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Worship and Devotion

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
ABSTRACT	1
CHAPTER ONE	2
THE PROJECT INTRODUCED	2
THE PROBLEM DESCRIBED	2
THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT	8
THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE PROJECT WILL BE CONDUCTED	9
PARAMETERS	11
CHAPTER TWO	15
THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	15
THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION	15
The Old Testament	15
Diagram 1	18
Diagram 2	19
Psalms	20
Psalm 1	20
Psalm 77	24
Psalm 119	28
Table 1	29
Psalm 119:15	32
Psalm 119:23	32

Psalm 119:27	33
Psalm 119:48	34
Psalm 119:78	35
Psalm 119:148	36
Conclusion	37
THE NEW TESTAMENT	38
Romans 10:5–13	39
Colossians 3	44
2 Timothy 3:10–17	47
Conclusion	50
THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT	50
God Communicates with His People	50
The Means of Grace	52
Worship	57
God’s People Communicate with Him	60
Prayer	60
CHAPTER THREE	65
RECENT RESEARCH	65
THE PROJECT IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE	65
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	65
THE LITERATURE REVIEW	73
CHAPTER FOUR	91
PROJECT DESIGN	91

THE PROJECT DEVELOPED	91
THE DESIGN OF THE PROJECT	91
RESEARCH TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY	93
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT	95
Recruitment	96
Instruction for Participants	98
Initial Interviews	105
Devotional Materials	107
June and July	112
August and September	117
October and November	119
Focus Group	120
Journals	122
Closing Interviews	123
CHAPTER FIVE	125
EVALUATION	125
INTRODUCTION	125
FINDINGS	125
RESULTS OF THE STUDY	126
Prayer	126
Edification through Devotion	127
Daily Life and Worship	127
Experience of God	128

ANALYZING THE DATA.....	128
Difficulties.....	129
Prayer.....	130
Edification through Devotion	135
Daily Life and Worship.....	139
Daily Life Leading Into Worship	139
Worship Leading into Daily Life.....	140
Experience of God.....	142
CONCLUSION.....	149
CHAPTER SIX.....	152
SUMMARY & CONCLUSION.....	152
CONTRIBUTIONS TO MINISTRY.....	152
For Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio.....	152
For the Church at Large.....	155
For the Existing Body of Knowledge.....	156
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.....	157
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	159
APPENDIX ONE.....	162
FORMS.....	162
APPENDIX TWO.....	167
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	167
APPENDIX THREE.....	169
RECRUITMENT MATERIAL	169

APPENDIX FOUR	171
AGENDA FOR PARTICIPANTS' MEETING	171
APPENDIX FIVE	172
DEVOTIONAL MATERIALS.....	172
APPENDIX SIX	276
SUPPLEMENTAL DEVOTIONAL MATERIALS	276
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	343

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S.D.G.

ABSTRACT

Tritten, Eric E. "Worship and Devotion." D.Min. thes., Concordia Seminary, 2016. 347 pp.

The purpose of this project is to examine how devotional practices of prayer and meditation on God's Word can complement the corporate services of a congregation in an intentional manner that edifies a Christian's life of faith and worship. This study looks at ten participants from Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, OH who used devotions rooted in the pericopes for the worship service. Data was gathered via two semi-formal interviews, a focus group, and weekly journals. The findings of this study may help pastors foster a life of devotion to God's Word connected to corporate worship

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

The Problem Described

God engages His people in conversation, shapes the heart, and informs the mind through public worship and the devotional practices that flow from the faith that is formed by Word and Sacrament. As Christians hear God's Word read, preached, and explained, they also respond with prayers, hymns, and confessions. God reveals and delivers forgiveness to His people, refreshes them in His grace, and revives them with His Spirit. What is more, He does not limit access to His gifts to times of meditation and prayer, or to a single day of the week, but He has sanctified all days for worship and spiritual growth.

God has given His people the Holy Scriptures, encourages them to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and invites them to pray without ceasing (Col 3:16, 1 Thess 5:17). In a literate society such as the United States, Christians have many opportunities to devotionally join in conversation and community with God. Each day is an opportunity for God's people to be formed and their minds, attitudes, and lifestyles renewed in the mind of Christ, displaying their connection to His kingdom through personal devotional practices. Yet how is this done?

In the past Christians have separated themselves from society, gone into the desert, sheltered themselves in monasteries, and employed a variety of strategies in order to attend to a deeper experience of worship and the presence of God in His Word. Many of the strategies Christians employed in the past are not viable options for most Christians today, nor would it necessarily be desirable for Christians to engage in them. However, the practice of Benedictine orders of connecting private devotional meditation and prayer with corporate worship provides a potential model that might be useful. Sister Joan Chittister writes:

To a world dry to the core with secularism, the Rule of Benedict brings the rhythm and ointment of prayer. Prayer in the monastic tradition is always psalm centered – always the cry of the universal human soul down one age and up the other. It is also always in tune with the turning of the liturgical year and the tender, haunting, mystical chants of a praying church everywhere.”¹

Such a habit of individual meditation and prayer connected to corporate worship could be adapted for a modern context within orthodox Lutheran piety.

The devotional life and writings of Martin Luther provide us with an example of individual meditation and prayer connected to a commitment to corporate worship. He himself was influenced by monasticism, and the devotional and worship practices established by St. Benedict. At some point Peter Beskendorf, Luther’s barber,² must have asked him about his devotional life, prompting Luther to write him a letter known today as, *A Simple Way to Pray*. The model he described is very similar to the Benedictine habit of praying the psalms in connection with public worship. He says, “I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where the congregation is assembled . . .,” and use them to stimulate his prayers.³ The text of the letter makes very clear that his meditation was on more than just the Psalms, however. His description of meditating on the Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed, provide a model for the modern Christian to engage God’s Word and to be led into prayer.

Today we find that many members of a congregation spend one hour—perhaps two if they attend Bible study—at church on Sunday, one day a week.⁴ The rest of their lives are spent in the

¹ Joan Chittister. *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*. (New York: Crossroad, 2010), xiii.

² It is important to remember that in the past barbers did much more than cut hair. They also looked after the health of their clientele, which could foster a very intimate relationship.

³ Martin Luther. "A Simple Way to Pray, 1535." In *Luther's Works: Devotional Writings II*, ed. Gustav. K. Wiencke, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1968), 193.

⁴ “What are the Major Strengths of Congregations?” U.S. Congregational Life Survey, February 17, 2014, accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.uscongregations.org/blog/2014/02/17/what-are-the-major-strengths-of-congregations/>. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey reports that while 76% of church-goers attend services

world. This is a necessity of life; one cannot spend all of his or her time in church, nor would it necessarily be salutary for them to do so. The vast majority of people's time is spent in their day-to-day business, and the trials, struggles, distractions, and preoccupations of life which often follow them into their time of worship. This is a challenge for the modern Christian as many of them report a desire to grow spiritually, yet much of their focus and time is demanded by other pressures.⁵

Worship is clearly an important source for spiritual growth, in which Christians participate. It is there that God meets His gathered people in the Word and Sacraments to give them forgiveness of sins and to sustain their faith. There are, however, other tools that could be used to extend the benefits of the divine service into the weekday lives of members that a congregation could take advantage of to aid and guide their members to receive God's sustenance, mercy, guidance, and peace.

Over the years people have sought ways to enhance their worship experiences through reading God's Word, meditation, prayer and other devotional practices of the church. Many of these habits, like fasting, solitude, or simplicity, are perceived as belonging to a time past and monasticism, and when they are practiced it is mostly by individuals at times and in ways of their own choosing rather than as an intentional part of the communal life of a congregation.

Fortunately, the habits of Scripture reading, meditation (time spent thinking about God's Word), and prayer are not uncommon, and about half of the church attenders surveyed by the U.S.

regularly, less than half of that group is involved outside the worship services. That includes attending Sunday school, Bible study, or other opportunities to spend time in God's Word.

⁵. "New Research on the State of Discipleship," Barna, accessed January 4, 2016, <https://www.barna.org/research/leaders-pastors/research-release/new-research-state-of-discipleship#.VosFgvkrLIV>. In a recent Barna study, 77% of active Christians reported that they desired to grow spiritually. Interestingly, a little over a third of non-practicing Christians expressed a similar desire for growth.

Congregational Life Survey stated that they participate in these activities daily.⁶ These habits, however, are often self-driven, leaving practitioners alone and somewhat disconnected from their brothers and sisters in Christ as they practice their daily devotional habits.⁷ Perhaps, though, there are ways that a congregation could reclaim some of those spiritual disciplines as practices that are not merely for individuals. Perhaps there are ways to approach devotional practices that might connect the participants to the fellowship of the congregation and extend or deepen the experience of corporate worship.

Such practices would be founded on the belief that God continues to speak to His people through His Word, and that He desires to be in conversation with His people in the midst of their personal devotional practices: such as reading His Word, singing psalms and hymns, praying, and more. This is also true of public worship. The gathering of the people of God in the Divine Service is an essential part of how God calls, gathers, enlightens, and preserves a Christian's life of faith, and in that same time He hears their corporate prayers. Tying those individual devotional practices to the experience of the Divine Service can deepen the experience of worship and help people grasp the message of the Word of God in the pericopes and the liturgy.

It is to be hoped that the saints who make up Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio, and other congregations, might benefit from such devotional connection to their weekly worship. At Gloria Dei, similar to the church at large, a relatively small number of adults who attend worship stay for adult bible study: around 20 percent. The congregation has a Christ Care Ministry which involves about 15 percent of the congregation in prayer, some Bible study, and

⁶ "Major Strengths of Congregations."

⁷ In the Barna report *New Research on the State of Discipleship* cited above they report that among those to whom spiritual growth is important 37% prefer to pursue spiritual growth activities on their own. <https://www.barna.org/research/leaders-pastors/research-release/new-research-state-of-discipleship#.Vowo6vkrLIU>. Accessed January 5, 2016.

fellowship twice a month.⁸ Additionally, when we provided daily devotions, such as those available from Lutheran Hour Ministries, to the congregation in the past at Advent and Lent we generally found that printing fifty for the month was sufficient. This likely represents coverage of about 50 percent of our worship attenders as one booklet will often be used by more than one person or by a family. However, we have noted that sometimes more than one family member will take devotional booklets.⁹ These devotions generally have little or nothing to do with the worship services. There have been times in the past in which members of the congregation were asked to write devotional meditations based on the pastor's sermon themes and texts for the Lenten season, but interest in these devotions was even lower than the one's mentioned above.¹⁰

All of this is to say that the members of Gloria Dei seem to reflect the habits of the American church at large with the same struggle to connect people to God's Word. We do not know how many members of the congregation read the Bible on a daily basis, or pray regularly, etc., but it is reasonable to extrapolate that these habits, too, are reflective of American Christianity. What is more, the Bible reading that is being done has little connection to the corporate life of the congregation. While individual growth is certainly desired, connecting the devotional habits to the life and worship of the congregation might also have salutary benefits in the experience of the divine service and the fellowship of the congregation.

Providing devotional materials that are produced in and written for the congregation and its

⁸ Christ Care is a small-group program created by Stephen Ministry that is designed for mutual support, fellowship, and prayer. Most groups do studies, but not all of them are studies of scripture. It should be noted that a portion of those involved in Christ Care are not regular attenders in worship, so quantifying the roughly 80 participants in comparison to the weekly attendance of the congregation would give a skewed number. Therefore they are presented as a percentage of the entire membership of the congregation.

⁹ The devotions for this study were also available online. While fifty booklets were printed each month, 25–30 people beyond those who used the books accessed the devotions through the blog. This study was not designed to look at congregational participation, but this could be an indicator that devotions written within the congregation might attract more participants than those from outside sources.

people may help them to meditate on God's Word, pray about aspects of the upcoming worship service, or provide the grounding to encourage, strengthen, inform, and inspire people to act upon teachings from God's Word and gain more from the service. A pastor providing devotions for his congregation that are rooted in the pericopes can explore themes that may not be included in the sermon, introduce contextual information that will help the congregants to understand God's Word with greater clarity, and direct the Law and Gospel within the devotions to the people of the specific context in which he serves. For instance, if 1 John 3:17 was part of the epistle lesson, the pastor could address a lack of charity or concern for the poor among his members.¹¹ In addition, such devotional material would allow the pastor to guide his members to pray about items specific to the congregation. Not only could such prayers be related directly to the texts, but they could include emphases on the beginning of Sunday school, stewardship drives, evangelism, humility, life issues, and more. Such devotions would also have the benefit of always leading people back to corporate worship. The idea being promoted to the congregation is something like this: *These devotions are based on the readings we will hear together this Sunday when we gather at church, worship together, and receive God's gifts – particularly in the Lord's Supper – to strengthen our life together in corporate worship and as the Body of Christ in the world.*

This project can introduce pastors and their congregation members to devotional practices that will complement the work God does in the Divine Service and help the congregation engage in conversation, corporately and individually, with God to the end that He might form them as

¹⁰ Generally about thirty of these booklets are printed, and only a few of them are taken.

¹¹ "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" 1 John 3:17 (ESV).

citizens of His kingdom which has broken into our world.

The Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to examine how the devotional practice of prayer and meditation on God's word can complement the corporate services of a congregation in an intentional manner that edifies a Christian's life of faith and worship. This will be done at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio over a six month period using devotional exercises focused on the week's upcoming worship service and will include evaluation of the results.

A project like this emphasizes to the congregation the benefit of spending time reading and thinking about God's Word outside of the divine service and encourages them to pray. It also highlights a connection between what is often perceived as the secular life and the spiritual life.¹² For a person to observe or experience these kinds of benefits, it is helpful to give an extended period of time, which is why the program will last for six months. This is congruent with Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 3. From Acts we know that Paul and Apollos were not in Corinth at the same time, but Paul writes, that he planted the gospel in Corinth, Apollos was there at a different time to water it, and God gave them growth. As the participants spend time reading God's Word and praying, God does His work and that work is done over time. In the case of this study it is to be hoped that the impact of the devotional practices will become more apparent to the participants as they reflect on their time participating in this exercise.

The desired outcome of this project is: To measure the impact of devotional exercises on members of Gloria Dei, using materials prepared for them within the parish, particularly in

¹². "The commonly held view point is the sacred and secular worlds are separate and distinct. Worship is for Sundays, but on other days one's thinking and behavior is set to conform to the secular world." David Kim, David McCalman, and Dan Fisher, "The Sacred/Secular Divide and the Christian Worldview," *Journal of Business Ethics* 109 no. 2, (2012): 203.

regard to their experience of corporate worship.

Items that will be measured include the participants':

1. Experience of personal benefit from their devotional practice.
2. Recognition of themselves in conversation with God as they:
 - a. Receive instruction from God's Word through:
 - i. Reading Scripture.
 - ii. Meditating upon Scripture.
 - b. Reply to God in prayer using the following themes:
 - i. Thanksgiving.
 - ii. Confession of Sins.
 - iii. Petitions related to the appointed Scripture.

It is possible that this project will profoundly impact the participants as they engage the scripture readings (and are engaged by the text which is, after all, living and active according to Heb 4:12) and speak to God in prayer using a pattern that is new to them and moves them outside of their normal routine and themes for prayer. Furthermore, the work done to prepare the devotions for the participants may also impact the sermon and preaching in the congregation through the additional time spent in preparation.

The Process by Which the Project Will Be Conducted

Prior to the project a group of ten¹³ people will be recruited from Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio. These individuals will participate individually in a semi-informal interview in which they will be asked:

1. Describe your devotional practices over the past 6 months.

¹³ There is debate over how many people are needed for a valid qualitative study. (For a study on the debate see Sarah Elsie Baker and Rosalind Edwards, "How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough?" National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper, accessed March 7, 2016, http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf). One author notes that even six interviews could potentially provide more data than necessary for a qualitative study; Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 48. However, other authors recommend a range of five to ten participants for a focus group, so the upper number was selected for the whole project. Jerry Willis, Deborah Inman, and Ron Valenti, *Completing a Professional Practice Dissertation* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2010), 204.

2. Describe your experience of God in worship.
3. Describe your experience of listening to God's word in worship.
4. Describe your experience of responding to God's word in worship.
5. Describe your experience of how God responds to your prayers.
6. Describe the relationship between your daily life and Sunday worship.
7. Describe what you hope your spiritual life will look like in six months from now.
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The project will be conducted for six months with devotional material being provided for five days of the week. Throughout that time participants will follow the model of Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer¹⁴ as it is described in *A Simple Way to Pray*. Luther encourages prayer within the following themes in response to the Word of God: instruction, thanksgiving, confession, prayer.¹⁵ This devotional practice highlights God's Word in the instruction section, where He speaks to the Christian and the Christian listens. This practice then guides the participant into a time for the Christian to speak to God in return through praying about what was learned, giving thanks, confessing sin, and offering petitions related to the instruction from God's Word. This is particularly helpful as God's Word is the heart of all devotional practices, and prayer is one of the Christian's first responses to God's communication.

Three months into the project the participants will take part in a focus group. Focus groups are helpful in that they allow the collection of a large amount of data in a short period of time. They also provide the opportunity to look for shared or differing opinions and experiences among the participants. They are particularly useful when the questions have relatively short answers, and when the respondents can benefit from conversation with others. The following questions were asked in the focus group.

1. How have you felt about your experience with these devotions so far?

¹⁴ This terminology reflects Luther's description of praying in four parts, "... thereby fashioning a garland of four strands." Thus this form of prayer is sometimes referred to as Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer.

¹⁵ Luther, "Simple Way to Pray," 200.

2. On the whole, do you feel this exercise has been good for you? If so, please describe what has made it so.
 3. Was there ever a moment that something from your devotional time came to mind when you were participating in worship? If it is not too personal, would you share it?
 4. Did you feel that the devotional practice helped you prepare for worship? If so, how?
 5. Has this exercise affected the way you pray, that is, talk to God?
 6. Is there anything you'd like to say about the project that you haven't had a chance to say?
- The participants will also be asked to complete a weekly journal reflecting on their

experience of devotional practice and worship. Journals have long been used as primary source information for historical research and they are also used in the social sciences as a source of reflection on individuals' experiences and how those individuals understand those experiences and assigned meaning to them. Journals have also been used for interior reflection by many for centuries. While the information journals provide is subjective, they can be used as a form of case study for the project. Participants will have the option of writing in a pen-and-paper style journal or to type their journal entries in an electronic format. They will be asked to write briefly on the following prompt:

The model for these devotional exercises includes Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petitions. Please reflect on one of these themes from this week's devotions. Write about how your devotions impacted your prayer life, worship life, and your life in the world.

At the end of the project the participants were interviewed a second time using the same questions as their previous interviews. This will be done to look for changes in the experience and opinions of the participants over time.

Parameters

This study was conducted over six months, from June 1, 2015 to November 30, 2015 at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio. Adult members of the congregation were recruited to participate in the study. The participants ranged in age from one who was in her forties and to another who was in her eighties. Six of the participants were retired, three work full-time, and

one part-time. Half of the participants were life-long Lutherans. Four have a variety of backgrounds (Catholic, Baptist, and Presbyterian) and converted to Lutheranism for various reasons, such as, their spouse was Lutheran, they moved to a new community and sought a church that might fit their family needs, etc. One participant described herself as a, “spiritual nomad,” and has moved from denomination to denomination across her lifetime feeling little connection to any particular group but focused on the common factors that unite different church bodies. All of the participants have been connected to Gloria Dei for twenty years or more. One, however, only recently became a member, although she had been a member over a decade ago and retained connections within the congregation. Effort was made to have equal representation of men and women. However, due to people dropping out of the program for different reasons, there were more women who participated (six) than men (four).¹⁶

It was not the intention of the project to investigate the impact of the devotional practices on the congregation at large. It was designed only to examine the impact of the prescribed devotional practices on the specific participants’ experience of Sunday worship in the hopes that their experience might be representative of the congregation.

This study presupposed that the participants in this project had a variety of experiences with devotions. Some participants had never cultivated a devotional habit. Others had long practiced a particular form of devotion. Yet others had experimented with a variety of devotional disciplines. It is none-the-less to be understood that the participants had the capability to interact with the Scriptural texts, and from their prior experiences understood concepts like instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petitions. At the introductory meetings the discussion only

¹⁶ The project began with eleven participants, five of whom were men. One of the men dropped out in August leaving the total number of participants at ten.

displayed how those capabilities and ideas applied to the project. For instance, the participants were told to look up the text of Scripture, they were not instructed how. Additionally, prayers were modeled in which elements of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petitions were identified, but the concepts were not defined.

All of the participants had some experience with prayer which they built upon to learn the Fourfold Garland of Prayer. Part of the informational session gave an overview to this style of prayer and provided historical context and examples of how to pray using the themes of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petitions.

In the past many Christians have written about and discussed their lives' faith experiences. Sometimes people struggle to express their spirituality and faith in words, but it is often done very well. This study presupposes that introspection, consideration, and deliberation make it possible to communicate important aspects of people's lives, including aspects of their spiritual life. Tools like surveys, conversations, and journals can also help people communicate about their spiritual lives in ways that allows their ideas and feelings to be studied.

This study also presupposed that the habits of meditation and prayer that were used in this project are not the only forms of devotion to God. Dr. David Schmitt writes, "Devotion is the deep reverence of an individual for a particular article of the Christian faith, often expressed in a variety of contemplative and active practices that manifest the working of the Spirit in that time and place."¹⁷ The devotional practices used in this project fall in three categories: devotion to the Word, devotion to prayer, and devotion to worship. Each of these activities is promoted and displayed in the Scriptures. These may not be the preferred or most natural forms of devotion for

¹⁷ Robert Kolb and Theodore Hopkins, ed., *Inviting Community*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 113.

some individuals. While God's Word is always beneficial to His people and is always at the heart of what we believe, teach, and confess, some participants struggled with this model and the way it guided their interaction with the Word. In fact, one participant dropped out of the study for that very reason. In a different project, or in the life of the congregation, it will be helpful to identify other forms of devotion to help people express their faith and reverence through their God-given interests and spiritual capacities.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A study on devotion might take for granted that one can experience God, know Him, and communicate with Him. What is taken for granted, however, often deserves closer examination and that is the case here. This section of the document will investigate what God's Word says about meditation and ask whether there is a biblical connection between an individual's devotional practices and corporate worship. It will also investigate the Lutheran Confessions to examine how God communicates with His people, and how His people communicate with Him.

The Biblical Foundation

Any study of the spiritual life of believers must be founded upon what the Scriptures teach about the matter, as Scripture is the source and norm for the Christian life (SD Intro 9).¹⁸ In examining the biblical foundation of meditation connected to individual devotional practices and corporate worship this paper will look to the Old Testament by looking at Psalms for precedents that display these connections. After the examination of the Psalms, the paper will turn to the New Testament to look at the life of the church as a display of the behaviors of meditation with connections to individual and corporate contexts by looking at three texts from Paul's epistles.

The Old Testament

God's people encounter His Word in both corporate and individual settings. That statement may be obvious, but sometimes it is important to take note of the obvious. Such is the case regarding how Christians interact with God's Word.

¹⁸ All quotes from the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

Some of the best examples of people’s interactions in both of these modes can be found in the Psalms. Horace Hummel writes, “It is almost redundant to underscore the importance of the Psalter, whether in contemporary life or in the history of the church (or the synagogue—or the temple preceding both), whether in public worship or in private devotion.”¹⁹ Within its chapters can be found prayers and praises of God’s people; some of which are very personal in nature, like Ps 13 when the psalmist cries out wondering if God has forgotten him, and others which are more liturgical in nature, like Ps 136 which seems like a responsive reading with its repeated refrain that the LORD’s steadfast love endures forever. Some psalms speak of meditating individually on God’s *Torah*, mighty deeds, wonderful works, etc. Ps 119 is an excellent example of this. Yet other psalms call the faithful to worship, like Ps 95 which urges the reader, “Oh come, let *us* sing to the Lord” (emphasis added).

Historically, the psalms have been a major influence for forming the hymns of God’s people and providing substance for their liturgies.²⁰ Pieces of liturgy like the *Venite*, the *Te Deum*, and the liturgical song *Create in Me* in the communion liturgy, all find their sources in Psalms. The *Venite* is a psalm set to music, the *Te Deum* uses language from the Psalms, and *Create in Me* is a part of a psalm. Yet many a saint has written about meditating alone upon the Psalter.²¹ This is extremely important because the corporate and individual aspects of relating to

¹⁹. Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1979), 404.

²⁰. *Ibid.*

²¹. St. Ambrose references his time of meditation on Ps 38 as the motivation for writing *Three Books on the Duty of the Clergy*, with Book I, Chapter VII, paragraph 23, saying, “Whilst, therefore, meditating on this psalm, it has come to my mind to write ‘on the Duties.’” Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 4th ed. BibleWorks v. 8 (n.p.: David S. Schaff, 1919), 6. St. Augustine writes in *On The Holy Trinity*, Ch. 3, paragraph 5, “Yet, for my part, ‘I meditate in the law of the Lord,’ if not ‘day and night,’ at least such short times as I can; and I commit my meditations to writing, lest they should escape me through forgetfulness,” in which he not only speaks of meditation, but quotes Ps 1 (Schaff, 21). The Second Council of Nicea, Canon II, went so far as to recommend mediation on the Psalms and to decree it for the clergy, writing, “When we recite the psalter, we promise God: ‘I will meditate upon thy statutes, and will not forget thy words.’ It is a salutary thing for all Christians to observe this, but it is especially incumbent upon those who have received the sacerdotal dignity. Therefore we decree, that

God through His Word are so closely connected in this book. In each case, whether praying the Psalms corporately or individually, people interact with God in His Word.

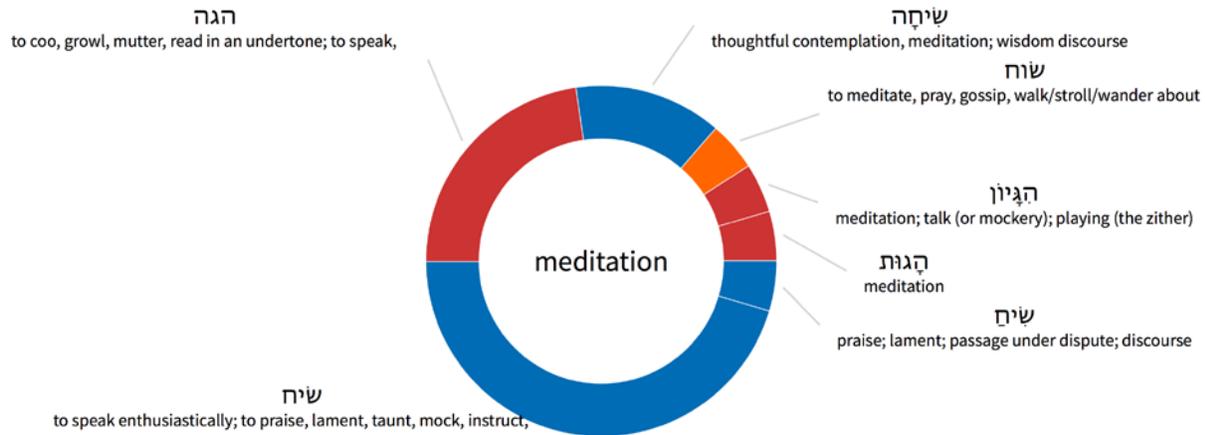
It must be kept clear that the Psalter, while taking the form of corporate and individual prayers, praises, laments, etc., is God's Word, inspired and authoritative. The point is not merely that people have used the psalms corporately and individually, but that God chose to inspire these writings to be used in both of these ways.²² He does not only interact with the congregation, nor does He solely regard the lone disciple in prayer. He chooses both interactions, and both are beneficial to His people.

One of the important ways God's people displayed devotion of old was through meditation on God's Word. There are two root words in the Hebrew text that are regularly translated to mean meditate, and they ground other words within the semantic field of meditation. The two words are *שיח* and *הגה*. Of the two, words related to *שיח* are used more frequently – about half again as many times.

everyone who is raised to the rank of the episcopate shall know the psalter by heart.” (Schaff, 557). St. Jerome states in Letter XXX to Paula, “Our riches are to meditate in the law of the Lord day and night” (Schaff, 45). Additionally, Luther's “A Simple Way to Pray” is a good example of this as he speaks of turning to the psalms before he expounds upon delving into material more related to his catechisms.

²² Second Peter 1:21 says, “[N]o prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Peter also refers to David as a prophet in regard to the writing of his psalms in Acts 2:30. The Psalms are God's Word and therefore inspired by Him. “All Scripture is God breathed,” says 2 Tim 3:16. Significantly, Paul instructs Timothy in 2 Tim 3 in regard to Scripture's efficacy in his personal life as well as its power in Timothy's public ministry for teaching, correcting, and training the congregation.

Diagram 1²³



The word *שיח* means to rehearse or to go over something in one’s mind.²⁴ It also can mean to muse, to talk, or to complain²⁵—which seems especially to be the case when what is being mused upon is painful or sad. The English Standard Version (ESV) translation translates words in this group as meditate or meditation seventeen times, as complain thirteen times, and simply as talk six times. The object of the meditating is significant: fifteen times it relates to God. The object might be God himself, or it might be His deeds, precepts, works, statutes, or law. Variations on *שיח* appear eight times in Ps 119, a psalm that emphasizes a love for God’s Word in its various forms – law, statutes, commands, etc.

The word *הגה* can mean to utter, mutter, moan, meditate, mourn or plot, and is used primarily in poetry.²⁶ The ESV translates words in this group as meditate or meditation ten times,

²³ Logos Semantic Field Search Graphic.

²⁴ R. Laird Harris, Clearson L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, ed., *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Prod. BibleWorks v. 8 (Chicago: Moody, 1980). s.v. *שיח*.

²⁵ Francis Brown et al., *Hebrew—Aramaic and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2001, Prod. BibleWorks v. 8. Ps.v. *שיח* – BibleWorks, v. 8.

²⁶ Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*. s.v. *הגה* – BibleWorks v. 8.

to talk or utter something seven times, as making an inarticulate sound (like a dove cooing or thunder rumbling) seven times, mourning three times, and devising or plotting twice. The object of this meditation varies more, but is still often related to God, His *Torah*, His deeds, etc.

What should be noted in both שִׁירָה and הִגָּה is that they both carry a sense of repetition or recitation on a particular idea, theme, or word. Unlike Eastern meditation that calls the practitioner to empty his or her mind or to remove all feeling, biblical meditation brings the practitioners' thoughts, words, and feelings to focus on God's Word.²⁷

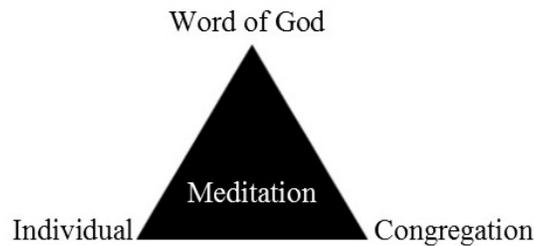
It has been said that the Psalms are a textbook for meditation.²⁸ Meditating and meditation are specifically mentioned more often in that book than the rest of the Bible combined. As such it is helpful to turn there for guidance. It should be observed how meditation relates to the individual and the community, and it should be seen that meditation connects both of these parts of human life and worship to God's Word.

Essentially, what is being examined here is a series of three relationships. The first relationship is between the individual and God's Word. The second relationship is between the individual and the community, or the congregation. The third relationship is between the community/congregation and God's Word. The common factor in the relationships is meditation on God's Word. The individual and the community of believers both meditate on God's Word, and the connection to Scripture joins the community of believers to the individual and the individual to the community of believers.

Diagram 2

²⁷ G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. XV, trans. Green and Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 322. s.v. הִגָּה.

²⁸ John Kleinig, "The Attentive Heart: Meditation in the Old Testament," *The Reformed Theological Review* 51, no. 2 (1992): 50.



Psalms

This section will illustrate the importance of meditation in the Psalms by examining three which highlight this activity. The first is Ps 1 which, as it opens the Psalter, speaks of meditating and delighting in God’s Torah and places the meditator in relationship with God’s Word and with the congregation. The second is Ps 77 which will illustrate those same connections on a personal level. Finally, Ps 119 will take a closer look at meditation and its relationship to God and His Word.

Psalm 1

In Ps 1 we see what could be assumed to be a treatise on personal meditation. Foster cites this passage as he describes meditation as one of the “inward disciplines” – a discipline that is conducted internally on one’s own.²⁹ In many ways it sets the stage for the whole book of Psalms

²⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Foster’s first section deals entirely with devotional practices that one engages in on his or her own. This stands in contrast to the third section of his book, “The Corporate Disciplines.” He cites Psalm 1, saying, “The psalm that introduces the entire psalter calls all people to emulate the ‘blessed man’ whose, ‘delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night’” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 16). Matthew Henry in the introduction to volume I of his famous commentary wrote, “How useful soever this book of books is in itself, it will be of no use to us if we do not acquaint ourselves with it, by reading it daily, and meditating upon it, that we may understand the mind of God in it, and may apply what we understand to ourselves for our direction, rebuke, and comfort, as there is occasion. It is the character of the holy and happy man that *his delight is in the law of the Lord*; and, as an evidence thereof, he converses with it as his constant companion, and advises with it as his most wise and trusty counsellor, for *in that law doth he meditate day and night.*” (Matthew Henry, *BibleWorks*, v. 8). Spurgeon wrote in *The Treasury of David*, “And now mark his positive character. *‘His delight is in the law of the Lord.’* He is

as it contrasts the righteous and the wicked, and establishes the importance of meditation on God's Torah.

Kleinig defines meditation as “a passive or at least receptive frame of mind, in which a person concentrates physically and mentally on something, so that it in turn affects him subjectively in some way.”³⁰ Using this definition as an outline, Ps 1 can be examined to show that the psalmist's mind is focused to receive a particular thought, that he is focused on something, and it impacts him objectively.

The psalm begins by examining two items on which a person could meditate. It begins from the negative: אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא—“Blessed or happy is the man who does not ...,” and after describing what the blessed man does not do, goes on to describe what he does do. So Ps 1:1 states, that the blessed man does not הֵלֵךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים—walk in the advice of the wicked, he does not—וַיִּבְרָךְ דַּלְתַּיִם לֹא עָמַד—stand in the way of sinners, nor does he וַיִּשָׁב לְצִיָּב לְצִיָּב—sit in the seat of scoffers. Notice that in each of the three activities there is something to consider – advice, a way, and scoffing or mockery. These things can be received in one's mind, concentrated upon, and occupy one's attention. These are also activities, which coincides with Kleinig's definition that meditation can be a physical concentration on something, and active participation in the activity that forms the idea; in the case of this psalm – walking in the wicked's counsel, standing

not *under* the law as a curse and condemnation, but he is *in* it, and he delights to be in it as his rule of life; he delights, moreover, to *meditate* in it, to read it *by day*, and think upon it *by night*. He takes a text and carries it with him all day long; and in the night-watches, when sleep forsakes his eyelids, he museth upon the Word of God. In the *day* of his prosperity he sings *psalms* out of the Word of God, and in the *night* of his affliction he comforts himself with *promises* out of the same book.” Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (n.p., David Otis Fuller, formerly published by Spurgeon on the Psalms, 1968). And Luther cites this Psalm in the Large Catechism, stating, “Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one's self with God's Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it, in the way, in the way that Psalm 1 [:2] calls those blessed who ‘meditate on God's law day and night.’” Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Introduction, 10.

³⁰ Kleinig, “The Attentive Heart,” 50.

in the sinners' way, and sitting in the seat of scoffers. If one were in the frame of mind, one could spend time, could occupy one's thoughts, with these things under the influence of the wicked, sinners, and scoffers. However, the blessed man rejects them all. This is described in Ps 1:2. The focus changes as בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה הִפְצִי—in the Torah³¹ of YHWH is his delight, and בְּתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה—in His Torah he meditates day and night. Both delighting and meditating are frames of mind in which one concentrates upon thoughts and memories of a particular idea or object. What is particularly worth noting is the move from activity to passivity. The way of the wicked has much movement to it and the one meditating on those ways walks, stands, and sits. The blessed man, however, meditates on the Torah. His focus is on what God has done and the reception of its benefits is based on God's activity.

As has already been implied, the man of Ps 1 has the choice of meditating on something. In Ps 1:1 the objects being offered for meditation are the advice of the wicked, the way of sinners, and the mockery offered up when in the company of scoffers. However, he is not blessed in these things. The blessed man has as the object of his meditation the Torah of YHWH in Ps 1:2. Instead of concentrating upon how he might engage in wickedness, sin, or blasphemy, he concentrates upon God's Word, His interaction with His people choosing them, saving them, and commanding them.³² This puts his focus on God's work in the Word and in his own life. It is a meditation that can focus on all or any aspect of what God has done; creation, redemption,

³¹. "The conventional translation of 'Torah' with 'Law' is most lamentable, however. If it were possible to turn back the clock and expunge fateful and misleading renditions from our Bibles, this would surely be the place to start. ... If it were possible, it might be better not to translate, but simply to transliterate 'Torah,' as is the common Jewish practice." Hummel, *Word Becoming Flesh*, 62. (See the full section on "Torah" for a fuller exposition. Hummel, *Word Becoming Flesh*, 62–63.)

³². "The term 'Law,'" in the context of Ps 1, Torah, "is used in Holy Writ also in a wider, or general sense to designate all the divine revelation and, moreover, the divine revelation κατ' ἐξοχὴν, the Gospel." Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1953), 222–23.

sanctification, etc.³³

The object of meditation then affects him in some way. This is displayed in Ps 1 in terms of the outcomes of the lives of the wicked and the righteous. The psalm deals first with the benefits to the one who meditates on *Torah*. In Ps 1:3 it says he will be like a tree planted by channels or canals³⁴ of water—כָּעֵץ שֶׁתּוּל עַל־פְּלִיגֵי מַיִם. The man meditating on *Torah* is like a tree that is tended and provided for with plentiful water so that it can give fruit in its time and its leaf will not wither—פְּרִיָּו יִתֵּן בְּעֵתוֹ וְעֵלְהוּ לֹא־יִבֹל. The image is of health and prosperity. The end of Ps 1:3 reiterates the idea of blessedness as it says that God causes all he does to prosper.³⁵ The effect upon the life of the one meditating upon the advice of the wicked and the way of sinners is described in Ps 1:4. It is brief and to the point. They are like chaff which is blown away by the wind—כַּמֶּזֶץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְבַּק בְּרוּחַ. They are ephemeral; not lasting. Though there are two activities that attend the righteous and the wicked, they differ in terms of their value. Bearing fruit is productive and associated with life, whereas winnowing away the chaff is destructive and associated with death.³⁶ This is further emphasized as the righteous tree's leaves do not wither or fall, whereas the wicked are already as dried chaff, the leftovers from which, in fact, all that

³³. Torah “relates both the impossible demand of God upon fallen man as well as the good news of God’s own meeting of His demand in the covenant – and in the promises attached to it.” Hummel, *Word Becoming Flesh*, 62–63).

³⁴. This varies from English translations, which tend to prefer streams or rivers to translate פְּלִיגָה. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, and Holliday all agree that the word means a canal or channel. Holliday goes further and emphasizes that it is an “artificial water-channel” – in other words, an irrigation ditch or canal. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew—Aramaic and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged BDB—Gesenius Lexicon)* Prod. v. 8 BibleWorks (Ontario, Canada: Online Bible Foundation, 1997); William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based Upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*, Prod. v. 8 BibleWorks. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2000); Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*. s.v. פְּלִיגָה – BibleWorks, v. 8.

³⁵. The phrase אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה יִצְלִיחַ in v. 3 uses two third-person singular verbs. יַעֲשֶׂה is a qal imperfect and the subject of the verb is the blessed man. יִצְלִיחַ is a hiphil imperfect. Hiphil verbs generally have a causative force, therefore it is reasonable to think that the subject of this verb is God – the one who blesses the man and causes all that man does to succeed. E.Kauthzsch and A.E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Gramman*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), BibleWorks, v. 9

was good has already been taken. Indeed, the fact that the tree does not wither and gives its fruit in the proper time symbolizes the righteous, the waste product of the harvest which is already lifeless and worthless symbolizes the value of the life lived apart from *Torah*, separated from God's righteousness.

In addition, the psalm unfolds the relationship between meditation and the community of faith. Having set forth the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, the psalm closes by contrasting the results both temporally and eternally in terms of the holy community of God's people. Beginning with the wicked, Ps 1:5 states that these ones will not *יִקְמוּ בַּמִּשְׁפָּט*—stand in the judgement – nor will they stand *בְּעֵצַת צְדִיקִים*—in the congregation/assembly of the righteous. This is essential, as it displays an important disconnection from the righteous ones. The psalmist says in Ps 1:6 that *כִּי יִדְעֵה יְהוָה דְּרֹךְ צְדִיקִים*—YHWH knows the way of the righteous, He observes, notices, is acquainted with it, implying an intimacy between YHWH and the righteous.³⁷ In the end the *דְּרֹךְ רְשָׁעִים תֵּאבֵד*—the way of the wicked will perish or be exterminated.³⁸

The blessed man who meditates on the Torah receives a place in the congregation of the righteous ones who will stand in the judgement and YHWH knows his way for He knows the way of the righteous. He shuns the meditations of the wicked, sinners, and scoffers and as such is separated from their assembly and saved from their final destruction.

Psalm 77

Psalm 77 provides a more personal view of meditation at work in the life of the individual.

³⁶ Matt 3:10–12.

³⁷ Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*. s.v. יָדַע – BibleWorks, v. 8.

³⁸ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew—Aramaic*. s.v. אָבַד – BibleWorks, v. 8.

Whereas, Ps 1 was about the blessed man in the context of the assembly, Ps 77 draws the reader into the meditation of a particular individual.

This psalm begins with the individual meditating upon his problems which leads him into prayer and meditation upon God's Word. He is presented as having two objects for his meditation. The first object of meditation is himself as he ruminates on his problems. The second object is God as the man considers His works.³⁹ The psalm actually shifts from the former to the latter. As the object of meditation becomes more focused upon God, the major emphasis of the meditation is upon that part of God's Word that recounts the story of salvation for the people of Israel, and he finds himself in the midst of the saved community.

The prayer of the psalmist sets the stage as he says that he cries aloud to God, that God will answer him, and that he will seek the Lord in the day of trouble. Interestingly, his soul refuses to be comforted through his prayers. This is, at least in part, because the focus of his meditation is upon himself.⁴⁰ An important truth is displayed in Ps 77:3, and that is that sometimes meditation is difficult. Sometimes the remembrance of God and His Word bring the believer discomfort. He writes, “אֶזְכְּרָה אֱלֹהִים וְאֶהְיֶה אֲשִׁיחָהּ וְתַעֲטֹף רוּחִי” – “I remember God and I groan. I meditate and my spirit faints.” This meditation seems to accentuate the experience of being separated from God, but this does not stop the psalmist. Despite being so troubled that he cannot speak, he continues in meditation looking back and recalling what God had done, which is another form of recounting God's Word.⁴¹

The next phrase has interesting possibilities for understanding public worship. Asaph

³⁹. Walter Brueggemann, "Psalm 77—the 'Turn' from Self to God," *Journal for Preachers* 6, no. 2 (Lent 1983): 8–14.

⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. “However, God cannot be dealt with and cannot be grasped in any other way than through the Word.” (Ap,

writes in Ps 77:6, “אֶזְכְּרָה נְגִינָתִי בַלַּיְלָה” – “I will remember my music in the evening.” What is this music that he brings to mind? Unfortunately, one can only engage in conjecture here, but it stands to reason that since Asaph wrote for the choirmaster, it might be something that he wrote to guide the congregation in public worship. If so, that would be another connection between public worship and personal meditation in the Psalter. Connected to that same statement, he writes, “עַם-לִבִּי אֲשִׁיחָה” – “with my heart I meditate.” This statement seems to say that the music of the worship service sometimes rests in the inner being as a form of meditation.

As the psalmist continues to experience anxiety and separation from God, he shifts his emphasis and turns his focus to remembering God’s deeds, wonders, and works. He writes, “וְהִגִּיתִי בְכָל-פְּעֻלָּתְךָ וּבְעֲלִילוֹתֶיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה” – “I will meditate because of all Your working, and because of Your deeds I will occupy my thoughts.” The last part of that verse could also be translated “I will meditate.”

What are the workings and deeds that led Asaph into meditation and contemplation? It is God’s salvation. His comments swirl around like thoughts sometimes do. His attention is diverted from his distress to God, to the deeds of YHWH (מַעֲלָלֵי-יְהוָה), His wonders (פְּלִאָה), His works (פְּעֻלָּה), and His actions (בְּעֲלִילוֹתֶיךָ). (Ps 77:12–13) From these the psalmist ponders God Himself, and what He is like. He considers God’s holy way (בְּקִדְוֵי שְׁרָרְךָ) and compares him to the gods, asking, מִי-אֵל גָּדוֹל כְּאֱלֹהִים—What god is great as *Elohim*? (Ps 77:14) He considers that God does wonders, and makes His strength known among people, by his actions in the world (הוֹרֵעַתָּה הַקֶּזֶזִּים). In one section of the psalm, he actually engages in meditation and gives the reader an example of what meditation looks like. The psalmist remembers the rescue of Israel at the Red

IV, 67).

Sea and repeatedly thinks about the wonder of that event. He recounts in poetic form the rescue of Israel at the Red Sea. His words are a description of mediation in action, he mulls over and slows down to recount different aspects of the Exodus and God's salvation from the Egyptians, focusing in on God's action, thereby setting himself aside. It is of note that in nine of the first twelve verses the psalmist talks about himself; what "I" did. But after Ps 77:12 everything focuses on what God did, finally recounting and reiterating different aspects of God's salvation of His people. In Ps 77:13 he begins the comparison by asking what god could compare to Elohim's greatness. He brings to mind that the Lord executed judgment on the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12). He says that God redeemed his people in strength (גְּאֻלַּתְּ בְּיָרִיעַ עֲמִדָּה), recounts the waters—describing their response to Him in terms of fear (Ps 77:17); he imagines and draws in images of the storm reminiscent of Israel's experience at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16; 20:18); and uses imagery of divine warfare consistent with Moses' words at the edge of the Red Sea, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." (Exod 14:13–14 ESV).

In the end, this is the answer to the psalmist's fear and doubt. God will not abandon him because he is part of that group rescued at the parting of the waters. The Word of God changes his whole view and redefines his relationship to God and God's people. Brueggemann comments, "Most striking about this Psalm is its abrupt ending. Nothing here about a return to the agenda of verses 1–6. There is nothing about all of that being resolved. ... Nothing has been resolved, but everything has been recontextualized."⁴² The psalmist finds that His comfort is in identifying himself as part of the story of salvation—the message that he heard in God's Word of

⁴². Brueggemann, "Psalm 77," 14.

being part of God's chosen people who were led through the waters on dry ground. He is not alone, but is part of the community and congregation that God rescued. He looks to the future on the basis of God's past salvation.⁴³

Notice that while this psalm begins with personal meditation, both upon anxiety and upon God which heightens the anxiety, the application of God's Word draws the psalmist into the context of community. As an individual his status is in doubt, but as part of the congregation his future is secured and his anxieties are relieved by the affirmation that he is part of the congregation. In this psalm God's Word changes the context of the psalmist's meditation revealing that he is not alone in his distress but is, in fact, part of the redeemed community.

Psalm 119

Psalm 119's particular significance for a study on meditation is the way that it displays the practice of meditating upon God's Word and how doing so has many fruitful dynamics. The psalmist encounters God's Word in a variety of forms, but there are six times that he specifically states that he meditates on it. His meditation on the Word affects the psalmist's life, and impacts his relationship with a community he identifies as blessed.

This is very similar to the theme of Ps 1 in which the blessed man avoids the counsel, way, and presence of the wicked, but who delights in *Torah* and meditates upon it. Ps 119, however, goes further than Ps 1 as its author expands and expounds upon the theme of walking in *Torah* and meditating upon it. In the *Aleph* section, in Ps 119:1–3, the psalmist identifies not just an individual who is blessed, but a community of people who are connected by *Torah*, and who, by walking in *Torah*, are blessed. Through the rest of the psalm (168 verses) he hardly refers to the

⁴³. This Psalm has interesting connections to the Christian life and the salvation that comes through the waters of baptism that would be worth delving into in another study.

community of the righteous, but establishes in the first eight verses that this community exists in relationship to God’s Word, and expresses his desire to be part of it. For the rest of the psalm the psalmist seems to make the case that he is part of that blessed group by describing his personal interaction with God’s Word.

In studying this psalm, it is important to remember what was established above regarding the word תּוֹרָה. *Torah* has a more expansive meaning than simply dealing with matters of legality and commandment. Luther commented on this psalm and, referring to the psalmist as a prophet, wrote, “the prophet looks with spiritual eyes at the law of Moses and sees hidden and enclosed in it the law of faith, the Gospel of grace, and the invisible things promised....”⁴⁴ A good dynamic equivalent of *Torah*, then, is the Word of God.⁴⁵

As the psalmist engages and is engaged by God’s Word, he focuses on different aspects of the Word. Some of those aspects are represented by a handful of nouns that comfortably fall under the category of *Torah*, but also have nuanced differences. The chart below displays seven words used with great regularity as expressions of *Torah*.

Table 1

Word ⁴⁶	Times Used	Definition ⁴⁷
דְּבָר	25	<i>Word</i> – particularly used of God’s Word in Ps 119.

⁴⁴. Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II: Psalms 76–126*, vol. 11, ed. Hinton C. Oswald (St. Louis, MO: Concordia), 1976.

⁴⁵. Hummel, *Word Becoming Flesh*, 63.

⁴⁶. Kent Aaron Reynolds, "Torah as Teacher: The Exemplary Torah Student in Psalm 119," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*. Prod. EBSCO Publishing, eBook Academic Collection (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁴⁷. All definitions are from Holladay unless otherwise noted.

עֲדוֹת	23	<i>Testimonies</i> —When this word appears in the plural, and only in the plural, it means <i>testimonies</i> (always of laws as divine testimonies or solemn charges). ⁴⁸
מִשְׁפָּטִים	23	<i>Judgements.</i>
מִצְוֹת	22	<i>Commandments</i> —can be used specifically of the Decalogue, or more generally. The latter seems to be the case in Ps 119.
חֻקִּים	21	<i>Rule/Prescription.</i>
פְּקוּדִים	21	<i>Precepts/Instructions.</i>
אִמְרָה	19	<i>Word</i> —ESV translates as <i>Promise</i> thirteen times in Psalm 119.

Of these, three are of particular significance for this project: חֻקִּים, פְּקוּדִים, and אִמְרָה, because these words, along with the participle נִפְלְאוּהֶיךָ, are directly connected to the psalmist's acts of meditation.

What the psalmist does as he encounters God's Word displays the richness of his experience. Some of the actions of those who engage the word are: walking in it (Ps 119:1), seeking God (Ps 119:2, 10), keeping it (Ps 119:5, 63, 134), delighting in it (Ps 119:14, 35, 70), loving it (Ps 119:97, 113, 163), hoping in it (Ps 119:43, 81, 147), singing of it (Ps 119:54), observing it (Ps 119:34, 146), not forgetting it (Ps 119:61, 109, 176), and, of course, meditating

⁴⁸ Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew—Aramaic*. s.v. עֲדָה—BibleWorks, v. 10

on it (Ps 119:15, 23, 27, 48,78, and 148).⁴⁹ This is no image of static thought or motionless consideration. It is responsive, emotional, sometimes intense, and other times comforting.

The Psalm also displays God as being active through His Word with actions like: giving life (nine times), taking away scorn and contempt (Ps 119:22), strengthening (Ps 119:28), teaching (eleven times), confirming (Ps 119:38), enlightening, and guiding (Ps 119:105).

One should notice that the nouns above that often stand in for *Torah* mostly fall into the category of Law divided according to the Law and Gospel paradigm that Lutherans hold in interpreting the Scriptures. But the actions that the psalmist experiences in the psalm is largely Gospel. Why that matters is that the psalmist's meditation is not solely focused on Law in the narrow sense of the word, but on both Law and Gospel. Clearly there are parts of the psalm that seem more focused on God's instructions and commands. The *Beth* section is a good example of this as it queries, "How does a young man make (or keep) his way clean? By guarding [it] according to Your Word" (Ps 119:9). The question is ethical in nature and the following verses answer the question in the realm of statutes, precepts, and avoiding sin. On the other hand *Kaph* is much more Gospel oriented and focuses on God's words, promises, and steadfast love (יְהוָה). What is more, it is according to God's Word that the psalmist approaches God asking to be saved in Ps 119:146. Romans 8:3 testifies that the Law is incapable of saving, and so the precepts and testimonies spoken of here must be related to the Gospel. What is being displayed through the psalmist's meditation is that whether he is focused on statutes, or testimonies, or whatever else, God is really dealing with him through the *Torah* in its expansive meaning, and bringing life, salvation, and sanctification to the psalmist.

The six specific verses that speak of meditation display this fundamental approach as well.

⁴⁹ Each of these six passages will be examined in greater detail below because these are key to this paper.

Psalm 119:15

This verse is part of the *Beth* section of the psalm which asks, “How can a young man keep his way clean?” The answer: “By keeping [it] according to Your Word.” He is asking a question of how to live a sanctified life. He speaks of storing up God’s Word in his heart to avoid sinning. There is no mention of condemnation here. The psalmist’s experience is of God teaching him through the Word so that he will know how to live rightly. It is in this context that he writes, “On Your precepts I meditate, and I look at Your ways.” His meditation on precepts is part of keeping his way clean. More than that, this is his passion to focus on God’s Word, for in the Word of God he seeks not just ideas about God, but God Himself (Ps 119:10). Therefore the psalmist goes over in his heart and mind what God has taught him in order to live according to God’s Word and to find God there. To use John Kleinig’s phrase, the psalmist is displaying an, “attentive heart.” Writing of the wisdom writers of the Old Testament, he says, “They nearly always defined meditation as the art of hearing properly, the practice of paying full attention to their teaching. At this point they diverged sharply from many ancient and modern kinds of meditation which seek to obliterate normal consciousness. Above all else, they intended to turn their students into good listeners, with all their wits intact.”⁵⁰ That is exactly what the psalmist is displaying here. He is the student paying rapt attention to God who is teaching him how to live and as He teaches the psalmist receives his heart’s desire – the presence of God.

Psalm 119:23

The next time meditation shows up in the psalm is in the *Gimel* section, in Ps 119:23. This passage states, “Even though princes sit [and] talk against me, Your servant meditates on Your

⁵⁰. Kleinig, “Attentive Heart,” 51.

statutes.” The psalmist imagines⁵¹ himself in a situation in which he might find himself scorned or treated with contempt, which he has already asked to have taken away from him in Ps 119:22. He sets up a contrast between princes plotting against him while he pictures himself as God’s servant, meditating on God’s statutes. Those statutes from God’s Word function as his counselor. They will guide him even when powerful people oppose him. So even in the realm of politics the psalmist places himself first and foremost as God’s servant, and when the great give their counsel, the psalmist prefers God’s Word, which provides him with counsel even in the face of trial and opposition—especially when that opposition flows from being guided by God’s Word.⁵²

Psalm 119:27

The *Daleth* section contains the next reference to meditating. The section begins with the statement, “My soul clings to the dust, revive me according to Your Word.” He sets the stage for this section with an image of repentance and new life.⁵³ He holds tight to the dust, which is a lowly position, even a place of punishment recalling the serpent in the garden. Finding himself in such dire straits he asks God to make him alive according to His Word. Feeling the terrible consequences of the Law, he finds the Gospel in God’s Word. This idea of confession and forgiveness carries forward into Ps 119:26. “I recounted my ways, you answered me. Teach me your statutes!” He recounted the things he had done that had placed him in dust and ashes, and

⁵¹ ׀ can function to state an “imagined case,” which is what the psalmist is doing here. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew—Aramaic*. sv. ׀ – BibleWorks, v. 10.

⁵² “Those that have pleasure in communion with God may easily despise the censures of me, even of princes.” Matthew Henry Commentary, “Psalm 119,” BibleWorks, v. 10.

⁵³ In The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret this passage is cited while describing an act of repentance: “Now the very faithful emperor [Theodosius] came boldly within the holy temple but did not pray to his Lord standing, or even on his knees, but lying prone upon the ground he uttered David’s cry ‘My soul cleaveth unto the dust, quicken thou me according to thy word.’ He plucked out his hair; he smote his head; he besprinkled the ground with drops of tears and prayed for pardon. When the time came for him to bring his oblations to the holy table, weeping all the while he stood up and approached the sanctuary.” Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 145, BibleWorks,

still the Lord answers him. He does not recount the answer but his words in Ps 119:27 are intriguing. “Make me to understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on Your wondrous works.” He calls God’s works wondrous, and one comes to the conclusion that what he meditates on is the forgiveness he has received, that despite his sin which has put him into repentance, he begs to understand God’s precepts which declare that He is a God who forgives, and He recounts this marvel to himself.⁵⁴ Thus he continues to speak of being strengthened by God’s Word (Ps 119:28), proclaiming that God has been gracious to him (Ps 119:29), and describes himself running in the commandments because God has enlarged his heart (Ps 119:32). His use of meditation is to focus upon God’s grace and God meets him there to grant him the forgiveness and life he so desires. Meditation is shown to be a place to hear – inwardly in one’s thoughts, or outwardly through the telling of God’s ways (Ps 119:26) – of God’s grace and salvation.

Psalm 119:48

The next reference to meditating is in the *Waw* section in Ps 119:48. It says, “I will lift my hands unto Your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on Your statutes.” Twice in this section the psalmist declares his love for God’s commandments. It is not difficult to imagine a person who puts his mind to contemplating the something that he loves, going over it again and again in his mind, or talking about it over and over. Yet it is clear that there is more going on than just a recounting of the Decalogue. This love of God’s commandments is rooted in God’s

v. 10.

⁵⁴. We can talk with a better grace of God's wondrous works, the wonders of providence, and especially the wonders of redeeming love, when we understand the way of God's precepts and walk in that way. Henry, “Psalm 119,” BibleWorks, v.10.

steadfast love and salvation which the psalmist counts on because of God's promise (Ps 119:41). It is not only the promise that the psalmist trusts in, for promises are easy to make and just as easily broken. He trusts in the One who makes the promise and lives in a relationship of trust in God. The Word of promise that gives him victory over the one who taunts him is God's Word and He Himself backs it up. Because God keeps his promises, the psalmist is bold to speak of God's testimonies even before kings (Ps 119:46). As New Testament people this puts one in mind of Luke 21:14 when the disciples are warned to not meditate beforehand what to say when brought before kings and governors for Jesus' sake. Their confidence was that God would provide the needed Word. Here too, the psalmist who meditates on God's statutes has no fear of speaking God's testimonies before kings. Part of his identity is in having the word of truth in his mouth (Ps 119:43) in order to speak it for others. He has listened to this word attentively, loves it, and even praises it. This Word, upon which he meditates, is the place where the psalmist has found God faithful, and he draws confidence from God's faithfulness to His Word.

Psalm 119:78

The *Yodh* section is where the next reference to meditating is found. In this passage the psalmist contrasts himself with the insolent. "Let the insolent be put to shame for [their] deception subverted me, [but] I, I shall meditate on your precepts." The psalmist finds himself dealing with insolent people who deceived and undermined him. This is similar to Ps 119:23 when the psalmist was persecuted by princes. It also carries some of Ps 1's warning against standing in the way of those who scoff, and the commitment to meditate on YHWH's *Torah*. Despite the injustice they have brought to him, he continues to meditate upon God's precepts. While he is in opposition with the insolent, whom he trusts God to put to shame, he also knows that he is in relation with "those who fear You" (Ps 119:74, 79). This brings to mind Rom 8:31

where Paul asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Indeed, there are those around God’s people who would wrong them with falsehoods, as the ESV translates this passage. Such is the way of the insolent in this passage. Yet God fashioned the psalmist. Those who fear Him – the community of believers – rejoice in the psalmist. God’s steadfast love comforts him and he rests in God’s promises (Ps 119:76). Therefore, even when confronted by those who lie about him, the psalmist focuses on God’s Word and what God has said in regard to him – that He fashioned him, gave him understanding, put him in the community of believers, and showed him mercy. God has formed the psalmist’s identity by His actions in his life, and it is in meditation that these things are heard and remembered against the lies of the insolent. Because God has made the psalmist into the man he is and drawn him into relationships with Himself and His people,⁵⁵ the psalmist trusts that he will not be put to shame, but the insolent will be put to shame in the judgment.

Psalm 119:148

The final appearance of meditation in Ps 119 is in the *Qoph* section. In this verse the psalmist is found awake in the very early morning meditating upon God’s Word. He writes, “My eyes meet the night watches to meditate on Your word.” The ESV translates this, “... that I may meditate on Your promise,” which is an appropriate translation for אֶמְרָה.⁵⁶ The image here is of a man engaged in his morning prayers. He deals with his problems (there are those who persecute him, who are far from God’s law) and his hope (God is near and His commandments are true)

⁵⁵. “How much he valued the good-will of saints, and how desirous he was to stand right in their opinion, and keep up his interest in them and communion with them: *Let those that fear thee turn to me*. He does not mean so much that they might side with him, and take up arms in his cause, as that they might love him, and pray for him, and associate with him. Good men desire the friendship and society of those that are good. ... It is desirable to have an intimacy with such.” Henry, “Psalm 119,” BibleWorks, v. 10.

⁵⁶. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament s.v. אֶמְרָה – BibleWorks, v. 10

bringing them both before the Lord. He calls out in prayer when he first arises, which is a beneficial habit. “If our first thoughts in the morning be of God they will help to keep us in his fear all the day long.”⁵⁷ His mind is filled with the good things of God’s Word and his confidence that God will save him, and that guides his prayer. His meditation has given him vocabulary so he is able to raise his voice to the Lord.⁵⁸ And it is in God’s word and promise that the psalmist is bold to pray; that he is confident that his prayer will be heard and answered. The Word tells of God’s faithfulness to hear His people’s prayers and to answer them. So in the watches of the night it makes the psalmist bold to lift up his heart to pray using the very words he learned from the Scriptures.

In each of the cases of meditation in Ps 119 the Word which is meditated upon affects the life of the psalmist. It guides him to keep his life pure according to the Word. It keeps him focused on God’s will and protects him against earthly wisdom. It gives life and comforts with God’s salvation. It fills his mouth with words of testimony. It gives confidence in the face of persecution. Furthermore, it teaches him to pray boldly trusting in God’s promise and speaking as he has learned from Scripture.

Conclusion

The Psalter serves as a rich context to observe meditation in the life of the believer and the community of believers. Psalm 1 introduced the practice displaying such meditation as nourishing and fruitful for the individual and the congregation. Psalm 77 displayed an individual engaged in struggling between objects of meditation, who finally finds his place in relationship

⁵⁷. Henry, “Psalm 119,” BibleWorks, v. 10.

⁵⁸. “The more intimately we converse with the word of God, and the more we dwell upon it in our thoughts, the better able we shall be to speak to God in his own language and the better we shall know what to pray for as we ought. Reading the word will not serve, but we must meditate in it.” Ibid.

to God and the community of believers through the message of God’s Word. And Ps 119 displayed a much larger context of meditation upon God’s Word and its vibrant practice and impact in the life of God’s people.

The New Testament

If one were to search for the word meditate in the New Testament using the ESV, one would find that it appears once,⁵⁹ and the word meditation does not appear at all. Even a study of Greek New Testament shows that meditating and meditation are not addressed directly. The LXX uses two words to translate הִשָּׁב and הִגִּד. The first is μελετάω. This word appears twice in the New Testament: in Acts 4:25 which is a quote from Ps 2:1, and 1 Tim 4:15 in which Paul instructs Timothy to practice habits particular to the pastoral ministry.⁶⁰ Neither of these is particularly pertinent to this study. The other word the LXX uses to translate הִשָּׁב and הִגִּד is ἀδολεσχεῖω. This word does not appear in the New Testament at all.

While meditation is not directly mentioned in the New Testament, the dynamics of meditation which are found in the Psalms can be found in the life of the church. Therefore, it will be necessary to look for texts that bring individuals, the congregation, and scripture together in a manner that reflects the dynamics of meditation – even if that particular word is not used.

Because this project examines how individual devotion impacts the experience of corporate worship, this study of New Testament texts will focus on the ecclesial life of God’s people gathered in worship and its connection to individual involvement in meditation on the Word. It

⁵⁹. The one instance is in Luke 21:14, and it translates the word προμελετᾶν, which means to prepare beforehand or to plan ahead, which is different from meditation in the sense found in the Psalms. Wilbur F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), BibleWorks, v.8.

⁶⁰. This search was done in the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle—Aland 27th ed. The Byzantine text of the New Testament contains another occurrence of μελετάω, which is parallel to the Luke 12 text mentioned

will examine three texts from Paul's letters, two of which are addressed to churches (Romans and Colossians) and one to a pastor (2 Timothy). By studying these texts focus will be placed on Paul's depiction of meditation in relation to his ecclesiology in three different contexts: a church he has not visited, to laity, and to pastors.

Romans 10:5–13

In Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, he is writing to a congregation that he has not yet visited. It is his hope to visit them. He has connections with Roman Christians. All the same he is only known to them by reputation and report of other Christians.

The first half of the letter is an exposition on God's grace. The second half delves into a variety of issues to help the Romans live as the Church. One of the issues that it deals with is the unity that the church has around its confession of Jesus as Lord. As in other contexts, the church in Rome was comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul emphasized to them that, "there is no difference between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord [is Lord] of all" (Rom 10:12) Starting in Rom 10:5 Paul laid the groundwork for this unity beginning with the righteousness of the law, which is insufficient to save the congregants, to the righteousness of faith which saves in Christ. That righteousness was revealed through the Word of God preached in the church and meditated upon as they went forth into their day-to-day lives. God's righteousness also affected their relationship to one another; that is, it gave them unity as the body of Christ, which Paul describes fully in chapter twelve.

Paul writes, "For Moses writes of the righteousness from the law that the man doing it will live because of them." (Rom 10:5) Paul had already established that no one lives up to this form

previously. BibleWorks, v. 8.

of righteousness, and that all fall short and are justly condemned by this law (Rom 3:23 and 6:23). He is, placing an idea from God's Word before them to consider, by using a repeated phrase from the Old Testament.⁶¹ In effect, Paul puts the Jews and Greeks in the congregation on equal footing, reminding them that neither has moral superiority over the other, by placing them together under the same Word. This is something that, having been preached to them, they would need to process and consider as they thought about their life in the congregation and made application to their individual lives as well.

The passage continues, "But the righteousness from faith says it this way, "Do not say in your heart, "Who will go up into heaven?" that is, to bring Christ down, or, "Who will descend into the abyss?" that is, to bring Christ from the dead." (Rom 10:6–7) Paul's language here does not quote, but echoes Deut 30:12–13, which asks, "Who will ascend to heaven ...?" and, "Who will go over the sea ...?"⁶² He uses similar questions, but with a different referent and a different point. He puts heaven and the abyss in contrast to each other to get his readers to think upon the impossibility of obtaining Christ's righteousness on their own.⁶³ He puts them in mind of Christ's coming at His Incarnation⁶⁴ and His Resurrection.⁶⁵ He is describing the new covenant using language similar to the old one. In doing so, Paul juxtaposes the Roman congregation with the

⁶¹. The quote, "if a person does them he shall live by them," is from Lev 18:5 and is repeated in Neh 9:29 and Ezek 20:11, 13, and 21. Jesus also presents this idea to the man in Matt 19:17 after being asked what good deed the man must do to inherit eternal life, and again to the lawyer who correctly summarized the Law as love for God and neighbor in Luke 10:28. Paul, actually used this phrase in Gal 3:12, when addressing that congregation. *Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2009), 1928.

⁶². "Paul is not 'quoting' the Old Testament at all; there is here no formula of quotation such as 'it is written,' and Paul makes a clear distinction between what 'Moses writes' (v. 5) and what 'righteousness says' (v. 6). Martin H. Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary: Romans* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1968).

⁶³. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. vol. 6. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1936), 650–52.

⁶⁴. Franzmann, *Romans*, 188.

⁶⁵. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 652.

congregation that stood before Moses to help them consider the source of their salvation.

The sentences are directed to the second person singular, *you*. Even as Paul preaches to the congregation, he urges the individual to consider God's Word as being spoken to them in the singular. He weaves together of the congregational activity and the individual faith. Paul completes his echo of Deut 30 as he asks, "But what does it say? 'The Word is near you in your mouth and in your heart,' that is the word of faith which we are preaching;" (Rom 10:8) In reminding them of the Word's nearness, they are reminded that they did not have to do the impossible to receive their righteousness, but it came to them through the Word of God. Not only that, he reminds them that God locates His Word in their individual mouths and hearts, which they join together as a congregation in one mind and one voice to confess.

Paul continues preaching to the congregation in a way that confronts the individual as well as the group. "... because if you (second person singular) confess the Lord Jesus with your mouth and if you believe with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes (third person singular) [which leads] to righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses [which leads] to salvation" (Rom 10:9–10). This is similar to Kleinig's description of the Old Testament wisdom teachers' method of meditation. He writes,

It is not enough to hear a proverb [or any other part of God's Word] with the ears and regard it objectively, like a table which we have painted. It needs to be absorbed like food and taken into the heart, the very core of our being, the seat of our thinking and imagining, feeling and desiring. By assimilating and internalising it, the hearer becomes a recipient of the word. The word becomes his subject, and he becomes its object. It touches him personally and affects him totally. He stores it up with himself and lets it direct his behaviour. What is more, the more he attends to it receptively, the more it increases his capacity for reception.⁶⁶

This internalization is important. The Word of God comes from the outside much as food is

⁶⁶ Kleinig, "Attentive Heart," 54.

external to the body. The real benefit is when the Word enters the individual and it touches him and it shapes him: even to the point where it changes what he does and how he thinks. This mirrors what the Psalms teach about meditating on *Torah*. As in Ps 1 when the meditation is upon *Torah* it impacts the actual life of the one meditating, establishing him and giving him success in what he does. And in Ps 77, the meditation of the Psalmist changes his view of his situation. He perceived himself in dismay, but God's Word declared that this was not his only reality, that God had claimed him as part of His people which was more important than his dismay. Yet again, in Ps 119:78, the insolent try by their lies to form and define the believer's life, but his meditation is on God's precepts which guide him into God's truth of who and Whose he is. In the same way Paul brings God's Word to these Christians to move into their ears and their minds that it might shape their hearts and actions, redefining what the world had taught them about their relationships with one another and replacing their worldly ideas with God's Word which defines them in Christ. This process works out in the life of the believer as he not only hears, but speaks of His salvation in a way that functions as a form of meditation, making a loop of sorts where God's Word is heard and the hearer throws himself back upon that Word by repeating it so that it forms him.⁶⁷ The impact of this meditation starts in the individual and then moves to the community.

Note that Paul moves from the specific to the generic. He says you (second person singular) confess and you believe and you will be saved, and then one (third person singular) believes and one confesses and that leads to salvation. The passages form a kind of chiasm

⁶⁷. "Meditation in the psalms is not at all a dispassionate contemplation of heavenly things. It is much more concrete and earthbound than that. It has to do with speaking. When people meditate they speak about their troubles to themselves in the light of God's Word, so that God's Word begins to speak to them in their troubles. Their trouble turns them from themselves to God and his grace. They speak God's Word to themselves, so that it speaks to them and through them to others. Kleinig, "Attentive Heart," 57.

showing that whether it is the specific individual (you) or a generic individual (another person in the congregation) both are saved in the same way – believing and confessing.

The connection between the individual and the congregation is made more secure in the next verse. “For the Scripture says, ‘All of those believing in Him will not be put to shame’” (Rom 10:11). In Rom 10:9 Paul referred to *you*, in Rom 10:10 to a generic *one*, and here he moves to *all*. He once again echoes God’s Word,⁶⁸ emphasizing that the hope of all the people in the congregation is rooted in believing in Christ. This is their common connection and singular hope.

He finally drives home the point to the congregation, “For there is no difference between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord [is Lord] of all, being rich toward all those calling upon Him. For all who might call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom 10:12–13) This time he is quoting a portion of Joel 2:32 (Joel 3:5 in Hebrew) and the words match the LXX perfectly. In doing so, he has caused the congregation to consider and meditate upon God’s Word so that it affected them to live in unity with one another based on the common salvation that they shared in the congregation. The saving Word that is confessed by the congregation unites the congregants whether they are Jew or Greek. This Word that is rooted in heart and mind and confessed publicly and communally on the lips is centered on Christ and on the salvation He delivers by faith. In essence then, Paul’s letter, which modern Christians might meditate upon as well as ancient Christians did, guided the meditation of the congregation and impacted the life of the individuals such that they were focused on Jesus who unites them in His salvation instead of the earthly circumstances that might separate them. It never commands unity in the congregation, even though it certainly leads the hearer to that conclusion, but instead it causes the hearer to

⁶⁸. “Moreover all those *waiting* for you will not be ashamed [author’s emphasis].” Ps 25:3.

meditate upon Christ, His salvation, how it belongs to *you* as an individual. *Any-one* who believes has the same salvation, so that *all* who believe are united in Him because of their common Lord, salvation, hope, and faith.

In the context of the Roman congregation, this passage displays meditation that begins with preaching and teaching. As the individual hears God's Word and then speaks of it, both internally and externally, that Word takes root in them and shapes their hearts. In this way the Word also defines the way the believer interacts with the realities of this life. The Word that is proclaimed influences the thoughts of the people, causes them to consider their place individually and as a congregation in relationship to the lordship of Christ. It is in Christ, in whom they believe with their hearts and confess with their lips individually, that the congregation is also defined. The Word of God binds them together in a common confession and a uniting hope. All of this is revealed in the Word, received from outside, meditated upon individually and in community, such that it makes the disparate people of the Roman congregation into a united church.

Colossians 3

Paul's letter to the Colossians is written to another congregation that Paul did not found and he had not visited. "From the epistle we gather the impression that Christianity came to these cities through the work of Epaphras."⁶⁹ As was Paul's way, after cordially greeting the letter's recipients, he dives into the message of the Gospel and expounds upon God's grace and its impact with his readers. Much as he did in Rom 10, Paul shows the Colossians an image of Christ as Lord by detailing the story of salvation and reminding them of their connection to

⁶⁹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*. 1964, vol. 9. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1937), 8.

Jesus. He writes of God the Father:

Who has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Who is the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, because in Him all in the heavens and upon the earth was created, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or authorities, or rulers, or powers, all were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all [things], and all [things] have been put together in him. And He is the head of the body, the church, so that in all He might be preeminent (Col 1:13–18).

Notice that Paul describes the Colossians' new identity; they are part of the Son's kingdom. He reminds them of the benefits of being part of the Son's kingdom: redemption and forgiveness of sins. And then Paul describes the lordship of Christ and its ramifications for headship in His body, the church.

In chapter two Paul returns to Christ's lordship and warns against the philosophy and deceit of human tradition. Paul writes:

Therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, being rooted and built up in Him and having been established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Watch out that someone will not make you captive through philosophy and empty deceit according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles, and not according to Christ (Col. 2:6–10).

The question this statement raises is: How did the Colossians receive Jesus? It was through the Word preached to them by Epaphras (Col 1:7). Paul is warning them that false teachers would take them captive unless they were rooted, built up, and established in the Word of God. It is therefore on the Word of God that Paul wants these Christians to focus. He then returns to the message of the gospel and displays its superiority over some of the false teachings which troubled them. This is similar to Ps 1 which shows that a person might meditate on wickedness or upon *Torah* which leads to righteousness.

In Col 3 he addresses the community on the basis of their relationship with Christ as their savior. He writes: "If therefore you were raised up in Christ, seek that which is above, where Christ has been seated at the right hand of God. Think of that which is above, not that which is

upon the earth.” (Col 3:1–2) Focusing upon their relationship with Christ, Paul urges them to place their thoughts on things related to what it means to be in Christ. For much of chapter 3 that translates into descriptions of behavior—putting to death those things that are earthly and not of Christ, putting off other sinful desires, and putting on Christ-like attitudes and behaviors. In the midst of this Paul makes a comment to these Christians that is pertinent to their life together as they live under the lordship of Christ. He writes: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, [and] spiritual songs, in gratitude singing in your hearts to God.

This passage begins with the Word of Christ. The imperative ἐνοικείτω (a present active third person singular) functions as an exhortation to let the word of Christ dwell in the hearers (ὁμῶν is plural). In this case, a reminder of the salvation and lordship of Christ comes first, uniting the community as it gathers around the word.

The community is to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom in light of the Word of Christ. To be clear, διδάσκοντες and νοουθετοῦντες are both present active participles, but they advance the exhortation to the community. As the community lives together in the Word of Christ it guides the individual’s thoughts and actions. They want it to dwell in them so they teach the message of the Word in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, even as they sing with gratitude. This sounds remarkably like a corporate worship service in which hymns and songs of faith are sung.

Yet, this passage has an individual aspect to it as it exhorts the community to teach and admonish one another—ἑαυτούς.⁷⁰ This means that the members of the congregation were

⁷⁰ It should be pointed out that this is not the word that is usually translated as *one another*. That word is ἀλλήλων. Gingrich, however, explains that ἑαυτούς can also function as a reciprocal pronoun, and that is the preferred translation in this passage. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, BibleWorks, v. 8.

charged to interact with God's Word with one another, and not strictly with the clergy. They found their place in their relationship with one another according to their relationship with Christ, and from that relationship encouraged one another with the Word of God. Some of this happened in corporate worship with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as the individual's participation in the corporate meditation the Word of God enabled them to encourage and build one another. But their thoughts and interaction with the Scriptures went beyond this corporate strengthening to also guide them to teach and admonish one another in their daily lives as well.

While the word, meditate is not used here, one can connect meditation to letting the Word of Christ dwell in a congregation or individual quite comfortably. The Word of Christ is the focus for the community as it gathers under His lordship and in His salvation as they worship singing hymns and spiritual songs and recounting the Psalms. The effect of corporately setting their minds on things above leads to the members of the congregation individually teaching and admonishing one another.

2 Timothy 3:10–17

Paul also encourages Timothy, a fellow pastor and protégé, to engage in behaviors that have the dynamics of meditation which are observed in Psalms. In 2 Tim 3:10–17 he speaks of the life of the pastor in manners very similar to Luther's pattern for spirituality – *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio*.⁷¹ It also has interesting parallels to Ps 1, 77, and 119 presented above.

The address begins with Paul writing, “And you followed my teaching, way of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecution, sufferings, such as happened to me in Antioch, in Iconium, in Lystra; such persecution I endured and the Lord rescued me from [them]

⁷¹. This concept is more fully investigated in the next section of this paper, and is rooted in John Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?" *CTQ* (2002): 255–67.

all. And also all those wishing to live in a godly manner in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:10–12). Timothy learned from Paul’s teaching and his way of life. That Paul’s teaching was the Gospel is indisputable.⁷² There is also ample evidence of Paul’s devotion to prayer.⁷³ The Greek word translated “followed” in 2 Tim 3:10 is παρακολουθέω and means not just applying standards or rules of conduct to one’s life but also being thoroughly familiar with the matters involved resulting in the decision to follow the model of another.⁷⁴ Timothy was therefore steeped in Paul’s teaching and lifestyle such that he understood it – the purpose, faith, patience, etc.—and adopted it. He had, in essence, meditated on Paul’s teaching and example, and its outcome and embraced it for his own life. And with the meditation (*meditatio*) and prayer (*oratio*) that Timothy followed in Paul, Paul warns that there would be persecution (*tentatio*). But Paul also observes that the Lord rescued him from them all. Thus the goal of *tentatio* is shown to be to drive the believer back to God in faith.

Paul’s letter continues, “And evil men and swindlers will advance to worse [evil], leading astray and being led astray. But you remain in what you learned and believed, knowing from whom you learned....” This parallels Ps 1’s presentation of two objects of meditation – the way of the wicked and the *Torah* of *YHWH*. There are indeed wicked sinners and scoffers in the world who go, “from bad to worse.”⁷⁵ Just as the psalmist recognized this, so did Paul, and he

⁷². Paul states “For I decided to not know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him having been crucified.” 1 Cor 2:2. Later on in the same letter, “παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον” – I passed on to you as the most important thing, what I also received. 1 Cor 15:3. That most important thing that he passed on to the Corinthians was the message of Christ: crucified, risen, seen, and ascended. This is what Timothy also learned from Paul. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul says, “The word is faithful and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of which I am foremost.” 1 Tim 1:15.

⁷³. See Acts 16:25, Col 1:3, 1Th 3:10, 2 Th 1:11, and Phm 1:6 as a handful of the many examples of Paul’s priority for prayer.

⁷⁴. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), BibleWorks, v. 9.

⁷⁵. As the ESV and NAS translate προκόψουσιν ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον.

urged Timothy to remain in what he (Timothy) had learned. This is like the blessed man who meditates on *Torah*, being a tree planted by canals of water, which remains where it is fed and watered. Or, as Ps 119:23 described, there are those, even those in power, who oppose the one who would speak and live in God's wisdom. Paul's encouragement to Timothy lines up with the psalmist's commitment to meditate on God's Word, keeping it in his heart, mouth, and mind for his personal benefit and for the benefit of his congregation.

There is a parallel to Ps 77 in 2 Tim:15 which says, "...and that from [when you were] a baby you have known the Holy Scriptures, these are powerful to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." In Ps 77 it is by returning to Scripture that the psalmist is reminded of who he is in connection to the story of salvation for Israel. Here Paul connects Timothy to the story of his own salvation in Christ Jesus. And just as the Holy Scriptures are powerful to make Timothy wise, it was the wisdom of God's Word that led the psalmist out of dismay through faith that, in saving Israel, God had saved him.

Finally, in 2 Tim:16–17 Paul writes, "All Scripture [is] inspired and useful for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for discipline in righteousness so that the man of God might be complete, having been equipped for every good work." This is quite similar to the benefits of meditating on God's Law described in Ps 119. Just as the psalmist asks, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" and goes on to demonstrate how *Torah* and its facets enlighten, guide, give hope, and teach godly living, Paul states the Scripture's benefits for guiding one's life in a similar way: it teaches, rebukes, corrects, and directs a righteous life. It makes the man of God ἄρτιος, that is, "*complete, perfect of its kind, suitable, exactly fitted.*"⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek—English Lexicon: With a Revised Supplement*, ed. Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), BibleWorks, v.9.

Without using the word meditation once, Paul instructs Timothy in a way that coincides with the dynamics of meditation and matches the spirit of meditation displayed in the Psalms.

Conclusion

While it must be granted that words that equate to meditate or meditation are not explicitly found in the New Testament, the habit and practice of meditation is observable. In Rom 10 the congregation is drawn together in common confession of Christ by pondering the Word of God and Christ's salvation. In Col 3 there is a depiction of the laity of the church gathered and united in God's Word individually applying that Word to one another in worship and in their day-to-day lives. And, perhaps most clearly, Paul instructs Timothy in a meditative spirituality that reflects Psalms' themes and concerns.

In these Scripture passages from the Old and New Testament it can be seen that meditation has long been a part of the lives of God's people. It is engaged in individually and corporately and is focused on the Word of God. It follows then that such a habit would be beneficial for Christians today.

The Theological Context

Lutheran Christians bind themselves to the Confessions as a true and right exposition of God's Word. It is important, therefore, to examine the issue of communicating with God in light of these documents. This section will display what the Confessions teach about how God communicates with His people and how His people, in turn, communicate with Him.

God Communicates with His People

"In many and various ways, God spoke to his people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son," says the liturgical verse in Evening Prayer

which paraphrases Heb1:1–2.⁷⁷ There is a confession in this verse that God speaks. He communicates. He desires to be known.⁷⁸

John 1 displays God’s communication with His people as essential to their relationship with one another (that is, God relating to people and people relating to God) by identifying the Second Person of the Trinity as, “the Word” (John 1:1). This Word is God (v. 1), is eternal (John 1:2), created all things (John 1:3), reveals God to spiritually darkened creatures (John 1:4–5; 9–11, 18), gives new life (John 1:4, 12–13), and delivers God’s grace to those who would believe in Him (John 1:14, 16–17). How did Jesus go about His work? His ministry, while punctuated by miracles, was a ministry of preaching. John emphasizes throughout his Gospel that Jesus’ ministry was focused on delivering God’s Word, and that it is the Word that reveals God to people that they might believe and be saved.⁷⁹ Indeed, this is also John’s purpose in writing his account of the Gospel.⁸⁰ All of this is to say that God is present, known, and experienced in His Word: Incarnate, preached, and written.

As confessed in the *Book of Concord*, the Holy Spirit creates through the Word the faith that receives the Word. The *Small Catechism* states, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”⁸¹ It is He who brings the work of Christ into the life of believers. Stated differently, salvation and regeneration come through God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who delivers these benefits to people,

⁷⁷. *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2006), 247.

⁷⁸. Jer 31:34.

⁷⁹. See John 3:34, 5:46–47, 6:63, 8:47, 12:47, 14:10, 14:24, 15:7, and 17:8.

⁸⁰. John 20:30–31

⁸¹. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1991). Apostles’ Creed, Third Article.

creating the faith which receives God’s salvation, and regenerating the life of the believer.

For the law indeed says that it is God’s will and command that we walk in new life. However, it does not give the power and ability to begin or to carry out this command. Instead, the Holy Spirit, who is given and received not through the law but through the proclamation of the gospel (Gal. 3[:2, 14]), renews the heart. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit uses the law to instruct the reborn and to show and demonstrate to them in the Ten Commandments what is the “acceptable will of God” (Rom. 12[:2]) and in which good works, “which God prepared beforehand,” they are “supposed to walk” (Eph. 2[:10]) (SD VI 11–12).

One cannot properly believe or understand the Scriptures or live according to them apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸² Luther states, “[N]either could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit (LC II 65).”

As God’s people interact with His Word, the Spirit “...is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested, as Christ also promises in Matthew 18[:20], ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (LC Preface 9).’” The Spirit is present when one meditates on the Word, and He enlightens the Christian,⁸³ grows his or her devotion, and makes these practices more and more pleasant.⁸⁴

The Means of Grace

In discussing the work of the Holy Spirit, it must not be ignored that while He certainly calls, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps the believer in the true faith, He also, “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”⁸⁵ He places individual Christians in the community of church, which is usually experienced through the local congregation. God’s Spirit continues to communicate with

⁸². 1 Cor 2:11–16.

⁸³. Jn 14:26, 1 Cor 2:13–14.

⁸⁴. Psalm 119 is an excellent example of this.

⁸⁵. Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism*. Apostles’ Creed, Third Article

His people through the Word, and this is essential to the life and ministry of the church as well as for the individual believer. Describing this communication as an act of God's goodness and mercy, the Confessions state:

God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save. By means of this proclamation he gathers an everlasting church from humankind, and he effects in human hearts true repentance and knowledge of sin and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God wants to call human beings to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or read)⁸⁶ and through the sacraments (which they use according to his Word) (SD 11 50).

So important is the Spirit's work of proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments that the Confessions hold these as the identifying marks of the church and define the church as, "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (AD VII 1). These gifts from God, the Word and the sacraments, are the vehicles the Spirit uses to create the church as well as to communicate with and to be in fellowship with His people, as He works in their lives.

The Lutheran Confessions speak of the essential nature of the Means of Grace in the following way:

But the Father does not intend to draw us apart from means. Instead, he has preordained his Word and sacraments as the regular means and instruments for drawing people to himself. It is not the will of either the Father or the Son that people not hear the proclamation of his Word or have contempt for it, nor should they expect to be drawn by the Father apart from Word and sacrament. According to his normal arrangement, the Father draws people by the power of his Holy Spirit through the hearing of his holy, divine Word... (SD XI 76).

⁸⁶ A footnote states "In the Torgau Book the word 'meditate upon' stood here, but the concordists decided at Bergen to avoid the possible implication that the unconverted could meditate on the Word with positive results." Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 553. Thus the Confessions further recognized the discipline of meditating upon God's Word.

The Formula of Concord names the means God uses as the Word and sacraments: Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are physical elements (water, bread, and wine) which have been "set within God's Word and bound to it (LC V 9)." It is perhaps here that people might most easily sense that they experience God as they receive the Word that is bound to the elements.⁸⁷ These three means are the normal places where God's people meet Him and He does His work in their lives within the congregation and in their individual lives.

Each of the Means of Grace does the same thing. Pieper writes, "According to Scripture, all the means of grace have the same purpose and the same effect, namely, the conferring of the forgiveness of sins and the resultant engendering and strengthening of faith."⁸⁸ They do this work in somewhat different contexts. Baptism is generally administered by the church early in the life of the Christian in the process of conversion, whether the baptized is an adult or an infant. The Lord's Supper is generally partaken of in the assembly of the congregation in worship. The Word of God, however, weaves in and around the whole life of the Christian, and, as noted above, is essential for the sacraments.

It is, therefore, good to take a closer look at the Scriptures themselves and the vital work that the Spirit of God does through them in the life of the church. First and foremost within the work that the Spirit does through the Word is the extension of salvation to sinners. This takes place in corporate worship at the absolution and every time the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and delivered to God's people. The Spirit also works when people forgive one another for Jesus' sake, and when they trust in God's promise for themselves. God's Word is the instrumental

⁸⁷. Several participants pointed to the reception of the Lord's Supper as times that they experienced God.

⁸⁸. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume III, 108.

cause of the reception of salvation.⁸⁹ Graebner writes, “The means by which the benefits of Christ are offered and appropriated to the sinner,⁹⁰ and by which not only the capability of accepting what is offered, but also such acceptance itself is wrought in him,⁹¹ are the means of grace, the written and the spoken word of the gospel⁹² and the holy sacraments.”⁹³ The believer is *simil justus et peccator*,⁹⁴ and as a sinner needs to hear the Word proclaimed to him or her to deliver the promised forgiveness of sins to them and to be comforted by the Spirit, who is, Himself, called the Comforter by Jesus in John 14:16 (KJV). This takes place both in public worship and in personal contemplation.

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon describes the impact of experiencing the forgiveness given in the promises of Christ in light of the knowledge of sin. He writes,

The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promises of Christ, namely, that on this account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life (Ap IV 62).

As God’s Word is proclaimed – whether through preaching, listening, or silently reading – the Spirit sometimes calls people to repentance and confronts the believer with his or her sin. This experience terrifies the sinner and fills them with fear. Then, at some point, when forgiveness is received, He delivers consolation, justification, and a new life.

⁸⁹ A.L. Graebner, *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1898), 180.

⁹⁰ Gal 3:2, John 14:27, Acts 2:38.

⁹¹ Rom 10:14, 17, John 17:20, Acts 11:14.

⁹² 2 Tim 3:15–17, John 5:39, Col 1:28.

⁹³ Graebner, *Outlines*, 180.

⁹⁴ Rom 7:7–14.

The Spirit's work also includes the preservation and protection of the Christian, particularly in the area of his or her faith. Luther describes the power of God's Word at work defending the Christian from the attacks of the devil. The description of this truth is urgent and powerful.

[Y]ou are daily under the dominion of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these ... commandments. Therefore you must constantly keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is the power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word, the devil is cast out and put to flight ... (LC I 100–102).

Speaking of the spiritual warfare faced in the Christian's life, Luther describes the salutary benefits of God's Word in which the Christian experiences God's protection against the devil's damaging work. What is more, Luther states in a manner reminiscent to Psalm 1's imagery, that God's Word always produces fruit in the life of the believer,⁹⁵ as it also "awakens new understanding,⁹⁶ pleasure,⁹⁷ and devotion,"⁹⁸ even as it also transforms the heart and mind.⁹⁹ These effects all come into the believer's life through the Word which Luther urges the believer to constantly keep in his or her heart, upon the lips, and in the ears. These activities could serve well as a description of personal meditation, which is what Luther refers to in this statement.

⁹⁵. Isa 55:11.

⁹⁶. Prov 2:1–5.

⁹⁷. Ps 119:24, 35, 47, 70, and 77.

⁹⁸. Acts 2:42.

⁹⁹. Rom 12:2.

They could also, however, describe participating in corporate worship within the church, as described in the commentary on Rom 10 earlier in this chapter.

As God’s Word delivers salvation and faith, the Spirit also works through it to shape and guide the life of the Christian for holy living.¹⁰⁰ It happens that, “after we have been justified and reborn by faith, we begin to fear and love God, to pray for and expect help from him, to thank and praise him, and to obey him in our afflictions. We also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses (Ap IV 125).” In other words, God’s Word acts as a guide in the life of the believer. Among those “spiritual and holy impulses” is the love of God’s Word and, indeed, the desire to meditate upon it. This too is a powerful effect of the Spirit working through the Word which is experienced in believers’ lives. However, it is impossible for these benefits to take place without faith. Melancthon states, “These things cannot happen until after we have by faith been justified, reborn, and receive the Holy Spirit (Ap IV 126).”

Worship

It is the nature of the church to be corporate. Devotional habits tend to emphasize the individual’s experience of God, therefore the corporate nature of the church must be remembered. As seen in the biblical study, meditation draws one into the community that is gathered around the Word. This communal aspect of the Word of God is also emphasized theologically in the confessional writings.

The Sabbath was to be a holy day of sacred assembly.¹⁰¹ The Lord had commanded, “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.” It was a day which was to be devoted to, “holy words, holy works, and holy living (LC I 87).” In other words, it was a day to gather around

¹⁰⁰ John 17:17, Rom 12:1.

God's Word in worship for the strengthening of one's faith and life; a day to hold God's Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it with other believers.¹⁰²

When Luther explained the Third Commandment, he reflected upon the outward observation of a day of rest as a matter of Christian freedom, not restricted "to a particular time so that it must be precisely this day or that, for in itself no one day is better than another. Actually, worship ought to take place daily (LC I 85)." He wrote: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it,"¹⁰³ which can happen any time a person hears or reads the Word.

The time which the commandment set aside for rest was given in order that the people of God might come together to worship. Luther noted that God gave the commandment because people need physical rest, but he also points to a greater purpose, "... most important, we observe [holidays] so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God (LC I 84)." One need not assemble with others to offer praise, song, and prayer. One can indeed hear God's Word apart from the assembly and even have a form of discussion within one's self. However, Luther highlights that this command was given so that people may attend worship services, and this indicates that the assembly is an important aspect of the hearing, discussion, praise, song, and prayer.

The corporate aspect of the life of faith is important because, "In this Christian church [the

¹⁰¹: Lev 23:3.

¹⁰²: Luther, *Small Catechism*. Third Commandment.

¹⁰³: Luther, *Small Catechism*. Second Commandment.

Holy Spirit] daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.”¹⁰⁴ We do well to note the twofold action in this statement. The Spirit forgives the individual in the church, and as He does so He forgives the sins of all believers. This is the heart of the matter of worship in the Confessions. “Such use of the sacrament, in which faith gives life to terrified hearts, is the New Testament worship, because the New Testament involves spiritual impulses: being put to death and being made alive (Ap XXIV 71).” So the essence of worship is faith, “which receives the benefits that God offers. . . . God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers (Ap IV 49).” These statements show that worship is first about what God does. He delivers His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Interestingly, however, when describing the way God delivers the Gospel to his people, Luther lists not only the Word and sacraments, but also the pastoral office and, “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters (SA III 4).” The relationship to the congregation is essential as Word and sacrament are administered there, and the relationships with pastors and other fellow believers become contexts in which the Word of God is shared with one another.

Lutherans often refer to and name their worship services as Divine Service, employing a double entendre to confess that God serves His people and in response His people serve Him in praises, prayers, and in the offering of their very lives.¹⁰⁵ The Confessions also speak of that response and the salutary nature of corporate worship in forming the response of God’s people. Melancthon writes, “Such worship pleases God, and such use of the sacrament cultivates piety toward God (AC XXIV 8).” It also describes how, having been reconciled to God, His people

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M.H. Bertram (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1968), 18–22. Brunner delves into the terminology and understanding behind the Lutheran understanding of worship (Gottesdienst).

offer a “eucharistic sacrifice” in which they, “give thanks or express gratitude for having received forgiveness of sins and other benefits (Ap XXIV 19).” He takes the point even further when he states, “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies (Ap XXIV 3).” This purpose for corporate worship reflects the experience of the Colossian church in which the corporate experience of and meditation upon God’s Word flows into the individual life of the believer. The Word which was heard in corporate worship can follow the hearer into their daily lives and become the object of meditation as they remember what they heard, consider its meaning, and seek to apply it to their lives.

God’s People Communicate with Him

As Melancthon noted, the ceremonies attached to the Divine Service are there to help God’s people to communicate with Him. In this context they participate in speaking together in, “Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” even as they join together in prayer. These are responses to God’s Word in which the people of God speak back to Him in faith.

Prayer

God’s Word guides His people to pray. Those prayers take place corporately, as evidenced by the early church’s practice.¹⁰⁶ The corporate nature of prayer is also displayed by the Lord’s Prayer in which Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, “Our Father...,” thereby connecting them in prayer. These prayers, especially the Lord’s Prayer, teach Christians to pray. Such is evident by the Confessions’ use of the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern and example to teach people about prayer

¹⁰⁶ Acts 1:14, 2:43.

and how to pray in the Catechisms. Individual prayer is also encouraged in this teaching. Jesus himself prayed privately and also encouraged others to do so.¹⁰⁷

Prayer, as noted above is a response to God's Word. It is not a means of grace. In the Means of Grace, God delivers grace, life, and salvation to His people. Noting that the Word is one of the Means of Grace, it could be said that in the Means of Grace God speaks to His people, and in prayer God's people speak back to Him in faith.¹⁰⁸ "Word and Sacraments are, as Luther was accustomed to say, something God does to us. By prayer, on the other hand, the believers are doing something toward God. Prayer is an exercise of the faith of Christians."¹⁰⁹

Additionally, prayer is something that is commanded of God's people; a matter of the law.

Luther states,

It is our duty to pray because of God's command. For we heard in the Second Commandment, "You are not to take God's name in vain." Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and to pray or call upon it in every need. For calling upon it is nothing else than praying. Prayer, therefore, is as strictly and solemnly commanded as all the other commandments ... lest anyone thinks it makes no difference whether I pray or not... (LC III 6).

Prayer should, therefore, not be confused with the Means of Grace, but be received for what it is and the purposes for which God gave it: that His people, corporately and individually, might, "call upon [God's Name] in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks."¹¹⁰

This does not mean that one should draw the conclusion that prayer is purely a human work. Prayer, as with all good works, is empowered by the Holy Spirit. As stated above, prayer is an act of faith. Faith is a gift of the Spirit. The Spirit guides and empowers prayer.¹¹¹ Indeed,

^{107.} Matt 6:6.

^{108.} LC III 120—faith is essential to prayer.

^{109.} Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume III, 216.

^{110.} Luther, *Small Catechism*. Second Commandment.

^{111.} "[T]he Holy Ghost, who by faith has made His home in the heart and is the *causa efficiens* of prayer,

the Spirit prays for and with the believer.¹¹² Individual prayer is the outflow of faith and the confession of trust in God as the believer brings his or her personal cares and concerns before the Lord. Thus the individual takes hold of God's promises for himself or herself and depends upon Him for all the needs of his or her body and soul.

It should also be seen that the Confessions recognize a variety of styles or forms of prayers. The first, and most obvious, are the scriptural prayers of the Psalms, and, especially, the Lord's Prayer. Luther urges the head of the household to teach his family to pray repeating the Invocation, Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. He also provides a prayer that could be used word for word.¹¹³ Such formulaic prayers are valuable to train people so they pray according to God's will (LC III 7).

Luther also describes prayers, however, which are wholly *ex corde*. "To pray, as the Second Commandment teaches, is to call upon God in every need (LC III 8)." This means that God's people can pray about every need in their lives, which covers a vast range of themes from the physical to the spiritual, and includes justice and the needs of others. He writes,

"But where there is to be true prayer, there must be utter earnestness. We must feel our need, the distress that drives and impels us to cry out. Then prayer will come spontaneously, as it should, and no one will need to be taught how to prepare for it or how to create the proper devotion" (LC III 26).

A third form of prayer can also be identified in the confessions which is really a hybrid of the structured formal prayers of the worship service or prayer book and the *ex corde* prayers Luther encourages. In the Large Catechism Luther examines and explains the Lord's Prayer in a

never ceases His activity but unceasingly vivifies and moves the heart." Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:77.

¹¹² Rom 8:26–27.

¹¹³ Luther, *Small Catechism*. Section 2, Daily Prayers.

way that shows this hybrid form of prayer, using portions of the structured prayer to guide the *ex corde* prayer.

In the Large Catechism Luther established the spontaneous nature of prayer driven by one's need and faith, and immediately afterward writes, "This need, however, that ought to concern us—our and everyone else's—is something you will find richly enough in the Lord's Prayer. Therefore it may serve to remind us and impress upon our hearts that we not neglect to pray (LC III 27)." He places the content of the formal prayer in the context of the needful spontaneous prayer. From there he takes the Lord's Prayer, petition by petition, and explains it, but also teaches his reader how to pray according to that petition. In the end he states, "Thus you see how God wants us to pray to him for everything that attacks even our bodily welfare so that we seek and expect help from no one but him. But he has placed at the end this petition, for if we are to be protected and delivered from all evil, his name must first be hallowed in us, his kingdom come among us, and his will be done. In the end he will preserve us from sin and disgrace and from everything else that harms or injures us (LC III 117–118)." He observes in the Lord's Prayer a pattern or reminder of the many things God's people need, and uses the petitions as they are written as a beginning place to delve much more deeply into the necessities which one should call out to God for in prayer.

This is essentially what Luther also did in *A Simple Way to Pray*, except there he includes a broader sampling of God's Word including the Ten Commandments and the scriptural truths about God confessed in the Apostles' Creed along with the Lord's Prayer. In each case the Scripture provides awareness of one's needs before God which are raised to Him in trust and faith. In *A Simple Way to Pray*, however, he identifies the needs of God's people within four categories: instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer (or petition). He then urges the

believer to speak to God from the need which arises from hearing God's Word.

In summary, God communicates with His people through the Word, and the Spirit gives them faith, forgiveness, life, and salvation. He also leads them into worship and prayer – corporately and individually. Through these experiences the believer hears and takes hold of God's Word, through the power of the Spirit, and responds to God in prayer by the guidance of that same Spirit at work in the Word.

CHAPTER THREE

RECENT RESEARCH

THE PROJECT IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

God's people have engaged in worship, meditation, and prayer across the ages. That is clear. The Scriptures testify to it, as the previous chapter pointed out. This constellation of practices, however, has taken different forms for different people throughout the ages. In this chapter, I will examine the historical context of my project, noting how these forms have been woven together for me and for my people, and offer an overview of the literature on these practices, giving shape to the theological framework for this study.

Historical Context

Aspects of this project have their roots in my personal journey as a Christian. For roughly half of my life my primary experience of corporate worship has been in leading and assisting in the service. I remember, however, being a participant in the pews who sometimes understood and sometimes was confused by God's Word in the Sunday liturgy and preaching.

I also longed for a deeper connection with God, by which I mean the experience of a range of feelings and experiences like peace, joy, a sense of God's presence, understanding, confidence, and obedience. Through friends and mentors in my college and seminary experiences, I was introduced to a variety of devotional practices which could best be described as a combination of study, meditation, and prayer. I noted the benefit that these habits had for me, particularly in the form of peace and patience when I was spending time with God in His Word and in prayer.

After seminary I primarily used prepared devotions which were available through Christian bookstores. That practice would change as a result of two events which introduced me to a broader experience of devotional habits.

The first event was meeting Marva Dawn and subsequently reading her book *To Walk and Not Grow Faint*. Dr. Dawn presented at a Michigan District All Workers' Conference, and we happened to share a mutual acquaintance so I was able to have lunch at her table. I observed in her a humble piety and a very deep intellect which is also evident in her writing. An example of that combination can be seen in her book *To Walk and Not Grow Faint*.¹ It is a verse by verse exposition of Isaiah 40. It was the first writing that I recognized was both devotional (in the sense that it draws the reader to God and exposit His Word) and intellectual. It was through this experience that the thought of studying God's Word deeply on my own as a devotional habit first came to me – though I would not have described it that way at the time. I didn't have the vocabulary.

The second event took place at a dinner hosted by my chiropractor. In discussing healthy habits she brought up the topic of fasting, which I knew was a biblical devotional habit, but had never tried. The person sitting next to me told me about Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. This not only introduced me to the devotional habits described in Foster's book, but also to a variety of classical Christian devotional writing – some of which I returned to in working on this project.

Up to this point, most of my thoughts and experiences of devotional habits were in the realm of personal devotion. Even in the context of a group devotion, the idea was primarily to preach a mini-sermon so that the individual would benefit from it. There was little or no thought

¹ Marva Dawn, *To Walk and Not Grow Faith*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

of how devotions might impact a congregation or community.

In 2005, I entered the Doctor of Ministry program through the wrap-around program offered in partnership with Pastoral Leadership Institute (PLI). One of the PLI's emphases was on the devotional life of the pastor. Through PLI, I participated in a spiritual retreat at a Franciscan monastery in Phoenix, AZ, and it was there that I began to wonder about the potential impact of using devotions in a way that would align a congregation around a common vision.

In 2009, in my second year as senior pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lake Orion, Michigan, I began keeping an online journal of comments and thoughts as I read through the New Testament. When some members of the congregation found out about my blog they wanted to look at it.² Some of them began using it as part of their own devotional habits, reading the text I had read and the comments I wrote; generally on the same day that I wrote them. Eventually, someone asked me to include a prayer. After that, members who didn't use computers asked for hard copies of the blog so we began printing a dozen or so per month, but these were always at least a month behind what I was posting on the website. It seemed that the exercise impacted the individuals positively, and it seemed right to me that a pastor might provide devotions for the members of the congregation he serves.

Observing the congregation after a year and a half of following this devotional habit, it occurred to me that the daily devotions were beneficial not just to the individuals who were using the blog, but to the fellowship at large. In my estimation there was an increase in discipleship related activity during this time. I cannot prove that it was the devotional material or that there weren't other factors involved. However, God the Holy Spirit does use the Word to impact

² Eric Tritten, "November 27, 2015," *Trittenish Thoughts: Reading God's Word to be Shaped by the Holy Spirit into Christ's Likeness*, November 27, 2015, accessed March 7, 2016, www.lotrittens.blogspot.com. This blog is still on the internet and was used by Gloria Dei's congregational members to access devotions during the project.

people's lives in both the Law and the Gospel. As it says in the Formula of Concord, "[T]he Holy Spirit, who is given and received not through the law but through the proclamation of the gospel (Gal. 3[:2, 14]) renews the heart. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit uses the law to instruct the reborn and to show and demonstrate to them in the Ten Commandments what is the 'acceptable will of God' (Rom. 12[:2]) and in which good works, 'which God prepared beforehand,' they are 'supposed to walk' (Eph. 2[:10]) (SD VI 12)." I observed greater interest in Sunday School and Bible Study, new volunteers arose (some of whom I knew were using the devotional material), and we were beginning to build some unity in areas that had been troubled with controversy.

Around Christmas of 2010 I received the Call to Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio. I accepted that call in January 2011, moved to Ohio, and attempted to continue the devotional work I had been doing in Michigan. I hoped to extend what I was already doing to Gloria Dei and to continue to serve those who were using my devotions back in Michigan and in a smattering of places across the United States.³ My initial thought had been to use the same style of devotional materials and bring them with me into the new congregation. But the new congregation and the old congregation were different from one another. Good Shepherd had a younger demographic of middle management employees in the automotive industry, and Lake Orion was fairly transient. Gloria Dei has more retirees, and has many more people who work in the medical field, additionally there are significantly more individuals who hold advanced degrees. The pressures of moving, building new relationships, and learning about the *sitz im leben* I had entered became barriers to carrying on with the blog as I had in Michigan.

Early on after I had moved to Ohio, in the first part of 2011, I read President Matthew

³ Tritten, *Trittenish Thoughts*. Some people shared the link to the blog with friends who used the devotions I wrote. Additionally, there were former members of Good Shepherd who had moved away and family members who were using the blog.

Harrison's, *A Little Book on Joy*.⁴ This book is where I was initially introduced to Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer. I had seen patterns of prayer before,⁵ but this was unique in my mind because of the way it connected prayer to the text of scripture, not to mention that it was part of our heritage as a Lutheran congregation. Harrison's book led me to read Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*. Even then, however, I was mostly interested in the idea and didn't really adopt or use the pattern for prayers. I was returned to *A Simple Way to Pray* by Maas & O'Donnell in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*⁶ in which they described Lutheran Spirituality using Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray* as I researched this project.

In 2013, while preparing for Lent, the idea came to me that it might be beneficial to our congregation to investigate some devotional habits together. I had seen that another congregation⁷ had used Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* as a guide for their Lenten observations. Over the season we used the various disciplines that he describes in the book. We declared a fast that ended at one of the Wednesday evening soup suppers. When we practiced simplicity we cleaned our closets and donated them to a local rehabilitation center. There was a lot of interest initially, which was reflected in the conversations we had within the congregation during that time. When Lent ended, though, to my knowledge, we all returned to our regular way of life, and dropped the disciplines. However, when Lent came around in 2014 there were members who asked for materials we had used to help them to fast, meditate, and pray.

⁴ Matthew C. Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy: The Secret of Living a Good News Life in a Bad New World* (Wylie, TX: Lutheran Legacy, 2009).

⁵ As a youth pastor in the first part of my career, I attended several youth conferences with our youth group, where the students were introduced to acronyms that served as patterns for prayer, such as ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication).

⁶ Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1990).

When it came time to seriously consider my major applied project, I initially desired to pursue using devotions (still thinking in terms of study, meditation, and prayer) to align a congregation's vision around the *missio Dei*. This idea never developed, partly because of the difficulty of determining what to measure and how to measure it.

Taking the required systematics and exegetical courses in the program impressed the need for members of the congregation to receive catechesis and exposure to God's Word. In systematics we delved into the idea of a catechism for Lutheranism in the face of modern nihilism. In exegesis we pondered the idea of letting the text do its work in the life of the believer. This brought me back to the idea of devotions that walk through the scriptures so the Word of God would do its work in people's lives, and also using those readings to expose people to Lutheran doctrine.

I was still wrestling with what exactly my major applied project should be in the Fall of 2014, when a friend at the gym struck up a conversation with me about Lutheranism. He had been reading Eric Metaxas' *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* and he reasoned that a Lutheran pastor might be able to answer his questions. I decided to read the book myself and was once again entranced by Bonhoeffer's efforts at Finkenwalde which were central to his writing *Life Together*. I was intrigued by the way the community of seminarians was bound together by their meditation on the daily *Losungen*, or Watch Word, and their commitment to pray for one another. Metaxas writes that when Bonhoeffer went to New York the second time: "Bonhoeffer had agreed to have private devotions each day at the same time as Bethge. This was one of the things about Finkenwalde that had captivated him: the daily meditation on the Scriptures and the

⁷ King of Kings Lutheran Church, Omaha, NE.

sense of union with those doing the same things at the same hour.”⁸ The idea that they came together reading the same Word (at the same time) was important to Bonhoeffer, and the sense of unity was intriguing for a congregation, too. Getting everyone to pray at the same time might not work, but to have the whole congregation reading the same Word would be possible.

As Advent came around, another devotional experience was employed, this time hearkening to *Life Together*. In the chapter, *The Day Together*, Bonhoeffer had written, “The practice has been lost to a large extent, and we must now recover the meaning of praying the Psalms.”⁹ Later on in the same chapter, he commented, “Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is, quite simply, that in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time – in other words, for the sake of uniting in the Word.”¹⁰ The devotional practices for Gloria Dei that Advent revolved around the Psalms for Advent and seven Advent hymns.¹¹ In this case, no commentary was offered. Each week the same Psalms and hymns were repeated. Participants were encouraged to pray the Psalms and sing the hymns appointed for the days of the week.

The idea of connecting the devotional meditations to the experience of corporate worship did not occur to me, however. My advisor, Dr. David Schmitt, is the one who brought forward the idea to use the appointed lectionary to tie the devotional habits of a congregation to their Sunday worship experience. He set me on a trail, first challenging my definition of devotion, which was focused primarily on study, meditation, and prayer, and only allowed for other disciplines.

⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 328.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together/ Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey Kelly, trans. Bloesch and Burness, vol. 5 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

By reading *Inviting Community* I was introduced to a definition of devotion that included any behavior that is engaged in because it is motivated by “the deep reverence of an individual for a particular article of the Christian faith, often expressed in a variety of contemplative and active practices that manifest the working of the Spirit in that time and place.”¹² This greatly expanded my understanding of what it means to have a devotional life – as opposed to trying to pursue *the* devotional life. This opened up the idea of “lives of devotion” in which people who are not particularly devoted to delving into God’s Word and prayer, as the model of this study follows, are still recognized for the way God’s Word shapes them in the articles of faith to which they are devoted. As Schmitt explains,

“While the Word of God does not change and the beliefs of the congregation remain the same, the Spirit works through God’s Word to shape the lives of God’s people and, through their devotion, to manifest to the world a varied, vibrant, personal, and passionate working of the Spirit in that time and place. These lives of devotion form thresholds to the faith. They foster inviting communities where faith is discovered, discussed, and deepened.”¹³

Dr. Burreson’s chapter in *Inviting Community, Hospitable Hosts*, also pushed me to consider the interconnectedness of people in worship. He writes, “Hospitality is one of the concrete epiphanies of God’s love within the life of the Christian community.”¹⁴ The image this presents is of brothers and sisters welcoming one another (and the stranger, as the document actually focuses on) in the connection that is ours as the body of Christ. In worship we are welcomed into God’s presence, and we welcome one another. What if those connections could

¹¹. *Lutheran Study Bible*, 845.

¹². David R. Schmitt, “Devotion and Community: Thresholds of Faith,” in *Inviting Community*, ed. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 113.

¹³. *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴. Kent Burreson, “Hospitable Hosts: Forming an Inviting Liturgical Community” in *Inviting Community*, ed. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 97.

be remembered, enhanced, encouraged, and strengthened by bringing the Sunday worship life and hospitality into the weekday life of the believer?

All of these influences (and more, some of which are described in the literature review below) came together to form this project. It is an attempt to recapture some ancient and traditional devotional habits in a distinctly Lutheran way. We do well to recognize that we are not the first to follow Christ, and there is much we can learn from the lives of those who went before us. As Luther emphasized prayer and meditation, these devotions, too, focus on those habits. In addition they hear the call of the Small Catechism's explanation of the Third Commandment that we, "should not despise preaching and [God's] Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." This exhorts Christians to gather in worship to receive God's gifts through the Word and Sacraments delivered through the liturgy, lectionary, preaching, hymnody, etc. Thus, the project uses the lectionary to guide the participants in prayer and meditation throughout the week, and to find out how that will impact the experience of receiving God's gifts in the divine service when gathered for worship.

In many ways this project seems like the completing of a circle in my experience. Using devotional habits to bolster the Christian life during the week, but focused on the upcoming lessons for corporate worship on Sunday when God's people gather to be fed and refreshed, appeared to be a great way to combine what I had been looking for in my own life, and I hoped it would meet the needs and desires of members of my congregation today.

The Literature Review

Dr. Luther Reed's opening paragraph in *The Lutheran Liturgy* states:

Private devotion is the duty and privilege of the individual. It may well be artless, that is, spontaneous and free. Public worship, on the other hand, is the privilege and

responsibility of the church. It must be ordered and administered. It is not an abstraction; it is a solemn transaction. It is faith in action.¹⁵

This statement brings to the fore the focus of this project: God's people live lives of devotion which are connected to corporate worship. Reed lauds both devotion and public worship as very important; they are both a "privilege." The one is called a "duty," and the other a "responsibility." It is telling that while Dr. Reed's focus for his book is on corporate worship and the liturgy, his first words are "private devotion." It serves as a reminder that these two activities are linked, and both are very important in the Christian life.

There is much literature published that touches on the topics of this project. One can find articles about meditation upon scripture, particularly if one searches for *lectio divina*.¹⁶ Benedictine spirituality has received some interest lately.¹⁷ Liturgical worship,¹⁸ the lectionary, prayer,¹⁹ and the combination of devotion and worship²⁰ are all represented in the literature on this matter. There is little published from a Lutheran perspective on the issue of using devotional practices to enhance the experience of the Divine Service when the congregation gathers for worship.²¹

¹⁵. Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*. Revised. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1947), 1.

¹⁶. Examples: Ernest J. Fiedler, "Lectio Divina: Devouring God's Word," *Liturgical Ministry* 5, 1996: 65–69; Evan B. Howard, "Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5 no. 1, (2012): 56–77.

¹⁷. Examples: Hilary Thimmesh, "Praying with the Benedictines," *Catholic Digest* 75 no. 8, June 2011: 24–29; Jennifer McKenzie, "Benedictine Spirituality and Congregational Life: Living Out St. Benedict's Rule in the Parish," *Congregations* 30 no. 1, (Winter 2004): 31–33.

¹⁸. Example: Christopher Boyd Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture 1550–1675*, ed. Robert Kolb (Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 205–58.

¹⁹. Examples: Mary Jane Haemig, "Prayer as Talking Back to God in Luther's Genesis Lectures," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 no. 3, 2009: 270–95; Douglas D. Fusselman, "Pray Like This: The Significance of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Catechism," *Concordia Journal* 18 no. 2, (1992): 132–52.

²⁰. Examples: James William Cox, "Public Worship," *Review & Expositor* 71 no. 3, (Summer 1974): 365–70; Angela Ashwin, "Spirituality and Corporate Worship – Separate Worlds or Vitaly Connected?" *Worship* (March 2, 2001): 106–29.

²¹. One notable exception to this is Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity

There are many Christians from the early days of the church who have written about devotional living. Origen wrote *On Prayer* in which he speaks of prayer which is empowered by the Holy Spirit and takes place regularly, three times a day.²² Augustine wrote, “Long time have I burned to meditate in Thy law, and in it to confess to Thee my knowledge and ignorance....”²³ The Rule of St. Benedict, describes how Benedict desired life to be lived in the monastery and seems to take for granted that those who live there will meditate.²⁴ St. Ignatius of Loyola even designed a series of spiritual exercises which included meditation.²⁵ In modern times Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “There are three things for which the Christian needs a regular time alone during the day: *meditation on the Scripture, prayer, and intercession.*”²⁶ And when Richard Foster published *Celebration of Discipline* the first two disciplines he examined were meditation and prayer.²⁷

St. Benedict’s influence on the habit of meditation in connection to community cannot be overstated. “Diverse expressions of Benedictine life and spirit have emerged across our globe since the sixth-century founding of western cenobitic monasticism by St. Benedict (AD 480–

Press International, 1997), 42–45. Pfatteicher looks at liturgical time in relationship to personal devotion. His work, however, focuses more on the liturgy as formative of Christian piety, following the dictum, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which he argues is more accessible than *lectio divina* and other forms of meditation on the Scriptures.

²². Origen. *On Prayer*. e-book. Translated by William A. Curtis. iBooks. (Charles Rivers Editors, February 23, 2013.), 40.

²³. Augustine. *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*. Edited by Philip Schaff. Prod. Smashwords. (Orange, CT: B&R Samizdat Express, 1 2009, February.), 617.

²⁴. “But afterward let him live in the apartment of novices, and there let him meditate, eat, and sleep.” Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Boniface Verheyen (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1949), 171.

²⁵. Maas and O’Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions*, 175.

²⁶. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 86.

²⁷. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 15, 33.

540).”²⁸ His *Rule* deeply influenced – and still influences²⁹ – Christian monasticism and spirituality.³⁰ While the Rule dealt with very practical issues like bedding, job assignments, and food, it also described the spiritual life of a monk. “The core of the monastic life as Benedict conceived it was prayer. Periods were assigned each day for private prayer, but most of the devotions took place in the chapel.”³¹ There was a life of devotion that touched on both personal meditation and corporate worship rooted in the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms which were recited in their entirety weekly.³²

One of the devotional habits that was practiced in monasticism is *lectio divina*. It has been observed, “that although the term *lectio divina* is often heard in monasteries, and it was the monastics who have preserved the practice through many centuries, *lectio* is *not* a monastic prayer form in itself. In the early Church it was a common – often the most basic – form of personal prayer for the Christian people. In fact, it is perhaps one of the oldest forms of Christian prayer.”³³ St. Benedict was a proponent of *lectio* and he instructed each monk to have his own book to read Scripture from – and this was at a time when individual book ownership was rare and most people were illiterate!³⁴ This is an important contribution that Benedict’s influence had on the devotional life of God’s people as it preserved and adopted this form of meditation on God’s Word.

Defining *lectio divina* helps one to realize that this form of meditation is not always

²⁸ Miriam Schmitt, "Benedictine Spirituality," *Liturgical Ministry* 10, (Fall 2001): 198.

²⁹ McKenzie, “Benedictine Spirituality,” 31–33. This is a good example. This article advocates adapting the Rule of St. Benedict for parish life.

³⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1984), 239.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Fiedler, "Lectio Divina," 65.

pondering in one's mind or emptying one's mind (as the Eastern religions teach), but reading out loud, contemplatively, and sometimes in community.³⁵ The corporate nature of meditation is an important counterbalance to the modern proclivity for individualism, which will be discussed below.

Today, there is renewed interest in *lectio divina*. Gregory Polan wrote about this interest stating,

As this issue of Liturgical Ministry focuses on preparing for the Sunday liturgy, we suggest that taking time to reflect on the Scripture passages assigned for the Sunday celebration can greatly enhance one's participation. While the earliest writers on *lectio divina* emphasize that its practice has no apostolic utility, like homily preparation, we have come to see today how its use by people from a variety of backgrounds has had an enriching effect on their spiritual life.³⁶

Interest is reflected, at least partly, by the many web sites that provide information and guidance to those who wish to pursue this devotional habit.³⁷

One of the significant books on *lectio divina* is *Praying the Bible* by Mariano Magrassi. He writes of this discipline, "It is hard to find in our language a single term to convey the meaning of *lectio*."³⁸ Magrassi offers two helpful definitions, one from Jacques Leclercq who said, "*Lectio*

³⁴ Ibid., 66.

³⁵ This teaching did not work into the devotions of this project, but it has influenced my personal devotional life.

³⁶ Gregory J. Polan, "Lectio Divina: Reading and Praying the Word of God," *Liturgical Ministry* 12, (2003): 198.

³⁷ "Your Daily Bible Reading Guide," *WordLive website*, n.d., accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.wordlive.org/>. This is one such site, and main page states that it is, "A space just for you, the Bible and God. Lectio Divina is Latin for divine reading, a traditional way of Bible reading and prayer to help communion with God. We provide the space and sound, you provide the time. God provides the inspiration." Many other sites are provided by Roman Catholic Orders and Protestant groups, some that support, some that oppose, and some that adapt to non-Christian contexts, like John S. Uebersax, "A Method for *Lectio Divina* Based on Jungian Psychology," *Works on Psychology, Religion and Society*, n.d., accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/lectio.htm>.

³⁸ Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 18.

divina is prayed reading.” The second is from Louis Bouyer, “It is a personal reading of the Word of God during which we try to assimilate its substance; a reading in faith, in a spirit of prayer, believing in the real presence of God who speaks to us in the sacred text, while the monk himself strives to be present in a spirit of obedience and total surrender to the divine promises and demands.”³⁹ He also states that while there is a method that governs *lectio divina*, just as there is a method to the use of the Fourfold Garland of Prayer, that one’s attitude is more important than methodology. As one encounters the Word of God prayerfully the individual is drawn into communion with God.⁴⁰ He says that worship and devotion are matters of the heart and not merely outward ritual.⁴¹

John Kleinig offers a helpful Lutheran view point on this topic when he points out that,

the focus of meditation is on the external word, it basically involves spiritual extroversion rather than spiritual introversion. It is indeed a matter of the heart, but not only the heart. The way to the heart is from the outside through the ears. In meditation we hear inwardly what is spoken to us outwardly.⁴²

The attitude of one’s heart might be fixed upon God, but one cannot find God or receive His Word simply with the right attitude. The Word comes to the hearer from outside to do its work on the inside.

The style of *lectio* Polan describes follows the model of meditation prescribed by the twelfth century book called *The Ladder of Monks*,⁴³ written by the Carthusian monk Guigo II. In this style of meditation one engages in *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*.⁴⁴ While the

³⁹. Ibid.

⁴⁰. Polan, “Lectio Divina,” 199.

⁴¹. Ibid., 201.

⁴². Kleinig, “Oratio, Meditatio,” 261.

¹⁵⁶. Guigo, “The Ladder of Monks,” in *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, by Guigo II, trans. Edmund and Walsh, James College (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1978), 65–86.

⁴⁴. Polan, “Lectio Divina,” 202.

idea of praying from the scriptures is, indeed, agreeable and beneficial, here a more Lutheran approach is needed. The spirituality of Luther's *A Right Way to Study Theology* in the introduction to the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writing is more suitable.⁴⁵ Pointing the reader to Ps 119, Luther wrote, "There you will find three rules which are abundantly set forth in the whole psalm: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*."⁴⁶ While using very similar vocabulary as Guigo used – in fact using half of Guigo's formula – Luther comes to a very different conclusion. While Guigo would have the one who uses his ladder ascend to heavenly bliss, Luther states that the one who prays and meditates upon God's word will experience *tentatio* – struggle and trials. He says, "For as soon as God's Word goes forth through you the devil will afflict you and make you a real doctor [of theology] and teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word."⁴⁷ John Kleinig comments on this different mode of spirituality:

Thus the attack of the devil on the student of theology serves to strengthen his faith because it drives him back to God's word as the only basis for his work in the church. In the face of an attack by the devil, he cannot rely on his own resources; he cannot depend on the affirmation of his theology by the world or even by the church. His own spiritual weakness and his lack of wisdom make him rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's word, "wisdom above all wisdom." Through temptation the student of theology becomes a theologian; he learns the theology of the cross; more correctly, the spirituality of the cross. He does not experience the glory of union with his heavenly Lord, but knows the pain of union with Christ crucified. He bears the cross together with his Lord and suffering with him in the church.⁴⁸

Thus it is not the glorious union with Himself in heaven that God delivers in prayer and meditation, as Guigo would have his readers believe, but it is a mysterious unity with the

⁴⁵ Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio," 258.

⁴⁶ John W. Doberstein, ed., *Minister's Prayer Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, n.d.), 287.

⁴⁷ Doberstein, *Minister's Prayer Book*, 288.

⁴⁸ Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio," 262.

suffering Christ that God gives His people through prayer, meditation, and struggle, and the strength that comes from resting on God's promises. This is an important distinction because this emphasis keeps the practitioner focused on sin and grace in devotion as well as in the Divine Service.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the model that Polan describes has as its goal a state, "where we find that words are no longer needed to express the sense of divine presence that comes to us," and says that this is, "the goal of human life."⁵⁰ In contrast, Luther's model, "begins and ends here on earth."⁵¹ Kleinig writes, "These three terms describe the life of faith as a cycle that begins with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, concentrates on the reception of the Holy Spirit through meditation on God's word, and results in spiritual attack. This in turn leads a person back to further prayer and intensified meditation."⁵² Thus the goal of the devotional habit is not only to make the hearer more receptive to hear God's Word (ala Polan) but to help the worshipper become more dependent upon God to receive His gifts, as, "The sacred Scriptures not only teach us about eternal life; they actually give us eternal life as they teach us."⁵³ Furthermore Guigo's method of meditation ends up removing the worshipper from the world so that he can experience the rapturous relationship with God. This is very different from Luther's view of what happens in worship in which an outward act leads the believer out into the world where he will face temptation and be thrown back upon the Word to be strengthened, comforted, and defended by

⁴⁹. "Thus this true worship is nothing else than the faith which obtains the remission of sin in the Gospel and the love for God and man issuing from this faith." Brunner, *Worship*, 21. The idea is to extend this attitude into one's personal devotion. The attitude behind *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* keeps that in focus as a tool like Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer guides a person to meditate on God's word. Luther, "Simple Way to Pray."

⁵⁰. Polan, "Lectio Divina," 205.

⁵¹. Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio," 258.

⁵². Ibid.

⁵³. Ibid., 259.

God.⁵⁴ At the heart of Lutheran devotion is the life on earth. The goal is not to escape this life but to survive it, thrive in it, and reflect Christ and His kingdom in it.

In Gregory Polan's article he provides an important observation that *lectio divina* is essentially the same activity in both private meditation and public worship: listening to God's Word. "[I]t lends itself well to Christians who seek to hear the voice of God, to listen attentively for the call to continual conversion, and to follow the word in faith."⁵⁵ When one considers the connection between private devotion and worship through the lens of God's word, one sees how the liturgical readings are a powerful resource for the church. They help to form and foster a devotional life that is centered on Christ. Normand Bonneau writes, "The first and most important characteristic of the Sunday and Feast Day Lectionary is its orientation to the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection."⁵⁶ This serves as a reminder that the focus of the readings each Sunday morning is the gospel. The whole goal of those selected readings is to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, not to focus on the individual. What could be more beneficial for a congregation to be thinking about through the week as well as on Sunday? This is very much at the heart of the matter, and meets nicely with a point that Kent Bureson makes in *Beyond Style: The Worship of Christ's Body within Cultural Diversity*. He writes that the assembled believers live by the words of the Lord. As such, "Worship that attends to the life of the body of Christ and is set within the local Christian assembly necessarily dialogues with the culture so as to effectively communicate the story of God and to form the assembly to live as the

⁵⁴. Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio," 265.

⁵⁵. Polan, "Lectio Divina," 202.

⁵⁶. Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 31.

body of Christ today.”⁵⁷ God communicates with His people in both contexts, meeting them in the Christian assembly as well as daily life.

This is, perhaps, the most significant point for this study: that private devotion and corporate worship belong together and enhance each other. Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* could be described as a treatise on how these two streams work together in the life of the Christian and the congregation. On this topic E. Glenn Hinson wrote, “Public worship and private devotion are integrally interrelated. Public worship depends for its vitality on private prayer, Bible reading, and other acts of devotion. Conversely, private devotion depends for its direction and nurture on public worship. Neither can do without the other.”⁵⁸ He identifies prayer and Bible study, in which he includes memorization and meditation, as particularly beneficial to the Christian’s experience of public worship.⁵⁹ Polan also noted that, “taking time to reflect on the Scripture passages assigned for the Sunday celebration can greatly enhance one’s participation.”⁶⁰

There is yet another important aspect of public worship’s impact on private devotion. It is this: that the public prayers are particularly helpful to teach people how to pray through modeling.⁶¹ Prayer may be as simple as talking to God, but, along with other aspects of the faith, it is also something in which one grows and matures.⁶² Bonhoeffer wrote, “The child learns to speak because the parent speaks to him. The child learns the language of the parent. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. In the language of the Father in

⁵⁷ Kent J. Burreson, "Beyond Style: The Worship of Christ's Body Within Cultural Diversity," *Cross Accent* 21 no. 3, (2013): 16.

⁵⁸ E. Glenn Hinson, "Private Springs of Public Worship," *Review & Expositor* 80 no1, (Winter 1983): 109.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶⁰ Polan, "Lectio Divina," 198–206.

⁶¹ Hinson, "Private Springs," 116.

⁶² CTCR, *Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View* (St. Louis, MO: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2011), 7.

heaven God's children learn to speak with him. Repeating God's own words after him, we begin to pray to God."⁶³ As the congregation gathers, the Lord speaks through the Word, read, woven into the liturgy, and sung in the hymns, and guides the Christian in his or her response. The Commission On Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of the LCMS commented on this very idea in a recent report:

Little children cannot mature if they speak only about their own concerns. Interactions with adults gradually stretch and expand their hearts and minds. The same is true for the children of God. ... We grow and mature as we begin to think and pray about God's purposes and not only our own. For this reason, throughout the history of God's people believers have not only prayed in their own words, but also in the words of others. They have prayed in the words of the Psalms and canticles of Scripture and the hymns of other composers. They have prayed in the words of written prayers from service books and other resources. They have prayed with pastors who speak in and for an assembly of believers, even when the only word the assembly speaks is "Amen." Such praying is every bit as important as the personal prayers we speak privately to God, for in this way our hearts are opened to the whole of God's people and their needs and to the concerns that God Himself places into our prayers.⁶⁴

The private prayers of the individual draw from and are formed by the prayers that take place in the corporate worship service. Not only that, but their themes are expanded beyond the mundane needs of the individual, or even the urgent needs of his or her loved ones, and begin to include God's priorities, His Will, and His mission because they are reflected in the congregational prayers, even if the individual's response is only, "Lord, have mercy," or, "Amen."

As reciprocity between public worship and private devotion has been observed, one can also perceive the way private prayer and meditation prepares believers for public worship, particularly by preparing the heart. This is an aspect of the relationship between private devotion and public worship that this study seeks to shed light upon. "Prayer," writes Hinson, "is the most

⁶³. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 156. Psalms.

⁶⁴. CTCR, *Theology and Practice*, 43.

obvious aid to worship. Not however, prayer as a perfunctory rite performed as a matter of duty and habit, but prayer as communion, communication, or conversation between ourselves as personal beings and God as the ultimate personal reality in the universe.”⁶⁵ And he continues, “Persons who pray like this bring with them a sense of presence, not just their own presence but God’s presence. They can, as it were, “electrify” a congregation with their presence....”⁶⁶ He goes on to write about Bible study, which, to him, includes meditation (he refers to it as such later in the document). “From the time of Hippolytus on, Christians have recognized that the limited number of hours spent in public worship does not allow sufficient time for the word of God to shape and mold our lives.”⁶⁷ The prayers that occur during times apart from the congregation and the time spent reading God’s Word and meditating upon it impact how one prays and hears God’s Word when the assembly gathers.

Public worship also provides important protection against private devotion degenerating into self-centered religion.⁶⁸ This is a sentiment echoed by Angela Ashwin who writes, “Liturgy has a built-in corrective to the tendency to privatize spirituality.”⁶⁹ One can hardly focus only on oneself when guided by the liturgy to hear the concerns of others and the petitions which seek God’s Will for His Kingdom. This concern for privatization is also addressed by the CTCR: “[I]f all we think and pray about is personal and individualistic – ‘what occurs to me and what I desire’ – our prayers are impoverished. ... [Jesus] leads us away from empty selfishness in our

⁶⁵. Hinson, “Private Springs,” 112.

⁶⁶. Ibid.

⁶⁷. Ibid., 113.

⁶⁸. Ibid., 116.

⁶⁹. Angela Ashwin, "Spirituality and Corporate Worship—Separate Worlds or Vitally Connected?" *Worship* 75 no. 2 (March 2, 2001): 109.

prayers.” In the opinion of this author, this is part of the danger of individualistic devotional materials that are often used by Christians today, and where devotions rooted in the liturgical life of the church can serve as not only a corrective, but also a connecting point to the congregation to remind the individual that he or she is part of it.

John Kleinig offers another insight on this topic. In his book *Grace Upon Grace* and his course *Christian Spirituality*⁷⁰ he expounds upon the idea of *receptive spirituality*, which is very important to a distinctly Lutheran devotional life. While embracing ancient forms of devotional habit, he also remains firmly committed to Luther’s teaching that a theologian is formed by prayer, meditation on God’s word, and struggle / temptation. In other words, the devotional life is more focused on what God does in a person’s life than whatever benefit the person might perceive in his or her life. Kleinig writes,

The point of meditation for Luther is, quite simply, to let the Holy Spirit preach the Word of God inwardly to the conscience of the believer. Now this preaching goes far beyond the intellectual exercise of working out the meaning and application of a portion of Scripture. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit who affects the person physically, mentally, and emotionally through the Word.⁷¹

His point is that every aspect of anything perceived as an individual’s spirituality is a gift from God. This is very much in line with Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* and his description of the human state in the *Bondage of the Will*. Indeed, Kleinig’s receptive spirituality is reflective of a comment found on a slip of paper in Luther’s pocket after he died, “We are beggars, this is true.”⁷²

⁷⁰ John W. Kleinig *Resources*, n.d., accessed September 8, 2015, <http://www.johnkleinig.com/index.php/full-course/christian-spirituality/>. The website states that the book *Grace Upon Grace* grew out of Kleinig’s experience “teaching this course over many years.”

⁷¹ John W. Kleinig, “The Kindled Heart: Luther on Meditation,” *Lutheran Theological Journal*, (1986): 142–54.

⁷² Gene Veith, “We are Beggars; This is True,” *Cranach: The Blog of Veith*, October 29, 2013, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2013/10/we-are-beggars-this-is-true/>.

Unfortunately, some people do not experience corporate worship as “a place of spiritual growth or community.”⁷³ Some seek to preference the individual devotion over corporate worship and others corporate worship over individual devotion, instead of recognizing both as important in the Christian life. Angela Ashwin writes, “...I frequently meet people, especially in parishes, for whom personal prayer and church worship flow into each other as naturally as breathing. Yet the separation exists for many others, with the result that opportunities for growth are lost, since, I believe, personal spirituality and corporate worship need and nourish each other.”⁷⁴ This is where Schmitt’s observations on devotional life are so helpful. This study is focused on devotion to the Word and prayer, and, to a different degree, public worship. Yet, ...

God, through his Word, forms and sustains lives of devotion in communities of faith. At different times and in different ways, God’s people are devoted to different teachings of the faith. Through these varied and vibrant lives of devotion, God’s people manifest the living body of Christ bearing fruit for others in that time and place. By this gracious work of the Spirit, congregations are inviting communities, where lives of devotion serve as thresholds of faith.⁷⁵

It must be recognized that the devotions of this study are not the only form of devotion, and when the disconnects exist that Ashwin describes above it is important to the individual and to the church to recognize them, honor their particular form of devotion, or help that individual discover God’s gracious guidance to the peculiar interests and gifts He has given them. As such the worshipping community can also be the place where other forms of devotion also flourish.

From the above it can be seen that the literature and research of today supports the concepts investigated in this project. Polan’s article approached the connection between worship and

⁷³. Ashwin, “Spirituality,” 107.

⁷⁴. Ibid., 108.

⁷⁵. Schmitt, “Devotion and Community,” 121.

individual piety in much the same way as this project does, although he sees the process through the lens of Guigo's, *The Ladder of Monks*, holding that the goal of the devotional life is spiritual bliss. Hinson wrote of the close connection between public worship and personal devotion in ways that are quite complementary to what was attempted in the project. Although neither of these authors provide Lutheran background to the concept, Kleinig's exposition on *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* does, as does Burreson's words on worship.

Burreson offers another helpful note before moving away from the literature. At the end of his previously referenced article he writes, "Christian worship practices the faith in cultural forms that are more than just a style. Here the church is culturally at home: washing, eating, drinking, reconciling, praying, praising, singing, thanking, celebrating, loving and serving – disciples living and desiring the reign of the Lord."⁷⁶ This project attempts to parallel that idea in the realm of personal devotion. It advocates a cultural form – meditation using Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer – in which the Christian can be at home: meditating, learning, thanking, confessing, and praying in a manner that complements his or her experience when the body of Christ gathers together.

In attempting to find such a cultural form to guide a life of devotion within a congregation like Gloria Dei, it makes sense to turn to Martin Luther, as our heritage is rooted in his teaching. Luther praised the reading and recitation of Scripture. One example of this is when he stated that it would be better if twice a day people (specifically pastors) would, "read a page or two from the catechism, the Prayer Book, the New Testament, or some other passage from the Bible, and would pray the Lord's Prayer for themselves and their parishioners (LC Preface 3)."

⁷⁶ Burreson, "Beyond Style," 16.

Luther recommended habits of daily Scripture readings and prayer to those outside of the clergy, perhaps most famously to Peter Beskendorf, his friend and barber in *A Simple Way to Pray*. As Luther describes his manner of prayer, it becomes apparent that he is not only talking about how one speaks to God. He first recommends a time of reading God's Word. As one observes his pattern it begins with listening to God in His Word, and then responding to Him. This is beautifully displayed in how Luther teaches Master Peter to pray the Lord's Prayer, which is itself both God's Word, delivered from Jesus' lips to His disciples, and our prayer. He encourages that one would pray the Lord's Prayer in its entirety, and then, "repeat one part or as many as you wish," expanding upon each part.⁷⁷

It is not until Luther describes praying through the Ten Commandments that he describes his methodology of expanding upon God's message as he responds in prayer. He writes, "I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer."⁷⁸ That this prayer is a response to God's communication through His Word is clear, however, in comments such as, "[I]f in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can."⁷⁹ The activity is not simply that the one praying speaks to God, but that he or she hears God, and the Holy Spirit works in that moment, interacting with the individual to teach and guide the believer in prayer as a holy conversation.

⁷⁷. Luther, *Simple Way to Pray*, 195.

⁷⁸. *Ibid.*, 200.

Luther never imagined this practice replacing the corporate gathering of believers for worship. One of the places he tells Master Peter that he seeks God’s Word to warm his heart to prayer is, “to the church where a congregation is assembled.”⁸⁰ For him the matter of corporate worship is covered under the Third Commandment where days of rest were provided to allow people, “to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God (LC I 84).” This was the given. Individual devotion was engaged in addition to the Sunday service.

This is further highlighted by a comment in *A Simple Way to Pray*, when Luther writes, “It may well be that you may have some tasks which are as good or better than prayer, especially in an emergency. There is a saying ascribed to St. Jerome that everything a believer does is prayer, and a proverb, ‘He who works faithfully prays twice.’”⁸¹ To have a day when one did not read Scripture and pray was no sin. To despise Scripture and prayer is.⁸² The goal is not to impose a rigid form for devotion upon the congregants. This is not legalism. However, in pursuing devotion to God’s Word, prayer, and worship, this form may introduce them to a devotional habit that is grace-filled and focused on God’s Word, which connects them to one another and reinforces their experience of the Divine Service.

From very early and forward into history, God’s people have gathered corporately for worship and also engaged His Word privately. Both of these forms of piety are important in the Christian life, but are too often treated as separate issues. Perhaps part of the outcome of this

⁷⁹. Ibid., 202.

⁸⁰. Ibid., 193.

⁸¹. Ibid., 193.

⁸². Luther, *Small Catechism*. Third Commandment, Explanation.

study might be that both corporate worship and private devotion can be addressed more holistically in the life of the believer so that they can be engaged to support his or her whole life.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT DESIGN

THE PROJECT DEVELOPED

This chapter describes the process which was used to develop this project, the methods used to collect the data from the participants, and the implementation of the project.

The Design of the Project

This MAP studied ten congregational members of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church as they participated in a series of devotional exercises which guided them in meditation and prayer following Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer. The purpose of the study was to examine what impact those practices might have on their experience of the divine service on Sunday morning. The participants were all adult active members in the congregation who are regular in worship attendance. They were chosen on the basis of their willingness to be part of such a study, and a perceived interest in exploring devotional habits.

The participants received a brief (one-hour) overview of the project. At that time they received a little historical background regarding Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer and the lectionary. The process of meditation and prayer was described to them. I also mapped out which readings they would read on each day, how they would receive the devotional material (on paper or via the internet), and described the tools I would use to gather information from them.

To gain a point of comparison, each participant was interviewed in a semi-structured interview prior to the beginning of the project. The questions asked were designed to learn about

the participants' prior devotional habits, their experience of listening to God's Word, their prayer life, how they have experienced God in their life, and their practice of corporate worship.

Through the project, I prepared six months-worth of devotional materials which were based on the pericopes for the upcoming Sunday. Monday through Friday the participants were asked to use these materials for their personal devotions. On Sunday, the participants were asked to attend a worship service, and then to reflect upon their experiences in worship in light of the devotions they had done through the week using a journal and a writing prompt which I provided for them.

Midway through the project, I conducted a focus group with the participants. During this event the participants were asked about how they felt about their experience thus far and if they sensed value in the exercises. Questions were asked about whether the devotional habits had impacted the participants' lives in any way, particularly their corporate worship time. They were also queried about any impact on their prayer life outside of their devotional time.

At the end of the project the participants were interviewed in a second semi-structured interview, using the same questions as their initial interview. The purpose of this second interview was to look for expanded experiences of hearing God, differences in their sense of hearing God's Word, changes in their experience of corporate worship, and impact on their prayer life.

Using the semi-structured pre- and post-project interviews, the focus group, and the journal allows the data to be triangulated to help both cross-check and increase the trustworthiness of the research.¹ The interviews and journaling allow for an accounting of individual experiences before, during, and after the project. From such data, trajectories of experiences for individuals

¹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 72.

can be discerned as well as turning points, discoveries, setbacks, and any other individualized growth experiences that may affect the outcome of the project. The opening session and the focus group allow for group processing before and during the experience. As worship is a corporate activity and one of the purposes of the study is to consider how individual devotional experiences resonate with the corporate life of worship, these moments of group engagement and processing offer a glimpse of the community in action and provide data about the nature and intensity of shared experiences. Once the various streams of data have been collected it will be necessary to examine the three sources to look for common experiences among the participants and to find where their experiences diverged. In particular, it will be essential to see how they describe their experience of worship over time and to determine if they feel that the devotions impacted their experience and, if so, how.

Research Tools and Methodology

This study is a qualitative study. As such the tools that were used are all appropriate to qualitative research. There were three tools used to gather information from the participants in the study. The tools were:

1. A semi-structured interview before and after the project.
2. A focus group midway through the project.
3. Journals which were filled out by participants weekly throughout the project.

Each of these provides information that can be studied to examine attitudes, perceptions of experiences, and communicated feelings.

“Few methods of research are conducted in so many ways, and for so many purposes, as interviewing.”² In the case of this study, two interviewing methods were used. The first was a

² Willis, Inman, and Valenti, *Practice Dissertation*, 203.

semi-structured interview, and the second was a focus group. Each has often been used in qualitative research over the years with good results. This is an appropriate method for a study like this which examines the connection between devotional habits and corporate worship because much of what is dealt with here is intangible to the observer and direct observation cannot interpret what the subject is experiencing. What does it mean when a participant in the study tears up during a worship service? Is she experiencing God's grace in a profound way? Has he been stricken by the Law? Is the individual sorrowful because a loved one is dying? Outwardly, we cannot know. "Interviews allow people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observation."³ When they share what is going on inside them, participants' responses can be studied by a researcher.

The first form of interview that was selected for this study is a semi-structured interview. In a very strictly structured interview the researcher would have a series of questions which he or she would ask without deviation or follow-up. In a semi-structured interview there is a definite plan for what is to be asked but freedom for follow-up within that plan. In the case of this study there were eight open-ended questions that would be asked in order to gather the information and to delve into the interior spiritual life of the participants which would otherwise be unobservable. Those eight questions would be asked, "regardless of the answers."⁴ Since this was a semi-structured interview, however, the researcher was able to pursue the questions further, as often happened in this study. Based on my research and experience, when a subject answered a question I would often follow up with another question or two. This served two purposes, it

³ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 103.

⁴ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 102.

helped to draw more relevant information out of the subject if his or her answer was brief or seemed incomplete, and when the subject brought forth a topic that was salient to the study I could delve into it more deeply.

The second form of interview that was used was a focus group. The interviews described above were conducted one-on-one with the subject. In a focus group multiple participants are brought together. Once again, the purpose is to draw out information that is physically unobservable, however this method is particularly useful when trying to gather information about a group who have had a shared experience.⁵ In this study the questions asked the group were about their common experiences of devotion and worship. This type of study allows the researcher to look for agreement and disagreement within the group and to subsequently summarize the data.

The journal exercise is part of a method for gathering data referred to as assigned homework.⁶ In some cases a single journal can provide core data for a Doctor of Ministry project.⁷ Once again, the journaling exercise provides the researcher with data that is outwardly unobservable as the participant reflects on his or her experience, shares their emotions, or describes their thoughts, motivations, frustrations, or hopes.

Implementation of the Project

This section documents the steps taken to implement the project.

⁵ Willis, Inman, and Valenti, *Practice Dissertation*, 204.

⁶ William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program* (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2000), 60.

⁷ Ibid.

Recruitment

Before the project began ten participants were recruited. This was initially done by soliciting volunteers through the church bulletin, announcements, and e-mail distribution list. Five weeks before the project began a message was sent out and verbally reinforced at the Sunday services.⁸ This produced three volunteers for the project.

When approximately two weeks went by, it was clear that broadly soliciting volunteers would not produce enough participants. I met with the staff of my congregation and made a list of fourteen people who might be interested in participating in a project that focused on doing devotions to whom we sent a letter inviting their participation.⁹ I chose a larger number than needed because it seemed likely that some who were invited would decline to participate. This was the case of one individual who had participated in a doctoral study for a colleague and did not want to do the work. It also seemed wise to know a few extra people who might be interested in participating in case someone dropped out or something happened to a participant. As it turned out, two people dropped out of the study, and I was able to replace them from people recruited with this letter. I also hoped to have more participants do the study than the agreed upon ten. One of the participants had terminal cancer during the study, and another developed a heart issue. Thankfully, both were able to finish the study, although the one with cancer died shortly afterward. Had either of them died, the study would be able to continue and not fall short of the requisite participants.

As we discussed who to invite we considered individuals' worship attendance, and we tried to find people who were not necessarily involved in any devotional habit, but seemed interested

⁸ The full text of the message is available in Appendix Three Exhibit A.

in spiritual growth as evidenced by conversations we had with them over the years. Having identified seven men and seven women we sent letters to the individuals asking them to participate in the study. This method of recruitment yielded eight participants. There were three who were invited who declined. Three others never responded.

At this point there were eleven participants, and the ratio of men to women was six men to five women. My plan was to use the research of five men and five women for the study and reserve the materials from the sixth man. Before the end of May, however, one of the men dropped out of the study citing concerns regarding his workload.

Around the time that the individual above dropped out of the study, one of the individuals who had received a recruitment letter contacted me to let me know she had been out of town and had only recently gotten the letter. It was agreed that she would become the eleventh participant. This turned out to be a great blessing as one of the other men dropped out of the study in August. The final count of the participants was ten with a ratio of four men to six women.

The participants ranged in age from forty-years-old to eighty, with three participants being below sixty and one at eighty. Six of the participants were life-long Lutherans, and at least three of them attended colleges or universities that are connected to Lutheran church bodies. Of the remaining four, one grew up Roman Catholic, one Methodist, one converted to Christianity as a teen and became a Baptist, and the last described herself as a “spiritual nomad”: she has been part of nearly every denomination around. Most have been members of Gloria Dei over fifteen years, and the one that has been a member for a little over a year has been deeply connected to the congregation for over twenty years. Six participants were retired from various careers

⁹.The full text of the letter is available in Appendix Three Exhibit B.

ranging from education, to business, to technology. The four that continue to work are a doctor, a librarian, a project manager, and a Christian care ministry worker.

Instruction for Participants

The participants were asked to specifically commit to participating in the project for its full six months – June 1, 2015 through November 30, 2015. They each participated in a semi-structured interview before the project began to get an understanding of their devotional and worship experiences. At the end of the project they were interviewed again. A transcript was made of each interview, and those transcripts are kept in a secure location.

On May 16, 2015 I met with an initial group of participants to accomplish the following three tasks.

1. Fill out the required paperwork: Consent forms, confidentiality agreements, etc.¹⁰
2. Give an overview of the project and answer any questions the participants might have.
3. Schedule the participants' initial interviews.

Before the meeting I set up coffee and bagels for the participants. I also used a white board to provide an agenda for our time in order to accomplish all that needed to be done in one hour. I have laid out the agenda below with brief explanatory comments in italics following the agenda items.

- I. Thank You! – *I wanted to make clear that I appreciated their time and help.*
- II. Forms – *Here is where we ran through and explained the required paperwork.*
- III. The Plan – *I walked through each of the following points with the group.*
 - a. Devotions Format – *Points i–iv with their sub-points are a basic outline of the devotional material. They will be dealt with in greater detail below.*
 - i. Scripture
 1. Context.
 2. Content
 3. Function

¹⁰. Text from these documents is available in Appendix One.

- ii. Teaching
- iii. Life
- iv. Prayer
 - 1. Instruction
 - 2. Thanksgiving
 - 3. Confession
 - 4. Petitions
- b. Interviews – *I informed them that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, emphasizing their confidentiality.*
- c. Focus Group – *I told them that this was a midpoint opportunity to gather information and to share their experiences with one another.*
- d. Journals – *I let the participants know that I would provide them with materials and explained the writing prompt to them.*
 - i. Google Docs
 - ii. Hand Written
- IV. Interview Appointments – *I had a form ready with dates and times so participants could sign up for their initial interviews.*
- V. Thank You – *Gratitude cannot be expressed enough. The participants were sharing their lives and experience, and they would be inconvenienced. It was only right to begin and end with thanks.*

Nine people attended that meeting. We opened with prayer, and I thanked them for their willingness to help me. After that I distributed the forms, walked through them with the participants, and, after they had signed them, gathered them.

The next portion of the meeting took the bulk of the time. I told them about Peter the Barber and Luther's letter to him. I described the Fourfold Garland of Prayer emphasizing that the themes of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petition are informed by the scriptural text. Giving this historical background piqued the interest of many of the participants. I emphasized that what Luther was doing was using Scripture to guide his prayers. It was at this point that I went through the devotion format they would be using, step-by-step.

Beginning with Scripture, I informed them that each of the devotions would be based on the lectionary and the pericopes for the upcoming Sunday. This required a little bit of explanation. While everyone there was familiar with the concept that we used appointed readings on a given Sunday, they were not all familiar with the vocabulary. Having clarified the

terminology, I laid out the plan for how we would approach the readings. I wanted to make the devotional pattern fairly predictable to facilitate familiarity and comfort for the participants so I used the following schedule.

- Monday: Old Testament Lesson
- Tuesday: Gospel Lesson
- Wednesday: Psalm
- Thursday: Epistle Lesson
- Friday: Sermon Text (For the purposes of this study I committed to preaching on the Gospel lesson for all of the regular Sundays.)¹¹

The participants were familiar enough with how our worship services are laid out that this made sense to them. They commented that it seemed good to them to use these devotions as a preparation for their time in worship on the upcoming Sunday.

Having established where the Scripture readings were coming from, I explained to them that I would provide them with a summary of the *context*, *content*, and *function* of the text, and explained what I meant by each of those terms.

The context of the text could mean one of two things. Firstly, it could refer to where the reading takes place in Scripture. What are the events happening around the reading? Is there background information that would be helpful to know? What themes are being explored by the prophet or apostle who authored the reading? Secondly, it could refer to where the reading fits into the church year. This was especially the case when we came to the end of the project and we celebrated Reformation Day, All Saints' Day, as the focus for the last three Sundays of the church year turned to the end times, and as we observed the first Sunday of Advent. The project was conducted during the Time of the Church, so most of the readings were a *lectio continua*

¹¹. Two festival days were observed during the project: Reformation Day and All Saints' Day. On these Sundays, the Old Testament Lesson was replaced by a reading from *Revelation*. In addition we had a guest preacher to celebrate All Saints' Day.

format for the Gospel lesson, a supporting lesson from the Old Testament, and a semi-continuous reading of several New Testament epistles. Establishing the context for many of the readings was a matter of referring to the readings from previous weeks.

The content of the text was a summary of what happened in the text. It could be as simple as, “Jesus miraculously fed five thousand men, plus women and children.” In the case of an epistle like Eph 2:8 it might be, “Paul emphasizes that salvation is a gift that is given by grace and received through faith.” The goal of this portion of the devotion was simply to state what took place in the text in a succinct way.

The function of the text was a statement of what the text does to the reader. It acknowledges that the Scriptures were written for a purpose. There could often be a range of functions within a particular text. For instance in the Feeding of the Five Thousand mentioned above, the function could be that the author comforts the reader by displaying Jesus’ compassion for the earthly needs of his people. Another for the same text might be that in recording this miracle the author was displaying Jesus’ divine power and calling his readers to put their faith in Jesus. The essential idea was to emphasize that God’s Word is active. Reading it and meditating on it does something to the reader.

When details were not provided in the materials I provided for them, participants were invited to use whatever resources they desired to work out the context, content, and function of the text. They were encouraged to look to the notes in a self-study Bible, to read the verses prior to and following after the text, and, if need be, to look at the devotions which were written for the congregation for that day, as they provided all the aspects of the readings.

Having set the content, context, and function of the text, the next step in the devotional exercise was to look at its *teaching*. This section highlighted key doctrines related to the text.

Sometimes there was too much doctrinal content to handle briefly, so it was necessary to choose what doctrine to highlight. The selection process for what to highlight was rooted in the sermon theme for the upcoming Sunday. This piece was intended only to ask, “What does this lesson teach?” It remained rather hypothetical and did not offer application. That was for the next section.

The *life* section of the devotion sought to make application to the life of the person doing the devotional exercise. It could lead the participant into an introspective confession. It might be a reminder of God’s forgiveness for the reader. It might also be an exhortation to some ethical, Word prompted, action like loving your neighbor, speaking out for justice, sharing the gospel, etc. This is the part of the exercise that asked, “What does this mean *for me*?”

This whole first section is focused on the Scripture reading. After it was completed, the devotion transitioned into prayer. The participants’ experience of prayer left them fairly comfortable with praying – that is, talking to God – but this was the portion that was most challenging to most of the participants because of the themes of the Fourfold Garland of Prayer. The outline of *instruction*, *thanksgiving*, *confession*, and *petition* caused the participants to pray in a way that finds its direction from the Scripture lesson, and that was new to them. I offered several brief examples at the meeting. For instance, one of the passages I used was John 15:9–17, which was the Gospel lesson for the Sunday previous to the meeting:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me,

but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another (ESV).

I emphasized that in the *instruction* part of the prayer they might pray about learning that God loves His people, wants them to abide in Jesus, desires for them to have joy, commands them to love one another, and that God chose them. Likewise, in the *thanksgiving* portion I told them that we might pray thanking God for loving and choosing us, for calling us friends, or giving us the privilege of prayer as we are able to call upon God's name. In the *confession* section of the prayer, I said we might pray asking for forgiveness for not loving one another, for not being a good friend to Jesus, or for thinking that we were better than others because we were chosen. In the *petition* section of the prayer, I showed them how we might pray for strength to love God, to be humbled by God's choice, that He help us find others He has chosen, or that we would indeed abide in Jesus and our joy would be made complete. In each case, I instructed them that they might choose to pray about some, one, or all the things in the passage.

I also informed the participants that for the first two months of the program (June and July) I would provide everything in the devotions. I also let them know that in August and September they would get less material. Instead of writing the entire devotion, I would leave a section unfinished and only provide questions to guide them to finish it. Then in October and November all that I would provide for the participants would be the Scripture citation and an outline of the parts of the devotion. This will be fully described later in this chapter when the writing is detailed.

After the participants were comfortable with the general way in which the devotional exercises would work, I described the data gathering aspects of the project. I let them know that I would sit with each of them individually and ask them eight questions. I told them that the tone of that meeting would be conversational, and that I might ask them follow-up questions based on

their answers. I had scheduled one hour blocks in which to do the interviews, not knowing how long each interview would take. The participants were informed that their interview would be recorded and transcribed, and they were reassured that the interviews would be confidential and the transcripts would be kept in a secure location.

The idea of a focus group was described. I told them that we would hold the focus group in September, and that we would schedule that meeting closer to that time. I described the focus group as a guided conversation in which I would ask a series of questions about their experiences with the devotional practices in regard to worship informing them they would have the opportunity to discuss their answers. I again let them know that the conversation would be recorded and that summary notes would be made of the recording. I also emphasized that this discussion was confidential and that the identity of the participants would be protected.

We then discussed the process of journaling. I asked them to write their journals on Sunday, after the worship services. I read the journaling prompt to them and told them that I would like for them to consider one of the themes as they wrote. The participants were concerned about how long the journals should be and what they should write about; in fact, this was a theme of conversation throughout the project. I assured them that what they wrote would be helpful and appreciated, and said they should write enough to respond to the prompt, noting that for some people that might be a couple paragraphs and for others it might be a couple pages.

I gave the participants two options for their journaling exercise: handwritten or typed. If people chose to handwrite their journal, I would provide them with a journal in which they could write. I also let them know that after the journal was transcribed they could have their journal back. For those who chose to type their journal, I offered to set up a Google Doc for them that I would have access to and they would only have to type their work. The participants asked me

which method I would prefer, and I stressed to them that they should choose whichever method was most comfortable for them. One of the participants asked, and I paraphrase, “Wouldn’t it save you a lot of work if we type it?” I responded that that was not the point, and that they should use the method which would be most comfortable to them. I believe, however, that this question swayed many of the participants to use the digital format.

At this point I had a schedule of times for interviews and we worked as a group to schedule the initial interviews.

In the end, I thanked all of those at the meeting for their time, their investment in my education, and their help.

Subsequent to this initial meeting there were two other sessions to introduce participants who could not attend the first gathering and to replace two participants from the initial meeting who dropped out of the project. Those sessions covered the same material in the same order. The first of the subsequent sessions was for two participants. The second was for one. Because of the size of these sessions, they were more informal and there was more dialog than the initial meeting.

I would note that, if I were to do this project again, I would have given more tangible examples to the participants and made handouts of devotional materials from different phases of the project and sample journal entries. The participants received enough information to execute the assigned work, but, in retrospect, I believe this would have made them more comfortable in the long run.

Initial Interviews

The initial interviews were conducted between May 19 and May 29. The interviews were held in the church’s library, a small, quiet room. The participants were offered a water, coffee, or

tea to make them comfortable. At each interview the participants were assured that their responses were confidential and that their answers would not be judged in any way. The interviews were recorded with Quick Voice Pro, on an Apple iPhone.

The interviews followed the eight interview questions as a guide and occasionally follow-up questions were asked to get more information. The questions were:

1. Describe your devotional practices over the past six months.
2. Describe your experience of God in worship.
3. Describe your experience of listening to God's word in worship.
4. Describe your experience of responding to God's word in worship.
5. Describe your experience of how God responds to your prayers.
6. Describe the relationship between your daily life and Sunday worship.
7. Describe what you hope your spiritual life will look like in 6 months from now.
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I gave the participants copies of the questions at the beginning of the interview. In retrospect, I'm not sure I would do that again. Several of the participants tried to move quickly through the questions, and I had to slow them down and bring them back to the question at hand.

Several participants, when asked to describe their devotional practices over the past six months said that they didn't have any. This prompted a follow-up question, "Are there any times that you pray?" Which was sometimes followed by, "Are there any times that you sit down with your Bible to read?" This drew out answers about prayers at meals and bed time, and one participant stated that he read a psalm every morning. The idea of devotional practices was, perhaps, something that should have been more fully explained at the introductory meeting.

One of the questions that required the most explanation was: Describe your experience of God in worship. Some people wanted more clarity regarding worship. Did I mean Sunday worship or some other worship experience? I told them that the question was intentionally vague so as to allow them to draw from all their experiences. Additionally, some wanted examples of what it means to experience God. At that point I tried to be very broad in my answer saying that

some people talk about experiencing peace, conviction, joy, a burden of sin, or comfort as signs of God's presence. Interestingly, after this many of the participants pointed to the Lord's Supper as a time that they experienced God in worship.

Additionally, some wanted clarification on what it means to respond to God in worship. I explained that this could range from an emotional response to a decision to an internal dialogue. Most talked about feeling peaceful or forgiven.

Once the interviews were concluded they were uploaded to DropBox and shared with the transcriber. When the interviews were all transcribed, the original files were loaded to a thumb drive and stored in a secure file drawer.

Devotional Materials

The devotional materials guided the participants in the fourfold style of prayer Luther advocated in *A Simple Way to Pray*. The devotions began with a study of and meditation on one of the Scripture lessons appointed for the upcoming Sunday and these lessons were apportioned for the week as previously described. The participants were asked to read the lesson from the Bible and then they were to read the comments and thoughts I had written.¹²

The devotions were written during the Ordinary Time of the church year. Unlike the festal seasons of the church year which focuses on aspects of the life of Christ, this season focuses more generally on the work of salvation in the life of the Christian. In *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape*, Normand Bonneau describes these Sundays as, "devoted to the mystery of Christ in all its aspects."¹³ I have understood this to mean that these Sundays focus on Christ's salvation working in the whole life of His people through both Law and Gospel and that

¹². Devotions are available in Appendix Five.

it deals with both justification and sanctification – which are both gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ The devotions, therefore, sought to draw out both the Law and the Gospel in the texts, seeking to make sure that the message of the Gospel was always predominant. That does not mean that sanctification was ignored or neglected. Thought was given to that work of the Law when it functions as a guide to the believer.

The devotions were all written with sin and grace in mind. Whatever the text was, two questions were in my mind: (1) What sin does this passage identify in our lives? And (2) How does this passage address God’s grace to that sin? I wanted to go beyond the general acknowledgement of being a sinner to helping the reader and the congregation to see the particular sin in the text in our own lives so that we would then confess that sin and experience God’s forgiveness for it. To this end, I treated the *Teaching* section in a more general manner displaying the broad doctrines of the texts. But in the *Life* section of the devotions I tried to avoid sweeping generalities about societal sins and to focus the individual on his or her own life and personal experience of grace.

The application of the Third Function¹⁵ of the Law, however, is an aspect of these devotions that I believe could have used more creativity and tangible examples. It was challenging to provide meaningful examples of what it means to love God or love one’s neighbor in light of the text. The devotions were not as successful on that front as I had hoped. On the

¹³. Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 141.

¹⁴. “The Sundays in Ordinary Time actualize the story of Christians being shaped and molded into Jesus’ death and resurrection through the difficult fidelity of discipleship.” Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 33.

¹⁵. Biermann, Joel, “Enriched in Every Way,” (lecture, Ohio District Convention, Dublin, OH, June 14–16, 2012). This terminology is influenced by Dr. Biermann’s presentation in which he preferred the term “function” over “use” of the Law, noting that the Law does its work apart from human application. It therefore functions as God designed it to function – as a curb, mirror, or guide – and we do not use it in these ways.

other hand, it might be better in the end if the participant made the application for himself or herself, as some of the participants did, which was reflected in their journal entries.

It is a hard lesson to learn that although I wrote these devotions and used my knowledge and skills to form them, ultimately the impact of the devotion is not up to me. I may be a teacher and preacher for my congregation, but the Holy Spirit is the Teacher and Preacher that shapes all of our hearts and minds to live in faith. With that insight in mind, I would have liked to have engaged these devotions more slowly. Trying to assemble a month's worth of material for printing did not always allow for my personal meditation and prayer on the texts. There is a sense in which I was out of phase with the congregation because I was looking ahead to the next month's readings and devotions while they were meditating and praying on the text for the day.

Looking back over the devotional material, one of the unexpected challenges that I faced was one of diminishing space. I felt that the exercises needed to be short enough for people to achieve them without feeling over-burdened. To that end I committed to keeping the written material to one page per day, hoping that they would be able to follow through with it in a ten to twenty minute time period. However, as time went on, the prayers, by necessity, became longer because they contained more themes. This meant that the meditation portion which focused on God's Word sometimes felt too sparse. Often there were topics that I would have liked to delve into more deeply, but there just wasn't space in this exercise. This was, perhaps, good, however, because the lengthening of the prayers coincided with greater experience among the participants, and they were learning to lean less on what I offered and more on their own meditation.

Another challenge that I did not expect was writing devotional material on the Psalm of the Week. A particular difficulty was in helping the reader to get context for the Psalm. What prompted the psalmist to write the prayer, praise, or meditation they had just read? With some

psalms there are clues and indications in the introduction to the psalm. In others there is nothing, or only mention of who the author is. It was hard to know how to help the reader connect to the text because, at least to some degree, the text is what it is: a prayer, a meditation, or a song and it stands on its own merits. Also, as the psalms are poetry, I do not think that the commentary helped the reader appreciate the artistic aspect of the reading, and often became too cut and dried in the interpretation I provided.

It is only recently that I have thought that it might have been better to approach these readings from the genre of being wisdom literature. If I had come at it from this point it might have been easier to apply them to the life of the reader as God's Word to make them wise – that is, to have a right relationship with Him. This, however, would have required some explanation either in the devotion or in some kind of introductory format to allow the lay reader to become familiar with the concept of wisdom from a biblical point of view and to consider the poetry of the Psalms in this manner.

There was an aspect of writing on the Psalms, however, that flowed very well into the devotional material. The prayer portion of the devotion often borrowed entire phrases word for word from the text, and occasionally was simply a paraphrase of the psalm itself. Sometimes the phraseology of the psalm was rearranged to fit the themes of the prayers, but occasionally they matched up such that the psalm focused on confession or thanksgiving, and so did the prayer for that day.

I also found that the idea of context had to be adjusted as the project developed. For much of the project the Gospel lesson followed a *lectio continua* through the Gospel of Mark, and even when it diverged for three weeks in August to follow John, it was still within the context of the last account we had read in Mark: The Feeding of the Five-Thousand. The Old Testament

lessons followed along with the Gospel Lesson's themes, and the Epistles followed their own *lectio continua* working through 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and part of Hebrews. Thus for the first four-and-a-half months the context for the reading was often a reference to what had been read previously. But when Reformation Sunday, All Saints' Day, and the end of the Church Year came about, the context started to be defined by the themes of the Church Year. This was additionally complicated by our congregation's stewardship emphasis in November during which we continued to use the pericopes, but sought to emphasize ideas of stewardship.¹⁶ The focus of the devotion was therefore influenced by our walk through the seasons and our common work as a congregation. Thoughts about context became less about what had happened previously and became more about the festival we were observing or the work in which we were engaged.

I wrote the devotions with the goal of forming an understanding and/or experience of being in dialogue with God while preparing the readers for the upcoming worship service. The essence of the format was that the participant would "listen" to God by reading His Word and meditating upon the message it delivered and then respond to what God said through prayer. To emphasize the idea of dialog the prayers were written using thoughts and ideas prompted by the text so that the prayers were talking about the same thing the lessons talked about.

The devotions were written in a way that initially provided more support and reminders for the process and moved to providing less of each at the end of the project. Early on in the project the devotions were basically reflections of my knowledge of the text, a sample of my meditation, and my prayer. As time went on I began to pull myself back by not writing one of the parts of the devotion and offering questions to guide the participants to think and meditate on their own. By

¹⁶ In 2014 the stewardship emphasis focused on generosity and money. For 2015 we dealt with the stewardship of our congregational legacy and focused on mission and ministry as the legacy with which we have been entrusted.

the end of the project they were challenged to take only the text and to work on understanding the context, content, function, and doctrine of the text, and to make application to their lives from it. They were also expected to pray in the themes of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petition according to the text on their own.

For six months I provided devotional materials for the participants which followed the pattern of Luther's Fourfold Garland of Prayer. I wrote these so they could be delivered to the participants one month at a time so that those who preferred to use a paper copy of the devotions would have them for the whole month. Additionally, I set up a new blog site using the Google service, Blogger. I shared the address for this site only with the participants so that they had exclusive access to it during the project. That site was updated daily.¹⁷ Throughout the six months of the project, I also provided the devotions to the congregation. The devotions provided to the congregation, however, did not decrease in their offerings, but continued to cover all the aspects of the devotional model.¹⁸

June and July

The first two months of these devotions provided the most content.¹⁹ As described above, these were my study, meditation, and prayer shared as an example. These devotions directed the participants to the readings, provided an example of meditating on the text, gave brief written thoughts and application on the text, and guided the participants with a written prayer that contained aspects of the themes of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and petitions rooted in

¹⁷. Eric Tritten, "Worship and Devotion," *Worship and Devotion Blog*, November 27, 2015, accessed March 7, 2016, www.dminproject.blogspot.com.

¹⁸. This point will be important when discussing the outcomes and findings of this study.

¹⁹. See the devotions for June and July in Appendix Five.

the readings.

The process for writing this segment of the devotional materials began with looking at the pericopes for the upcoming Sunday. The devotional materials provided for June 1, 2015 will serve as an example. The bolded italic words below are the headings from the devotion, the sections in italic are part of the original devotion, and those will be followed by commentary in normal font.

Instruction

Just as Luther began with the Word, albeit he was focused on the Lord's Prayer and Commandments, these devotions begin with listening to God's Word.

Scripture: Genesis 3:8-15

Note that the reading is underlined and bolded. This is because it was a hyperlink that would take the participant to Bible Gateway, where they could read the identified text in the English Standard Version, the translation used during public worship.²⁰ Participants were welcomed and encouraged to use whatever format (traditional, tablet, internet) or translation of the Bible they desired.

¹In this text we find Adam and Eve immediately after they have disobeyed God by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. ²As Adam and Eve begin the new reality of their life as sinful beings they experience separation from God and from one another, but God promises One who will save them from their sin. ³God moved Moses to record this event to show us the damage that sin does to individuals and their relationships. In addition God promises the Savior and sets his plan of salvation into action.

Notice that the first sentence provides the context for the reading, marked with a superscript 1. In this case the *context* is historical and helps the reader understand that God is confronting that particular act of disobedience. The second sentence, marked 2, provides a brief

²⁰. www.biblegateway.com.

summary of the *content* of the text. After superscript 3, the *function* of the text is described. This piece seeks to help the reader consider why this text was recorded.

The only commentary that was used to assist in the writing of any of these sections was the notes from the Lutheran Study Bible. Beyond that, no materials were used outside the text.

Teaching

This section highlights important doctrines that are found in the reading. While very brief, this section was often about two paragraphs long.

This passage teaches us what sin is and what it does. Sin is disobedience of God. Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat, and they did. Essentially, they placed their own will over God's will. Sin's consequence is death, but in the meantime, what it does is create separation and division in relationships. The man and woman experienced separation from God. They displayed division as they blamed one another.

Interestingly, God's response to sin was to create another division. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring," God said to the serpent. In putting enmity between us and the serpent, he divides us from the devil, the world, and even our own sinful nature. Not only that, but He is here promising a Savior who will undo the evil that has been done and restore our relationships with God and one another.

Notice that the tone of this section is didactic. It handles the teaching of the text in a factual way without application. The goal was to state what the reader might learn from the reading in a semi-academic sense.

Life

This section of the devotion was intended to make application of the text and its semi-academic sense in the life of the reader.

Often in life we find ourselves caught in strained relationships. We do well to recognize that the cause for that strain is sin. God has kept his promise to send an offspring from Eve to crush the serpent's head – that is to defeat the devil. That offspring is Jesus and He defeated the forces of sin and death by dying on the cross to forgive our sins. Since Jesus has provided forgiveness for us we are reconciled to

God. At the same time, we have the opportunity to extend and receive forgiveness in our relations with others, and to be reconciled to them.

Look for opportunities to forgive others for Jesus' sake, and recognize where you also receive forgiveness.

It can be quickly seen that this section begins to make application to the life of the reader.

This part of the material often dealt with relationships, how sin creates problems in life, and other ways the text impacts the reader's life. In this sense it often contained messages of both Law and Gospel, and regularly had elements of the Third Function of the Law, where the Law guides the believer into Christlikeness. Some texts were dominated by Law, in which case the Gospel was always presented, despite its absence in the reading, as the Gospel must predominate and is, itself, the power of salvation.

Prayer

This section was written to guide the participants in prayer following the themes of the Fourfold Garland of Prayer. Because this format for prayer was unfamiliar to the participants, and they hadn't prayed in this way before, it was decided to begin slowly using one theme at a time. Monday through Thursday initially focused on one theme of the Fourfold Garland. Friday added an additional theme. In this devotion the theme was *instruction*. On Friday it was *instruction* and *thanksgiving*. In July the prayer began to have two themes from Monday to Thursday and three themes on Friday. The goal was to model prayers to the participants that focused them on the desired method of prayer.

The focus of this prayer is on Instruction.

Each prayer was prefaced with an introductory sentence that identified what themes the participants would find within the prayer.

Father in Heaven, You have given us your word that we might know You as our Creator, Savior, and Comforter. Please give us Your Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds so that we might receive and believe Your word. As You teach us about

sin, help us understand how damaging it is in our relationship with You and the relationships we have with others. Grant us faith to trust Your promise to save us from our sin and to trust that You have kept that promise by giving your Son, our Savior, Jesus to die for our sins. Open our minds to understand our lives according to Your Word. Amen.

This prayer, written in the theme of *instruction* seeks to confess what the reading said and asks for greater understanding and faith. Notice how it deals directly with the text itself. In some cases, the prayer would borrow words and phrases from the text. This was especially the case when the text was a psalm. In the case of this text's prayer, had it been in the themes of *thanksgiving* it would have drawn the participant to give thanks for forgiveness in their relationship with God and with their neighbor and thanked God for keeping His promise to send a savior. If the focus had been on *confession*, it would have guided the participant to confess sins of disobedience (drawing from the context of the reading) and for times the participant had hurt or betrayed friends or loved ones as Adam and Eve had done to one another and to God. The prayer would have led the participant to pray for others to know God's reconciliation and salvation, or to believe in the promised savior, or for deeper trust in God's promises if the theme had been *petitions*.

It should be noted that the prayers are all written in the first person plural. While the devotion was performed individually, it also had an eye toward the fellowship of the believers and the culmination of the devotion in the Divine Service when the congregation gathered. The prayers in this project then highlight an essential aspect of the life of God's people; that even when we are alone we are part of a larger fellowship, the body of Christ, and when we pray it is because we are in and with Him. As Bonhoeffer says, "...only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray."²¹

²¹. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 157.

August and September

The following two months directed the participant to the readings as before, but instead of providing all the material to the participants, one of the sections would include questions, or the prayer would be left blank with suggestions for themes about which to pray.²² My full meditation on the lesson and the prayer was posted outside of the materials that the participants received, but they had access to it.²³ This was done in case they had difficulty meditating on the text or thinking of how to pray about it, and to allow the entire congregation to benefit from the exercise.

The devotion from September 11, 2015 will serve as an example. Notice that the pattern remains the same, while there is difference in the content. Once again, the headings for devotion will be in bold italics, the text will be in italics, and comments on the devotions will be in normal text.

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:14–29

Having just come back from His Transfiguration, Jesus found His disciples in a crowd arguing with the scribes. He discovered that the disciples had been unable to cast a spirit out of a boy, and expresses His exasperation at their lack of faith. The text functions to show that faith centered on Christ is capable of miraculous things because Christ is the one who acts powerfully for His people.

If this section had been left for the participants to complete it would have asked, “What is the context, content, and function of this text?”

Teaching

What does this reading teach us about faith?

²². See the devotions for August and September in Appendix Five.

²³. See Appendix Six.

What makes faith effective? Is this about a person's power or God's power?

What does the interchange between the boy's father and Jesus teach us about faith?

It is the teaching section that was left for the participants to complete on their own in this devotion. All that I provided the readers was the three questions above. It was up to them to answer them as best as they could, using whatever resources they desired.

Life

Have you considered the father's prayer as one you might want to emulate? There are many times in life that our faith gets stretched and we feel like our faith is faltering. This prayer can serve as both reminder and confession. There are also times that we deal with the mysteries of faith: creation, Jesus as God and man, the real presence in the Lord's Supper, etc. When our ability to understand falls short, these words are much like throwing ourselves on the Lord's mercy; and He is always ready to extend His mercy to us!

In this devotion, I offered life application. If I had not, this section would have posed three questions to the reader, perhaps:

1. Have there been times in your life when you desperately desired God's help like the father did in this reading?
2. How might the father's prayer, "I believe; help my unbelief!" prove helpful in your prayers?
3. How difficult is it to trust God when things are going wrong in your life? What does the difficulty teach us about faith?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

This devotion was given on a Friday. By this time in the process Monday through Thursday had the participants praying in three of the themes and Friday included all four.

Lord Jesus, when You returned from Your Transfiguration You discovered Your disciples in a moment of failure. All throughout this event You observed how frail people's faith can be. We see ourselves in this reading, too, learning to trust You and empowered to trust You by the work of Your Holy Spirit in our lives.

We thank You for giving us faith so that we might believe You, Your Word, and Your promises. Thank You for not giving up on us when we are more like a faithless generation than the disciples we wish we were. Thank You for giving us victory over

the powers of the devil that continue to work in this world and for giving us the ability to cast them out by the power of Your Word and prayer.

We, however, have not always clung to Your power as we live. All too often we have turned to our own strength, wealth, position, or power to live this life of faith. We have allowed our senses and our intellect to overshadow Your promises and Your power. Forgive us, Lord Jesus! We confess that we believe; help our unbelief!

We throw ourselves at Your feet recognizing that without You we are like corpses with no life in us. Take us by the hand as You did the boy that we might walk in faith, believing all You have said and done. Give us wisdom to recognize when we place our trust in ourselves or worldly reason to the detriment of the faith You have given us. Help the many who doubt to come to believe so they too may have the life You long to give them through faith in Your death and resurrection. And help us to be steadfast in prayer, trusting that You, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, hear and answer that prayer because of Your compassionate love for Your people. Amen.

Notice how the prayer finds its substance in the scriptural text, and draws the individual into fellowship with the other members of the congregation who are using the devotion by employing the first person plural. The first section, *instruction*, re-visits the events of the lessons and applies them to the one praying. The second section, *thanksgiving*, deals with the issue of faith, which is central to the reading. It also borrows language from the text speaking of a “faithless generation.” The third section, *confession*, again deals with faith, and how it is sometimes misplaced. This section also uses biblical language echoing the father’s statement of faith and request to help his unbelief. Finally, the prayer turns to *petitions* in which imagery of the boy from the text is applied to the one praying and it asks for faith, help for those who doubt, and aid to be steadfast in prayer and trust.

October and November

The last two months of the project directed the participants to the readings, as before, but asked them to meditate on the text, self-identify the doctrines of the texts, meditate on application for their lives, and pray with themes of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and

petition related to the text on their own.²⁴ Basically they were provided with the appointed text, and they executed their own study, meditation, and prayer. As in the second stage, a full written meditation and prayer was provided for the congregation and was available if the participants felt they needed it.²⁵

The devotion from November 27, the last devotion in the project, will serve as an example.

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

***Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and
Petition.***

The framework of the entire devotional process is still there, however, at this point the participant must fill in from their own notes, understanding, and experiences the various parts of the devotion. Essentially, the only thing they were provided with is the Scripture reading.

Focus Group

About half-way through the project, in mid-September, seven of the participants joined in a focus group conversation. Three were unable to be present. Input was sought from them on what

²⁴. See the devotions for October and November in Appendix Five.

the participants found to be valuable and their overall impression of the project. As with the interviews, the focus group was conducted in the library around a table large enough for all of us to sit at.

After opening with prayer, I asked the group the following six questions, one at a time, waiting for the group to answer them. The participants also each received a copy of the questions at the meeting.

1. How have you felt about your experience with these devotions so far? How did you feel about the step(s) in the devotional exercises where less material was provided for you over time?
 2. On the whole, do you feel this exercise has been good for you? If so, please describe what has made it so.
 3. Was there ever a moment that something from your devotional time came to mind when you were participating in worship? If it is not too personal, would you share it?
 4. Did you feel that the devotional practice helped you prepare for worship? If so, how?
 5. Was it challenging to you to pray through the themes of thanksgiving, confession, and petitions related to the Scripture reading? How has this affected the way you pray, that is, talk to God?
 6. Is there anything you'd like to say about the project that you haven't had a chance to say?
- Initially there was a little confusion as the participants seemed to think they would each answer all the questions before the next participant responded. After that was cleared up the conversation generally moved from individual to individual, but there was some group response when people agreed with one another.

This conversation was recorded and a summary of the conversations has been written and stored in a secure location. It was stressed before and after the focus group that the conversation was confidential and that they had signed forms indicating that this was understood. The participants were not identified on the recording or in the summary document. Eight of the volunteers participated in the focus group.

²⁵. See Appendix Six.

Journals

The participants were also asked to write a weekly journal exercise on their experiences. These journal entries provide the subjective view of the participants into the experience. The journals were gathered and, in the case of those who hand wrote theirs, were subsequently typed. Most of the participants chose to use the Google Docs document that I set up for them, but some chose to type their journals in a different program and to email them to me. The journals are stored in a secure location as well.

My initial thought was to read these weekly, but when I saw that the participants did not always fill them out in a timely manner²⁶ and considered that a few were handwriting their journal, I opted to skim the materials I had every four to six weeks, mostly to make sure that the participants were writing, and if they were not to encourage them to do so. Early on, a couple of people asked me to comment as to whether they were doing the exercise correctly, and I looked more closely at these entries and reassured them that they were doing them in a way that was helpful to the project. This was, however, a point of discomfort for the participants throughout the project, and is something that would benefit from a training exercise if a project like this were to be done in the future.

Most of the participants journaled the whole way through the project. There are some who, having missed the worship service, would listen to the sermon on SoundCloud²⁷ and write their journals on the basis of their experience of that piece of the worship service in connection to

²⁶. Some participants journaled on Sunday afternoon, others waited until later in the week, wanting to consider their experiences, and yet others wrote very sporadically, doing three or four entries at a time.

²⁷. SoundCloud is an online service that allows people to record a variety of sound related items – vocal, musical, etc. – to share with others. My SoundCloud page can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/pastor-tritten>. Additionally, there is a link from our church's website: www.gloriadeihudson.org.

devotions. There were a couple people who did not finish a significant part of the journal exercises due to health, family, or work pressures. One individual lost his journal, and he tried to recreate what he lost, and for his input this is mostly what was submitted.

The length of the entries varied from person to person, but each individual seemed to be fairly consistent in the length of their entries. A couple people would write entries that were one paragraph of five to eight sentences. Others typed half a page, and that seemed to be about the norm. There was one who regularly typed a full page.

Closing Interviews

The closing interviews were conducted December 15–20, 2015.²⁸ I sent the participants an e-mail with a suggested schedule. From their responses I was able to negotiate times to meet with each of them as I had before in the church library, recording their interviews with Quick Voice Pro on my iPhone. As in the initial interviews the audio was uploaded to DropBox for transcription, and subsequently removed to a thumb drive for storage.

There was one notable exception in the interview process. As mentioned earlier, there was a man in the study who had terminal cancer. The treatments he was undergoing kept him well through October, but early in November the treatments ceased to work and the cancer returned aggressively. His exit interview was conducted in his home on November 20, about one week before the project actually ended.²⁹ Comments on his illness and prayers for him and his wife actually showed up in a couple others' exit interviews.

To prepare for the second round of interviews, I reread the first round of interviews and

²⁸ Gloria Dei graciously provided a guest preacher to come in once a month from November 2015 to March 2016 to allow me to attend to the project.

²⁹ This individual passed away January 13, 2016. With permission of his family, I was able to use quotes from his exit interview as part of the funeral sermon to display his confession of faith.

familiarized myself with how the participants had responded to the questions initially. The atmosphere for the second round of interviews was very different, however. There was little need to provide explanation, and people arrived with items they wished to speak about. Many of the participants asked if I was planning on returning to writing devotions in this style after my degree was completed. A couple encouraged me to write the devotions and publish them for a larger audience. All of the participants expressed a sense of benefit from the exercise. One, however, stated that the experience had completely changed her faith because she had shunned what she called the “bloody Jesus” for most of her life, preferring to focus on the risen and glorified Christ, but she had seen through these devotions that it was the “bloody Jesus” who had atoned for her sins and reconciled her to God.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATION

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to examine how the devotional practice of prayer and meditation on God's Word can complement the corporate services of a congregation in an intentional manner that edifies a Christian's life of faith and worship. It was my belief that the devotional practices of meditation on God's Word and prayer would enhance the participants' experience of the Sunday service, and impact other parts of their lives as well. It was also my belief that this form of devotion would resonate more with some than with others, but all would benefit from it.

This chapter will report the findings of the study and then analyze the data that was gathered from the participants.

Findings

From the very outset it should be acknowledged that not all the participants found the practices of this study to be beneficial to them. Of the eleven participants who began the project, one participant dropped out after two months of the project. The other ten participants engaged in the exercises of this project from June through November 2015. They all participated in a semi-structured interview before and after the project. The interviews averaged about twenty-five minutes each.

Six of the participants also engaged in a focus-group in September which lasted about

forty-five minutes.

Nine of the participants submitted journal entries across the six-month period. The one who did not submit a journal sent me three emails related to the project that I have included with the data. Of the nine, three completed all of the journals. Two only missed one entry. Two completed over half of the entries, but less than three-quarters. Two completed less than half of the entries. The length of the journal entries varied. A couple of the participants averaged around 100 words per entry. On the longer end two participants averaged around 260 words per entry. The average length of a journal entry was about 190 words.

Results of the Study

The results of the study will be reported in four categories: *Prayer*, then *Edification through Devotion*, followed by *Daily Life and Worship*, and concluding with *Experience of God*.

Prayer

Part of the purpose of this study was to develop the devotional life of prayer for the participants. All of the participants prayed in a variety of settings. One question in the pre- and post-interviews examined this aspect of the participants' life and thereby gave a qualitative assessment of the participant's experience of prayer. The question was: **Describe your experience of how God responds to your prayers.** In assessing the data from the pre- and post-interviews, one can register the responses on a spectrum of change from negative change through no change to positive change. The answers given in this section tended to be more nuanced than a simple continuum of positive to negative experience. Before and after the project, all the participants believed that God heard and answered their prayers, although the answer was not always what they looked for or when they looked for it. What I observe in comparing the original

interviews with the exit interviews is a general maturation in themes in the prayers and a more profound sense that their prayers are in God's hands and that they can trust Him. This was a positive change in terms of a deepening of the relationship with God within which they pray. This change will be examined in more detail below.

Edification through Devotion

While the level to which the participants were involved in devotional habits before the project began varied from none to highly-structured and daily, the study looked for change in this behavior with two questions in the interview. The first question was: **Describe your devotional practices over the past six months.** Nine of the participants reported having positive experiences and signs of edification in response to this question. One reported that her experience was negative, largely due to the pressure of her life. The second question was: **Describe what you hope your spiritual life will look like in six months.** As with the previous question, nine participants indicated this to be a positive experience in their lives which benefited them. These answers were also all tempered with a negative aspect, as the participants were concerned that they would not keep up the habits. This will be looked at more closely below. The remaining participant was dying at the time of this interview. His response indicated that he looked forward to experiencing the joys of heaven, where he is now with Christ.

The dominant experience reported by the participants was that they were edified by their experience of participating in daily devotions.

Daily Life and Worship

In terms of daily life and worship, several participants stated that their daily lives were not impacted by their worship experiences at the beginning of the project. One question in the

interview looked for change on this topic. The participants were asked: **Describe the relationship between your daily life and Sunday worship.** Six of the participants responded in ways that indicated there had been a positive change in their lives during this project. No one displayed a negative change, but four of the participants' responses indicated that there was little to no change in their experience of daily life and its connection to Sunday worship.

Experience of God

In their initial interviews, all of the participants stated that they had experienced God in one way or another in worship, but in the second round of interviews participants indicated that there had been positive change in their experience. Three interview questions dealt with this aspect of the project. The first was: **Describe your experience of God in worship.** Seven of the participants displayed positive change in their experience of God in worship. Three displayed no change. The second question was: **Describe your experience of listening to God's Word in worship.** Nine of the participants claimed or displayed positive change in this area. The remaining participant was neutral and his response was very similar to his first interview.¹ The third question was: **Describe your experience of responding to God's Word in worship.** Seven of the participants showed positive change in this area, and three were neutral.

In terms of experiences of God and His Word, the impact of this project was dominantly positive. Further evidence of this phenomena will be displayed below when the data is analyzed and displayed in detail.

Analyzing the Data

¹ This participant also missed over half of the worship services during the study due to health issues.

Before we analyze the data that was offered in relation to the aforementioned themes, I would like to mention some difficulties with the project. These difficulties resulted in frustration for some of the participants but, aside from the individual who withdrew from the project, I don't believe that these difficulties invalidated any of the data. Instead, these difficulties reflect precisely the kind of real life experiences that a qualitative study is seeking to measure.

Difficulties

The main difficulty was time. There was one individual who completely dropped out of the project. When I asked him what the biggest stumbling block to using the devotions was, he stated "Time management plain and simple." He was not the only one to notice the pressure of time in regard to doing the devotions. The issue of time as a potential struggle was raised by two men who completed the study. One, who was working part-time, stated, "I'm looking forward to not working and being able to schedule my day again and have that freedom where I can do [devotions]." The second stated that before he retired and was still working full-time he did not attend to devotional habits in his life. Although the desire was there, his schedule made maintaining such habits challenging.

Time was also an issue for the second participant that sought to drop out, although her experience was mixed. She states that she, "started out strong," but, "the circumstances of life" made it difficult for her to follow through with spending time reading the Scriptures and praying in the pattern provided in the devotional material. Interestingly, she notes that prayer was still an important part of her life, and she appreciated the devotions when she read them, but they were, "much more involved," and the effort to process them was too much on top of work and parenting. She also stated that, "I really like [the project] for what it was," but also lamented, "[in] November, I was just completely lost," which I understand to mean that she was

overwhelmed from work and the total experience. In a world where people deal with overscheduled calendars, this is a concern that must be taken into account.

In addition to the difficulty of time, there was also a difficulty expressed by one member regarding the type of materials provided. This individual who did not finish the project stated that he has difficulty, “following and reading type format.” This, of course, was the very format of these devotions. He stated, “I am visual and conversational in my learning skills....” Thus a different format would likely be beneficial to him. This is a case of needing to help the individual identify a devotional habit with which he is more likely to be comfortable, or recognizing devotional habits in which he is already engaged and affirming and encouraging him in these.² If a congregation were to pursue an endeavor like this project, they should be sensitive to this and seek to help those participants whose educational styles and devotional temperament are different from devotion to the Word and prayer.

Prayer

When it comes to the experience of prayer, this devotional project positively changed the experience of the majority of the participants. Before the project began, the participants all believed that God hears and answers prayers. It was interesting to note how many of them stated that God answers prayer, but in His own way. In the first round of interviews one individual made a statement that reflects that belief, “He answers prayers. It doesn’t necessarily happen when you want it or how you want it to happen, but they all get answered.” Another echoed that sentiment, “I think God always responds to our prayers. He doesn’t always respond the way we want Him to.” There was a sense of resignation in this, as though recognizing that God would do

² In this case I believe it is more the latter than the former.

what He would do no matter what a person prayed.

In the second round, the idea that God would answer prayers in His own way was still present, but seemingly in a context that understood His response would be better than simply answering prayers as they originally desired. Thus one of the participants who was praying for a friend with cancer desired for his friend to be healed. He came to accept and be at peace with the idea that God's healing might not come in the way he hoped or even in this life, but he was confident that the healing would certainly come in heaven and that was better for his friend. People made statements about God answering prayers differently than they'd like with additions like, "I think probably more than anything else [it] is just letting things go and trusting that I know it's part of His plan." Notice that in that statement the relationship is not one where God just does what He does, but that there is trust involved on the individual's part that God has a plan for him. Another spoke of her prayers saying she offered them, "... knowing that I may not see an end result ... quickly ... knowing that He's always there in the long term it will all work out to the best of His accord...." In this case the idea that God will do as He wills is still present, but here there is a sense that His will is best and that it is part of something larger for the individual.

In addition to a deeper faith relationship with God within which they prayed, the themes of prayer the participants discussed seemed to deepen through the project. In the focus group the general consensus was that their prayers had focused on daily life and prayers for family members and people who were sick. In the first round of interviews there was discussion about God knowing what was needed before the prayer was offered, so some of the participants were slow to pray. One participant represented that logic by saying, "I don't ask for petitions but I know that He knows what I need..." Others talked about praying for family members, loved

ones' illnesses, and personal needs. They also described requests for wisdom, understanding, and strength. But during the focus group one of the participants said that she had never thought about praying about her soul or spirit before, and she had never thanked God for eternal life. In the second round of interviews, another individual raised the issue of praying about eternal life saying, "He's promised me eternal life. That is the prayer that I want Him to fulfill." There were also statements that indicate that the participants recognized a change in the way they prayed. One stated, "It made me look at how I pray a little bit differently because, you know, sometimes it's just very surface level ... I mean ... it's easy to sit down and [pray] thank you for everything, the blessings and all that but I...given the readings, I feel like that there's much more intent behind where that prayer could be and how it affected me at that time." Yet another described her previous difficulty in asking God for anything,³ feeling it was, "a waste of my time and [God's]," because God already knew what she needed. However, in the second interview her thoughts changed on the basis of what she had read in the Scriptures and she said, "But in reading and being in Scripture more it's pretty clear. You don't [refuse to pray because God knows] – you are to ask."

It was also interesting to see in the journals that all but one of the participants included prayers in their reflections, which was not part of their writing prompt. It seemed that as they discussed matters of faith it was natural or appropriate to include prayer. Most did so only occasionally, but others included prayers regularly. These prayers can be divided into the themes of the Fourfold Garland of Prayer, but the prayers in the journals never included all the themes in any one prayer. One participant did write on October 11, "I was surprised to realize that while praying after ... communion, that my prayer also followed the instruction, thanksgiving,

³ This individual prayed regularly, describing her prayers as responses of praise or thanks for God's guidance.

confession, and petition format.”

Several participants included prayers regarding instruction. One jotted in early July, “Keep my eyes/focus on God for His mercy, directions, and promises.” Another wrote in August, “I pray that I am more receptive,” to the message of the Scripture reading. On July 19, another reflected on God’s guidance in doing good, and wrote, “The devotions this week actually affected my prayer life a little differently.... I also asked how I could be used to help....” A similar sentiment is found in a different participant’s entry from July 19, who said, “Help teach me to better serve others....” The prayers also recognized instruction from God’s Word in the Divine Service. On October 12, a participant wrote, “I pray that Pastor’s [sermon message] will ... guide my life.” The theme of instruction, or understanding, was also a major emphasis in the participants’ experience of God in worship, which we will return to later.

Prayers of thanksgiving are also present in the journals. In a journal from June 14, a participant responded to the “promise and hope for eternal life,” writing, “Thank you Jesus!! What an opportunity I am so thankful for!” August 23 contained a prayer giving thanks for the youth of the congregation who had presented about a mission trip from which they had returned. Writing about Christ’s sacrifice, a participant inserted the following as part of her prayer on September 13, “Thank you, Lord, for your love ...” Yet another wrote on June 18, “Thanks for struggles,” which gave her opportunities to meet others and to serve them.

Confession played a significant role in some of the participants’ responses to other questions, and in some reflections in the journals. In terms of volunteered prayers, it only surfaces in one participant’s journal, but it is seen with some regularity. In an entry at the end of July, a participant wrote, “Please forgive me for my multitudinous sins.” And again on November 15, this participant wrote, “... please forgive me, again and still....” As can be seen

from the prayers of thankfulness, however, the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation with God were not absent from the others' minds as they prayed.

Prayers of petition are also evidenced in the journals. None deal with petitions for health concerns or physical needs, although there is conversation about those prayer items. Indeed, on September 13, as one participant prayed regarding health concerns, he wrote, "Please, Lord, give me the wisdom to be present for X and Y as they go through these times." This individual discussed in his interview that he had been praying for healing, but this prayer goes beyond that need to a matter of great importance – the ability to love one's neighbor in their need. Another participant wrote on July 19 of the potential to be a godly influence on others, "I pray that I can be a resource of [p]eace for those that come in contact with me..." A prayer for spiritual protection was recorded on August 30, "Please be with me, Lord, as I put on my armor of faith to face and fight off these ways of our culture...." This prayer is particularly interesting because it incorporates part of the Epistle lesson appointed for that Sunday and displays the Scripture lesson's influence on the believer's prayer.

Combined, these instances of volunteered prayers seem to imply that the participants' practice of prayer was influenced by the devotions. It should be noted that these prayers all take place on an individual level, and not in corporate worship. Only one of the participants discussed corporate prayer as an aspect of her experience. On August 24, she commented that one of the prayers in the Prayers of the Church had struck close to an experience in her own family. She also commented on September 28 that the Prayers of the Church "encompassed all of these lessons, reminding us how important it is to pray for all people..." This is not to imply that corporate prayer is less important than individual prayer, but it does seem that perhaps such written prayers which engage people individually and daily might be a good formative tool to

help people to pray.

Edification through Devotion

The dominant perception of the devotional experience was that devotions were edifying to the individuals, as was hypothesized. In the focus group, one of the participants commented that her initial thought regarding her participation in the project was, “What was I thinking?” But as she got used to the “process” she came to the conclusion that this style of devotion “works.” One participant commented that he was “pleased” with his experience at least in part because, “it certainly got me into the Bible a whole lot more than I had ever been.” Another said, “... you get the time to get [the devotions] soaked in ... instead of just reading it over once and then you never think about it again.” One reflected on the benefit she experienced saying, “I think it’s helping me as a saved person in Christ in His life and resurrection and it’s helping me with my own ... beliefs in carrying them out”

There were some who stated that they felt their days went better, one commenting that her time was used more efficiently. One participant wrote on November 22, that through the interaction with God’s Word in meditation and prayer he discovered there was, “a plan for my daily life, a goal for my activities, and a pattern to follow.” So the devotions seem to have provided beneficial guidance for the individual’s lives.

Much of the edification perceived by the participants seemed to be in the area of their understanding. Several participants mentioned in interviews, journals, and the focus group that they found having context for the readings to be helpful. Participants mentioned that they appreciated the “explanations,” “descriptions,” and, “applications” related to the texts. After the first week one of the participants wrote in her journal that the devotions helped, “clarify your understanding,” implying that this made comprehending the Sunday service easier. On July 19, a

participant commented in his journal that the readings were “much easier to understand” and he “gain[ed] meaning from them” because of the devotions. And in the focus group several participants agreed that they had, “learned a lot.” One of the participants made the point quite clearly in her last journal, “I especially like the ‘context, content, and function’ part of studying the lessons since it gave the background for them....” While I am glad for the understanding the participants gained, I was surprised at how much the participants focused on it as a desirable benefit as opposed to things like the Fruit of the Spirit. I wonder if that is related to the format of the devotions, or if it is something inherent in the way Lutherans, or even Christians in general, approach God’s Word.

Interviews and journals also revealed a general feeling of thankfulness among the participants for being able to participate in the project, which one can understand as a general sense of edification. One participant wrote on November 22, “I want to thank God for leading me to participate and to continue my [devotional] readings.” Another said in her second interview, “I really appreciate the opportunity” to participate in the study because it “really helped me.”

One of the other points of edification was in the area of talking to others about the faith. This was not broadly experienced among the participants, but two did comment on being more comfortable with sharing the faith. One wrote in her journal on November 22, that she was more comfortable as an evangelist at work, “I have noticed I feel more comfortable ... in sharing my faith” And on August 9, another participant was speaking with some members of the church who were experiencing difficulty in life, and he recorded his memory of that encounter writing, “I was able to share information which I had recently read during my devotional study,” to encourage them. Both attributed that ability to their time in God’s Word. These are strong marks that the devotions and worship impacted the lives of these individuals by making a change in

their behavior.

However, there was a negative point to this part of the experience. There was a level of doubt as to whether the participants could maintain this devotional habit on their own. While the devotional experience was edifying, it was not edifying in the sense that the individuals learned how to practice these devotions on their own. One reason for this could be that the major form of edification was understanding. The devotional materials provided the participants with knowledge about the Scriptural texts and they trusted that knowledge because it came from their pastor. The practice of using these devotions, however, did not provide the participants with a method for reading the Scriptural texts and discovering that knowledge on their own. Thus, while the majority of members appreciated the edification in knowledge, they also felt ill-equipped to continue these devotions because they did not know how to access such knowledge on their own. While the devotions were edifying for the participants in knowledge, they also were forming the participants in a dependent relationship with their pastor who was providing the devotions and, thereby, teaching them the faith.

Although one participant commented in the focus group that she liked not being guided and that this kept her from “just go[ing] through the motions,” most did not care for getting less devotional material as time went by. Already in the focus group in September participants were asking about what to do when the project was over, and confessed that they had been using the devotions supplied to the congregation as a supplement to the devotional material with diminishing information.⁴ One participant said in her final interview, “I’m not sure if I can carry on and do it by myself without your guidance. As a matter of fact I must confess that when our participant booklets had nothing on those pages I did resort to looking at the ones that were for

⁴ This was corroborated in the journals.

the congregation.” Another commented, “When I was on my own at the very end ... I did look [at the readings], but I wasn’t as strong at it. And it didn’t challenge me. I know that sounds silly but it didn’t challenge me. It was like if you don’t know, you don’t know. I didn’t even know what the issues were sometimes when I was in it.” It would seem that there is a benefit to some people in having the devotional materials fully written out for them.

On one level, providing devotions like these can be seen as appropriate work for a pastor, as a responsibility of the pastoral ministry is to equip the saints for the work of ministry as it says in Eph 4:11–12. It would seem that this style of devotion can have an equipping impact on the lives of some of the participants, particularly in the area of knowledge of the text. Yet the ability to follow this and other forms of devotion to God’s Word and prayer on one’s own is achievable as has been shown in many people’s lives. Furthermore, it is impractical to be fully dependent on the pastor who may not be inclined to do this kind of work, and who will at some point leave the congregation by receiving a Call, retirement, or death. It would be desirable if people would learn to be comfortable with their Bible, avail themselves to tools such as those in the Lutheran Study Bible which also identify themes and show Law/Gospel dynamics in the text. Familiarity with the Scriptures can rise over time, and perhaps if the participants had a longer period of time using these devotions they might have been more comfortable taking on leading themselves in devotion, but this study does not display that. There are other tools a pastor could use, however, to help people acquire the ability to pursue a devotional life, including mentoring and modeling for individuals and classes. In this way the members see more than the finished product of the devotional material, but the pastor can display his process of dealing with the text, using the tools in his study Bible, and praying as the text leads him, and the members of the congregation can question the process and learn from their pastor’s experience as he walks with them and teaches

them.

Daily Life and Worship

Six of the participants indicated positive change in the relationship between their daily life and their Sunday worship. In the initial interviews a couple of participants indicated there was little connection between their daily life and Sunday worship. One stated, "...as far as the actual worship directing or changing what happens [in daily life], right now I can't think that it does." Even after I asked clarifying questions and suggested that perhaps it might add a sense of order for the week, he said that it did not. However, at the end of the study this participant said that Sunday now had a different "purpose" and that he had a greater "desire to be [at church] on Sunday." His devotional life led him into worship. Another participant indicated that the benefits of worship carried with him into the week saying, "...the devotions now have put the worship as a different component in my life and especially my daily life. I always felt good about receiving the [Lord's Supper]. Now I feel the [Lord's Supper] all week." For this participant worship led him into the week. Using those two responses as themes we will examine the data in two categories. First we will examine the data from the stand point of the *daily life leading into worship* and second *worship leading into daily life*.

Daily Life Leading Into Worship

For some of the participants the daily devotions seemed to lead them to worship. One participant stated, "I can remember how I answered this question before where [daily life and Sunday worship] were kind of two separate [things], now they kind of blend together. During [the study] they just really blend[ed] together where because I was doing the devotions during the week and then Sunday just exemplified it so it more." On July 20, a participant noted that she

enjoyed participating in the daily devotions because of the way worship “comes together” with the hymns, readings, prayers and sermon all working together to bring the weeks devotions to their full conclusion. Later, on October 11, another participant wrote, “Having read and studied this week’s lessons allowed me to interact more with today’s service.” Another journaled about a worship service and confessed on August 16, “...too often I do not listen to God...” which was quickly followed by comments that Jesus tells His people to eat His body and drink His blood to preserve our lives. His interaction with the Scripture readings seem to have driven him to note, first, that he did not listen to God’s Word, but also, second, that it was in the Word that Jesus promised forgiveness through the Lord’s Supper, and, third, that it was at worship that he receives that holy meal. People seemed to sense a greater connection between their lives in general and worship on Sunday morning. A participant wrote of her angst regarding violence in the world and her sense of hopelessness, but then she notes, “... after the sermon today, and reading the Scripture again, I’m in awe of God’s grace, mercy and favor for us!” The brokenness she experienced in her day to day life led her to seize upon the message of God’s grace in the worship service. This is an important change in the lives of these individuals and it shows that connecting daily devotions based in the Sunday worship can help people experience greater impact from the service in their lives.

Worship Leading into Daily Life

Some of the participants noted that parts of the sermon carried with them beyond the Sunday service. On July 5, one of the participants commented in her journal, “Because of the readings during the week and the sermon, I reflected upon how my weakness[es] ... have become a tool for helping others....” The devotions worked with the sermon to help her recognize that God uses painful aspects of our lives to reach out to others with God’s love. On

July 13, another participant commented on the sermon, “Jesus showed us the way to show compassion. Now it is up to us to follow His example, after praying for guidance.” This statement is interesting in the sense that this individual clearly saw (and experienced as the rest of her journal shows) Jesus’ compassion and perceived that it is something to be emulated, but she does not assume to emulate it on her own. She wants to follow Jesus’ example, but also wants God’s guidance as she goes back into her daily life. In the second round of interviews, I asked one of the participants in a follow-up question if anything from the worship service ever came up during the week or was helpful later on. She replied, “...there are things that you say in the sermons or there are things that pop up during the week...,” and that being in worship made her more aware of God working through the week. On June 21, I spoke in the sermon about the shooting at Emanuel A.M.E., Charleston, S.C. One of the participants commented in her journal, “I looked within myself and prayed to God for forgiveness for my thoughts.” She also was moved to pray for hope and love, and the ability to remember that, “Judgement is the Lord’s.” For her, the impact of the devotions and worship carried into her daily life to address fear and hatred. This is, of course, something a preacher likes to hear. It may be, however, for some of the participants at least, that this effect was due in part to adopting another salutary habit: the participants took sermon notes. During the focus group five of the six participants stated that they took notes on the sermon to help them when they wrote their journal entries. This effect could easily be due to the additional effort that went into paying attention to the sermon. However, the first person quoted in regard to this topic did not take sermon notes or write a journal, so, for her, the effect was based, from a human point of view, solely on hearing the sermon.

Some of the participants found the sins of the week driving them back to Sunday Worship

so that they might receive absolution. One participant said in her final interview, “The thing that I never realized before that I do now, and it’s probably the key thing that brings me back, is I never really believed ... when the priest ... said ..., ‘Your sins have been forgiven.’ ... [W]ell that sounds good. But now I think I need that.” In the same vein, another participant wrote, “During the week my devotions made me more aware of confession.” Another noted that her confession on Sunday was “more meaningful” in light of the devotions she had done during the week. It was good to find a statement that made a direct connection to the recognition of sin and the application of absolution on Sunday, like the one above. However, that is the only statement that makes such a direct connection between the devotional readings and absolution in the journals, focus group, and interviews. There is, as seen above and in the prayers, a broad recognition of the need for confession and for forgiveness in the lives of the participants in relationship with their devotional readings. It was recognized that the participants’ sins were forgiven, but a direct connection from the impact of the Law in the devotional readings to the absolution in the Divine Service was not expressed by the other participants.

Experience of God

As we explore the topic of the participants’ perception of their experience of God, we will approach it by focusing on the context of worship, and within worship we will look at three aspects of experiencing God. First, it will be approached generically. Second, the topic will be explored in terms of listening to God’s Word, where God speaks to His people through this means of grace. Finally, the ways that the participants responded to God’s Word in Worship will be examined.

It should be acknowledged that the participants struggled to some degree to describe their experience of God. One participant’s initial response was exactly the same in both interviews

when this question was asked, she said, “That’s a tough one.” Another participant stated five times across her two interviews, some variation on, “I just feel He is there.” A couple tried to describe experiencing God’s presence as a sense of peace, one talked about a “good feeling,” and one said she felt “overcome with praise.” One of the participants said that she felt she experienced God one time as she felt she was being forgiven, “over and over.” Four of the participants referred to hearing God’s Word as times they experienced His presence. But how they described experiencing God was very amorphous. This is part of the interview process that would have benefitted from better follow-up questioning. God’s presence was more like a common thread in everything the participants did, rather than a standout experience in worship. In fact, a participant commented, “I feel like I should be experiencing something big, but it doesn’t happen necessarily that way.” It is as if God’s presence is a given in worship, and the experience of Him is mundane unless something out of the ordinary happens. One participant noted this in his journal when he wrote, “I was comforted by the knowledge that God is always near” There were also more comments about experiencing God’s presence apart from the worship service.

This did not stop the participants from talking about experiencing God in parts of the Divine Service, however. Participants named absolution, the prayers, the Lord’s Prayer, baptisms, and the benediction as times they experienced God. Four participants talked about the music and hymns being an aspect of the worship service in which they experienced God. In the journals there were comments like this from July 5, “*Above All* was particularly moving this week,” and again on November 8 a different participant commented that the hymn *Faith of Our Fathers* “spoke of faith” and moved her to thankfulness and prayer. Notice that these, too, are rather vague in terms of describing the experience of God itself, they rather sense a feeling or

effect that they connect to experiencing God. I do not mean that in a demeaning way, but I point it out to highlight the difficulty in describing the experience of God.

There was another part of the service that half of the participants referred to as a moment that they experienced God, which was the Lord's Supper. The evidence for this is entirely in the interviews. One participant referred to this as the "most reverent time" in the worship service. Another participant said that after receiving Holy Communion her time in the pew was a "one on one" experience with God in which she thanked Him for salvation. There was one participant who experienced a significant change on this issue through the study. She says that before the study she felt that Communion was "sort of barbaric." But by the end of the study she says that it was "sacred" to her.⁵

One other part of the Sunday service was mentioned as a place where the participants experienced God, and that was in the Word. It is to that topic that we turn now as we delve into the topic of the experience of listening to God's Word. While still discussing experiencing God, one of the participants stated that he felt he heard the Word "better" and described the reception as being more direct and "intimate." He also says he felt, "like I'm in a conversation with God." Another participant wrote in her journal on June 14, "From the opening hymn to the sermon I felt so connected to the Word and enthused with the Holy Spirit to sing praises...." Even before being asked about the experience of listening to God's Word in worship, the participants pointed to God's Word as a place that they experienced Him. In the journals one of the participants wrote on the power of reading God's Word in worship, "I was really moved by the Scripture and felt a closeness to God that I would like to feel more often." This actually melds nicely with the

⁵ There is much more to this participant's story, some of which – including the reason for this change – will be detailed when we examine the participants' responses to God's Word in Worship.

understanding that God works through His Word and that the Holy Spirit is present in the life of the believer through the Word as described in the previous chapter.

One of the challenges to listening to God's Word raised by the participants was the issue of "distractions," "focus," or "attentiveness." One of the participants said in her second interview, "If I can focus I [experience God] through ... the Bible readings ... often times I don't understand them but I feel God there." I remembered that others in their interviews had used the word "focus" in regard to listening to God's Word, so I asked if she felt there were distraction in worship, and her response was, "Most definitely!" She noted that her distractions were internal, which others noted about themselves as well, but some noted other distractions – particularly when a reader stumbled over words in the Scripture reading. It was also noted during the focus group that hearing someone read the lesson sometimes impacted their perception of what the lesson meant. The participants felt their reactions to these distractions improved through the use of the devotions. One described his experience this way, "...I'm on track. I'm focused. ... I'm more in the Word on Sunday than I ever have been before." Two participants commented similarly in their first journal entries that they found themselves "more alert" and "more attentive" during the service. One felt that the text was "speaking" to him, and this participant had commented that listening to the readings and trying to understand them was, "frustrating" in his first interview. Thus it seems that while participants acknowledged there were distractions, the devotions helped them to engage with and receive God's Word in the worship service.

Another important aspect of listening to God's Word that was raised by the participants was "understanding." One of the participants in his initial interview shared that he did not know the "history" of the Bible and felt that lack of knowledge kept him from applying God's Word to life today. He wrote in his journal at the end of the study, "I believe I have learned a great

deal....” Another participant wrote in his first journal that the devotions helped to “clarify your understanding” so he didn’t have to think about it as hard during the service to understand the message. Another felt that he got more out of the lessons because the devotions “explain everything about [them].” Another participant stated in her last journal that she especially liked the format of the devotions because they gave the background to understand the lessons. It makes sense that understanding would be important to receiving God’s Word as that Word is delivered in human language and in a particular context.

Others approached the readings from the stand point of receiving God’s message. One of the participants who talked about hearing the Sunday lessons felt that, “because I had meditated on [them], I was more open to the lessons....” Another person found her experience to be “just listening” to the readings and “listening to what God has to say” in them. Then having heard, she sought to apply what she heard to her life. Another spoke of listening actively because she felt that as she listens, “the Word sinks deep into me....” This attitude matches nicely with meditation as it is described in the Psalms.

Having heard God’s Word, the participants were asked to describe their responses to God’s Word in Worship. There is very little in the data about responses to God’s Word that took place in the actual worship service. I expected discussion about feelings, and a couple participants did mention feeling comfort or peace, or about the desire to praise God in the service. The responses to hearing God’s Word which the participants talked about took place outside of the worship service, and focused more on their personal lives. This section would have benefited from better follow-up questions, however, given the understanding that worship does not take place only in church, the answers do provide an appropriate response to the question.

There was one participant whose answer fell within the context of the Sunday service. For

her everything that was done in worship was a response to God's Word. However, a big part of her experience was a call to humility. She stated, "...in worship I realize that I have to be brought down to a level where I can love instead of judge." This sentiment is wrapped up in the understanding that as a forgiven child of God she now lives in relationship, not just with God, but with her fellow worshippers. She said, "I look around and I think, 'These people are God's people.'" Her response to God's Word is to love her fellow worshippers and to inwardly extend God's grace to them instead of her judgement.

One participant in particular pushed back against an emotional response to hearing God's Word. She talked about people having a powerful conversion experience as a response to hearing God's Word. As a lifelong Lutheran she has only known a life of faith and worship. She acknowledges that there are emotions, and, "Sometimes it's stronger than others," but she has never had some kind of powerful experience in response to God's Word, nor does she seem to desire this kind of experience. She seems perfectly comfortable with the promise that as a baptized child of God she is reconciled with God. God still works in her life through the Word and Sacraments, and that doesn't seem out of the ordinary for her.

A few of the individuals talked about their response to God's Word in worship in terms of obedience. An individual described his response of obedience as needing to find somewhere to serve others. One participant, described her obedience in a very interesting way. She spoke of obedience saying, "... a lot of times I think responding to God's Word is things that I don't do." I asked her to elaborate on that and she described resisting, "... that retort to something you know you don't really need to say," and she also elaborated that this included resisting temptations within addictions. In a similar vein, a woman who was mentioned earlier in this regard, described her resistance to hate. She spoke of her frustration with a world that is "going backwards" and

her desire to resist bad actions that make her “feel good” – which I understood to mean some kind of lashing out. But she does not pursue those actions because of the influence of God’s Word. Her response is to look “to the Lord more [for] guidance as opposed to my feelings.” In these descriptions the way the individuals ethically live out their lives becomes their daily worship.

One of the unexpected responses that I received to asking how the participants responded to God’s Word in worship was that a participant felt more “guilty.” Her journal is also full of prayers of confession and asking for forgiveness for her sins. This was certainly not what I intended for her when I asked her to consider participating in the study. She said, “[I]t frustrates me because if I’m really in God’s Word then I should be doing more of what He asks us to do.” She also described asking for forgiveness for repeated sins. I validated guilt as an appropriate response to God’s Law, and then I asked if God’s grace had had an impact on her as well. She answered, “It has helped me in realizing that, yes, I am a saved, living soul....” She further described her feelings on the matter in a way similar to Paul’s in Rom 7 – *The good I would do, I don’t. The evil I hate, I do*. Her experience in the devotions and worship highlighted that response in her.

There was one very dramatic response to God’s Word that took place in this study. One of the participants was deeply invested in meditation upon the Cosmic Christ and heavily influenced by Fr. Richard Rohr. In her final interview I did not even get to begin asking questions before she started delving into what she wanted to say. I am quoting her at length with her permission.

[T]he overall thing that happened [to me in this project] is [that] I always looked at myself as a good person. Objected to being called a miserable sinner. Objected to looking at a bloody Jesus on a cross. Always did. Didn’t like that. I liked the risen, Cosmic Christ. I liked that Christ and this experience has brought me to look at a bloody Jesus on the cross that died for me. And I never in seventy-nine years, I was seventy-nine as this was happening to me, was willing to accept that [I] was that

bloody, miserable sinner that He died for. Seventy-nine years I went through thinking I was a good Christian. ... Jesus was just a historical figure that was a good role model, but He was not my personal Jesus. Whoa!

... I think I've been called way back and I kept avoiding looking at that. No, my ego was too huge. I was not a sinner. I mean, yes, I...sure I, I had a lot of episodes of doing what normal people do. ... What do you expect? But I never looked at it as sin. Sin offending the Man on the cross who was dying for me! It just seemed like nonsense to me. And then I have gotten into Scripture through you and through this [project] that says that ...the natural man is not going to ever be redeemed until I'm ready to show Him [I am a sinner] and I wondered, I wondered, "Well, why did it take me so long?" And I realized that my ego was, it just had to be cracked. And it's painful. It was painful. This has been a painful experience but a wonderful, joyful, blessed experience, too.

... It's no question that the Lord has been the great hound of heaven, which is not scriptural, but the great hound of heaven has never given up on me. Thank God! It's a little late. Eighty! Seventy-nine! I can honestly say I met the Jesus on the cross before I got to meet Him in the end.

God's Word not only sustains faith, guides Christians' lives, convicts, and comforts, but it also creates faith, converts hearts, and changes minds. For this individual, her total view of the God whom she worshipped changed, and she experienced the forgiveness and reconciliation Jesus won on the cross through her time meditating upon God's Word and participating in worship.

Conclusion

The use of devotions connected to the worship of the congregation and rooted in the pericopes can have a salutary effect in people's lives. This style of meditation upon God's Word may not be appropriate to everyone, but the stories and experiences of the individuals who participated in this study indicate that it can benefit God's people. What that benefit is, however, needs further clarification. It is clear that these devotions benefited the participants with understanding, appreciation of the worship service, and a personal connection to God's Word and worship. However, what is less clear is that they were moved to be or do much differently.

Outside of a couple comments, there is little to indicate that participants felt that they were moved to evangelize, to engage in acts of mercy, or the like. There is also little to indicate that, beyond thankfulness, the participants experienced growth in the Fruit of the Spirit. There was nothing that talked about how the devotions impacted the participants' families. What is more, there is little to indicate, beyond one participant, a greater connection to the fellowship of the congregation.

I have tried to evaluate why that might be. On the one hand it could be that the devotional materials did not engage people in a way that helped them to experience or recognize these parts of the Christian life. Perhaps, like so much of the materials provided for personal devotion, these devotions engaged the participants as individuals and did not help them see themselves as part of a larger fellowship. Perhaps six months was too short of a time span for the individuals in this study to manifest those kinds of changes. It could also be that the tools used to gather data did not ask the right questions, or even predisposed the participant to consider their interaction with worship at a primarily individual level. Future studies on this topic will want to consider this carefully.

However, there clearly was benefit to the participants in the areas described above in this chapter.

In the area of prayer participants were moved to pray about themes that both went beyond their normal daily petitions to include items prompted by their devotional readings. They displayed prayers that followed themes prompted by God's Word. At least one individual incorporated Scripture into her prayer. There was also evidence that some even used to some degree Luther's Fourfold Garland to organize their personal prayers.

There was edification in the lives of the participants displayed, at a minimum, by their

gratefulness for participating in the study. The most recognized benefit for the participants seems to have been in the area of understanding God's Word. There was great appreciation for what the participants learned. Some felt that this also helped them engage in the worship service better as they could more clearly connect the themes of the service.

The impact of daily life and worship was, perhaps, one of the least clear portions of the study. The participants did, however, note that sometimes sermons and aspects of the worship service helped to guide them during the week. Additionally, some noted that the weekly devotions led them back to worship. That being said, it would be good to look for ways to more clearly connect daily life to worship in areas like experiencing the Fruit of the Spirit, recognizing the body of Christ, and other forms of Christian growth.

The idea that participants experienced God in worship and in His Word and responded to Him was also affirmed by this study. The response was not necessarily in the context we hoped to find it – in worship – or in the ways we had hoped – greater joy, decisions made out of love for God, fuller fellowship with other Christians, or strengthening their families—but there was response, nevertheless. This too, however, will benefit from further study and closer scrutiny of the methods used to gather the data. Yet it was displayed that the participants grew in their ability to listen to God's Word, to engage in the worship service, and to make sanctified choices. The study also displayed how God's Word can radically change an individual's heart and mind, and radically change a person's perception of Him so that person can know God's love and grace.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Contributions to Ministry

In this section, I will examine the contributions this study has made to ministry at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio, the church at large, and the existing body of knowledge on worship and devotion.

For Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio

This study has solidified for me the idea that devotions can be used in a congregation to help the members of the church grow in faith. It has also done so in a way that brings the day to day devotional life into a stronger connection with the Divine Service. Because of this, I will likely continue to write devotions for Gloria Dei based on the pericopes. We already announce in our worship bulletins what the upcoming readings are, so if a person were inclined to take on meditation on the pericopes on their own they could. However, since the sentiment of the participants was that it would be helpful to have commentary and guidance for their prayers,¹ this could be offered to the benefit of the rest of the congregation in an ongoing fashion.

The benefit to Gloria Dei could be multifaceted. It could certainly help prepare people to hear God's Word on Sunday, as was displayed by the participants in the study. It could also heighten appreciation for the worship service as a whole; a couple of the participants pointed out

¹ Remember that the participants appreciated the devotions but reported preferring to use materials that I had prepared for the congregation rather than working through the steps of the devotion on their own.

that by reading the devotions they began to see connections from the hymns and liturgy to the themes of the readings. Devotions such as these could be used at different times to emphasize different themes such as evangelism, stewardship, or even focus on Scripture around our congregational mission statement: *Gathering People to Christ, Building Believers in Christ, Serving the World as Christ.*

It might be good to put together devotions that specifically address some of the weaknesses this study revealed in terms of devotions helping those who use them connect to their fellow congregants. Such devotions could also address the Christian's privilege of engaging the world in a variety of ways: evangelism, mercy ministry, volunteering, or advocating for justice. These might even lead to exploring other forms of devotion for the Christian life.

In addition to benefits to the experience of worship, engaging others in this kind of a devotional discipline could help members become more biblically literate. Understanding of God's Word was one of the primary benefits the participants recognized for their own lives. While the pericopes in the three-year series only cover a small percentage of the Bible, they focus on proclaiming the salvation message, and those who chose to use such devotions would become more familiar with those readings. They would also be able to meditate upon these readings to a greater depth to incorporate them into their thoughts, actions, and prayers. Depth of study is sometimes better than a wide breadth of familiarity as is displayed in the Greek proverb, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." This would be a change in attitude from the many reading plans that guide a person to read the Bible in a year, but it fits nicely with passages like Ps 119:11 in which the psalmist says he stores up, hides, or treasures God's Word in his heart. I am still a proponent of reading the full text of Scripture, and encourage people to do so, but it should be recognized that knowing a small important part of the

Bible well is very useful.

These devotions could also be used in a small group setting like Gloria Dei's ChristCare™ groups. In the focus group it was clear that individuals enjoyed talking about their experiences with the devotions. This might be a way of connecting meditation to the congregation by fostering relationships around meditation on and conversation about the pericopes in a subset of the community. Could this serve to encourage relationships within the group which lead them back to worship in the congregation?

It is hard to determine or predict the full impact of employing such a strategy of devotion and worship in a congregation. It seems reasonable, since the participants felt that they learned about God's Word, that devotional habits could be used to help equip members for mission, or help them prepare for ministry. What remains unanswered, however, is how to move from learning to faithful action: to raise up leaders, to embolden individuals' witness, to encourage members to join or begin new ministries, and the like.

One other important ramification from this study on ministry at Gloria Dei is understanding that there are limitations to this type of devotion. It does not appeal to everyone and does not meet everyone's needs. One of the applications of such devotional habits might be to prepare devotions about Christian devotion. This could expose participants to a broader definition of devotion and introduce them to other devotional habits for which they might have an affinity. This partly means that I must stretch myself to engage in and appreciate other forms of devotion. It also might mean encouraging people who have different forms of devotion and helping them to appreciate and engage in those forms of devotion to the benefit of themselves, others in the congregation, and the community.

For the Church at Large

On a larger scale, it would not be hard to imagine a resource like this being published for the members of varying congregations to use. As many congregations in the LC—MS use the pericopes to guide their Sunday worship, there is good reason to conclude that members of other churches, or even other church bodies (in so far as our lectionaries are similar to one another), would benefit from engaging in such habits. There are already studies written for congregations which are based on the pericopes such as Concordia Publishing House's *A Longer Look at the Lessons* and this could be a complementary resource that comes at the Scripture readings from a different angle which helps the reader meditate upon the lessons, pray according to them, and find fuller connection to worship in his or her own congregation.²

With the use of the internet, this style of devotion could benefit the church on a much broader basis, and the benefit need not be only for lay people. I was told by one pastor in the Ohio District that he was using my devotions from the project as he was preparing his sermons. In the past my blog has received hits from around the world including places like China and the Middle East where Christians are oppressed if not persecuted. It has also been read by people in Africa and Haiti where a simple resource like this could provide basic information to help pastors and deacons who have not had the benefit of seminary training.

Another potential benefit to the church is reclaiming a form of devotion which is genuinely Lutheran. Certainly the members of Lutheran congregations have benefitted from devotional resources which flow from different traditions within Christianity. I myself have. Yet using such resources sometimes includes doctrines that are foreign to the Scriptures, emphases that are not

² One of the participants in the study related to me that he was visiting his son's church, a non-denominational congregation, when he found the devotions he had been doing for the week helped him understand the pastor's sermon even though the theme of the sermon, the Scripture reading it was based on, and the style of the

biblical, and a focus that does not necessarily lead back to corporate worship. There are also other forms of meditation which are pursued in Christianity. Guigo's *Ladder of Monks* still influences the way some Christians pursue *lectio divina* to an unhealthy end. Mysticism is still at work in the devotional habits of some Christians.

Rooting devotional meditation and prayer in the lectionary of our church body and using a distinctly Lutheran approach which emphasizes Law and Gospel, is informed by our confessions, and was even advocated by Luther and others who followed him, can help to protect our members against such influences while meeting the desire for a devotional expression that some people crave. It can foster a spirituality that is less focused on the mystical and more rooted in the Means of Grace. It can also equip people for the *tentatio* all Christians face as the user grows in their trust of God. As people grow in prayer and meditation, they will experience struggle in life. Lutheran spirituality teaches us to expect that. The first two parts of Luther's formula for what makes a theologian are prayer and meditation upon God's Word. Such devotions can help to develop a habit of constantly returning to these two practices so that when struggles come it will be part of the believer's life to turn to God in trust to pray and hear His Word.

For the Existing Body of Knowledge

To my knowledge, this is the only study of its kind on the topic of devotion rooted in the worship life of a congregation. That is not to say that others have not written about worship and devotion, this document itself testifies to the fact that others have. It is to say that I did not find any documents that studied what impact devotion (in this case devotion to God's Word) had on a person's experience of worship. I believe that this study is significant for the existing body of

service were disconnected from the devotions.

knowledge for the way that it connects the individual devotional life to the worship life of the congregation. In a time when there is a lot of emphasis on individualism and one's personal relationship with Jesus, it is important to recognize the importance of the gathering around the Word and Sacraments.

I believe this study is important for the existing body of knowledge regarding Lutheran Spirituality, as well. By rooting the individual's devotional life in the Means of Grace and the life of the church, the study endeavors to look at the spiritual life of the believer holistically. It recognizes that faith is expressed both individually and communally. Both expressions are important in the life of the believer, and to study only one side of that expression can miss the essence of the whole.

Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth

The process of writing a D.Min. thesis is both exhilarating and frustrating. Studying at this level has allowed me to think more deeply about theology, to learn about aspects of the life of faith that interested me, and to unlearn things about which I was wrong. The D.Min. program also allowed me to learn from some great theologians – both in classes and in reading. But the process is not easy, and it tests your character and discipline. The back and forth of proposing ideas, having them tested and found wanting, going back to the drawing board, writing, editing, getting feed-back, and re-writing is truly humbling. There were multiple times that I considered quitting. Yet, without all of those experiences, the exhilarating and the frustrating, this study would have been of lesser quality, and I would not have found that my work could be better than I was offering.

This study has completely redefined my understanding of devotion. As I described earlier, I

was very committed to the idea that reading the Scriptures and praying were *the* way to do devotions. I have come to see a much richer picture of what a devotional life might look like as the Holy Spirit enkindles passion about doctrines from God's Word which move people to rejoice in different aspects of His work in their lives and to live in ways that witness about God's Word to others. This is a much more free understanding of devotion which recognizes the amazing diversity with which God has gifted His people.

My research for this study also introduced me to resources for the devotional life that have blessed me personally and professionally. I will name two that have had the most profound impact on me. The first is *Starck's Prayer Book* which has helped me give words to the sick and dying to guide them in their prayers. His prayers in the section *For the Use of Those Afflicted* were of great encouragement and comfort to me as I struggled through depression as a side effect of a concussion. The second one which is more meaningful to me is Doberstein's *Minister's Prayer Book*. I'm not sure I would have been introduced to this resource which has become my daily devotional guide if I had not been talking to someone about this project who then asked me if I was familiar with this excellent little book.

This time of study has also served to help me know how little I know. There is so much to learn of God's Word, how He works in this world, how He uses pastors and laity, the expression of His Word through sermons, teaching, and writing, His created order, and so much more. The Doctor of Ministry degree might be a "terminal" degree, but rather than the end of learning it seems more like the opening of a new wing of a library which has many more things to learn in it.

Professionally, I feel that my ability to express theological concepts grew through this experience. I often found that items I was studying cross-pollinated into my sermons, adult Bible

classes, and even confirmation instruction. I feel that I have also grown in my knowledge and confidence in discussing matters of faith with those who disagree with Lutheran doctrine. This is partly because I am more confident in my knowledge, but it is also due to the fact that others have pushed back against my ideas and I have found that I have learned much through such experiences. I hope others learn from them too, and that I display the same grace I have received in my learning process.

I also feel that this experience has helped me in leadership in the congregation. This is largely due to the rigors of trying to clarify and express thoughts and ideas. I find myself thinking critically about the conclusions that are drawn in meetings, and feeling comfortable challenging them to test their veracity. It has also helped me to study my congregation to understand the culture, gifts, and interests of the people who make up Gloria Dei.

Perhaps the most important contribution to my professional life that the D.Min. program and this project have made is helping me to think carefully about how God's Law and Gospel are communicated in the different genres of Scripture. Preaching or writing a devotion based on a Gospel lesson is different from working with an Epistle, and both are different from Psalms or Proverbs. Yet the Law/Gospel dynamic exists throughout the Scriptures, and it is important to make certain that both are proclaimed with clarity and potency, and that the Gospel predominate.

Recommendations

The practical applications of this study are fairly straightforward. Where pastors have the gifts, time, and ability it can certainly benefit their congregation if they provide devotional materials which help to lead their congregation into worship. There are other ways of doing so beyond what I have presented here, and with the use of blogs, email, and church websites, this

need not be expensive.

Because pastors are often quite busy or not gifted for the work of writing, I believe it would be good if someone wrote a series of devotions based on the pericopes for congregations. I am strongly considering attempting this. I believe such a resource could benefit pastors and laity as they meditate on God's Word together through the week, even if the pastor's sermon ends up focusing on a different aspect of the texts than the devotions emphasize.

As for further studies on this topic there are a couple areas that I believe would benefit from a closer look.

I believe it would be helpful to have a similar study with a smaller cohort of participants but who gathered for monthly focus groups and had greater interaction with their journals. While the journals in this study were wonderfully full of information on the participants' experiences, they also had a tendency to focus on personal experiences, repeat the lessons, summarize sermons, and offer commentary on these topics. I wonder if more guidance and conversation on the journals might not yield richer layers of data for a study.

A logical next step from this study would be to offer the devotions to participants in a variety of LC-MS congregations – perhaps in a circuit, or even a broader context – which use the lectionary. It would be beneficial to understand if the devotions are efficacious even when the person preaching on Sunday is not the same person who wrote the devotions.

This study was done in the Time of the Church, which has themes which are often related to Christian living and growth. It might be useful to do a similar study during the Time of Christ and to focus the devotional material on the festivals of the church year to measure the impact those devotions might have on the participants' experience of those observations, their understanding of their importance, and if there is any impact on how they observe the holidays of

the church year.

In a similar vein, it might be helpful get a half-dozen pastors who would be willing to take on the practice of providing devotions based on the pericopes for their parishioners three to five times a week and to study the impact this discipline has on them. How might that affect their preaching and teaching? Would it change their personal devotional life? Would they perceive a benefit in their ministry?

During the planning of this study, we had discussions about writing a curriculum to teach congregational members how to engage in devotional practices. I believe this study bears out that there could be benefit to such work in the life of a congregation. Such a study might also raise further issues that hinder people from engaging in devotion, and identify strategies and tools that help people to embrace devotional habits.

It would also be helpful to study the generational aspect of devotion and worship. As I wrote this thesis, it struck me that none of the participants was younger than forty years old. This means that the Millennials and the older edge of Gen—Z were completely unrepresented. We already know that different generations tend to respond to authority, faith, and a host of other topics differently. Looking at this topic from a generational point of view might be beneficial.

I also believe it would be useful to study this topic solely with a cohort of Millennials. This generation is, in many ways, slipping away from the church, but often still longs for faith and community. It might be that a devotional life that is rooted in corporate worship will be a helpful tool to hold on to Millennials and help them connect their faith to life, church, and witness.

APPENDIX ONE

FORMS

“Devotional Habit and Worship” Research at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio

Consent for Participation in Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Pastor Eric Tritten as part of the requirements of the Doctor of Ministry degree at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about daily devotional habits and their connection to worship at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, OH. While portions of the study will be open to everyone in the congregation, I will be one of approximately ten people from Gloria Dei being asked to participate in this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, other participants will not be given details regarding my decision. Those details will also not be shared with other members of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, OH.
2. The length of this project is six months. I understand that participation involves attending an orientation seminar. I will also be asked to participate in personal devotional habits, reading God’s Word and spending time in prayer, attend worship services, reflect on how the devotional experiences impacted your experience of worship, and answer questions related to these activities. Those questions will be asked and answered in the following ways, through interviews, by keeping a journal, and by participating in a focus group.

Focus Group Portion of the Research

3. I understand that most focus group members will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the focus group session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end my participation in the focus group.
4. I understand that the conversations within the focus group are confidential. I will not share them with others.

5. Participation involves the participants in the research group. The focus group will last approximately an hour-and-a-half. Pastor may take written notes during the focus group. An audio recording of the focus group will be made. If I do not want to be recorded, I will not be able to participate in the study.

6. I understand that the audio recordings and transcriptions will only be used for the purposes of this research. The transcriptions of the audio may be made by a third party who will not have access to my name as connected with the recordings. That third party will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement if used.

Journal Portion of the Research

7. I understand that participating involves writing (or typing) a weekly reflection based on the themes of the devotions and their impact on aspects of my life including prayer, worship, and daily living.

8. All information in the journal is confidential, and my signature below indicates that I agree to give these writings to Pastor Tritten for his research. Should I decide I would like to keep the original copy of my writing, I will allow him to keep a copy of my work.

Publication of Research and Retention of Materials Gathered

9. In Pastor Tritten's final paper that will be published and available at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and online via dissertation services, my focus group answers or comments from my journal will only be quoted as short phrases that cannot be used to identify me.

10. If Pastor Tritten would like to use any lengthy quotations or reference to longer answers or comments, he will first need to seek my further, explicit permission.

11. I understand that Pastor Tritten will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from the focus group and journal, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.

12. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

13. Faculty and administrators from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, will neither be present at the focus group nor have access to raw notes or transcripts.

“Devotional Habit and Worship” Research at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Hudson, Ohio

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

I agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio recordings received from Pastor Eric Tritten related to this research study.

Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of the audio recorded focus group session.
2. To not make copies of any audio recordings or the transcribed focus group text, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
3. To save all study-related audio recordings and transcriptions in the password-protected Google Drive folder as administered by the researcher.
4. To delete any copies of electronic files that are saved to my computer hard drive and any back-up devices during the process of transcription.

I am aware that I can be held responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audio recordings and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name (printed) _____

Transcriber’s signature _____

Date _____

Signature of the Researcher

Date

APPENDIX TWO

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Information Requests for Semi-structured Interviews

1. Describe your devotional practices over the past 6 months.
2. Describe your experience of God in worship.
3. Describe your experience of listening to God's word in worship.
4. Describe your experience of responding to God's word in worship.
5. Describe your experience of how God responds to your prayers.
6. Describe the relationship between your daily life and Sunday worship.
7. Describe what you hope your spiritual life will look like in 6 months from now.
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Focus Group Questions

1. How have you felt about your experience with these devotions so far? How did you feel about the step(s) in the devotional exercises where less material was provided for you over time?
2. On the whole, do you feel this exercise has been good for you? If so, please describe what has made it so.
3. Was there ever a moment that something from your devotional time came to mind when you were participating in worship? If it is not too personal, would you share it?
4. Did you feel that the devotional practice helped you prepare for worship? If so, how?
5. Was it challenging to you to pray through the themes of thanksgiving, confession, and petitions related to the Scripture reading? How has this affected the way you pray, that is, talk to God?
6. Is there anything you'd like to say about the project that you haven't had a chance to say?

Journal Entries

The participants who agree to take part in the journaling exercise will need to choose whether they will fill out their entries online through the use of a Google Docs document or a traditional pen-and-paper journal. If they select the later they will be provided a 7 ½"x 9 ¾" note

book to journal in. Either way they will be offered the same prompt.

Prompt:

The model for these devotional exercises includes Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petitions. Please reflect on one of these themes from this week's devotions. Write about how your devotions impacted your prayer life, worship life, and your life in the world.

APPENDIX THREE

RECRUITMENT MATERIAL

Exhibit A

I have received approval from Concordia Seminary to begin the research phase of my doctoral project. The topic of the study is an investigation of how personal devotional habits impact a person's experience of corporate worship. The study will last for six months beginning in June and going through November. During this time I will provide devotions for the congregation for Monday through Friday which will be based on the appointed readings for the upcoming Sunday. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate. No experience is necessary.

I need ten participants who will allow me to study their experiences during the six months of the investigation. These individuals will commit to doing the devotions for the six month period, and report their experiences by allowing themselves to be interviewed before and after the project, participating in a focus group midway through the project, and keeping a weekly journal. It would be good if this group was a mix of men and women. (If there are more than ten people who volunteer I will divide the group by gender and then draw names to determine who will participate in the study, but, again, everyone is welcome to join in the devotions.) If you would like to participate as one of the subjects of the study, or if you have questions, please contact me. My phone number is below, or you can simply reply to this e-mail. If you reply to the e-mail, though, please make sure you do not use the reply-all function. Just reply to me.

Exhibit B

Dear XXXXXXXX,

Perhaps you have heard that Concordia Seminary, St. Louis has approved my doctoral project. I will be examining how devotional habits impact a person's experience of the Sunday worship service.

This is an exciting moment for me, but it also means that I've got to get to work! I need help on this, and I am writing to ask you to strongly consider participating in this project.

Let me describe what I am asking of you.

Sometime in May I would interview you about your devotional life. This should take about 45 minutes to an hour – tops! The interview is 100% confidential. It will be recorded, transcribed, and kept in a locked file for comparison to a second interview which will take place in late November/early December.

From June through November you will be provided with devotions for Monday through Friday of each week. These devotions will be patterned after Martin Luther's Devotional habits. They will be based on the readings for the upcoming Sunday. The first two months of devotional material will have a brief instructional piece and a prayer that includes thanksgiving, confession, and intercession regarding the reading. Then next two months of devotional material will have bullet point ideas for the main points of the reading and ideas for you to pray about. The last two months will provide only the reading and you will draw your own ideas from the reading and

pray your own prayers. If that seems a little confusing, do not fear! I will hold an informational meeting to teach you the process, and even when you will be given nothing for the devotions, I will still provide resources and devotions online that can help you. I expect that these devotions will take about 15-20 minutes per day, although if you choose to meditate on the reading or pray longer you are certainly welcome to.

Each week – preferably on Sunday – you will be asked to write a journal entry reflecting on your experience of the devotions in relationship to your life and worship experiences. You could do this either by hand or on the computer, whichever is more comfortable to you. You will decide how long this takes. I can imagine someone writing for 10-15 minutes and being done. Other people might get into it and write for a longer period of time. These will be submitted to me.

Early in September I will have a focus group that draws all the participants together and we will discuss your experiences. I expect that event to last about an hour and a half. This will also be recorded and notes made of the proceedings. Once again, these will be kept in strict confidence.

Would you please prayerfully consider helping me with this? You are not committing to being in worship every Sunday or even doing everything perfectly. That is part of life and, therefore, part of the study.

I need ten participants. You should know that I have sent this letter to 14 members of the congregation. You also know that I have openly solicited for participants in the congregation. I did this because you need to feel free enough to say, “No.” I want the participants to enjoy this process, and if you feel that I have twisted your arm to get you to participate, I fear that you won’t enjoy it. If more than ten volunteer I will have to limit the group, but you will all still be welcome to participate in the devotions. In fact I hope everyone in the congregation participates in the devotions!

That being said, I selected you because you seemed like good candidates for a study like this and I thought that you might enjoy spending some additional time in God’s word and prayer.

Thank you for reading this. Please pray about this and let me know if you will help me out.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Tritten

APPENDIX FOUR

AGENDA FOR PARTICIPANTS' MEETING

I. Thank You!

II. Forms

III. The Plan

a. Devotions Format

i. Scripture

1. Context.
2. Content
3. Function

ii. Teaching

iii. Life

iv. Prayer – We will explore different combinations of these.

1. Instruction

2. Thanksgiving
3. Confession
4. Petitions

b. Interviews

c. Focus Group

d. Journals

i. Google Docs

ii. Hand Written

IV. Interview Appointments

V. Thank You



Monday –	Old Testament
Tuesday –	Gospel
Wednesday –	Psalm
Thursday –	Epistle
Friday –	Sermon Text

June & July – I will provide full devotions and prayers.

August & September – I ask questions to guide you, but provide most of the materials

October & November – You will do the devotions on your own.

APPENDIX FIVE

DEVOTIONAL MATERIALS

June 1, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Genesis 3:8-15

In this text we find Adam and Eve immediately after they have disobeyed God by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As Adam and Eve begin the new reality of their life as sinful beings they experience separation from God and from one another, but God promises One who will save them from their sin. God moved Moses to record this event to show us the damage that sin does to individuals and their relationships. In addition God promises the Savior and sets his plan of salvation into action.

Teaching

This passage teaches us what sin is and what it does. Sin is disobedience of God. Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat, and they did. Essentially, they placed their own will over God's will. Sin's consequence is death, but in the meantime, what it does is create separation and division in relationships. The man and woman experienced separation from God. They displayed division as they blamed one another.

Interestingly, God's response to sin was to create another division. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring," God said to the serpent. In putting enmity between us and the serpent, he divides us from the devil, the world, and even our own sinful nature. Not only that, but he is here promising a Savior who will undo the evil that has been done and restore our relationships with God and one another.

Life

Often in life we find ourselves caught in strained relationships. We do well to recognize that the cause for that strain is sin. God has kept his promise to send an offspring from Eve to crush the serpent's head – that is to defeat the devil. That offspring is Jesus and he defeated the forces of sin and death by dying on the cross to forgive our sins. Since Jesus has provided forgiveness for us we are reconciled to God. At the same time, we have the opportunity to extend and receive forgiveness in our relations with others, and to be reconciled to them.

Look for opportunities to forgive others for Jesus' sake, and recognize where you also receive forgiveness.

Prayer

The focus of this prayer is on Instruction.

Father in Heaven, you have given us your word that we might know you as our Creator, Savior, and Comforter. Please give us your Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds so that we might receive and believe your word. As you teach us about sin, help us understand how damaging it is in our relationship with you and the relationships we have with others. Grant us faith to trust your promise to save us from our sin and to trust that you have kept that promise by giving your Son, our Savior, Jesus to die for our sins. Open our minds to understand our lives according to your word. Amen.

June 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

Mark records this event in the context of great ministerial growth for Jesus. He has drawn large crowds because of his miracles and has just appointed the Twelve Disciples. Mark records that despite the many people who were following, some did not accept him, and others were seeking to discredit him. Jesus uses this confrontation to show the true nature of his ministry. It was not that he had a demon, but that he had come to confront and bind the demonic and to save people from the power of evil which was (and is) at work in the world.

Teaching

Jesus uses a brief parable to describe his ministry in this reading. A parable is a story that is told in very earthly terms that contains heavenly revelation. So as Jesus spoke of the strong man's house, plundering, and binding, in the context of casting out demons we infer his meaning.

The strong man's house is this world. The strong man is Satan – the prince of demons. Jesus himself is the one who comes to bind and plunder Satan. But what are the goods that Jesus plunders? What is of value in this world that he would desire? That would be you and me, the ones he rescues from the powers of evil.

Life

The view of Jesus as the stronger man who binds and plunders the strong man fits nicely with what we believe about the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Thy will be done." God's will is done when he breaks and hinders the evil plans of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. Our life of faith begins and ends with this: that Jesus has saved us from sin, death, and the devil by his death and resurrection.

Living in this reality allows us to have a humble confidence. We are among those who have been saved. That does not make us better or cleverer than anyone else, but it does mean that we know the Savior and we can introduce others to him. As people who have been saved our lives are shaped by compassion for people who are still caught in the strong man's grip, and our desire is to bring them news of the stronger man who has defeated him in order to save them.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for coming into the world to bind the powers of sin and evil, and to rescue us from them. Thank you for bearing with the doubt and unbelief of people you loved, never wavering from your mission. Thank you for confronting those who would lead people away from you. We give you thanks for the salvation you have won by your own death and resurrection, which display that you are indeed the strongest of all and that your salvation is more powerful than the contrivances of any demon by any name. Thank you for saving us to make us your own. Amen.

June 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 130

This psalm is one of the Psalms of Ascents. It is believed that these psalms were sung as pilgrims came to Jerusalem (which is on a hill) to worship on festivals like Passover, or when they went up to the temple at other times to worship. This psalm is a prayer of one who is in the depths of sorrow because of the sins he committed. It teaches us both to confess our sins and to put our hope in God's love and mercy. The function of this psalm to teach us how to call upon God in our sin and to give words to the painful experience of feeling separated from God even as we hope in him for salvation.

Teaching

How should we feel when we sin? We are shown two responses in this psalm.

The first response is shown as the psalmist begs for mercy from an emotional place that he calls, "Out of the depths." Iniquity brings darkness into our lives, including dark emotions like shame, guilt, unworthiness, and powerlessness. This moves us to confess our iniquity and our guilt.

The second response is one that proclaims hope. This is the confession of faith and trust in God. But what is the basis of that faith and trust? That is what the psalmist speaks of toward the end. With the Lord there is steadfast love – not a fickle love that would abandon us. With him is plentiful redemption – not just a little for those who feel their sin is small, but *plentiful!* These things make us confident that he will redeem his people from all their iniquities.

Life

In our life negative emotions like guilt and shame are often shunned, but in the life of faith there is a time and place for them, and we see that they play an important role. These negative feelings drive us back to God, in whom we have experienced love and redemption. We believe that God loved us so much that he gave his Son, Jesus, to die to redeem us. This leads us to throw ourselves on God's mercy when we sin.

We are not meant to dwell forever in those dark feelings. Even as watchmen waited for the sun to rise in the early morning, we wait with certainty, hope, and even joy because we know that just as the sun will rise, God will forgive us because he has redeemed us. Because of this we

always have hope even in our darkest moments.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Confession.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! Please hear my voice and have mercy on me. I know that I have sinned and that my guilt is great. Indeed, it is so great that I can do nothing about it, and of that I am ashamed. But in your love and kindness you have had mercy on me, and so I cry out in hope: Please forgive me for Jesus' sake! He has died for me. He bore my sin. Do not let my iniquity overcome me, but help me to always have in mind Jesus' cross and sacrifice. I confess my sin, and I also confess my faith that as surely as the sun will rise you will forgive me because of your great love. Amen.

June 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Context

This passage comes in the middle of a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. He has been stressing that the gospel has been entrusted to broken people so that its power is clearly revealed as God's power and not our own. Paul describes the unity believers have in the gospel and the hope we have in the face of this world's troubles. In this portion of the letter Paul is reminding his readers that the things of this world often distract us from God's glory, but they are really only temporary. The things of Christ are what are eternal.

Teaching

The church's reason for being is Jesus' resurrection. It is the confession of faith that Jesus died and rose for us which unites all believers. We are diverse in many ways – ethnically, politically, geographically, and more – but the resurrection and Jesus' salvation bind us together in the belief that there is more and better than this world offers us. There is a life beyond that is given as a gift to those who believe.

Jesus' resurrection also gives us a common purpose. God's grace extends to more and more people, and our desire is that they will believe in the Risen One so they too may have eternal life in Jesus' resurrection. This is to God's glory, and for this good news all who believe give thanks.

But we live in a world where these things are hard to see. The evidence that our eyes behold would cast doubt on our hope in Jesus. To this our answer is that Christ is risen, and he will keep his promises.

Life

In this life we often lose heart because we can see so many things that make us question God's salvation. We see the guilt of our own sin. We see the moral decay of the world. We see corruption, ruthlessness, and oppression. These things weigh us down and make the world a hard place to live.

How then shall we respond to this? We cling all the more tightly to God's promises. We begin to see that what the world perceives as real, solid, or permanent are actually imagined, ephemeral, and transient. God's promises are more certain than what we can see with our eyes. Because of Jesus' resurrection we can face the doubts and sorrows of this life without losing heart. They cannot take God's promise from us, nor can they keep him from finally bringing us to the glorious permanent life he has prepared for us.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Petition.

O God, it is written, "I believed, and so I spoke." Help your people, including me, to have the courage to speak all the more boldly of Jesus' resurrection. When the world resists this good news help us to not lose heart. Fix our thoughts all the more solidly on the glory you receive when new believers give thanks for the gospel message. And when we face times when the world seems more real than your promise, when we become consumed with the things of this life, or doubts rise in our hearts we ask you to turn our eyes upon what is unseen – the work you do in our lives and throughout the world to save sinners – and bring to mind the eternal home we have because Jesus rose from the dead, and we will too. Amen.

June 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

In this passage Jesus was confronting the scribes regarding their accusation that he was possessed by a demon. Jesus revealed that there is a sin for which there is no forgiveness: blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Jesus used the opportunity of this accusation to teach us that forgiveness is central to his ministry, but when people reject the Holy Spirit's gift of faith they cannot receive forgiveness.

Teaching

If Jesus died to forgive all sins, how can one be unforgivable? It is because the only way to receive forgiveness is by believing in Jesus. Only faith can receive forgiveness, and only the Spirit creates faith. By rejecting Jesus' word, the scribes refused the good news he had come to bring, and in so doing refused the salvation the Spirit would have delivered to them. This still happens today.

We should note that Jesus' biological family did not believe in him either. At least not yet. This shows us that the warning about the eternal sin is not the only word to hear here. Jesus says that whoever does the will of God is part of his family.

So what is the will of God? To save sinners by faith in Jesus!

Life

We are always tempted to come to God on our own terms; perhaps on the basis of our pure

doctrine, clean living, generosity or good deeds. These cannot work. We strive for pure doctrine, clean living, etc. because Jesus saved us. He has loved us and made us part of his family – brothers, sisters, mothers – but nothing we do can save us. Only Jesus’ death and resurrection do that. But we do good in this world as testimony to all that God has done for us. The good we do is fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Prayer

This prayer combines the themes of Instruction and Thanksgiving.

Father in Heaven, you teach us in your word that it is your desire to include all people in your family, but some people refuse the gift that you give by the work of your Holy Spirit. Help us firmly hold the truth that, while all are invited to believe, some will reject your invitation. Use that belief to move us to boldly speak of the gospel to invite others to believe in your Son.

Thank you for giving us your Spirit and creating faith in us. Thank you for making us sisters, brothers, and mothers of Christ. Thank you for the privilege of sharing the hope we have because of him with our friends and neighbors who do not know him. Thank you for all you have done to make us your own: creating us, redeeming us, and giving us faith to make us your people. Amen.

June 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ezekiel 17:22-24

The prophet Ezekiel worked with Israelites who were captives and exiles, longing to return to their homeland. In this passage he uses the image of sprig from a tree that is transplanted and grows into a mighty tree which is capable of holding many birds. This symbolizes the coming of the kingdom of God which at first appears very small, but grows so large that all kinds of people are welcomed in it. Ezekiel’s prophecy of God’s word is intended to help us see how great and all-encompassing God’s kingdom is.

Teaching

When the Babylonians captured Jerusalem they took many of the brightest and the best out of that land and into captivity. It was a strategy to keep any nation from rising up against them after they had been conquered. It is only normal that the captives would long to go home. God’s message to the people was that there would be a small number – a remnant – that he would save to restore them. The sprig would become a noble cedar. That was good news, but then something strange happened in the text.

God said that under this noble cedar every kind of bird would dwell and nest in the shade of its branches. In other words, if the noble cedar was Israel, they would be welcoming people from all nations into their lives. The kingdom’s purpose would not be only for the Israelites to return home and live happily ever after. The purpose would be to welcome all people so that they would all know that he is the Lord.

Life

Are you a welcoming person? When it comes to bringing people into God's kingdom we are called to be welcoming. The good news of Jesus' salvation is not meant for us to hold to ourselves. In fact, we are extensions of the tree Ezekiel spoke about. As the church we are now the ones who have as part of our purpose to welcome all people who would find comfort and home in Jesus.

Living with a bunch of birds would be pretty chaotic. There would be lots of noise, squawking, and squabbling. Sometimes our life in the church seems like that too, and that can be discouraging. Next time you feel like you're surrounded by squawking birds at church, remember that each of them is just like you – a sinner forgiven and welcomed in Christ. Let that help you see them in a different light.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Thanksgiving.

O Lord God, thank you for sending your prophet Ezekiel to speak your word. Thank you for the image of the sprig that grows to a mighty cedar, which reminds us that, though it sometimes seems small, your kingdom is great and draws in all kinds of people. Thank you for the wide diversity of your people who are positioned to reach even more people to bring them into your kingdom. Thank you for including us among the many who take shelter in the church and find our home in Christ. Thank you for the great reversal of fortunes that you have brought about, for surely we were the low tree and the dry tree, but by Jesus' death and resurrection you have given us life, making us high and green. Thank you for standing against your enemies to bring them low and dry them up in order to save us. Thank you that if even they turn and repent they too will be welcomed into your kingdom. Thank you for your salvation. Amen.

June 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

In this section of the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus teaching in parables – earthly stories with heavenly meaning. In both of these parables Jesus compared the kingdom of God to seeds that grow in ways that the one who plants them cannot control. Mark recorded these parables to pass along to us Jesus' teaching that growth of God's kingdom is not dependent on us, but on God, although God uses us in the process.

Teaching

Perhaps in science class when you were a child you performed an experiment in which you took a bean seed and put it in a plastic bag with a piece of paper towel. The towel was dampened, and the seed was watched. In a few days the seed sprouted, and a plant began to grow from the seed. You waited for the seed to spout, but there was nothing you could do to force the seed to put forth its roots and stem.

Jesus' parable likens the kingdom of God to a man who scatters seed on the ground. What can he do to make the seeds spout? Nothing! This is how it is when we as God's people share the

Gospel. We plant seeds – hopefully many, many seeds – and they either grow or they don't. We cannot control that. But when God gives the growth we rejoice in the harvest and we see that God uses us to bring people into his kingdom.

Life

Often we shy away from telling people about Jesus. We are torn between two fears: the fear of rejection and the fear that we are responsible to save people from their sins. The first has some legitimacy. The second does not.

Sometimes people will reject us when we share the hope we have in Jesus. We have to be prepared for that and accept that sometimes we will suffer for our faith. To bring someone to faith, however, is not something we are capable of, but only the Holy Spirit can do. We need to relinquish that responsibility which does not belong to us anyway.

Our place in this parable is to scatter seeds. We share the hope that the kingdom of God has broken into this world, even into our own lives, in order to save us. Beyond that only God can give the growth. So we freely share the good God has done for us, and rejoice when he creates faith in people.

Prayer

The theme for this prayer is Confession.

O God, I confess that sometimes I am afraid to speak of you and the salvation you have given me. I become afraid that people will reject me, ridicule me, or I might suffer in some other way. I also have to admit that sometimes I experience guilt and fear that you expect me to make people believe in you. I cannot do this, but you don't expect me to, so please forgive me for allowing myself to become paralyzed by responsibilities that do not even belong to me. Forgive me for thinking more highly of myself than I ought. Forgive me for keeping the seed of the Gospel to myself and for not trusting you to bring the harvest. Forgive me for Jesus' sake. Amen.

June 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 1

The book of Psalms contains prayers and hymns of God's people. It often gives language to the prayers of our hearts. The first psalm sets the stage for the rest of the book by laying out two categories that all people are separated into: the righteous and the wicked. The psalm is designed to encourage the righteous to remember the blessings God has promised, especially salvation from the final judgement that all people will face.

Teaching

As Christians we know that we become righteous in God's sight by faith in Jesus. We have been separated from the wicked because our sins are forgiven. But how should we live since we have been claimed by God and made his people? Psalm 1 poetically probes the ethical dimensions of our lives in Christ. It urges us to reject the life of sin and to focus on God's will as it is revealed

in his law, which includes the full teaching of the word of God. The word of God becomes the focus of how we live by faith. We meditate on it, which means we fill our minds with it. It roots us so that we are not blown away by the troubles of life which test our faith, and we are nourished by it to bear fruit in our lives.

Life

God invites us in this psalm to see life differently. He gives us the lens of his word to shape our vision and to see life as he sees it. We see there is righteousness and wickedness. We see that there will be a judgement and that the things of this world, the things so many people build their lives on, will not last. God is inviting us to put his word in our heads and hearts so that it becomes our focus and our greatest treasure. It, after all, is what reveals his love to us, proclaims Christ crucified and risen to us, and is the vehicle God uses to come to us and create faith in us.

God's word also firmly roots us. When people speak of Christian growth they often mean outward deeds. That is appropriate as this psalm speaks of bearing fruit, which is good works. But there is also growth that is not seen. We do not get to see the root systems of trees, especially when they dig down deeply. But deep roots sustain a tree in hard times and keep it upright in the strongest winds. God's word does something similar in us, and it is good for us have this word on our lips and ears so that it gives us strength in hard times and keeps us upright in the face of all kinds of temptations.

Prayer

The theme for this prayer is Petition.

O Lord, we long to be the blessed people the psalmist speaks of. Help all your people to shun the counsel of the wicked – the philosophies and worldviews of this age that would turn us from you. Help us to never stand in the way of sinners – content with tolerating the evil of this world. Help us never to sit in the seat of scoffers – mocking those who believe your true word and who seek to live according to it. Instead, Lord, give us your Spirit so that we might delight in everything you teach in your word. As you have made us righteous in Christ, let our lives show righteousness in how we live. Make us like a firmly rooted tree that is well nourished by you and strong because of you. Let our lives bear the fruit of faith – love, joy, peace, godliness, etc. Help us to do good works that will cause people to give you glory. Keep us every mindful of your judgement and sustain us as your people. Amen.

June 11, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:1-17

Shortly before this passage Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to recognize that the things of this world are temporary while the things God had promised were eternal. He went on to encourage them to find their confidence in God's promise of eternal life so that they would live lives dedicated to Jesus. Paul's purpose in this passage is to help the reader have courage that is rooted in God's salvation and is focused on God's judgement so that she will live her life in the service of the Lord.

Teaching

Paul painted a picture of life in this world. He compared it to living in a tent; we are covered but not very securely. We long for something better to live in. This body we have is temporary. But in Jesus' resurrection, we have been promised our own resurrection. We will be clothed in a body that Paul likens to a house made by God himself for us.

This reality can only be known by faith, and Paul urges us to, "walk by faith, not by sight." This is not easy as we are so connected to these bodies, and this world is the only "reality" we have ever known. But knowing there is more than meets the eye about life urges us to persuade others – to witness to them about Jesus, his death, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life. It is this reality that allows us to live for others instead of ourselves, and this is especially the case as we seek to live our lives for the sake of Jesus.

Life

We live in a world that seems to think that it is not accountable to God, and that we are free agents to do whatever we please. This is not the case, but, "we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ..." In the meantime, we often face pressure (internal and external) to remain silent about God's will, sin, the world's accountability to God, and the like; which are things that also give us opportunities to speak about God's love and forgiveness.

The message of this passage is one that encourages us to spend our lives for Christ's sake. We can live holding loosely to this life, because we know we have something better waiting for us. We are privileged to face the world with faith, recognizing that the things we see are only temporary. We also have the joy of knowing the one who died and was raised for us, and his love and life enable us to live selflessly.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Instruction.

Lord Jesus, help us learn to walk by faith and not by sight. Grant us your Spirit so we take to heart that these bodies are temporary even as this life is temporary. You have immortal bodies for us. We may suffer and groan in this body and long to be unclothed from it so we may receive that immortal body, but there is much for us to do in this life. Our lives are intended to please you, to be lived for your sake. You know us profoundly better than we know ourselves. Keep us mindful of your judgment and the good conscience we have in your death and resurrection so that we do not lose heart. Amen.

June 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

In this chapter Jesus used parables to reveal truths about the kingdom of God. The parables in this reading have the theme of growth. This growth is something we do not control which shows the kingdom's power and amazing size. Jesus is teaching us that God's kingdom work has

broken into our lives and that he is including us and all kinds of people in it.

Teaching

People are often attracted to big dramatic events. Jesus, however, spoke of the kingdom of God in the most mundane terms of seeds and plant growth. Plant growth is something that evades the eye. We do not see the grass getting taller, only that it has gotten taller. As God does his work growing the kingdom there will be times that we will wonder if it is growing, and other times that we will be awed by how big and inclusive it is.

The image of birds in the garden is telling. People often put items like scarecrows, rubber snakes, and flashing pie pans in their gardens to keep the birds away because of the damage they do. Here Jesus welcomes the birds, even as he welcomes sinners, into the shade of the kingdom to find their homes in him.

Life

Too often we see church as a place for holy people to go and worship. The kingdom of God expressed in the church is intended to draw people in from all walks of life. Our presence there is a gift of God's grace, too. It is only by Jesus' sacrifice for our sins that we become part of God's kingdom.

Prayer

This prayer blends the themes of Confession and Petition.

O Lord God, as I live this life I don't often think about your kingdom and its growth. I get wrapped up in my doing and the urgency of what happens to me. Please forgive me! Please forgive me for the many times that I've had opportunity to scatter the seed of the Gospel and didn't. And please forgive me for the times that I did not welcome people into your kingdom, but thought them a nuisance or considered them as someone who doesn't need the peaceful place you prepare for all people.

Grant me and all your people courage to live as citizens of your kingdom in the kingdom of this world. Help us to spread the word that grows into a harvest of believers. Help us to invite others into the shelter your kingdom provides for sinners. Fix our thoughts and prayers on your kingdom and its growth, and help our lives to reflect the values of your kingdom, particularly the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death and resurrection. Amen.

June 15, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Job 38:1-11

Through all his suffering Job remained faithful to God until he finally came to the point when he exclaimed, "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35). Chapter 38 is the beginning of a four chapter response from God in which he essentially says, "I am God. I don't answer to you." While this is but a taste of God's answer, it functions to put Job (and us) in awe of God and to call us to put our trust in him as the Almighty who provides for his people.

Teaching

As Job was confronted by his friends they provided many reasonable arguments to defend God's justice and to accuse Job of deserving the terrible things he had experienced. Not only that, but in arguing his own innocence Job himself proclaimed he wanted an answer from God. God's answer is to put Job and his friends in their place. He asks, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" Too often we assume we know what God should or would do in a given situation. His response here tells us that our reason cannot match God's wisdom.

God revealed himself as the Creator of all things in this passage. He will continue in this vein putting Job in his place, but also putting Job in awe of God once again. This passage is important for us modern believers to remember in a world that sees creation more-or-less as a random accident. It is not. It is designed by a God who takes all things into account and to whom all things are accountable.

Life

When people go through difficult times they can become overwhelmed by the pain they are experiencing. It is not a sin to wonder why we suffer; although the Bible makes clear that the source of our suffering is sin, just not necessarily a particular sin. We assume that God must be punishing us when we suffer, and that there can be no good purpose in it. But one of the awesome things about God is the way that he uses suffering to his glory. There is no greater example of that than the cross, and Jesus' sacrificial suffering and death to redeem us.

When we become overwhelmed Job reminds us that there is another factor at work in the world. Beyond our sin, beyond all evil, God the Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter is at work. He offers us the opportunity to be overwhelmed by him, his power, his love, his sacrifice, his salvation.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Confession.

O God, you are the Creator of all things. Please forgive me for the times that I've thought that this world was out of control or that my life was random happenstance. Forgive me for the times that I doubted your goodness, your power, your love, or anything else about you as I went through hard times. Forgive me for heeding dark counsels and words without knowledge instead of listening to your word and trusting in you. Forgive me for considering the suffering of my life as punishment from you for something I did or as something that you could not use to your glory. Indeed, please forgive me for caring more about my glory than yours. Forgive me for the sake of Jesus who suffered for me. Amen.

June 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41

Mark recorded the account of Jesus calming the sea after a series of parables about the kingdom of God. In this passage Jesus fell asleep in the boat as they crossed the Sea of Galilee. When a storm arose which threatened to sink the boats, the disciples woke Jesus and he calmed the sea.

This serves as a tangible example of the kingdom of God having broken into the world in Jesus, and his action show his authority as they call us to put our faith in him.

Teaching

People will speak of the storms of life and use this passage as an allegory for how Jesus can bring peace into every aspect of our lives. There is truth in that idea, but there is something more profound going on here. While Jesus does indeed rescue the disciples from the tossing sea, his question to them is, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

There is no promise in this passage that God will calm all the metaphorical storms of our lives. Instead there is a sense that God will be with us in the midst of all those storms. There is a call to trust him with our lives and to know that he does indeed care that we are perishing, but there is no need to fear. Jesus himself suffered the storms of life even to the point of death in order to win everlasting life for us. He will certainly not abandon us in our time of need.

Life

Where do we find ourselves asking God, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” Is it when we receive a dreaded diagnosis from the doctor? Is it when we hurt for our children’s sorrows? Is it when we are estranged from someone we love? All of these, and many other circumstances, can make us feel like we are dying, or want to die. Jesus’ response to that pain is to say, “Trust me.”

The kingdom of God has broken into your life, and Jesus is present in and with you. The situation might be terrifying and heartbreaking, but Jesus understands and he will bring you through it. Remember that he faced a terrifying and heartbreaking death in order to win your salvation. What can he do with your life as he brings you through the hard times?

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Petition.

O Lord, maker of the sea and the sky, be with us in the storms of life. There are many people experiencing painful situations. They have lost loved ones, been diagnosed with illnesses, have had their hearts broken by people they love, suffer from terrible temptations, and are wracked with guilt. Help them know that you are there with them and that you will not abandon them. Help all of us who face hard times to trust your good and gracious will for us even when we suffer. Fill our hearts with faith and trust that no matter what happens to us your promises are certain and they will be kept. We ask that when our hearts are in turmoil like a tossing sea that you would speak your command, “Peace! Be still!” and that we would know that you are God who loves us, provides for us, defends us, and delivers us from all evil. Grant us awe at your power, confidence in your will, and peace in your love. Amen.

June 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 124

Psalm 124 is one of the Psalms of Ascents sung by worshipers going to the temple in Jerusalem.

This one was written by David, before the temple was built. Its focus is on God's salvation and a recognition of our inability to save ourselves from the troubles of this world. The psalm's function is to prepare the one who reads it for worshiping the God who saves and for rejoicing in the certainty of that salvation.

Teaching

There is nothing in this psalm that suggests a particular event that inspired David to write these words. They are a general confession of what David experienced throughout his life: that God delivers his people. This is from a mighty warrior who many could have considered more than capable of fighting off his enemies, but David did not see it that way. Instead he acknowledges a total reliance on God for his safety and victory over his enemies.

It is helpful to us to see that salvation is at the heart of why the Israelites worshiped God in this passage. The salvation Jesus won for us by his death and resurrection is at the heart of our worship, too.

Life

In these words we are moved to ask, "What great enemy would swallow us up or sweep us away?" As God's people, there are always earthly terrors that we face, and there is no promise for us here that we won't be swept away in this life. Not only that, but we see the church in decline and a world aggressively asserting that the time of faith is over. However, we can take heart because our help is in the name of the Lord. He will not allow his word to go silent, and our hope for eternal life is secure in him.

More personally, each of us faces temptations, struggles of faith, and guilt for our sin. We do well to take all these things up in prayer crying out, "Our help is in the name of the Lord! He is the one who made heaven and earth, and his power is sufficient to rescue us!" When we put ourselves at his mercy and rely on him, we will find him faithful. We are confessing that our salvation is a gift from him; not something we have in hand already. If you have any doubt about the surety of that salvation though, look to the cross and see what he was willing to do to rescue us.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Instruction.

O Lord, teach us to see the dangers of this world rightly. Help us to perceive the enemies that surround us who would harm us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Help us to understand that the threat of being swallowed up or swept away is real, but make us certain that it is nothing more than a threat. Grant us your Spirit that we might know that you have indeed been on our side and that you will not leave us, but you will see us through the flood and rescue us. Give us wisdom to recognize our greatest foes in the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures and help us see that you have rescued us from those foes by Jesus' death and resurrection. Teach us to pray with confidence, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," so that we may know that nothing in this world can overcome us because we are protected by you.

Teach us to worship you from a heart that recognizes our own weakness but marvels at your salvation so that we may worship you with joy and humility. Amen.

June 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians was a little tense when he wrote 2 Corinthians. Because he loved them, he confronted them about sins which were troubling them in 1 Corinthians. They were deeply sorrowful. In this letter his purpose is to reassure them. Paul reminds them of the time of God's favor (which is "now") and all that he and his ministry partners have gone through to get the gospel out into the world. Finally he urges them to widen their hearts to him and to respond to his love for them. The function of this section urges them to recognize the Lord's favor and to open their hearts to Paul and to be reconciled to him.

Teaching

When it comes to working together with God, there is no place for our efforts when it comes to our salvation. However, when it comes to other people's salvation, Paul said that he worked with Jesus to bring salvation to those who did not have it. There is a partnership in which God includes us in his work, and our lives find purpose in joining with Christ to deliver the gospel.

Paul's experience teaches us that we can (and will) bear with much for the sake of the good news of God's salvation. While he went about sharing the word of God, he experienced all kinds of struggles. The way that he endured those difficulties is a great part of his testimony as he shared the love of Jesus and the hope of his death and resurrection.

Life

How do you feel about suffering for the gospel? Many people consider suffering to be one of the worst things that can happen to us. How does Paul speak of his sufferings for the sake of the gospel, though? His struggles are a key part of how he commended himself to the Corinthians; they were part of his witness.

When we suffer in any way with peace, patience, a gentle spirit, hope, and faith that commends us to those who see us. Our suffering also often provides us a stage from which to share our hope with others. In this way all of our suffering can be for the gospel because God can use it to allow us to join in the work of bringing the good news that saves sinners to those who need to hear it.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, thank you for suffering for us and for bringing salvation to us by your suffering. Thank you for put us in a favorable time and place to hear about your love and to believe in you. Thank you for people, like Paul, who passed the faith down from generation to generation, often through pain and difficult toil. Thank you for the struggles of this life that remind us that this world is not our home. Thank you that those struggles can often give us entry into other people's

lives to share the hope of your crucifixion and resurrection with those who do not know you. Thank you that those struggles can also place us where we can encourage others, even fellow believers. This truly is the time of your favor and salvation. Thank you for placing me in it to join in your work of reaching people with your love so that they might be reconciled through you to the Father by the working of the Spirit. Amen.

June 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 4:34-41

The miracle of calming the sea follows a series of parables about the kingdom of God, and it also is first in a series of miracles that display Jesus' divine power. The focus of this miracle is Jesus' power over creation; the wind and the sea obey him. Mark records this miracle so that we can see Jesus as both human (he sleeps) and God so that we might have faith in him and trust him in all circumstances of our lives.

Teaching

Jesus is both human and divine. Wearied as he was from the work of his ministry Jesus fell asleep in the stern of the boat. His peacefulness contrasted the panic of his disciples. As a man his faith and trust in his Father superseded the threat of the storm, so he rested quietly. As God incarnate Jesus displayed his power in calming the storm and the sea; they heard their Creator's voice and obeyed.

Life

It is our privilege to hear our Creator's voice through the Bible. Jesus' miracle shows that he cares for his disciples, and that includes modern day disciples like you and me. While he commands the storm and sea, "Peace! Be still!" he gives those gifts to those who have faith in him. No matter what happens in the world around us we can be at peace and be still knowing that Jesus is our God. He who slept in the stern laid down his life for us. He will not abandon us in our time of need.

Prayer

This prayer combines the themes of Instruction and Confession.

Lord Jesus, teach us to trust you more fully. When our lives feel like we are being tossed by a storm, help us to realize that you are there in the midst of them with us. Keep us mindful of your power and presence. What can this life do to us? When you are with us there is nothing that can destroy us and nothing that can ultimately harm us. It is true that our bodies may be harmed or even killed, but when we walk with you by faith we know that the end of this earthly life is but the moment that we enter into your presence and fully experience your peace. Give us your Holy Spirit so that we might learn to trust you all the more deeply and that we would learn to trust you in the midst of all dangers.

We confess that our fears too often overwhelm us. As we experience the dangers and struggles of life we sometimes wonder, as your disciples did, if you care about us. Our lives are so attuned to

what we experience in our physical being that we lose sight of the greater reality that you have brought to us; we are part of the kingdom of God! Forgive us for be so focused on this world and this life that we lose sight of what you have done for us by dying and rising to rescue us from all that is sinful, harmful, and damning. Forgive us for our lack of faith. Forgive us for the many times we seek to solve our problems apart from you. Forgive us for thinking that we have the wherewithal to protect ourselves. Forgive us for not being at peace in your presence, but being fretful and anxious about what the future holds. Please forgive us for these and all other sins that reveal our lack of trust in you, for you are our Savior, Lord, God, and King. Amen.

June 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22-33

Lamentations was written by Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem. As the name implies the book is a lament over the sorrowful things that had happened because of Israel's sin and God's punishment of that sin. This portion of Lamentations, however is a word of hope to help us know God's faithfulness even in the midst of the sorrows of our lives. It encourages us to see our struggles as a consequence of sin and a place where we experience the redemption that comes to those who have faith in Jesus. We also see that God deals with us through his law and gospel.

Teaching

The most challenging part of this text is the way that it talks about suffering. It speaks of having to wait for the Lord, which implies a time when it will at least seem that he is not present or active. It says that this waiting is good for us. Not only that, but it indicates that suffering is something that is laid upon us, and it implies that the Lord casts people off – if not forever, then for a while. Indeed, it says that God brings grief into our lives and afflicts us, but that he does this unwillingly. It is a consequence of our sin.

Those uncomfortable truths are countered by confessions of faith regarding God's steadfast love, mercies that never end, and the hope we have in him. While it speaks of waiting, it also firmly believes that salvation will come at the end of the waiting, because God is compassionate with us. These blessings make it possible for us to endure hardship and suffering, and they call us to hold on to God's word with faith in the future.

Life

When we read the news we can see moral decay similar to what brought Israel under judgement. It may make us wonder if God will bring punishment upon our nation. We might worry about our children and grandchildren and the difficulties they may face.

We do not like to think about God disciplining us, but it is a reality of the life of faith. Not only that, but the sins of others bring suffering into our lives, too. But overarching these realities is that God's faithfulness and love moved him to save us from our sin and its consequences. He did that by Jesus dying and rising for us. Because of his death and resurrection we have real hope in the midst of our sorrows, and we too can bear patiently by God's grace.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Petition.

Lord, we pray for those who suffer in any way. We ask that you would comfort them and us with your mercy and steadfast love. Help us to wait for you quietly, trusting that you will bring your salvation at the proper time, even as you brought our salvation from sin and death at the right time when Jesus died and rose for us. Help us to remember that your mercies are new every morning, and we pray that you would pour out your mercy on us so that our souls will say, "The Lord is my portion, therefore I hope in him." As our souls hope in you, we pray that hope will show forth in our lives. Help us to not lose heart under your discipline, but to grow more firm in faith trusting in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

June 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

As Mark laid out the gospel of Jesus, he recorded a series of miracles which move in an ascending pattern from nature to the demonic to healing a long lasting illness to raising the dead. The miracles in this reading took place as a synagogue ruler named Jairus asked Jesus to heal his sick daughter. Jesus' mission of mercy was delayed however by a woman who had a bleeding disorder. She touched Jesus and was healed. In the meantime, the girl died, and Jesus, undeterred, raised her back to life. This passage shows us Jesus' compassion for the sick and suffering even as it also reveals his divine power.

Teaching

It is important to see that none of the people's lives that Jesus interacted with in this reading went the way they dreamed they would. Jairus and his wife never wanted to intercede for a sick and dying daughter. The woman with the flow of blood only wanted a normal life. Too often we think we have God and his ways sorted out. We think we know what he should do in this situation or that. Jesus shows in this reading that God uses those undesirable experiences for his glory.

God is able to do something glorious with the parts of our life that cause us to struggle. The pain and the sorrow that we think are the end are for him the places where his glory can be seen. Jesus does not always give us earthly glances of healing and resurrection as he did in this reading. It would seem they get a happy ending, when many others remained ill or died. We should see in these miracles a promise of what the kingdom of God does for all people. All will be healed. All will be raised. This is but a taste.

Life

It is a horrible thing for a parent to mourn the death of a child. So many hopes and dreams are shattered when something like that happens. Perhaps you have had some taste of such sorrow. It may be that we have prayed for people we love to get well and they didn't, or worse, they died. It may be that our own lingering illness has debilitate our lives. Does this mean that God has

abandoned us or doesn't love us? Absolutely not!

Part of the challenge of our life is to live now possessing all of God's promises, but not having yet what was promised. We are promised healing, relief from sorrow, everlasting life, etc., but we don't have them yet. We keep our eyes on Jesus waiting for the day when he makes his promises our reality, and in the meantime we live in hope because of his faithfulness and love trusting that he has won the victory.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Instruction.

O Holy Spirit, teach us to see illnesses, sorrows, grief, and pain as places where we experience your mercy and love. Teach us to be compassionate in those times. Guide us to remember your faithfulness to us when we see others in need so that we will be mindful of their need. Teach us the words to say, to be comfortable with silence, to act in the best ways, and to do loving deeds that proclaim your mercy and salvation to those in need. Guide us into all wisdom to live according to your Word. Amen.

June 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 30

This psalm was written by David for the dedication of the Temple. David never saw that event, so it was probably used when the land for the temple was dedicated. It is a song of praise that recognizes God's blessings and provision in the good times and bad times of life. The message of this psalm urges us to praise God for the many ways he has defended us and turned our fortunes from the path to death to everlasting life.

Teaching

This psalm recognizes the strange response that people have to prosperity and adversity. When prosperity comes they feel secure and solid like a mountain, but when God removes the prosperity they are dismayed and forget that God was the one who provided it in the first place. David recognizes God's providence in both the prosperity and adversity and points out that God's faithfulness in our adversity is the more memorable to us.

As we stand in good times we do well to remember that the Lord has drawn us up out of the pit. In times of adversity we do well to remember that he is merciful to help us. We should recognize that in our sin it is only adversity that we deserve, but God in his grace has given his Son so we may have healing, life, and joy as we declare God's praise and give him thanks.

Life

No matter what we are experiencing in our lives right now we do well to remember that God is there in the midst of it. If we are prospering, it is from the Lord's blessing and we should remember him and give him thanks. If we are struggling, this too is a blessing from the Lord to teach us to cling to him, to reveal his faithfulness to us, and to display his salvation to and

through us.

Our lives are lived wholly in God's hands. This is a good place to be, and the proof of that is the nail marks in Jesus' hands. If God would give his Son to save us, to pull us up from death and the pit, we can have full confidence that he will turn our mourning into dancing and clothe us with gladness.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Thanksgiving.

O Lord, thank you for drawing us up from the shame of our sin. Thank you for giving us healing in our body, mind, and in my soul. Thank you for restoring our life, for to sin is to die and you have made us alive in Christ. Thank you for privileging us to sing your praises and to give you thanks, even that is a gift from you! Thank you that while weeping may last for a night, joy comes with the morning. Thank you for all you do to turn back the consequences of our sin and to establish us in a secure place and to prosper us spiritually. Thank you for giving your Son to die for us, to go down to the pit in our place. Thank you for raising him to everlasting life and for giving me faith in him so I may give thanks to you forever. Amen.

June 25, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

Paul has been writing a message of restoration to the Corinthians. Now he turns to the topic of Christian living. There had been a famine in Jerusalem, and he was gathering an offering to support the fellow believers in their time of need. His purpose in this part of the letter is to urge the Corinthian believers to be sacrificially generous, pointing to the generous grace they had received through Jesus' sacrifice as the model of giving.

Teaching

Paul's teaching on generosity was both bold and rooted in grace. It was bold in the sense that he did not shy away from telling the Corinthians what he was looking for. He hoped to see sacrificial generosity. He commended the Macedonians, the Corinthians' neighbors to the north, for how they gave. He stated flat out that this was a mark of genuine love, and urged them to grow in this aspect of the life of faith even as they excelled in other areas.

He also referred to giving as an act of grace. Paul places the Corinthians' giving in line with the grace that was given to them by Jesus. Jesus became poor and gave up everything, even his life, because of his love for his people. He gave the most generous gift possible in order to make his people rich – not monetarily, but with his love and forgiveness. In a similar way, the believer's giving of self, money, time, etc. is motivated by what Jesus has given her and flows from his grace.

Life

How does this reading make you feel about your giving? Volunteering? Helping? Care for

others? The standard it sets for us is very high. It is an important area of our life in Christ that deserves careful attention. Our material blessings are not meant only for our comfort, but also to support ministry, help the poor, and care for the oppressed.

But giving is also referred to as an act of grace. This is something we do because we've experienced Jesus' forgiveness in our lives. Giving is a matter of perspective when we perceive and believe how richly God has blessed us with gifts like forgiveness and everlasting life, and at what cost. It is also an imitation of God's generosity when we give and a behavior that is Christ-like.

Look for an opportunity to give generously and sacrificially. See how it feels to give as Jesus gave to us.

Prayer

The theme of this prayer is Confession.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, I confess that this idea of giving sacrificially and generously makes me a little uncomfortable. Often I view my earthly goods as the fruit of my labor for the benefit of my comfort. Please forgive me for not seeing the bigger picture of how you have blessed me and how you use my blessings to protect, provide for, and love others. Forgive me for the times that I have wrestled with generous giving and come up wanting. Cleanse my heart of the fear of earthly lack, the doubts that question your gracious provision, and the hold that earthly goods have on me. Change my heart and forgive me for being stingy with your grace as well. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

June 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

The miracles that Mark recorded in this section of his Gospel precede the account of Jesus' rejection in his hometown, showing that the miracles themselves did not create faith in people, but only raised attention for Jesus to proclaim the word that creates faith. We return to this passage where the girl and woman were healed, this time looking more closely at the woman. Her healing was different than most healings as she initiated it and it took place, ostensibly, without Jesus' awareness until after the fact. This healing shows the importance of faith in receiving the gifts God so generously gives.

Teaching

The woman with the flow of blood was desperate. Her illness separated her from her family and community as her touch would make a person ritually unclean. Her very presence in the crowd was risky, and would have been offensive to the people around her. We should note that her touch does not make Jesus unclean. In fact, it works the other way around. Touching the Holy One makes her clean, whole, and healed. This is how it is when a sinner with faith comes into contact with Jesus in the word, Baptism, or the Lord's Supper; it makes us clean, forgives our sins, and marks us as holy.

Life

Where do we touch the hem of Jesus' robe? Where do we come into contact with him? As we read his word, his Spirit is there. When we were baptized, Jesus cleansed us. When we receive the Lord's Supper, we touch Jesus' body and blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. When we gather for worship and two or three gather in his name, he is there. Think on these things the next time you come to worship and see how Jesus graces you with his presence to heal you from your sin, shame, illness, and pain.

Prayer

This prayer combines the themes of Thanksgiving and Petition

O Lord Jesus, thank you for healing the woman with the discharge of blood. Thank you for having compassion on her, knowing her need, restoring her, and praising her faith. Thank you for your holy presence that is at work in us to make us holy. Thank you for not rejecting our unclean touch, but accepting us, you cleanse us of sin and its stain. Thank you. Thank you for giving us faith to take hold of your promises so that we too will be healed of all illness, cleansed of all disease, and purified of all sin; if not in this life, then in the life to come.

Lord, please grant us your Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith so that we will all the more boldly take hold of you in your word and Sacraments. Let nothing keep us from running to you to at least touch the hem of your robes so we will be healed. Help us to live as your present messengers to people in this world so that they too may take hold of you to be healed. Give us courage to not resist the touch of people that this world would shun; those that bear a wide variety of shames, stigmas, and sins. Instead, let us, filled with your Spirit, reach out to them, love them, have compassion for them, and offer them the word that creates faith so they may lay hold of you. Let us see healings in our lives: healings of broken hearts, troubled marriages, diseased bodies, fractured relationships, and sinful lives. Grant us the joy of seeing how you restore people through faith. In your blessed name we pray. Amen.

June 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ezekiel 2:1-5

Ezekiel was among the brightest and best of Judea who were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. He was a priest who was called to be a prophet to declare to God's people that they had abandoned him, but that God would be merciful and he would, one day, restore them. This passage is his calling and commissioning as a prophet. This passage sets the tone for Ezekiel's ministry, warning him that his ministry will be difficult and he will face opposition from them. Nevertheless he is to faithfully proclaim God's Word.

Teaching

This passage does not paint a pretty picture of Israel. God calls them rebels, transgressors, impudent, and stubborn. This is due to the way that they disobeyed God's Law, rejected his covenant, and took him and his grace for granted. We might be inclined to ask how this could be,

however it is a reflection of the condition of all people. God repeatedly testifies about the sinfulness of people in his word, and that sinfulness is what leads to the rebellion, transgression, impudence and stubbornness.

God, then, is sending Ezekiel to testify to them what God has said. Much could be written about God's Law and Gospel here, and the testimony God gives against his people along with the gracious promises he makes to them. Yet there is something else to note: God sends Ezekiel. He wants people to hear his word and to be confronted with their sin so that they may be comforted by his promises.

Life

It is never comfortable to experience rejection from others, but as we look at the world we live in we can see that people are no less rebellious than the Israelites were. The warnings given to Ezekiel speak to our hearts, too. Not only that, but we should note that those who call themselves God's people can stubbornly refuse his word and will today.

What then should we do? What would God have us do? We cling to God's word. "Thus says the Lord God," becomes our source of authority and power as we engage the world. Not only that, but the word of God which reveals Jesus as our Savior and Lord is also our comfort and consolation to give us courage. God's promise is certain, and our lives declare to the world that not only has a prophet been among us, but the Son of God has saved us and his Spirit dwells within us.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the theme of Instruction.

O God, you teach us with your word and call us to be your people. You sent Ezekiel to his own people knowing that they were rebellious, impudent, and stubborn. Open our eyes to recognize when we behave in those ways contrary to your word. Also, Lord, teach us to know that you have sent a prophet among us. The prophet we speak of is Jesus who proclaims your love and grace to us. Teach us to hear and to never refuse to hear your word whether it is read, spoken, sung, or however you deliver it. Teach us to recognize our transgressions so that what you teach us of your forgiveness might be all the more potent in our minds and hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

June 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:1-13

This passage follows after two great miracles in Jesus' ministry – the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, and the raising of Jairus' daughter. It could be said that this was a high point for Jesus' ministry. In this passage we read about Jesus being rejected in his hometown, though. He then calls his disciples together to send them out and instructs them how to conduct themselves in ministry and he includes instructions for facing rejection. Mark records these events in a way that helps his readers recognize that when we take up Jesus message of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins there will be rejection. We should expect the same rejection as Jesus received, but not lose heart for there will also be successes in ministry and people will be healed and blessed by God's word.

Teaching

It cannot be denied that Jesus faced rejection in his ministry. When he visited his hometown they essentially asked, "Who does this guy think he is?" They had seen him grow up and they thought they knew him. They found the change in him from carpenter and commoner to rabbi and teacher offensive. Jesus took note of that and warned his disciples as he sent them out that they, too, would sometimes find that they would not be received. The same is true today. People reject Jesus, so they also reject his followers.

Yet Jesus also laid his hands on some sick people and healed them in Nazareth. Mark also records that the ministry of the twelve was successful as they proclaimed repentance, cast out many demons, anointed folks with oil and healed the sick. Even if the vast majority of people were to reject Jesus and his people, there will be some who hear his word and are healed – not just of illness, but of the destructive power of sin in their lives.

Life

Often we are fearful of how people might respond to us if we share our faith and hope in Jesus with them. We have seen and heard that what Jesus taught his disciples is true: not everyone will receive him. Their rejection of him often feels like a judgement against or a rejection of us.

We should not lose heart though. Jesus has called us to be his people. He has made us his modern day witnesses. We might not shake the dust off our feet at people anymore, but we still have a similar saying. When bad things happen we, too, say, "Shake it off." Shake off the fear and pain, and trust that God can use us to bring release and healing – physical and spiritual – in this world by the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the theme of Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, thank you for facing rejection. Thank you for taking the risk of entering this world knowing people would reject you. Thank you for coming to those who would receive you and creating faith in them. We are so grateful to be among those who are saved by your grace. Thank you for making us your followers to share the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. We rejoice to know that even as some will reject your word when we speak it, others will hear and you will deliver them from the devil's power and the pains of this world. Thank you. Amen.

July 1, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 123

Psalm 123 is one of the Songs of Ascents, songs sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem.

However, this one is unique. Most of the Songs of Ascent have a positive message in the end, so

that even if they lament trials and suffering they confidently declare trust in God to rescue them. This psalm is the prayer of the downtrodden and those who are mocked for their faith and obedience to God. It is a cry for mercy. This psalm gives us words to pray when we, too, are worn out by the scorn and contempt of those who are of this world, and reminds us to keep our eyes on the Lord in the midst of our troubles.

Teaching

In sports, players are often urged to keep their eye on the ball. Here we are urged to keep our eyes on God. In the past, servants and slaves lived wholly at their masters' will and they relied on them completely for every good thing in their lives. The same is true for us. Our eyes are fixed on God to see his mercy as he gives us what we need.

Yet the world scorns those who wait on the Lord. Those who are at ease find their comfort in earthly pleasures and feel no need for God's mercy. Those who rely on God's mercy are treated with contempt, as the proud of this world rely on their own power, wealth, or skill.

Life

Where are your eyes right now? Are they on the problems in your life? Are they focused on earthly things – pleasures, sorrows, comforts, insults? The world gives a two sided temptation to us as it places both good things and bad things before us. Either could be our focus, distracting us from the God who has had mercy on us.

So where do our eyes belong? On God. On the cross. It is there that we see God's mercy so clearly revealed to us. The contempt that we experience because we faithfully follow Jesus may get us down, but God's mercy is greater, and his promise is more permanent than the scorn and contempt we face here. Do not lose heart! God's mercy is yours.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Confession.

O Lord, we confess to you that we grow weary of the contempt we bear because of our faith in you. Forgive us for the times we have given in to the temptations of ease and pride, comfort and power. Too often we take our eyes off of you and do not trust you to provide us with all that we need, and we long to solve our problems in our own power. Forgive us for not waiting patiently for your mercy. Forgive us for the times that your promises were not enough for us, and help us to be content in your forgiveness. Amen.

July 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Some people in Corinth were calling Paul's credentials into question, claiming that they were greater than him. Paul pointed to his life and ministry boasting of even greater faithfulness and revelations. In this section he continued to boast, but quickly turned to what kept him humble – a "thorn" in his flesh and God's refusal to remove it from him. The message that Paul received

regarding the removal of this thorn shows us the main point of this section: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

Teaching

People are often boastful about what they are good at. We boast about the good things we have, too. But who would boast about trials, weakness, and frustration? Apparently, Paul did. In this passage he speaks of “the surpassing greatness of the revelations” he received from God. This is something we would be excited about, but what he goes on to boast about is his weakness. Why would he do that?

Paul had learned that his strength was insufficient. He needed Jesus’ strength. What did he need that strength for? His salvation. To overcome temptation. To endure suffering. To go about the mission God had given him. To evangelize. To preach. To teach. In all of these areas of his life, he found himself to be insufficient when he relied on himself. But when he accepted his weakness, then he found he was strong because Jesus worked in and through him. It is Christ’s strength that matters, not Paul’s or ours.

Even Jesus’ strength was displayed in weakness. He won the victory over our sin by dying for us. He humbled himself and submitted to his Father’s will and did not exert his strength, but wholly gave himself over to weakness and death to save us, trusting his Father to raise him up.

Life

We often beat ourselves up when we crumble under temptation. We try to live life and face our troubles under our own strength and we are left feeling guilty and shamed. So what do we do? Too often we set our chins and determine to be better, to be stronger, and to get it right next time.

What would happen if we accepted that we don’t have the strength to be the people God calls us to be? Not as an excuse for bad behavior, but just accepting the reality. And then what would happen if we, knowing our guilt, weakness, and insufficiency, clung to God’s word, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Would not our weakness be the very place that we see God’s power at work in us? The place where God’s glorious forgiveness is experienced?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Petition.

Father in Heaven, your power is made perfect in weakness. Help us to know our weakness and embrace it in such a way that we know your power more clearly in our lives. Let the power of Christ rest on us and on all your people, so that we will not rely on our own strength but only on the grace that you revealed in Jesus’ death on the cross. When we are tempted to boast, turn our eyes upon what you have done and away from our own deeds. Help us to be content in weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. We only ask that as we go through them we may experience your power and grace and that it may be revealed to others as you work in our lives. Amen.

July 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:1-13

Jesus returned to his hometown after he started his ministry. He had been healing the sick, casting out demons, preaching repentance, teaching in parables, and proclaiming the kingdom of God was at hand. But when he returned home the people there were offended by him, nevertheless he sent out the twelve disciples to live by faith and to trust God to provide for them even if they were rejected, as he had been, in the towns they came to. By recording these events, Mark, guided by the Holy Spirit, shows his readers that the life of faith requires trust in God to provide all things: what is needed on the road, success, and strength in the face of rejection.

Teaching

There is a teaching among some Christians that if we have enough faith everything will always go well, we will never lack, struggle, or experience hard times. How does that square with Jesus' and his Apostles' experience? This passage teaches us that in this life there will be successes and failures, joys and disappointments. It teaches that some will receive the good news of God's kingdom as we've learned it in Jesus' death and resurrection, and others will reject it.

Life

How do you handle setbacks? How do you feel when you see people that you care about struggling spiritually or turning away from Jesus' and his gift of forgiveness? It can be very painful. There may indeed be times that we must live with a separation between us and people we love. Yet we also find that God is faithful and he provides for us on the journey of life. And, much to our joy, we find that there are some that hear of the hope we have in Jesus and believe it. They receive the true miracle; not necessarily healing from sickness, but forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the themes of Instruction and Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, we learn in your word that you and your disciples faced the pain and disappointment of rejection in your ministry. Help us to know that this will be part of our life as we follow you, too, but also let us keep firmly in mind that some will hear, believe, and be healed of their sin. Make us ever mindful that you provide all things for our bodies and this life so that we will not be over-burdened by the things of this world and slowed down as we seek to serve you. Help us to learn that it is okay to be rejected for Jesus' sake. Help us know how and when to faithfully show your love and judgement to those you send us to as your witnesses.

Thank you for all you have given us, most especially the faith to receive your forgiveness and also the call to follow you as your modern day disciples. Thank you that there will be some who accept your word of grace as they hear it from us. But thank you also that we will share in the sorrows that Jesus experienced – even rejection – so that we can be more and more like him. Thank you for letting us lose our honor for Jesus' sake in this life, but gain your glory in the life

to come. We give you thanks and praise for bringing the kingdom of God to us, making us part of it, and allowing us to play a part in extending your kingdom in this world. Amen.

July 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Amos 7:7-15

Amos was one of the so-called Minor Prophets. His ministry took place shortly before Isaiah's. Much of his prophecy confronts the sins of the people, and many of his prophecies resonate with modern sins of society. In this particular passage he speaks of a plumb line – a tool used to see if an object is truly vertical – as an image to proclaim that the Israel's life was not plumb – truly straight – with his will. It also records a conflict Amos had with a priest who wanted him to stop prophesying God's judgement. This passage confronts the reader with a warning that God's will is absolute, and his people's lives are to match his will. It also shows that God's will is resisted in this life, even by people who appear to be his followers. However, the existence of such false and deceptive followers does not excuse those who know God's will from following it. Indeed, it makes the follower more determined to obey.

Teaching

God's judgement is real. The Israelites learned this the hard way because they took his grace for granted. They were God's chosen people, but their lives did not match up with God's will for them. However, even in disobedience, they assumed that God would continue to bless them and tolerate their behavior. God's message, delivered through Amos, was a stark revelation, "Even you, O Israel, are subject to my judgement."

This is a danger for God's people today. We should not take God's grace for granted. Sin is not something we should treat lightly and we should resist it and flee from it. Jesus himself underwent the punishment for our sin, and it cost him dearly; he had to pay the ultimate price.

Jesus measured up perfectly to God's plumb line, and because he died for us God declares that we match up to it for Jesus' sake. What an amazing blessing God has given; a blessing that we cherish, and which changes us and the way we live.

Life

Setting a plumb line is an act of judgement. God has given us the tool to measure if we are plumb with him. It is his word, in which he has declared his Law. How do you measure up? Can you see where your life doesn't match God's will for you? Sin is the name we give for the parts of our lives that don't match God's will for you. Confess it. Ask for forgiveness. Try to live a godly life.

God's word does not only contain his Law, however. It also delivers the Gospel to us. The word of God is a tool that not only shows us what it means to be plumb with God, it makes us plumb. By faith in Jesus, who was crucified and raised for us, we are declared forgiven for our sin, and straight with God. Rejoice!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Thanksgiving.

Lord God, we thank you that your word is true and that it measures our lives to see where we are out of plumb with you. We thank you that you welcome us to confess when we are out of plumb and that you not only forgive us, but declare us to be right with you. Thank you for your Law which shows me how to live according to your will, as well as shows my sin and the ways I do not live according to your word. Thank you for your Gospel which comforts me in my sin and brings me back to you. Amen.

July 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

Mark records the death of John the Baptist between the mission work of the Disciples and the Feeding of the Five-Thousand. In this section Mark introduces King Herod and records his perverse relationship with his wife/sister-in-law and step-daughter/niece. This was the heart of Herod's conflict with John the Baptist, because John called Herod, too, to repentance. It was Herodias, however, who made the bold move to get her daughter to have John executed. This passage displays the conflict that Jesus and his followers had with the secular powers of their time and functions as a foreshadowing of what would happen to Jesus himself. It is often the case that Jesus' followers are met by the world with both animosity and violence.

Teaching

In this passage we see the uncomfortable relationship between church and state on display. Herod was, indeed, a king, but John, as God's prophet and messenger, confronted him when he took his brother Philip's wife as his own. This was a violation of God's laws regarding marriage, and outside of his design for this blessed estate. In this we see that it is often God's people's duty to speak out against evil and injustice in the world.

What is more, we get a glimpse of the wickedness of the human condition. When the members of Herod's family were confronted with the truth of God's word they sought to stop the messenger. Herod had him thrown in prison. Herodias conspired to have him killed. Herodias's daughter asked for John's head. Herod gave the order, though reluctantly. When sinners are confronted with God's truth, we do not want to hear it, and there is much that people will do so they do not have to hear God's word: violence, intimidation, abuse their power, and even murder.

Life

Have you ever heard God's word and not liked what it said? What do you do when that happens? Sometimes when we are caught in our sin – even if our sin is not actually known – we become defensive, we resist, argue, or become angry with the one who delivered the word to us.

When we believe that Jesus died to win our forgiveness, we will still be confronted by our sin. Indeed, the confrontation becomes keener because of our love for him and our desire to be

Christ-like. However, this should not lead us resist the confrontation. Indeed, un-like Herod and his family, we can confess our sins knowing that, by Jesus blood shed on the cross, all of our sins are forgiven. We can even be thankful for the confrontation which helps us see our sin and experience forgiveness for it.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the theme of Confession.

Heavenly Father, we confess to you all our sins and iniquities; those we know and those we don't. We confess that we resist your word, and live according to our own desires. We have become angry when caught in sin. Sometimes we have even continued in sin, knowing that what we were doing, saying, or thinking was wrong. Please forgive us. Cleanse us. We see the depravity in our own hearts, and we need you to save us from it. Jesus shed his blood that we might be saved by believing in him. We cling to his cross and claim no merit or right of our own. Please grant us your forgiveness, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

July 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 85

The Sons of Korah were descendants of Levi and served in the temple as musicians. It was written in a time when the people were going through difficulty. They knew they were a forgiven people, which may indicate this was after the Jew's return from exile in Babylon, but they still sense a need for restoration and removal of God's anger. This psalm gives us beautiful words to call out to God asking for forgiveness and restoration, but it also points us to hearing God's word and putting our trust in him.

Teaching

The psalmists saw God's forgiveness in the center of their relationship with him. They knew they had broken the covenant he had made with them and that they had sinned against him. Notice that in the first three verses the psalm speaks of the forgiveness they had received in the past. This leads into the next four verses (4-7) which look to the future asking for restoration and salvation. Verse 8 stands as a turning point in the poetry as here the psalmist reminds himself to listen to God's word, implying that not listening would be returning to folly. Verse 9-13, then, preach God's word. They are what the psalmist wants to remember: that God is steadfast in love, faithful, righteous, and the bringer of peace. He will do what is good, and it will be done in his power.

Life

When your life is difficult, or you go through trials, how often do you remember that you are God's forgiven child? The heart of your relationship with him is the forgiveness that Jesus has won for you by his own death. Some would say that the heart of your relationship is that he made you, or that his Spirit dwells in you, but your relationship with the Creator is broken by sin, and the Spirit comes to deliver Jesus' salvation. Let that forgiveness give you hope and confidence in all things for this life.

Also, keep verse 8 in mind. We want to hear what God will speak. We know much of this already; the peace he gives to his holy ones. Yet we do not want to “turn back to folly.” We do not want to go back to our ideas, desires, or reason to guide our lives. Indeed, we want to look for the many ways that we can live lives that display the steadfast love and faithfulness we have experienced in Jesus.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Petition.

Lord, you have been favorable to us, and you have restored our future by Jesus’ death and resurrection. You have forgiven our iniquity and covered our sin. Restore us again. Revive us – that is, make us alive in Christ once again! Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Let me hear your word, Lord God: the word that declares that you have made peace with your people through your Son’s blood. And set your word in our ears, mouth, heart, and mind so that we will never return to the folly of our sin in its many forms. Indeed, let me hear, over and over, of your steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace, for in you they all come together! Bless us with your good so that all of us who follow you will walk in your righteous ways. Amen.

July 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14

Over the next eight weeks we will read most of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. (Feel free to read the whole thing!) Paul had a special relationship with the Christians in Ephesus, a great port city on the coast of what is now Turkey. He spent 3 years there – longer than any other place where he served as a missionary.

In this opening section of the letter, Paul praises God for the blessings and grace that he had poured on Paul and all believers in Jesus. He also points to the gospel as central to our relationship with God and one another as heirs of an inheritance from God. The passage draws the reader into praise of God, encourages her to look forward to the inheritance received in Christ, and reminds her of the gift of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of the inheritance.

Teaching

This section teaches the deep mystery of salvation. This is God’s work, and his alone. There is no confusion about who is active in this whole process described in Ephesians 1. From first to last, it is God. Paul drives this point home by writing that those who believe are predestined for adoption and to receive an inheritance from God. This has led some to teach that God predestines some for adoption and others for judgement, but that is not what the text says – here or elsewhere.

This matter of predestination is intended to be a matter of confidence for us, not a matter of comparison to others. We can be confident of our salvation because of what God has done for us

in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of the inheritance of eternal life with God in glory because of Jesus.

Life

Do you remember playing team games at recess when you were in school? Did you ever dread being chosen last? Did it feel good to be selected for a team? Hear this clearly. God chose you! He adopted you. He made you one of his heirs. Why would he do that? Because he loves you.

Is there anyone in your life who needs to hear God's good news? Anyone who could use the good news that God has chosen them? Perhaps you, like Paul, can be the one to deliver, "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation," so that they, too, can know how it feels to be predestined.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the theme of Instruction.

God, this teaching that we are predestined is hard for us to grasp. Teach us what it means that you have chosen us to be your adopted children and heirs. When we hear that word, "predestined," help us to remember that it means that we are chosen for salvation, and not that others were chosen for damnation. Help us to learn the lesson that the work of redemption in yours from first to last, and that I am blessed to benefit from it and that you have sealed me with your Holy Spirit as one who is yours in this life and in the glory that is yet to be revealed. Amen.

July 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

The events of Mark 6 take place right before a series of miracles and times of teaching in which he reveals that he will suffer and die. In the death of John the Baptist we have a foreshadowing of that event, and a warning regarding the hostility the world has toward God, his word, and his messengers. In a secondary way, this passage displays the destructive power human lust has and how damaging it can be to those who give in to its enticements and those around them.

Teaching

John the Baptist ran afoul King Herod when he confronted Herod regarding Herodias. Strange relationships are not unknown among royalty, but Herodias has been married to Herod's half-brother, Philip, and was, herself, both Herod and Philip's niece. He wanted her, though, and married her.

Herodias's daughter (still related) was said to have danced for Herod and the guests. This was likely not a cute little folk dance. Swollen with drink and lust, Herod offered her up to half the kingdom. She asked for John's head ... on a platter.

As bizarre as this seems to us modern readers, this is an example of the destructive power of unchecked lust. And as surely as John died because of the lusts of the Herodians, Jesus died

because of ours. The difference being that Jesus died to save us from ours and free us so that we might live holy lives.

Life

What lusts drive us? Food? Sex? Pleasure? Success? Comfort? Power? Each of these can be good gifts from God, but when they are uprooted from God's design for them and our desire for them outweighs our obedience to or dependence on him they will surely destroy us and others will be hurt in the process. Jesus' death freed us from the driving power of our lusts so that we might live as God's people. Examine your desires. Confess your lusts to God, and strive against them. Then let your confidence be the freeing forgiveness Jesus won for you.

Prayer

This prayer is in the themes of Confession and Thanksgiving.

Lord God, we want what we want, and too often what we want is not good for us and rebels against your will for us. We confess that our desires often drive us to do things that hurt us, others, and our relationship with you. Please forgive us. We have taken your good gifts and used them according to our own will instead of your design. We eat when we're not hungry. We accept sex outside of marriage as a normal part of life. We allow pleasures, entertainment, and comfort to keep us from you. Forgive us, please. For Jesus' sake cleanse us of our sin and set our hearts to desire your good will.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you willingly bore our lusts to the cross and died there for our sins. Thank you for bearing the opposition of people like the Herodians, scribes, and Pharisees. Thank you for being patient with us as we sometimes oppose you. You always love us and desire our good, even when we would rather pursue earthly pleasure. Thank you. Our gratitude for all you have done is so small compared to the sacrifice you made, but we are grateful. Thank you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for your loving work to free us from our sin and to sustain us in the new life you have given us. Amen.

July 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:1-6

Jeremiah wrote in a time when the leaders of God's people were largely unfaithful to him. They sought wealth and power and neglected the needy God had appointed them to care for. Through Jeremiah, God speaks words of condemnation on those leaders, and then prophesies a new king who will rule with justice and righteousness. This prophecy points us forward to Jesus as both the Messiah (the anointed king) and savior who makes his people righteous.

Teaching

God cares deeply about the wellbeing of his people – both physically and spiritually. The physical aspect of God's care for his people should not be ignored in favor of a more spiritual understanding of this text. Both must be held even though the spiritual meaning must, in the end, be the emphasis. It is the place of government and the leaders God appoints to promote peace

and justice even as it is the responsibility of the church and its leaders to proclaim the truth and teach pure doctrine. Both are necessary for God's people to thrive in this life, but the Lord's righteousness carries on into eternal life.

As Jeremiah prophesies about a righteous branch from David and proclaims his name, "The LORD is our righteousness," this points us forward to Jesus. He is the king that reigns on David's throne forever – the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. And by laying down his life for us sinful sheep, he made us righteous by faith. Apart from him we have no holiness or righteousness, so the prophecy is fulfilled in him. The Lord – Jesus – is our righteousness.

Life

Some have complained that Christians can be so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good. This passage in Jeremiah encourages us to promote acts of justice and righteousness in this life because Jesus has secured and become our righteousness before God. He makes us righteous, so our lives reflect what he has done for us.

Where do you see injustice in this world? What can you do – even in a small way – about it? Certainly we should pray to the Good Shepherd for the needs of others, yet he has placed us here in this time to serve him by serving them. Righteousness is given to us in Christ. How might it be shown in your life for the sake of others?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Confession.

The Lord is our righteousness; yet we often live un-righteously. The Lord is our righteousness; but too often righteousness and justice are hard to find among us. Woe to us if we join the shepherds who destroy and scatter your flock, O Lord, instead of following your Shepherd, the righteous branch! And we know that there are times that we have done just that! By our inaction we have allowed injustice in our land. By our actions we have participated in injustice. If it were up to our actions, O Lord, we would be lost and without hope. Even so, there have been times that we've thought that our actions were sufficient to declare us righteous. Bring us back to your fold. Forgive us. Comfort us in our dismay at our sin. Care for us and be our righteousness in truth. Amen.

July 14, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

After Jesus' disciples returned from their time of preaching repentance, casting out demons, and anointing and healing the sick, Jesus invited them to a time of rest. The time of rest, however, turned into a new opportunity for ministry because when people recognized them they flocked to Jesus and the Disciples. Jesus had compassion on the crowds and he taught them, and later he fed them with miraculous food. While this passage gives evidence that Jesus is God, it also shows his compassion for people's lives as he fed them both spiritually and physically.

Teaching

We should note well that Jesus cares about the physical need of his followers. The reason they went to a desolate place was so that they could rest. When the crowds gathered, Jesus' compassion moved him to feed them until they were satisfied.

This is not to say that there was no spiritual care here. Jesus taught the crowds. When it was evident that the people would need to be fed, he tested his disciples, "You give them something to eat." This was not a matter of planning and logistics, but of helping them put their faith in him and his Father who provides for his people.

Life

Have you ever felt like a member of the crowd in this account? Have you, looking at your life, seen how God has provided for you physically and spiritually? Examine your life. What part of it doesn't have its source in God's provision for your life? It is all from him because of his love for you. That is not to say that life will never be challenging – the people came to Jesus hungry – but God provides for this life, and, more importantly, for the next. Of course we see the provision God has made for our greatest need in Jesus' cross, where he died to pay for our sins and to show us the depth of God's love for us.

Have you ever felt like one of Jesus' disciples in this account? Have you seen the needs of others and in some sense felt like God was calling you to care for their needs; to join him in having compassion for them? Even here God provides. He uses the insufficient things we offer – five loaves and two fish – in ways we cannot imagine. God's mercy to you includes you in sharing his mercy with others. Do not underestimate how God might use even the smallest act of kindness you might perform in Jesus' name!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Petition.

O God, there are many times in this world that we live without refreshment and rest. Please help us set aside the time that we need to rest so that having been refreshed we may serve you better. Be with those who are so busy trying to make ends meet in this life that they are weary and give them rest. Move in our hearts to have compassion on the many people around us who are like sheep without a shepherd, help us to point them to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who cares for us and for them. We pray that you would provide for the hungry, the needy, and all who are in physical want and need. Provide for them, and use our small offerings to great effect for them. And we pray that you feed us spiritually as well. Allow us to hear Jesus' teaching in the word and use us to feed others with it, too, so that they may know you through Jesus. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

July 15, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 23

We do not know when David wrote this psalm or if there was a particular event that moved him to do so. It does reflect David's experience as a shepherd and the recognition of how God had shepherded him. The content of this psalm is well known. It compares the Lord to a shepherd who leads us, never leaves us, and provides for us. This psalm is a word of comfort for us, and God's people often lean on these words in the darkest moments of our lives.

Teaching

There are three main themes in Psalm 23. They are God's leadership, his presence, and his provision. God leads us in this life. He has given us guidance through his word, through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and by the circumstance of our lives. He is present with us, and not only in the good times. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... thou art with me" This is a great comfort when our life is dark and when we face our mortality. And he provides. He provides in this life – food, drink, blessings, and more. But he also provides and eternal home to dwell with him forever.

We should also see in these words a relationship that is deeply intimate. He leads me. He is with me. He prepares a table for me. This is not just something God does generically. His concern is for you. And while he often works on a large scale for all, he knows you individually and cares for you, [insert your name here], and keeps this word for you.

Life

This beloved psalm is often relegated to funerals or the time of death, but do you see how pertinent it is for your life today? These are promises to take hold of as we face all aspects of this life. When we wonder what to do in life it points us to the Lord to guide our ways. He does that through his word, and he also welcomes our prayers. When we feel alone or struggle in life, it reminds us that God is indeed with us ... now! This isn't a pious dream of someday. It repeats what God often says, "I am with you always." And as for God's provision, we see this gracious Shepherd and know his loving presence. Will we not find him faithful for our needs in this life and the next?

This psalm is a wonderful prayer for our lives and a great confession of the hope we have in Christ.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Instruction.

Lord you are my shepherd. You lead me, are present for me, and provide for me. Fix that in my mind so that I learn to be content. You provide me with all that I need for this life and even lead me in righteousness for your name's sake. Help me to know those ways all the better! You teach me that you are with me in all circumstances and that you do not abandon me in the worst times of my life. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...." Keep that in my mind and heart when things seem bad, and teach me to be confident in your presence with me. You also provide all things for me and you have blessed me richly. All that I have has been prepared by you and truly, "my cup overflows," for you have

given me what I need to live now, but you have even given your Son to die for me so that I might live with you forever. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever!” Amen.

July 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

This text follows on the heels of one of the beloved descriptions of the human condition and God’s grace. The chapter begins by stating that we were dead in trespasses and sins, but goes on to proclaim that we are alive in Christ and that we have been saved by God’s grace, through faith, as a free gift. In this section of Ephesians 2 Paul teaches about the unity Jesus’ followers have because of the salvation we share in him. The effect of the reading is one to encourage unity among God’s people and to encourage peace among us because of the salvation we have in common by faith in Jesus.

Teaching

Division is normal. Harmony is not. Because of fallen human nature people break relationship and accent differences, looking for points of superiority or creating worldviews that divide people in a wide variety of ways – gender, skin color, age, intellect, wealth, etc. In this text the division that is being explored is between Jews and Gentiles. Each had their reasons to think their relationship with God was superior to the other’s, but Paul negates whatever those reasons may have been by pointing them to Jesus who reconciled both groups to God.

Jesus’ cross is central to this unity. It is a unity that transcends the differences people have from one another, so that those who should, by earthly standards, have nothing to do with one another have a common bond that is more important than their differences. Because of this we confess in the Nicene Creed that there is, “one holy Christian apostolic church,” despite there being many denominations. All who believe in Christ are united by his death for us, even when it looks like we are not.

Life

Unity does not mean that we are all the same, but that we are connected. Sometimes people are connected because of a person that they know or love. How would it be if we looked at the other churches in our community as people who love Jesus and whom Jesus loves, just like us? Would we still have problems with things they teach and do? Yes. But we would also be able to recognize that here are people that Jesus died for just like us. Or perhaps there is someone you know who is different from you because of their politics, or there is something else about them that makes you uncomfortable. How will knowing you share Jesus in common impact your relationship with her?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Thanksgiving.

Father in Heaven, we thank you for making us one in Christ: one with you and with one another.

Thank you that, despite the divisions among us, we are still one, because our unity does not depend on us but on Jesus and the salvation he won for us by dying on the cross. Thank you for making us to be your people, because we know that we were once separated from you because of our sin. Thank you for making people so different from one another and the beautiful diversity you have put among us. Thank you for giving your Son so that he has become our peace and for making us citizens with the saints in the household of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

July 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

Seeking a time of rest and refreshment after a busy time of ministry, Jesus and the disciples found themselves surrounded by a crowd of people who long to hear God's word and to see Jesus. The passage shows how Jesus responded with compassion to the people and functions to show us his compassion for us as well.

Teaching

When Jesus got out of the boat he saw the crowd and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. That compassion led him to lay aside his agenda for this time with the disciples and to minister to the crowd. That same compassion is what moved Jesus to be born among us, setting aside his glory, and to die for us to forgive our sins.

Life

What would you do if you were looking forward to rest and you found people waiting for you where you thought you'd find peace? Jesus' compassion challenges us in our interaction with others. It urges us to put them before ourselves and convicts us because we know that we are often selfish with our time and priorities. That is why it is so important to hold fast to the truth that we are people who received and continue to receive compassion from Jesus. We are forgiven for our lack of compassion even as Jesus' compassion upon us moves us to be compassionate for others.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Instruction.

Lord Jesus, when we read of your compassion on the crowd part of us just takes it for granted that you'll be compassionate because that's who you are. Forgive us for not seeing that act of compassion as the great sacrifice it was. Forgive us for not comprehending that it has always been your compassion that led you to come to us, to bear our sins, and to die for us. Forgive us for not being moved by your compassion to be compassionate with others. Forgive us for putting our agendas ahead of your will for us, when you have put us ahead of yourself. Forgive us for the many times that we have seen others in need and we ignored them, or believed that there was nothing we could do, or judged them for their situation. Forgive us for our lack of compassion.

Indeed, Lord, we ask that you would teach us to be compassionate and that you would help us to see throughout your word that compassion is a great gift to receive and to share. We see that

your compassion did not extend only to forgiving sins and speaking of heaven, but of meeting people where they were and dealing with the needs they have now. Help us to learn to have compassion on all aspects of people's lives – their guilt, their grief, their need, their lack of faith, and everything that hurts them. Help us to understand that you are the Shepherd who came for lost sheep, and that lost sheep are vulnerable. Make us aware of the many ways people are like sheep without a shepherd and give us wisdom to help them meet you – the Shepherd who came to save us all. Amen.

July 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17

This reading records part of the covenant God made with Noah after the waters of the flood receded and Noah and his family had come out of the ark. This portion focuses specifically on the sign of the covenant – the rainbow. God said that he placed the rainbow in the sky as a reminder that he would never destroy the earth by a flood again. The passage shows us that God makes covenants – sacred agreements or pledges – with people in which he, the more powerful, is the one who takes action on behalf of the weaker.

Teaching

The rainbow is a thing of beauty that people often love to behold. Its beauty, however, is not limited to its shape or its colors. The beauty of the rainbow is also that it is mark of an agreement between God and the world to never destroy the world by flood again.

When we say it is an agreement, we often get the idea of negotiation and compromises, but this was not the case. God stated to Noah and his sons, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you” God's covenants say more about who he is and what he will do than what the recipients of the covenant will do! God bound himself for Noah's family's sake, and for the whole world's sake, because of the love he had for them.

Life

Noah's covenant is still in effect today. When we see a rainbow we do well to remember God's covenant and his faithfulness to his word. Beyond thinking about refraction and the properties of light, we think of the Creator who chose this beautiful phenomenon to comfort and encourage us.

God is not done with covenants. He has made a new covenant with us. It deals with the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus broken body and shed blood. Like the covenants of old, it has more to do with what he does than what he requires from us. But here again we see that he chose to make a promise to us for our salvation. And He will keep it.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Petition.

Lord God, you created this world and all the wonders that are in it. Help us to hold on to that in a world that consistently denies your existence, doubts your deeds, and tries to put aside your

wonders and simple natural phenomena. Help us to live faithfully in a world that you created and to which you have given order that we can study and comprehend. Keep us and all your people in awe of the covenants you have made with us. Not only the covenant you made with Noah, but keep us in the covenant that you have made with us in Jesus. Help us trust what you have promised – forgiveness of sins, salvation from death, resurrection, everlasting life, and sharing in your eternal glory. When we see your rainbow in the sky, help us to remember your covenant and to rejoice that you continue to keep it. But even more, we ask that when people behold the cross of Christ that they would see the new covenant you have made by which we are saved from sin and that all hearts would believe what you have done for us because of your great love and grace. Amen.

July 21, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:45-56

One of Mark's favorite words in his account of Jesus' life is, "immediately." This reading takes place immediately after the Feeding of the Five-Thousand. In it he sends the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he goes off to pray. Later he walks upon the water and would have beat them to the other side of the sea, but when they saw him they were afraid, so he stopped and comforted them. The last verse of the reading gives us the reason that this account is recorded for us as it tells us that despite the fact that they had seen many miracles, the disciples did not understand and that their hearts were hardened. They did not yet believe in Jesus as the Christ who saves his people from their sins.

Teaching

This short account can provide a handful of lessons for us to learn. One thing we could observe in it is Jesus' habit of spending time in prayer, and much could be said about the importance of prayer in his ministry and for our lives. We could also spend time considering the miracle. Jesus again shows himself to be the master of the sea and one with power to break the laws of nature. This mark of his divinity did not create faith in his disciples however. We could also spend time considering the extra detail that Mark includes in his account of Jesus walking on water: he meant to pass them by. Indeed, so much about Jesus had "passed by" the disciples, could Mark be saying that believing in Jesus has less to do with intellect and observation and more to do with blind faith and revelation?

There is yet another teaching in this text that confronts us and comforts us. It is this: the disciples didn't understand. They saw Jesus. They heard him preach. They were right there, but they didn't understand. Mark says it was because their hearts were hard. The confrontation here is that our hearts, too, can be hard leading to our inability to understand Jesus. Yet the comfort for us is that Jesus forgave those men and used them as his messengers to world. He forgives us and uses us in his mission to reach those in the world with the good news of his love and forgiveness.

Life

Often we feel inadequate in life, and that includes our faith life. We know all too well our

confusion, fears, doubts, and lack of understanding. Sometimes this holds us back from acting upon our faith in Jesus. We think we have to get ourselves together before he can use us. The truth is just the opposite, he uses us in our inadequacy and comes to us saying, “Do not be afraid.” His forgiveness is enough.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Instruction.

Lord Jesus, you teach your followers in your word. The disciples saw the miracles, ate the bread and fish, saw you walk on water and so much more, yet this did not reveal to them who you are or why you had come. Teach us to be patient with people when they (or we!) struggle with understanding who you are and what you have done for us. Open our minds to understand your word and soften our hearts so that we might believe it. We read that you intended to pass by the disciples in the boat, do not let your word pass us by, but by the power of your Holy Spirit enlighten us to know you for who you are – not merely a miracle worker, but the one who came to die and rise again for our salvation and for the glory of the Father. Amen.

July 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9

This psalm was probably used responsively in worship. Its simple response allows it to include all the people who were there who could speak; no reading or memorization necessary. The psalm directs the hearer to give thanks to God, repeating over and over again, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” So this psalm functions as a type of liturgy to lead the people to give thanks for who he is, what he has done, and, of course, for his steadfast love.

Teaching

The steadfast love of God is essential to his character. It is because of his steadfast love that God does all the good things he does for his people. It is his chosen attitude toward us: steadfast love. We should take note of those words. It is not merely that God loves us, but his love is steadfast, unchanging, and unbreakable. In this way we can understand this steadfast love as another way of speaking of God’s grace and the love that moved him to give Jesus to redeem us.

The psalm itself divides into five sections; verses 1-9 being the first two. The first section declares God’s uniqueness among the gods because his steadfast love endures forever. The gods of this earth may be fickle in the affection for people, but God’s is not! The second section describes God in regard to the glories of his creation, which are also attributed to his steadfast love. Even the beautiful things we see in this world are the product of God’s steadfast love.

Life

This psalm urges us four different times to give thanks to God. What do we have to give thanks for? How about these things that Luther includes in this definition of daily bread: *food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace,*

health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.

Even greater than these things, though, is the good news that God's steadfast love endures forever. The one who is greater than all the gods and created all the marvels of this world has looked upon us and loved us in such a way that nothing can break that love. In fact, when we sin against him he continues to love us, and that is why he gave Jesus to redeem us and reconcile us to him. Give thanks, indeed!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Thanksgiving.

We give you thanks, O Lord, for you are good and your steadfast love endures forever. You are the God of gods and Lord of lords, and you have pledged your steadfast love for us will last to eternity. Thank you! You created this world and all its wonders: the heavens, seas, and land, and the sun, moon, and stars and you sustain them because your steadfast love endures forever. Thank you! When you saw mankind's condition and knew our broken sinfulness, even then, your steadfast love endured and we give you thanks and praise! You did not leave us in our sin, but cleansed us with Jesus' blood shed for us. Why would you do that? Because your steadfast love endures forever. Thank you, O God! Amen.

July 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21

After writing about the unity the believers have in Christ, Paul elaborated a little more about this mystery and also wrote about his calling to proclaim the gospel. In this section he wrote about his prayer for the Ephesians. He asked for the Holy Spirit to give them power in their "inner being" and that they be rooted and grounded in love – specifically the love of Christ. The force of the text is to move the reader to trust solely in the power of God to live the life of faith and to reveal the true nature of the love of Christ, having been filled with, "the fullness of God."

Teaching

Christian athletes often like to refer to Ephesians 3:20 as a source of encouragement for their competitive pursuits. Paul has described a relationship with God in which we are powerless, indeed dead, but God has intervened and his power makes us alive, "in Christ." Paul's prayer is in much the same vein. He speaks of God's Spirit in the believer's inner being and Christ dwelling in the believer's heart. This is power to animate the one who trusts in Christ. Moreover, this where the ability to comprehend how great this salvation is and how amazing the love of Christ is.

When Paul refers to being, "able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask of think..." he is really stressing how great a miracle it is for us to have faith and to know God's love. It is bringing the dead to life. It is such a great thing that one must think of it in terms of breadth and length and height and depth. It surpasses knowledge. And this incredible life giving salvation is what God delivers to sinners who believe in Jesus.

Life

There is a saying that familiarity breeds contempt. While we certainly do not have contempt for the glorious salvation and new life that we have in Christ, our familiarity with it often dulls our sense of awe at the miracle God has made in us. This is especially true for those of us who grew up in Christian homes and have been Christians since we were little children.

When was the last time you pondered the riches of God's glory? And I don't mean the glory of heaven, but the glory of God who risks all, dares all, and gives all to save you? Have you ever considered how incredible it is that the Holy Spirit makes your soul alive and dwells within you? Is it not beyond our wildest imagination that God would give his Son to die for sinners like us? And he didn't just die, but rose and gives us forgiveness, life, love, strength, and so much more!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Confession.

Lord God, we confess to you our slowness to bow our knees before you and to rely on the strength and power that you alone can give. Too often we try to live by our own power, or to take credit for some piece of what you alone can do. Please forgive us. We have become dulled in our sense of awe at how richly you have blessed us – giving us your Holy Spirit, Christ dwelling in our hearts, grounding us in love that surpasses knowledge. You have filled us with your own fullness, but we live as though these lives are ours to do as we choose and to pursue our desires. We call on you in time of need, but do not rely on you for every good thing that we have. Forgive us, dear Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

July 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 6:45-56

After Jesus dismissed the crowds who ate the miraculous meal from five loaves of bread and two fish, he sent the disciples to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he himself went off to pray. Later in the night, as the disciples strained against the wind in the boat, Jesus came to them walking on the water. Mark displays Jesus as powerful but confusing to the Twelve, which serves as a warning to us against thinking we have Jesus fully figured out and that we know what he will or should do in every circumstance.

Teaching

There is so much strangeness in this text. Jesus sent off the disciples leaving himself stranded on the opposite side of the lake. He saw them struggling against the wind and went to them, but he meant to pass by them. His presence in the boat calmed the wind, similar to what they had experienced before, but the disciples were still utterly astounded and they did not understand. How could they? They were actually in the presence of the Creator of all things. Jesus is God who does as he chooses. He is also God who lays down his life to save his people. These things can only be understood by faith. These are things that can only be revealed by God's word, otherwise Jesus might be another prophet, and not God incarnate.

Life

Sometimes our lives are confusing and God does not do for us as we think that he should. We expect healing but we continue on in illness. We desire blessings but feel like everything in our lives is going wrong. We yearn for God's presence and yet he feels distant. The problem is not with God, but with our expectation. Jesus came to give his life to save sinners. Walking on water and calming storms are secondary for him. The real good news in this passage is Jesus' words, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And this is what he speaks into all of our confusion as we follow him in faith.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Petition.

Lord Jesus, teach us to hear your word so that we may know you rightly. You have shown us that despite seeing your miracles, the disciples were still hard-hearted and did not understand. This danger exists for us too. The miracles you did served as testimony to support your preaching and teaching, they accented and leant credibility to your words. Teach us to not focus on the signs you performed but to take heed of what you say. Enlighten our own confusion and help us to believe in you, help us to not mistake you for a ghost or some popular myth of who you are, but to know you for who you say you are.

As you came to the disciples you comforted them with your words. Your presence unsettled them and astounded them. Comfort us and all who go through difficult times with your word. When we think we understand you, unsettle us with your presence to drive us back to your word so we may know you all the better through it. Do not allow our hearts to be hard, and if they are, create new hearts within us that we might believe in you rightly. Defend us from attitudes that presume to fully understand you, but fill us so much with your love that even when we do not understand what is happening in our lives, we will still trust in you. Amen.

July 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15

These events took place shortly after God had brought Israel out of Egypt. They had witnessed the plagues, experienced the first Passover and the Death of the Firstborn. They had walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. Now some of the logistics of being free were coming to mind. How would they eat? Where would they get food? These doubts led to grumbling – particularly against Moses and Aaron, the visible leaders of the group. God, however, heard their grumbling and provided miraculous food for them. This passage displays God's grace and mercy to us in that he showed his kindness and provided food even as the people grumbled. There is also another lesson here: God gave specific instructions on how much food was to be gathered – enough for one day, or on Friday, enough for the day and the Sabbath. This required the Israelites to trust God and to obey him.

Teaching

God is good, even when his people are not. The people of Israel had seen great miracles and had

been rescued from a life of slavery, yet when they ran into difficulty they did not turn to him, but instead grumbled about the leadership of Moses and Aaron. They did not trust God to provide for them, and did not even acknowledge that he had rescued them from Egypt! (They said to Moses, "...you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.")

Trust is central to the life of faith. God drove that point home in the way that he provided food for Israel. He gave bread from heaven in the morning; meat in the evening. They were to gather enough for the day, except for on Friday. Then they were to gather enough for two days so there would be no work on the Sabbath. And even the bread required a bit of faith to eat. They called it "manna," which means, "What is it?" They had to trust that what God was giving them was for their good.

Life

As sinful people we, too, sometimes grumble. We grumble about the cold in the winter and the heat in the summer. We complain when it rains and when it's too dry. We look into refrigerators that are filled with food and grouse that there is nothing that we want to eat. Grumbling seems to be a big part of our sinful human nature. At its core, grumbling reveals the dissatisfaction of our hearts and hints at a doubt we carry: Is God good? Grumbling implies that the answer is, "No, he is not. So I must take matters into my own hands."

But how has God responded to that grumbling in us? Because he is good, he sent his Son, who called himself the Bread of Life, to die for our sins. That includes the sins related to grumbling. And he continues to feed us in strange ways, giving us Jesus' body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Instruction.

O God, teach us to trust you and to not grumble. All that we have comes to us because you graciously provide for us. We may not see it as clearly as the Israelites did in the wilderness, but what do we have that did not come from you? Your provision is hidden within markets, economies, careers, skills, hard work, and talent, but none of these would exist without you. You are indeed, good. Amen.

July 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:22-35

John records the details of what happened after Jesus fed the five-thousand and walked on water. As one might expect people were amazed by the miracle and pleased to be fed, so they sought to follow Jesus. John records that it was even their intention to make Jesus their king. This reading records Jesus' conversation with those who had come looking for him and his effort to point them in the right direction; to believe in him as savior. He also reveals himself to be the Bread of Life. Jesus' purpose in this conversation is to turn his hearers' attention away from the earthly benefit they had received and wanted more of, and to focus them on the eternal blessings he longed to give them which are only received by faith.

Teaching

Jesus is not who we want him to be. He is who he is. He does not conform himself to our desires. He confronts our desires with the truth and calls us to believe in him so that, in him, we may have real life; eternal life. This might seem like a rather obvious statement, but it bears some thought.

The people who came to Jesus in John 6 wanted him to be their king. Jesus came to be a king. So, why didn't he embrace them, take the throne, and reign? He knew they were only attracted to the miracles, and not to what Jesus truly came to give. He had come to give life. And this life that he offered was not merely a matter of heartbeats and breathing. This life was given because people live in death because we sin. Jesus is the bread of life – the source and sustenance of life. This is what he has to offer; life. This was not what the people were after, though.

Life

When you think about what Jesus has done for you in your life – your earthly life, that is – have you ever considered that he has moved you from eternal death to eternal life? “The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” How do you give life to the living? He is speaking of something greater than our physical lives. He is speaking of the everlasting life he gives to those who do the work of God, which is to believe in him.

There are many ministries that are based on the idea of self-improvement, personal growth, positive thinking, and other so-called benefits of following Jesus. Jesus' message is that we are dead and what he wants to give is life. So what do you desire from Jesus? Perhaps we should take the crowd's words on our lips as a fitting prayer: *Sir, give us this bread always*. In other words: *Jesus, we need you*.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us yourself, not as we think you should be, or as we want you to be, but simply as yourself. You are who you are – the Bread of Life who gives life to the world. Thank you for stepping into our world of death and giving us life. Thank you for confronting our desires and pointing us to something so much better; the gifts you give. Thank you that in you we shall never hunger or thirst; we shall always be satisfied with the real eternal life that you have given to us. And thank you for revealing what the work of God truly is. The work of God is to believe in you. And we thank you that we do the work of God, because you made us alive and keep us alive in you. Amen.

July 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 145:10-21

The precept on this psalm tells us that it is both a song of praise and that it was written by David. It is a fun fact that this is the only psalm in the Book of Psalms to actually be called a

psalm in its title. For a psalm is a song of praise. The content of the psalm itself has to do with thanks and praise for good that God does for the whole world, and encourages the worshipper to make God known to others so they too will praise him. The psalm gives words and reasons for us to praise God and to make him known in the world.

Teaching

David writes in universal terms in Psalm 145. “All your works shall give thanks,” “to make known to the children of men,” “throughout all generations,” “The eyes of all look to you,” etc. He also covers a wide group of topics in his thanks and praise: glory, power, help for the falling, relief for the bowed, satisfaction for the hungry, righteousness, and God’s presence and preservation.

David would have us think much more broadly in our thanks and praise. He looks out at the world and sees all of it as God’s and in all of it examples of what makes God praiseworthy. And above all, what makes God praiseworthy is that he is God. What he does is rooted in who he is. He is creator, provider, sustainer, savior, and all things good.

Life

What do you thank and praise God for? Is your focus on things like family, health, and good things that happen to you and the ones you love? Perhaps you give thanks for God’s protection. Maybe your focus in giving thanks and praise is on Jesus and the salvation he won for you when he died and rose again.

These are certainly worthy topics for thanks and praise. This psalm challenges us to look even more broadly and to give thanks for how deeply interwoven God is in our existence and the many ways that he blesses our existence and makes it good. Indeed he brings us into his kingdom where we live as his people.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Confession.

O God, all your works shall give thanks to you, but all too often we are unaware of how vast your works are. We look at this world through our modern eyes and see natural processes, laws of physics, and the general working of the world, but too often we do not see you as the author of those processes and laws or as the one who keeps the world working. All of this is your kingdom which displays your power and glory, but too often we are so caught up in our day to day life or the troubles of this world that we fail to see that this is all yours, and that we ourselves belong to you and are part of your kingdom. Forgive us for failing to fully thank you for all you have done – upholding us, raising us up, feeding us, satisfying our desires, giving us righteousness, being kind, drawing near to us in our need, preserving us, and destroying the wicked. Forgive us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

July 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16

Paul has been expounding the mystery of the gospel and delving into the incredible grace and salvation God has given to us through faith in Jesus. What is more, he has taught the Ephesians that whether they were Jew or Gentile they have an overarching unity in Christ.

In Ephesians 4, he turns to urging us to live in a way that reflects the grace and salvation we have received. The overall message is that God's people live according to the salvation they have received from Jesus and that we are to grow and mature in the faith that unites us in love.

Teaching

Paul urges us to, “walk in a manner worthy of the calling,” to which we have been called. “Walk,” is a metaphor for, “live.” In fact, some English translations have this, “live in a manner worthy of your calling.” So what does that look like? Paul lists things like humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. He also talks about becoming more mature and Christ-like.

At the heart of all of what it means to walk in a manner worthy of our calling is Jesus. As Paul speaks of the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace he goes back to what he's already talked about – the salvation Jesus won for us that we hold in common. There is only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. But there are those – God's enemies – who would twist this unity and love into something different. They would bring division. They do this by attacking Jesus, reducing his grace and exchanging it for our works, providing a different standard for unity, or defining love apart for the salvation and new life Jesus has won for us.

Life

In the late 1990's, Charles Colson co-authored a book titled *How Now Shall We Live?* That quizzical title is at the heart of this reading. How do we live in light of what God has done for us? What difference does Jesus make in our lives? Where do our lives reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit in us? These are all good questions for us to ponder, especially to lead us into confession, because we will always see that we fall short on the front of living Christ-like lives.

The heart of Paul's answer to this question lies in v. 15 where he writes, “...we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” This means, firstly, living as his forgiven people, and then being changed in our priorities, lifestyle, worldview, and everything else so we become like Jesus. But forgiveness is first, because as we delve into the other things we will always fall short and need to return to the source of our hope; Christ crucified and risen delivered to us by faith.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the theme of Petition.

O Holy Spirit, help us to attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Help us to mature and become more like Jesus. Bless us with humility, gentleness, patience, love, and an eagerness to maintain the unity you have given us in the bond of peace – the common hope

and faith we have in Jesus' death and resurrection. Help your people to be more united by becoming more connected to Jesus, hearing his word, trusting in his salvation, and seeing one another in light of the cross. Amen.

July 31, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:22-35

Jesus' conversation about the bread of life takes up the rest of chapter six. This is a challenging teaching and many of his followers will abandon him after this. Nevertheless, Jesus proclaims that he is the bread that came down from heaven and he gives life to the world. In doing so, he challenges the status quo of those who follow Jesus because they feel they get some earthly benefit from him.

Teaching

Jesus' statement, "I am the bread of life," is part of a conversation with some of the people who ate at the feeding of the five-thousand. They wanted Jesus for their own purposes – to provide for them – but Jesus' purpose was much greater than theirs. He had not come to merely satisfy their physical hunger, but their spiritual hunger. He came to make them alive to God and sustain that life. Indeed, nothing can satisfy our spiritual hunger other than Jesus himself.

Life

People have needs and desires. We often confuse the two things. Our Lord Jesus knows that as physical beings we need food, shelter, clothing, medicine and the like. He also knows we are emotional beings who need love, community, and compassion. He provides these things, although when he does we often think we get them by our own means. He knows that we have a need that surpasses the physical needs and, while touching on the emotional need, goes far beyond our experience of these things. He knows that we have an eternal spiritual need for a new life; a sinless life. He graciously provided that by dying for us, and offering the benefit of his death to us. Like bread given to someone who is starving, we take hold of it with thanks and praise.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Petition and Confession.

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would provide for your people. Give those who are hungry the food and resource that they need for this body and life. Place firmly in our minds that all that we are and all that we have comes from you, given to us because you love us, and use that knowledge to make us thankful. Help us to see the many ways you provide for our lives and make us more and more confident in your gracious providence. More than that, Lord, we pray that you would give us and all people the bread of life – your very life, presence, forgiveness, and salvation. Turn our minds and hearts from the desires of this life so that we would long more and more for you and be satisfied only with you. We pray that you would place that desire in the hearts of all people, and draw us all to you.

Lord, we are ashamed to confess that too often we desire things of this life more than we desire your gifts. When we have food to eat and our lives are comfortable, all too often, our desire for the bread of life is diminished. Sometimes we seek you for wrong purposes, to satisfy our wants and desires. Cleanse us, O Lord, give us the life that will change us from being dead in our sins to being alive in you. Graciously forgive us, for your name's sake. Amen.

August 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8

Context: Skim 1 Kings 18:20-40 to find out why the Jezebel wanted to kill Elijah.

Content: What did Elijah do in this reading? What did God do?

Function: What does this reading say about where Elijah's strength came from? What about ours?

Teaching

There are many who hate God's will and resist Him with violence in this world. Unfortunately it is God's people that bear the brunt of that violence. Persecution has always been part of the life of the church. It happens in a wide variety of ways, but God's people have always lived as aliens in a hostile land.

This world is, however, still God's. He continues to protect and provide for His people's needs. He fed Elijah with divine food which gave him strength to travel forty days and forty nights. God provides miraculous food to His people today through the Word and Sacraments. This is most obvious in the Lord's Supper where we eat Jesus' body and drink His blood in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Life

Persecution might not be overly evident in places like U.S. America, but God's people in other parts of the world often face physical danger. This is something we must be prepared for. People will hate us because we bear the name, "Christian." We will be labeled as intolerant, bigots, and irrelevant. This will be hard for us and it might be frightening. We do not need to fear, though. Just as Elijah was strengthened by the food the angel gave him, God will strengthen us for the tasks he gives us by His Word and Sacraments. We can count on Him to achieve His will in and through us.

Prayer

This prayer is written with the themes of Instruction and Thanksgiving.

O Lord, in Your Word we learn that your people have long faced threats and danger in this world. We also learn that You provide for Your people when they face such dangers. Sometimes You provide physical protection, sometimes endurance, sometimes peace, and sometimes the provision is entry into Your eternal presence. Help us to learn as we face the threats of Your enemies in this world to have confidence in You and to know that in all circumstances You will provide for us.

Thank You for the many ways that You have protected Your people. Thank You also for the privilege of suffering for the sake of Your name and the hope that we have in Jesus. We are so grateful that no matter what happens to us in this world nothing can take us from You, and, when the journey is too difficult for us, You provide all that we need to be steadfast in our faith and trust as well as to finally come home to that place where there is no more pain or sorrow, where we finally dwell with You face to face. Amen.

August 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:35-51

This reading is a portion of a conversation Jesus had after He miraculously fed five-thousand men (and likely their families). They hoped that He would continue to feed them, which led to Jesus warning them to seek heavenly food from Him, not earthly food. In this passage Jesus once again identifies Himself as the bread of life and warns His hearers that no one can come to Him or His Father unless God draws that person. He also tells His hearers that He is there to give eternal life to those who believe in Him.

This reading is challenging. Jesus seems to be excluding people and making them uncomfortable. He probed their preconceived notions of who God is, how He works, and how people relate to Him. There is comfort here, though, because Jesus reveals His Father's will: to save sinners and give them eternal life.

Teaching

What kind of hunger does Jesus satisfy? What need do we have?

How do people come to Jesus according to this passage?

Life

Have you ever entered a home where bread is baking? Did it make you hungry? Did you feel like you could hardly wait to taste that wonderful, wholesome, food? Jesus describes Himself as the bread of life in this passage. Much like wanting bread to sustain our earthly lives, there is a longing in our spiritual life for something that satisfies a hunger that goes beyond the food that we eat and which only sustains us until we die. That longing, whether people recognize it or not, is for Jesus. His flesh, which He gave into death for the life of the world, is our salvation; our everlasting life.

Do we, like the people Jesus dealt with, only long for Him to feed our bellies? Do we look at our lives primarily as material and physical? Jesus offers us something better: to draw us to Himself, to bring us to the Father, and to give us everlasting life. He spoke metaphorically of being bread, but He did give His flesh so the world might live, and even now, one of our most intimate experiences of His flesh is when we eat it and drink it in the Lord's Supper, where we receive the forgiveness He won by giving His flesh.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

Father in Heaven, we confess that we are often more interested in earthly bread than the bread of life that You give. Forgive us for thinking that we came to You on our terms and for what we want. Forgive us because Jesus gave His flesh for the life of the world.

Lord, help us always have in mind that You drew us to Yourself to give us life. Please keep drawing people to Jesus that they might also have their hunger and thirst for Your real salvation satisfied. Please give us the eternal life You have promised, and raise us up on the last day. Amen.

August 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 34:1-8

Many of the psalms do not reveal their origin. This one, however, does. It was written by David, “when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.” This is likely a reference to 1 Samuel 21:10-15. The long and the short of it is that David, fleeing from King Saul, ended up in the land of his enemies, and by pretending to be insane was saved.

This portion of the psalm is a prayer of praise which proclaims God’s salvation. It serves us by reminding us of how God provided salvation for His people in the past while giving us words with which to praise Him in the present. As it does so it reveals attitudes and themes for praise.

Teaching

David had come through a difficult and dangerous experience. His reflection upon that experience is one of profound gratitude and praise to God for bringing him through it. As he looks at the whole of his life and sees God’s faithfulness and salvation he says, “I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise will continually be in my mouth.” The protection he received changed his perspective and made David want to always have God in his mind to bring Him praise.

Verse 8 gives an interesting picture for how a person might experience God’s goodness; David says, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” He is, of course, speaking metaphorically here. In this case to taste and see would be to experience and know God’s goodness. The invitation is to check God out, because when one trusts in Him He will always satisfy our needs.

Life

Where do you taste and see that the Lord is good?

How is receiving the Lord’s Supper an opportunity to taste and see the Lord is good?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Petition.

O Lord, You taught David that You can be counted upon to rescue him. We, too, have learned to trust in You for our salvation from earthly danger, and, more importantly, from the danger of our sin. Every blessing and praise belongs to You for the salvation You have given us in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and our soul boasts in You and exalts Your name. We have tasted and seen, O LORD, that You are good.

We pray that You would continue to help us know Your goodness in every situation we find ourselves in. Help us to boldly and beautifully bring You praise as we speak Your name, and may all come to magnify Your name as glorious. Help us to seek You, knowing You will answer and deliver us. Lord, the poor are still crying out in our world, we pray that You would save them out of their troubles. And help us to fear, love and trust in You above all things so that we would once again taste and see that you are good. Amen.

August 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 4:17-5:2

St. Paul took the first half of his letter to the Ephesians to talk solely about God's salvation which He gave to us by grace through faith in Jesus, who died and rose for us. Starting in chapter 4, Paul describes how followers of Jesus who have experienced such amazing grace should live. In this part of the letter Paul describes life in terms of an old way of life and a new way of life. He sums the new life up as being imitators of God and having love for others. The function of this passage is as a reminder and description of the ethical difference faith in Jesus makes in his followers.

Teaching

Paul's teaching here is clear. He urges us to live rejecting sin and embracing the life we have in Christ. He describes the sinful life with words like futility, darkened, alienated from the life of God, ignorant and hard-hearted. He stresses that it was not through the ways of the world that people came to know Christ and his salvation, and he urges us to put these things off and no longer live in such ways.

On the other hand he urges us to imitate God, who has saved us and reconciled us to Himself and one another. As we are His beloved children, we are to "walk in love" which means to live in such a way that love is a hallmark of who we are, identifying us as God's children because we love as He loved us. The highest expression of God's love for us is that Jesus gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering, and so we too are encouraged to display such love to others.

Life

We Lutherans go through great pain to emphasize God's grace as the sole source of our salvation. This does not mean that we are not intended to do good works. This passage speaks bluntly to the topic. Our lives should be different, more Christ-like, since we believe in Jesus. The heart of the matter, though, is why we are to be different. We are different because of the salvation we have and cherish, not because we are seeking to earn anything from God.

The behaviors we are warned against are still part of our world and lives: callousness, sensuality, greed, impurity, anger, slander, and malice – to name a few. Perhaps you have noted them in others. Maybe you've noted them in yourself, too. Remember, that God in Christ forgave you, and let the comfort and joy of that truth lead you to live a kind, tenderhearted, forgiving, and loving life.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Thanksgiving.

As you pray a prayer of Confession, think about phrases from the reading like: the futility of our minds, callous, greedy, angry, and slanderous.

As you thank God, think about the phrases: a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to atone for our sins.

August 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:35-51

Context: What happened that prompted Jesus' conversation with the Jews?

Content: What did Jesus tell the Jews? How did they respond? How did Jesus respond to their response?

Function: What does Jesus want us to believe according to His words?

Teaching

Jesus' insistence that He is the living bread that came down from heaven is often lumped together with our teachings of the Lord's Supper. The actual event is not as simple as that. The Lord's Supper had not been instituted yet, although it is undeniable that the themes are similar. The eating and drinking spoken of here is the reception of Christ and His flesh is His word which we receive by faith. That faith receives Jesus, who gave His flesh for the life of the world, and Jesus gives us eternal life.

Life

Have you taken time to ponder what you hunger and thirst for? Often our hunger and thirst is directed toward earthly comforts, but Jesus offers us more. Since you believe, you have eternal life. That life is sustained by Jesus who comes to you in His Word and Sacraments.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

Lord Jesus, You are the bread of life, whoever comes to You shall not hunger, and whoever believes in You shall not thirst. Your Father draws us, and because we have come to believe in You, You give us eternal life and will raise us up on the last day. Teach us to know this truth all the more!

Thank You for giving Your flesh for the life of the world. Thank You for the privilege of allowing us to be drawn to You. Thank You for feeding our faith by Your Word and Sacraments. Thank You for confronting our connection to and desire for the food that only sustains our earthly lives, like the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness. Thank You for giving us even better food, food that gives eternal life and sustains it.

We confess that only too often we have longed for earthly bread – things we need for this body

and life, as well as many things we do not need by desire. Our desire for the bread of life has been dulled and sometimes ignored. As a result we find ourselves often spiritually hungry and often thirsty, and we try to satisfy ourselves with things that cannot meet our need; things we consume knowing we will die. Forgive us for being earthly minded. Forgive us for not desiring Your greater gift. Forgive us for thinking that we are in control of our relationship with You when it is Your Father who draws us to You. Forgive us, for You have given Your flesh for the life of the world. Amen.

August 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Toward the end of Joshua's life, after he had led the Israelites into the Promised Land, he gathered the people together to speak God's Word to them once again. The chapter begins with a recounting of their history: specifically their calling to be God's people, their salvation from Egypt, being led into the Promised Land, how God gave it to them. In this portion Joshua calls on the Israelites to not be divided in their faith and urges them to be faithful to God alone. The text functions as a call to the hearers to put away the objects of idolatry in our lives and to keep the First Commandment to have no other gods. At the same time it reminds us that the God whom we serve is the God who saves us and provides every blessing for our lives.

Teaching

Which of the Ten Commandment does this reading deal with? (It might be helpful to look at Luther's Small Catechism if you have one.)

What were the deeds which displayed God's grace that the Israelites were to remember? What deeds displayed God's grace to us?

Life

What are the gods in your life which would divide your loyalty to God? What are the things that try to take precedence over the Lord in your life? As a person who has been saved from sin and death, and from the false gods of this world, you have been given eternal life and a glorious home in God's presence. Joshua's words cry out to you, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

And what better way, when tempted to give our love or energy to another god, to resist that temptation than to recall all the blessings God has bestowed on you: earthly blessings like house, home, and loved ones as well as eternal blessings like forgiveness, eternal life, and citizenship in God's kingdom won for us by Jesus through His death and resurrection.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Confession.

O Lord, You speak to us in Your Word and reveal Your will to us. Once again You have called us to not have divided hearts but to serve You and serve You only. You remind us of the salvation and blessings You gave to Israel; freedom from slavery, victory over their enemies, signs and wonders, and a land of their own. You have blessed us with victory over sin, faith, and

life in Christ.

Forgive us, Lord, because we do not always keep You as our only God. Our hearts are sometimes drawn to old sinful behaviors and desire to serve other things like gods, seeking comfort and provision from them. Sometimes it seems evil in our eyes to be obedient to You. Forgive us once again for Jesus' sake, who has led us into a better Promised Land making us citizens of Your kingdom. Amen.

August 11, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:51-69

This passage is part of a longer conversation regarding faith and how we relate to God, but it is couched in the language of eating and drinking. It actually starts with Jesus feeding the crowds and them seeking Him out hoping for more food. Jesus once again speaks of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man and having everlasting life. Jesus also reiterates that one comes to Jesus because the Father grants it. This teaching, however, made His followers very uncomfortable and some of them left Him at this point. In response to this defection, Jesus asked the Twelve if they wanted to leave, too. Peter replies with a great confession of faith.

This text invites us to consider how we came to faith, what we receive in faith, and why we continue to follow in faith. It also gives us words for a strong confession regarding Jesus' words – the words of eternal life – and who He is – the Holy One of God.

Teaching

There is only one way to have life and that is by eating Jesus' flesh and drinking His blood. In this context, Holy Communion has not yet been instituted, so we should understand this life as the life of faith and the eating and drinking as receiving that life-giving word of God that Jesus both speaks and is. (Don't forget that John is the one that records, "In the beginning was the Word," speaking of Jesus.)

Peter confessed what Jesus had been saying all along very succinctly at the end of the reading. He says that Jesus has the words of eternal life and they had believed and come to know that He was the Holy One of God. God had drawn them through Jesus' words, and He had given them life – that is faith which receives the eternal life Jesus had come to give His actual flesh to win for all who believe in Him.

Life

Do you ever pause to think about eternal life? What does this passage teach us about eternal life? How does Jesus sustain faith according to this reading?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Thanksgiving and Petition.

O God, we thank and praise You for giving us Jesus, and that He has given His flesh for the life

of the world. Thank You for Your Word and Spirit which give us everlasting life and sustain that life. Thank You for drawing us to Jesus by giving us the words of eternal life, revealing Him who is Your Holy One.

Grant that we would always be fed by Jesus and that we would always receive His words as they are – words of eternal life. Sustain the life and faith You have given us until the day You raise us up! Amen.

August 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 34:12-22

This psalm continues last week's and was written as a reflection of David's experience in 1 Samuel 21 when he behaved as though he were insane before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away, and he was, therefore, rescued from the danger of Saul and the King of Gath. This portion of the psalm continues the theme of tasting and seeing that the Lord is good (v. 8). It describes the Lord as a vigilant defender, avenger, and redeemer. In the New Testament, verse 20 is connected to Jesus' crucifixion, indicating that none of His bones would be broken. For us today this passage invites us to live under God's protection having hope even in difficult circumstances and points us to Christ as our ultimate redeemer.

Teaching

This psalm asks a very basic question: Do you want to have a long and good life? Most people would likely answer yes to that question, and David immediately describes how that can happen. He writes for just one verse about avoiding evil and doing good, but then goes on to write about how the LORD relates to the righteous and those who do evil. In this way he shows that a long and good life is a blessing from God and a result of His redemption.

This psalm takes on an even fuller meaning when we know that it was cited as speaking about Jesus. Jesus who lived a short life and saw a terrible end is also the ultimate example of God's redemption because He was raised from the dead and saved from the worst that can happen to any person. Not only that, but He is now glorified and lives eternally. What the psalm describes for us is what Jesus experienced and won for us.

Life

It would be easy to turn this reading into a morality lesson: Do good to live a long good life. That, however, is not the point. The point is that God rescues us.

It is interesting that this psalm that speaks of long and good life also notes that we are sometimes brokenhearted, crushed in spirit, and afflicted. It speaks of the reality that we who know we are forgiven feel the most guilt when we sin. But notice what it says, "the Lord delivers him out of all of them." The long good life is rooted in the Lord's deliverance from our sins.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

As you pray a prayer of Confession think about how you have kept your tongue from evil and

your lips from speaking deceit and how well you have turned away from evil and done good; and sought peace.

As you pray a prayer of Petition think about ideas like: Hear our cry for help, draw near to the brokenhearted, the crushed in spirit, and the afflicted because. Think about how the Lord redeems the life of his servants.

August 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 5:6-21

How does the theme of God's grace in Ephesians 1-3 help us understand the theme of living the Christian life in Ephesians 4-5?

What does this passage say about how Christians should live? What image does it use to help us understand why we are different?

What does Paul want us to understand as we read this?

Teaching

Paul states very bluntly, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." This is a warning to us that (a) there are those who would deceive us and lead us away from God's will, (b) that there are empty words that are harmful to the life of faith, and (c) that the wrath of God is real and coming. The dichotomy between darkness and light serves as an example of how little we should have to do with such empty deceit which brings division to God's people.

Instead of sinful behaviors, we are urged to keep our conversation and thoughts filled with godly words. These are things that unite us – psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and giving thanks to the Lord. They not only root us in the forgiveness we cherish, but also help us live humbly and lovingly with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Life

In U.S. American culture, submitting to another person is generally viewed as weakness and as undesirable. We strongly value our independence. However, this passage urges us to both shun darkness and submit to one another. Our lives are meant to be lived for others. We shun darkness and walk as children of light not just for ourselves but for others; to encourage our fellow believers and to be a witness to those who do not believe in Jesus. This means that we are thinking of the needs of others in our life choices to help them stay or come into the light of God's grace.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Thanksgiving.

O God our Father in Heaven, Your Spirit teaches us to shun the deeds of darkness and to walk as children of light. Indeed, we were once darkness, but now we are light because of Jesus' forgiveness and salvation! Teach us to walk in a manner that is pleasing to You, and help us

display Your light to expose the works of darkness. Teach us to make the best use of the time, knowing the days are evil. And help us learn to submit to one another for Jesus' sake.

We thank You that though we were darkness, Christ has made us light. We thank You for the wisdom You reveal in Your Word that exposes sins and leads us to live in righteousness. Thank You for giving us psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to fill our hearts and mouths with melodies that are wholesome and helpful to us and our neighbor. Thank You for putting us into relationships where we may both experience and share Your love as we submit to one another for the sake of Christ. Amen.

August 14, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:51-69

Jesus taught about Himself as the living bread in response to the desire of the Jews for earthly bread and earthly blessings. He speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood in a way that refers to the life of faith in which we receive Him and He gives us eternal life. This language and the idea that Jesus was the source of life was offensive to Jesus' hearers, and many who had been His followers left Him after this. The point we get from this, though, is that God draws us to believe in Jesus and His words are life for us, and they give us eternal life.

Teaching

What does Jesus teach is necessary for us to have life within us?

What does Jesus mean when he says the flesh is no help at all in verse 63?

Life

Jesus asked, "Do you take offense at this?" He is basically saying that apart from faith in Him there is no life, no hope, no salvation. Is that offensive to you? Yet He also says, "Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." That means that this faith is available to anyone who will receive the gift of faith the Father offers and the life the Spirit gives.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for being the living bread. We know that ancient Israel ate the manna in the wilderness, but You have given us bread that gives eternal life. Thank You! We are so grateful that the Father sent You and that You came so that we might hear the words of eternal life from You and live forever! Thank You for ascending to where You were before and for giving us Your Spirit who gives us life.

Forgive us for the times in which we live as though the flesh was what matters. It is with shame that we must admit that although we have eaten Your flesh and drunk Your blood we have behaved as though we did not have life within us. There have been times that we too deserted You because Your teaching was hard and made us uncomfortable. There have been times that we didn't listen to You because we didn't like the Word You spoke to us and You challenged our

understanding of God and how we come to live in Him. Please forgive us!

We pray that You and Your Spirit would help us to share the good news of the bread that gives everlasting life, which is Your flesh which You gave for the life of the world. Draw many more people to Yourself that they may have everlasting life. And please keep us filled with Your body and blood, and with the words of eternal life, so that we might know You are the Holy One and that our lives would help others to know You are the Holy One so they may have the life You have won for all people. Amen.

August 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 29:11-19

Isaiah 29 begins with a prophecy regarding God's promised protection for Israel. Despite the sins He condemned in their midst earlier in the book, He says that He will defend His people from their enemies among the nations. Interestingly, though, this promise moves into a complaint that God's people no longer hear and believe God's word. Indeed, they cannot understand the good news of what God is saying to them. So in this passage the Lord laments that His people outwardly claim to follow Him, but in reality they have followed only earthly wisdom. He therefore promises that He will do something to recapture their hearts. The passage is a prophecy to confront our own sin and to cause us to examine if we are living by faith or merely in dead ritual while it also points us forward to Jesus – the only one to ever heal the eyes of the blind – and the fresh joy in the Lord that He won for us.

Teaching

The observation that a people can honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him is a call to examine our own faith. When faith becomes about commandments taught by men, wisdom from wise men, and discernment that is rooted in the politics of the day it causes a darkening of the heart. Understanding of God's Word is related to faith. Certainly anyone can read the words of the Bible – ink on paper – but to perceive God's Word on the page requires faith, and only faith can perceive God's salvation in the midst of the tragedies of the world.

God knew even then that it was the way of people to deny that God had formed them and that we are accountable to Him. We make ourselves gods in this way, which is much like a clay vessel claiming the potter did not make it. Ridiculous! Yet God chooses to allow a great reversal of roles. He gives His Son to open the deaf ears and blind eyes – giving faith to receive the great blessings He gives.

Life

This is a great passage to consider when we prepare to confess our sins. Have we drawn near to God with our mouths and honored Him with our lips while our hearts were far from Him? Have we ever gone through the motions of a religious life without any actual faith and trust to move us? Have we allowed human wisdom to become greater than God's Word? The honest answer to all of these is that, yes, we have. But here is something to think about: If we can see and perceive

that, it means that we are not blind. We may sometimes turn things upside down, but God is still at work to give the fresh joy of His forgiveness to poor people like us who see our sin and who hope in him to save us.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

In your prayer of Confession think about hearts that are far from God and having things upside down.

In your prayer of petition think about opening deaf ears and giving sight to the blind – particularly in a spiritual sense.

August 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:1-13

Context: Note that Mark 7 marks a shift in themes. Skim the following headers to see what's coming up in Mark's Gospel and what Jesus will be doing.

Content: What actually takes place in this reading? Note the reference to yesterday's reading in Isaiah 29.

Function: What does this reading accomplish? (This might be difficult for this reading as we only get half of the story this week.)

Teaching

The Pharisees were concerned about Jesus' teaching because it conflicted with their own. What they had lost sight of was that their own teaching had deviated from God's Word as it had been revealed in the Scriptures. They had, in essence, preferred the ideas and teachings of people over the revealed will of God. Make no mistake, they were very pious and religious people, but the foundation of their faith was skewed, and Jesus' teachings threatened them.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees for the traditions they held to which contradicted the commandments of God. He pointed out one of the ways they set aside the Fourth Commandment (to honor one's father and mother) and stated they had other similar practices. In doing so Jesus puts the foundation of faith and our teaching squarely on God's Word.

Life

There are a wide variety of teachings that people believe are in the Bible which are not. "God helps those who help themselves," is one of them. Another is the teaching that God desires us to be happy, healthy, or prosperous, so if we are not there must be some kind of disobedience in our lives. What Jesus teaches us here is that all of these teachings – and every doctrine that we believe and teach – must be bound to the Scriptures. There is where we find the truth and the authoritative command to live in.

It is also good to note that Jesus does not tolerate the Pharisees' false teachings. He confronts it and condemns it. In His wisdom He knows the danger of false teaching in the lives of His

followers. We, too, must speak the truth of God's Word, sometimes even in confrontational situations.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Petition.

Lord Jesus, You teach us that it is hypocrisy to put the commandments of men over Your Word. You do not want us to reject the commands which are revealed in Scripture to establish our own traditions. Nor are You pleased when we make God's Word void by handing down our own ideas.

Protect us from false teaching and doctrines that deny Your Word. Help us to recognize if and when such teachings are part of our lives and give us, and all who hold such teachings, the faith to confess our guilt, receive Your forgiveness, and to turn away from them. Help us to honor You with our lips, hearts, and lives, and in this way help others to know Your Word of Truth. Amen.

August 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 14

This is another psalm which was written by David. There is no specific event that we know of that caused him to write it, but it is clear that he was concerned about unbelief, and the context of dealing with people who reject God is something we can relate to today. The psalm itself is fairly straight forward speaking of the foolishness of denying God, the depth of human depravity, and, in the background, the longing for God to reveal Himself in such a way that all will know Him and believe in Him. The psalm gives words to God's people in their frustration with atheism in the world and by describing the depths of human sin provides a glimpse of the greatness of God's grace in Christ.

Teaching

How does this psalm deal with and describe the human condition? Note the repetition in v. 2 & 3
How does this description of the human condition impact the tone of v. 7?

Note: Zion is a symbol for where God dwells.

Life

We live in a world that largely operates as though there were no God. More and more people try to base their lives on a foundation other than God's Word. They might choose pleasure, intellect, work, family, or other things as the foundation of their lives, but they do not want God. It should come as no surprise then when we see corruption, abominable deeds, and a lack of understanding of God's will and what He declares to be right or wrong.

We do well to pray to God, as David did, asking for His salvation to come forth. We long for that salvation for ourselves and for those "fools" who do not even know they need to be saved. In Jesus' anticipated return we long for our own salvation. But in the meantime, we see that we are

here as witnesses to reveal the Lord who restores the fortunes of His people and would save us from ourselves.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Thanksgiving.

Lord, You teach that it is the fool who says that there is no God. It is that state of rejecting You that leads people into all kinds of evil, making them corrupt, doers of abominable deeds, so that, by Your measure, there is no one who does good. Not only that, with You absent from their lives they have no knowledge of what matters most. They may have the form of knowledge, but lacking You they lack its substance.

We thank You that You have rescued us from such foolishness, for we know we were born into it. Your salvation has gone out. You have sent Your Son to die for us and to rise, revealing Your love for us and forgiving our sins. Thank You! Thank You for being our refuge! Thank you for restoring our fortunes in Christ and for giving us reason to rejoice and be glad. Amen.

August 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 5:22-33

Paul has been writing about the Christian walk and describing behaviors and influences that are opposed to God's will, much as darkness is opposed to light. Those works of darkness bring division into our relationships and would have us put ourselves over others rather than submitting to them. In this reading, Paul looks at the central human relationship: marriage. He gives a picture of submission and sacrifice as key to marriage, but also makes clear that this is a picture of what Christ has done for us. The function of this passage is to teach about the relationship between wife and husband when it is in Christ's love. More importantly it describes Jesus' passion for the church and how He lovingly saved her.

Teaching

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...” Too often people read the first quote and forget the second. The relationship of wife and husband in Christ is one of submission and sacrifice. This is God's design that the woman would willingly lift up her husband and his needs over her own, and that man would sacrifice himself and his needs for the sake of his bride. Their love is to be turned to one another.

Paul goes on from the husbands' sacrificial lives to talk about how Jesus gave Himself up for the sake of the church. The church's splendor is revealed in how deeply He loves her, what He was willing to do to cleanse her, and how He made her His own. In this way the institution of marriage is seen in its fullest meaning as The Man, Jesus, left His Father in heaven, to be united to His bride, the church, uniting us with Himself.

Life

How does this passage compare to modern thoughts and feelings about marriage?
Paul emphasizes that he is talking about Christ and the church. How does the visual image of Christ as the groom impact your understanding of the gospel?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, please forgive us for the mess we have made of marriage in this world. We have made marriage a place where the sexes battle and each seeks his or her own pleasure instead of submitting and sacrificing ourselves for one another. In doing so, we have given the world a false witness regarding this loving gift and have brought dishonor on the picture of Your love for us. Please forgive us.

We thank You for the blessing of marriage and the gift of love that You give to husband and wife therein. Thank You for revealing Your love for us and for cleansing us by Your sacrifice. Amen.

August 21, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:1-13

Jesus found himself in the middle of controversy raised by the Pharisees: His disciples hadn't properly washed their hands before eating. Jesus used their accusation against Him to reveal that it was they, the Pharisees, who had ignored something greater than a tradition, they had ignored God's Word. This passage challenges us to look at our own lives to see where we have traditions or behaviors that we hold which are contrary to God's Word.

Teaching

Jesus specifically confronted the Pharisees regarding one of the traditions that they held regarding caring for one's parents. They held that if one had dedicated an offering to the Lord, it could not be repurposed to help parents who were in need. He knew that the Pharisees often gave offerings in order to look good in the eyes of others. He says it is better to do as God's Word teaches and to honor our parents.

The issue of the keeping of the Fourth Commandment gives a good illustration of how people can use pious sounding words and actions to hide their sinful desires. God's Word does not leave room for that in our lives. Instead it condemns our sin, calls us to repentance, and grants us forgiveness by grace.

Life

There is a derogatory remark that is sometimes thrown at people who are trying to obey God's commands. People say, "She is acting holier than thou!" We do well to recognize that sometimes we act in ways that make people think that we think we are better than them. When our faith becomes a shield against accusations that reveal our sin, we must be careful. We are people who repent of our sin, which means we acknowledge and turn from them. We are not "holier than

thou,” except by the forgiveness Jesus gives freely to all who believe in Him.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession, Petition, and Instruction.

In the Confession portion of your prayer consider Jesus’ words, “rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.”

In the Petition portion of your prayer consider Mark’s quote from Isaiah: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” In light of these words what do you want God to do?

In the Instruction portion of your prayer think about what this passage teaches us about what defiles a person and how knowing that impacts your confession of sins and reception of forgiveness.

August 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Context: Deuteronomy is Moses’ farewell to the Israelites. How does this passage fit with a farewell message?

Content: What does Moses say to the Israelites?

Function: What does Moses want the Israelites to do? How does that apply to us?

Teaching

God’s Word contains two main messages: Law and Gospel. This passage contains and deals with both. The Law is that which condemns sin, reveals God’s holy will, and tells us how to live as His people. The Gospel reveals God’s salvation and displays the heart of His relationship with us as we live in God’s forgiveness. So this passage does not shy away from the exhortation to listen to God’s rules and keep them exactly as He delivered them. Nor does it hide that the heart of Israel’s relationship with God was their salvation from slavery. Indeed, they were chosen by grace to receive the Law to be an example to the people around them to draw them to God.

Life

We might be tempted to look at Old Testament readings like this one and wonder what it has to do with us today. There are some important teachings here for us as we live in relationship with God and His Word. First, like Israel, we do well to remember what God has done for us and to make all that He has done known to our family and to those around us. The Gospel has come to us and we know of Jesus sacrifice, death, and resurrection. What a powerful message to share with others! Second, we too have received God’s Law and the wisdom that it provides. This does not mean that we try to fulfill the Law. Jesus did that for us. We do, however, recognize that our God knows how our lives work best and out of love for Him and for our neighbor we seek to live in a manner that is consistent with His will as He revealed in His Word.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Thanksgiving and Petition.

Lord God, we thank You for Your Law and Gospel. Thank You for revealing our sin by Your Law and Your forgiveness in the Gospel. Thank You also for giving us wisdom to live according to Your will. We are grateful to be able to share Your wisdom in this world – especially the wisdom of the cross where we receive our salvation.

Lord, let all who hear or read Your Word be moved to worship You and to be in awe of the God who is near His people. Help us to listen to Your statutes and rules, neither adding to nor subtracting from them, but keeping and doing them. Make us diligent to keep close watch on our souls as well, lest we forget all that You have done for us and the many ways we've experienced Your salvation. Amen

August 25, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:14-23

After a confrontation with the Pharisees about setting aside God's Word and favoring human traditions, Jesus took to opportunity to teach about what makes a person unclean. It was not, as the Pharisees had accused the disciples in this case, a matter of whether one's hands were washed or not. Rather it is the deeds which reflect the state of the heart that defile a person. This text points to the true problem of the human condition – the sinfulness of our hearts. It leaves us without any hope in our power to save ourselves.

Teaching

What is the essential difference between how the Pharisees looked for to determine if someone was defiled and what Jesus looked for?

There is not a lot of gospel in this reading. Is there a familiar Bible passage or piece of liturgy that speaks to cleansing hearts? Check out Psalm 51:10.

Life

In verse 21 Jesus provides a useful list for us to examine our hearts for the attitudes and desires that cause the sinful acts that defile us. Look at the list: *evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness*. Let's examine ourselves for these things in our hearts and call upon Jesus to purify us and give us clean hearts.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

Lord Jesus, we confess to You that our lives are defiled by the sinful acts which come out of us. We have all of the evil thoughts You describe in the heart of man. Please hear our individual confessions as we recognize our evil thoughts (*confess any of these sins that come to mind as you pray*)..., sexual immorality ..., theft ..., murder ..., adultery ..., coveting ..., wickedness ..., deceit ..., sensuality ..., envy ..., slander ..., pride ..., and foolishness

Lord, change my heart so that it will no longer be a source of defilement in my life, but will be a

place filled with Your Spirit and flowing with good deeds. Do not let me be fooled by externals but live freely in regard to the world, but always being mindful of my heart and how You are honored there. Amen.

August 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 119:129-136

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible at 176 verses. It is an extended meditation on the believer's relationship to God's Word. This psalm is also unique in that it is an acrostic. Each eight verse section has the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet as the first letter in the line. It would be as if for eight verses every line began with "A", and then eight verses began with "B", etc. In this segment the psalmist states he has done what is right and calls upon God to bring him salvation and to teach him His statutes. What is more he recognizes how God's law has been broken and calls upon God to act. The function of this psalm is such that it leaves us uncomfortable for we do not feel so strongly about God and His Word, so we must recognize that it is only in and with Jesus that we can truly pray such a prayer.

Teaching

This psalm teaches us to pray with the voice of Jesus. This is what it means to pray in Jesus' name: we pray His words and speak as He speaks. It is only in and with Him that we can say, "I have done what is just and right." Normally such words would condemn us.

Our role in this psalm is that of a servant. We often think of servants as hired hands free to come and go. This was not the case in the culture of Israel. A servant was a slave who was not in bondage. She was in a relationship of dependence upon her master or mistress. This is the attitude of the psalmist. He comes before God fully dependent upon Him, counting on Him to do what is good and right.

Life

How do you feel about praying statements like these: "I have done what is just and right," or, "It is time for the Lord to act."? How can we pray such things legitimately?

How might praying about God's statutes, testimonies, and commandments impact your life and worship?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Confession.

Lord, we have done what is just and right. It is not so much that we ourselves did what was just and right, but Jesus did what is just and right on our behalf, and for His sake You have given us good, defended our lives, and caused us to long for Your salvation and the fulfilment of Your promises. Teach us Your statutes. Open our minds to know Your testimonies and our hearts to believe them. Help us to learn to love Your commandments and to hate every false way.

We know, to our shame, that apart from Jesus we have loved the false way and hated Your

commands. Please forgive us. Forgive us for the times we did what was unjust and wrong, for the times that we were the oppressors. Forgive us for not dealing with You as servants, but by thinking we were Your masters. Forgive us for not recognizing the fine gold You have given us in Your commandments. Amen.

August 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20

Ephesians 6:10 begins a switch in the tone of this letter. Paul started out by writing about God's grace and then moved to describing how one should live having experienced that grace. Now he focuses on the challenge to the life in Christ which come from spiritual forces and the protection God gives to His people to protect them from those dangers so that in the end they may stand. The function of this passage is to warn the reader of the danger we face, but also to encourage us because God has protected us and has given us a weapon that defeats our enemy.

Teaching

This passage is a favorite for many people because they love the image it provides of wading into combat with the spiritual forces of evil and claiming victory over them. However, we must be clear that the victory is ours because Jesus won it, not because of our own valor or strength. Indeed, mostly what we are encouraged to do in this combat is to put on the armor that God provides for us so we may stand under the temptations and struggles we will face.

The armor itself is telling as to how we are attacked. The belt of truth protects our sexual organs. From of old Satan has attacked God's people with sexual temptations. The breastplate of righteousness covers our hearts, but this righteousness is not ours it is Jesus' given to us so we know we are forgiven. On our feet is the gospel of peace. People often stumble when the path gets hard and stressful. God gives us peace to continue to follow Him. The shield of faith is a large rectangular shield, coated in leather, soaked in water to put out the flaming darts of the evil one. It is faith that sees and receives God's gifts of salvation and deflects the devils' torments and accusations from us. The helmet of salvation protects our head. Our thoughts can often be led astray, remembering Jesus' salvation keeps us from sin. And finally the sword of the spirit – the only offensive weapon – which is the Word of God – is what we use to go forth and rescue sinners like ourselves, prayerfully speaking the Word that gives life.

Life

Ponder for a moment how the different pieces of the armor of God address our needs as we struggle to stand under temptations. How remarkable and comforting it is that God knows our needs so well! Not only that, but in His love for us He gives us what we need so that in the end we will be found standing firmly in the faith.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Confession.

As you pray a prayer of Instruction, pray about how the different pieces of the armor of God

protects you.

As you pray a prayer of Confession, pray about how you may have failed to put on the full armor of God.

August 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:14-23

Context: What happened that prompted Jesus to talk about what defiles a person?

Content: What happens in this reading?

Function: What does this reading teach us about the human condition?

Teaching

The Pharisees were obsessed with outward behaviors. They didn't understand that outward behaviors, even good behaviors, done for the wrong reason are still sin. It is not the outward life that matters most, but what goes on in the heart. Once the heart is wrestled away from sin, good works will flow – even if they are good works that no one recognizes. God looks upon actions motivated by faith with much higher value than the world does.

Life

When we look at illnesses, there are symptoms and there are causes. If a person goes to the doctor's office with a head ache, the head ache is a symptom. It could be caused by several factors. It could be a migraine, it might be a tumor or concussion, or it could be that the person didn't drink enough coffee and was in caffeine withdrawal. Spiritually speaking behaviors are symptoms. Even if the behavior is sinful, it is a symptom of an internal cause; the sin that lurks in people's hearts. Jesus came to cure the illness that is sin and did so by dying on the cross. He does not want us to misunderstand our condition and how deeply we are broken for he came to heal us wholly.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Petition, Instruction, and Thanksgiving.

O Lord God, change our hearts. Cure us of our sin and cleanse us with Jesus' blood. Change us to value what You value, to rejoice in what You rejoice in, and to do good from a heart that is set on You.

Father, Your Son taught that what enters into a person does not defile her but passes through and is eliminated. What comes from the outside cannot make us sin. Instead, what causes us to sin is already within us. Help us see the defilement within so that we might know the forgiveness that comes from outside of us.

Thank You for revealing to us the true nature of our sin and its depth. Thank You also for the remedy that You give for our sin in Jesus' blood shed for us. Amen.

August 31, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 35:4-7a

Context: Look at chapter 36. What is this prophecy preparing its readers for?

Content: What does the prophecy actually say?

Function: What is this prophecy intended to do to/for us?

Teaching

This is a passage of pure gospel for God's people. It lifts the eyes of the believer away from herself and on to God to find encouragement and hope. This is especially important as Isaiah often confronted the people with their sins. God wants to be very assuring: the consequences of sin are hard, but He will not abandon His people; not only that, but He will heal them.

One of the great promises in this passage is that the eyes of blind shall be opened. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there record of a blind person receiving sight. When Jesus heals the blind it is one of the signs that He fulfills God's promise to come and save His people.

Life

It is easy to become discouraged in this world. The news is often doom and gloom. We see bad things happening and we wonder why. If that were not enough, God's people often experience (rightly!) guilt and shame when we consider our sins. God's Word speaks to us in such a way as to say, "I know your sin. I know your guilt. Take courage! I have rescued you, and I will come and restore you to the glory I intended for you from creation."

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

O God, You call us to strengthen those who are weak, feeble, and anxious because of their sin. Your Word to us is that You will defeat our enemies, save us, and heal us. We certainly are like the parched desert without Your gracious mercy, but now You have made streams run in the desert and brought life to us! We hear Your Word and we break forth in songs of joy, for You come and save us.

Thank You for this beautiful description of your salvation. Thank You for sending those who speak the words that strengthen us and keep us firm in faith. Thank You for taking vengeance on our enemies by rescuing us from the harm they do – especially those enemies that would lead us into sin. Thank You for opening eyes and unstopping ears so that we might perceive Your salvation. Thank You for the joy that leads us to leap and sing praises to You. Thank You for giving us life where once there was death.

We confess, O Lord, that we sometimes resist the good Word that would strengthen us, and we avoid hearing Your message that would make us strong and drive out our fear. Forgive us for living as though we were still blind and deaf; as though we never received Your Word. Forgive us for our shallow joy and praise. Forgive us for looking more like a spiritual desert than like a life-filled oasis. Come and save us at last and bring us to the glorious paradise You have promised us in Christ. Amen.

September 1, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:24-37

Jesus had confronted the scribes and the Pharisees about what defiles a person: the sins of one's heart. In the first half of this reading He is confronted by a person who would have been considered defiled because she was a Gentile, whose daughter had an unclean spirit. This is a difficult passage! It is followed by Jesus opening the ears of a deaf person. The function of the passage is challenging. It forces us to consider what makes us part of God's family and how we relate to Jesus.

Teaching

The account of Jesus and the Syrophenecian woman is unsettling. It appears that Jesus is being rude to the woman and callous to her need. It is helpful to know that as Jesus speaks of children and dogs, the word He uses for dogs is not the form that would be used to speak of wild or street dogs, but of a family pet. There is a question of belonging to God's family here, and the woman understands that while the pet's relationship to master is different than the children's, the pet is still loved and cared for. In a similar way the Gentiles' relationship with God is different than the Jews' for they were his chosen people, but God still loved, cared for, and provided for them. It is a sign of faith that the woman is content, knowing she doesn't have the prime place, but that she is nonetheless loved and provided for.

Life

Why is this reading hard for us today?

What does this reading teach us about who gets God's blessings?

Who really belongs at God's table, or who deserves His miracles?

Why does God help people?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Petition, Instruction, and Thanksgiving.

O God, welcome us to Your table although we are unworthy to have a proper place there. Give us faith to hear Your words of invitation and know that Your gifts are so marvelous that even if we were only to receive scraps that fall to us, it will be more than sufficient for our joy and salvation. We pray that You would open the ears of all to hear Your Word and believe it that they too may be fed from Your table and receive the healing from sin You have won for all who trust in You.

Teach us, Lord, that what You provide is sufficient. Indeed, it is beyond sufficient, so that when we receive Your Word and grace we would receive it with the enthusiasm of a dog who gets scraps that fall from the master's table. You opened the ears of the deaf, and You have opened our ears to hear Your Word and to believe it. Keep speaking, "Ephphatha," to our hearts and minds so that they will be open to You and to believe You.

Thank You, for giving us a place at Your table. We am thankful to receive even scraps of Your love and forgiveness, but You have not given us mere scraps but made us Your children to receive the fullness of Your gifts. Your goodness is overwhelming! Not only that but You have indeed opened our ears, hearts, and minds so that we may believe Your Word and have Your salvation. Thank You! Amen.

September 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 146

Psalm 146 begins a series of five psalms – the last five psalms in the book – that begin and end with the words, “Praise the Lord!” In Hebrew, that beginning and ending is a familiar word for readers in nearly every language; it is the word, “Hallelujah!” This psalm begins with an exhortation to praise the Lord, and moves immediately to a first person singular commitment to praise Him. It urges the reader to not trust in earthly power, but in the full power of the Lord who did, does, and will do glorious things. It gives words to one who has experienced God’s salvation, recognizing the many wonderful things God has done and will do, so that one may join in praising the Lord.

Teaching

What does the psalm present as things people trust in?

Where do we see real power for salvation?

How does God’s power compare to earthly power?

Life

People are often tempted to seek salvation from their problems by turning to earthly solutions. This is not entirely bad as we believe and understand that the Lord has created this world in such a way that we might have good things – including help – in it. The potential pitfall is when people no longer recognize the Lord’s provision in those earthly gifts, and when they long only for earthly salvation and not for the greater gift He has given in giving Jesus to free prisoners from sin, open eyes to see His love, to lift those bowed down with guilt, to watch over us as we sojourn here until He comes again, and to protect us from the wicked.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession, Petition, and Instruction.

O Lord, we get wrapped up in our earthly lives and all too often we fail to seek You in our need. We get sick and we go to the doctor. We see injustice and we write to our senators. We respond to our problems with earthly means, which in and of itself isn’t wrong, but we fail to lift up our hearts in prayer. We don’t see Your healing at work in the doctor’s craft, Your justice in the government’s laws, and Your provision in our earthly blessings. We give the praise that is rightfully Yours to the earthly vessel You have provided for our good. It is as though we praise the gift and not the giver! Forgive us!

Help us, Lord, to put our trust in You and to praise You in for all Your benefits: for princes who

are Your servants to protect us, for Your creation, for Your faithfulness, justice, and compassion, and for all You do on our behalf. Especially help us to praise You for giving us Your Son, Jesus, that He might set us free by His death and open our eyes with His Word so we may believe and be saved.

Lord, You have shown us that the powers of this world are temporary. There is but one power that reigns forever, and that is You! You are the source of all that is good in our lives, and so we join the psalmist to say, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” Amen.

September 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: James 2:1-10, 14-18

The book of James is a book that focuses readers on how they should live in light of the salvation they have in Jesus. It is not evangelistic in the sense that it does not seek to proclaim the Gospel to draw people to faith in Jesus. Instead, James’s focus is on those who already know the Gospel, but whose lives don’t reflect that faith. This portion of the letter reminds the reader that to break part of the law is to break the whole of it so that the whole law will be taken seriously. This reading also contains what is possibly the most famous passage in James where James says that faith without works is dead. The function of this reading is to urge the reader to love their neighbors – including the less loveable among them – and to do so with not mere words, but actions.

Teaching

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” is the second greatest commandment, and it sums up all the commandments that deal with how we relate to other people. James was concerned that the early Christians were showing partiality to the wealthy in their congregations, and that the poor were being dishonored. Love would have both treated with the same honor.

James also focuses on works as a sign of faith. He wants us to take seriously that faith in Jesus changes the way we live, and one of those changes is to love our neighbors enough to actually do good to them. In that sense, good works are evidence of the faith that saves.

Life

Doing good for others matters. It is how we show people that we love them, and, by extension, that God loves them. Jesus gives us the ultimate example of doing good to show love. He could easily have preached and taught about God loving people, but He did more than preach and teach. He gave His life because He loves us so much. In doing that He, first and foremost, saved us from sin and death, and He also gave us an example so that we too might show our faith in Him by giving our lives (our time, money, interest, skills) out of love.

Prayer

Pray this prayer in the themes of Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

What can we be thankful for in this text?

How does this reading confront our sin? What sins should we confess in light of this reading? What do we want God to do in light of what this text has revealed to us?

September 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:24-37

Context: What were Jesus and the disciples doing when these events took place? What had Jesus been teaching/doing just before this?

Content: What happened in the reading?

Function: What does this reading teach us? How does it impact our life?

Teaching

“Ephphatha,” is a strange looking word in English, but its meaning is beautiful: “Be opened.”

Jesus uttered this word when He healed a man who was both deaf and unable to speak. He opened the man’s ears to hear His Word and his mouth to praise God.

In the history of the church the word ephphatha was used in Baptismal liturgies, which emphasized that a person’s coming to faith was possible because God had worked in that person to open her ears to hear the Gospel and be saved. This emphasizes the point that whether it is a Gentile woman pleading for her daughter, a deaf man who wishes to hear and speak, or any person who experiences brokenness and the defilement of sin, it is the Word that the Spirit of God uses to make and keep faith in people.

Life

How has God opened you with His Word? He has brought you to faith. He has cleansed you. He has given you the opportunity to declare His praises. He has also opened you to love Him and your neighbor. How great and glorious God is!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

O Lord, You are teaching us that no one comes to You on their own. You must open our ears to hear of Jesus’ cross and empty tomb in such a way that it creates faith in us. You open our hearts and minds to understand Your Word and receive Your gracious release from everything that makes us unclean.

Thanks for proclaiming Your Word to us and for opening our ears to hear and believe. It is amazing how some hear of Your love and compassion, who know about Jesus’ suffering and death, but that Word does not lead to faith in them. Thank You for the grace You have shown to us so that we confess that we believe in Christ crucified, we belong to Your family, and Your provision of grace is sufficient for us.

We confess that sometimes when we read Your Word, we wrestle with it. We don’t always understand and we don’t want to believe what You are saying. Please forgive us for closing ourselves off to Your Word. Forgive us for believing that You should make Yourself clearer to

us, when all we need is the forgiveness given to us through faith in our risen Lord Jesus.

God, please give us grace and strengthen our faith so that our ears would be open to hear Your Word in its fullness and to believe it. Grant us a humble spirit to receive what You give us and to rejoice in it; not placing ourselves as judges of Your gifts, but as unworthy recipients. And grant that Your Word would go out through Your people so that many will come to believe in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

September 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-10

This is one of the sections of Isaiah in which the words that are spoken by the Lord's Servant, a recurring character who points ahead to Jesus, and to some degree the Church as Jesus' followers. In this reading following the Lord's Word leads the Servant into persecution and mistreatment. His response to this treatment is to "set his face like flint" and to put his confidence in the Lord as the one who will vindicate him as he lives by faith. The passage points us ahead to Jesus and we see aspects of His ministry in it. It also encourages us as servants of the Lord to keep our faith and hope in Him when we suffer for the faith.

Teaching

How is it that we come to know God?

Who does this reading make you think of? What does it point forward to?

How are God's people able to stand up under the kind of abuse described here?

Life

Have you ever considered that Jesus knew, spoke, and lived God's Word, but the reception He received from the people of His time was ultimately crucifixion? It is not every ear that hears God's Word to be taught and sustained by Him. It is only by faith that we receive such blessings, living as one who walks in darkness, not knowing what will come next, but trusting God to lead us through.

What a blessing it is to know that the Lord God helps us and defends us. There may be those who accuse and try to disgrace us in different ways, but God has urged us to set our face like flint – to not be turned away or distracted from what He has done for us; particularly what Jesus has done for us by His death and resurrection!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Petition, Instruction, and Thanksgiving.

O Father in heaven, please open our ears, hearts, and minds to be instructed by You that we may know how to sustain the weary with Your word. Defend us against our enemies, and lead us in the darkness of this life as we follow Jesus by faith.

It is You who has given us your instruction so that we may speak Your Word. It is You who

opened our ears and gave us faith. It is You who helps us when we face oppression and resistance to Your Word.

We thank You for all You have done. Thank You for giving us Your Word in our ears and our mouths that we may both hear and speak it. Thank You for standing up for us when we suffer for the faith. Thank You for leading us in the darkness and for being the one we can trust in for all things. Amen.

September 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

This event took place right after Jesus' Transfiguration. While the Transfiguration is a high point which reveals Jesus as God, the disciples' performance and inability to cast out the demon forms a kind of low point bringing the focus on to the issue of faith. The account itself shows Jesus returning to the nine disciples He had left behind and finding them embroiled in an argument with the scribes over a boy who is possessed by a demon which they were unable to cast out. Jesus spoke with the father of the boy, and exorcised the demon. This reading functions as a warning against relying on our own strength in our spiritual life and conflict as Jesus focused the father on belief and the disciples on prayer.

Teaching

The disciples had cast out demons before, but there was something in this situation that left them at a loss. There are two thoughts as to why the disciples were unable to exorcise this demon from the boy. The first is that there are different kinds of demons and different techniques to cast them out. This would seem to be supported by the comment Jesus makes, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." Another possible reason is supported by the context as the disciples go on to argue about who was the greatest among them. It may be that they were more focused on their power than on God's gracious love that worked through them, and God did not honor their request because their hearts were set on their own prestige instead of His glory.

Life

What does this passage teach about the importance of faith in our lives?

How might our strengths or skills get in the way of living according to God's will?

What importance does this passage have for your life and walk of faith?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession, Petition, and Instruction.

O God, we confess that there are times that we trust in things that we can see, touch, or understand more than we trust in You. We do not always recognize that You provide earthly benefits, and we assume that we deserve the good You give us. Please forgive us for Jesus' sake!

Lord, please grant healing to all who are oppressed by evil spirits in this world. Grant healing to all who suffer with disease. We also ask that You would keep our hearts set on You, and that our

hope and confidence would be solidly set in the grace You have shown us by Christ's suffering and death. Help us to never take for granted the wondrous blessings You pour out on us. We believe; help our unbelief!

God, we recognize that every good and gracious gift comes from You. You have shown us that You are Lord over the unclean spirits, the illnesses that beset us, and those who accuse us. We see here that You call us to put ourselves in Your hands by faith, and, feeble as that faith may be sometimes, we are being formed by You to trust You with our whole selves. Amen.

September 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-9

The first person singular, "I" in the first verse shows us this was originally the worshipful thoughts of an individual, however those words have guided God's people in worship over the centuries, and they still do today. These words call in the grateful joy of one who has been rescued to declare love for the Lord, our rescuer. It was not merely trouble that the author was saved from, but death itself. It goes on to describe God's work and then speaks directly to God ("You") in verse 8-9 to tell what He has done. The function of the passage is to guide us to express our love for God for the salvation He has won for us in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Teaching

God hears the prayers of His people and responds to them because of His love for them. We see that love so clearly when He addresses our greatest problem – death. Death is the proper reward for our sin and it comes to us in two ways: the natural death where our hearts stop beating and state of being dead in trespasses and sins. God rescued us from both by taking on human flesh, being born, dying, and rising for us. That's love! The one who has the power and right to punish us for our sin instead delivers our souls, preserves us, deals bountifully with us, and makes it possible for us to walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

Life

We will all die. That's just a fact of life for sinful people. The good news is that God loved each of us so much that when the snares of death encompassed us He rescued us – and at great cost! How much do you have to love someone to save them by dying for them? How do you respond to receiving love like that? Does that not move us to call out, "I love the Lord!"? This is always at the heart of our worship and prayer. God heard our voices and our pleas for mercy, and He loved us so much He saved us, so we love Him in response.

Prayer

Pray this prayer in the themes of Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

What can we give thanks for in this text?

What sins does this sin lead us to confess?

What does this text guide us to pray to God about? What might we ask Him to do?

September 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: James 3:1-12

Context: Where does this reading fall in in James's letter? What kinds of things has he been writing about?

Content: What does this part of the letter focus on?

Function: Why did James write this? What should happen in the life of a person who reads this?

Teaching

What comes out of our mouths matters. James addresses this on two levels. Firstly he speaks about teaching. A teacher is judged with greater strictness because such a person should know what God's Word says and must be faithful to it. Yet we are all sinners and all stumble. Because of this we should always pray for pastors and teachers of God's Word that He would keep their words faithful to His own. Secondly James addresses the regular everyday temptations of the tongue, and in particular the hurtful words (cursing) that we speak. He says this is like a spring that gives off salt water sometimes and fresh water others. In nature that is impossible! In other words, as God's people our words should be consistent with our faith.

Life

Gossip, slander, cutting remarks, rude comments, degrading statements, and the like should not be part of our lives. They are though. So what does this mean for us? It means that we are sinners who have been forgiven for our sin and still struggle with it. The key here is that we still struggle. We should not give in to sinful patterns of speech which do not glorify God or build up our neighbor, and the reason we should not is because we are forgiven and redeemed people. We've experienced God's loving Word spoken upon us, and as bearers of the Word we speak it for others so they may be blessed by it through us.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

O Lord Jesus, James teaches us that our words matter. How we speak of You and testify about what You have done for us and what You've taught us is important because those words bear Your Word which gives faith and life. Not only that, but our words have the power to bring death or life, despair or encouragement, destruction or refreshment in the lives of others. Too often we are a mixture of the two!

Thank You for the forgiveness You won for we who stumble in many ways, including our words. And thank You for giving us words with which we bless You as our Lord and praise our Father in Heaven. Thank You for Your Spirit's work in us to tame our tongues.

Forgive us for our inconsistency as we go through life speaking both curses and blessings. And forgive us for when we have spoken of You or Your Word incorrectly. Too often our tongues have been guided by anger and hurt feelings, and not often enough guided by Your love. Forgive us! Amen.

September 11, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

Have just come back from His Transfiguration, Jesus found His disciples in a crowd arguing with the scribes. He discovered that the disciples had been unable to cast a spirit out of a boy, and expresses His exasperation at their lack of faith. The text functions to show that faith centered on Christ is capable of miraculous things because Christ is the one who acts powerfully for His people.

Teaching

What does this reading teach us about faith?

What makes faith effective? Is this about a person's power or God's power?

What does the interchange between the boy's father and Jesus teach us about faith?

Life

Have you considered the father's prayer as one you might want to emulate? There are many times in life that our faith gets stretched and we feel like our faith is faltering. This prayer can serve as both reminder and confession. There are also times that we deal with the mysteries of faith: creation, Jesus as God and man, the real presence in the Lord's Supper, etc. When our ability to understand falls short, these words are much like throwing ourselves on the Lord's mercy; and He is always ready to extend His mercy to us!

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord Jesus, when You returned from Your Transfiguration You discovered Your disciples in a moment of failure. All throughout this event You observed how frail people's faith can be. We see ourselves in this reading, too, learning to trust You and empowered to trust You by the work of Your Holy Spirit in our lives.

We thank You for giving us faith so that we might believe You, Your Word, and Your promises. Thank You for not giving up on us when we are more like a faithless generation than the disciples we wish we were. Thank You for giving us victory over the powers of the devil that continue to work in this world and for giving us the ability to cast them out by the power of Your Word and prayer.

We, however, have not always clung to Your power as we live. All too often we have turned to our own strength, wealth, position, or power to live this life of faith. We have allowed our senses and our intellect to overshadow Your promises and Your power. Forgive us, Lord Jesus! We confess that we believe; help our unbelief!

We throw ourselves at Your feet recognizing that without You we are like corpses with no life in us. Take us by the hand as You did the boy that we might walk in faith, believing all You have

said and done. Give us wisdom to recognize when we place our trust in ourselves or worldly reason to the detriment of the faith You have given us. Help the many who doubt to come to believe so they too may have the life You long to give them through faith in Your death and resurrection. And help us to be steadfast in prayer, trusting that You, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, hear and answer that prayer because of Your compassionate love for Your people. Amen.

September 14, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jeremiah 11:18-20

Jeremiah's ministry was filled with struggles, tears, and danger. He had been called to warn God's people that their sin would lead to their destruction – and his ministry lasted long enough to see that happen when the Babylonians took Jerusalem and burned the Temple. This reading is a prayer of Jeremiah's in response to the news that the people in his own town wanted to kill him because of the message of God's judgement that he proclaimed. It is written in a way that shows Jeremiah's inability to protect himself and his reliance on God to save him. The text stands as a reminder that when God's people faithfully proclaim God's Word there will be people who oppose them; sometimes violently. When that happens God's people place their trust in Him knowing that He will judge and exact vengeance to protect them.

Teaching

Jeremiah was in a bad position. God had called him to warn his own people that the curses that God had told Israel were the consequences for breaking His covenant were about to fall upon them. It was not that God hadn't been patient, but the people persisted in their sin and had rejected God's will for their lives. Such behavior always leads to the same sad final destination: judgement.

The people did not want to hear what Jeremiah prophesied to them: what God said through Jeremiah. Their choice to respond through violence was nothing new. Many prophets had died at the hands of God's people. Nor is their response gone, as God's people still often suffer for speaking the truth and testifying to God's Word. Jeremiah's example to us when we find ourselves in this place is to put our trust in God and to call out to Him to rescue us.

Life

If Jeremiah was threatened for proclaiming God's Word, should we expect anything different? What in God's Word offends people when we speak about it? How might this reading guide us when we face opposition because of our faith in Jesus?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession, Petition, and Instruction.

Lord God of hosts, we confess that we were once Your enemies. You have reconciled us to Yourself through Jesus' blood, but we still resist Your Word in our lives sometimes, and we grow angry at those who confront us with Your Word when we sin. Forgive us, for Jesus' sake,

and cleanse us again.

Grant Your protection to all who speak Your truth, and give all Your people courage to remain steadfast in faith even at the risk of our bodily safety.

You teach us that You deliver Your servants. We are Your servants. You will deliver us. Amen.

September 15, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus' Transfiguration is a turning point in Mark's Gospel. The direction of the narrative is moving steadily to His cross, highlighting the necessity of faith to take hold of the salvation He won there. In this reading Jesus once again foretold His death and resurrection, but the disciples did not understand. In fact, they go on to have an argument about who was the greatest among them. We are presented with a picture of disciples with wrong priorities whom Jesus must redirect in order to display the priorities of God's kingdom instead of the world's priorities.

Teaching

Jesus was very clear about His purpose and He stated it to His disciples in this reading. He came to suffer and die for our sins and to rise again. It is not that strange that the disciples did not understand this; it is the kind of thing that, even today, can only be understood by faith. It became painfully clear that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was about in the second half of the reading as they argued over who was the greatest. There is something in our sinful nature that wants to be powerful, important, and recognized by others. This is not Jesus' way. He shows that greatness in God's kingdom is related to service, humbling one's self, and taking the last place as He Himself did.

Life

Have you ever been in a conversation where you or someone you were with obviously missed the point? That is rather what is happening in the reading, and it can still happen today. Even as Christ's followers we become concerned with power to coerce people to do what is right, prestige so that we will be honored by the masses, and recognition of our importance and the good we do. This is not Jesus' way, though. He came to suffer and to die. And, yes, He came to rise again. We too will rise because He rose. For now, though, humility and service – laying down our lives – is the way of life.

Prayer

Pray this prayer in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

What did this lesson teach us?

What might we give thanks for in this lesson?

What sins does this lesson confront us with or encourage us to confess?

September 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 54

Context: Look at the introductions of Psalm 51-55. What do these psalms have in common? (Look in the notes at the bottom of your Bible's page for an explanation of any strange terms.)

Content: What does the psalm say? How does it guide our prayers or worship?

Function: How does this psalm help us? What does it reveal to us?

Teaching

There is a tendency among Christians to over focus on either the physical or the spiritual part of our lives. This psalm was written about a time that God delivered David from physical danger. We should recognize that. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "... deliver us from evil," that evil includes the physical ills of injury, sickness, violence, pain, and the like. However, it should not be overlooked that we have spiritual enemies in this life, and this psalm, which finds its full meaning in the salvation and deliverance Jesus won for us, points us to thank God for that deliverance as well. Our lives are not either spiritual or physical. They are both, and God's salvation extends into both.

Life

People often casually blurt, "O my god," in all kinds of situations. In this psalm God's name is our salvation and we give thanks to God's name. There is a time and a place for us to call out, "O God!" We are privileged to call on that name when we pray, praise, and give thanks.

We call on that name when we proclaim how God has saved us, helped us, and upheld our lives. God's name has become the name that comes to our lips when we face struggles, enemies, dangers, and sorrows. This is especially significant as we remember that the name Jesus means, "The Lord saves," or "The Lord is salvation." We call on His name, and the Father, and the Spirit for God saves and gives us victory over our enemies.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

O God, You save us by Your name; Your name by which You reveal Yourself to us so we may know You and call upon You. You hear our prayers and give ear to our words, and when enemies – physical or spiritual – rise against us You are our helper who makes us triumph. It is by Your name that we lift our thanksgiving to You!

Thank You for Your name; Your name by which You reveal Yourself as our savior. Thank You for hearing us when we call and for answering in such a way as to save us. Thank You for giving us Your name so we can call to You, and for placing that name on us in our baptism.

Forgive us for the times we have not honored Your name or given thanks for hearing our prayers. Forgive us for misusing Your name. We know there have been times we have even failed to call on You in our times of need. Forgive us for Jesus' sake – because You are the Lord who saves. Amen.

September 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: James 3:13-4:10

Some have compared James to a catechism for the early church because of the format of questions and answers. In this section James asks (and answers) questions about godly wisdom, the source of quarrels within the church, and worldliness. The text serves to teach on each of these topics and to point the reader back to God's Word and His will, and to call us to repentance.

Teaching

What does this lesson teach us about sources of wisdom for our lives?

What does it teach about worldliness?

What hope does this reading offer us?

Life

James ask a question that is really worth thinking about: Who is wise and understanding among us? There are many people who are honored for their intellect and for their great understanding in a variety of areas like chemistry, physics, economics, theology, and the like. But notice that James is not interested in general knowledge or cleverness. He's talking about wisdom, and that is something different. Wisdom is the good application of what we know and believe to real life situations. James has two criteria for us to look for when we consider wisdom: first, that is it godly (it comes down from above) and second, its fruit – pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, etc.

When we live grace-filled lives and are guided by God's Word in our decisions we will display wisdom for all to see.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Petition, Instruction, and Thanksgiving.

O God, make us wise with Your wisdom. Help us know the difference between Your wisdom and earthly wisdom that our lives may be filled with the peace and unity that flows from living in Your Word. Root out any bitter jealousy and selfish ambition that is in our hearts and help us be people of peace. Keep us from worldly passions which ensnare us and pull us away from You. Instead, help us live lives of humble repentance that are filled with the joy of Your salvation.

Lord, this world's wisdom is constantly presented to us as the way to live, but in truth it is full of jealousy and selfish ambition, and leads to division. It is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Our good conduct, however, is formed by the wisdom from above and shows in meekness, peacefulness, gentleness, and good fruits. The quarrels and divisions we experience are established by living according to our passions, but we are Your people called to resist the devil so he will flee from us. Our only response to the realization of earthly wisdom's hold on us is to repent and cling to Your grace.

Thank You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for revealing Your wisdom. Thank You for the faith that believes Your word, and gives us strength to live by it. Amen.

September 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

These passages record conversations that Jesus had with His disciples as they traveled. In the first conversation we find Jesus once again teaching that He will be handed over to be killed, but that He would also rise. In the second conversation Jesus confronts the disciples' desire for greatness. The text shows us an example of how people hear God's Word, but still miss the point and focus on themselves.

Teaching

Jesus teaches us that He came to die and to rise. This is His purpose and His method to rescue us from sin and death. People become confused about this when they focus more on what they ought to do instead of what Jesus has done for them. Without Jesus' sacrifice, they are left with their insecurities about greatness, while Jesus shows that greatness is all about service.

Life

Why is it important for your life to know Jesus knew He would suffer, die, and rise?

Who do we encounter when we receive people in Jesus' name?

How does this reading display Jesus as the greatest?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord Jesus, You stated very clearly that You would be delivered into the hands of men and killed. Not only that, You would rise after three days. You laid down Your life for us. That is hard to understand, indeed, it can only be fully grasped by faith. We are not, therefore, to consider ourselves to be the greatest or the most important, but we can be humble and serve even the most insignificant people in our midst.

Thank You for allowing Yourself to be killed for us. Thank You for rising from the dead. We are so grateful that You have rescued us from sin and death. Thank You for saving us from our fears and insecurities about being the greatest, and for freeing us to serve those that the world considers insignificant. And Thank You for showing us that when we serve others we serve You and our Father!

We confess that the desire for greatness still lingers in our hearts and we must wrestle with it. We also confess that we sometimes want to make our faith less about Your cross and more about our deeds; especially deeds that make us look good in the eyes of others. Forgive us, Lord Jesus, for the sin that we see in our lives (and that which we're not even aware of) is why You were killed and rose again.

Please give us the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts so that we would always have Your cross at the center of our faith and life. Shape us by Your gracious salvation so that we will be humble and place ourselves last and make ourselves servants of even those that the world would consider the least. Help us to receive You and Him who sent You by receiving many people in Your name. Amen.

September 21, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

The Book of Numbers takes up the story of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness after God rescued them and brought them through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. God had already provided manna and quail for the people to have food to eat, but the people longed for the food they ate in Egypt. It was as if they had forgotten that they were in slavery in Egypt! Their complaint led Moses to come before the Lord and ask Him to provide for His people. God's response was to appoint more leaders for Israel and to place His Spirit upon them. The main point of this reading for us is not the complaining of the Israelites, although there are lessons for us to learn there. The main point is that in the end when Moses said he wished that all God's people were prophets and that they all had God's Spirit because this is truly what God has done.

Teaching

The people were looking to Moses for more than he could provide. Moses understood something about his leadership, though. It was not he who was leading Israel in the wilderness; it was God. God graciously provided other leaders for the Israelites by placing His Spirit on them. These leaders prophesied, and the prophecy was evidence to those who saw this happen that God had indeed appointed these people, and that His Spirit was upon them. It was, therefore, the Spirit that led the people through these men.

Life

One of the amazing things about this text is how Moses wishes for all of God's people to have God's Spirit on them. In Christ, this is exactly what has happened. All Christians have had the Spirit of God poured out on them in their baptism. God continues to place His Spirit on us through the reading and hearing of His Word. This gives us permission to prophesy – that is to speak God's Word to others, so that they too might receive the Holy Spirit and have the faith that brings us salvation.

Prayer

Pray this prayer in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

What does this account teach us about how God leads His people?

What can we give thanks for in this text?

How does this text confront us with our sin? Where does it lead us into confession?

What are we asking God to do in light of this reading?

September 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

Context: What did Jesus talk to the disciples about right before these verses? How does that impact our understanding of this text?

Content: What happened in this reading? What did Jesus teach?

Function: What is Jesus' point? How does He want to impact our lives in this lesson?

Teaching

How is a demon cast out? It is not a magic incantation, saying the right words, that drives it out but Jesus Himself who does it by His divine power. The person driving out demons in Jesus' name had faith in Him.

Faith is the heart of the matter when it comes to our relationship with God. Faith receives what God gives, and does not earn anything. If we could cut off hands or feet, or pluck out eyes and that would save us it might be reasonable to expect us to do so in order to save ourselves. But we cannot save ourselves, and we should not allow ourselves to be tempted to think that we can. Faith holds on to Jesus and His power to save us.

Life

We have faith. That faith is a gift, but that doesn't change that we are people of faith because of the Spirit's work in us. That means that our hope is in Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation. "Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?" It is great that we believe, but if we lose Jesus and His power that works our salvation, how will we be saved? In the end, it is not merely our belief or our actions that will save us, but Jesus Himself.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord God, Holy Spirit, open our hearts to believe that our relationship to the Father is not based on something special in us or in our efforts, but rests on our faith in the work of our Lord Jesus.

We thank and praise You, O God, for rescuing us when our salvation was so far beyond our reach that our greatest sacrifices could never save us. Thank You for giving us faith to receive You salvation.

We confess that we are still tempted to find a way to earn Your salvation; to use our power to satisfy You. Forgive us for not putting ourselves wholly in Your hands and trusting solely in Jesus' power to rescue us from sin and death.

Work in us so that our hearts would always be set on You and we would not be jealous of others who share in the salvation Christ has won. Grant that the salt of Jesus' power would always be the focus of our faith. Amen.

September 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 104:27-35

The first three-quarters of this psalm praise God for His glory, His acts of creation, and His continued provision for creation. This text is the last quarter of the psalm and it, too, focuses on God's providence, confessing that God created and sustains all things. The psalm then moves into a prayer which asks God to continue caring for His creation and for the psalmist to be kept in awe to continue to worship God for all He has done. The psalm functions as a reminder of our dependence upon God for all things, and helps us to see God's gracious provision as a reason to worship Him and to not sin against Him.

Teaching

What does this psalm teach about the world we live in and everything (everyone) in it?

Why does the Creator/creation relationship matter?

How does sin violate that relationship?

Life

Some believe that this world and all that is in it came into being through some kind of cosmic chance. In that view you and I are nothing more than accidents. In that view there can be no sin, no right or wrong, beyond what our opinions form into sin.

The view the Bible presents is very different. We are not accidents. We were created, fed, sustained, and provided for by our gracious loving God. He loves us so much that He would make us. Being created means that we are accountable to our Creator and we know our sin. But once again we see our God's love because He gave His only-begotten Son to rescue us from our sin.

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

O Lord God, we look to You as our Creator and the source of our lives. You provide food for us. If You were to withdraw Yourself from us, we would certainly perish. For Your loving kindness in creating us we worship You and seek to live according to Your will.

We thank You for this world that You've created, the creatures that roam it, and the lives You've given to us. Thank You for graciously providing a world in which we have all that we need to support this body and life. And thank You for putting it into our hearts to worship and obey You.

We confess that sometimes we see this world and even ourselves as things that just exist separate from You, our Creator. We also sometimes think that just because someone doesn't believe in You they are free to live however they please without regard to Your will. Indeed, we ourselves sometimes worship created things instead of You. Forgive us!

We pray that You would continue to sustain this world and our lives. Guide us to use this world's resources wisely, with thankfulness to You, and in obedience to Your will. Amen.

September 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: James 5:1-20

As James wraps up his letter, he quickly hits several topics in quick catechetical fashion. He warns the rich, encourages the suffering, and calls the faithful to prayer and confession. This section functions as much of the rest of James's letter: quick concise teaching to call people to live their lives according to the faith and salvation they hold on to.

Teaching

James does not condemn wealth, but does take seriously that money can become a god in people's lives, and can be at the heart of oppression of others. He also takes on the issue of suffering, which is primarily talking about suffering on account of faith in Jesus. He urges patience and mindfulness that God is trustworthy and faithful, and He will judge. The last part of the reading urges us to pray. Often people seem to think prayer is a small matter and not a terribly good way to help others, but James's point is that the prayer of a person who trusts God is powerful because God answers us. In all, James's message is that we should live the life of faith in word and deed.

Life

How does this reading apply to our lives?

How does this reading impact your view on wealth? Suffering for the faith? Prayer? Saving the lost?

What comfort is there in this reading?

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

O God, Your servant James presents a high and hard standard for us to live by. He delves into matters that seem so personal: how we spend our money, the hope we live by in this life, and our prayer life. In all these areas and more he has presented Your truth to us and guided us away from the world's wisdom to Yours.

Thank You for pouring Your Spirit out on James to proclaim Your will to us so that we might live the life of faith in our words and actions. Thank You for the wealth You have blessed us with. Thank You for the opportunity to suffer because of our faith in Jesus. Thank You for the privilege of prayer.

We confess that we have not always used our wealth to Your glory. We have purchased products that were made by the oppressed and we are sometimes stingy. We have shunned suffering for the faith and sought to not offend others with Your truth. We have also neglected prayer. Please forgive us!

Grant that in all things our hearts and minds would conform to Your will, Lord God, because You have redeemed us and made us Your people scattered in this world, but waiting to be gathered to You. Amen.

September 25, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

As Jesus has been teaching the disciples, they have not understood Him or His purpose. In this reading they rebuke a believer and receive a lesson on temptation and judgement. That lesson leaves no doubt that they will be unable to rescue themselves! This text should drive us to despair of our own ability to save ourselves so that we focus on God who alone is able to rescue us from sin and its consequences.

Teaching

The disciples couldn't comprehend that Jesus' ministry would extend beyond them. It seems like they wanted to keep Jesus to themselves. This sense of self-importance can lead to arrogance that thinks we have something important to offer God and that is why He chose us.

Jesus' comments about temptation point to the disciples' inability to save themselves. He would have them humbly rely on His power to rescue them from temptation and to lead His mission of saving people from the powers of darkness.

Life

Think of the things that we'd have to get rid of to remove temptation from our lives: televisions, radios, the internet, some of our friends, and more! But stop and consider this again. Does your hand cause you to sin? Your foot? Your eye? What has Jesus taught us about where sin comes from? Back in Mark 7:21, Jesus showed that it is the heart that is the source of sin in our lives. Can you get rid of your heart? Of course not! But we can pray, "Create in me clean heart, O God!" (Psalm 51:10) And the good news is that Jesus has done exactly that by His death and resurrection.

Prayer

Pray this prayer in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

What does Jesus teach us in this reading?

What kinds of things can we give thanks for in this reading?

What sins does this reading confront us with? What is it leading us to confess?

What does this reading teach us to ask God to do for us?

September 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Genesis 2:18-25

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

September 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

September 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 128

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 1, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 2:1-18

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:17-22

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 90:12-17

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 3:12-19

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:17-22

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:23-31

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 14, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 119:9-16

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 15, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-6

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:23-31

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 14:6-7

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 8:31-36

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 21, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 46

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Romans 3:19-28

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 14:6-7

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 7:2-17

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 149

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 John 3:1-3

Context

Content

Function

Teaching**Life****Prayer**

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

October 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 7:2-17

Context

Content

Function

Teaching**Life****Prayer**

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 146

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 9:24-28

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Daniel 12:1-3

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:1-13

Context

Content
Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 11, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 16

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 10:11-25

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:1-13

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 51:4-6

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 93

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jude 20-25

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 25, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm

Context

Content

Function

Teaching

Life

Prayer

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Context

Content

Function

Teaching**Life****Prayer**

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

November 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Context

Content

Function

Teaching**Life****Prayer**

Pray a prayer following the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

I want to say a very special thank you for participating in this project with me. My prayer is that our work will help people grow in faith and have a deeper, richer, more meaningful worship and devotional life. Thank you for your help. I hope you, too, were blessed by participating in these devotions.¹

¹ This note was included in the participants' devotions.

APPENDIX SIX

SUPPLEMENTAL DEVOTIONAL MATERIALS

This section provides the devotional material that is absent from the corresponding devotion in the participants' material. Several participants mentioned that they availed themselves of this material.

All the duplicate material between the devotions has been removed.

August 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8

One of the highlights of Elijah's ministry was a great confrontation with 450 of the prophets of the false god, Baal, in which they each were to prepare a sacrifice, but not light the fire for the burnt offering. Whichever deity brought down fire was to be the god of the people. After the Lord burned His offering and Baal did not, Elijah ordered that the prophets of Baal be executed as well. This angered the queen, Jezebel, and she swore she would kill Elijah. This text records that threat and Elijah's response – which was to run away. God provided for Elijah through an angel and gave him miraculous endurance. As we read these events, we see that, even in a moment when we might expect great confidence in God's people they sometimes become fearful, but God, in His mercy, sustains us.

August 4, 2015

Teaching

When Jesus says that He is the bread of life and that He satisfies the hunger and thirst of all who trust in Him, He is not speaking of physical hunger and thirst, but spiritual. The hunger and thirst that He satisfies is that which is fueled by our need for God, His love, grace, and presence in our lives.

Jesus makes bold claims here. He claims to have exclusive access to God. He claims to have seen Him and to be sent by Him. This is a stumbling block to His hearers. What is more, he proclaims that those who believe in Him were drawn by God Himself and that He gives both resurrection and everlasting life to those who come to Him.

August 5, 2015

Life

We have an opportunity to taste and see that the LORD is good that David never imagined. Certainly many people today still experience deliverance from danger, illness, hardships, and other experiences that, in retrospect, they look and recognize God's blessing, and they are moved to praise. However, David never had the opportunity to taste the good news of God's salvation in such a tangible form as the Lord's Supper. When we eat and drink Jesus' body and blood in,

with, and under the bread and wine of the Holy Communion we taste and see God's goodness, mercy, love, and forgiveness.

August 6, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Thanksgiving.

O God, we confess that we have walked as the Gentiles do. We have allowed the futility of our minds inform us more than Your Word. We have been callous, greedy, angry, and slanderous. Only too often we have let the sun go down on our anger and we have not sought to forgive others and to be reconciled to them. Please forgive us!

We thank and praise You that Your Son, our Savior, Jesus gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to atone for our sins. And we rejoice that we do indeed know Him and that we have the truth of Jesus to shape and form us. Thank You for giving us our new selves, created in Your likeness in true righteousness and holiness. Amen.

August 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 6:35-51

Jesus has been confronting the Jews' views on the bread that came down from heaven and challenging their desire for Him to feed them earthly bread. He now calls Himself the bread of life, and points to Himself as the source of eternal life, stating that it is the Father's will that all who believe in Him will have eternal life. The Jews were offended by Jesus' words, but Jesus reiterates that faith in Him is necessary for eternal life and that the Father draws those who believe in Him. This text is intended to help us think beyond our earthly lives and needs and to take thought of our eternal life and the blessings that God gives us when we believe in Jesus.

August 10, 2015

Teaching

God does not want us to be divided in our loyalties. We understand that we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things, but there are things that would like to crowd the Lord out of our lives. What God spoke through His servant Joshua in this reading urges us to recognize those other gods in our lives and to shun them.

The people's words in v. 16-18 are also very important. They set themselves to follow and serve the Lord citing His salvation as the reason. "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods..." they declared. We can declare much the same. Just as God had provided a home for the Israelites, He has given us an eternal home in glory through Jesus' death and resurrection.

August 11, 2015

Life

Do you ever pause to think about eternal life? When people do they often think of heaven,

angels, seeing loved ones who have died, or even seeing Jesus. This passage reveals that eternal life is something that we have now. If Jesus is in us we are alive in faith now and forever. That life, however, needs sustenance to remain alive, healthy, and strong.

Jesus feeds us on Himself. This is why it is so important to take time like this to read God's Word. This is also why going to church to hear the Word is so important. Jesus is feeding us with Himself. He is present there in His Word, and His Spirit gives life there. Next time you read the Bible or come to worship think about this – Jesus meets you there to feed you with His body and blood to sustain the eternal life of faith that you have right now.

August 12, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

O LORD God, we confess to You that while we do desire life and to live for many days, our behavior is too often not that of the righteous. Our tongues speak evil and our lips carry lies. We do not always do good, nor do we seek peace with those who sin against us or harm those we love. Please forgive us for the sake of Jesus, whose bones were not broken and who was righteous on our behalf.

Hear our cry for help, O Lord, as You promise. Draw near to us who are brokenhearted, crushed in spirit, and afflicted because of our sin. Keep our bones and defend our lives. Redeem us, for we take refuge in You. Do not let us be condemned, but remember that Jesus was condemned and died on our behalf to deliver us from all of our unrighteousness. Amen.

August 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ephesians 5:6-21

After spending the first half of his letter to the Ephesians writing about God's grace, Paul turned to discussing how a person who has received such grace should live. This section is part of the description of what the life of a person who has been saved by grace through faith should be like. In this section he compares the life of sin to darkness and the life of faith to light. They cannot coexist. As light always exposes what is in darkness, the life of faith exposes sin in us and others. Therefore he urges his readers to be filled with the Spirit and to submit to one another out of reverence to Jesus. The passage serves as an exhortation to live rightly, or to walk in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ.

August 14, 2015

Teaching

We must feed on Christ if we are to have life within us. This means that we must devour His words and imbibe the good news that He has come from the Father to save us. His presence is our life, which means that apart from Him we are dead.

Jesus does not want us to put our confidence in flesh, which means the things of this world. The

Father has drawn us so that we might receive the words of eternal life and believe in the one who came from heaven to speak them and to do what they say must be done for us.

August 17, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession and Petition.

O Lord, it is true that sometimes our hearts are far from You and we prefer human wisdom to the truth of Your Word. We get things upside down! We make ourselves gods of our own lives as though we made ourselves and are only accountable to ourselves. Please forgive us for Jesus sake.

You have opened our deaf ears to hear Your Word, and given sight to our eyes to perceive Your glorious grace. Please keep them open! Help us to live each day with faith that draws near to You with our hearts. Give us joy in You, O Lord, and let us exult in You for Jesus' sake. Amen.

August 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:1-13

Chapter 7 is a shift in Mark's gospel and the readings of the last few weeks which have been connected to the feeding of the 5000. This section begins a series of conflicts with and challenges from the Pharisees, who were religious lay leaders of the time. In this reading they confront Him regarding a tradition of washing before eating and Jesus, referring to Isaiah 29, accuses them of teaching commandments of men and setting aside God's Word. This text moves the conflict in Mark's Gospel forward toward Jesus' crucifixion. For us, it is a call to examine the source of our beliefs and practices to keep them rooted in God's Word.

August 19, 2015

Teaching

The teaching of this psalm deals first and foremost with the human condition. We should take care to recognize that this is what we have been saved from in Jesus' death and resurrection. The description in the psalm is very unflattering. Perhaps the harshest words are in v. 3 (which repeats part of v. 2) – "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one."

No wonder David yearns for salvation to come out of Zion, which is a symbol for where God dwells. If this is the condition of the people apart from God he would certainly want to be rescued from such people. In addition, he would also want God to rescue these people from their terror and shame, which He has done by Jesus' death and resurrection.

August 20, 2015

Life

In a world where we often focus more on what is broken in marriage than what is good and right about it, Ephesians 5 might sound a little outdated and idealistic. As God's people we see this as a revelation of His plan for how marriage works. This passage shows us that marriage is very

important to God, for this is the picture He gives us of His relationship to His people; husband and wife.

This is also a beautiful description of Jesus' motivation for saving us. People sometimes ask how the Father could sacrifice His Son as He did when Jesus died on the cross. There is more to it than that. Jesus went to the cross with the express purpose of loving, saving, and purifying us. What is more He unites us to Himself in an eternal union as we become the body of Christ.

August 21, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Confession, Petition, and Instruction.

Father in Heaven, please forgive us for setting aside Your commands and placing our own self-righteous deeds as our hope for holiness. Forgive us for not honoring our parents as You have called us to do. Forgive us for living "holier than thou" lives which do not recognize our sin, but finds fault in others.

Lord, let Your Word take root in our hearts so that we would know that our deeds do not make us holy, but only Your grace and forgiveness. As forgiven people help us to live according to Your Word and to represent it rightly to others in our thinking, speaking, and doing. Help us to keep Your Word in its proper place in our lives and please guard us from presumptuous sin and false humility.

O Holy Spirit, teach us in this Word that living rightly has less to do with washed hands and flattering lips, and more to do with a heart that is close to You. Help us to recognize the doctrines of men that reject Your Word so that we live according to Your guidance, and let us see where we set aside God's Word so that we would learn our sin fully and confess its depth and breadth so we may fully know the power of Jesus' forgiveness which You deliver to us. Amen.

August 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Moses wrote Deuteronomy at the end of his life and ministry as a last sermon for the people. God had revealed that he would not enter the Promised Land with the people, but would only see it from a distance. In this portion of the book Moses exhorts the Israelites to carefully observe and keep God's statutes and rules. This was not merely for the sake of being obedient, but God's rules and commands would give the Israelites wisdom and make them an example to the nations around them. He also warns them to never forget the incredible acts of salvation and judgement that they had seen as God rescued them from Egypt and preserved them in the wilderness. The function of this text is as an exhortation to hear and keep God's Word, remember both the Law revealed there and in the Gospel message of God's salvation.

August 25, 2015

Teaching

It is curious that this reading was separated from last week's reading as it is the obvious conclusion to the scenario of eating with unwashed hands. While the Pharisees looked at the outside for obedience to certain traditions and rituals to determine if a person was defiled or not, Jesus put the cause of defilement closer to home: the heart. Indeed, He argued that the things we put into our bodies from the outside pass through after being used up. It is the behavior that is rooted in the sins of our hearts that defiles us. This makes for a pretty hopeless situation. How do we change our hearts.

This text does not speak directly to that need for a new heart, but other places in Scripture do. Psalm 51 calls out to God for a clean heart, and we know that it is Jesus' blood that cleanses us of all our sins.

August 26, 2015

Life

When we approach God in prayer, we must learn to do so with the humility of one who is dependent on God, but to whom God owes nothing. Yet we know God's mercy and love; that He desires us to come and pray, so we do. That dependence allows us to also pray with a kind of pertinence and boldness, not because we deserve or are owed what we pray for, but because of who God is. So in Christ we can pray, "I have done what is just and right," or, "It is time for the Lord to act."

One of the important aspects of this psalm is the desire to be taught God's statutes, to know His testimonies, and to love God's commandments. It urges us to pray to God – teach us, help us understand, and help us love Your Word.

August 27, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction and Confession.

Lord, You protect us so magnificently. Because You know our weaknesses and our enemies' strength so well You cover us to keep us safe sexually, morally, spiritually, and mentally. Not only that, but You have given us Your Word, the one weapon that our foes must flee from and which can be used to rescue captives from sin's clutches. We pray that you would always keep and defend us.

Forgive us for those times we have neglected our armor, let down our guard, or in any other way given in to temptation. Forgive us for thinking that temptation was light or easy and we could handle it on our own, for we wrestle with powers which are beyond us. Forgive us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

August 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:14-23

Having been accused of breaking the tradition of the elders and eating with defiled, that is

unwashed, hands, Jesus confronted the Pharisees in their hypocrisy. In this reading He taught the crowd what truly defiles a person, which has nothing to do with traditions or washing, but has everything to do with sinful desires in one's heart that lead to sinful behaviors. This text teaches us about the human sinful condition and gives us direction to look deeper than surface behaviors to know our sin so that we get to the true heart of the matter.

August 31, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 35:4-7a

These verses are part of a prophecy of hope. Many of Isaiah's prophecies up to this point have declared God's judgement on His people because of their unfaithfulness to Him. At last God speaks words of comfort and hope through His prophet declaring that He will come and save them. The marks of this coming and salvation are in miracles of healing and renewal. This passage points us ahead to Jesus' coming and ministry, and encourages the hearer to anticipate God's salvation in the midst of their troubles and sinful deadness.

September 1, 2015

Life

It is hard for us to "hear" Jesus speak to the woman the way He does in this reading. We sometimes feel that we are children at God's table and that we have every right to be there. There is truth in this because we are called the children of God. At the same time, there is a sense of wonder and awe in being welcomed and fed at God's table. There is a realization that, because of our sin, we don't belong there any more than a dog belongs at the dinner table. But how wonderful it is that whether we are pets or people God's gracious provision is ours because He loves us.

September 2, 2015

Teaching

This psalm sets up two things that one might put one's trust in: the Lord or temporal powers (princes). It quickly shows how ridiculous it would be to trust in temporal powers noting that any salvation they might offer is ephemeral for people die and their plans perish with them. Instead the psalm extolls the Lord's greatness by declaring that He has created all things and provided for them, He does marvelous miracles and protects His people, and He will reign forever.

September 3, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for loving us so much that You laid down Your life for us. Thank You for not showing partiality for people who might be smarter, wealthier, or better than us in some way. Thank You for choosing us and for lifting us up. And we thank You for the example that You have set before us so that we might show our faith not only with words but with actions that display Your love to others.

We confess that we do not always display our faith in You by the things we do, and that our actions are often selfish and require little to no sacrifice from us. We have also shown partiality for people who are like us or have something to offer us. Please forgive us! We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves!

Pour Your Spirit on us so that our estimation of others will be directed by His influence in our lives. Help us to learn to show no partiality – for rich or for poor, but to love all people for Your sake. And we pray that Your church would be full of good works and acts of love that display our faith in You to the World. Draw people to Yourself through us, and let our faith be declared in our words and deeds. Amen.

September 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 7:24-37

These events took place as Jesus traveled. The first happened when He was in the region of Tyre and Sidon in the north. This area was Gentile territory, and Jesus' interaction there is with a Gentile woman who begs for her daughter to be exorcised of an unclean spirit. When He returned from that region, He healed the deaf and mute man. The function of this reading is such that it challenges us to consider what right we have to be Jesus' followers and to receive benefits from Him, and to recognize that it is He who opens us to receive His grace.

September 7, 2015

Teaching

This passage teaches us that it is God who makes Himself and His will known to us. He is the one who gives us His Word to speak that others may be instructed as well. The life of faith, from first to last, is a gift which God gives and sustains, and our relationship with Him is rooted in how He has reached out to us.

However, hearing God's Word, believing it, being instructed by it, and living according to it brings God's people into conflict with those who are rebellious against Him. The people of God should expect to experience persecution when they live according to God's teaching. We need not be daunted or feel disgraced, though. God helps us bear those burdens and overcome them as we live by faith.

September 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:14-29

This event took place right after Jesus' Transfiguration. While the Transfiguration is a high point which reveals Jesus as God, the disciples' performance and inability to cast out the demon forms a kind of low point bringing the focus on to the issue of faith. The account itself shows Jesus returning to the nine disciples He had left behind and finding them embroiled in an argument with the scribes over a boy who is possessed by a demon which they were unable to cast out. Jesus spoke with the father of the boy, and exorcised the demon. This reading functions as a

warning against relying on our own strength in our spiritual life and conflict as Jesus focused the father on belief and the disciples on prayer.

September 9, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

O Lord, thank You for hearing our prayers and answering us. Indeed, You have delivered our souls from sin and death, and we thank You that we need not fear the grave because of Your salvation. We thank You for coming to us when we were low and did not deserve Your mercy and saved us.

We love You, Lord, but we must confess that our love for You pales in comparison to Your love for us. Although You have dealt bountifully with us, we continue to sin and to put ourselves in places where our eyes must have tears, our feet must stumble, and we walk as though we were not in Your presence. Please forgive us and deliver our souls once again!

Lord God, You have saved us from the snares of death, but there are yet many who are in its grasp. We ask that You would use us to bring the message of Your salvation to them. Encourage us by the love we have for You to speak of how gracious, righteous, and merciful You are, and help us live in such a way that Your deliverance would be evident in our lives. And we pray that You would keep us until that day when You finally fully deliver us in the resurrection when we will walk before You in the land of the eternally living; for Jesus' sake. Amen.

September 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: James 3:1-12

In the middle of his letter which confronts believers with actions that do not match the confession of their lips, James turns to the sins of the tongue as his next focus. After warning them about the stricter judgement for teachers because of the importance of pure teaching, James describes how people have been able to control large vessels and tame animals, but the tongue is harder yet to control. This stands as a warning to God's people to be aware of the words they say and the harm they can do emotionally and spiritually.

September 11, 2015

Teaching

The dialogue between Jesus and the boy's father highlights the importance of faith, and points to the source of faith. Jesus says, "All things are possible for one who believes." The father replied, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Faith is powerful because it is God's gift. We do not make it stronger, but Jesus does, and in so doing accomplishes much in us, for us, and through us.

September 14, 2015

Life

Have you ever been blindsided by an angry response after you've told someone what you believe

on a given topic? It sometimes happens when people speak about God's will for our sexuality, spirituality, or worldview. Have you ever shied away from speaking about God – even talking about His love and forgiveness – because you were afraid that the person would be offended? It is in times like those that we can take comfort with Jeremiah that God protects His people. It is not us they are rejecting, but God – although that still hurts.

God's enemies are real. We should be aware of that. But remember that God gave Jesus to die for His enemies, to save us (for we were once God's enemies, too!), and to reconcile us to Himself.

September 15, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, and Confession.

Lord Jesus, You came for the very purpose to suffer and die for our sins and to rise again to give us everlasting life. You show us that to follow You is not to be great or glorious in the world's eyes, but to be humble, to be servant of all, and to love people that others consider insignificant. Indeed, You show us that to welcome the unwelcomed in Your name is to welcome You and to receive Your Father.

Thank You for calling us to follow You and for teaching us the way of humility. More importantly, thank You for humbling Yourself so much that You would suffer and die for us and then rise again. Thank You for the people that You bring into our lives that the world considers inconsequential, but You give us the privilege of welcoming them and thereby welcoming You and Your Father.

We confess that we sometimes consider ourselves to be the greatest, and we think we are Your best disciples. We overlook those who are marginalized and considered unworthy of our time or attention. There are times that we long to be first and not last; served and not servant. Change our hearts and cleanse us of our sin with the blood You shed when You died for us. Please forgive us. Amen.

September 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 54

Starting with Psalm 51 there are fourteen psalms that are marked, "Of David." Psalms 52, 53, 54, and 55 are all labeled as a "maskil." We do not know what this word actually means, but we think that is either a musical or liturgical term because the Psalms have long been used in worship. In this psalm David praises God for saving him from his enemies and declares his intention to bring an offering to thank God for his deliverance. The particular rescue that David refers to in this psalm can be read about in 1 Samuel 23:15-24. Today we can see many enemies who set themselves against us as God and His people. These would include physical enemies like governments and people who oppress and persecute Christians, but would also include enemies of a spiritual nature like sin, death, and the devil. God delivers us from those enemies – physical

and spiritual – and in the end we will look in triumph on them.

September 17, 2015

Teaching

Throughout his book James helps us see that the ethics of the Christian life are different than the world's ethics. While there is certainly outward crossover between what the world calls good and God calls good, James points out that key differences lie in things like the ambition of our hearts, our passions, and humility. Each of these, along with the rest of our lives are to align with God's wisdom.

James places earthly wisdom, which he, inspired by the Holy Spirit, calls unspiritual and demonic, at the center of our conflicts within the church and in our relationships.

September 18, 2015

Life

Jesus is the greatest because He is the one who served us all by allowing Himself to be killed for us and then rising from the dead. In this act of mercy He serves us in such an incredible way that it transforms our priorities. We don't need to be first. We don't need to be greatest, or to get our way. Because He gave Himself for us, we are now free to give ourselves for others, too.

September 21, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

O God, when the Israelites complained in the wilderness and wanted to return to Egypt and slavery, Your servant Moses despaired and threw himself and his people on Your mercy. You provided for them in a most unexpected way: You put Your Spirit on more people than that they might join in leading Your people by the power of that Spirit.

We thank You that today You have given Your Holy Spirit to all of Your people and that we can be confident that You will lead us to walk in Your ways, and that You guide us to help others hear Your Word and come to faith in You. And we thank You for Moses' gentle humility that we may imitate him and not become jealous of those who speak on Your behalf.

Forgive us, Father, for seeking guidance from other places and for longing to return to our own slavery to sin and death. We know that we think nostalgically about the sins of our youth sometime.

Lord, grant that Your Spirit will continue to rest upon Your people and especially upon our pastors and leaders. Guide all of us to live for the benefit of others and let Your Spirit lead us all. Amen.

September 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

This reading continues the theme of the disciples showing their lack of understanding and Jesus teaching them the priorities of the kingdom of God, which are at odds with the priorities the disciples are displaying. The reading begins with John reporting that they had stopped someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus teaches them that the one who is not against them was for them, and goes on to teach about the dangers of temptation. This text shows us that our relationship with God is not about our specialness, nor should we be tempted to think that our own deeds, no matter how great give us a special place in God's kingdom. Essentially, our relationship with God and our fellow Christians is about a state of being in faith.

September 23, 2015

Teaching

God made us and everything that exists. That message resounds through the whole of the Scriptures. We are all dependent upon God for every aspect of our lives. He did this for His glory and for the joy of creating. That He created us is one of the reasons we worship Him and why we are accountable to Him.

The psalmist wanted to live in a right relationship with His Creator. Sin is a violation of that relationship. Wickedness is not what we were created for, so the psalmist longs for both to be removed from the world. Instead he longs for his soul to bless and praise the Lord his maker.

September 24, 2015

Life

How does this reading apply to our lives? We should examine these areas of our lives and allow God's Word to lead us into confession. We generally do not consider ourselves to be wealthy, but as U.S. Americans we are in the top 2% of the world in wealth. Are we using it God's glory? To bless our neighbor? Are we patient in suffering? Indeed, do we even suffer for the faith, or do we present a "Jesus" in our lives who is so bland that none can be offended by him ... or drawn to him? How is our prayer life? Do we believe that God hears and answers us?

The last words of James give us comfort. When we find that we have wandered from God's truth in the matters above, or in any part of God's will, we can be brought back. There is forgiveness in Jesus' cross that rescues our souls from death and covers our sins. That is our hope, and the hope we testify to.

September 25, 2015

Prayer

This prayer is written in the themes of Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, and Petition.

Lord Jesus, You teach us that the one who is not against us is for us. One who does a mighty work in Your name will not be able soon after to speak evil of You. This is because following You is not primarily about doing mighty works but about being rescued from sin. You also teach us to take temptation very seriously, and to see our inability to rescue ourselves so that we will rely solely on You.

Thank You for revealing Your truth to us. Thank You that there are others in our families, communities, and beyond who are, “for us,” fellow followers of You. We give You thanks for rescuing us from our sin so we need not amputate body parts to avoid sin, and we are grateful that You have put us on alert against the temptations we face in this life.

Lord, to our shame we confess that we have looked at those who we should recognize as our fellow disciples with disdain and considered them less worthy of serving You than we are. We overemphasize our own importance and the greatness of our contribution to Your kingdom. Not only that, but we have not taken temptation as seriously as You clearly do. Instead we have dabbled and played with things that tempt us.

Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil, dear Father. By Your Spirit’s guidance help us see ourselves as You see us so that we might know both the depth of our sin and the greatness of Your grace and love. Guide us to humbly perform the mighty works You have prepared for us and help us to be glad to do even simple works like offering a cup of water to someone out of love for Jesus. Amen.

September 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Genesis 2:18-25

The Book of Genesis was written by Moses and is the record of many firsts: first light, day, animals, person, covenant, and, in this text, the first woman and first marriage. All through the first two chapters of Genesis everything God had done He declared to be good, but here He says that something is not good: for the man to be alone. God created woman to be the match for the man and instituted marriage. This text reveals the Biblical foundation for marriage and shows us that things like marriage, child birth, and family were all part of God’s will before sin entered the world.

Teaching

One of the important things that God reveals to us in His Word is that He created all things. This is what gives Him the authority to give His creation a sense of order; placing people over the animals, giving living things genders to complement and to procreate, and establishing marriage and the family. None of this is accidental, and God’s motivation in all of it is rooted in love for His creation.

God’s love is what moved Him to give the man a, “helper fit for him.” The man needed someone to love and to be loved by. He needed companionship that was more profound than the animal life could offer and more tangible than God would offer. He needed someone who was the same stuff as he was. This relationship allowed the man and the woman would be like God two very important ways: first, their love and unity would be a reflection of the love and unity within the Trinity, and second, God blessed their union to create families, bringing new life into the world.

Life

There is a lot of confusion about marriage today, and the competition between the sexes is something that God never intended. The differences between men and women were not intended to drive us apart but to draw us together and to be celebrated. We rightly give thanks that God created both male and female and has given marriage a structure that is intended to build up both wife and husband and to create and nurture new life. These are good gifts!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You created us and we Yours. In Your wisdom You created us male and female. You also instituted marriage by binding the first man and woman together to make them one flesh.

Thank You for creating us as sexual beings: different and yet complementary. Thank You for the gift of marriage. Thank You for giving humankind such a relationship as to bring new life into the world.

Forgive us for Jesus' sake the mess we have made of marriage in our society. Forgive us for not honoring or rejoicing in the sexes, but seeing them as adversarial or as means for our own gratification. We confess that the lifelong union You intended for husband and wife has been treated with scorn among us, made the butt of jokes, and has not been cherished or looked forward to for the good gift that it is.

Help us, Lord, learn to live with love and respect for both sexes. Work among us so that marriage will be honored and the vows made by husbands and wives will be kept that they would love, honor, and keep one another until death. And we pray that marriages would be fruitful and that the children that are the result of them would be loved and cherished. Amen.

September 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

Jesus was in the region of Judea beyond the Jordan and He was teaching the crowds that were gathering to Him there. In the midst of His teaching, Jesus was questioned by some Pharisees regarding divorce, so Jesus affirmed God's design for marriage as unity between husband and wife until death parts them. Later He welcomed and blessed children that the disciples sought to drive away. This text attacks the idea that there are excuses for our bad behavior and rejects our ideas of self-justification, but it highlights that our relationship to God is rooted in His mercy and grace for us.

Teaching

Problems with marriage are not new. All of the maladies regarding marriage in our modern times have been seen before. In this reading the problem of divorce was brought before Jesus. At Jesus' time divorce was very easy for men, and very difficult for women. We should take careful note of how Jesus responded to this problem. He referred the Pharisees back to the Scriptures. He quoted Genesis. He said specifically that a man and woman are united in marriage, and that they

should not be separated.

Life

As sinners, we hear such categorical teaching from Jesus and we start looking for loop holes, excuses, and times that our sinful behavior might be justified. By talking about divorce in this way, one of the things Jesus is showing us is that sin is never justified. There is never a good excuse for us to sin. We will always be accountable for our actions if we think we can somehow make what we've done okay.

Why would Jesus push us so hard with a teaching like this? It is because He came to justify us by taking our sins upon Himself. He urges us to let our sin be sin. Do not make excuses! Instead, acknowledge it, confess it, and let His forgiveness be your hope for justification before God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Your teachings are hard and they leave us no room to justify ourselves. They reveal our sins so that we know that we need You and the free blessings of forgiveness that You won for us by Your death and resurrection. You also show how highly You value marriage and that You drew Your definition of marriage from Your created order. Not only that, but You show how You love and value children.

Thank You for pointing us to the Scriptures as the authority for our understanding of marriage and, in a broader sense, for our whole lives. Thank You for showing us how highly You value the union of husband and wife by teaching that such a bond should not be broken and by welcoming the fruit of the union of husband and wife.

Forgive us for not being nearly as firm about marriage as You are, and for not rejoicing in children as You do. We pray Your forgiveness, not just for ourselves, but also for those who utterly reject what You teach about marriage, divorce, and children.

Lord, please bless the marriages of Your people. Help husband and wife to love and honor one another. Bless children by helping parents to bring them to You. Give us Your Spirit so we may hear Your Word, believe it, and live by it. In Your name we pray. Amen.

September 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 128

Psalm 128 is one of the Songs of Ascents, psalms that were sung as travelers traveled to Jerusalem for festivals like Passover. This psalm describes the blessed life of one who fears the Lord. It touches on three areas in which a person who fears the Lord is blessed: first – in their labor, second – in their family, and third with prosperity – which also touches on family. This psalm gives us a pattern of speaking blessings on ourselves and others, and shows us some of the blessings God bestows upon His faithful.

Teaching

People will sometimes balk at the language of fearing the Lord. Why would we fear the One who loves us so much? They will make excuses for the strong language and try to soften the idea of fear by replacing it with respect. We should not lose this strong language, though. Fearing the Lord is a recognition of His holiness, power, majesty, glory, and might. It is a holy awe that makes us aware of our weak nature before Him and causes us to appreciate all the more that this fear-worthy God chooses to come to us in blessings, and not with curses and condemnation.

We should also notice the emphasis that the psalm places on work and family as blessings. Today's society often looks at both of these more like curses than benefits received from God's hand. Yet in both of these things we reflect the God who made us – a God who works to create, sustain, and defend, and Who calls us His children and makes us His family.

Life

Do you feel blessed? Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't. Feelings, however, can be deceitful. This psalm can be helpful to us to know we are blessed. Has God given us work for our hands? (Or our minds, as is often the case!) Do you see how God blesses you through that work with satisfaction, wages, food, and other comforts? Not only that, but He even places you in positions to bless others through your labors. It is often in our work and families that we get to share the hope that we have in our God who blesses us – even by giving His own Son to bear the curse our sin deserves!

Prayer

O Lord, blessed is everyone who fears You, who recognizes Your glory, majesty, power and might, but also sees that You have chosen to act toward us with love and compassion. You bless with work, family, prosperity, and long life. You give our lives meaning.

Thank You for all Your blessings; especially for giving Jesus to go up to Jerusalem and to die and rise so that we might prosper spiritually through the new life He won for us. Thank You for giving us work and family, earthly goods and the very lives we live.

Forgive us for the times that we don't pay attention to You; when we live as though this world was all there is and life is just a matter of eking out our days. Forgive us for not recognizing just how blessed we are, and for not seeing work and family as blessings from You.

Lord, we ask that You would increase our fear of You. Let others come to fear You, too. Give us Your Spirit to lead us to believe Your Word and to receive Your blessings with faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

October 1, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 2:1-18

The Letter to the Hebrews is full of quotations from Scripture (the Old Testament) and presents

Jesus as the fulfillment of those Scriptures. We do not know who wrote Hebrews, but it does claim the authority of an apostle in 2:3, and it has been cherished by the church over the centuries. This section urges the reader to pay close attention to the message of salvation, and presents Jesus as the savior given by God who, although He is God and has all authority, became fully human to stand with His people and to rescue them from death and the devil. The message is meant to comfort us by showing us how great Jesus' work was and how well He understands when we suffer temptation.

Teaching

The reading begins with a warning that, "we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." This reminds us that there are false teachings and false teachers in our world who would lead us away from Jesus, the true source of salvation. It also highlights how important it is for us to speak rightly of who Jesus is and His great salvation.

God has put everything in subjection to Jesus. He is greater than the angels, but He became lower than them for a time. He suffered death, to taste death for us all. He makes us holy. He is flesh and blood, and His flesh and blood served as the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice) for our sins.

Life

Temptation can be a terrible thing. It "can be" because we are not all tempted the same way, one may be tempted by gluttony but not by gossip; or by pornography but not by drunkenness; or, again, by greed but not by pride. Part of Jesus' humanity was to face temptation, just like we do, and yet to do so without falling into sin. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine what it would be like to stand up under the temptation that you've cracked under so many times? Jesus understands how hard it is for you. He stood under that temptation for you, He bore your sin in His body to the cross, and He helps you.

Prayer

O Holy Spirit, You teach us that Jesus is both truly God and fully human. While we may struggle in our minds with how that can possibly be, we confess this truth and cling to it because the Son of God became one of us to taste death – the consequence of sin – for us and to defeat death and the devil.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for this amazing work You have done. Thank You for dying on our behalf. We praise You for willingly leaving Your glory to become one of us in our frailty so that You were even tempted as we are. Thank You for helping us in our temptation.

Father in Heaven, we confess that we so easily give in to temptation. Not only do we give in to the temptations of the devil, but sometimes as we talk about Your salvation, we do not do so correctly, leaving people with the impression that there must be something else that is necessary to be saved.

O Holy Trinity, please continue to work in our lives to draw us to You that we might live victoriously in the victory over death and the power of the devil. Guide all Your people to speak rightly about Your salvation so that more people may receive freedom from slavery to sin. Amen.

October 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

Jesus was teaching His disciples, but continued to be surrounded by crowds and tested by His enemies. In this account He was tested by the Pharisees in regard to marriage and divorce. Additionally, He corrected the attitude of His disciples who were keeping children from coming to Jesus, and He took time to bless the little ones. This text affirms Jesus' joy in marriage and its natural result – children.

Teaching

Jesus' teaching in this section drives us to enter the kingdom of God by faith ... and by faith alone. Having disallowed the excuses that the people held to justify divorce, He then rebuked the disciples for turning little children away saying that if one does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child that person will never enter it. This begs the question, "How does a child receive the kingdom of God?" They do not seek to earn admittance, they simply trust the one who brings them to get them in. That is the kind of faith Jesus calls us to; a faith that does not self-justify our actions, but trusts Him to save us.

Life

Have you ever noticed that when people apologize they often qualify their apologies with excuses and explanations for their actions? There is a tendency in each of us to want to be right in some way. It would be better for us by far if we simply hung our heads in shame like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar and rely on Jesus to give us His forgiveness, with no addition from us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is only because of Your death and resurrection that we can come into the kingdom of God. The truth of the matter is that we contribute nothing to our salvation and there is no merit or worthiness in us. While these are unhappy lessons, we also take heart remembering that You took the children in Your arms and blessed them, and You welcome us in the same way because of Your love.

O Holy Spirit, we thank You for convicting us of our sin through the power of the Law. We thank You for making known to us just how incapable we are of saving ourselves. We thank You for such knowledge because it makes all the more important the message that You reveal in the Gospel of the forgiveness Jesus won through dying and rising for us, by which He takes us in His arms and blesses us with forgiveness, eternal life, love, and salvation.

Father, we confess that we have not honored marriage or cherished children as You do. We also admit that we often try to justify our sins with excuses, looking for something, anything, that allows us to deserve to be forgiven instead of trusting in Jesus' sacrifice alone. Yet for the sake of that sacrifice we pray that You would forgive us for all our sins and grant us entry into Your kingdom.

O God, we pray for marriage, children, and families to be blessed. Help Your people to give a holy testimony and example to the world of Your will and design for these blessed gifts. Grant that while we live on earth we would see how often we fall short of Your will so that we would flee to You for Your grace. Keep us steadfast in faith so that we may dwell in Your kingdom in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Amen.

October 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Amos came from Judah, but his ministry was in Israel, where he was called to proclaim God's judgement on them. His prophecies often deal with justice and the lack-there-of among the Israelites. In this prophecy he urges the people to seek the Lord and to do what is good. The function of this prophecy is that it challenges us to love the truth, to hate evil, and to do the good things God calls us to do.

Teaching

"Seek the Lord and live," says Amos. He is with these words calling his readers to repent of their sin and to turn to the Lord for their life and salvation. Repentance is turning to life because sin's consequence is always death and God's wrath. Amos describes that wrath as a fire that devours; it is deadly.

One of the marks of repentance is seeking to live the Lord's way. Amos marks several ways that the people were living contrary to God's way. He condemns those who make justice into bitter poison and those who work against righteousness. He states that others hate those who speak God's truth to them, trample on the poor, persecute the righteous, and do not help those who are in need. He urges his readers to seek good – which is God's way – and to live according to His will.

Life

Do we as God's people ever abhor hearing the truth of God's Word spoken to us? Do we trample the poor while we ourselves live in comfort? While we may not actively consciously do these things, we participate in systems and purchase products from people who do. Do we ever turn from those who are in need? Amos's words could easily have been written to us today. "Seek good and not evil.... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice." Amos says that it may be that the Lord will be gracious. We know that He has been because we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. So if or when we recognize that we have sinned, even in these ways, we can seek the Lord and live because of Jesus' forgiveness.

Prayer

O Lord, You are a God who loves justice and calls us to do that which is good in Your sight. Indeed, to do the good You call us to do is life and joy. Yet we are in a world that is full of injustice, while we are called to establish justice, to hate evil, and to love good.

Thank You for giving real justice to the world as You rescued us from sin and death by the death of Jesus. Thank You for revealing that there is such a thing as good and justice and for calling us to pursue it. And thank You for having been gracious to Your people.

O God, You know how many are our transgressions and how great are our sins. We call out to You for forgiveness. We confess that we have not loved those who told us the truth about our sin, and that we have participated in systems that promote injustice. Be gracious to us and save us from our sin!

By the power of Your Holy Spirit, work in the hearts of Your people to help us to love what You love and hate that which You hate. Open our hearts and minds to receive Your truth and to live according to it. Be the God who gives justice, defends the poor, and who confronts our sins with Your Word. Help us to seek good and not evil, that we may live; and move us to hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the land. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

October 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:17-22

In the verses just prior to this reading, Jesus welcomes little children stating that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. In this passage, He rebuffs a young man who wants to follow Him, but is too attached to his wealth. The reading makes us consider our own connections to the world and to consider what it means for us to follow Jesus, it also reminds us that Jesus loves us even when we are in error, for it says He looked at the young man and loved him.

Teaching

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This is a question that has been asked for time out of memory. Many people have tried to solve the question by doing good works, praying multiple times a day, making great sacrifices, and even dabbling in occult practices. Jesus' answer seems to point the young man in that direction; “You know the commandments” But when the young man states that he has done all these things, Jesus pointed out where his sin was: his connection to the things of this world.

Jesus knows that the young man has not kept the commandments, but He still looks on him and loves him. Jesus loves sinners. He is patient with us even as He confronts our sin and calls us to follow Him.

Life

How often do we ask the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” There is often a piece

of us that longs to be able to receive eternal life as a reward for the things we have done. But notice that word *inherit*.

How does one inherit anything? Generally an inheritance is something we receive because someone else died and passed it on to us. So, how do we inherit eternal life? We inherit it because Jesus has given it to us by dying for us because we did not keep the commandments, and now He calls us to follow Him because He has secured our eternal life for us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You loved the young man when he claimed to have kept the commandments. You love sinners and You are patient with us to lead us to repentance. You confront our sin and help us to know where we fall short of Your will and God's Word.

Thank You for loving the young man, and thank You for loving us when we believe we have done what is necessary to inherit eternal life. Indeed, we thank You for securing eternal life for us by Your own death and resurrection. Thank You for showing us our sin so that we may know how great Your forgiveness is.

Forgive us for thinking we can somehow inherit what You so freely give to those who follow You. Forgive us for deluding ourselves into thinking that we do what Your Father commands. And please forgive us for the times that we love the things of this world more than the eternal life You have given us.

Lord Jesus, please send us Your Holy Spirit to help us to know the Commandments and to live according to them, but help us to have set in our hearts that we keep the Father's commands because we have inherited eternal life through Your death and resurrection, and that we do not (cannot!) do anything to gain eternal life. Help us to see the things that keep us from following You and lead us to remove them from our lives. Grant that we receive the treasure of heaven and that we would follow You. Amen.

October 7, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 90:12-17

Psalm 90 is unique in that it was written by Moses. The first eleven verses of the psalm are a lament of human frailty and death and compares people to God who is almighty and eternal. The last six verses are a prayer for wisdom and relief from death's impact. The psalm teaches people to acknowledge their mortality and put their confidence in God's gracious mercy.

Teaching

It may seem obvious, but people die; all people. Even though medical breakthroughs have allowed people to live longer than ever, and people strive to find ways to cheat death, they cannot avoid this reality of life in this world. This prayer teaches us to call upon God to teach us to number our days: that is to know our mortality and to live wisely making use of the time we

are given.

The only relief people have from this sad state of affairs is if God intervenes in their lives. The psalm reveals that satisfaction comes from God's steadfast love and because of that, love, joy, and gladness can break through the sorrow of knowing we will die. Indeed their confidence in life and in death is God's love and favor which He pours out on them.

Life

We deal with our mortality in different ways at different points in our lives. From the person who says she just can't do everything she used to do, to the one who complains of the aches and pains that come with age, to the one who actually faces a disease that is terminal all of us are reminded that we will die, so we should live wisely. The heart of wisdom in the Bible is knowing where we stand with God. We do well to remember that God has had pity on us and shown us His steadfast love by giving His only begotten Son, and living our lives in Him.

Prayer

Lord, You know the number of our days and the span of our years, but we do not. We know that, unless Jesus returns first, we too will die, yet there is joy and gladness in life because of Your mercy and love. We indeed have been afflicted because of sin, and we have seen evil, but You have shown us Your work in the cross of Christ, and You establish the works of our hands for Your glory's sake.

Thank You for having pity on us and for giving us joy in this life, even in the face of death. Thank You for satisfying us morning by morning with Your steadfast love and for showing us the great work Jesus has done on our behalf which shows us that Your favor is indeed upon us.

Forgive us for our foolish ways in life and for the many ways we waste the days You have given us. Forgive us for doubting that You have had pity on us or that You delight in our afflictions. We confess that we even think that Your steadfast love is not enough to satisfy us and that the work of our hands must be established in our own strength. Have pity on Your servants!

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many years as we have seen evil. Let Your work be shown to us, and Your glorious power to our children. Let Your favor rest upon us and establish the work of our hands. Amen.

October 8, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 3:12-19

The writer of the letter began chapter 3 with a comparison of Jesus and Moses urging his readers to recognize that Jesus' glory is greater than Moses'. In this section he warns believers against falling into unbelief as the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness did. This reading stands as a warning to all Christians against being hardened by our sin and rebelling against God.

Teaching

There are those who teach that a Christian cannot lose their salvation. Hebrews says otherwise. Sin is always damaging to faith – especially sin that is open rebellion against God’s will for our lives; when we either don’t care that we are sinning or refuse to believe that our actions are sinful.

Sin’s deceitfulness is one of the reasons that it is important for Christians to live in community with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Those other people in our lives can sometimes see things about us that we do not see when we examine ourselves, and their encouragement is important for resisting temptation.

Life

John Donne wrote, “No man is an island, Entire to itself...” While he wrote of the sorrow of death that connects us all, this statement is true for followers of Christ because of the life that connects us all. Are you cherishing sins in your heart so that you need to hear someone say, “For the sake of Jesus, stop!”? Are you holding on to guilt so that you need to hear the words, “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.” God has given us to one another so that we might exhort one another. We are God’s gifts to one another to speak of Jesus’ salvation and to proclaim the Word that keeps us from unbelief.

Prayer

O Father, is it really true that sin could cause us to lose our faith? You warn us to watch out for evil, unbelieving hearts and for the hardness that creeps in from sins deceitfulness. Yet You have, out of Your love, given this word of warning and reminded us that this is what happened to Israel when they were to enter the Promised Land. Not only that, but You have given us our sisters and brothers in Christ to exhort us and help us to resist rebellion and unbelief.

Thank You, Lord God, for this warning; and thank You for putting us in relationships where we can exhort one another.

Forgive us, Lord, for Jesus’ sake for the times we have dabbled with sin as though we were more powerful than it, or as though it did not matter. Forgive us for our rebellion against Your Word. Forgive us for resisting the exhortation of others and for being shy in exhorting those in need of Your Word which we might have spoken to them. We share in Christ, and our confidence is in Him for forgiveness.

Give us an extra portion of Your Spirit, O God, to keep our hearts from hardening, and to sustain and grow the faith You have given us. Give us wisdom and courage to exhort one another with the good news that we do share in Christ – in His death and resurrection. We pray for those who are in rebellion and ask that their hearts would be turned to You, and we include the descendants of those who rebelled in the wilderness that the Jews, too, may know Your salvation once again. Let all people hear Your voice, and let their hearts not be hardened. Let them be receptive to the

good news of Your salvation. Amen.

October 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:17-22

While Jesus was seeking to teach His disciples privately, He was approached by a rich man who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. As Jesus spoke to him it was clear that he did not see how he had broken God's commandments, nor did he see his attachment to earthly goods. The passage serves to open our own eyes to see where earthly blessings lay hold of our own hearts.

Teaching

Martin Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, "Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from [them]." As Jesus spoke to the young man, He discerned that this sin against the First Commandment was in the man's heart. His call to him was to cut his bondage to earthly treasure so that he might receive the heavenly treasure of forgiveness, love, and eternal life by faith.

Life

As U.S. Americans we are the wealthiest people in the world. That might seem strange to us as we hear words of doom and gloom in the economic news, or as we think of our bills and bank accounts, but it is nonetheless true. Have you ever paused to wonder how such wealth impacts your soul? It is not that the wealth itself is evil, or that it is bad to have wealth, but if the earthly comforts we enjoy keep us from following Christ then there is a problem that we should confess, and we should change the way we live in regard to our earthly wealth. Besides, Jesus has promised a much more permanent and more valuable treasure in heaven.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we have inherited eternal life because You died for us and You have risen to break death's hold on us. We now strive to keep the Commandments as people who have eternal life, not to earn it. Yet we are also people with wealth, and we do not want that wealth to interfere with following You. Your treasure is greater than anything this world can offer.

Thank You for loving the man who felt he had kept God's commands. Thank You for loving us in the same way. We give You thanks for making us think about our attachment to earthly things, and consider how we live in a right relationship with our Heavenly Father and our earthly blessings.

Forgive us, Lord, when we mix that relationship up and we love our things more than we love our God. Forgive us for breaking the first of all the Commandments; that we have no other gods before You. We ask that You would forgive us for the times that we deluded ourselves into thinking that we had kept the Commandments, while we never made it past the First.

Change our hearts, O God, and move us to love You above all things and to place all of our hopes and confidence in You alone. Let us live in this life using the earthly blessings You have poured out on us in such a way that we are ready to leave them all behind to follow our Lord Jesus even as we rejoice in them as signs of Your love and providence. Amen.

October 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Written by the wisest man to ever live, King Solomon, Ecclesiastes investigates the wisdom of a long life in a broken world. It notes the vanity, that is, the meaninglessness that people experience and finds that meaningful life can only happen when a person begins from a right relationship with God. This passage looks back across life and notes that money cannot truly satisfy a person; not only is there a desire to accumulate more, but there is also concern and worry that comes from wealth. The passage serves as a message encouraging contentment with one's lot in life knowing that He has placed us in our place and provided all that we have.

Teaching

People generally assume the being wealthy is a good thing. But Solomon observes that this is not necessarily the case. He had seen the dissatisfaction that came with wealth and how wealth can actually hurt the one who holds it. Solomon would urge us to not desire wealth but to desire enjoyment in the work we have to do with our hands and in the food and drink that we have before us. Indeed to accept our toil and to rejoice in it is seen as a gift from God.

Another way to speak of what Solomon is exploring here is contentment. It is a blessed thing to be content with where God has placed us and to learn that we don't need to strive after things that we can't take with us in the end.

Life

A restaurant owner once quipped, "You don't own a restaurant. It owns you." How true that statement is of the many things we own! A house requires upkeep, wealth demands protection, comforts must be cared for, and cars require maintenance. The more we have the more we are responsible for. That is not necessarily bad in itself, but these things can be distractions that keep us from enjoying life and the greater blessings that God has given us – especially the right relationship He has given us with Himself in Christ. How often do we neglect our prayers, devotions, and time with God because of other "stuff" that has somehow become more important than Him? No wonder we feel dissatisfied!

As St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in You." Thanks be to God that He has given us release from such restlessness by giving us faith to trust that He provides all things for us.

Prayer

O God, the way our hearts yearn for wealth is so foolish! We see how it can distract us from walking with You and how our possessions bring troubles into our lives.

Thank You for all that You have provided. Everything we have is from You, even our very selves. Thank You for our work, our place in life, and the ability to enjoy all things that come from You.

Forgive us for having our hearts set on wealth and for not being content with the lot in life You have given us. Forgive us for not having enjoyment in our food, drink, and work, and for constantly wanting something more, different, or, as we think, better.

Grant that the things of this world would never take hold of our hearts, but that our hearts would cling to Christ and His cross. Let us find joy and contentment in Your great blessings. Amen.

October 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:23-31

Jesus' teaching in this section follows His encounter with a rich man who wondered how to inherit eternal life. Having confronted this man's idolatry of wealth, Jesus commented on wealth in relationship to living in the kingdom of God, and He points out that there is spiritual danger in human fixation on wealth. The reading functions as a warning against worshipping wealth and assuming that wealth is good. It is also an encouragement to long for greater gifts that come by faith in Jesus.

Teaching

Wealth has almost always been interpreted as a blessing from God. But what if that's not always the case? Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Which is better to have: wealth or eternal life?

The fact is that it is impossible for any person to enter the kingdom of God under her own power. It is only by God's grace that any of us enter. As Jesus said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

Life

There are things that are more important than wealth. Just as there are things that are worth dying for, there are things that it would be worth losing everything for. The kingdom of God is the greatest of these. It is losing something temporal and gaining something eternal.

Life in God's kingdom is topsy-turvy compared to the world. We lose to gain. Persecution is a blessing. We die to live forever. Many who are first will be last, and the last first. This passage is very much a call for us to live counter culturally in regard to wealth, and to place God's kingdom above our comfort.

Prayer

How difficult it is, O Lord, for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Yet with You it is possible, even though we cannot save ourselves. Your kingdom is greater than anything we face in this life. Even facing persecution, a real possibility as we follow You, is worthwhile in light of the eternal life and many blessings we look forward to when Your kingdom comes.

Thank You for granting us faith to follow You, Lord Jesus, and for drawing us into Your kingdom. Thank You for warning us regarding wealth and for breaking wealth's dominion over us by Your death and resurrection. Thank You for drawing us into a huge family where Your love flows within and between us all. And thank You for the privilege of suffering persecution for Your name's sake.

Forgive us, O God, for our attachment to wealth. Forgive us for not seeing how wealth can draw us away from You. We reason that wealth gives us resources with which to serve You and Your people, but all too often it only serves we who hold it. Forgive us for our reliance on earthly things without recognizing You as the Creator.

Lord, we ask that You would continue to break the hold of any idolatry on us, including the hold that wealth has on us. Bring us through the eye of the needle into Your eternal kingdom, and bring many others through, too, so they may receive the great blessings You have promised to all who trust in Christ. Amen.

October 14, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 119:9-16

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible. Each section is made up of eight verses which begin with the same letter, and there is a section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The central theme of the psalm is love for God's Law which permeates every aspect of the psalmist's life. Verses 9-16 make up the second section of the psalm and it seems to focus on the protective nature of God's Law; that it keeps us from sin. As the psalmist declares his devotion to God's Law, it shows us a godly response to God's Word that we would keep in our hearts and minds so that it guides our actions as God's people.

Teaching

From the very beginning the psalm deals with the issue of how a person can live a pure life. The psalmist's immediate answer is that it is God's Word that guards as well as guides us. He knows that he is always in danger of wandering from God's commandments and falling into sin, so he focuses on ways that God's Word can be present in his life – memorization, meditation, speaking, studying, listening.

To understand this psalm rightly we have to remember that the psalmist is already a believer; already saved by God's grace. These are words of faith, not a plan to earn salvation or to gain

God's favor. This is the prayer of one who believes and longs to draw closer to God because of His love for him.

Life

How do you keep your way pure? What we are talking about here is how we live in a way that shows our faith in Jesus and the salvation He has given us. We long to imitate Jesus, to be like Him in our actions, and to have our priorities match His because this is a good and right response to being loved by Him.

God has given us His Word for two purposes: to declare the salvation we rejoice in, and to show us His desire for how we are to live. The Law, as the psalmist talks about it, is a guide for us that directs us to live rightly. As we spend time reading this Word, God is declaring His salvation to us, creating faith in us, and guiding us to live lives that are steeped in His Word and the power He has placed there.

Prayer

O God, we love Your Word that tells us of Your love and salvation, and we love Your Word that teaches us to live pure lives. You guard us with Your Word from sin and false teachings. In Your love You teach us Your statutes so that we may declare Your Word, delight in it, meditate on it, and be guided by it.

Thank You for Your Word, O Lord. Thank You for the Gospel that tells us of the forgiveness You have given to us in Christ, and for the Law that guides us to live as Your people. Thank You for giving us that Word in writing so we may return to it over and over again, meditate upon it, and hide it in our hearts.

Forgive us for our neglect of Your Word. Forgive us for not desiring the pure way You desire us to live. Forgive us for seeking You in half-hearted ways and for wandering from Your commandments. Forgive us for not storing up Your Word in our hearts, but assuming we will always have access to it if we want it. Forgive us for the times that we hate Your Law.

Change our hearts, Father, by the power of Your Spirit, Who works through the Your Word. Strengthen our faith to turn our hearts and minds to You, and help us love and desire Your every Word. Amen.

October 15, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-16

The writer of this letter described the disobedience and rebellion of the Israelites who refused to enter the Promised Land. Now he warns his listeners to take note of their fall, for they did not enter into God's promised rest. Despite the fact that He had secured their salvation, their disobedience ruined their entry into the place God had promised. This passage stands as a warning to us to resist sin and rebellion, and a reminder to cling to God's promises in Christ to

shape our lives in obedience.

Teaching

Obedience matters. We often focus on the great truth that we have been saved by grace through faith. This is good news, for we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves! Yet now that we are saved, that does not mean that we should wantonly give ourselves over to sin. Nor should we live rebelliously, conforming ourselves to the ideas and patterns of the world rather than to Christ.

We must be clear, however, regarding the obedience that God desires. His desire, first and foremost, is that we be rescued from our sin through faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior. Being rescued from sin, we now struggle against the sinful inclinations of our hearts to live according to God's will and confessing our sins and the many ways we fall short of that will.

Life

This is a difficult lesson for us. We do not want to think about receiving God's salvation, but failing to reach God's promised rest. A great good is ours because Jesus gave His life for ours. Just as the Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt and given a new home in the Promised Land, we have been rescued from slavery to sin and given a new home in heaven. We do not want to neglect that gift or take it for granted. We neglect it if we think we think that our actions somehow contribute to entering into God's promised rest, and we take it for granted if we think we can freely disregard God's Word.

Prayer

O Lord, when You called the Israelites to enter into the promised land many of them doubted Your goodness and refused to act upon Your salvation. Something similar can happen still today as the people that You call as Your own doubt Your promises and turn to disobedience. We too can lose our place in Your eternal rest. Protect us, O Lord!

Thank You for delivering good news to us in the person of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus. He has rescued us from this wearying world and we have rest in His name. Thank You for delivering the message of Your salvation to us in Your Word, through the prophets and apostles, and handing this message down to today, so we may believe and be saved.

Forgive us for our disobedience. Forgive us for taking the message of Christ crucified for us for granted. Forgive us for not trusting Your grace, and continuing to think we must earn our salvation. Forgive us for not clinging to Your promises and acting upon them.

Grant that we never lose the rest You have won for us by Jesus' death and resurrection. Let those who have turned away from Your promise remember and return to it. Fill us all with faith to hold tightly to Your Word and to live as people You have saved. Amen.

October 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 10:23-31

The question of the rich man, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” led into a larger conversation regarding wealth and faith. In this passage Jesus points out that wealth can be a detriment to a person’s faith, in fact, he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” The passage causes the reader to reconsider what it means to be blessed and to see how great a gift it is to enter God’s kingdom.

Teaching

Much has been written about what Jesus meant by a camel going through the eye of a needle. Some have said that there was a small gate called, *The Eye of the Needle*, and it was hard to get a camel through it. It is more likely that He is saying that salvation for the rich (just as it is for anyone) is miraculous; as miraculous as a great big camel going through a little bitty needle’s eye. It is not possible for people to accomplish this feat. He is saying salvation is fully a gift from God for Whom all things are possible.

Life

Have you ever paused to consider how miraculous it is that you get to be part of God’s kingdom? We get so used to going to church, praying, taking Communion, and participating in the things of God’s kingdom that sometimes we think that this is normal. It is not. It is as miraculous as a camel going through the eye of a needle that the Son of God would die and rise for us. How amazingly blessed we are! Pause to consider how much it means to be part of the kingdom of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You teach that it is truly miraculous when a person enters into the kingdom of God. Even those who seem the most blessed among us enter only through a miracle as great as a camel going through the eye of a needle. You show us that entering the kingdom is impossible for us, but that all things are possible with Your Father.

Thank You for dying and rising for us – more actions that seem as likely as a camel going through the eye of a needle! – so that we are now part of the kingdom of God. Thank You for making this possible. Your promises of extended family, inheritance, and eternal life are great, and we thank You for them.

Forgive us for the times that we think that some people are more blessed, or more worthy, or somehow better equipped to enter the kingdom of God than we are. Forgive us for forgetting that all who enter do so only by Your grace and the faith that You give them by the power of the Holy Spirit. Forgive us for thinking that salvation is rooted in human action instead of God’s miraculous grace.

Bless us, Lord Jesus, with strong faith and fill us with wonder and awe that we too are privileged to be part of Your kingdom. Keep us grateful and amazed at what You have done to give us everlasting life. When the persecutions come that You say must be, give us an extra portion of

Your Spirit to strengthen and comfort us. Bring us safely into the eternal home You have promised us where we will live with You, and the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

October 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 14:6-7

The readings this week are for Reformation Sunday, and they highlight God's grace and the salvation that comes by faith in Christ alone.

The Book of Revelation is the record of a series of visions that the Apostle John had while in exile. Each of the visions revolves around the same point; that Jesus will return and His people will receive salvation when He comes. This part of the vision records an angel proclaiming the eternal gospel and calling people to fear and worship God. The function of this text is that it reminds the reader of God's desire for all people to be saved and that, even today, He continues to call people to return to Him in faith.

Teaching

Revelation is a book that has been badly abused and misunderstood. It is intended to be a message of comfort for the readers reminding them that no matter what the devil and the world throw at them Jesus has won the victory and that cannot be changed. This reading reminds them that the message of Jesus' salvation continues to be proclaimed in the world today and the call still goes out to all people to trust in the God who both made and saved them.

It should be noted that throughout the Bible the mark that God is the true the God is that He made heaven and earth; the sea and all that is in it. This idea is largely dismissed by the world today, but it should not be so among us. The God who made all things is the one who decided to redeem us in the most remarkable way – the death and resurrection of His Son. That is the gospel the angel proclaims.

Life

The next time you go to the store, work, school, or wherever you go, take some time to look at the people. The eternal gospel is to be proclaimed to everyone who dwells on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. Each person that you see has a message waiting for them from the eternal God who created all things, and that message is that He has saved them and provided a way for them to be reconciled to Him.

Prayer

O God, You have sent Your messengers into the world to proclaim the eternal gospel of salvation for all people. The greatest of these messengers is Your own Son our Savior, Jesus. You desire for all to be saved; from every nation and tribe and language and people on this earth which You created.

Thank You for Your gospel, and thank You for making all that there is. We thank You for the vast diversity of the peoples of the world and for eternal desire to have them come to a right relationship with You in which they fear You and give You glory.

Forgive us, Lord, for forgetting that this world is Yours and acting as though You did not make it. Forgive us for our lack of concern for the people whom You have made who dwell in this world. Forgive us for holding the eternal gospel close to ourselves rather than joining in proclaiming it.

Let Your angels and all Your messengers continue to proclaim Your gospel. Open the ears of men, women, and children around the world to hear of Your salvation, and let them come to know their Creator so that they too may fear You and give You glory. Amen.

October 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: John 8:31-36

One of the major ideas of the Reformation is that we are all slaves to sin, and we must be set free from that sin by Jesus. He is the only one with the authority to set us free, and He displayed that authority by dying and rising again.

In this passage Jesus was talking with the Jews about the importance of His Word and how the Word gives them truth and sets them free. They balked at the idea of needing to be set free, but Jesus teaches that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. This text forces us to consider our own condition and our own weakness in our sin, and comforts us with the good news that Jesus has set us free.

Teaching

It is an interesting thing that as Jesus confronted the Jews about being slaves they claimed to have never been slaves. The heart of their identity was that they had been slaves in Egypt and God had rescued them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. This was the sign that they were God's chosen people. But here they say, "We ... have never been enslaved to anyone."

Similarly people either forget or ignore the enslaving power of sin. We don't want to admit that without Christ in our lives we are powerless to do anything but sin, because sin has to do, first and foremost, with one's relationship to God. Because of this we don't always appreciate how remarkable it is that we have been set free – not to do whatever we want, but free to do God's will, which, because we love Him, is now our will, too.

Life

Addiction support groups say that when a person admits that they have a problem that is the first step toward recovery. When we deal with Jesus, admitting we have sin is essential to receiving forgiveness. If we don't admit that we need to be set free from our sin, we are like the children of slaves who say they've never needed to be set free. We're lying to ourselves and we miss out on

how great Christ's freedom is.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You have set us free. We now abide in Your Word, and You have shown us the truth of our sinful condition and of Your gracious forgiveness. Truly we were once slaves to sin, but now we are free indeed.

Thank You for that freedom. Thank You for coming to us while we were still slaves to sin. Thank You for not despising us in our enslavement, but still loving us and coming to us to set us free.

Forgive us for the times that we do not recognize our enslavement to sin. Forgive us for the times we have not listened to Your Word, and we thought that we were less sinful than we are. Please forgive us for using our freedom for ourselves, and not to follow You.

Lord we pray that You would continue to work in our lives to sever those ties to sin that drag us back to our former slavery. Set free those who live in sin, especially those who struggle with secret sin who think no one can know. But You know. Let them (and us!) experience the freedom that comes from hearing You say, "Your sins are forgiven. I have set you free!" Amen.

October 21, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 46

Psalm 46 is the basis for Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

This psalm, like many of the psalms, focuses on God's salvation and describes His power and glory in relationship to the weakness of earthly powers. The main message is that God is our savior and we need Him to rescue us, and we are encouraged to wait for Him. The psalm serves God's people by revealing that God uses His strength on behalf of His people and urging them to wait with faith.

Teaching

The psalmist proclaims that God is his people's refuge and strength, and he supports that belief by describing God's power over creation and the political forces of the world. He melts the earth with a word. He dismays the nations bringing desolation, causing wars to cease. This is the God the psalmist's confidence is placed in; the God who demands exaltation from nations and all the earth.

The beginning of the psalm declares God to be a refuge and strength, and the psalmist returns to that theme in the end remembering that the Lord of hosts (the armies of heaven) is with them and God is their fortress. We don't often think of God in this way, but He is a warrior who defends His people.

Life

Where do you turn when everything seems to be going wrong in life? Have you ever felt like the earth was giving way beneath your feet, or that the things or people or dreams that you thought were so permanent were just crumbling around you? These are moments when we can take great comfort in a God who defends us and fights for us. He defends us from sins' accusations, pointing us back to the cross. He defends us from death, pointing us to Jesus' empty tomb. He defends us from illness, suffering, persecution, and more; sometimes with healing or mighty interventions and other times by bring us to our eternal home with Him so that in the end we are delivered from every evil of body and soul.

Prayer

God, You are our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, and everything we ever counted on crumbles around us, for You will still be there with us to be our mighty fortress.

Thank You for protecting us in so many ways in this life: for rescuing us from sin and death; for defending us amid the raging nations and tottering kingdoms of the earth; for bringing desolation to those who work sin; and frustrating those who wage war unjustly.

Forgive us, Lord, for the times that we were overwhelmed by our fears because of what we see in the world. Forgive us for looking for our protection from the government, money, or other earthly powers. Forgive us for forgetting that You are God and that You will be exalted among the nations and in all the earth, even if at this time all of these things seem to be in rebellion against You.

Be with us, O God! Defend Your people and protect us from the powers of this earth that would do us harm. Deliver us from every evil of body and soul. You are the Lord of the hosts of the armies of heaven, the angels serve You, and we pray that You would deploy them to guard us so we may proclaim all that You have done for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

October 22, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Romans 3:19-28

This passage completely changed the way that Luther looked at the Gospel and was an important catalyst for the Reformation because it emphasizes that God's righteousness is ours by faith, not works.

Here we are taught that no one is righteous before God because of the things they do, but only become righteous before God, that is they are justified, by faith in Jesus. The force of this text is to take away any sense of self-reliance for our salvation and to impress upon us the all-sufficient nature of Jesus' sacrifice.

Teaching

In these verses St. Paul looks at the issue of how one can be righteous. Many try to do so through

works; trying to be obedient to God's Law. He states flatly that this won't work, for all have sinned and fall short. Finding the Law incapable of making people righteous, Paul focuses in on faith. It is faith in Jesus that receives God's righteousness as a gift of grace because Jesus' blood was shed as the sacrifice to pay for sin.

Paul asks, "Then what becomes of our boasting?" It is human nature to point to our actions, our contributions, and our importance, and Paul leaves no room for any of these things. The law of faith holds that only Jesus' actions can justify us, and we can only receive justification from our sins by His death. No efforts of our own will suffice. This is, however, good news because Jesus has acted on our behalf, and elsewhere Paul will note that our boasting is in Him.

Life

Everything either stands or falls on the message of this passage. Must we, by our actions earn our place in God's presence or contribute something somehow to be accepted by Him? Or, do we come to be justified – that is, forgiven, set right with God – because of what Jesus has done? This passage says it is what Jesus has done that matters.

So does that mean good works don't matter? Of course not! Luther once said, "We are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone." Faith always produces good works in us. Romans 3, however, has us dealing with the cause, not the effect. It is dealing with the first thing, not the second. Faith in Jesus saves us. Faith alone takes hold of the forgiveness Jesus purchased at the cost of his own blood for us.

Prayer

O God, You have provided salvation for us that is completely separate from the things that we do. Through the whole Bible You show us that we are justified by Your grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Thank You! Words cannot express how grateful we are for this great gift!

We know that all have sinned and fall short of Your glory, O God. Please forgive us from seeking to justify ourselves. Forgive us for also acting like our actions don't matter since we are justified.

O God, let this good news go out into all the world, and let our hearts cling firmly to the message that we are justified by faith alone. Then let our lives show that we are indeed justified people – that is, we are forgiven sinners who boast only in what You have done for us in Christ. Amen.

October 23, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 14:6-7

Lutheranism has a slogan that is referred to as the, "Three *Solas*." *Sola* is Latin for only or alone. The "Three *Solas*" are *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, et *Sola Scriptura* - Grace Alone, Faith Alone, and

Scripture Alone.

In this passage the angel proclaims an eternal gospel which is God's Word handed down by prophets and apostles all the way to today which proclaims how a person comes to be saved. This passage would have us focus on God's Word as the message that gives us salvation and brings salvation to the world.

Teaching

John's vision seems so strange. Modern people don't generally think about angels and the spiritual forces that are at work in our world. Angels, however, are real. They are servants of God and they serve in a variety of ways, particularly as messengers. In fact, the word, "angel," means, "messenger."

So what message would this messenger have us receive? "Fear God and give Him glory!" The angel would have all people see their Creator, recognize their accountability to Him, fear His wrath at their sin, and also know that our Creator loved us so dearly that He rescued us from His wrath by the death of His Son, our Savior, Jesus.

Life

This passage is not intended for us to focus on the messenger, but on the message. The angel proclaimed an eternal gospel. From the beginning God planned to rescue us from sin and death. Our Creator knew we would rebel, and as our maker He could not (would not!) sit idly by and let us be destroyed. So He gives a message of gospel – good news. He would save us. He provided an amazing rescue that was not just for us, but for all people. And now we get to join that angel – that messenger – sharing the eternal gospel that saves all people, no matter where they come from.

Prayer

Father in Heaven, You have revealed an eternal gospel – everlasting good news! Christ has died for our sins and He is risen. He has made the way for us to return to You, our Creator, and has opened Your kingdom to everyone – every nation, tribe, language, and people – through faith in Him. And You continue to have messengers who proclaim this good news as they speak Your Word.

Thank You for revealing Your Word to us. Thank You for giving us messengers who spoke this eternal gospel to us. And we thank You for gathering us from the many peoples of the world to be Yours.

Forgive us for times that we have been slow to share that eternal gospel or when we ourselves have neglected the message of Your Word in our own lives. Forgive us for looking at the world and seeing the mass of humanity without seeing them as Your beloved people whom You have made and saved.

Let Your messengers go out into all the world, O Lord. Let everyone hear the good news of Your salvation. Create faith in people who do not know You, who do not believe in a Creator, who are hostile to You, and who are simply ignorant about You. Give them faith in Jesus our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

October 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 7:2-17

As we prepare to observe All Saints' Day the readings focus us on the Last Day, salvation from death, and the everlasting life we have been promised in Jesus. Revelation shows many things about the End, and has often been used to frighten people about what is to come. This passage shows a more comforting vision; a great number of people who are saved and who worship Jesus in the heavenly throne room from many nation, tribe, peoples, and language. The message for us today is that Jesus' salvation is for all people, regardless of where they come from, and that there will be a great number of people in receive that salvation.

Teaching

Revelation is a letter that records a series of visions the Apostle John had concerning God's salvation and the End. The visions are highly symbolic, and to read the literally is to misunderstand the message. For instance, the 144,000 who were sealed. Does this mean there will only be 144,000 people in heaven? Certainly not. The number is symbolic. There were 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus had 12 disciples. 1000 was a huge number, used similarly to how we might use "millions" or "billions." $12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144,000$. In other words, a huge number of all the people who believed in God's promise of a Savior and the fulfillment of that promise.

It is also important to see the way that worship is described in these passages. The great multitude stands before God's throne and before the Lamb, who is Jesus, proclaiming his praises. The elder identifies the crowd as, "ones coming out of the great tribulation," who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. We should see here that Jesus' salvation is central to worship, and that all believers of all times and places share a common link in worship: We are in God's presence together.

Life

Perhaps you were blessed to attend worship with parents, grandparents, or others who were dear to you but who have now died and gone to heaven. As we gather in this life – the great tribulation – for worship, we gather with them in Jesus' presence to proclaim how marvelous our Savior is.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You have revealed that the people who will be cleansed by Your blood will be a great multitude from all over. You comfort us with this vision so we may face the great

tribulations of life knowing that one day we will be where You are and You will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Thank You for this amazing all-inclusive salvation. Thank You that so many will be saved and cleansed.

Forgive us for our narrow vision of worship and for not recognizing how great a multitude we are part of. Cleanse us with Jesus' blood for we still struggle with our sin in this time of trouble.

O Holy Spirit, keep us steadfast in faith in the midst of this life's tribulations so that we too may see what John has seen. Help us to believe that we are part of that multitude even now, and increase our desire for the day when we will see all Your people together in worship with our own eyes. Amen.

October 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

What does a saint look like? As crowds gathered to Jesus He healed their sick and cast out demons. He also spent time teaching them. This reading is the beginning of an extended teaching time called, *The Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus began this sermon with a series of statements that describe what a blessed person is like, but many of these statements seem counterintuitive to the world's definition of being blessed; this highlights that the kingdom of heaven is different than the kingdom of this earth. In the context of All Saints' Day celebrations, this text reminds us that God's agenda is very different from the world's. His goal is that we will be saved and live in Christ, not by our own sufficiency or power.

Teaching

When is a person blessed? Most people would say that being blessed means we have good things in our lives, pleasant things are happening to us, we have sufficient or abundant wealth, and overall we don't have problems. Jesus says something different. He talks about being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, longing for righteousness, and even being persecuted. How can that be?

Jesus looks at blessedness in relationship to a person's connection to God. A person is blessed with they recognize their need for God. They're blessed to know that they are not sufficient in and of themselves, but God, who is sufficient, acts on their behalf to save them and make them righteous. They're blessed to believe that the best thing a person can have is God Himself, and God provides what they really need.

Life

It is hard to feel blessed if we look for the wrong signs. Jesus points to some very humble marks of blessedness. It is the hard and unsatisfying situations in our lives that signal our need for Jesus.

The world teaches us to long for all kinds of things that do not last: wealth, comfort, pleasure, prestige, etc. Jesus is showing us that when we long for what God wants to give us we will be satisfied, no matter how hard our lives are now. He always comes through for those who trust in Him.

Prayer

Lord, blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and even those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. All of these run to You to save them, provide for them, take care of them, and to be their God. They will not be let down.

Thank you for giving us hope in the midst of struggles, and for looking upon us with love in our humble state. Thank you for coming to us to show that we need not be the most competent or powerful to be part of Your kingdom. Thank You for blessing us with weaknesses the drive us to You.

Forgive us, O God, when we hate the things in our lives that drives us more close to you. Forgive us for longing for self-sufficiency and our own glory. Forgive us for feeling hard-done-by when things do not go our way, forgetting that You bless the humblest acts of faith. Forgive us for avoiding persecution and for not recognizing how great a blessing it is to confess our faith in You in every situation.

Please bless us with those things you long for us to have. Give your people those things that will draw us closer to you. Help us to lived blessed lives. Help us to know You are with us always. Amen.

October 28, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 149

This is the second-last psalm in the Book of Psalms. It is one of the “Hallelujah Psalms,” beginning and ending with, “hallelujah,” in the original Hebrew, which is translated, “Praise the Lord.” The psalm teaches the reader to praise God as their Maker and Savior. It declares that God delights in His people purely as an act of grace. It also shows that God’s people will participate in executing God’s Judgements on the earth in some way because of God’s judgement. The effect of the psalm is to call us to praise the Lord of his grace and mercy, and to rejoice in His righteous judgement against His enemies.

Teaching

This psalm starts out in a very comfortable manner for modern Christians, speaking of singing and praising God. It should be noted that verse 4 gives the motivation for such praise, and that motivation is that God takes pleasure in us and gives salvation to the humble; in other words, His actions toward us and driven by His grace. Such a wonderful thought is with us when we gather

for worship and even when we go to bed at night.

The psalm becomes a little uncomfortable for us in verse 6 as it begins to speak of two-edged swords, vengeance, punishment, and judgement. We do not like to think of such things that our own sins deserve. However, as we speak God's Word (which St. Paul describes as the Sword of the Spirit) it often has a two-edged impact on people: on the one hand it declares God's Law and condemnation of our sins, and on the other, it proclaims God's mercy and grace.

Life

Is it right for us to pray for God to judge the wicked? Is it correct for us to long for God to execute vengeance on those who hate Him and us? The answer is: yes. But this is only because God's judgement and vengeance are rooted in His holiness, perfection, justice, and righteousness. In short: It is right because God is right. However, any desire on our part for vengeance or judgement will also be tempered by the knowledge that we ourselves are forgiven sinners who deserved such vengeance and judgement, but God chose to have mercy on us, and Jesus bore the brunt of God's vengeance and judgement we were due. In the end, we long for God to return and to set all things right; bringing us to a day when all people will know God. At this time, our own life of faith will be unmolested by sin and the temptations, tempters, and torments of this life.

Prayer

O God, we praise and worship You with singing because You take pleasure in us and adorn us with the salvation Jesus won for us by dying and rising again.

Thank You for dealing with us graciously and lovingly. We also give You thanks for the hope that one day You will return in judgement and set all things right.

Forgive us for times that we have longed for judgement and vengeance apart from Your holiness and compassion. Forgive us for overlooking what our own sin deserves and for our lack of compassion.

Grant that all Your people would speak Your Word in such a way that it both cuts and heals those who hear it, and that we would speak the message that saves people from Your punishment. Amen.

October 29, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 John 3:1-3

John's first letter carries many of the same themes and images as his gospel does. He wrote to proclaim the same message as his gospel, part of which is that we become children of God through faith in Jesus. In this particular part of his letter John marvels at God's love as he points out that it is because of God's love that "we should be called children of God." Adoption, however, is not his only point, but he also states that such faith also purifies the believer. This

point is key as we celebrate All Saints' Day: we are cleansed of our sin through faith in Jesus, and have become God's children who live in His love. When Jesus returns we will be revealed as something wonderful in His glory and love.

Teaching

Jesus is going to return. One day He will appear and He will judge the living and the dead. At that time something marvelous will happen to us. We will be raised and we will be much more than we are now. We will be perfect, glorified, and pure just like Jesus. Until then we live as people who wait for a promise reminding ourselves who we are: children of God, beloved, declared pure, and waiting for the resurrection.

God's love, however, brings a separation from the world. John speaks of this as the world not knowing us. It does not know us because it does not know Jesus. One of the things we learn as God's children is that just as the world rejects Jesus, it will reject us. We will bear that burden, however, because we have been so deeply loved by God and because of the promise of what is to come. We might not know what we will be like when Jesus appears, but we know we will be like Him. That will be amazing!

Life

Do you ever dream of heaven? Have you ever wondered what we will be like when we live with Jesus forever in glory? The Bible is frustratingly vague about these things, yet the clear sense is that it will be wonderful. While we wait for that day to come, John gives us this comfort: We are God's children. No matter what we go through in this life we will not be abandoned and we can be comforted by the fact that God has made us His own and purified us through Jesus' blood shed for us.

Prayer

Father in heaven, we are Your children. What a wondrous thought! What a privilege it is to be called Your child! You have not only claimed us as Your own for this life, though, but have promised us life that will be even greater in the world-to-come and purified us in Jesus for that life.

Thank You for adopting us and making us heirs of Your kingdom. Thank You for claiming us as Your own. We are so grateful for the privilege of calling You our Father, and for the hope of becoming like Jesus in the resurrection; especially that we will be pure and sinless.

But we are not there yet. We still sin much and act as though we were not Your children and that we will not live forever in Your glory. Please forgive us for living more like the world lives than we should as children of God.

Fix this good news in our hearts: We are children of God and loved by God. Let that message buoy us during the struggles of this life and encourage us to look forward to the life-to-come. Amen.

October 30, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Revelation 7:2-17

The Book of Revelation is full of strange images and symbols which are intended to comfort those who read this book with the message that God saves His people from the disasters and evils of this world. In this particular reading the earth is preserved in the proclamation of the angel until God's servants are sealed. That is to say that the end of the world is held off until every person who will be saved comes to faith. Even more comforting is the news that the number of the saved will be great indeed. This leaves us with an image for All Saints' Day of a great multitude in heaven who have been rescued from death.

Teaching

There will be a great many people in heaven. John saw a multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are clothed in white because they have been cleansed in Jesus' blood and their sins no longer stain them. They carry palm branches as a sign of victory – victory over sin, death, and the world that tempted and persecuted them. There will be great celebration and worship there in God's presence because his salvation will no longer be promised, but it will be fulfilled and complete.

Life

As we go through life we often face struggles and suffering that are the result of the sinfulness of this world. This will not be the case in heaven. As we think of the many, many, people who will be there, it is good to also remember what God has promised us about our life there; what we will enjoy. We will worship Him more profoundly and majestically than we ever have. We will join in singing God's praises with the angels. And God will eternally protect us from all the things that brought us suffering in this life even as He wipes every tear from our eyes, comforting us and leading us to everlasting joy.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You are the Lamb Whose blood was shed to cleanse us of our sin and to provide atonement for the sins of all. Because of You heaven will be filled with so many people we cannot count them all. The day will come when we will gather with all the angels and the saints who have gone before us to worship You in Your presence. We do that even now, but then we will see it clearly and You will comfort us with eternal joy.

Thank you for the salvation You won for us and for the multitude of people from all over the world who believe in You. Thank you for Your protection in this world and the privilege of worshipping You even now as we await the day we can worship You face to face.

Forgive us, Lord, for our lack of patience during this life. Forgive us for forgetting what wonderful things you have promised us. Forgive us for the shallowness of our worship in this life and for times that we have doubted how great Your salvation is even though we are among those

who have washed our robes and made them white in the blood You shed for us.

Grant that the day of Your glorious return would be soon, Lord Jesus. Keep us mindful of Your protection in this life and Your promises for the life to come. Indeed, You comfort us even now, yet we long for the greater comfort of that Day. Keep us in the faith that glorifies You singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

November 2, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:8-16

As we read these lessons we enter into a time in the Church year that focuses on the Last Days. At the same time, our congregation focuses on stewardship as we prepare the budget for next year. In this reading we find that Elijah, God’s prophet, had proclaimed that it would not rain and that there would be a great drought because of the king, queen, and many of the people had turned away from God to worship idols. In the midst of this drought, God sent Elijah to a widow who had a son, but she herself was at the end of her supplies. Elijah instructed her to make something for him first, proclaiming that the oil and flour would not run out. God provided it through the end of the drought. This is a lesson that speaks to faith, giving, and obedience even in extreme situations, and it comforts us as God provides.

Teaching

The idolatry of Ahab and those who followed him had terrible consequences that hurt other people. This is something that should be realized about sin: it hurts people in many ways. But in the midst of the hurts of sin, God displays His mercy and love in some remarkable ways. In this particular situation, God protected Elijah, the widow, and her son through a miracle of providing flour and oil. God’s grace was fully on display in His care for these three people.

This lesson is also a message about trust that leads to action. The widow was planning to starve to death. She knew she only had enough to make a small cake of bread, yet at the promise of God she gave it up. Sometimes people complain that giving is hard and they ask, “Would God really ask me to give so much?” This woman was asked to give everything. She did and God blessed her for her faith.

Life

Have you been asked to give everything to God? In a sense the answer is, “Yes!” Jesus has redeemed our whole lives and we belong fully to Him. In another sense the answer is probably, “No.” You probably have not been asked to sell your home and all you own to be obedient to God. In fact, God has provided those things for you out of his love for you.

This raises a question, though. How much has God asked us to give? Perhaps a better way to ask that question is: How has God asked us to give? We can talk about amounts like giving tithes or even all that we have, but our motivation is also key. God asks us to give in faith that He has

provided for us and will keep providing for us because He loves us.

Prayer

Father in Heaven, this account of the widow of Zarephath both comforts and challenges us. You show that sometimes you ask us to give everything we have for Your service, but we also see that You provide for your people out of Your mercy and grace.

Thank you for the faith of the woman. Thank you for all You provide to us.

Forgive us for doubting Your ability to provide and for clinging to the things of this earth more than we cling to Your Word and promise. Forgive us for not trusting You fully.

Please give us faith to trust in You, O Lord, and when You ask much of us we pray that You would strengthen our faith and give us Your Spirit so we may joyfully follow Your call for Jesus' sake. Amen.

November 3, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

With the Triumphal Entry (recorded in Mark 11) Jesus entered the last week of His life. In that time He taught, was tested by the religious rulers of the day, and challenged those same leaders. In this text Jesus teaches about hypocrisy and generosity. He contrasts the deeds of those who do things to be seen and honored with a poor widow who gives her last bit of money. The lesson for us, especially as we deal with stewardship, is one of humble integrity and sacrificial giving.

Teaching

Jesus warned His disciples against the scribes because they were more motivated by the recognition that they received than the Word in which they were experts. It was not their faith that motivated them but the honor that they expected when they appeared in public and when they did acts of charity.

The poor widow stands in stark contrast to the scribes and the rich people putting large sums in the coffers at the temple. Her giving was done quietly, humbly. No one would take note of what she had done if Jesus hadn't. In giving two small copper coins, she gave all she had to the Lord. That is a remarkable deed despite the small amount of money involved! It was an act of faith for her, and she put herself completely in God's hands trusting Him to provide for her.

Life

There are many motivations for giving, and they are not all good. Recently there have been calls for the government to rescind the church's (and other religious organizations') tax exempt status. We might well wonder what would happen to the church's finances if that happened.

Giving is about faith. It is an act of trust and worship. It recognizes that all that we have is a

blessing God has bestowed upon us. It is motivated by love for the Giver and gratitude to Him because we see that He gave something to us that cost Him deeply. God gave us His Son to die and rise for us because He loved us so dearly, and His sacrifice moves us to give sacrificially back to God in worship.

Prayer

God, Our Father, You are honored and worshiped above all. There are those who love to be recognized and whose actions are not motivated by faith, but by their desire to be acknowledged. Yet you have set in the hearts of others a deep humility and a willingness to give humbly and sacrificially.

Thank You for the privilege of returning to You a portion of the earthly blessings You have provided for us. Thank You for recognizing and honoring the gift given in poverty – even the poverty of our own hearts and faith. Thank You for receiving the tokens we return to You in worship.

Forgive us, Lord Jesus, for our own acts of hypocrisy. Forgive us for shallow thankfulness and giving out of weak faith. Forgive us for wanting to be recognized for the generous deeds we do instead of allowing our deeds to point others to You. Forgive us for holding back from You and for our fear of giving out of poverty. Forgive us for giving only out of our abundance and in ways that require no sacrifice from us.

O Holy Spirit give us faith like the widow's faith so we trust You with all that we have. Make us wise in giving so that we will live in a right relationship with our abundance, and we will use it as You guide us to, providing for ourselves and our families, but also as a tool for worship and an item to sacrifice. Amen.

November 4, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 146

Psalm 146 is the first of the "Hallelujah Psalms." This particular psalm is an acrostic: each line begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order. As the psalmist praises God he expresses his commitment to do so through his whole life, contrasts God to the unreliable power of political figures, recounts some of God's blessings and deeds, and declares that the Lord will reign forever. All of these together to reject the notion of putting our confidence in earthly powers, but urges us to put our trust in God as we praise Him.

Teaching

There are two kinds of power described in the psalm. One is the power of the created. The other is the power of the Creator. The psalmist urges us to not put our trust in the power of the created. We should not place our confidence or faith in people, government, leaders, or rulers. The created power only lasts for a while and eventually it will wear out and the one who wields the power will die.

Not so with the Creator's power. Its limitlessness is expressed in creation, God's justice and mercy, His salvation and care for the weak, and in His eternal reign. His power does not cease and will not disappoint in the end. We therefore praise Him and put our trust in the One who made us, has had mercy on us, saved us, and promises (and delivers) eternal blessings to us.

Life

In an election year candidates vying for nomination essentially ask people to put their trust in them (individually) and to make one of them our leader. Who is the best person for the job? Which one really knows what our country needs? How will they provide it? What will happen when they are elected, and then when their term is done?

God is not elected. His reign does not end. He truly knows what we need and displayed that by giving Jesus to rescue us from sin and death. He has lifted us up although we were bowed down under sin. He has upheld us in our weakness. Because of Who God is and what He has done we cry out, "Hallelujah!"

Prayer

We praise the Lord and do not put our trust in a person's power. People die, their wisdom is limited, their ability to save is inadequate, and even their best plans perish. But not so with God. He is eternal and our Creator is mighty to save.

Thank You, Lord God, for helping us and giving us hope. Thank You for making us and also for rescuing us. Thank you for setting us free from the prison of sin and for lifting us up. Thank you for loving us and for watching over us in our weakness.

Forgive us for times when we have trusted the created powers more than we trusted in You. Forgive us for doubting that You are still living, active, and powerful to save and to reign in this world. Forgive us for not praising You and for delivering our praise to earthly people, powers, and programs.

Lord, let us praise You as long as we live. Move all people to praise You. Let the created powers know their proper place in relation to You. Keep helping people. Keep giving hope. Execute justice for the oppressed and give food to the hungry. Open the eyes of the blind so all may praise You in Christ. Amen.

November 5, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 9:24-28

In this chapter the author of Hebrews writes about the necessity of purifying people and the items of worship with blood. Having stated that our earthly worship is a copy of heavenly worship, the writer of Hebrews states that because Jesus has ascended into heaven as the crucified and risen one He stands in God's presence on our behalf. He is there for us and will return from there to

rescue us from this world.

In the midst of a focus on stewardship, this is, perhaps, a strange passage; more focused on the judgement and salvation than tithes and offerings. However, it is precisely the salvation we have in Christ that motivates our giving and fuels our worship.

Teaching

In the Old Testament God gave Moses very explicit directions on how to build the tabernacle: the place the Israelites were to worship. The items in the tabernacle and the worship that took place there was somehow a reflection of heavenly reality. It was put together in a way that proclaimed God's presence, perfection, and salvation. Today's churches are, similarly, reflections of heavenly reality.

But now since Jesus has died, risen, and ascended our worship is filled with the assurance that He intercedes on our behalf. Not only that, but He will return to take us from the earthly imitations to be with Him in heavenly reality.

Life

Which is real: the things of this world or the things to come in heaven? In truth, the answer is both, but the things of heaven are eternal and the things of this world will pass away. Often we live our lives with our eyes focused on this life. We get wrapped up in the storm and strife of life. This reading would have us lift our eyes heavenward and remember that Jesus is there speaking to the Father on our behalf. He will also come from there to bring us to that glorious place where our worship will not be hampered by our fears, our earthly attachments, or our sin.

Prayer

O God, Jesus has entered into the most holy place for us. While we worship on earth experiencing copies and foretastes of the glory that is yet to be revealed, He is there inserting that reality into us. And His sacrifice for our sin was so sufficient that we need not think of Him giving His blood repeatedly for us, but instead we can eagerly wait for Him to come to rescue us from death even as He has from sin.

Thank You, O God, for that forgiveness and that certainty that Jesus will return for us. Thank You for giving us copies of heavenly reality and foretastes of Your glory in our worship. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for entering into the holy place for us and for making it possible for us to enter, too.

Forgive us for being more focused on earthly realities so that we forget about the heavenly reality. Forgive us for thinking that this world is eternal and the promises of heaven are ephemeral. Forgive us for not eagerly waiting for Jesus' second appearance, and for doubting that it will even happen at all.

Lord, impress upon us and upon all Your people the eternal hope we have in Jesus. Make us

keenly aware that this world and the things of this life are temporary and that the life-to-come is eternal. Help us to see our worship now as a foretaste of all we will do in heaven when we are face to face. Amen.

November 6, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

Mark 12 finds Jesus in conflicts with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. In this reading Jesus denounced the scribes for their desire for recognition and honor while they actually harmed others with their actions. He went on to praise a poor widow who gave her last bit of money and contrasted her with the rich people who gave out of their abundance. The impact this reading has on us is to challenge our motivation for self-glorification and to urge us to live humble generous lives of faith.

Teaching

Sacrificial giving can be an uncomfortable topic of discussion. In this passage we see a powerful example of it as the woman drops her two small copper coins into the offering box. It would be tempting to look at the wealthy people who gave so much and to think of how little value she gave. A penny, what good is that? But Jesus honored her gift above the others. Why? Because of the faith attached to the gift.

God does not usually call us to give 100% of our income to Him. He provides that income to us for the care of our earthly lives. However, part of our worship is giving back to the Lord from what He has provided for us. It is a statement of faith that we trust God to provide when we return to Him from what He has given us. It also says, "God is my God, not money or wealth. He will provide for me."

Life

It is difficult to imagine giving away the last bit of money that you have to live on. Perhaps there have been times when money was tight and you looked at that last "twenty" or "five" in your wallet and sensed that giving it away was the right thing to do even as you remembered pay day was a few days away. How did that feel? Did it make you anxious? Did it anger you? Did you give it away?

Sacrificial giving is not easy, but it is beautiful. It is beautiful because it is a response to the free gifts God has given to you. You see, God Himself is a giver. He gave Jesus to redeem us and make us His people. When we give, we are simply imitating our Father. When we give sacrificially we imitate our Brother.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You taught us to shun self-glorification and to embrace humble generous faithful living. You showed the hypocrisy of the scribes who looked religious, but behaved in ways that dishonored Your Father. You taught us to look at our giving from the motivation of faith and to

see beyond the measurement of money to the measurement of trust.

Thank You for giving us all that we have. Thank You for privileging us with the opportunity to return to You from what You have given to us. Thank You for teaching us that it is not the size or the grandeur of the gift that impresses You but the faith and love that motivates the giving that You rejoice in.

Forgive us for being impressed with things that look large and impressive while we disregard the humble and the small. Forgive us for giving comfortably from our abundance and for resisting the joy and power of giving sacrificially. Forgive us for not trusting You to truly provide for us in all things.

Grant us faith, Lord, that moves us to live humbly and to give generously. Help us to hold more tightly to Your gifts of life, salvation, and forgiveness, and more loosely to the earthly gifts of wealth and comfort. Teach us to be giving people, even as You are a giving God. Amen.

November 9, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Daniel 12:1-3

Daniel contains a series of visions of events that would impact the Jews who were captive in Babylon. This vision is one that deals with the End of all things. It speaks of a time of tribulation that leads up to a day when the dead will rise to either eternal life or everlasting shame. The reading emphasizes for us that this world will not last, the dead (perhaps including us) will rise, and there will be a judgement, but that judgement is a reason for hope and joy for those who trust in Christ.

Teaching

The Michael spoken of here is the archangel. He was the defender of Israel: all those who believe God's promise of salvation and its fulfillment in Christ. His presence shows that God will defend His people and preserve them as they endure a time of trouble such as has never been.

This passage also speaks of the resurrection of all flesh. People often think of someone dying and then going to either heaven or hell. Here it says that all people will rise and then go to their appropriate place – life or contempt. On that day God's people are the wise – those who believe in Jesus, and who share the true hope that comes from believing in Him crucified, risen and returning.

Life

It may seem presumptuous to consider ourselves to be wise, but the Scriptures teach us that wisdom is primarily found in knowing one's proper place with God. We know that place. We stand in His presence as His beloved people because of Jesus' death and resurrection. That wisdom brings us forgiveness and cleanses us from unrighteousness. We shine like stars as we witness about the hope we have in Jesus. After all, He Himself said that we are the light of the

world. We do as God designed us to do when we push back against the darkness of sin in all its forms and as His light shines through us to the world.

Prayer

O God, You protect Your people in the midst of the troubles of this life. There are more and worse troubles yet to come as people reject Your Word and truth. Yet there will be a day when the dead will rise, and we ourselves will be translated into eternal glory, but others will rise to everlasting contempt. Now is our time to shine like stars to turn others to the righteousness that comes only by faith in Jesus.

Thank You for promising to defend us and to deliver us from evil. Thank You for giving us faith in Jesus our crucified and risen Savior so that our names are now written in the book that lists all who are to be delivered. Thank You also for using us as lights to shine to others to show them the One who, when they believe in Him, will write their names in that book of life as well.

Forgive us, Lord, for times that the light has not shone from us. Forgive us for trying to blend into the darkness, and to be like the world rather than the light that draws others to You. Forgive us for not being mindful that there will be a day when all will rise and some will receive life and others will receive condemnation. Forgive us for falling short in the wisdom You have given us so we may know You.

Lord, pour out Your Spirit upon us and fill us with the Light of Christ so that we will indeed shine like stars in the darkness. Make us glow with faith, hope, and love so others may know You. Defend us with the wisdom You alone can give until that day when we stand before You in everlasting life. Amen.

November 10, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:1-13

This reading takes place at Jerusalem in the week before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It was Passover, a time when the Jews focused on the temple and prepared to celebrate God's salvation. In the midst of this Jesus spoke of the temple's destruction and a different salvation. The passage causes the reader to look beyond this world and the beautiful things in it to a time when all things earthly will fail or turn against the believer. The believer will only find support from the Holy Spirit.

Teaching

"Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" So often people are entranced with earthly grandeur and incredible architecture as though these things would last forever. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the beauty in such things, or, indeed, in all things that have earthly beauty, but nothing earthly will last. The temple, specifically, would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

The disciples asked Jesus about this privately on the Mount of Olives, so He taught them of the terrible times that would come with end. While He spoke of wars, earthquakes, and famines, His comments about persecution and betrayal may be the most disturbing part of His predictions. Yet He also speaks a word of hope. The Holy Spirit will help, so don't be anxious. We will endure. We will be saved.

Life

Watching the news, one cannot help but notice the sad condition of the world we live in. We can very much see that nation rises against nation, there are earthquakes and famines, and God's people are persecuted. How then should we live in light of that? We look at the world and see all of it for what it is – the beauty and the sorrow – and we live by faith. We trust God to see us through safely to the end. Jesus' warning helps us to not cling too tightly to the powers of this life, but to hold on to Him because He has secured salvation for us to live an eternal life.

Prayer

Teacher, do you see all the marvels of our world? Do you see the technology, the advancements, and the amazing things we have done? None of them will last, will they? There are hard times ahead in this world; times of persecution and strife. Yet, You, Lord Jesus, are faithful. You have saved us by Your death and resurrection and You will save us from the perils of this life to bring us safely to eternal life.

Thank You for warning us that such days are coming so that we will not be dismayed when they do. Thank You for giving us Your Spirit to give us a good witness. Thank You for providing us with a great and glorious eternal home in Your presence.

Forgive us for living as though this world was our home and such days of suffering would never come. Forgive us for being over awed by the technology of our day and under awed by the power of Your Spirit. We crave Your forgiveness for all the times we have lived as though this world were permanent, and the salvation You have promised us was like a dream or sentiment.

Give us clear sight, Lord God, so that we perceive Your hand at work in this world to bring it to the conclusion You have planned. Bring us to the end You have planned for us. Fill our mouths with Your testimonies and praises so many will hear of Your salvation and come to believe. Amen.

November 11, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 16

This psalm was written by King David. It is called a *miktam*, which probably means that it was sung in a certain way, perhaps as part of a liturgy. Its message speaks to the context of the church year as it promises that God does not abandon His people to the grave, does not allow them to decay in death, but gives life and joy forever. It also guides us in our worship as we consider where we put our trust for good things in this life and models the desire to have one's faith set

firmly on the Lord.

Teaching

The First Commandment is at the heart of this psalm. God declares that His people shall have no other gods, and we understand that to mean that we are to, “fear, love, and trust,” in Him above all things. Yet there is always the temptation to, “run after,” other gods. David teaches us that when people do so sorrows are multiplied. Other gods cannot satisfy our needs or desires. Indeed, they tend to create desires that are unquenchable and the worshipper always seeks after one more thing.

With God it is different. He is a refuge for His people. He brings good into their lives. He gives them a beautiful inheritance. He instructs them in the way they should best live. Not only that, but He rescues His people from death – something the other gods absolutely could not do! Indeed, they often required death from their devotees! But God works against death and decay. He makes known the path of life; the path walked by Jesus whereby He passed through death to resurrection for us.

Life

The gods of our time still ask for death as their tribute. When a woman is inconveniently or tragically pregnant the solution of the gods of this age is to kill the child before it is born. There is more and more clamor in our political system for people to have the right to die when their lives are stricken by illness and suffering because it is reasoned that nothing good can come from suffering.

Except Jesus saved us by suffering. He saved us by dying. It is far better to listen to the Lord’s counsel in regard to life and death than to listen to instructions from the gods of this age. Even if in this world we suffer God has promised that we will not languish in death. He will not let us become mere rotted corpses. He leads us in the path of life – life beyond death which is eternal and full of joy.

Prayer

Lord, we take refuge in You and we have no good apart from You. We are Your holy ones, Your saints, and You are our chosen portion. You hold our future in Your hand. Those who run after other gods will have eternal sorrows, but our hearts are glad, for You will lead us through death to eternal life.

Thank You for defeating death by Jesus’ cross and grave. Thank You for rescuing us from our own graves.

Forgive us for thinking death can solve our problems. We have stepped off the path of life and allowed hunger, injustice, suffering, and selfish corruption bring death into the lives of many. Forgive us for trusting the words spoken by gods which promote death rather than pursuing life.

Lord, make our hearts glad again and let our whole being rejoice. Give us Your counsel and instruct our hearts so we may walk the path of life and lead others upon it. Keep our hearts fixed on You and the salvation Jesus won for us so we may at last come into Your presence with full joy. Amen.

November 12, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Hebrews 10:11-25

In Hebrews 10 the author writes about the necessity of continual sacrifices to atone for the many sins of God's people. It also says that the offerings were ultimately ineffective. The text of this reading tells us that Jesus' sacrifice was the single sacrifice that was needed to atone for sins. This assurance gives us confidence to draw near to God and encourages us to live in ways that display our hope by our actions as we look ahead to Jesus' return. The function of the text is to make us think of our eternal hope in Christ as motivation for our daily living and confidence of our eternal life.

Teaching

The proper punishment for sin is death. God's people offered animals' lives to pay for their sins, but the sacrifices, in and of themselves, could not satisfy the debt. Only Jesus' death could fully pay the price for sin, and that benefit could only be received by faith. When faith moved the offering of sacrifices, there truly was forgiveness – not merely because of the action, but because of the promise of God.

Faith alone takes hold of the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection for us. That faith also changes the believers' interaction with the world. They have confidence before God that causes them to hold fast to the confession that Christ died for them. They are also motivated to do good works and to encourage others to do them; not to earn salvation, but because they have received salvation. They are drawn to worship God by that faith, and they long for the Day when sin is finally finished and eternal life is theirs.

Life

Have you ever heard an actor ask, "What is my motivation?" This reading speaks to our motivation as disciples of Jesus. Our motivation is the fully satisfying forgiveness Jesus won for us. The amazing salvation we have by faith in Him motivates us. It sets us free from having to satisfy God by our works and allows us to do good works because of love and the hope we have because we are forgiven.

There are many voices around us – some of them in our own minds – saying, "This is too good to be true. Surely something must be required of us." However, we are urged to, "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." God is faithful, so we are confident.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You gave Yourself as the sacrifice that fully satisfies God and cleanses us from our sins. Our hearts have been sprinkled clean. Our consciences are clear because of You. We are forgiven in You.

Thank You for such generous and great forgiveness. Thank You for removing the need to offer sacrifices for sins and for giving us confidence to stand in the Father's presence.

Please continue to forgive us as we fall short. We do not worship You as we ought, nor do we do the works of love that we should do. Wash us once again!

O Holy Spirit, strengthen our faith so that we hold fast to the confession of our hope in Jesus. Draw us together to worship our God and Father through Christ. Make us bold in love and good works, especially as the Day of Judgement draws near. Amen.

November 13, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:1-13

In the week before His crucifixion, Jesus spent a lot of time in the temple teaching people and debating with the religious rulers of the time. In this reading one of His followers was impressed with the physical majesty of the temple. Jesus informed him that all of it would be torn down and destroyed. He later explained to the disciples that terrible days were ahead, but in the end those who endure will be saved. The passage urges us to consider how impressed we are with the majesty of our own age and encourages us to live lives of faith that endure until we are saved from this life and given eternal life.

Teaching

One of the marks that Jesus points to of the terrible conditions at the end of time is that there will be those who come in His name, saying, "I am he!" He is saying that there will be those who speak pretending to have His authority, claiming to speak His words, but who, in truth, are false prophets who lead people to destruction. The message of such people must always be tested by God's Word, found false, and the prophet must be rejected.

One of the sure signs of a false prophet is that they tend to proclaim prosperity, peace, and happiness in this life. This is clearly at odds with what Jesus Himself says. He warns of suffering, sorrows, and persecution in this world. He points beyond this life for our ultimate hope, reminding us that there is life after death for those who are saved.

Life

As we read Jesus' words describing the end of the age we could very easily come to the conclusion that His description sounds a lot like today. The truth is that He describes every time period between His coming and His return. We are living in the Last Days.

That thought might make us feel anxious. Who wants to experience the terrible things described

here? But we cling to Jesus' promises. The gospel will be proclaimed. The good news that He has died for our sins and risen again must be shared. The Holy Spirit will work in us when we are called upon to share that good news. And in the end, as we endure, we know there is joy waiting for us and we will be saved.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, there are those who claim to speak on Your behalf, but in truth they are liars who lead people away from You. There are all kinds of troubles in the world – wars, earthquakes, famines, and more. These are but the beginning of the end. You will save us from all these troubles and use us to proclaim the good news of Your death and resurrection so yet others will be saved by Your gospel.

Thank You for Your salvation. Thank You for giving us Your Spirit so we can confess the hope we have because of Your cross and empty tomb. Thank You for blessing us with faith to endure until You save us.

Forgive us for our fears and doubt. Forgive us for thinking this world will last and never end. Forgive us for listening to the false prophets and thinking all will be well in this world instead of placing our hope on the life You give after death.

Strengthen our faith. Preserve us by Your Spirit. Help us to endure and be Your witnesses. And in the end, save us. Amen.

November 16, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Isaiah 51:4-6

This reading is set in the midst of a prophecy which is intended to comfort people who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord. The portion of the chapter that is appointed for the pericopes calls the reader to give heed to the Lord pointing out that the Lord comes to those who wait for Him and He also sends righteousness and salvation. The reading also declares that the heavens, the earth, and all who dwell in them will come to an end – but God's salvation and righteousness will not end. This reminds the reader to look for hope beyond this world and this life, and to focus on what the Lord has done and will do to redeem His people.

Teaching

Isaiah 51 begins with the call, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord" This is important for understanding what is read in the rest of the rest of the chapter. These people lived in the real world where things go wrong, injustice is common, and righteous living is scoffed at. God is saying, "Pay attention to Me. I am calling you and I will show you what I will do. Don't focus on your situation. Focus on Me." In fact, He says, "Give attention to Me, My people, and give ear to Me My nation," in verse 4.

What does God want His people to hear? He wants them to hear that He will bring righteousness

to them and deliver salvation that goes out to the ends of the earth. His righteousness and salvation are so powerful that, although everything in the world will pass away, even after the world has worn out and the heavens have vanished like smoke, God's righteousness and salvation will remain.

Life

The world will end. People we love will die. For all of our efforts to save the environment, it will wear out and vanish. If those things are true (and they are!) what should our lives revolve around? Isaiah writes about God's righteousness and salvation. His salvation has gone out and Jesus has both died and risen to save us from sin and death. The impact of that salvation is that it has made us righteous in God's sight. Our sins are forgiven and we have been promised eternal life. God's righteousness and salvation are now the foundation of our lives as people who look for the end of this world and desire one that lasts forever and can never be dismayed.

Prayer

Lord God, You created this world and You will bring it to an end, but Your salvation and righteousness last forever. You have given these to us, and we too will last forever because of Jesus' resurrection.

Thank you for bringing justice to light in the cross of Christ, and for setting us right with You.

Forgive us for living as though this world mattered most, and as if it would last forever. Forgive us for times we have given up hope that righteousness and salvation will be ours.

Set the images of a worn out world and heavens that vanish like smoke in our minds to make us mindful that You have more in store for us. Remind us that we will die so that we live accordingly. Comfort us with the truth that Your salvation is forever and Your righteousness will never be dismayed. Amen.

November 17, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

This reading follows Jesus' comments that Jerusalem would be destroyed, which led to a conversation about the end of all things. In this part of the conversation Jesus speaks of His glorious return from heaven, tells the disciples that His world will never pass away, informs them that no one knows the day or hour of His return, and charges them to keep watch. As these words are read today they stand as a call to remember that the End will come at its proper time and we should be on guard for that day clinging to God's Word to comfort and strengthen us in the present time.

Teaching

Throughout history there have been those who have predicted the return of Jesus. That He said

He would come again is indisputable. The question of when that will be, however, is not answerable because it is not revealed in God's Word. In fact, Jesus is very clear that no one knows when. We can only know that He will return and live in anticipation of that event.

Jesus' use of the fig tree is a way of saying that even as we perceive the seasons changing and expect fruit at the proper time we can see the signs that the end times have come. He urged His hearers to take note of what they were seeing and to not cling to the things of this earth, but to look ahead to the life to come.

Life

Many people use a prayer that some call the "common" table prayer. It begins, "Come, Lord Jesus..." This prayer is an invitation for Jesus to dine with us, but what if we began to think more of Him actually coming again. How might that impact the way we live? It could make us more confident in living our faith knowing that Jesus is coming soon. After all, what can the world do to us that Jesus hasn't saved us from or that He cannot undo in His eternal glory?

Does it frighten you to think of Jesus' second coming? Is that because your life and faith don't match and you have sins you need to confess? The thought of Jesus' return should give us comfort and peace knowing that our struggles will one day end, and we will receive the eternal home He has promised us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You will return, but we don't know when. You have, however, already given us Your eternal Word which will never pass away to keep us mindful of Your promises and salvation.

Thank You for giving us Your Word so we may know that the End is coming and that, though there is suffering now, there will be a time when You will set all things right and gather us to be with You.

Forgive us for being overly focused on this life and for not watching for that day. We ask that You would forgive us for not observing the signs of the season that tell us that the End is coming.

Give us Your Holy Spirit so that He will strengthen our faith to help us hold on to Your everlasting Word all through our time on this earth. Come soon, and take us to be with You and the angels in glory. Amen.

November 18, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 93

Often when we speak of the context of a passage it is with the thought of what comes before or

after the text in question. In this psalm the context is of living in a land where people serve other gods. In the face of such idolatry God's people confess that He reigns and is almighty. This is true of God now, always has been, and always will be. The psalm is a declaration of our God's sovereignty and calls upon the hearer to be in awe of Him and to trust in Him above all gods.

Teaching

This psalm proclaims God's might. This is perhaps an aspect of God that we do not always consider in modern times. In David's time God would regularly have been compared to the gods of the nations around them. As strange as it may sound, this still happens today. There are other religions that vie for people's worship. Not only that, but people have come to worship reason and knowledge to the point that they declare God a quant and obsolete notion – nothing like the powerful image presented here.

It is important for God's people to continue to speak of God's might. The earth still under God's command and we do well to point to the knowledge that comes from observing the world and pointing back to the One who made it all. What is more, God has displayed His power in a more magnificent way in Jesus' death in which He paid for our sins, and His resurrection.

Life

Have you ever considered God's power? The Bible regularly points to God's creative work to say that He is the God among all gods. Nature declares His awesome nature. Yet today we often see nature apart from its Maker. We observe storms and seas, consider the smallest atom and the farthest star, ponder the cell and its genetic material, and often receive them as parts of the world without awe for the wisdom and power of the One who made them. We do well to observe creation as exactly that: creation. Something made, crafted, and designed. And we do well to give glory to the Creator for what He has made proves that He is indeed awesome and powerful.

Prayer

O God, You are powerful above all gods. You are clothed in majesty and power. You are the maker of all that there is, and without You nothing has been established. As we think of the most fearful and powerful things in this world, none of them compare to You. You reign above all and make holy just decrees that bless and guide us.

Thank You for making us, O God. Thank You for placing us as one of the glorious pieces of all You have made. Thank You for the many ways that creation declares Your wisdom and power.

Forgive us for not being in awe of You and for failing to see Your hand in leaf and root, rock and river, and plant and animal. Forgive us for taking this world for granted, heedless of You its (and our!) Creator.

Lord, open our eyes to see all You have made and let us be in awe of You. Grant that we would hear and obey Your trustworthy decrees and worship You in all holiness as Your created and redeemed people. Amen.

November 19, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jude 20-25

Jude is a brief book which was likely written by one of Jesus' half-brothers. It is a letter written to urge believers to contend for the faith because there were people within the church working against the message of the gospel. This particular passage urges the believers to be built up by the Holy Spirit and to proclaim the gospel of salvation as they wait for the mercy of Jesus to bring them into eternal life. The passage serves to point believers to remember that the ministry of God's people is about saving sinners even as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus to present us before the Father in eternal glory and joy.

Teaching

The apostles had warned the church that in the last time there would be scoffers who followed their own ungodly passions. While these people brought division and worldliness into the church, Jude sought to firm up those who believed God's Word and clung to it. He says that while the scoffers cause division the believers should keep themselves in the love of God and to wait for Jesus' mercy which leads us into eternal life. To do this the believers should build themselves up in the faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. They were to study God's Word and let it lead them into prayer.

The life of the believers was also to be marked by mercy as they continued to share the message of the Gospel so as to save many. Their own position might seem precarious in such a time, but they were encouraged to trust God to keep them from stumbling.

Life

Jude's words to the early church ring true for us today. Do we not live in a time when there is division within the church? As we wait for Jesus to return aren't we, too, called to lead faithful lives built up in the holy faith that is delivered to us in God's Word? Aren't we, too, called to pray in the Holy Spirit? And certainly we, too, have been called as God's people to join in His mission of saving sinners by sharing the hope we have in Jesus.

But what strength do we have to do this work? Often it feels like none. Jude 24-25 can serve as great words of encouragement to us because, while they are praise to God, they remind us that Jesus is able to keep us from stumbling and to make us blameless before God. That message gives us joy as we serve Him now and wait for His glorious return.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we wait for Your mercy to be fully ours at Your second coming, we are called to build ourselves up in the faith by hearing Your Word and to pray in the Spirit. You privilege us by allowing us to join You in Your mission of saving sinners and sharing the mercy You have given to us.

Thank You! Thank You for having mercy on us, keeping us from stumbling in sin, and for making us blameless in the Father's eyes. Thank You for giving us both mission and ministry.

Forgive us for not being committed to being built up in the faith, for not praying as we ought, and for not being merciful to others as You have been merciful to us.

Let Your Spirit form us in true faith so that we pray as we ought and our lives reveal Your glory and mercy to others. Amen.

November 20, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37

As we read this passage we should remember that this conversation was sparked because one of Jesus' disciples was overawed by the physical glory of that place. Jesus, having been asked when the destruction of the temple would take place, began to talk also about the end of all things and His second coming. The impact of this passage on us is to take our eyes and thoughts off of this world so we will not be drawn to be in awe of it, but so that we fear, love, and trust in Jesus instead.

Teaching

Carl Sagan said, "The Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be." Often we think of the stars, the moon, the earth, and the things upon it as though they will always persist in some way or another. But notice what Jesus says about this world we live in and the cosmic structures around it. He speaks of them being shaken and says that heaven and earth will pass away. The only thing that lasts this shaking and ending will be Jesus' words – His promises, and the work that they do bringing salvation to those who believe.

He compares this world to a house which has a master who has gone on a journey and the servants are left in charge. The servants may do their work or neglect to do it, they may remember the master is coming or forget all about him, but whatever they do the master will return, and all will give an account. The warning is clear: the judgement is coming! That day will be terrible in earthly terms, but the believer's hope is in the promise that the Master sent His Son to save His people.

Life

This world will end. The many things that we pursue in this life will often be shown to be useless endeavors and self-indulgence. Yet it is clear that we have been given a stewardship of this world and our lives. We are intended to live in this world, despite the fact that it will not last, and to do the work we have been given. That work is not named here, but it is to serve our God by sharing the hope we have in Christ's death and resurrection.

We become so focused on physical things in this life. This is not wrong in-and-of-itself. It becomes a problem when we focus on the physical to the exclusion of the eternal. We lose track

of what lasts: God's Word, His promise, His salvation, even the hope we have because Jesus died and rose for us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You have taught us that this world will end. There is, however, work for us to do in Your service until that day. We may not know the day or the hour that the cosmos will be shaken, but the signs tell us that the time is coming. It will be good for us to be awake to that truth when You come.

Thank You for making known to us that the physical world as we know it will have its end so that we do not overly focus on it. You have given us eternal goods in Your Word, particularly the message of Your salvation. Thank You! And we also thank You for the earthly blessings we steward until then.

Forgive us for dozing on the job and for not remaining alert in Your service. Forgive us for clinging to things that are temporal instead of holding on to Your eternal truth.

Keep us steadfast in Your Word and help us stay awake so that we serve You with our whole lives. Help us use the things of this world for Your eternal glory. Amen.

November 23, 2015

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Part of the context which must be considered in reading this passage is that a new church year is beginning, and this reading is for the season of Advent where the focus is on the coming of Jesus; both as a baby in the incarnation and as a glorious judge in the second coming. Jeremiah's prophecy points us to those events.

Most of Jeremiah's ministry dealt with prophesying doom and punishment for God's people because of their sin. It is largely a sad book, and Jeremiah is often referred to as, "The Weeping Prophet." Chapters 30-33 stand in stark contrast to the rest of the book. Here God promises hope and salvation to His people. The verses appointed for this week point to days which are coming that will see God keeping His promises to His people as He raises of a righteous Branch which will spring up from David. It is a reference to the king that will sit on David's throne forever, whom we know to be Jesus. The passage prepares us to receive this King and to watch for Him, reminding us that He won't be like any earthly king for He will be our righteousness.

Teaching

"The days are coming," says the Lord through His servant Jeremiah. This is not a phrase like people often use that, "someday," they'll do this or that thing they've put on some kind of bucket list. This is God's way of saying that the time is imminent. Even so, imminent for God does not always seem so imminent to His people. It would still be almost six-hundred years until the righteous Branch would spring up.

This coming king would be different from any other that had yet been born. For one thing, this

king would be righteous and just in a way that no other king had been before. Indeed, He would save God's people and would be their righteousness.

Life

As followers of Jesus our language is often influenced by the way the Bible uses words. One of those words is *righteous*. In the 1980's and '90's we might have heard someone talking about an intense or incredible experience as being, "righteous," but this is a word that doesn't get much use today. The word itself actually means to be right with God, or to do what is right. It is somewhat synonymous with being holy. But here is what is so special about this passage. It does not say that we will do righteous things, or even become righteous. It says, "The Lord is our righteousness." In other words, it is what God does that makes us righteous, and that is ultimately true in Jesus' perfect life, death and resurrection.

Prayer

Lord God, You raised up the righteous Branch when Jesus was born. He is our righteousness. Lord Jesus, thank You for removing the burden of trying to become righteous by our deeds and for giving Your life in such a way that You have become our righteousness.

Forgive us, O God, for trying to satisfy You with our righteousness and for imagining that we can somehow be good enough to satisfy Your justice.

O Holy Spirit, help us to comprehend and be amazed by the truth that the Father has kept His promises and given the Son to be our righteousness, and grant us faith to trust in Him so firmly that our faith changes the way we live and our lives testify to Christ's righteousness which is available to all. Amen.

November 24, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

With the coming of a new church year, the Gospel which the reading focuses on shifts. In this church year the Gospel that will serve as the primary source is the Gospel of Luke. The events of this passage took place in the days shortly before Jesus' crucifixion. The reading records predictions Jesus made about the End, promises that His Word will not pass away, and the exhortation to stay awake and be watchful for Jesus' return. In the Advent season, these texts draw the reader to the message that Jesus is coming. We may not know when, but we do anticipate His return and hold tightly to His Word.

Teaching

Jesus speaks of the end of the world as an event that is both fearful and hopeful. He speaks signs in the heavens, nations in perplexity, people fainting with fear and foreboding. It is clear that God's judgement is hard, and the day that His judgement falls upon the earth will be dreadful.

At the same time, this second advent is a time of hope. Believers know that Jesus' return means

their full redemption. The full effect of Jesus' cross and empty tomb will be known in their life and they will no longer struggle with sin, temptation, persecution, fear, or doubt. Having watched and waited for that day and having held on to Jesus' eternal Word they will receive the promised reward

Life

Sometimes when people talk about the end of the world and Jesus' second coming they do so with fear and trepidation. It is important that we take Jesus' words to heart on this matter. He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." We are indeed to watch so we do not become weighed down in dissipation and drunkenness; that we are not lulled to a comfortable doze by the enchantments and pleasures of this world, but we watch and wait for that day when our salvation will be completed.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You will return at the proper time, a time we do not expect. That day will be terrible and some will pass out with fear because of the terror. For us who trust in You for our salvation, however, that day of Your coming is our redemption, hope, and joy.

Thank You, O Lord, for promising to return. We thank You for judging sin and for destroying it. You will come in power and might against those who have harmed Your people, and we thank You for redeeming us from the powers of this world. Thank You for warning us to be awake and to not be lulled asleep.

Forgive us, Dear Christ, for allowing ourselves to become so comfortable with this world that we have indeed been like drunks, dissipated and heedless of Your will and judgement. Indeed, there have been times that even Your salvation has been far from our minds and all we longed for was the pleasures that this world offered us. We repent and ask for Your forgiveness.

Come soon, Lord! Shake the heavens and come down to rescue us from our lives of sin and sorrow. Help us to see the events of this world and to not become discouraged but to lift up our heads and to take note of the change in the seasons which tell us that You are coming soon. Give us strength, to endure and to hold on to that which will never pass away: Your Word. Amen.

November 25, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Psalm 25:1-10

Psalm 25 is an acrostic with 22 verses, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Luther says it is, "a psalm of prayer in which the righteous pray that God will make them godly, forgive their sins, guard them from sin and shame, and finally deliver them from all enemies and all evil. Along with this the psalm mocks the false, self-centered spirits and teachers." In the advent season this psalm reminds us to wait for the Lord and we think of the Old Testament people who waited for Jesus' birth, and of believers today who wait for Jesus to return.

Teaching

Trust and waiting go hand in hand. We trust God to come for us and to rescue us. That means that we wait for Him to come to us in His chosen way and at His proper time. For the people of the Old Testament they waited for Messiah to come. Ever since God promised a savior to Adam and Eve the birth of each boy raised the question: “Is he the one God promised?” So they waited for God to come and save them from sin.

As New Testament people we know that God kept that promise by sending His Son, Jesus, who took on human flesh so that He could pay for the sins of our flesh with His blood. We, also, have been called to trust and wait. Jesus promised that He would return to judge the living and the dead, and that He would take us into the eternal home God has waiting for us. That day has not come yet, but it will. Trust and wait.

Life

Think back to when you were going to be picked up to go somewhere. How would you feel if the person who was driving was late? What if they didn't tell you exactly when they would be there, but to be patient and know that they would come get you? Would you doubt that they were coming?

Some doubt that Jesus will return. We might begin to wonder if He will return as we go through difficult times or think of the time between Jesus' Ascension and today. Psalm 25 encourages us to lift up our souls to the Lord, to call on Him in worship, praise, confession, and prayer, and to wait. He will come.

Prayer

To You, O Lord, we lift up our souls. O God, we trust in You, and it is for You that we wait. You are good and upright. You instruct sinners in the way, lead the humble in what is right, and teach us Your way. All the Your paths are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep Your covenant and testimonies.

Thank You for not letting anyone who trusts in You be put to shame. Thank You for leading us in your truth, teaching us, and for being the God of our salvation. Thank You for remembering Your mercy, O Lord, and Your steadfast love.

Remember not the sins we have committed and forget our transgressions, O Lord. According to Your steadfast love forgive our sins for the sake of Christ who shed His blood for us.

Lord, let the wantonly treacherous be ashamed, but lead us in Your truth and teach us to know Your ways all the more deeply. Give us faith to wait for You all the day long, even for all of our lives knowing that none who waits for You will ever be put to shame for Jesus' sake. Amen.

November 26, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

When Paul preached the Gospel in Thessalonica there was a group of people who formed a mob and they sought Paul to hurt, or possibly kill, him. He and Silas had to sneak out of town by night. (See Acts 17.) One can imagine that he might have some anxiety for these people's safety and their feelings about him for the trouble they endured because of him. That is why he writes as he does in this passage of giving thanks for them, having heard from Timothy that they were not angry with Paul and that they prayed for him and longed to see him. He too longed to see them and to continue to teach them about God's salvation in Christ. This passage combines the longing for fellowship which is natural for Christ's followers with their longing for His return – His second advent.

Teaching

There is great joy in the fellowship of believers. They share a common hope and desire. The hope is that because Jesus died and rose again their sins are atoned for and they can live forever in the resurrection. The desire is to be with Jesus when He comes again and they can experience being completely blameless and holy. In the meantime Paul prays that the believers' love for one another will increase and abound.

Life

As we prepare for Christmas we think of Jesus coming as a little baby, but Advent is also about Jesus' second coming. We rejoice in the first coming because in it Jesus died and rose again for us. Our hearts have been cleansed, and although we do not feel blameless God has declared us to be so. This truth moves us to love God as we have been loved, and to love one another as God has loved us.

The day will come when Jesus will come with all His saints; all the people who have been cleansed by faith and the shedding of His blood. What a day that will be! We have much to be thankful for even before that day comes however. He has given us one another to love and to be loved by, to encourage and so we may receive encouragement, to pray for and for them to pray for us, and to stand before God together because of the hope we have in Jesus.

Prayer

Lord God, You have placed us in relationship with one another, therefore we pray for one another and love one another as You have loved us. We long for the day when Jesus will return with all His saints.

Thank You for giving us blameless and holy hearts. Thank You for giving us brothers and sisters in Christ. Thank You for the privilege of having people pray for us, and for being able to pray for them.

Please forgive us for not sensing the connection You have made with us and our fellow believers more keenly and for not loving them as deeply as we ought. Forgive us for growing excited about celebrating Jesus' birth, His first coming, and for not anticipating His second coming.

Send Your Spirit to work in our hearts to help us to love one another as You have loved us. Lead us to pray for one another with passion and love. Help us remember that Jesus is coming again, and to rejoice because of that, longing for the day that we see You face to face when He comes. Amen.

November 27, 2015

Instruction

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Over and over Jeremiah had to prophesy about God's wrath due to the idolatry and sin of the people of Judah. His message was clear that the people would go into captivity and Jerusalem would be overthrown. But in the midst of this message, Jeremiah was also privileged to proclaim that God would save His people – not just from captivity, but from their sin. He would provide an eternal king who would be the righteousness of the people. This passage points us forward to Jesus and reminds us that while our deeds of righteousness are insufficient and tainted with sin, the Lord has provided His own righteousness to us.

Teaching

Israel never had a perfect king. Every monarch's rule was marred by his sin. Saul became faithless. David became an adulterer and murderer. Solomon was ruled by lust and turned to other gods. And the following kings did no better. Some lived by faith and were good kings, but none was perfect, and God was going to bring this line of kings to an end. The problem was that God had promised David that there would be a king on his throne forever. However, He was not necessarily speaking of a king who would govern from a palace in Jerusalem, but of an eternal king who would rule from heaven.

God raised up a righteous Branch from David by having His Son be conceived of David's descendant, a girl named Mary. He is a different kind of king. Not one who raises taxes or conscripts armies, but one who saves His people from sin and becomes their righteousness before God.

Life

Have you ever had the feeling that you just weren't good enough? Perhaps you tried out for a sport and got cut from the team. Maybe it was the cutting comment of a teacher, spouse, or parent that raised that doubt in you. Jeremiah's message of judgement is one all God's people should take to heart. The truth of the matter is that we are sinners and we are not good enough. We are not righteous in our thoughts, words, or actions. But God loves us so much that He refuses to leave us in such a state. He raised up a righteous Branch for His people – a person who would be righteous on our behalf. This is Jesus. He is, "The Lord our righteousness." He bore our sin, and gives us His perfect righteousness.

Prayer

Lord, You tell us that the days are coming when You will fulfill the promise You made to Israel.

Indeed You have kept Your promise by raising up Jesus to be the righteous Branch. He is the Lord our Righteousness.

Thank You, O God, for keeping Your promises. Thank You for giving us Your righteousness and for allowing us to dwell securely with You as Your people who have been declared righteous.

Forgive us for the times we have taken the gift of righteousness for granted. Forgive us for the times that we have wandered from You and sought things that we considered to be more satisfying at the time, but found they were to our loss.

Grant us to live fully in the righteousness Jesus won for us, and help us share that righteousness with others so they too may dwell securely with You in glory. Amen.

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