obeying God's commandments. Deuteronomy, chapter eleven, verse thirteen reads, we are, "to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with your whole heart and with all your soul." That as Martin Luther said, "is the purpose of man" and of course women. Luther also added that our purpose is to glorify God.

The purpose of prayer in the Bible is to make your praise or request known to God. Through prayer, men and women of God were able to ask Him for deliverance, mercy, healing, and miracles.

The reason Christians pray today is for the same reasons why people prayed in the Bible: to speak to God and ask for healing, forgiveness, and direction. Praying is how Christians grow a deeper relationship with Christ and how they know the direction he wants their life to go in.

Psalms one hundred and nineteen reads: "Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." How can God teach us His statutes? The best way I know is to meditate with Him in quietness. There are a few important things to remember about prayer. You should do it with total concentration on God; there should be nothing else in your mind. Nothing, and prayer should be completely from the heart.

There are at least three different sorts of prayer, and we should use all of them. These are prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of praise, and prayers that ask for the benefit of others and for us. I believe that God will take action in response to prayer, and a teaching from the rabbis tells us that the more we ask God to help us, the more God will love us. But prayer doesn't just do the things that the words say it does—thanksgiving, praising, requesting. Prayer changes our faith, and it changes us also. Praying with heart and mind and soul takes a person into a state of being that is different from their everyday awareness. Prayer enhances a person's closeness to God. Prayer enhances a person's closeness to their fellow believers. Prayer also helps us to remember what we believe. Prayer invites us to find new insights into our relationship with God and with each other.

It is my hope that the above will help you understand why it is important to be taught and to learn how to pray. However, if you need more encouragement let me add a few more reasons. (1) Spending time with Him is essential to our spiritual growth. (2) When we spend time with Him, we grow closer to knowing what He has planned for our lives. (3) Chances are if others see the changes in us brought about through prayer, they may want to enlarge their prayer life. (4) If we get into a routine, God knows when to expect us to come calling. I have always heard that a routine is like a rut and a rut is an open-ended grave. This routine will bring more life to your soul. And, (5) by spending more time with God, we are telling Him that He is the priority of our life. It is time to get our priorities straight. No doubt about it.

## Tuesday: December 28<sup>th</sup> -- How Long O Lord: How Long: Part 1

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry  
with your people's prayers? (Ps 80:4)

I can only imagine how many times this prayer is offered up to God by His people or by those who call themselves His people.

I can only imagine what these prayers sound like to God. How long must I suffer with this disease? How long before my child will come to their senses and return to your ways? How long will I be out of work and must rely on the family's savings account? How long before this medicine starts to work, and I can return to the way things used to be? How long, O Lord, how long?

I have often heard ministers tell their flocks to keep a prayer journal. This way they will be able to track when they prayed, and when God answered. I know people who kept prayer journals for years. This I cannot understand. Why? Because it would only add to my confusion and maybe a little anxiety. I would rather say a prayer and rely on the promise that God will answer me while I am yet speaking. So, if I kept a prayer journal, mine would not show any unanswered prayers. All my prayers get answered on the day I pray them.

Now, what I am not saying is that all my prayers are answered in the positive. But what I am saying is, there may be a time lag between the delivering or praying the prayer to the arrival of the answer. It may be instantaneous, and it may take years. I am not in charge of God's time schedule, nor do I want to be. However, I do have God's assurance that He will answer. In addition, I am hesitant to pray for the relief of circumstances that I have brought upon myself. Nevertheless, I may ask God to forgive me of my stupidity, but that's all. What I need to do is ask God for more wisdom and a greater understanding of the prayer process. Maybe some day I will.

I will confess that I do not have the slightest bit of knowledge about your prayer life, but if you are like most people, you may have encountered a little frustration with God at the speed at which the answer is delivered. Now please consider this. How many times has God had to tap you on the shoulder and say to you "how long?" How long has it been since you have spent time with Me in my word? How long has it been since you broke out in joyous song and praised me for all the blessings I have bestowed on you? How long has it been since you told someone you were sorry for the words you spoke in anger? How long has it been, well do you know?

When I was younger, I must admit that I became impatient with God because of the time lag of His answers and the results. I always wanted God to operate on my time schedule. I finally learned that it just does not work that way. I found that as I matured and walked closer with my God that I understood why I missed so many answers. It was because I was not in tune with Him, or I was only looking for a specific answer. When I figured out that God was asking me "How long?" I understood the problem. Me. Are you a problem child, too? I certainly hope not.

## Wednesday: December 29<sup>th</sup> -- How Long O Lord: How Long: Part 2

*Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? (1 Kings 18:21)*

I believe that one of the worst sins an individual and especially a congregation can commit is complacency of thought and action, thinking all is well and will stay that way. According to the definition of complacency, it is "a feeling of quiet pleasure or security, often while unaware of some potential danger, defect, or the like; self-satisfaction or smug satisfaction with an existing situation, condition, etc." If you assume that the status quo will remain in place, you are setting yourself up to be blindsided. If you stay in the safety of your complacency without a notion as to what's happening, your safety zone can become a danger zone overnight. Changes that are occurring all around may be warning signs that change is about to happen.

The first congregation I served did not just have two or three different opinions, they had at least five or six. Each department had their own agenda, and each wanted their program to be number one in priority. When it came to dividing the pie, each wanted to make sure that they received their fair share. Talk about infighting. You would never believe you were in a church. Did it get any better at any other church? No, it did not. Why not? Because each group or ministry wanted what it wanted. Unless you belong to a mega-church, and sometimes even then, there are not enough resources to go around. If you ask me why I would tell you, I do not have a clue.

However, I do know this. A church or congregation divided will never stand the test of time. It is just like a marriage that is pulled in two or more directions. Eventually, because of lack of unity it will fall apart. I went to hear a speaker when I was in college, and his words remain with me to this day. Those words were, "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." There is only one problem with that statement. There may be more, but the main one is, the statement holds true for both sides of an issue. When both sides of an issue think they are correct, what you have is one immovable position trying to move another immovable position. In other words, you have a lose-lose situation. Not good.

Stephen Covey writes in his book, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People that for a stalemate to be broken, what needs to happen is for those involved to first "seek to understand and then be understood." It sounds simple enough, but what happens if the other side starts making sense? What happens when I really listen to their concerns? What happens if I start seeing their point of view? What happens if those who oppose my point of view start seeing my position from a different angle?

I honestly believe that God told the Hebrew children to walk around Jericho and not say a word, because if He did not, someone would open their mouth and start complaining and then many would join in. Our job as the body of Christ is to be ONE, not two or three. We are to not to say I am such and such like the Corinthians did. We are to sing "we are one in the spirit; we are one in the Lord." Paul writes in Philippians; "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." Do you think it is about time we heed His message and become one? I do.

## Thursday: December 30<sup>th</sup> – Mature

*"But now I have grown old, and you by Heaven's mercy are mature in years. Take my place and my brother's, and go out and fight for our nation, and may the help that comes from Heaven be with you." (1 Maccabees 16:3)*

I am sure that at least one person that reads this will ask, "Why is he quoting something from the Apocrypha?" Well, these are seven books in the Catholic Bible that are not included in the Protestant version of the Old Testament. These books are referred to as the deuterocanonical books. Apocrypha (from Greek *apokryptein*, "to hide away"), in biblical literature, works outside an accepted canon of scripture. The history of the term's usage indicates that it referred to a body of esoteric writings that were at first prized, later tolerated, and finally excluded. Even Martin Luther kept a copy of the Apocrypha in his Bible for the history it provided.

I refer to it because, although it is not considered divinely inspired, but regarded as worthy of study by the faithful. For example, it contains the word "one," over six hundred times. In first Maccabees, the first chapter the forty-first verse reads, "Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people" Second Maccabees reads, "it had appeared that they were of one mind, they agreed."

According to Wikipedia, maturity is: "In psychology, maturity is the ability to respond to the environment, being aware of the correct time and location to behave and knowing when to act, according to the circumstances and the culture of the society one lives in. The age or qualities assigned for each of these contexts are tied to culturally significant indicators that often vary because of social norms. Because of these factors, the definition of maturity and immaturity is somewhat subjective."

Sometimes, we as Christians equate biblical knowledge with maturity. That is a mistake. Maturity has nothing to do with how many Bible verses you quote. It has nothing to do with how many times you come to church. It also has nothing to do with the number of theological terms you know. And it has nothing to do with how much you give. Big shocker, right. Christian maturity has everything to do with how much time you spend letting the Holy Spirit infuse you. It has everything to do with how much time you spend fulfilling the statutes of God outside the walls of the church building. Christian maturity depends far more on how we answer and respond to God's call in and for our lives.

The writer of Psalm 119 has much to say about our need for understanding. He begins by saying, "Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments." Then, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple." Also, "Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live." And finally, "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart."

James writes, "let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." Mark twelve reads, "to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." It is better to gain maturity and understanding than to enter heaven and have God ask, "Are you also still without understanding?" Not the question you want to hear. At least I don't. Do you?

## Friday: January 31<sup>st</sup> -- I Confess

*I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and what I have failed to do, and I ask you my brothers and sisters, to pray for me unto the Lord our God.  
(Roman Catholic Missal)*

The first time I had ever heard a congregation confess their sins out loud was at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community in Louisville Kentucky. How did I ever wind up going to a Catholic Church? Well, that is a long story.

I met Joyce, my wife, while in seminary. We dated for four months, then we ran away, along with her sixteen- and twelve-year-old daughters to Las Vegas to get married. After honeymooning in San Diego with my family, we returned to Louisville. Joyce's parents lived about an hour south and it was our practice to, on Sunday after church, travel to their home for lunch. Two years later we moved to Northern Virginia. When we moved, we made it our practice to return to Kentucky as often as we could to visit her parents and the girls. Then her oldest married a Catholic. One weekend, I could not return with Joyce. When she arrived back in Virginia, I asked her if she went to church. She did not answer, so I asked her again. Again, she did not answer. Not wanting to let her off the hook, I asked her again. She finally told me that she had gone to the Catholic church with Debra. I said OK.

On our next trip, we started making it our practice to go to church with our daughter. I did participate in the service as much as I could. Thank goodness they had cheat sheets in the pews. After going for quite a while, I memorized the prayers but with some, I felt uncomfortable. Like Mary being ever virgin and asking the saints to pray for us. Father John Michael Talbot in his mass uses the words sweet to describe Mary so I adopted his words. The second part that gave me trouble was asking the saints to pray for us. One day I just left it out. Immediately God tapped me on the shoulder and asked me why I did that. I told Him that I had trouble asking to a saint to pray for me. God then asked what I thought I would do all day when I arrived there. I said, sit on a cloud and play a harp. Wrong answer, and God was not amused.

When I returned to Virginia, I went to a nearby Catholic church to speak to one of the priests. I spoke with the head priest about praying to the saints. He looked at me and said, you're not a Catholic, are you? I confessed and told him my problem. His words of wisdom are still with me to this day. He informed me that I was not praying to the saints in heaven. The prayer begins, Almighty God, and that is to whom we are praying for the forgiveness of our sins. The second part of the prayer is asking the saints to pray for our needs, not only forgiveness, but for all our earthly needs.

In the Catholic service, when I did not understand why something was done the way it was, or did not understand the words that were used, I would go to St. James and speak to the head priest. There were so many issues I needed to understand. And there are still so many things that I do not understand. But one day, I will be able to sit at the feet of the Master and have all my questions answered. If my allotted time runs over, may I have some of yours? If you said yes, thanks in advance.

Saturday: January 1<sup>st</sup> – *Penitence*

*My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy. (Rite of Penance, no. 45)*

The purpose of the Introductory Rite is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish community and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist. The purpose of the public confession of sin has its origin in the Jewish synagogue and was part of the early Christian liturgy during the first century.

For example, the first century Didache states, "But every Lord's Day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure."

One primary source for this ancient tradition is the story of Jesus about the Pharisee and the tax collector found in Luke the eighteenth chapter. It reads, "Two people went up to the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke his prayer to himself; 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity-greedy, dishonest and adulterous-not like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I tithe on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood a far off at a distance and would not even lift his eyes to heaven but beat on his chest and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'"

The act of confession or reconciliation is one of the most unique and beautiful aspects of faith in Christianity. Jesus the Christ, in His abundant love and mercy, established the tradition so that we as sinners can obtain forgiveness of our sins and be reconciled with God and His family. We are, as it were, "washed clean" and renewed in Christ.

I find it interesting that in some denominations there is not public confession or a time for private confession during public worship. It is my opinion that when you come into the place of worship the first thing that needs to happen is to set your hearts right with God. The only way I know how to do that is to get on my knees (or at least bow the knees of my heart) and ask for forgiveness and to ask God to make my heart right to receive His blessings.

If you do not know how to ask God for forgiveness in the quietness of your own heart, I offer this simple prayer. "O most merciful God! I prostrate myself at your feet, I seek your forgiveness. I sincerely desire to leave all my evil ways and to confess my sins with all genuineness to you. I am a sinner, have mercy on me, O Lord. I ask you to give me a faith that is alive and well and a firm hope which I place in my Redeemer. Give me a heart that is sorrowful for having offended you, so good a God. Thank you and Amen."

If the above does not work for you, I am not offended. If you already have one, good for you. The exact words are not as important as remembering to confess. Remember the words of the apostle John; *if we confess our sins we will be forgiven.* That is what's important.

## Sunday: January 2nd -- Lord I am not worthy

*"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." (Matthew 8:8)*

This prayer is not exactly something one would want to say to God. Yet, these words are prayed by most every congregant before receiving Communion. The plea represents our brokenness due to sin, which is the intrinsic brokenness everyone has. As stated in Genesis, "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). With the existence of sin, we are imperfect. We long for happiness, for something greater. As Saint Augustine says, "our hearts are restless until they rest in [God]." Evil exists, and we are all broken.

Recognizing our imperfection is important, the liturgy reminds us of that. But don't beat yourself up for being fallen, because there is hope. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is approached by a Centurion, who pleads with Him to cure his servant. Upon hearing that the Lord would come to help him, "the centurion said in reply, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed.'"

The Roman centurion—a man of power and authority—subjects himself to Christ and has faith in Him. He recognizes his own brokenness, saying that he is not worthy of the Lord. How does Jesus respond? He does not say that the centurion is broken or that he is not worthy; rather, Jesus commends him, even to the point of saying "in no one in Israel have I found such faith."

So why do congregations recite this recognition of their inadequacy every week at worship? One must look even further than this story of healing to find the answer. Look to the Crucifixion. Imagine Jesus, the Lord, dying on the cross, a symbol of all the sins of humanity He carried for us. Jesus redeems us on Good Friday. Before we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, we recognize that we are not the Lord, that we are broken. The prayer prepares us for an encounter with God and is a recognition that Jesus is Lord, and that His Body and Blood saves us. It is the ultimate expression of faith and surrender to God.

We should not equate unworthiness with being unloved in the eyes of God. Unworthiness is simply recognizing that we are not perfect, and that we sin. Jesus fulfills God's promise that He would send a redeemer to save us. Jesus is the Redeemer who makes us worthy and allows us to be saved. The least we can do is recognize God's saving power. Jesus is the one who delivers us from our sins, our unworthiness, and bestows grace upon us.

This prayer we recite reminds us that we are dealing with the great mystery, God. We receive, Jesus, the most incredible gift God could give us. Therefore, we pray that we are unworthy of Jesus' mighty words and deeds so that we may be saved from that unworthiness. If that does not work for you, maybe this one will.

*"Almighty and ever-living God, I approach the sacrament of your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I come sick to the doctor of life, unclean to the fountain of mercy, blind to the radiance of eternal light, and poor and needy to the Lord of heaven and earth. Lord, in your great generosity, heal my sickness, wash away my defilement, enlighten my blindness, enrich my poverty, and clothe my nakedness." (Breaking Bread)*

## Monday: January 3<sup>rd</sup> – Intermission

*Deliver us, O Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. (Breaking Bread 2004)*

For the longest time I could not understand the difference between the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew and the Lord's Prayer found in Luke. I like to think I am a student of the Bible. I will in no way claim to be a Biblical scholar. Nor will I claim that I completely understand everything that is between the covers. But I would like to think that I know a little. That is why I am confused about the two versions.

While in seminary, I learned that, most likely, the Gospel of Mark was the first of the synoptic gospels. Because of the reference to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (Mark 13:2), most scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written sometime during the war between Rome and the Jews (66-74). Most early dates fall around 65 A.D. and most late dates fall around 75 A.D.

There are scholars who believe the Gospel of Matthew was written as early as ten to twelve years after the death of Christ. Those who hold to this earlier dating of Matthew believe he first wrote his Gospel in Aramaic, and then it was later translated into Greek. One of the evidences of this earlier dating of Matthew's Gospel is that early church leaders such as Irenaeus, Origen, and Eusebius recorded that Matthew first wrote his Gospel for Jewish believers while he was still in Israel. In fact, Eusebius (a bishop of Caesarea and known as the father of church history) reported that Matthew wrote his Gospel before he left Israel to preach in other lands, which Eusebius says happened about 12 years after the death of Christ. Some scholars believe that this would place the writing of Matthew as early as 40-45 A.D. and as late as 55 A.D.

Much of the dating of the book of Luke depends on the dating of Acts. Luke's second volume cuts off with Paul imprisoned in Rome, before Paul's death (68 A.D.) and even before the persecution of Christians broke out under Nero (64 A.D.). It stands to reason that the book of Luke was completed before Acts. But when? Dates range from 65 A.D. to 75 A.D.

So why does it matter when the gospels were written. To some it does not matter, and to others it matters a whole lot. To some it is important that the Bible is consistent and to others it is not. Take the Lord's Prayer. Some scholars believe that the version in Luke is the original with no doxology added on at the end, while Matthew's version is later and contains the doxology. Which one is correct? I cannot tell you because I was not there to hear Jesus speak those words. Does it make sense that a doxology would come at the end of a prayer. Yes, it does. Did Jesus put a doxology at the end of His other prayers? No. So which one do we say?

If I am honest, I do not really know. What I do know is this. When we say the prayer, we acknowledge that God is the Father of all and that His name is Holy and set apart. We pray that His kingdom will come to this earth and His will is done in heaven. We recognize that God is the supplier of forgiveness and all our needs. And we must admit that without His guidance we will fall into temptations and trials that we cannot withstand. And yes, we need to add a doxology to let God know that we give glory and honor to His Name.

## Tuesday: January 4<sup>th</sup> – Doxology

*May the Lord accept the sacrifice of our hands, for the praise and glory of His name, for our good, and the good of His church. (Roman Catholic Missal)  
Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him, all creatures here below,  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (Doxology)*

I have always enjoyed singing God's praises. A praise song in the proper place compliments a hymn perfectly. And a well-placed hymn in the middle of praise songs adds depth to its meaning. I never had the luxury of having a staff member dedicated to what is now being called a worship leader. That had to be my job. Although I was able to be trained by someone who, I believe, knew more about worship than anyone else. Whenever there was an international conference, he was always asked to prepare the worship ceremonies. I had the pleasure of being on his team several times.

There would be weeks that I would spend hours mulling over the music for the Sunday service. Picking out songs, both praise and hymns that go together is not an easy task. At least for me it wasn't. I always seemed to figure it out somehow and the congregation never complained. However, there was one song or hymn that I always got right. That was the placement of the Doxology. It always came after the offering and before the Eucharist.

After the offering was collected, after the music had ended, after the communion table had been set, after the ushers had brought down the offering, and after the congregation had risen to their feet, we would sing the Doxology. Music to my ears and hopefully to God's. Then I would raise the offering and say, "*May the Lord accept the sacrifice of our hands, for the praise and glory of His name, for our good, and the good of His church.*" And the congregation would say the Amen.

Ever wonder why we give praise to our God? Well, God is enthroned on the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3). We sing praises to God because He is our strength and our mighty fortress (Ps. 59:17). My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued (Ps. 7:23). In addition, we sing "praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting" (Ps 147:1).

We read in the Apocrypha, "I will praise your name continually and will sing hymns of thanksgiving. My prayer was heard, for you saved me from destruction and rescued me in time of trouble. For this reason, I thank you and praise you and I bless the name of the Lord." (Sirach 51:11-13)

There is what I call "The Therapy of Thanksgiving." It does not require you to go and pay one hundred and fifty dollars per hour to a therapist. What it does require is the recognition of how blessed we are in Christ Jesus. It requires the acknowledgement that left to our own devices, we could never work our way into heaven. It requires that we recognize that God loves us so much that He sent his Son to die for our sins. And it requires the confession that we as individuals are desperate and in need of redemption. If that does not make you praise our Father, I have no idea what will. Do you? Maybe that you woke up in your right mind? Maybe.

## Wednesday: January 5<sup>th</sup> -- Prayer of Humble Access

*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11)*

*"We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear son, Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body and our souls washed through his most precious Blood, and that we may dwell in him and he in us. Amen." (EBCP 1548)*

The Prayer of Humble Access is a traditional part of the Christian Eucharistic service of Holy Communion. The primary Scriptural basis for this prayer is Mark chapter seven and the twenty-eighth verse in which Jesus says, "it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" and a Gentile woman replies, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It also appears to have an allusion to Luke chapter seven and verse six, in which a Centurion says to Jesus, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." It may also allude to passages such as First Chronicles sixteen, verse thirty-four, "his love endures forever." In John chapter six, Jesus teaches the people to "eat his flesh and drink his blood" and hearing that many turn away from him. Another allusion may be to First Corinthians ten and verse sixteen, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"

The Prayer of Humble Access is the two sides of the Gospel held together. We are fallen creatures, and in our sinfulness, we are not worthy to stand before a Holy God. Whenever we speak of human sinfulness, we immediately speak the word of Grace, that our Lord's nature is always to have mercy. The Christian Gospel holds these two realities always together. We are sinners, God is merciful. Other religions and heresies tend to separate these two, or to hold to one or the other. Jesus showed us that in Him, because of His grace, we can accept our own unworthiness, and then be lifted up by and through Him into the presence of God. As Jesus taught in Luke seventeen, we are to keep in mind that we are unworthy servants, as we serve the Lord, retaining gratitude for and awareness of his grace.

Those who do not accept the Gospel have theological objections to this prayer. Some groups today do not believe that we are to see ourselves as sinners, or unworthy, etc. For them, this prayer is offensive. But the offense is really to the Gospel itself. These objections are really rooted in heresies. For those who accept Scripture and the actual words and teachings of Jesus, alongside the Creeds ("I believe in the forgiveness of sins" for example), there is no objection to the Prayer for Humble Access. Especially keeping in mind that our unworthiness is immediately paired with God's mercy and grace. If the prayer did not pair these two, then theological objections would hold. Since the prayer keeps our sin paired immediately with God's grace, this objection does not hold for me.

Before I partake of the Host and the Wine (the body and blood of Christ) this is my prayer. It is my fervent prayer. It is my hope and prayer that before you partake of the body and blood of Christ that you recite a prayer of thanksgiving. If you do not have one of your own, there is one printed in the bulletin each week. It is very good. You might want to make it your own.

## Thursday: January 6<sup>th</sup> -- Epiphany

*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. (Philippians 3:10)*

Epiphany in literature refers generally to a visionary moment when a character has a sudden insight or realization that changes their understanding of themselves or their comprehension of the world. The term has a more specialized sense as a literary device distinct to modernist fiction. Author James Joyce first borrowed the religious term "Epiphany" and adopted it into a profane literary context in *Stephen Hero*, an early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In that manuscript, Stephen Daedalus defines epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation."

The word "epiphany" descends from the ancient Greek *epipháneia*, meaning a "manifestation or appearance." The word is built from the Greek words "*pha*" (to shine), "*phanein*" (to show, to cause to shine), and "*epiphanein*" (to manifest, to bring to light). In ancient Greek usage, the term often describes the visible manifestation of a god or goddess to mortal eyes, a form of theophany. Early Christians adopted the term to describe the manifestation of the child, Jesus to the Magi, which was understood figuratively as the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles and commemorated in the Feast of Epiphany, celebrated January 6th. In the Greek New Testament manuscripts, *epiphaneia* refers also to Christ's second coming.

The Twelve Days of Christmas, also known as Twelvetide, is a festive Christian season celebrating the Nativity of Jesus. In some Western ecclesiastical traditions, "Christmas Day" is considered the "First Day of Christmas" and the Twelve Days are 25th December to 5th January, inclusive, with the 6th of January being a "thirteenth day" in some traditions and languages. However, the 6<sup>th</sup> day of January is most often considered Twelfth Day/Twelfth Night with the Twelve Days "of" Christmas after Christmas Day from 26 December to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. For many Christian denominations, for example, the Anglican Communion and Lutheran Church, the Twelve Days are identical to Christmastide.

In 567, the Council of Tours "proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred and festive season, and established the duty of Advent fasting in preparation for the feast." Now I do not know many who still Fast and celebrate during this period. But, maybe, just maybe it is time to return to the days of old. Maybe it is time not just to celebrate the twelve days of Christmas, but each day because God sent His gift to us to be with us each day.

Do you remember the day that you accepted Christ as your King, Lord and Savior? I do not remember the date, but I do remember it was on a Monday morning. As I was packing my bags and getting ready to catch a plane, I sat down on the edge of my bed at looked up and said, "If you want my life, you can have it." There were no rockets red glare or any bombs bursting in air just a quite moment of surrender. My epiphany moment in life. What about your epiphany moment when you came to the decision to surrender your life to the King of Glory? Do you still remember how it made you feel? For me it was like the Haynes underwear commercial, I felt good all under. Maybe it is time to celebrate again and capture that feeling. What do you think?

## Epilogue

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change  
the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time.  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace. Taking, as he did, the sinful world  
as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that he will make all things right  
if I surrender to His will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
and supremely happy with Him forever. (Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892-1971)*

The first half of the Serenity Prayer is the most commonly quoted section of the prayer. Perhaps it is due to the prayer's unusual popularity among non-Christians and the fact that it is the second stanza of the prayer that gives emphasis to Christ and His life rather than how to achieve serenity. Still, the prayer has inspired millions of people, Christians, and non-Christians alike. This beautiful prayer, however, is so often quoted that its wisdom can be lost

Everyone has things in their life they wish that they could change, whether it is something as small as the traffic and congestion in a daily commute or something as serious as a loved one's diagnosis with terminal cancer. When faced with something we wish we could change, we often fight it. We rage against the congested traffic and fall prey to road rage. We deny the terrible news of a deadly diagnosis and stick our heads in the sand. We hide from the truth. We hate it. We curse it. We do the spiritual equivalent of punching a brick wall and expecting the wall to come down. In our hearts we know that there is nothing we can do to change some facts of life. People will die. Tragedies will happen. The inevitability of those facts does not make them less horrible, but it does mean that there is nothing we can do about it. The first two lines of the Serenity Prayer ask for perhaps one of the hardest things of all: the strength to both accept that some things are out of our control and come to peace with that fact rather than drowning in useless, toxic rage.

Discernment is one of the most difficult skills to master, especially when it comes to dealing with our ability to influence the world around us. We often have an overinflated sense of our own power to enact change. On some subconscious level, we truly believe that we can make other people see our point of view if we just have one more conversation, explain our position one more time or, sometimes, yell loudly enough. This, of course, is ridiculous. People do not change their minds when others shout at them or call them names. Even those who try to change events or others' opinions with civil, respectful behavior often find themselves frustrated as things refuse to change. This is because the things they want to influence are not within their ability to alter. Discerning what we can change and what we simply wish we could change takes maturity. There is an old saying that goes, "let go and let God." It sounds so simple, but it is extremely hard. That is why the prayer begins "God." Let Him be the change agent in your life. He is able. As far as I know He is the only one who has changed water into wine. Not ordinary wine, but the best.