

Phil Mercer's Covid-19 Daily Devotions

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1. On our Knees. 31.03.2020

The coronavirus is a tiny microscopic organism that has brought the whole world to its knees. This organism is invisible to the naked eye and there is presently no antidote in the form of a vaccine. The only practical step we can take to withstand it and prevent many fatalities is to slow the spread of the virus by all practising strict hygiene and social distancing requirements mandated by governments. We also have a responsibility to pray, to humble ourselves and pray.

So, this is a call to obey all lawful instructions issued by government to stop the spread of the virus. We show our love for God by submitting to those in authority over us and obeying all lawful instructions. We also show our love for our neighbour by doing all in our power to limit the spread of the virus. It is completely counterintuitive, but to not shake hands or embrace is in this present context a sign of friendship. To cross the road when you see another person coming toward you is in this context a sign of friendship.

This is perhaps the first time in living memory that the whole world is facing the same threat at the same time. The threat posed by this virus points to our interconnectedness. For all our differences, we are part of a single human family. We are all susceptible to catching this disease. None of us are immune. We share a global solidarity and a global vulnerability. We are all in this together, and we are all part of the solution to this problem by maintaining healthy habits and observing healthy social distancing and self-isolation measures.

For all our modern sophistication as evidenced by medical and technological advancements, that we as a human family find ourselves in the position of being brought to our knees by a tiny microscopic organism that no politician or scientist or world superpower has yet any answer to – should humble us deeply and awaken in all of us a sense of our vulnerability and need. Only Almighty God can shield and defend us from this pestilence. We will respond in faith by seeking our refuge and strength in Him and find Him to be an ever-present help in trouble. Only that will deliver us from all fear.

2. The Antidote to Fear (Habakkuk 3:16-19). 01.04.2020

The Covid 19 pandemic, like all pandemics, is a fear-inducing event. The antidote for a pandemic is a vaccine, which could still be 12-18 months away. But the antidote to fear is faith, and faith is a gift of God that is available to all right here, right now. As the pandemic spreads around the world, fear and panic spread with it, leading to acts of brazen, sometimes callous self-protection, but faith is what will free us from all that and give us the peace and calm, the care and consideration to see this thing through together and come out the other side stronger and kinder for the experience.

So, this is a message of encouragement to faith, a faith that will pass this test, a faith that will last the distance. And a faith that lasts is a faith that rests on the promises of God, and on God's faithfulness to His promises and His people. It is a faith that can be stripped bare of every other visible means of support, and still keep on calmly trusting in God and His grace, no matter what. When the foundations are being shaken, as they are right now, when uncertainty abounds, faith can be at rest on the one who has promised to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. In times of crisis, faith sustains like nothing else can.

The prophet Habakkuk personifies just such an unshakable faith. He lived and ministered in the last days of the southern kingdom of Judah, at a time when everything both for him and his generation appeared to be spiralling out of control. The Babylonian Empire was on the rise and their imperial ambitions knew no bounds. Not only had the northern kingdom of Israel already fallen, but Judah's near neighbours were also falling like dominos to the all-conquering Babylonian invader.

Furthermore, there was nothing about the national life of the kingdom of Judah to suggest that things would be any different in their case. Among the people of Judah, there had been a long and painful spiritual decline, the

people had forgotten God, the wicked seemed to be prospering, the corrupt seemed to be flourishing, prayers went unanswered, faith was at a low ebb, the entire country had reached a tipping point. God's patience had run out. Judgment was about to fall - and the seemingly unstoppable Babylonian army had been raised up as God's instrument of judgment. It was enough to set hearts pounding, lips quivering, knees knocking, and legs trembling. It created not just an atmosphere of fear, but of dread and foreboding, like decay in the bones. Rushing for the exits was not an option. Those making a last stand were holed up inside a walled city and completely surrounded. There was nowhere to run or hide. It was a case of simply waiting for the siege to grind down the last remaining spirit of resolve prior to a dreadful end.

The closing scene of Habakkuk's prophecy captures for us the chronic sense of fear that prevailed as every last visible means of support was stripped away as the siege of Jerusalem ground on towards its inevitable conclusion. It is a scene of utter devastation - with chronic crop failure, leading to starvation rations brought on by a desperate food shortage. The population was under such incredible stress and strain that they began to turn on each other. It is a scene infinitely more desperate than anything we will ever experience. Yet remarkably, Habakkuk does not curse God and die. He does not complain that somehow God has forgotten His people. In fact, there is not the slightest touch of accusation or complaint in what he says.

Instead, remarkably, there is a note of joy. "Yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God, my Saviour". Faith in the character and promises of God enabled Habakkuk to rise above the grim resignation and despair of his present circumstance to actually see things from God's eternal perspective, and then there was cause for hope, despite the doom and gloom of his present experience. His joy was surely sparked by his belief that the Babylonian invasion, the grim siege of Jerusalem with its tragic loss of life, and their future joyless exile in bondage in Babylon for 70 years, would not spell the end for God's people. They were not evidences of God's rejection. They were evidences of God's severe mercy, God's fatherly discipline, to break the power of sin in them, to purify them from all wickedness - and having done so, God would in turn judge Babylon, redeem Judah from her bondage in exile, and return His people to the land of promise for the completion of His redeeming purposes through them in the world.

God's promises remain true. God's faithfulness is unailing. With God, there is always reason for hope. Even in times of greatest crisis, God remains true to His promises and to His people. There is nothing wrong with feeling perplexed and confused about what God is doing at times. We can never fully know the mind of the Lord. We can never fully understand His works and ways. But of this we can always be sure: He is still on the throne; our life is still in His sovereign care; His plans and promises concerning us remain true; our life is not dependent upon our outward circumstances such as health, wealth, employment, access to essentials like medicines and food stuff. God's enabling grace sustains the life of His people, even when every outward and visible means of support is stripped away.

That is the rock upon which we can take our stand amid this present crisis. That alone will enable us to weather this storm and come through stronger and kinder for the experience, with a joyful testimony, like that of Habakkuk, of God's keeping power.

3. A Crisis asks some tough Questions 07.04.2020

A crisis, among other things, asks all of us the question: "what are you relying on for your peace and security?". It does so by stress testing the reliability of whatever it is we are trusting in. The more solid and lasting, the more reliable. The less solid and lasting, the less reliable. The more extreme the crisis, the sterner the test, the clearer the result in terms of establishing the reliability or otherwise of whatever it is we are trusting in for our peace and security.

Jesus addressed the question of what it is we are relying on for our peace and security when he taught the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-29). It follows the story of two builders. One built his house on the rock while the other built his house on the sand. To all intents and purposes, they were both eminently liveable, comfortable homes suited to the needs of their respective occupants. The only difference between the two houses was in what could not be seen, their foundations. For some time, that difference remained hidden, until one day a violent storm struck both houses simultaneously, and the house on the rock withstood the storm undamaged, while the house built on sand was completely destroyed. It is primarily in a storm that strong foundations prove their worth.

Jesus' clear intention in telling the parable was to challenge us all concerning what it is that we are relying on for our peace and security. Building our lives on the truth of God's Word, by hearing and putting into practise the words of Jesus, is like building on the rock. Relying on things like our health, financial security, reliable access to medical care and food supplies, even the people around us for our peace and security is like building on sand. The difference could not be greater, yet the consequences of that difference remain hidden until a storm, a sudden and unexpected shock occurs.

Life brings with it many unplanned, unexpected, uncontrolled events - like pandemics – these are the storms of life the parable speaks about. And it is only when they strike that the foundations of our life, the very things we rely upon for our peace and security, face the sternest of tests. Then, anything that is not rock solid will fail, will disappoint, will be unable to deliver the peace and security that we need just when we need it the most. How quickly our health can be threatened, or our financial security evaporate.

Whatever stresses and challenges this present crisis bring for you, be sure to see it as a wake-up call to get back to basics, to dig deep and strengthen the foundations of your life so that they rest on the solid rock of Christ and His Word. That alone will enable you to withstand this storm and come through it stronger and kinder for the experience.

4. The Resurrection casts out Fear. 14.04.2020

There is a lot of fear abroad in the community right now. You can see it in the strain on peoples' faces. You can see it in selfish acts of panic buying. You can see it in the cruel and irrational abuse of uniformed medical clinicians as they make their way home from work. Fear of the sickness, fear of our vulnerability to the virus, fear of death, fear of the unknown cause people to act out of self-protection, and when fear-induced self-protection becomes our impulse, people are capable of acting with callous disregard for the welfare of others.

The message of the resurrection speaks more directly and more powerfully into this context of fear than anything else can. And that is because the wonder of the resurrection breaks the power of all the things we would otherwise fear, it delivers us from being held in bondage to fear. In Christ, we have no reason to fear anymore. The sting of death has been taken away. The grave no longer holds any fear for us. We no longer have anything to fear come judgment day because the price has been fully paid, justice has been done in the atoning work of Christ. By believing and receiving the accomplished work of Christ on our behalf, we are at once freed from our bondage to fear of death and from fear of judgment. We can know that God is for us, and if God be for us, who can be against us. We can know that now no one can condemn us in God's presence or separate us from God's love. We can be at rest in our Saviour and know that our life is secure in the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. So, instead of being controlled or paralysed by fear, we can be released to love, to be joyful, courageous, bold, and kind.

In almost all of His post-resurrection appearances to his disciples, Jesus' first words to them were "Fear not/do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:5,10) or its positive counterpart "Peace be with you" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19,21,26). And this was just the message of hope his disciples needed to hear. At the time, the disciples were holed up in a locked room for fear of the Jews, they feared for their lives, they feared for the future. When Jesus miraculously appeared to them, his first concern was to speak peace to them, to allay their fears and give them cause for hope. There was nothing trite about his greeting. One of the great accomplishments of the cross was to win for all believers, peace with God, and at his first available opportunity, Jesus was concerned to declare this new reality to his frightened followers so as to dispel their fears. In doing so, His grace and compassion are evident by the way He conceded to their weakness in providing them with the physical proof of the scars in His hands and His side – proof that no one can fake. They respond with abundant joy. His love for them was casting out fear. Again, he spoke peace to them. Reassurance is also a mark of compassion and love. Then, he sent, commissioned, and empowered them by the Holy Spirit for the task of world mission. With every word, Jesus gave his disciples cause to cast fear aside and embrace their new status and calling as apostles of the risen Lord Jesus.

Thomas was absent on the occasion of Jesus' first appearance, and when he received credible eye-witness testimony from 10 of his closest friends that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead, he stubbornly refused to believe. But such is the generosity of God's love for us in Christ, Jesus appeared to them again a week later, this time with Thomas present. His concern was to not only dispel fear, but to remove all doubt as well. With remarkable tenderness, Thomas was set free from his stubborn pride and unbelief.

Likewise, Peter was graciously restored by the risen Lord Jesus by the Sea of Galilee after three times denying His Lord. His failure was turned to service, and Peter becoming mighty in God's hand as a witness to the resurrection.

The resurrection casts out all fear, banishes doubt, and transforms failure into bold service. At a time when so many of our fellow citizens are held in the grip of fear, we who serve a risen Saviour have the opportunity to shine with the love of Christ. As those who no longer have any reason to fear either death or judgment, we can be released in love for our fellow citizens, so as to be joyful, courageous, bold, and kind in all our dealings with others in these troubled times. Perfect love drives out fear.

5. The only Protection against the Wrath of God. 15.04.2020

The disciple whom Jesus loved, the Apostle John, used the word "propitiation" several times in his first letter to describe what was accomplished through the cross of Jesus. In chapter 2:1-2 he writes: "If anyone does sin, we have one who speak to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the propitiation/atonement sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." Again, in chapter 4:10 John writes: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as a propitiation/atonement sacrifice for our sins." The entire purpose of Christ's coming, the very heart of the cross is all about propitiation. But what is that? It is all about God making a way to be both just and righteous in regard to our sin, while showing love for us and peace toward us as sinners. He did so, not by denying or contradicting himself, but by providing in His one and only Son, a perfect substitute who would take our place in judgment and bear all our sin in His own body upon the cross. By doing so, He would satisfy all God's strict justice and turn aside God's righteous anger from us who had sinned against Him, by interposing His pure sacrifice on our behalf. By trusting in the death of Jesus for us, we are shielded from the righteous anger of Almighty God. Well may John say: "This is love". It is the greatest act of love the world has ever known.

The concept of propitiation is unfamiliar to many of us, but it is vital to understanding the wonder of the cross of Jesus. To help us understand its meaning, I share with you one modern example of its use from the world of space exploration that Bruce spoke about at a recent Bible study. When a manned spacecraft re-enters the earth's atmosphere, it does so at a speed of around 20,000 miles per hour, and the heat that is generated upon re-entry is so extreme, around 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit, that without some means of shielding the craft from that extreme heat, it would destroy both the craft and its crew. To guard against that possibility, NASA has developed heat absorbing, heat deflecting foam tiles which are adhered to the nose cone and exterior panels of the spacecraft so as to shield both the craft and its crew from the extreme heat of re-entry. These tiles are known as propitiatory tiles and collectively formed what has become known as the propitiatory shield that protects both the spacecraft and its crew from the destructive heat generated by re-entering the earth's atmosphere.

Just how critical the propitiatory heat shield is for spacecraft on re-entry is to be seen in the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster of 1st February 2003. Having safely carried out its full mission in space, Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry into the earth's atmosphere killing all seven crew members on board. The disaster was caused by damage to the propitiatory shield that occurred right at the start of its mission when an external tank struck the left wing on take-off. The damage caused to the foam shield was not a problem until re-entry, but at that crucial stage, it allowed super-heated gases to penetrate the internal wing structure of the shuttle, causing the entire spacecraft to become unstable and break apart. For a spacecraft re-entering the earth's atmosphere, the propitiatory shield is so critical that even the slightest damage to or breach of it poses an extreme risk to both the spacecraft and its crew.

For sinners seeking to enter the presence of our Holy God, the heat of re-entry caused by God's righteous anger against human sin is such that nothing but a propitiatory shield in the form of the sacrifice of Christ applied to our hearts by faith is sufficient to protect us from burning up in the holiness of God's presence. Only the sacrifice of Christ, applied to our hearts by faith, can shield us from the wrath of God, can enable us to stand in the presence of a Holy God and not be consumed. Our God is a consuming fire. His anger against human sin is just and no one can withstand it in and of ourselves. We need a shield of protection to turn away the fierceness of the wrath of God against our sinfulness, and in all the world, the only thing that is able to achieve that is the shed blood of Jesus, applied to our hearts by faith. When God the Father looks upon the blood of His Son, applied to our hearts by faith, His justice is satisfied, His anger is quenched, he has found a way to be both righteous and loving, faithful and peaceful. He looks on the sacrifice of His Son and is satisfied so as to pardon us all our unrighteousness and accept us as His blood-bought child. The cross is where God's love and justice meet, where His righteousness and peace embrace. Be sure to receive His warm embrace by believing and receiving what He did for you in love when He stretched out his arms and was nailed to that cruel cross to win your pardon.

6. From Anxiety to Peace through Prayer. 29.04.2020

It is often hard living in a fallen and broken world. Just such a time as this is for many a cause for high anxiety, and Christians are not immune from feeling stressed and anxious. It is what we do with our anxiety that will set us apart, that will mark us a different, that will bear witness to the Gospel. Anxiety is not our friend. It robs us of our peace. But in Philippians 4:6-7, Paul exhorts us to move from a position of anxiety to peace through prayer. In 1 Peter 5:7, we are exhorted to cast all our cares upon the Lord because He cares for us. Expectant, believing, thankful prayer is the means by which we can exchange anxiety for peace. We have no need or reason to fret or worry about the way things are when we can hand our cares over to the one who can actually do something about them.

It is important to accept that God has never promised to change every anxiety-producing situation to our liking, but He does promise to change us amidst our situation of need and give us peace. Praying about everything is the way to become anxious for nothing. Yes, God may change the situation, but as we pray, He will most certainly change our heart attitude toward the situation so that it no longer causes us to be anxious. Peace is the fruit of prayer. The peace that comes through prayer is a peace that passes all understanding, in other words, it is a peace that mere human reason cannot account for. And that is perhaps the most attractive witness to the Gospel that we can give right now: to be at peace, to exchange our anxieties for peace through prayer and so to be overcomers, by the grace of God

7. View your Present Sufferings from an Eternal Perspective. 22.04.2020

In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle Paul invites people of faith to see all our present sufferings, which for us includes the coronavirus pandemic, in light of eternity and the glory that awaits us. Paul is under no illusion when it comes to the vulnerability of human life. We are not masters of our own destiny. Our grip on life is tenuous to say the least. In light of which he describes our human bodies as being like jars of clay – fragile, easily broken, and not so easily put back together again. Yet while we are jars of clay, contained within us is a treasure – the Gospel; and an all-surpassing power – the risen life of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Because that was true for Paul, his personal testimony was one of being hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. For all people of faith, it is true that while outwardly and physically we are all in process of wasting away, yet inwardly and spiritually we are being renewed day by day. The life of Christ within and the hope of heaven sustain us in the midst of our present sufferings, whatever form they may take, so that we do not lose heart.

In 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 Paul reaches the conclusion of his teaching on how we should view our present sufferings, when he says: "... our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Here Paul invites us to make a direct comparison between our present sufferings, which are temporary, and the future glory that awaits us, which is eternal. If somehow we could quantify both – if we could wrap up all our sorrows in a bundle that could be weighed – and if we could do the same with the eternal glory that awaits us – if we could then weigh them off against the other in a set of scales – we would find that the eternal glory that awaits us far outweighs our present sufferings. So much so, that despite the seriousness of our present sufferings, they become light and momentary when compared to the life of the world to come and the eternal glory that awaits us there.

Paul's conclusion may appear harsh and uncaring to someone going through deep personal grief or suffering, but it is not. He does not trivialise human suffering, he just appreciates the full measure of our glorious inheritance in Christ. All human suffering, when viewed through the lens of eternity, while neither light or momentary in and of itself, becomes light and momentary when compared to the joys of Heaven and the life of the world to come which have no end. A full appreciation of the joys of Heaven, and the fullness of life that awaits us there will give us the perspective of hope from which to view all our present sufferings, and not lose heart.

Not only so, but Paul's assertion that our present sufferings are "achieving" for us an eternal glory further points to the fact that all human suffering is purposeful and preparatory. It is not merely to be endured. Suffering is permitted by our all wise ever-loving Heavenly Father to fit us for Heaven. Somehow, He works it together for our good, to conform us to the likeness of Christ. In light of which, it is essential that we seek after and find the good God has purposed for us in every experience of suffering or hardship. We are not to waste our sorrows by missing out on the good our Heavenly Father has purposed for us by them.

8. Even Bad Things God works for the Good. 28.04.2020

Romans 8:28 reveals to us the reassuring truth that .. *"in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purposes."* The "all things" spoken about includes everything, all the good things that happen, as well as all the bad things that happen, even this pandemic. In this pandemic, God is working for the good of those who love Him, and that means you and me.

While this pandemic can never be regarded in any way as good in and of itself, our all wise, ever loving God has permitted it and works it for the good of His own. How He does that is a mystery, a mystery of His grace and providence, but that He does so is a fact of His sovereign rule over this world, and of His tender care for each one of His redeemed people.

The truth is, God has plans for His own, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, to give us a future and a hope. Those plans are based on God's own character and God's covenant commitments to bless us and through us to bring blessing to the whole world once again. God's good plans for us find expression in the great and precious promises He has made that we can claim by faith and experience the miraculous fulfilment of in our daily life. By faith, we will seek to discover God's plan in trials and hardships, we will seek after the good God has purposed to work for us in pain and difficulty. We will not grumble or complain when things are not to our liking. We will not seek to escape hard circumstances as quickly as possible. Rather, we will not want to miss the good that God is working towards in every tear, every heartache, every setback, every loss. We will not want to waste our sorrows by short circuiting the process that God has permitted us to experience for our good. We will want to bear whatever discomfort or inconvenience hard times may bring, because our Heavenly Father is wanting to do good things for us by these means that perhaps He cannot achieve for us any other way.

The ultimate good that God is working all things together to achieve is described for us in v29ff and following: that we be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that we ultimately share in His glory, and that we share in a bond of love that is unbreakable, inseparable, for all eternity. Nothing can compare with these outcomes in terms of goodness. You can't get any better than that: to be so utterly saved from the penalty, power and presence of sin as to be fully conformed to the likeness of Jesus; and to be so utterly incorporated into God's family that we become brothers and sisters in Christ and share in the glory of Almighty God eternally.

Our present sufferings are achieving for us a future glory. Every hardship, every trial is purposeful and preparatory. Only as we bear the cross shall we at last wear the crown.

As we live a life of love for Jesus, as we seek to fulfil His calling upon our life, as we seek to give up our own ambitions in favour of knowing and embracing His purpose for our life, we can be at rest in the goodness of God, that He is in control, He has a way through these present difficulties, that He has a future and a hope in store for us, that will be all the sweeter for every battle fought and triumph won along the way.

9. What to do with Anxious Feelings. 29.04.2020

Life in a fallen world is often hard. With a pandemic currently sweeping the globe, life is particularly hard for many of us all at the same time. At just such a time as this people can feel anxious, and Christians are not immune to feeling stressed and anxious along with everyone else. It is what we do with our anxiety that will set us apart, that will mark us as different, that will bear faithful witness to the Gospel of Christ.

In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul exhorts us to move from a position of anxiety to peace through prayer. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* Anxiety comes to Christians as much as it does to unbelievers. But when we feel anxious, instead of letting it settle, of giving in to it and coming under its power, we are as a first resort to take it to the Lord in prayer. As Peter says, we are to cast all our anxieties onto Him because He cares for us. By handing over our anxieties to God, we lose them, and gain God's peace in our hearts as His gracious replacement.

This truth was not merely head knowledge for Paul but was his personal experience and testimony. The apostle Paul was in a bad place when he wrote to the Philippians. He was in prison in Rome on a capital charge awaiting trial and if found guilty faced beheading. While in prison, instead of becoming anxious about his very uncertain future, Paul had on his heart both the salvation of the lost around him and the welfare of his fellow believers, and

so used his time in confinement among other things to write to the Christians in Philippi to strengthen them in the face of their present difficulties.

With the help of the Lord, Paul was able to rise above the pain and uncertainty of his situation and set an example for his friends at Philippi. He wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" and "my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in Christ Jesus" because that was his personal experience. He also wrote "do not be anxious about anything" because that too was his personal experience.

Think of anxiety as part of the Enemy's arsenal of fiery darts that he shoots off at us to undermine our faith and rob us of our peace. To defend ourselves against his attacks, we need the full armour of God: the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith. And each of these pieces of the spiritual armour we are to put on with prayer. By prayer, we arm ourselves for battle against the Enemy so as to not come under his lies. Then, his fiery darts won't strike fear into our hearts.

Here the apostle Paul commends to us expectant, believing, thankful prayer as the means by which we can exchange anxiety for peace. In doing so, he could not commend prayer to us more highly. It is the only way to experience the miraculous exchange of our anxiety for God's peace. We have no need to worry about the way things are when we can hand over all our cares to the one who can actually do something about them. Our cares, while overwhelming to us, are not too hard for Him. Nothing is impossible with God. He is able to do far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

Prayer is God's gift to us through Christ. By it, we enter the presence of the Holiest of All, we boldly approach the throne of grace, we are granted free access, an audience with the King, we have dealings with the Almighty. Our prayers ascend as sweet incense before the throne of God. They are presented to Him in golden bowls, pleasing and acceptable in His sight. Expectancy in prayer is vital. Complete confidence in God's grace and power will inspire us to ask great things of Him, and rest in the knowledge that He has heard and will answer. As Paul states just a few verses later: "my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (v19). It is as we pray in faith with such confidence that we move from a position of anxiety to peace through prayer.

It is important to be realistic in all this and remember that God does not promise, either here or elsewhere, to change every anxiety-producing situation to our liking. But He does promise to change us in the midst of our situation of need and give us His peace. Praying about everything is the way to become anxious for nothing. Yes, God may change the situation, but then again, He may not. However, as we pray, He will most certainly change our heart attitude toward the situation so that it no longer causes us to be anxious. Peace is the fruit of prayer. The peace that comes through prayer is a peace that passes all understanding, in other words, it is a peace that mere human reason cannot account for. It is a peace that rests in God's faithfulness to His promises and His people. It is a peace that trusts in God's willingness and ability to do for us far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine. It is the soul at rest in God alone.

10. The Plans God has for Us. 01.05.2020

With our international borders closed and community transmission of the virus being brought under control, some states and territories are beginning to introduce an easing of restrictions on social distancing and stay at home orders. But will that result in a return to normal or to a "new normal" going forward? Until a vaccine is developed to effectively cure those who become infected, it is hard to see us going back to life as it once was. There is no doubt that there is considerable uncertainty concerning what the future holds for all of us in light of this new reality.

Uncertainty about the future creates anxiety, and enforced change is hard to adapt to for we who are creatures of habit, especially as we get older. But there is nothing new in that. Issues surrounding our learning to live with the threat of coronavirus present us with a unique set of challenges, but then again, every change presents us with challenges. The questions for all of us are: how will we respond to those challenges? How will we adapt to those changes? How will we view our future in light of all this change and uncertainty?

For people of faith, the rock we can all stand on is the promise of God to each one of His own: "I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). We have always had to live with uncertainty about the future. We do not know what a day may bring forth. If anything, the coronavirus has highlighted just how little control we do have over our own destiny. But that does not mean we are exposed to forces beyond our control with little or no capacity to shield ourselves

from the impact of unplanned and unwelcome possibilities. The reality is that our life is a gift to each one of us. Our life is a gift from God, and when we repent and believe the Gospel, when we confess Christ as Lord, we become one of His covenant children, to whom such covenant promises as Jeremiah 29:11 belong. We can believe them, claim them by faith as our own, and live in the light of them going forward. We can know that our life is in God's hands, and therefore could not be in better or safer care. We can know that while our plans may be changed or disrupted, God has far better plans for us, and nothing can disrupt or thwart His plans.

Because God has plans for each one of us, and those plans are always directed toward our welfare, to prosper us and not to harm us, to give us a future and a hope, we can rest in God alone and be at peace, regardless of how uncertain our outward circumstances might be at a given point in time. In light of this fact, our responsibility is not to crash through in pursuit of our own plans and ambitions, but to surrender all to Him, and seek after the better plans He has for us in each day and in each circumstance. Not only does God have good plans for us and has our future sorted, He is also working all things together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). In other words, not only does our gracious Father hold our future in the palm of His hand, not only has He planned for us the best of all possible futures, but He also takes responsibility to work all things together for good for them that love Him. In other words, He takes care of both the means to the end as well as the end itself. He is taking us to a better home, and He is overseeing every step of our journey homeward to ensure we arrive there safely.

These are liberating realities for all of us. It means we do not need to know the future, but simply place our hand in the hand of the one who holds our future. We do not need to become anxious in that our Father has never failed us yet and is not about to do so now. He can be trusted to keep us through the ever-changing seasons of life and bring us safe home to His eternal kingdom, there to grant us our eternal reward. Instead of grumbling or complaining about unwelcome developments, faith will accept hardship or adversity as from the hand of God for a reason, for a season, and seek after the good He has planned for us by it. The all surpassing good that God is working toward for each one of His redeemed is that we be conformed to the likeness of Christ and that we share with Him the glory of Heaven. These are the ultimate good outcomes our gracious Father is working toward for each one of us in the midst of this present coronavirus crisis, which calls for us to cast care aside, to banish fear about the future, to put off self-pity and complaint, in favour of steadfast faith, quiet trust, and brave endurance.

11. A Short History of Pandemic Response by Christians. 02.04.2020

It is helpful to seek to place our present experience in the wider context of human history, and to realise that plagues and pandemics have been a part of the human story ever since the Fall. Not only so, it is important to realise that a Christian response to such events has been profoundly significant for the witness to Christ down through the centuries. Here is a very brief summary of the Christian response to plagues/pandemics over the history of the Christian church:

The Antonine Plague of the second century AD wiped out around one quarter of the population of the then Roman Empire, but led to the rapid spread of Christianity as believers cared for the sick and gave the dead an honourable burial when even the families of the sick and deceased had abandoned them. Why? Because they proclaimed plagues to be not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a fallen and broken world in rebellion against its Creator. Their fearless compassion was a powerful witness to the reality of the Gospel.

The Cyprian Plague of the Third century AD, caused by a disease similar to ebola, triggered the explosive growth of Christianity. In a sermon, the Christian leader Cyprian instructed Christians not to grieve for the dead, but to care for the living. In response, Christians were heedless of danger, took charge of the sick, and tended to their every need. Good was done to all, not just to the household of faith.

This habit of sacrificial care has been repeated by the Christian community down through history. When the Black Death swept through Europe in the Fourteenth century, at least half the population was wiped out. Fear of the contagion was palpable. A contemporary writer, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote a first-hand account, citing how: "citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbours was scarcely found any that showed fellow-feeling for one another, how kinsfolk held aloof, and never met ... nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers."

In 1527 the bubonic plague struck Wittenberg in Germany, the home of Martin Luther. Luther refused calls for him to flee the city to protect himself. Rather, he chose to stay and minister to the sick. His refusal to flee came at great personal cost, with his daughter Elizabeth succumbing to the plague. When asked by a colleague about a

Christian response to plague, Luther wrote in reply the tract entitled “Whether Christians should flee the Plague”. It is available online and is illuminating to read it in our present context, not only for the light that it sheds on the ignorance and superstition that prevailed at the time, but also for the tenderness and compassion with which Luther regards those who feel the need to flee. But for all that, Luther is insistent that leaders must not run but lead. “We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: it turns them into crosses on which we must be prepared to die.” Luther’s tract urges believers to obey quarantine orders, to fumigate their houses, and to take all necessary precautions to prevent the spread of disease. He was also convinced by the 6th commandment that believers must never endanger the lives of others by our own carelessness or neglect.

One controversial aspect of historic Christian plague ethics is that we don’t cancel church. Yes, we willingly agree to restrictions on the expression of our freedom of religion, we willingly close down church buildings, but we find ways to do church differently. The whole motivation behind personal sacrifice in caring for others, in improving personal hygiene so as to stop the spread of infection, presupposes the existence of a community in which we are all stakeholders, a community in which our lives are invested and to which we belong. So we refrain from Communion, from the common cup, from public displays of affection, from close human to human contact, even from meeting together in a building, but we are still to be in fellowship. We are not to give up meeting together. We seek to find ways to maintain the bond of fellowship and the unity of the Spirit, as we are doing now each Lord’s Day. And in these days of electronic communication, technology enables us to stay connected and in fellowship more than ever before. At times such as this, we need each other more than ever.

12. Marriage as a Union – Max and Nadine. 26.03.2020

A crisis, as we are experiencing right now, challenges us to consider what is really important in life, and what is really important about getting married. It forces us to strip away all the non-essentials, and what we have left is something wonderfully simple and truly beautiful: the love that God has set between a man and a woman, their desire to commit to living together in marriage in order to realize the fulfillment of their love for one another, and to do so in the context of faith, family, and friends.

By necessity, this is a simple, back to basics wedding. And in keeping with the theme of getting back to basics, the one thing that has remained the same ever since the first marriage back in the Garden of Eden, is that marriage is a unity. If we had just one word to describe what marriage is all about, we could not go past this word: unity. It is the one-word description of marriage to be found in Genesis 2:24. Unity in all things is to be the goal of every marriage.

In seek to explore this wonderful theme, something as down to earth as rivers provide us with a helpful picture of unity. The meeting place of two rivers, the junction where two rivers merge and become one is called a confluence.

The two mightiest rivers in the state of Victoria are the Murray and the Goulburn. Together they form the Murray-Goulburn catchment area, and combined form a significant part of an even larger river system of national importance, the Murray-Darling Basin.

The headwaters of the Murray rise from a natural spring near Cape Howe in the Snowy Mountains of NSW. The river then drains the western side of the Australian Alps, Australia’s largest mountain range. It then meanders in a westerly direction forming the border between Victoria and NSW. By contrast, the headwaters of the Goulburn River rise below Corn Hill, south of Eildon near the town of Woods Point. It then flows in a northerly then westerly direction, forms a major dam at Eildon, then flows through the towns of Alexandra, Seymour, Nagambie, Murchison, and Shepparton before reaching its confluence with the Murray near Echuca.

The Murray and the Goulburn – two distinct rivers each with its separate source, its own course, direction and flow. But where the two rivers meet, the waters merge and become one, downstream from which they have just one course, direction, flow, and purpose, they become inseparable, indistinguishable, two become one.

The confluence of two rivers into one is a helpful metaphor for expressing what a marriage union is intended by God to be like – the confluence of two lives into one, two distinct lives with two distinct and separate sources, courses, directions, and past histories – yet in marriage, those two lives meet, merge, flow together and become one, downstream from which they are inseparable, having one direction, one course, one purpose, one hope, one future.

Marriage that is created, ordered, and blessed of God, is in its very essence a union where two become one. And being the union of a man and a woman to whom biological children may be born, it is intended to be the most intimate, enduring, rewarding, unbreakable relationship in all of life.

Now, a union is a complete coming together, no exceptions, no exclusions, no reservations, no holding back. It is the union of bodies, souls and spirits – a physical, emotional and spiritual union. It involves a pooling of resources, a collaboration of strengths, a complimenting of the other's weaknesses, a complete sharing in the effort and labour, and equally enjoying the benefits and the bounty of life together– one dream, one hope, one future.

God's design for marriage is that it be a one flesh union, one being an indivisible number. In Genesis 2 we are told that God made man out of the dust of the ground, but woman was made out of the body of the man, and as has been observed - out of his side – to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, near his heart to be loved. In creating woman, one became two, and in marriage, the two become one. Man and woman were one flesh historically, and in marriage, the two become one all over again. It is a profound mystery that cannot be fully explained and yet instinctively we know it to be true. So much so that when marriage is received with thanks and entered into with love and sacrifice – there is something good and right about the union of marriage that simply cannot be experienced in any other relationship, something primal and natural that takes us all the way back to our origins as a human race.

Marriage is a pre-fall divine institution now lived out in a post-fall world where selfishness and sinfulness play their part in ensuring that unity in marriage is so much harder to attain and maintain. To be sure, unity in marriage is constantly being challenged. Consequently, every married couple needs to consciously choose unity.

The best thing you can do to promote unity in your marriage is to learn to humbly seek God together – in other words - strive for spiritual unity. Pray together and let nothing hinder your prayers. Read the Bible together. Let it be a lamp to your feet, a light to your path. Worship together – God can reveal himself to you in fresh ways when you do. It is a good way to discover the plans God has for you both. Keep short accounts with one another. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry. Be quick to say: "I am sorry" and "I forgive you". Don't let pride get in the way. Don't expect that perfection of each other that belongs to God alone. Refuse to take offence. Be forbearing, tender-hearted. Choose to cherish each other's strengths rather than wine about the others' weaknesses.

Unity is the essence of marriage. The goal of a truly good and blessed marriage will be: unity in everything. Never stop aiming for it, striving to attain it. Understand that disunity is death. Strenuously guard against it. Never settle for it, accept it, or give in to it. Keep no secrets. Be completely open and transparent, be sure you have nothing to hide. Keep yourself sexually pure for each other. Maintain a pure and undivided love for one other.

Let the one great love of your life be the person you are about to marry. Let your eyes, affection and desire be for your spouse – to the exclusion of all others. The strength of your union will be the joy of your lives, the foundation for your family, the peace and stability of your home, the basis of all your future success and happiness. Make the union of your marriage the great project of your lives. In the ever-changing seasons of life, strive for new ways to promote unity between you. Let nothing but death break your love apart. You will need the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this, and yet all the resources you need are promised to those who seek to walk this way. Every blessing, strength and joy to you both for your life together."

13. A Case Study in Sacrificial Lockdown _ Eyam. 03.04.2020

At time like this, it is vital that we have the perspective of history and learn the lessons of history in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past which can be at the cost of many lives. One of the most striking lessons of history in time of plague can be learned from the faith and example of the town of Eyam in England during the bubonic plague of 1665-6. Here is their story in summary form.

In 1665 the latest outbreak of a worldwide pandemic known as the Bubonic Plague, otherwise known as the Black Plague, was gripping London. In September of that year, George Viccars, a tailor's assistant living in the Derbyshire village of Eyam, unloaded a parcel of blankets from London that unbeknown to him were flea-infested. Within weeks, Viccars was dead. Panic set in. Six weeks later, 29 of Eyam's residents had died. The townsfolk staggered through the winter with the number of deaths slowly dropping. In May there were no deaths at all. The townsfolk began to believe that the outbreak was over.

But the disease had mutated from bubonic to pneumonic form, a much more highly contagious form of infection transmitted human to human by breathing and coughing. By June of 1666, Eyam's newly arrived Church of England rector, William Mompesson, realised the critical need to contain the disease and began to formulate a quarantine plan.

Eyam's residents were skeptical of their new priest and of his plan, choosing to remain loyal to his Puritan predecessor, Thomas Stanley, who was living in poverty on the edge of the village after being evicted from his pulpit as a consequence of the 1662 Act of Uniformity which required all priests/ministers to adhere to the Book of Common Order. Mompesson however recognised the need of the hour and managed to win Stanley over to the wisdom of his plan, and despite their religious differences and past divisions, they began to cooperate in providing united leadership to fight the spread of the disease.

They called a meeting of the parish and appealed to the townsfolk to voluntarily isolate in the village. Believing they faced near certain death if they remained but could cause the deaths of thousands more if they fled, remarkably the residents of Eyam agreed to stay. A quarantine cordon was established in a one mile radius of the town boundary marked by a ring of stones. For 14 months nobody went in or out of the village. Food was left at the boundary stones by nearby townsfolk.

During that time, the death rate in the village skyrocketed. The people of Eyam suffered greatly throughout their period of isolation. For example, Elizabeth Hancock buried six of her children and her husband in the space of eight days. Elizabeth was made to carry out her dead and bury them by her own hand, with nearby villagers watching on from the surrounding hills but not daring to lift a finger to help.

Measures were taken to limit cross-infection. Church met outdoors in a natural amphitheatre known as Cucklett Delph, where people remain physically distant from one another in their family groupings, what we would call social distancing, and yet were able to worship and fellowship together and hear God's Word for their very great need. Also, burial of the dead was done by their own families with a high regard for hygiene and safety.

In all, 273 of Eyam's 800 residents perished during its self-imposed quarantine. But their self-sacrifice worked - the plague never spread outside of Eyam to the surrounding towns and cities but was contained within the town itself - an extraordinary feat in those times - and all due to the united leadership of Mompesson and Stanley, and the courageous self-sacrifice and singleness of purpose of the townsfolk to do all that was necessary to save the lives of countless others.

Because of its remarkable history, Eyam remains known to this day as "Plague Village" and much of its tragic history has been preserved.

This is but one conspicuous example of Christian faith and love in action in times of plague. The history of Christianity sparkles with similar such examples of loving self-sacrifice and leading the way in compassionate care and preservation of human life in the service of others. Why? Because we know we have a secure future. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, which is far better. Death holds no sting for us. And that peace and security come from an absolute assurance concerning the finished work of Christ, applied to our hearts by faith. To possess such a hope, to have such an eternal perspective from which to view present crises frees us from fear and self-protection in order to act with selfless sacrificial love for our neighbour, for our fellow human being, as is so beautifully portrayed by the townsfolk of Eyam.

14. Suffering – A Test of Faith

It has been over four weeks now since we have been able to meet together as the body of Christ at Trinity. This time of enforced isolation has led me to all the more appreciate and give thanks for the blessings of Christian fellowship and the bonds of love God has set between us. The following is a brief excerpt from last Sunday's message.

1Peter 1:6-7 teaches that human suffering is permitted by God, not to stumble us, not that our faith may fail, but to test our faith and prove it genuine. The crucible of suffering is also the refiner's fire, sent to purify our faith, to remove the dross of sin and self, and to bring forth our faith as pure gold in the sight of God. Experiences of suffering provide not stumbling blocks to faith but stepping-stones to a closer walk with God. Our experience of the joys of heaven will be all the richer for all the suffering and hardship we have had to endure along the way, for every triumph won. Every experience of suffering and hardship in this life is ordered, shaped, and limited by our all wise, ever loving Heavenly Father to strengthen faith, hope and love in our hearts, to wean us from a love of this world, to ignite in us a longing for Heaven, and to equip us for the day when suffering will come to an end

and give way to unending, never diminishing joy, when we shall enter in to our eternal inheritance in Christ. It is in that sense that our sufferings are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

In January of 1738, John Wesley was caught in a fierce Atlantic storm, and was terrified. By contrast, he could not help but notice the sense of calm and peace displayed by a group of Moravian Christians on the same boat in the same storm. Sometime later, back on dry land, he reflected that he only possessed what he called 'a fair summer religion', and this led him onto a seeking after true faith in Christ. A 'fair-weather' Christian is one whose faith dissolves into fear or complaint at the first sign of trouble. But amidst suffering, the best thing that can happen is not for the suffering to end as quickly as possible, but for faith to grow stronger, for love to go deeper, for hope to persevere, so as to find God's strength made perfect in our weakness and God's grace prove sufficient for our every need. It is only then that we will not have wasted our sorrows but will have found the good God purposed for us by them. Only then will they have achieved for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

15. Faith and the Future. 06.05.2020

To the children of Israel was granted the promised land as their inheritance, but they nevertheless had to claim it by faith as their own, they had to walk the length and breadth of it in order to possess it, and they had to stay true to their calling in order to retain it. Their future was full of hope by the grace of God's sovereign choice, but that did not leave them passive when it came to what their future would consist of. The children of Israel were required to walk by faith in the promises of God in order to be God's people, living in God's place, under God's rule, experiencing God's blessing. The Old Testament narrative is in part the account of Israel struggling to come to terms with their calling, and failing to enter in to the fullness of the promised inheritance granted to them by drifting from a position of faith, into apostasy, then judgment, repentance, mercy, and restoration, only for the slide into apostasy to begin again a generation later. It is possible to forfeit the grace that should have been ours.

The redeeming grace won for us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus means that now the covenant blessings of God are no longer national but global, and what Israel as a nation struggled to accomplish is now open to all regardless of race, made possible by grace. In Christ, we have a promised inheritance, an eternal reward, and a future full of hope to look forward to. But as was the case under the old covenant, we the recipients of God's mercy, have a responsibility to enter into and claim by faith the promised inheritance that is ours in Christ. We are required to lay hold of God's rich and precious promises in order to claim by faith all that has been given to us in order to possess it and benefit from it.

It is the nature of faith to believe the promises of God, to rest in the sure word of God, despite all evidence to the contrary, and despite not receiving the things promised as and when we would want. The Patriarchs were tent dwellers who in their own lifetimes never entered in to possess or enjoy the blessings of the promised land, but they never gave up hope, they never stopped believing. Indeed, their hope deferred led them to even deeper faith. Their hope awakened in them a longing for Heaven. They looked beyond the physical land of promise to the eternal city not built by human hands, that city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God Himself.

Times of hardship and adversity as we are presently experiencing present us with a serious challenge to walk by faith in the promises of God. As the redeemed children of God, we still have a rich inheritance God has called us to. We still have a bright future God has planned for us. But we by faith must claim it, we must boldly take possession of it, and we do that by receiving and believing God's rich and precious promises and claiming them by faith amidst our present circumstance. So, if God has promised to "keep you from falling", we need to claim that by faith and act upon it when every other visible means of support appears to be stripped away. If God has promised to "present you faultless before the presence of His glory", we need to claim that by faith and live in the light of that reality, not beaten for by false accusation or condemnation. If God has promised to bring you "safe home to His heavenly kingdom", we need to believe that and take courage that no matter the dangers, our lives are held safe by the hand of God. If God has promised that "nothing can separate us from the love of Christ", then we can stare down any threat or adversity in the sure knowledge that He will hold us fast. Now is the time for us all to be standing on the promises of God. By standing, we understand: receiving, believing, and placing the full weight of our hope and confidence in the sure and steadfast promises of God.

16. The Keeping Power of God. 13.05.2020

The God of the Bible is a keeping God, one who keeps His children and blesses us with His love. As His redeemed, we are kept by His power, by grace, unto salvation. Our persevering in faith is dependent, not so much on the strength of our commitment to God, as on the strength of God's unwavering commitment to us and His power to keep us. The fact that we are kept by the power and grace of God is proclaimed in the Aaronic Blessing (Numbers 6: 22-27), and in Jude's doxology (Jude 24-25), as in so many other scriptures.

But what does it mean in practise? Surely it means that God's loving commitment to us is such that He will do all that it takes to protect us from harm, to deliver us from evil, to preserve us body, soul, and spirit, for the fulfilment of His good plans and His eternal purposes, to deliver us from every evil attack, and to bring us safe home to His eternal kingdom. To be kept by God means to be never out of His care, and never separated from His love. As the song puts it: "No power of Hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand". Nothing in all creation is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8). He will hold us fast!

Our persevering in faith, our preservation for all eternity as a child of God, is a factor of God's keeping power at work for us and in us, is an evidence of His everlasting arms surrounding us, carrying us, especially at those time where we feel quite overwhelmed by circumstance. Our faith is such that we could never be sure of our ability to hold on to God through any and every circumstance. But God's love for us is unbreakable, unailing, never ending. God's love for us will keep us through every trial, every hardship, every adversity, every temptation.

God's determination to keep us is demonstrated by the seal of ownership He has placed upon each one of His redeemed: the seal of His Holy Spirit. The Spirit takes up residence in our hearts and is the permanent seal or mark of God's ownership of us. We have been bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ, and now we belong to God, His Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are God's children. The Spirit prompts us, convicts us, leads us, sanctifies us, conforms us to the likeness of Christ, prepares us for Heaven and escorts us there. The Spirit is a shield and defender to us. The Spirit become our teacher and leads us into all truth. The Spirit illuminates the Word of God to us and applies it to our hearts and lives, causing it to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

The seeking, keeping love of God is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the lost sheep, in which the shepherd leaves the 99 safe home in order to risk all to find and rescue the one lost sheep. Each one of His children are precious in His sight and He will do all that is needed to rescue us when we become lost, and to return us when we stray so as to keep us in life and for all eternity.

Because all this is true, each one of us will have a lived experience and personal testimony of God's keeping power at work for us and in us. We can all look back on life and identify a near miss in traffic, or a timely diagnosis which was crucial to our life being preserved. We have all experienced timely and extraordinary protection or provision that has kept us in faith, in health, that has blessed us on our way. So much so, that we need all consider and contemplate: where would we be but for the keeping power of God upon our lives? The fact that we have all been preserved from coronavirus to this point in time is an evidence of God's kindness and His keeping power. Despite all the personal hygiene and social distancing we have practised, there is nothing we can do to stop catching the virus. Only God can keep us in life and in health.

In Hebrews we are challenged by the truth that only those who persevere to the end will be saved. This reminds us that we all have a responsibility to put one foot after the other in trust and obedience to the living God, to never give up running the race of faith that has been set before us. But while we are responsible, God remains utterly sovereign in the salvation of His children. When we get to Heaven, none of us will congratulate ourselves on finally making it. We will all be lost in wonder, love and praise for the way our gracious God has kept and defended us and brought us safe home to His eternal kingdom.

17. The Aaronic Blessing. 14.05.2020

During this pandemic, one expression of praise to arise from within the Christian community that clearly speaks into our collective sense of need is "The Blessing". If you haven't yet seen it, here is the Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtll3mNj5U> It is a modern rendition of what is an ancient Jewish blessing sacred to both Jews and Christians around the world. Commonly known as the Aaronic Blessing or the Priestly Blessing, it first appears in the Book of Numbers 6:22-27. The Book of Numbers was written by Moses, who lived in the 15th century BC. That it still strikes a chord with people in the 21st century AD is extraordinary in itself and speaks to its timeless authority and richness of meaning. Numbers 6 makes clear that the author of the Aaronic Blessing is not Moses but God himself. It is a revealed blessing that flows directly from the very heart of God to His people, expressing His love and compassion for them, His will is to lead them to wholeness and

wellbeing in the fullest sense of the word, that we flourish under God's hand in body, soul, and spirit, personally, relationally, materially, spiritually, both now and into the future. In essence, it declares God to be for us and with us in the fullest most complete sense possible. It is a thrilling affirmation of God's heart of love for His own that is intended to apply in all circumstances of life and to flow on through families inter-generationally. In other words, it is a blessing that transcends time and circumstance, and that rings true especially when life is difficult, like now.

Presbyterians will immediately recognise "The Blessing" as familiar in that we have used it as a sung blessing for centuries. On every significant occasion, we commonly bless an individual or a couple by singing over them the Aaronic Blessing, be it at births, baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, confession of faith, ordination to leadership roles, you name it. Every significant milestone event in the life of God's people is an opportunity for the entire community of believers to sing this blessing over that individual or family grouping. Whenever we do so, whenever the Jewish priests did so, the blessing does not originate with us. We simply become the conduit through whom God's blessing is pronounced and passed on. We become the vehicle for God's blessing to flow. We join our hearts together with that of the heart of God to bless His people with His love. Just as the priests of Aaron were the appointed intermediary for proclaiming the blessing over all Israel, now we, the new covenant priesthood of all believers are the intermediary, the channel through whom God's blessing is spoken over and flows out to God's people today.

The Aaronic Blessing is made up of six interconnected parts. Like ripples in a pond or echoes in a confined space, the six parts are interrelated and build on one another, progress toward a predetermined end, and together form a whole. The six component parts to the blessing are: 1) the Lord bless you; 2) the Lord keep you; 3) the Lord make His face shine upon you; 4) the Lord be gracious unto you; 5) the Lord turn His face toward you; 6) the Lord give you peace. These are all covenant blessings from a covenant making, promise keeping God that apply to all His covenant people. Being a holy and just God, this blessing can only apply and ring true for someone whose sin has been dealt with and paid for through redeeming sacrifice. God cannot bless rebellion and sin. He is of purer eyes than to even look upon sin in us His creatures. God doesn't bless our mess, but He loves to bless all who humbly seek His mercy and forgiveness.

A brief description of what each of the six parts to the blessing means will be helpful for us all. "The Lord bless you" means the Lord is for you and not against you, the Lord is with you and will not forsake you, His favour rests upon you and He holds nothing against you. What an affirmation of love and acceptance. "and keep you" means God's almighty power at work for you to keep you in His care, to shield you from all harm, to deliver you from all evil, to hold on to you through every storm, to cause your faith to not fail but persevere through every trial. With what tender care our Father keeps us for Himself - nothing can separate us from His love or snatch us out of His hand. "The Lord make His face shine upon you" means God is with you always, He is ever present with His love and care, His face shining or radiant means He delights in you, He rejoices over you, He is not ashamed to be your God, His face lights up because of you - so hard for us to accept, but this is the language of love. "and be gracious unto you" helps us all remember that none of us deserve the blessing and favour of God, it is in fact the very opposite of what our sins deserve, but God in love has made a way to be gracious to we who had sinned by means of a pure and holy sacrifice offered in our stead, the benefits of which are deemed ours by grace through faith. "The Lord turn His face toward you" speaks of God's presence, His ever-present help in time of need, the opposite of God turning His face away, a description of His displeasure and the withdrawal of His presence when grieved by sin in His people. "and give you peace" means shalom peace or wholeness and wellbeing, a sense of flourishing and living life to the full under God's hand of blessing, it is so much more than mere absence of conflict, but is the presence of God's reign of grace and love, which only gets better and richer and more joyous the more we experience of it.

Today, and always, it is my joy to pronounce this blessing over each one of you as the covenant people of God, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, indwell by the Holy Spirit. May the assurance of God's favour resting upon you fill you with all joy and peace and purpose so as to flourish in your personalities, in your families, in your chosen profession or field of work, in your neighbourhood, in you witness to Christ, in your ministry for Christ, throughout these difficult days we find ourselves in, and when they pass, in all the changing seasons of life yet to come.

18. Guardian Angels. 15.05.2020

That our Heavenly Father is able to keep us through every trial and danger we may face in life in order to bring us safely home to His Heavenly Kingdom, the Scripture makes plain. That is a truth we can hold onto, especially when life is hard. How God does that is not always clear. No doubt we all have stories of near misses and great escapes, in which we attribute our rescue from danger or deliverance from evil to divine intervention. More often than not, we become aware of God's guardian care through hindsight, as we look back on our life and experience, only to wonder at what God has done for us. God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to

perform, and to be sure, the resources at God's disposal and the power God possesses that He exerts on our behalf for our defence are limitless. So nothing should surprise us. Our expectancy for God to graciously intervene on our behalf, to act in our defence, should be high. As CH Spurgeon once said: "We are immortal until our work on earth is done".

One means our Father employs for our protection are angels. The ministry of angels serves the purposes of God in keeping us from falling and delivering us from evil. Angels are created spirit beings, good angels, who have never known sin and who worship and serve their creator. Their capacity to exist in both the atmosphere of Heaven and to enter earth's atmosphere and engage with us in our world is made plain throughout all the pages of Scripture. There are categories of angels such as cherubim and seraphim, and there is a hierarchy of angels, with arch-angels being the most important. So, there is a clearly defined structure and order to angels and the way they operate at God's command.

The Bible teaches that angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14). From this we are to believe that, as heirs of salvation, our Heavenly Father has squadrons or legions of angels at His command whom He assigns for our blessing and benefit, to serve individual believers. It is hard for us to fully appreciate this for the simple reason that angels are ministering spirits. In other words, they are usually invisible to the naked eye. Being spirits, they inhabit the spiritual realm and possess spiritual powers. We may be surrounded by angels and yet not see them or be aware of their presence or activity in our lives, at least in that moment. Because that is the nature of angels and their activity, the truth is, we will never know, this side of Heaven, to what extent our lives have been kept and blessed by the ministry of angels. But that God's angels are deployed for the guardian care and keeping of God's people, none of us should have any doubt. And although we cannot see them, we ought to be aware of their presence and help in our daily walk as they guard us in all our ways, as they lift us up in their arms so we will not strike our foot against a stone (Psalm 91:11-12). Psalm 91 articulates for us the notion of guardian angels who serve us at God's command, whose primary role is our personal care and protection, both physically and spiritually.

2 Kings 6:8-23 recounts the occasion on which the king of Aram declared war against the Kingdom of Israel. Israel were hopelessly outnumbered, and from a human perspective, on paper, were headed for a heavy defeat. However, the prophet Elisha did not judge by mere human sense. He knew that the God of Israel encamps around those who fear Him and delights to defend them. The King of Aram sent a strong force, including horses and chariots, to Dothan to capture Elisha and to defeat all Israel. It was a sight sufficient to strike fear into the hearts of most people. Certainly, it was enough to make Elisha's servant weak at the knees. Undeterred, Elisha declared, despite being hopelessly outnumbered in terms of boots on the ground, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them". The servant must have wondered what on earth the prophet was talking about. Then Elisha prayed for his servant: "O Lord, open his eyes so he can see". In answer to Elisha's prayer, the Lord opened his servant's eyes to see, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. The servant's eyes, once blind to the spiritual reality of squadrons of angels in chariots of fire, saw and believed. With God as our shield and defender, it is always true to say "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them". The legions of angels at God's command, the overwhelming power and might of our great God, are always greater than any force that may be arrayed against us as His people.

I am aware of stories of God's people in extreme danger who have been granted deliverance by the ministry of angels, quite often unawares, only to discover that fact after the event by testimony of their adversaries. John G Paton testified to his house being surrounded by head-hunting cannibals one night. But as the Patons prayed, angels were deployed like an armed guard around the house, something only the cannibals could see and which kept them from entering the house or doing harm to the servants of the Lord. It was only after the event that this fact came to light. More recently, Merve Topp of Topp End Ministries, bore testimony to a similar experience when ministering to a hostile group of indigenous men in a remote location. Angels that were visible to their enemies kept the missionaries from all harm. I remember when Rick Hillman suffered his horrendous bicycle accident and was lying on the roadway with severe head and neck injuries, the first person to attend him identified himself as a doctor and gave Rick instructions concerning how to immediately manage his neck injury that were vital to Rick's survival and eventual recovery. But there was no record of a doctor ever being present at the scene of the accident or having attended to Rick on the roadway. It was a complete mystery, the kind of mystery that cannot be explained from a human perspective, but which fits perfectly with our belief that our Heavenly Father is a caring and keeping God who graciously intervenes in times of crisis to defend and protect His own, who commands His angels concerning us.

Know that in this time of danger, you are held in the everlasting arms of love, you are kept by the grace and power of God, who commands His angel concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

19. "I sought the Lord and He heard me and delivered me from all my fears." Psalm 34:4. 19.05.2020

Here King David bears personal testimony concerning God's gracious dealings with him in a particular situation of need - and in doing so, points us to deep spiritual truths that ought to be of great encouragement and hope to each one of us: namely, fears are not part of God's good plan for us; He wants to free us from them entirely both in this life and the next; He has the power and grace to do this for us - to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves; and all we have to do to access God's deliverance from fear is to seek after Him, to have real dealings with Him, He delights to deliver from fear those who earnestly seek Him.

This is very good news for all of us, because we are vulnerable to being assailed by fear. Fear is a tool of the Evil One. It is aroused in us whenever we listen to the Devil's lies and begin to believe them. Whatever the fear, or the fear-inducing circumstance - fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. In other words, we stop believing that God's love is unfailing and that nothing can separate us from His love; we stop believing in God's ability to keep us from falling, to hold onto us through any and every circumstance; we stop believing that God is able to bring us through every danger and trial safe home to His heavenly kingdom; we stop believing in God's power to present us faultless before the presence of His glory. Fear is to stop believing that our life is safe and secure in the everlasting arms of God's love, and to start yielding to false evidence appearing real. Fear is to walk by sight and not by faith.

Fear is a weakness we are all vulnerable to. But the good news is that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness. Jesus, our Great High Priest, was tempted in every way, just like us, and is therefore able to sympathise with us in our weaknesses. Fear is a weakness that our Saviour sympathises with us in. And His sympathy extends to the fact that He has a plan to set us free from all our fears. There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear. Our Lord and Saviour wants us to live free from fear - bold, confident, overcomes, more than conquerors through Him who loved us, and able to do all things through Him who strengthens us. We have not been given a spirit of fear, but of love, of power, and of self-discipline.

Our loving Heavenly Father does not want us to be bound up in fear a day or moment longer. He wants us to lay our burden down and give us rest. He wants to deliver us from all our fears. I trust you know something of the victory of faith overcoming fear in the midst of our shared sense of need.

20. Sanctity of Life and the Coronavirus. 20.05.2020

One positive aspect of our collective response to the coronavirus has been the willingness on the part of governments and citizens around the world to make costly sacrifices in terms of personal freedoms and economic prosperity in order to protect and save human life. Respect for human life expressed in a desire to protect all, but especially the most vulnerable among us, from catching the virus has brought out something of the best of human nature in us all. Perhaps it is because coronavirus poses an existential threat to all humanity that there has largely been bipartisan support for all constructive attempts to mitigate the risk and spread of the virus. It is always true that people are much more important than things. Things are replaceable, people are not. The decision made to choose life over all else has been heart-warming to see play out in collective action.

Perhaps we needed the shock of a crisis of this magnitude to get us back to basics in terms of accepting and honouring our social obligations to one another. Modern life and modern families do not always respect the dignity and worth of all human life. There are many ethical and moral dilemmas that arise within modern society that erode the dignity and worth of human life in a variety of ways. We can easily cease to be scandalised by the atrocities of war, by repeated exposure we can become comfortably numb to the barbarity of suicide bombers in targeting innocent civilians, even to intentionally attacking the maternity ward of a hospital in order to kill innocent human life at birth. To what depths of human depravity some will go, in terms of man's inhumanity to man, is revealed constantly in the news headlines that confront us. And that is not to mention the scandal surrounding the seemingly much more socially acceptable way in which modern society deals with unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.

Honouring our social obligations to one another requires us first to understand what those obligations are and then to accept them as binding upon all of us. The sixth commandment spells out what is the greatest social obligation incumbent upon us as a human race. It is couched in the negative "Do not murder", but it actually has an incredibly important positive message to communicate, namely that we are to treasure all human life as sacred, that all human life is a gift from God, our Maker and sustainer, to be accepted, respected, protected, defended. The intrinsic value of all human life derives from the fact that regardless of our gender, race, age, health, disability, or social status, we have been made in the image of God, to bear His likeness and to reflect His glory. The sixth commandment requires of all the living that we treasure both our own life and that of all our fellow human beings, that we uphold the dignity and worth of all human beings, that we respect each person's

inalienable right to life and their equal and intrinsic worth as persons, which are established, not by the things we do or by the accumulated goods we possess, but by virtue of God's act of creation, His gift of life, His forming us in His image, His sustaining of our life from day to day, and His work of redemption in Christ, in which He shed His blood to win our pardon. Every man and woman, boy and girl has a God-given potential, a God-given destiny that they ought to be free to seek to fulfil unhindered.

The sixth commandment affirms the dignity and worth of all human life and outlines our social obligation to refrain from the unjust taking of innocent human life, but rather to respect, defend and protect their life and ours. By contrast, the greatest offence one can commit under the sixth commandment is for we, to whom life has been granted as a gift, to use that life to take the innocent life of another human being unjustly, to deny them their inalienable right to life, to deny them their intrinsic worth as a person, to destroy the image of God in them, to arrogantly take the place of God and decide who lives and who dies.

From its very inception, the Christian Church has affirmed that life is precious and that it begins at conception. The Christian Church has always taught that children are to be welcomed, cherished, nurtured. They deserve to be protected, even in the womb, and it is a monstrous sin in the sight of God to rob a pre-born child of the life he or she has not yet begun to enjoy. Modern families are often confronted by the shame, embarrassment, inconvenience, or disruption of an unplanned, unwelcome pregnancy. At a human level, in our modern world, the termination of a pregnancy is one way to remove the sense of shame, embarrassment, inconvenience, or disruption, but at what cost? God sees what is done in secret. He knows and is deeply grieved when the life He has formed for His own glory is rejected and destroyed. The blood of the innocents cries out to Him from the ground as much today as it did in Cain's day. When an unborn child is robbed of the life they have not yet begun to enjoy, all life is cheapened, human dignity is lessened, and for all the so-called freedom and convenience it may bring, there is the unspoken guilt and grief that remain, along with such a grievous waste of human life.

21. Life is Precious. 22.05.2020

The Moderator General of the Presbyterian Church, Rev Peter Barnes, has called for churches throughout Australia to celebrate this Sunday, 24th May, as "Sanctity of Life" Sunday. Trinity Session has answered the call and has resolved to participate. So, the focus of this Sunday's service will be on celebrating the sacredness of human life, rededicating ourselves to affirming all life as given by God, and as such is to be respected and protected. At a time when we share in the heightened risk to life through the worldwide spread of coronavirus, it is right that we express our gratitude for the life that we have been given, to give thanks for God's grace in preserving and sustaining us through this time of danger, to cherish the life of each one and to give thanks for it.

Our shared belief in the sanctity of human life derives primarily from God's creative act in forming us all in His image, yet uniquely so as individuals. It is further established by the sixth commandment, which clearly outlines that our greatest social obligation to one another as fellow human beings is to respect, protect, and defend all life, both theirs and our own. This is a core value shared by both Jews and Christians and is fundamental to our entire understanding of right and wrong, good and evil. The greatest social good one can do is to defend and protect the life of our neighbour. The greatest social evil one can commit is to take the life of one's neighbour unjustly.

The sixth commandment speaks directly into the modern ethical dilemmas raised by abortion and euthanasia. In the ancient Roman world, the world in which the Christian church came into being, abortion and infanticide were widely practised. But from the very beginning, an authentic Christian morality has rejected abortion as a sinful choice displeasing to God, and a clear breach of the sixth commandment. A widely circulated first century AD Christian tract called "The Didache (The Teaching)" forbade abortion among the church of Jesus Christ and upheld the Judeo-Christian conviction that life is precious and begins at conception, and that children are precious and deserve to be protected, even in the womb.

At the time of the Reformation, when biblical Christianity was rediscovered, John Calvin wrote, in a similar vein, that "the foetus, though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being, and it is a monstrous crime to rob it of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy." We would want to express our unqualified agreement with that statement. Respect for human life is an indisputable characteristic of both a humane and civilised society and of a Bible-believing people. An unborn child, while enclosed in the body of its mother, is from the moment of conception, a unique individual with its own genome distinct from both parents, its own gender, its own hair, eye, and skin colour, an unborn child is its own person, with an inalienable right to life, and with an intrinsic worth as having been made in the image of God. As God-fearing people, we would want to affirm together the inalienable right to life of every unborn child and seek to both defend the rights of unborn children who are unable to defend themselves, and speak up for unborn children, who cannot speak for themselves.

22. The Fruit of the Holy Spirit. 26.05.2020

Galatians 5:22 reveals to us what are the fruits of the Holy Spirit. These nine beautiful character traits are the proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. Christ-like character is produced in us not by our trying harder to be better people, not by our striving to keep the law, but by yielding to Christ and submitting to the life-giving presence and power of the Holy Spirit, a presence that is manifest in us and through us by purifying our personality, transforming our temperament, renewing our character and values, so as to conform us more and more to the likeness of Christ our Saviour. We have been saved from sin and death, but we have also been saved for a life of godliness and holiness, in which our old sinful nature is crucified with Christ, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies us through and through, equipping us to live a God-pleasing life, and ultimately preparing us for Heaven. If we confess Christ as Lord, then we have the Holy Spirit, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be progressively being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. The beauty of His life will be seen lived out in us and mediated through our personality amidst all the changing seasons of life. Times of crisis, such as we find ourselves in at the present, are times in which the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit will be most evident in our lives, when we will shine for Jesus in a world that desperately needs Him.

These nine Christian graces or virtues that are the fruits of the Holy Spirit will be evident in the change that is effected in our very disposition, what we regard as important, how we handle conflict, how we react in situations of provocation, how we react to fear-inducing circumstances. Our instinctive reactions to unexpected things that happen often say more about a person than carefully considered actions. Instinctive reactions reveal the true state of our heart. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to so work these virtues into our personality such that they shape and determine all our actions, including our instinctive reactions in those split-second moments when we get caught unawares by some life circumstance that adversely affects us.

I am sure you will agree with me that Nichole Nicholls' internet posts throughout James' prolonged illness bear all the marks of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, her love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control have shone through in every post, even in moments of deep discouragement or great uncertainty. James' deliverance has been a miracle of God's grace. Nichole's steadfast testimony throughout James' illness has been no less a miracle of God's grace, and a beautiful example to us all of how to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

23. Keeping Step with the Holy Spirit. 27.05.2020

Last Sunday was the seventh Sunday after Easter, or Pentecost, the day on which we particularly remember and give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of Jesus, sent by the Father and the Son, to be with us always, to the very end of the Age. The Holy Spirit is the presence of Jesus, manifesting the life of Christ within every blood-bought believer. Unlike under the Old Covenant, the Spirit is not given for a limited period of time, or for a specific purpose, but is poured out on all flesh, as the prophet Joel puts it, in other words, is poured out on all believers regardless of age gender, or ethnicity, and will be with us always until Christ returns. We become temples of the Holy Spirit. He takes up residence in our lives and leads us by His grace. He is our teacher and leads us into all truth. He takes the things of Jesus and makes them known to us. He illuminates God's Word to our hearts and minds. He uses the Scripture to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us in righteousness. He renews our mind, He grants to us a new heart, He enlivens our will, He quickens our conscience, He makes us spiritually alive. He imparts faith, He inspires prayers of faith, He enables us to step out in faith claiming the promises of God. The Holy Spirit is primarily the Spirit of Holiness. His task is to sanctify us through and through. His mission is to prepare us to be ready and unashamed at the coming again of the Lord Jesus. To do this, He is committed to purifying all our affections and desires, so that we love all that God loves, and hate all that God hates, with every touch of the old sinful nature crucified with Christ, and the life of Christ fully formed in us. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to lead us all through life, to keep us in eternal life, and at last to bring us safe home to Heaven, blameless and with great joy.

The Holy Spirit has sometimes been described as the "shy member of the Trinity". Certainly, His concern is not to attract attention to Himself, but to point away from Himself to Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not force His will on us, contrary to our own choice or desire. It is possible to resist the Holy Spirit. It is also possible to grieve the Holy Spirit, even to quench the Holy Spirit. To guard against such bad outcomes, in Galatians, Paul urges all believers to "keep in step with the Holy Spirit". This simple phrase points us to a wonderful truth, namely, the Holy Spirit has been sent to lead us through life, in holiness and righteousness all our days, in acknowledgment of which, we must follow His lead, keep step with Him, walk at the same pace, not running ahead of Him or lagging behind. To keep step with the Holy Spirit requires of all of us to give up our own agendas and ambitions so as to be in the Spirit, keeping step with His plans and purposes at any given point in time on our journey home to Heaven. Right from the beginning, the Scripture describes the life of faith in terms of a walk. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening. Enoch walked with God and then he was not, for the Lord took him. David

described an experience of extreme hardships as walking through the valley of the shadow of death, but not alone, for the Lord was with him. Walking has been the primary way of life and mode of transport for people down through history until the advent of the motor car. It is estimated that the Apostle Paul walked over 30,000 ks when undertaking his missionary journeys, that is one and a half times around the coast of mainland Australia. In other words, he walked a very long way. And no doubt as he walked, God spoke to him by His Spirit, directing him where to go next, directing him what to say or write in his letters. It was the walking Apostle who urges us to not just walk the walk of faith, but to keep step with the Holy Spirit as we do so. We never need walk alone. We simply need to keep pace with, walk the way of, follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of our unique personalities, as we keep step with the Holy Spirit, He works in us the same beautiful virtues albeit mediated through our own personalities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Holy Spirit has been given to us to lead us all the way home. It is for just such times as we are presently experiencing that His help has been supplied. He wants to draw along-side of you, He wants to be your helper, companion, guide. Times of danger, hardship, and adversity are times when we feel our weakness and need but are the perfect opportunity for the Spirit's help to prove more than sufficient for our need.

24. Just like Jesus - The Fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). 28.05.2020

Galatians 5:22-23 contain a list of nine personal and relational qualities that we know to be the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The evidence of these qualities made manifest in the life of a believer is proof of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in that person's life. An absence or lack of these qualities indicates a serious spiritual problem, a major dis-connect between profession and practise. While we may be instantly attracted to the beauty of these qualities and aspire to be like this, such perfection is unattainable by our own striving. Only the Holy Spirit can form in us these virtues and enable us to live up to such a high standard. These nine personal qualities represent the best in human nature, they summarise what a perfect human being looks like, the greatest good we could ever aspire to, they describe the kind of friend we would all want to have, and hopefully, the kind of friend we would all want to be.

And what a friend we have in Jesus! These nine virtues are in truth a picture, a portrait of Jesus. Our Lord and Saviour embodied in His earthly life the perfection of these virtues in all His being and doing. They describe a relational integrity, a level of personal virtue that Jesus displayed in all His dealings with people, and in all His obedience to the Father. So, we are right to understand that it is the mission of the Holy Spirit to form in us the character and likeness of Christ by bringing forth in us these beautiful qualities in increasing measure, albeit mediated through our own unique personalities. Our progress as pilgrims can be measured by our inward transformation so as to outwardly display these Christ-like virtues in increasing measure as we journey homeward along the path of faith. The measure with which we keep in step with the Holy Spirit will determine the rate of our progress in terms of manifesting these fruits of the Holy Spirit. Keeping step with the Holy Spirit means letting the Holy Spirit lead, and following His lead, keeping pace with Him, letting go of our own ambitions, not going our own way, but fully yielded to the Spirit's leading, not running ahead or lagging behind. As we do so through all the changing seasons and circumstances of life, the Spirit will progressively transform us from the inside out so as to conform us to this beautiful standard in increasing measure. By staying this course in keeping step with the Spirit, there will come a day when His work in us will be complete and we are made to be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ. That will be a day of exceeding joy in which we are presented faultless before the presence of God's glory, the life of Christ fully formed in us, made to be a perfect replica of Jesus concerning these nine beautiful character traits.

God's love for us is such that no unexpected development, no crisis, no pandemic, no nothing, can stop His plan for us from reaching its fulfilment. On the contrary, times of hardship and adversity, far from frustrating God's purposes concerning us, in fact serve to advance them. God works all things together for good for those who love Him. Our Heavenly Father can sometimes do more to sanctify us through hard times than good, by bringing us to realise our need, so to live more expectant, more dependent upon His gracious help.

It is the will of God for each one of His children that we excel in these graces of the Holy Spirit. In realisation of this fact, make it your goal to come through this pandemic a more loving, more joyous, more peaceable, more patient, kinder, better, more faithful, gentler, more self-controlled child of God than you were before, then you ever have been up until now. As you align your will with God's will for you, as you adjust your spiritual gait so as to keep step with the Holy Spirit, God will bring it about, for your blessing and for His glory.

25. God's Highest and Best. 29.05.2020

In celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which falls 7 weeks after Easter, or last weekend, I have sought this week in these letters to focus on the key role the Holy Spirit has in the life of the believer, particularly during a time of crisis as we find ourselves in right now. In John 14,15 and 16, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as "the Counsellor" or "the Helper", inferring that the Spirit draws alongside of each believer to help us in time of need, to act as our advocate, our counsel, enabling us to rise to the challenge and overcome by His power at work within us.

Central to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives is His determination to sanctify us completely in order to conform us to the likeness of Christ. He does this by an inward transformation that becomes evident in what are described as the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). These are nine virtues the Spirit forms in us to make us more like Jesus. Each of these nine qualities are absolutely true of the perfect life of Christ, which the Spirit is determined to form in us also. A pandemic is an opportune time for us to acknowledge our need, to express our utter dependence upon God, and for Him to advance His work of forming these Christ-like qualities in us, for our blessing and for His glory. It is vital that we appreciate that it is the mission and objective of the Holy Spirit to form these graces in us and to actively seek to place ourselves in the way of growing in these graces as we pilgrim through life.

Today, I wish to present to you in summary form each of these nine Christian graces in order to encourage an earnest seeking after what God has clearly revealed to be His will for us. A simple way I have found to remember these nine graces in order to meditate upon them and actively seek after them is to break them into three brackets of three, and to recognise that the first bracket of three have just one syllable, the second bracket of three have two syllables, and the third bracket of three have three syllables: love, joy, peace; then patience, kindness, goodness; then faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is a simple way of remembering and remembering is vital to attaining the goal the Holy Spirit has for each one of us. Our willing participation is vital to the attainment of the Spirit's goal for our lives.

Firstly, then, our Heavenly Father, who is love, whose every thought is love, wants your life and mine to be defined by love, the kind of love Jesus had for people, not a love that is mushy and sentimental but a love that is selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional, a love that is giving and serving, a love that is free from judgment, a love that accepts people just as they are in all their brokenness, yet a love that does not want them to remain for one moment longer enslaved by sin but bids them go and sin no more.

Our Heavenly Father has given us His Spirit so that our lives may be marked by joy, the same joy that Jesus had. For the joy that was set before Him, Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem, He endured the cross, despising its shame. For the joy of knowing what the cross would accomplish in terms of bringing many sons and daughters to glory, Jesus willingly bore the cross with all its shame, He endured the taunts and cursing, and without the least sign of any rage or spite commonly shown by those crucified. Instead, Jesus prayed for God's mercy on the souls of His executioners. The joyous future that awaits us ought likewise enable us to bear present sufferings with calm and brave endurance, knowing that they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Our Heavenly Father longs for us to experience real peace as our personal disposition, as our relational base. He wants us to be peace-loving, peace-making people, at peace with God, and peaceable in all our relationships. He wants to give His peace to us, so that we become channels of His peace in a troubled world.

Our Heavenly Father wants to transform our personalities so as to rid us of the propensity to annoyance, anger, impatience, complaint and intolerance in order to replace it with patience, an unhurried trust that is willing to wait on God, that is long-suffering and fore-bearing when it comes to dealing with the faults and weaknesses of others.

Our Heavenly Father wants to eradicate any touch of harshness, cruelty, judgment, or prejudice in us, and replace it with Christ-like kindness and compassion. This of course requires humility and a willingness to think of others more highly than ourselves. The will to bless others through acts of kindness requires intentionality, effort, forethought, sensitivity, discernment and genuine concern that are born of the Spirit of Jesus.

Our Heavenly Father wants to break any attraction to evil and create in us a delight in all things good, so that we side with the good, so that we hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Only the Spirit can open our eyes so as to delight in the good, only a Spirit enlivened conscience can enable us to sense and recoil from every touch of evil and resist every temptation to evil.

Our Heavenly Father wants to form us to be trustworthy and faithful as His children, loyal, obedient and true through ups and downs, through thick and thin, true to our word, faithful in all our commitments and responsibilities. Such constancy and perseverance in doing good is born of the Spirit in us.

Our Heavenly Father longs for us to be gentle people, both personally and relationally, not forceful, authoritarian, opinionated, harsh, critical, judgmental, or divisive but meek like Jesus. And to be sure, meekness is not weakness but is strength under the control of the Holy Spirit, much like a bridled horse, broken in and yielded to the will of its master. Instead of our strengths being asserted to serve our selfish ends, they are yielded to the will of our Master, Jesus, and as gentle people under the leading of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to build others up and not tear them down.

Our Heavenly Father longs for us to be self-controlled, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, so as to take responsibility for all our decisions and actions, without shifting blame. Spirit empowered self-control will enable us to stay strong and true in the face of temptation, to win through to victory against compulsions and addictions, to be true to God when no one else is looking.

White light, when refracted through a glass prism, is displayed as the seven colours of the rainbow, the full range of light frequencies that form the constituent elements of light. Likewise, when the love of Christ is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, it shows itself in the full display of these nine Christ-like graces known as the fruits of the Spirit.

These nine Christian graces taken together represent God's highest and best for each one of us, here is described what Spirit-empowered perfect humanity consists of, principally expressed in the life of Christ, yet progressively replicated in each one of His followers by an inward transformation wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. As we come out of lockdown and begin to anticipate what life will be like going forward, may this be the "new normal" for each one of us. It is the will of God for each one of His children that we excel in these graces of the Holy Spirit. In realisation of this fact, make it your goal to come through this pandemic a more loving, more joyous, more peaceable, more patient, kinder, better, more faithful, gentler, more self-controlled child of God than you were before, then you ever have been up until now. As you align your will with God's will for you, as you keep step with the Holy Spirit, God will bring it about, for your blessing and for His glory.

26. 2020 – the Year that God Forgot? 02.06.2020

There has been some alarmist commentary offered in relation to the pandemic, but perhaps the most strikingly off-the-wall comments I have heard were made by an ABC political commentator early on in the pandemic, who felt the need to stray from his area of expertise into theological speculation by declaring that 2020 was "the year that God forgot". That he believes in God is commendable. That the God he believes in is capable of forgetting to the extent that a pandemic breaks out while he is not watching begs the question what does he imagine God to be like, and if the God he believes in can be so careless or so powerless, is he worth believing in anyway? Such a God of political commentary is certainly not the God of the Bible. For in Scripture, God reveals Himself to be the one who neither slumbers nor sleeps. He is ever watchful, never sleeping. Psalm 121 proclaims the God of the Bible to be the one who watches over the life of His people, our comings and goings, both now and forevermore, and as the Maker of heaven and earth, He is willing and able to keep us from all harm. The only thing He ever forgets is our sin when we repent of it. He casts it into the depths of the sea and remembers it no more (Isaiah 43:25).

An objective reading of the Bible will lead us to a very different conclusion than that of the ABC political commentator. Whenever a plague broke out in biblical history, it was not that God had forgotten people, but that people had forgotten God. The plagues of Egypt were ordered by God when all ordinary means had failed to bring the Egyptian pharaoh to let God's people go. After the death of Aaron, there was a plague of snakes that broke out upon the Israelites, due to their bitter complaints against God and against Moses, and many died (Numbers 21), until, at God's command, Moses crafted a bronze snake, mounted it on a pole and called on the people who had been bitten to look at the bronze snake and live. When Israel lost the ark of the covenant to the Philistines, who regarded it as a trophy of war, a plague of boils broke out in the Philistine population until they repented of their pride and returned the ark to Israel (1 Samuel 5). When David counted the fighting men of Israel, an act of confidence in the flesh rather than faith in the living God, the Lord sent a plague that was ended only when David repented and built an altar where the angel withdrew his hand, it was at the threshing floor of Araunah, the Jebustite, which David then purchased, the one and only time that piece of real estate has ever changed hands for money. That site became the location of the temple, or Mt Moriah, where Abraham had offered his son Isaac, and remains the location of the Temple Mount to this day (2 Samuel 24).

It is clear from this brief summary that plague is one means that God has used in times past to warn, to humble,

and sometimes to judge those who forget Him. It has been used both in relation to those who oppose the Lord and His people, and also to warn His people when they forget Him and oppose Him. Because God's Word links plague with some sin or offence, we know it to be an act of God in that context. However, because God has used plague in times past as a form of warning or judgment, does not mean that every time there is a plague outbreak, God has got it in for someone. Just like all sickness and disease, plague is part of the groaning nature of creation, plague is a consequence of the fallen nature of our world. Pandemics will likely remain with us until Christ returns and makes all things new. When God speaks, either directly or through His prophets, and declares that He is using plague to warn people who have forgotten Him, the right response is to repent and return to Him. But when God does not speak and make that link Himself, we need to be very careful about presuming to speak for Him with any degree of authority by making that link ourselves.

Some Christians may be tempted to speculate or to make "thus says the Lord" type statements concerning this plague, its causes, and God's purpose for permitting it. That God has permitted it is beyond doubt, for He is sovereign in His world and nothing happens to us or at all without God's knowledge and consent. That God has permitted this as a warning, a wakeup call to us all to return to the Lord, to remember the Lord, is beyond doubt. This plague ought to humble us in our pride as a human race, bring us to an acknowledgement of our vulnerability and need, and turn to God in faith and trust. In that sense, the plague may be seen as "a day of the Lord" that is intended to get us ready for "the day of the Lord", "the great and terrible day of the Lord" or the return of Christ and the last judgment, a day of strict justice, when the Judge of all the earth will do right.

There is no doubt that society at large has forgotten God. There is no doubt that as a society, we need a wake-up call so as to turn to God or return to God as the case may be, acknowledge Him, submit to Him, and honour Him, personally and corporately. But without a clear word from God Himself, we must refrain from making the link between this plague and God's displeasure with any specific action or offence or group within society. To do so can in fact cause untold harm to the cause of the Gospel. I remember living in Tasmania when in April 1996, Martin Bryant went on a shooting rampage at Port Arthur, killing 35 people, the worst mass murder using a military style automatic weapon in Australia's history. It was a deeply distressing and traumatising event for the entire population, that shook us as a nation to the core, and led to meaningful gun control thanks to the leadership of John Howard. While part of that island population at the time and responsible for ministering to my own congregation in the midst of such grief, I was shocked and appalled when a leading Christian educator from the mainland wrote a tract linking the massacre with our nation's forsaking of the Lord's day sabbath (the massacre occurred on a Sunday afternoon). To speculate as to a divine cause of such evil is one thing, to be specific about linking such evil with God and then to assert that God was somehow displeased at our refusal to keep the Lord's Day holy became national news for all the wrong reasons, and set back the cause of the Gospel in this country. Such speculation embittered Walter Mikac and no doubt many others who had suffered such profound grief, only for a complete stranger to compound their grief with false guilt.

Unless and until God speaks and reveals His will concerning some tragic event, we will do well to avoid speculating or presuming to speak for God in order to attribute guilt or blame, other than to be in agreement that this pandemic is a wake-up call for us all, reminding us that life is precious, that we are all vulnerable, our hold on life is tenuous, we are not masters of our own destiny, we are all dependent upon God whether we know it or not, and we are all accountable to God. 2020 is certainly not the year that God forgot, but because of this pandemic, I trust it will be the year that many repent of having forgotten God and remember and return to Him.

27. "It came to Pass" A biblical view of History. 04.06.2020

Common throughout the Old Testament is the Hebrew word "Vaheyi", translated in the KJV as "it came to pass". It often appears in the text to denote singleness or continuity of purpose after the passing of a long period of time, as in "after 430 years of slavery in Egypt, it came to pass that..." It is the usual way that the Old Testament describes the passing of time and the fulfilment of purpose. There are 727 uses of it in the Old Testament. Modern translations sometimes render it as a link word translated "now" or "then" or not at all. However, if the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then every word has meaning and is the very breathed out Word of God. God uses words to reveal Himself, His will and purpose, and He does not waste His words. This word "vaheyi" or "and it came to pass" communicates that there is an overall flow and direction to history, there is a plan, purpose, goal, and end. History is not a string of accidental, disconnected, haphazard events all lumped together at random. History is a chain of events that express God's plan and purpose for the world. God is about His business, He is in control, everything is going according to plan. "It came to pass" indicates that there is a reason and purpose to everything that happens. Every event, even crisis events, represent a link in the chain of God's plan and purpose, and is part of the good He is working towards for those who love Him. We will do well to recover this rich sense of history as we seek to engage with our world, and particularly as we respond to the coronavirus.

When we have a biblical view of history and the passing of time, being the outworking of God's purposes in the

world, then we are immediately faced with the challenge to not grumble or complain or stress when hard or unwelcome events unfold, but to ask: "What is the good purpose God has for us in this?" Times of danger or trial or hardship, as we presently experience, are for all God's people a test or trial of our faith. They can become a stumbling stone to faith in which we doubt God's love and care and turn away from Him in unbelief. Or they can become stepping stones to a closer walk with God. The truth is God really does care. It is not His will that our faith should fail but that it be proved genuine and refined like gold in the fire. Days of trouble must happen. This pandemic will pass. We are already beginning to see the passing of it through containment, even though a vaccine is still not available. What this little Hebrew word gives to us all is height and perspective, an eternal perspective so as to see the big picture, to be able to hold on to the reality that God is still on the throne, that He is still in control, that He knows what He is doing, that He can be trusted, and that He does not make mistakes.

When we believe this and get about the Father's business, not preoccupied with our own condition, not obsessed with our own needs, not swept along by our own fears, we can be at peace amid the storms of life because we know we are at the centre of God's will for us, and there could not be a better or safer place to be. Whatever adverse circumstance, whatever disruption to life or business this pandemic may cause, by faith we can see it all as part of God's plan, for the accomplishment of His purposes. And in that light, the phrase "and it came to pass" will be for us among the most comforting, reassuring words in all the Bible. There is a plan. There is a purpose in everything that happens leading on toward the goal. Crisis situations are opportunities for faith to rise. This crisis will pass, but in the meantime, God has a plan and a purpose in it.

"And it came to pass" is such a suitable and helpful way of describing the flow of history, the passage of time, the interconnected sequence of events that shape our lives. Amid the blur of bare events, we are steered away from thinking in terms of luck, chance, or coincidence. Rather, we believe that everything has a purpose, everything has a season, everything has a limit, everything will have an end. Hence, every event presents a limited opportunity for us to seek for the good God has purposed for us in it, before that season passes and we find ourselves in a new situation entirely.

28. Learning from Job how to deal with tragedy. 05.06.2020

It is a tendency of fallen human nature to want to find fault or apportion blame in the event of some tragedy. Such tendency is often predicated on a false assumption as to the ways and character of God. One commonly held assumption is that God punishes people with physical suffering and affliction for the sins they commit. Based on that assumption, all tragedy is caused by some hidden sin in the sufferer, and the only hope for relief from the suffering is to confess and repent of the hidden sin that allegedly caused it. The Old Testament Book of Job, with its longwinded, tiresome, and erroneous speeches by Job's "comforters", seeks to expose the fallacy of such thinking, in order to open us up to the mystery of God's providence, and the wonder of God's plans and purposes, even through tragedy.

You will remember that Job was a righteous man who had a happy family, was successful in business, and owned vast wealth. Then tragedy struck. He lost all of his 10 children in a tragic building collapse. He lost his considerable wealth to thieves. And he lost his health, leaving him unable to work or socialise or function with any degree of wellbeing. His suffering was extreme. He did not know what hit him. His life was devastated by tragedy. But he humbly accepted what happened to him and was released to acknowledge and worship God through it all.

While Job remained in the dark as to the cause of his tragedy, we the reader are given insight into its cause. It was Satan inspired, and was based on the lie that Job only believed in God for the personal benefit he gained by doing so, but if all benefits were taken away, Satan's assertion was that Job would curse God to His face. Satan put this monstrous proposition to the God of Heaven, who agreed to permit, restrict, and limit Satan's testing of Job in order to put the lie to Satan's falsehood and in order to bring glory to His name by Job's vindication. All the while, Job remained oblivious to what was happening in heavenly places, as were his "friends", who sought to comfort him, based on their false and judgmental assumptions.

The majority of the text of Job is comprised of his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar along with another character Elihu tag teaming to wear Job down with their repeated judgmental narrative to the effect that for all Job's success, he was a bad person who must have done some very bad things which he needed to repent of in order to find relief. Their words were cold comfort indeed. With friends like that, who needs enemies? They sought to heap false guilt on Job at a time when he was at his weakest and most vulnerable. The deterioration of Job's mental state is discernible as the drama unfolds. Job's spiritual state also suffers as he is constantly plied with not words of faith but pious falsehood and lies. Just how much can any man take? Job begins to mentally and spiritually disintegrate.

But God, in His mercy, will not allow His children to be tested beyond their ability to endure. After what for Job must have seemed like forever, God called a halt to this whole sorry episode. The Lord thundered at Job, in the kindest possible way, rebuking him for those times he gave in to doubt and despair. But most importantly, God revealed Job's faith to be genuine, not mercenary and self-serving. God's own character is shown to be nothing like the vindictive, judgmental, legalistic, cruel God that Job's friends made him out to be. Satan is exposed for the liar that he is. Then having stood the test, Job was far more abundantly blessed in the latter part of his life with material prosperity than he had been before. And Job was tasked with being an intercessor for his friends, who had failed him so badly, and who themselves needed to be released from their bondage to falsehood.

When Jesus was asked by His disciples: "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?", they were reflecting the exact same false assumption that lay behind the message of Job's "comforters". Jesus' reply also sums up the main message of the Book of Job: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened that the work of God may be displayed in his life". (John 9:1-3). Apportioning guilt or blame in the event of some tragedy is a seriously unhelpful exercise that falsely misrepresents God and damages people. But with Jesus we can always be sure that the occurrence of some tragedy or hardship is an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in that person's life. This present tragedy in the form of a pandemic may have spiritual and moral causes, which we do not know and cannot say for certain. But one thing we can be sure of: this pandemic is an opportunity for God's work to be displayed in our lives and in our community. May it be so for the praise of His name.

29. Don't waste your sorrows (Job II). 09.06.2020

We can learn from godly saints like Job how to not waste our sorrows but to grow in faith and love for God through what was for him the combined tragedies of ill health, bereavement, and financial loss, what for us may be chronic back pain, a terminal diagnosis, or the grief of a pandemic. When we are first introduced to Job, he is described as a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil, the greatest man among all the peoples of the east (Job 1:1,3). He had a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of his children and took active steps to intercede on their behalf. In other words, Job had a lively faith and love for God that was lived out in practice in his personal and family life. Being the greatest man among all the peoples of the East suggests that Job knew God and walked with God in such a way as to set him apart from his peers. When tragedy struck, Job's response was also full of faith in God and complete submission to His will (Job 1:21-22; 2:10).

But in addition to the immense tragedies he had to deal with, Job was up against it, with his wife far less accepting of their loss, urging him to curse God and die, and his three friends wearing him down by their constant nagging, bombarding him with a false narrative and compounding his grief with false guilt. The aloneness and intensity of his sorrow combined with the falsehood spoken out by those closest to him only served to drag him down into hopelessness and despair. Never did he curse God or want to die, but he did wish he had never been born. Never did he believe for a moment the false narrative of his so-called friends, but he did want it all to end, especially their nagging.

But when God finally called time on the testing of Job's faith and declare his servant vindicated, there were rash statements that Job has spoken along the way under severe provocation that needed to be corrected. When the Lord finally spoke into Job's situation (chapters 39-40), He did so by way of a long list of questions for Job to consider, questions that magnify the difference between creator and creature, between Master and servant, questions that highlight just how little we know of the ways of God, for all we think we know. God's interrogation of Job concerned the wonders of creation, the mysteries of the universe, the forces at work in the world that cause it to hold together, the ways of the wild, the power of a thunderstorm, the strength of a horse, the cunning of a bird of prey. They were a list of questions designed to enable Job, and we with him, to reflect on just how much we think we know, just how little we in fact do know, and just how little control we have both over our world and our life in this world. God's questioning of Job was designed to reawaken in him a sense of complete dependence and trust in God who is almighty.

Recently, our six-year-old grandson confidently announced, without fear of contradiction, that he knew everything. It was one of those innocently audacious moments in which it is better to just say nothing in reply. I trust it will not be long before he knows enough to realise just how little he in fact does know. The more we grow in knowledge, the more we ought to discover just how little we in fact do know, quite apart from becoming aware of just how weak and vulnerable we are, how little control we have over our own destiny, how unable we are to keep ourselves alive. God's questioning of Job was intended to lovingly bring him back to that place of dependent trust that realises that our life is in God's hands and that He, not we, controls our destiny.

In that lightbulb moment when he realised the futility of his contentious and accusative outbursts, even under extreme provocation, Job was silenced, he acknowledged his unworthiness. But that was just the start. God

wanted to not merely humble him but to restore and renew him in his faith and in life. So, a second interrogation took place recorded in chapters 40-41 which further highlights just how small we are even by comparison with other living things, the great creatures of the land and sea. Eventually the questions cease and the narrative of human weakness and limitation is impressed upon Job to such an extent that he is no longer under any illusion as to his place in the world in relation to the works and ways of God.

Finally, Job was strengthened to take his hand away from his mouth and reply to the Lord. His reply demonstrated that his sorrows had not been wasted, that he had in fact grown stronger in faith and learned to walk closer with God because of the tragedy he had experienced. Reflecting on his life and experience of God both before and after the tragic events that overwhelmed him, he confessed: "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes". (Job 42:5-6). Job was a man who did not waste his sorrows but learned from them and grew through them. They did not make him bitter but better. Despite the fact that at the start, Job was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil, having come through the experience of tragedy, he could look back on those former times and liken them to a hearsay knowledge or a second-hand experience of God compared to the firsthand eyewitness personal experience and encounter with God that he had entered into through the event of profound tragedy and loss.

Suffering and hardship are means God uses to bring us to an end of ourselves, to bring us to Himself, and to reveal Himself to us in ways that are not possible any other way. Tragedy was for Job not a stumbling stone that caused his faith to fail, but a stepping-stone to a deeper faith, a closer walk, a more real and personal experience of the living God. Don't waste your sorrows. See them, like Job did, as an opportunity to renew dependent trust, humble submission, a closer walk with God going forward. Make the experience of tragedy that life-changing event that upscales your walk with God from a second-hand hearsay faith to a firsthand deep personal experience of the living God.

30. Where is God in a Pandemic? 12.06.2020

Living through a pandemic has been a humbling experience for us all. For all our technological and medical advances, with all the best will in the world, even with all the best minds in the world applied to mitigating the risk and searching for a vaccine, we as a human race have not been able to keep ourselves from being ravaged by a tiny microscopic organism. Millions have become infected, hundreds of thousands have died, economies have been shut down, societies have gone into lockdown, jobs and businesses have been put at risk. We have all felt our vulnerability. We have all become aware of how little control we have over our own destiny. Perhaps this is the first time in human history that people the world over have felt their collective sense of need all at the same time.

It is an ideal time to seek the Lord while He may be found and to call on Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6). Surely there could never be a better time than now to turn to one who is so much greater, mightier, higher than us, who can sustain us, shield and defend us through this time of danger. Such is the priceless privilege that every child of God possesses, such is the privilege of all who humble themselves before Almighty God and seek His grace and help in their time of need. We may not be able to make sense of what is happening to us or around us, but that doesn't matter because we know someone who does, and we are trusting Him to see us through. We may ask ourselves: "Where is God in a pandemic?", and we may not be supplied with neat and complete answers. But again, it doesn't matter because His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). All we need to know is that God has a good plan, He knows what He is doing, He doesn't make mistakes, He does not want our faith to fail, He intends to deliver us in the face of this trial, and bring us safe home to Heaven. He wants to do things for us through hardship and difficulty that He could not achieve any other way.

As Paul makes plain in Romans 11, God's judgments are unsearchable and His paths are beyond tracing out. The depths and riches of His wisdom and knowledge are infinite and unbounded, far beyond the capacity of our finite minds to fully comprehend. Our categories of thought and reason along with our capacity for thought are finite. We are all limited in our capacities. By contrast, our Heavenly Father operates at an entirely different level. He alone sees the end from the beginning. He alone is able to do far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

Our shared experience of living through a pandemic ought to inspire in us the need to be led to one who is higher and mightier and wiser and stronger and more knowledgeable than we are, one who can shield and defend us, one who is able to keep us from falling. God's character is such as to be best described as transcendent. He is so far above us and the troubles that threaten us, He is in fact enthroned upon them. Because He is not touched by our weaknesses or infirmities, He is well able to meet us in our need and help us overcome by His power at

work within us. And because, in the person of His Son, Jesus, God took on human flesh and became one of us, He is also well able to sympathise with us in our need, having been tempted in every way, just like us, yet without sin.

It is not our place as creatures to question or doubt or accuse our Creator, but to trust Him, to seek refuge in Him, to be led by Him, to be abundantly provided for, and to maintain our dependent trust and confidence that He knows what He is doing, and that He doesn't make mistakes.

31. On being the Bride of Christ. 18.06.2020

The image of a spotless and radiant bride beautifully dressed for her husband is that vivid image the Bible frequently uses to describe the will of Christ for His church. That priceless and unrepeatable moment when all the waiting is over, when all the hopes and dreams of two people are realised, when a bride and groom come together dressed in their resplendent wedding garments to be united together as one in marriage – that is the treasured moment in life that the Bible uses as a picture to help us understand the love of Christ for His people, and the plans and preparations he is making for our shared life together.

In Ephesians 5:22-33, the Apostle Paul speaks directly to the question of the obligations and responsibilities a married couple have to one another. Within that context, a husband's obligation to love his wife, which is key to the flourishing of any marriage, is to be modelled on nothing less than love in its purest, most perfect form, namely Christ's great love for the church, His bride. Paul identifies several hallmark qualities of Christ's love for the church that are to find expression in a husband's love for his wife, which in turn will give life and vitality to that marriage. Christ's love for the church, His bride, is first of all sacrificial – He "gave Himself up for her"(v25); then purifying "to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."(v 26-7); and then caring – He feeds and cares for the church (v29). Every husband is here called upon to love like Christ, to love one's wife with a sacrificial, purifying, caring love, a love that lays down our life for the beloved, a love that seeks after the purity and welfare of the beloved, a love that cares for the needs of the beloved with the same sensitivity and attention to detail as if her needs were our own.

Within that context, the purifying love of Christ speaks to us of His will for the church, His bride. His will for us is that at His coming again, He present us to Himself as a spotless bride, as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In other words, during the interim period we now find ourselves in, the period between His first and second coming, despite His long absence from us, He is not only preparing a home for us in Heaven, a mansion with many rooms, but He is preparing us for that place in order to take us there by dealing with every stain of sin, every wrinkle of pride, every blemish of self will. Anything in us that does not belong in Heaven, that we need to be free of, that we need to cast aside and leave behind, anything that grieves the heart of our Beloved and that can prevent us from entering into the joy of a shared life with Him, He lovingly wants to deal with now so as to not be an impediment to the fulfilment of His love for us in eternity.

The purifying love of Christ is exercised in us by the washing with water through the Word. The Word when applied to our hearts and lives, has a purifying cleansing effect upon our souls. It is therefore essential that we engage with God's Word and take it into our lives, so that it can have its purifying, cleansing effect upon us. As we hear God's Word spoken into our life and circumstance, and as we receive and believe it within a glad and willing heart, it will have a purifying effect upon us. It purifies our desires and affections. It renews our heart and our mind. As the truth of God's Word washes over our souls, it deals with anything in us that would grieve our Beloved, any stain or wrinkle or blemish on us as the bride of Christ that would cause Him sorrow, and in doing so, washes us spotlessly clean in God's sight.

Understand that as one of Christ's beloved, His will for you and me is that every stain, wrinkle or blemish caused by sin or self or pride or independence be dealt with now, prior to His coming again, so that we can be presented to Him holy and blameless at His appearing. Understand that the constraints and difficulties associated with a pandemic represent a unique opportunity for the Word of God to speak to us in ways that bring about a cleansing purifying effect on our heart and soul. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is in part a work of subtraction. He wants to take from us anything that is impure or unholy, anything that would grieve His heart of love for us. That process of removal is like taking a bath. In this, we have nothing to lose but the dirt of our sinful habits and our impure desires, and we have everything to gain – the shared joy of all that God has prepared for those who love Him.

32. **Don't Waste a Crisis. 19.06.2020**

Crisis events like a world-wide pandemic don't happen in a vacuum. They crash in upon us and add an extra layer of complexity to our pre-existing living conditions. When those pre-existing conditions are fraught and difficult, a crisis event can heighten the underlying tension and make matters worse. If things are already rocky at home, a lockdown can serve to exacerbate the problems. A sharp rise in reported incidence of domestic violence has been one sad consequence of the lockdown. A spike in the number of people seeking to divorce is another. There has been a tragic spike in the number of terminations of pregnancy. And the increased sale of alcohol suggests that some have turned to the bottle to drown their sorrows and numb the pain of their existence. The economic uncertainty and loss of job security associated with the pandemic has no doubt also compounded the problem for many. If our house is not in order, a crisis event will likely serve to magnify our problems.

But it need not be this way. It certainly ought not be this way for people of faith. No matter the state of our personal circumstances, for believing people, crisis events like the one we are in at present, are sent, not to make us bitter but to make us better. They present us with opportunities to break out of set ways and bad habits. They shake us up so as to awaken us to our vulnerability and need, that we are not in control and we don't have it all together, so to come to an end of ourselves and our own resources and in faith to cast ourselves upon the grace of God, which alone will prove sufficient to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

When we do that, we will not want to waste our sorrows by going down into self-pity and giving vent to self-indulgent base instincts. We will not want to waste a crisis by giving way to fear and unbelief. Rather, we will see this crisis, any crisis, as an opportunity, a God-given opportunity, to grow as a person, to get back to basics in relationships, to put right long standing wrongs, to reconnect with dear friends we've lost touch with, to draw near to God, to renew our prayer and devotional life, to get back into God's Word as the source of our life and faith. As Jesus said, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Being renewed in our love for and our taking in of God's Word will give us the height, the faith, the perspective, the direction to rise above our present difficulties, so as to see the hand of God in it and discern His will for us by it.

A crisis provides us all with the opportunity to rethink, reset, re-evaluate. Life has slowed down enough for us to draw breath and to rethink a whole lot of things. Christ's will for His church is that we be prepared as a spotless bride to be presented to Him as a radiant church, blameless upon His return. That means getting rid of anything and everything in our lives in the present that would grieve the heart of our Saviour. A pandemic lockdown is about the best opportunity any of us will get, amid the hectic pace of normal life, to engage in the thoughtful and reflective process of meditating on God's Word, receiving it in a glad and willing heart, and responding to it by making a clean break with any interest, involvement, attitude, or action that involves compromise with the world, or sinful indulgence, anything in us that would fall into the category of a stain or wrinkle or blemish upon us as part of the bride of Christ that would grieve the heart of our Saviour upon His return.

33. **Proverbs 4:23 "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." 23.06.2020**

The Old Testament Book of Proverbs is full of practical spiritual wisdom to live by. It is a treasure trove for anyone who longs for their faith to find expression in practical and down to earth ways. So when this particular text says: "Above all else" we should pay careful attention because it is giving priority importance to this one thing above all else as being essential to living well as God's children in this God's world. It gives to each one of us direct personal responsibility for guarding our own heart. That is not something anyone else can do for us, it is something we must all take responsibility for ourselves. Whatever else we may do on any given day, whatever our life may consist of in the end, our top priority, our greatest responsibility will always be to guard our heart first and foremost, and ultimately, what our life consists of will in large part be determined by our willingness and our vigilance to consistently guard our heart by God's grace. There is a natural human tendency to adopt a victimhood mentality or to play the blame game if our life is not as we would want it to be. This Scripture dispels that darkness and shines a light on the one great responsibility we all have to guard our own heart, our own life, and the choices we make.

When the Bible talks here about our heart, it is speaking metaphorically. It is not referring to the muscle that pumps blood around our body located in the left side of our chest. It is referring to the source of our life, the centre of our personality, the essence of our being, the unique and precious individual each one of us are. It is speaking about the soul, the conscience, the spirit of a person. And this life force, this life source within each one of us that enlivens us and makes us at the same time one with and yet uniquely different from every other human being, is here described as a spring. In a dry and parched land like Israel is, springs are an invaluable resource for giving and sustaining life. And being so vital, it is critical to one's very survival to guarantee the safety and security of a spring. To poison, or pollute, or block up a spring was one of the first acts of war, one of the first

escalations in a dispute between neighbours. Hence, the need to guard a spring and keep its life-giving flow free from corruption.

King Solomon, the likely author of this text, would have been especially conscious of just how critical a spring is to the life and wellbeing of a community. There were numerous reasons why Jerusalem was located where it is. Most importantly, Mt Moriah (the Temple Mount today) had long been regarded as the place of sacrifice where God met with His people. It was where Abraham offered his son Isaac, only for a ram to be given in his place. It was the place where King David built an altar and offered a sacrifice that ended the plague. It was where Solomon built the Temple in which the shekinah glory of God dwelt. But another key factor why Jerusalem was established on top of several mountains was because of the existence of Gihon Spring, located on the western slope of the Kidron Valley, adjacent to the Temple Mount. From Gihon Spring issues a steady stream of water all year round sufficient to sustain a population of tens of thousands. Without it, the population could not survive. However, its geographical location made it hard to secure and for many centuries, it lay outside the city walls, and therefore, while constantly guarded, was vulnerable in the event of an overwhelming force invading the land.

Under the reign of King Hezekiah, just such an overwhelming force threatened to invade the Kingdom of Judah. Assyria was the super-power of the day and had the capacity to lay siege to Jerusalem and bring it to its knees. In faith, Hezekiah looked to the Lord, and initiated several defensive strategies to withstand any potential invasion. He strengthened Jerusalem's walls and ramparts. He mass-produced weaponry for the army. And most significantly, he embarked upon one of the most remarkable civil engineering feats of ancient times, by diverting the flow of the Gihon Spring so as to ensure Jerusalem's water security in the event of an invasion, at the same time denying the invading Assyrians access to a reliable water source, thus reducing their capacity to mount a prolonged siege. He achieved this by ordering the construction of what is now known as Hezekiah's Tunnel, a substantial diversion tunnel that completely rerouted the flow of Gihon Spring so that instead of it flowing up out of the ground in the Kidron Valley, outside the city wall, it flowed through the newly built diversion tunnel 40 metres underground, and poured into the Pool of Siloam, within the city walls. This enabled Hezekiah to block the upper outlet of Gihon Spring so that it was invisible above ground to any invading army and secured the primary fresh water source for his people. The work was completed prior to the Assyrian siege, and was critical in enabling Jerusalem to withstand, and ultimately repel the siege.

Hezekiah's Tunnel is over 500 metres long, was cut through solid limestone, and follows a meandering path believed to have been determined by tracing a natural fault line in the rock. Two teams of men began digging at opposite ends and worked tirelessly over several months, somehow meeting in the middle with only minor mistakes along the way in achieving the feat. Built 2,900 years ago, one can walk through Hezekiah's Tunnel today on visiting the City of David Museum complex. The Gihon Spring still flows knee deep through the tunnel. The marks of the pic-axes on rock can still be seen on the walls and ceiling of the tunnel. There is even a replica of an original plaque installed upon completion of the project to mark the achievement. The tunnel is to all intents and purposes, the same as it was, performing the function today for which it was built 2,900 years ago.

The reason why I mention all this is to describe for you the trouble one king was willing to go to in order to guard a life-giving spring that was critical to the survival of his people and kingdom. And it is with the same vigilance and energy that we each one are to guard our own heart for it is the wellspring of our life. Because our heart is the wellspring of our life, we ought to be vigilant about guarding it from corruption, pollution and harm. We ought all be aware that our heart can become wounded by rejection or crushed by condemnation. Our heart can be hardened by deceitfulness or pride. Our heart can become captivated by a love of money, by the deceitfulness of riches. Our heart can become corrupted by impurity. Our heart can become embittered by un-forgiveness. Any one or all of these influences are likely to poison the flow of our life spring at its source and not only blight our lives but the lives of those with whom we have to do. Your life and mine are like a spring continually bubbling up and flowing out to other people, and unless we each one take personal responsibility for guarding our heart, its flow can become polluted, which in turn will be both toxic for us and for others.

I do not have time today to outline how we are to guard our heart, which I hope to address on another occasion, but I hope I have stressed upon you all here the imperative of doing so daily, consistently through life, not only as our great priority in life, but also the challenge of each circumstance. "Above all else", in other words, at all times and in every circumstance, guard your heart. Take responsibility for your own choices, decisions, actions, reactions, all of which will affect your own heart. Inside of all of us, from our heart, our life issues forth like an ever-flowing stream, like a mountain spring, fresh and clean. We each have the responsibility to guard our heart so as to keep it that way by the grace of God.

34. "Guard your Heart" II. 24.06.2020

Yesterday, I spoke to the necessity of guarding our hearts as our personal responsibility and highest priority. Today, I seek to address the question how we are to do that.

The immediate context of Proverbs 4 provides a vital part of the answer, and that is to receive God's word in a glad and willing heart. We are exhorted in v 21 to keep God's word within our heart. Our first defence against becoming hard hearted is to receive, believe, and live by God's word, to keep it within our heart. It is one thing to receive God's word, it is another thing entirely to keep it there. It takes discipline to keep hold of God's word in our hearts. Many have found that the best way to do that is to make a habit of choosing to let the Word of God be the first words you hear in the morning and the last words you hear at night. Conscious of the life-giving truth they contain, we choose to give priority to listening to what God has to say to us. Psalm 119:9,11 helps to illustrate this point. Verse 9 reads: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word". Verse 11 reads: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you". Knowing the truth of God's word, believing and receiving it, meditating upon it, seeking to apply it to all of life - that is a sure way to guard your heart. Bible memory is also a crucial means of keeping God's word in your heart. When you do so, it gives you a plumb line for measuring everything else by. It establishes a standard of righteousness by which you can choose out the right path and make level paths for your feet. It will keep you from swerving to the right or the left. It will keep you from evil. It was by means of keeping God's word in His heart that our Lord Jesus was enabled to resist the devil's temptations in the desert, by silencing Satan's lies with the truth of God's word. It will be the same for us. In the hour of temptation, we will be able to stand firm against Satan's lies if we have kept God's word in our heart. This truth finds its parallel in Ephesians 6, where the spiritual armour of God is described. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God and we are to wield it to slay all the lies of Satan.

In addition to this one offensive weapon, the spiritual armour also provides us with critical defensive equipment to guard our hearts against every form of attack. There is the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith, each of which are also crucial to guarding our heart in the heat of the spiritual battle. These pieces of the spiritual armour relate to the Word of God. Faith claims the promises of God in the thick of the battle. Righteousness is both our status before God due to the sacrifice of Christ credited to our account and is also a practical standard of right living we seek to aspire to. As children of God, we will instinctively recoil from or feel a check in regard to anything that involves compromise with the world, that causes us to choose between going God's way and following another path.

The New Covenant offers us the blessings of a new heart, makes us a new creation, and pours out God's Spirit upon us. Our stoney heart is replaced by a heart of flesh, and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Holiness is given to us to keep us in the love of God and to lead us all through life so as to bring us safe home to God's heavenly kingdom. Keeping step with the Spirit is key to guarding our heart in the sense that our heart has become the Holy Spirit's place of residence. His indwelling presence is absolutely key to guarding our heart. Anything in us that would grieve the Holy Spirit needs to be repented of if we are to guard our hearts. Making compromises with sin and worldliness will only grieve, possibly quench the life of the Spirit within us, which in turn will cause our hearts to become cold and hard. The Holy Spirit will soon let us know if there has been compromise. He will convict us by means of a guilty conscience. He will give us no peace. He will use any means, whatever it takes, to bring us back to Himself in repentance and faith. As David confessed, when we are under conviction but hold out on God, we become as brute beasts, heartless and without feeling. Only as we keep short accounts with God and with one another will we avoid the anguish of becoming hard hearted.

If Satan is mounting a campaign against your heart, be aware of his schemes and take pre-emptive action to cut the ground from beneath him. If he is seeking to ensnare your heart with impurity, bring it out into the light. Share your struggles with a trusted mentor. Relocate your devices so that you are not placed in a situation of vulnerability. Make yourself accountable. Ask God for the strength to resist and run from danger if necessary. It takes great courage to flee a tempting situation. The Book of Proverbs is blunt about the dire effects on our heart and life if we fail to act in this regard.

If Satan is seeking to ensnare your heart by a love of money, it may be necessary to do something radical to break its hold on you. There is nothing inherently evil about money or having it. It is the love of money that is the root of all evil. The problem with the rich young ruler when he came to Jesus was his love of money. Jesus saw it and realised that the only way he could possibly get free and know life was for his love of money to be broken. So Jesus said something to him that was radical, that he did not say to anyone else. Give away all your money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Jesus was not advocating salvation by philanthropy. He was simply diagnosing that this man's idol was his money and that if ever he was to get free, he needed to smash that idol, get rid of it, give it up, give it away, whatever it took to get free. The man went away sad because he was wealthy and would not let go.

Life can at times be harsh and cruel. Hopes deferred can make the heart sick. More than heart sickness, feelings of rejection, betrayal, condemnation can embitter our hearts if we let them. If we take to heart the hurtful things that people may do to us, if we hold on to the cruel things that get said, if we take offence, even when no offence was intended, if we allow ourselves to feel offended, we will become embittered by these things and by our response to them. To respond in this way will do us and others immense harm. It will defile our heart, and it will in turn defile many others also. Like a virus spreading through the population, so too bitterness will not only infect your heart but those with whom you share your bitterness. Sometimes wrongs will never be put right in this life. Sometimes we have to learn to live with unresolved conflict. Only at the last judgment will all wrongs be put right. But that does not mean we need to be locked into bitterness. Forgiveness is the way to get free. Forgiveness is giving away the right to feel offended, giving away the holding of a case against another. True forgiveness sets your own heart free from the stranglehold of bitterness, and it can also become the means for the other person getting free also. When they receive from you love instead of judgment, kindness instead of condemnation, that taste of grace can lead them to search for its source in Jesus and find rest for their own souls too.

35. “Guard your heart” III. 25.06.2020

A further vital means of guarding our heart is the ministry of prayer. In life, we face many troubles and hardships. If we take them to heart, they can become a crushing burden to bear. We can become anxious or fearful or depressed. For all God’s believing people, prayer is a gift whereby we may bring all our cares and concerns to our Heavenly Father and hand them over to His loving care and His sovereign power to deal with. For all God’s redeemed people, we are afforded the priceless privilege of free and ready access into the presence of God, right up to His throne of grace, in order to bring to Him our cares and concerns, whether they be great or small, hand them over to Him, and leave them with Him, trusting Him that He knows what to do with them and in the absolute confidence that He cares, He hears, and He will answer, indeed He is well able to do far more abundantly than we could ever ask or imagine.

In Philippians 4:6-7, the Apostle Paul explains for us how praying always will guard our hearts. Prayer is the means whereby we can move from a position of anxious worry to a heart at peace and at rest, with the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds from the fear and unbelief that anxiety would otherwise generate. Paul’s language paints a picture of God’s peace acting like a military garrison forming an impenetrable ring around our heart to maintain it in a state of peace, and to repel any touch of anxiety or fear. That is the effect in us of praying about everything and being anxious for nothing.

It is human nature to become anxious or fearful when bad things happen. It is what we do with our anxieties once we become aware of them that is key to all of this. If in faith as a first resort we turn to God in prayer and pour out our heart to Him, we quickly transition from a state of anxiety to peace. By contrast, if we yield to anxiety and give way to fear and panic or go into action and try to put things right in the flesh, we lose our peace, we get out of rest, we become troubled and burdened, our joy is diminished, our heart becomes heavy, our outlook becomes gloomy.

It should be a no brainer. Praying about everything is the only way to be anxious for nothing. Its a win win situation. And yet, it is not uncommon for prayer to become a last resort rather than a first resort. There is a temptation to be so strong and competent that we regard prayer as a last resort, to be turned to when everything else has failed. When it is stated like that, we would all want to disown such thinking. And yet quite often, our conduct, and our anxiety levels suggest otherwise.

Joseph Scriven’s well-loved hymn “What a Friend we have in Jesus” declares the privilege and blessing of taking everything to God in prayer. For him, it was no hypothetical reality but a lived experience. Joseph was engaged to be married, but before their wedding day, his fiancé fell ill and died. After his time of grief had passed, Joseph again became engaged, only for his second fiancé to be killed in an accident on the way to the church. Subsequently, Joseph emigrated to Canada, and gave the rest of his life to serving the needy within his local community. He found the grace to write this well -oved hymn as a testimony to his lived experience, which explains for us how he found the strength to not only carry on but to become such a blessing to others in doing so.

When we make prayer the priority that it ought to be, we can quickly transition from anxiety to peace. God’s peace stands guard around our heart and keeps it from going down into fear or unbelief. The sense of freedom we feel when we lay our burden down and know that our Saviour has taken it up and has it in hand is key to guarding our heart from all the cares of life and keeping it free to glorify God and bless those with whom we have to do.

36. Living Sacrifices. 26.06.2020

Beginning with Romans 12:1, the Apostle Paul makes the case for how Christians are to conduct themselves in light of the grace that has come to us in Christ amid all the changing seasons of life. Chapters 12-16 of Romans represent a summary of the ethical and moral implications of the Gospel, of living under God's reign of grace, of how being a recipient of grace ought to change us. The "therefore" that Paul uses to begin this new section refers us back to the sum total of Paul's vast teaching contained in chapters 1-8 in which he so majestically states the doctrines of grace, justification by grace through faith in particular. Building on that great doctrinal foundation, these later chapters are hugely important for all believers. They describe how we are to adorn the Gospel we profess. They explain how our behaviour is to accord with our belief. They describe what a life fully devoted to Jesus looks like, where there is no glaring inconsistency between lip and life, no touch of hypocrisy that would be a shame to Christ or that would bring the Gospel into disrepute.

Right up front, here in verse 1, Paul outlines what is to be our default setting as redeemed children of God, what is to be our standard operating procedure as Christians, the very heartbeat of what constitutes being a follower of Jesus Christ. Here is our greatest obligation, a matter pertaining to our life and witness in the world that the Apostle regarded as of the utmost urgency for us to know and act upon. It is that one thing that, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he gave priority to when seeking to impress upon us the practical implications of our faith, and it is the one thing we are to give priority to as recipients of grace. It is at the same time both disarmingly simple and yet incredibly costly.

We are to daily make as our priority the offering up of our whole bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Every day we are to consciously put sin to death in us, place ourselves on the altar and die daily to pride, independence and self-rule. Self on the altar, Christ on the throne of our hearts, the Spirit having free course among us – a living sacrifice. That is to be the default setting for every blood-bought, Spirit-filled, Heaven-bound child of God. That is at the same time both the immediate implication and the greatest obligation of believing and receiving the Gospel of God's grace. Failure to do so, even intermittently, let alone habitually, is perhaps the greatest offence we can commit as Christians. Failure to offer our whole bodies as living sacrifices lies at the heart of every schism, every division, every scandal, every shame that has ever been caused to the Gospel by those who profess it.

If we confess and call ourselves Christians, the life of each one of us is to resemble a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. What is envisaged is our complete transformation, a radical non-conformity to the world/the way we once lived, a complete renewing of our minds. The very description of our daily offering up of ourselves as a living sacrifice contains within it a fundamental tension between dying and living – we are to die daily to sin and self and instead the life of Christ is to be lived out in us and expressed through our transformed personalities. To daily offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice means handing over complete control of our lives to the indwelling Lord Jesus. We step down from the throne of our hearts, we surrender all to Him, we accept His sovereign right to rule in us, we acknowledge that for that to happen, we must relinquish control completely. Not only do we agree to do so, but we welcome and accept the Lord Jesus taking up residence within us by His Holy Spirit, claiming the throne of our heart, made by Him and for Him, and ruling from there in our lives as our unrivalled King.

Sacrifice is to be the dominant theme and character of our life in Christ. And just so appropriate that it should be so. Such was the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave His all for us, who shed His blood for our forgiveness. If we have been bought at such a cost, our pardon purchased at such a price, it is only right and fitting that sacrifice should characterise our life in Christ. As the missionary CT Studd once said: "If Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him." And so it is that we give our life a living sacrifice back to Him.

Paul's use of words also alludes to the Old Testament sacrificial system which he had been steeped in growing up as a Pharisaical Jew. Temple, priesthood, and sacrifice were the key element of Old Testament worship. Without sacrifice, without the shedding of blood, there could be no forgiveness. The sacrifice of Christ and the cleansing power of His shed blood was what all the Old Testament sacrifices anticipated. No amount of the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin. Only as those sacrifices were offered in faith and expectation of a pure and perfect sacrifice to come were they at all effective. Now that the once and for all sacrifice for sin has been made by Christ at the cross, we who benefit from that act of grace are to present our whole bodies back to Him as a daily offering, a living sacrifice.

Every part of us is to be included in that daily sacrifice of praise. Our eyes and what we permit them to settle on. Our ears and what we permit them to hear. Our lips/tongue and what we permit them to say. Our hands and what we permit them to do. Our feet and where we permit them to go. Our right foot on the accelerator must be offered

up as a living sacrifice. Our right click on the mouse must be offered up as a living sacrifice. Unless what we do is pleasing and acceptable to the God of Heaven, we have no business being involved in it, and simply cannot offer it back to Him as a living sacrifice. Self on the altar, Christ on the throne, the Spirit having free course in our hearts and lives - that is how we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, in grateful thanks, as an act of living worship, to the one who gave His all for us.

37. Being Ready for the Return of Christ. 30.06.2020

The Bible assures us that the world as we know it will come to an end, not with a nuclear war, or a pandemic, or an extinction emergency, but with the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. It also assures us that no one knows when that will happen, other than that it is imminent, it could happen at any moment, hence the absolute need for all people everywhere to make ready for the return of Christ and to prepare to meet God. To respond in faith at a personal level by believing and receiving the Gospel, that Jesus died for your sins and rose again to give you new life, to be trusting in the power of His shed blood for your forgiveness and acceptance with God, and to persevere in that to the last, is the only way to be ready for the return of Jesus Christ. To live and to die in such a state should the return of Christ tarry, or to be found living in such a state upon the return of Christ will result in our being welcomed in to the celebration of Heaven and to experience the shared joy of all that God has prepared for those who love Him. To go all through life, to be found at last, unprepared for Christ's return by not having made a personal response of faith or having not persevered in it to the last, will mean that person will be turned away, will not be known or accepted into Heaven upon Christ's return. These days, we talk about FOMO, fear of missing out, and we tend to apply it to relatively trivial things like the latest fad or fashion. In truth, fear of missing out at Christ's return, at the last judgment, ought to occupy the attention of all people. So many opportunities are presented to us all through life to make ready to prepare to meet God, holy moments when God draws near and the call of the Gospel sounds loud and clear to us. God's mercy is demonstrated in His holding back the return of Christ so as to give all people every opportunity to be ready, leaving none without excuse.

Matthew 25:1-13 records Jesus' Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, in which He uses the picture of a Jewish wedding procession to describe His love for His own, and the need for us all to make good use of our time in the here and now so as to be ready and prepared for His coming again, whenever that may be. The key point of the parable is that since we do not know when that will be, we need to be prepared to wait for as long as it takes, and however long the wait, it will prove more than worth the wait when Christ returns and we enter in with Him to share in the joy of Heaven.

Readiness for the return of Christ is explained in terms of our preparedness to persevere in faith and to wait for as long as it takes. The point of the parable hangs on the one point of difference between the wise and foolish virgins. The wise virgins each armed themselves with both an oil lamp so as to join in the night-time procession, and a jar of oil so as to replenish their lamps in the event of a long or unexpected delay in the bridegroom's arrival. By contrast, the foolish virgins had their lamps ready, but did not arrange for any back-up supply in case there was a delay and their oil ran out. They were prepared for a short wait, but not for a long wait, and were certainly not prepared to wait for as long as it took for the bridegroom to arrive. The jar of oil is symbolic of a faith that saves, a faith that perseveres, a faith that is sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Such a faith cannot be second-hand or borrowed from another or handed down from one's parents. It must be personal. It must be one's own. It must be a first-hand faith received as a gift from God and sustained by the Holy Spirit. At the return of Christ, lack of a persevering faith sustained by the Holy Spirit will result in that person being shut out of the presence of the Lord, as illustrates by the five foolish virgins. When Christ returns, no last minute attempts to make up for one's own lack of persevering faith by borrowing from another will count for anything. In the Christian life, what matters most is not how well one starts but how well one finishes. A faith that does not last can be tested by a whole range of hard or tempting circumstances. A pandemic can be the cause of some falling by the wayside. The wars of the 20th century were the cause for many to turn away from faith. Something as seemingly innocent as the freedom that comes with getting one's driver's licence or getting a paid job or getting married can be enough for some to give up their faith. The bitter experience of hypocrisy within the church or suffering injustice can cause the faith of some to fail.

The sober truth communicated to us by this parable is that not all who profess faith in Christ and who claim to be waiting for His return will experience the joys of Heaven. Only those whose faith perseveres through every trial and every delay will enter into the joy of the Lord. There is only one way to be ready for the return of Christ, by having a first-hand persevering faith that is daily sustained by the indwelling Holy Spirit and that is not only longing for that day, but prepared to wait for as long as it takes. Let nothing stop you from persevering in faith. Let no trial, no distraction, no upheaval, no crisis distract you, or confuse you, or side-track you. This pandemic is, in the context of this parable, maybe a further five minute delay in the return of the bridegroom. But that the

bridegroom is coming is certain, and that His delay in coming both tests our willingness to persevere and grants us opportunity to be ready, leaving all without excuse at the last, let no one doubt.

38. No Separation. 02.07.2020

Following on from Tuesday's pastoral letter based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), one false conclusion that may be drawn from that parable is that following Jesus is a hit and miss affair, with possibly only a 50% success rate in making it all the way to Heaven (the wedding banquet). Nothing could be further from the truth. That parable is concerned to teach us the nature of saving faith, being a faith that is sustained by the Holy Spirit and is willing and prepared to wait for as long as it takes to be ready for Christ's return, whenever that may occur. 100% of those with such a faith will make it safe home to Heaven (the five wise virgins), while 100% of those without such a faith will not (the five foolish virgins). So, where does that leave us when it comes to hope and certainty concerning our promised future inheritance as followers of Jesus?

The eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans concludes with the most precious promise, the most amazing assurance given to all those who have believed the Gospel and have received the love of Christ for them personally. It is the promise that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is a promise that rests, not on our performance or the strength of our faith in Christ, but on what Christ has done for us, and the unshakable commitment He has made to each one of us as God's redeemed people. This is a promise that will endure through every hardship or danger. It assures us that our eternal destiny is secure. It represents a rock-solid guarantee, a foundation to build on, a truth to hold on to, a faith to sustain us through life's greatest dangers, trial, hardships.

We are currently going through the collective grief of a pandemic, with enforced lockdown and closure resulting in prolonged isolation and separation from one another unlike most of us have ever experienced in our lifetimes. There are other situations in which we may also experience separation in various ways, through bereavement, relationship breakdown, or loss. We can become separated from close friends and feel the grief of that. We can experience the sting of rejection, even to being disowned or disinherited. But the wonder of God's promise to each one of His children is that He will permit nothing whatsoever, nothing in all creation, nothing in the physical or the spiritual realm, nothing in the present or the future, to separate His children from His love for us in the Lord Jesus. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Our union with Christ is indivisible, insoluble, unbreakable, indestructible, eternal. Heaven will be the fulfilment and demonstration of God's love for us in Christ. So, if nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing can stop us from entering into our Heavenly inheritance, where that love will be most fully expressed.

The inseparable nature of our union with Christ is to be seen in that He is the vine and we are the branches. He is in us and we are in Him, with His life flowing through us, making us fruitful for Him. He sticks closer than a brother, is more watchful than a mother, He watches over us continually, our names are engraved on the palms of His hands, we are the apple of His eye. The love of God for each one of His own, expressed in His Son, is eternal, unmerited, and unconditional. He has loved us from before time began, before we were born, not for any good in us, indeed despite our sins and failings. So, it is all of grace.

Verse 35 of Romans 8 provides us with a check list of potential threats to our union with Christ, many of which are ticked by our present circumstance. Trouble and hardship are being experienced by many people around the world all at the same time due to this pandemic. For some, persecution has intensified. There is no doubt the world seems to be a more dangerous place. We are all vulnerable to this virus and to the sickness and death that it can bring.

But no virus, no pandemic, no amount of trouble or hardship can succeed in separating us as God's children from God's love or snatching us out of God's hand. He will hold us fast. His love will never let us go. Having bought us at so great a cost, with the precious blood of His Son, He will never permit anything in all creation to separate us from His love. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. By the grace that has come to us in Christ, we have every resource made available to us so as to resist all evil and temptation, to withstand all opposition, to persevere through all manner of trouble and hardship. Far from separating us from God's love, we should view trouble and hardship, persecution and suffering as like nails that serve to only drive us deeper into Jesus.

39. God's Severe Mercy Lamentations 3:22-23. 08.07.2020

When carbon that is buried deep underground is exposed to extreme heat and incredible pressure, followed by a volcanic eruption that brings that material up toward the earth's surface, a unique chemical reaction takes place: the carbon atoms crystallise to form diamonds. These objects of stunning beauty and great worth can only be produced under such extreme and adverse conditions. In a similar way, some of the most precious gems of faith contained in the Bible were formed under conditions most extreme and adverse to faith. One conspicuous example is to be found in the Old Testament book of Lamentations 3:22-23. *"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."* This declaration of the praises of God was spoken in faith amid the ruins of invasion and captivity, with nothing left but the character and promises of God to hold onto.

The Book of Lamentations focusses our attention on the collective suffering and shared grief experienced by the Kingdom of Judah at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, who invaded their land, laid siege to their walled city of Jerusalem, brought the entire population to its knees, then took the city, destroyed it, and spared only the brightest and best of their youth, whom they took captive and deported to Babylon in order to be pressed into serving the enemy. The land was laid waste, the temple was destroyed, the Davidic monarchy was brought to an end, it was one of the darkest days in the history of God's people. In that catastrophic event, the promised land was lost, Israel's treasured institutions were destroyed, and but for a small remnant left, all was lost. It was a situation of overwhelming calamity. The Book of Lamentations was likely written by the prophet Jeremiah, one of the few who survived the invasion and deportation. He gave voice to this lament expressing the shared grief of the few who survived.

Amid the ruins of their shattered dreams, Jeremiah, though overwhelmed with bitterness and grief, spoke out God's Word over the ruins of the city of Jerusalem and declared: *"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed"*. He spoke out over the deserted streets and burnt out buildings that God's compassions are unending, His faithfulness is great, and that they are new every morning. I am sure you will agree that such declarations are extraordinary under the circumstances. How is it that one can be surrounded by scenes of utter devastation and yet speak such faith and express such hope for the future? Surely it was because Jeremiah believed in the covenant promises of God. He trusted in the character and purposes of God above and beyond the chaos and confusion that he must have felt after such a heavy defeat. Jeremiah believed that the real power behind the devastation was not the seemingly unstoppable Babylonian military, but the Lord God of Israel, permitting, shaping, and limiting the catastrophe for His eternal purposes. And knowing the unending character of God gave Him hope.

Finding God's love, compassion, and faithfulness amidst the ruins of defeat is never easy. But for Jeremiah, the simple fact that he, along with a small band of brothers, had survived the ordeal, that by God's grace a remnant of God's people remained, that from them God's covenant people could be renewed, and through them God's covenant purposes could yet be fulfilled, gave him hope. If God had chosen to abandon His people, they would have been utterly consumed. That Jeremiah and others had been spared gave him hope that God's promises had not failed. Yes, the Babylonian invasion and deportation was a heavy blow, but it was not the end. It was a severe mercy. The Lord disciplines those he loves. The Babylonian exile was God's way of disciplining His people, purifying them, purging them of their idolatries by taking them captive to the most idolatrous nation on earth, there to deliver them and renew them through the uncompromising and godly leadership of the likes of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And once purified and renewed in faith and zeal for godliness, it was God's plan to return them to the promised land for the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes in them and through them, which were so wonderfully expressed in Jesus.

Jeremiah was not simply being a "glass half full" kind of guy. He was not trying to make the best of a bad situation or put the most positive spin on things. This was faith declaring even through the darkest of days that all will be well because God is still on the throne. He is working His purposes out and nothing and no one can stop Him. The Babylonian exile would be of considerable yet limited duration, 70 years altogether. The extremity of it would be relieved by God raising up an even more powerful empire, the Persians, who having defeated the Babylonians, would show mercy to the people of Judah and permit their return to the promised land and facilitate the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and temple.

For Jeremiah, on even the darkest of days, amid the devastation of the most crushing defeat, there was nevertheless reason to hope, because of the character of God. He remains loving, and steadfastly so. He continues to be merciful, and endlessly so. He remains faithful, and greatly so. No matter how bad things may get, Almighty God does not change. His love, mercy and faithfulness not only continue, but come to us fresh and

new every morning, perfectly suited and adapted to our ever-changing circumstance. In that sense, God's love, mercy and faithfulness are just like the manna God provided for the Israelites in the desert – new every morning, fresh manna for each new day, sufficient for that day and all that it held, but for that day only, not for tomorrow. It is our responsibility to actively seek God's daily provision of love, mercy and faithfulness sufficient for the challenges that each day holds. Faith believes beyond the horizon of sight, beyond the immediate context of devastation, by holding on to the hope that God has a better plan in view, He is working His purposes out, and as we trust Him, it is only a matter of time before we see His plan unfolding in our personal circumstance for our blessing and for His glory.

To think of ourselves and our suffering brings despair, but to think of God and His covenant faithfulness brings hope. Even on our darkest of days, when everything is not as we would have chosen or as would want, God's love remains steadfast, His compassions are unending, His faithfulness is great. They come to us fresh and new for each new day and for each new challenge. May your darkest day be that day in which God's love and faithfulness come to you fresh and new and sustain your faith so that it will not fail, but flourish and become like a beautiful diamond precious in God's hand.

40. Strength for Today. 10.0-7.2020

The wilderness wandering was for the people of Israel a severe mercy. There was judgment in it. An entire generation would die in the desert due to their unbelief. Not even Moses was permitted to enter the promised land. Only Caleb and Joshua, who issued a minority report full of faith, would be permitted to enter. What should have been a 10 day journey became a harrowing 40 year struggle. The desert is the most inhospitable place imaginable. The deserts of Midian, along with the harsh terrain of Edom and Moab, have similarities to the desert regions of central Australia, where to be stranded without food and water can quickly have fatal consequences. Having travelled through these regions several times on our trips to the south of Jordan, I have been struck by just how hard life must have been for the Israelites during those forty years. There is almost nothing there capable of sustaining human life, let alone a nation of millions.

In truth, that was the point of the whole exercise. Almighty God was bringing a complaining and unbelieving people, who just wanted to go back to the relative comforts of slavery in Egypt, to an end of themselves and their own resources. He did this in order to embed in their national consciousness an absolute dependence upon God for their very life, in order to be able to face the future, with all its trials, trusting in the covenant faithfulness of Almighty God to see them through. There was nothing for them to do. No amount of striving to seek out an existence in the desert would amount to anything. They simply had to trust. So while they were sleeping, every night of their forty year sojourn, Jehovah Jireh rained down on them manna from Heaven. All they had to do to live another day was to receive God's gracious provision for them by going out each morning to scoop up enough manna sufficient for each household, and a double portion on the eve of the Sabbath. It was literally bread from Heaven, but they had to be humble enough and willing enough to receive it.

Simple trust and dependence were the lessons Israel needed to learn if ever they were to fulfil God's calling upon them as a nation. That the people were to refuse their natural instincts to gather more than what was needed for each day was part of the lesson. The truth God was wanting them to learn was that God's mercy and provision is always sufficient for today's troubles and needs. The strength and resources need to live through today's crisis will be given today. Yesterday's mercies were for yesterday's trouble. Relying on yesterday's manna for today simply will not do. Fresh manna for each new day is what was required to live. Living one day at a time in complete dependence upon the faithful provision of Almighty God was what God's people were called to. It was so simple, almost too good to be true. Receive God's provision, just enough for the family for that day and no more. Any departure from God's simple instructions and provision quickly resulted in trouble. Living by faith one day at a time, putting one foot in front of the other in trust and obedience to the clear will of God was the only way to live and survive in the desert, and indeed, it would also be the only way to survive and thrive in the promised land when finally they made it there as a nation.

A jar of manna was one of the few items stored inside the ark of the covenant that was ultimately placed within the Holy of Holies, the most holy place within the temple built by Solomon. Throughout the generations, it served as a constant reminder of their history and heritage as the people of God. While an entire generation fell in the desert, the life of God's people was yet miraculously sustained on a daily basis for the entirety of that 40 years by the unending love of God, until a whole new generation could be raised up to move forward to fulfil God's plans for His people. That this lesson was learned by some at least is to be seen in Jeremiah's remarkable declaration of faith and hope spoken over the ruins of Jerusalem after the calamity that was the Babylonian invasion and exile. Even amid the ruins of defeat, he was able to declare: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness". Like Caleb and Joshua,

there remained a remnant even in Jeremiah's day who had learned the lesson of trusting Almighty God to lead and to provide, one day at a time, and to seek from Him the evidences of His love and compassion that will sustain us in the midst of the troubles of each day.

This is not just a quaint story that applies to another people. It is also our heritage, our story. We are called to live our life one day at a time, trusting in the gracious provision of our Heavenly Father to sustain us through the troubles that each day brings. Fresh manna for each new day is what we are to seek from God also. Not the literal manna from heaven, believed to be a honey infused, sesame-seed based bread equivalent, but the resources we need in order to be the faithful people of God in our day and generation.

Each day has its fair share of trouble, and we are always feeling our need. The challenge of walking by faith one day at a time is to live a life of simple trust and dependence upon God, drawing from His inexhaustible supply of grace all the resources we need to be true to Him in our day and generation.

Our present shared sense of need, while unique in all our lifetimes, nevertheless represents the latest and current need for which we all must seek fresh manna for today's need. God's grace and provision are more than sufficient for every need we will ever experience, as fresh and new as ever they were. Amidst our every changing circumstance, the never changing character and provision of Almighty God is the rock we can all rely on to see us through.

41. The Solitude of Self-Isolation. 14.07.2020

A second hard lockdown, with the associated isolation that comes with it, is no doubt disappointing for all of us. Despite all the technological means of communication available to us in this day and age, there is no substitute for personal interaction, face to face contact, and we all miss that very much. But while separated from one another, we are never alone. God promises to be with us always. The solitude of self-isolation is an opportunity to draw near to God and have dealings with Him.

This vital truth is wonderfully illustrated in the life of Moses. For the first 40 years of his life, Moses was raised in the palaces of Egypt and shared in all the privileges of royalty, including obtaining the best education money could buy. But when his true heritage became known, Moses chose to identify with the people of God rather than continue to enjoy the pleasures of sin. That forced him to flee the palace, and for the next 40 years, he dwelt in the deserts of Midian, shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, spending much of his time alone, far from the bright lights and the privileged life he once enjoyed. The contrast between his life as an Egyptian prince and a Midianite shepherd could not have been greater.

And yet Moses' prolonged isolation during those 40 years as a shepherd were preparatory for what was to come, his shepherding the people of Israel in that very same harsh desert terrain for the final 40 years of his life. Throughout his prolonged period of solitude, he learned to cope with the harsh climate, he learned to survive on meagre rations, he learned how to care for and protect a flock of wilful, vulnerable sheep that were not even his own, he learnt to trust God completely, and he learnt to draw near to God. The experience was formative in humbling Moses and making him into the meekest man that ever lived. He may not, in his own estimation, have been a good public speaker, but in every moment and every experience of his life, God was preparing him for his life's greatest work, that of leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt and bringing them to the point where they were ready to enter the Promised Land.

Was one second of Moses' isolation wasted? Was one day of his prolonged solitude too much? Absolutely not. All of it was used of God to train and equip Moses to be a man who was mighty in God's hand. One particular episode points to God's dealing with Moses in preparation for his life's work. It was the incident involving the burning bush. To know the Deserts of Midian is to know that a burning bush would have been a striking image in that landscape for several reasons. First, that there was a bush there to burn at all. The landscape is devoid of all vegetation of any size. Second, that the bush continued to burn without burning up also captured his attention. A burning bush in that landscape could be seen from maximum distance, and inevitably, Moses was drawn to it to take a closer look.

To add to the wonder and the mystery, as he approached the bush, amid the silence and solitude of the desert, a voice rang out warning Moses to take the sandals from off his feet for the ground where he was standing was holy. It was the voice of God. The Living God chose to reveal Himself to Moses out of the burning bush, to reveal Himself as holy, and to call on Moses to reverence Him as holy by removing the sandals from off of his feet. This episode pointed Moses to the awesome truth that every square centimetre of this earth, even the sandy deserts

of Midian, as well as the pomp and show of Egypt, are God's own country, where His presence makes everything holy, where His voice can be heard, and where His rule must be obeyed. God led Moses out into the desert, into a life of solitude, completely isolated from the busy streets and the bright lights of the city, in order to meet him, and speak to him, to prepare him for greatness and to bring him to meekness.

It must have seemed to Moses that his life was on hold or in slow motion, but sometimes God has to slow us down enough so that we can listen to what He wants to say to us. God uses solitude, hardship, isolation, privation to achieve that. Historically, the Presbyterian Church was born in an atmosphere of extreme hostility to the Gospel, where to even meet together, even in secret, was a crime deserving of death. So many paid in blood for their faith in Jesus. This led the church fathers to adopt the symbol of the burning bush as the emblem of the Presbyterian Church and to adopt the Latin phrase "Nec Tamen Consumabator" or "Burning but not consumed" as our crest. Our church fathers learned resilience and perseverance and loved not their lives so as to shrink from death when called upon in order to remain true to Christ.

With such a biblical heritage in Moses, and such an historical heritage in the martyrs, may God grant us all His grace to grow meeker, stronger, mightier in God's hand through this present isolation. Go deeper, draw nearer, believe that God is with you in the solitude, and wants to reveal Himself to you in ways that are simply not possible any other way.

42. "Our Refuge and Strength" Psalm 46. 15.07.2020

Psalm 46 is a song of faith amid troubled times. It declares the wonderful truth that for all believing people, God is with us in trouble, no matter how extreme it may get, and He helps us to bear, to improve, to survive, to overcome trouble to the praise of His name. The world may trust in whom or what they will, but we will trust in God our Redeemer. That God is a fortress, a refuge for His people in time of trouble is a favourite theme of many psalms but is most wonderfully expressed in this psalm. The use of personal pronouns points to this as personal testimony, a lived experience. Our God is an ever-present help in trouble. He has come through for us time and again. His help is tried and proven. He has shown Himself to be near at hand, by our side, ever present to help. God's help is never hit and miss, but true, constant, and effective. God's supernatural care and deliverance of His people occurred so often throughout biblical history, and it shines a light on God's character and actions on behalf of His Redeemed people. His commitment to us is such that He simply will not stand idly by and allow any harm to come to His people contrary to His will and purpose for us. As His dearly loved children, whoever touches us touches the apple of His eye. And we can be sure that when that happens, He will deploy the unlimited resources of His strength and power to provide for us a shield and defence against the foe. All this should fill us with faith and eradicate fear. We may still our souls with this wonderful truth.

How God does this for us is described in verse 4-7. He does it by being with us, giving His vitality and life to our souls sufficient for every challenge and need, much like an ever-flowing stream gives life to a city. Because the life of God in the souls of His people is unquenchable, inexhaustible, refreshing, life-giving, when we live by faith and trust in Him, His life continually renews our own. Repeatedly, the Scripture envisions a flowing river as the source of our vitality and life. The Book of Revelation pictures it as the River of Life. It is the grace of God abounding to us. It is the Spirit of God indwelling us, giving life to our whole being.

One of the greatest sources of trouble throughout all of human history has been the advent of war which seemingly knows no end. But this psalm declares that God's help is such that a day is coming when He will put an end to all wars, He will destroy all weapons of war, He will subdue the wrath of man and break his war-like pride. If that is the glorious end to which God is moving, if His plan is to eradicate the scourge of war, and bring to a complete end the troubles that beset us now, then that calls, not for activism on our part, but stillness, a stillness that comes from knowing God as exalted, as with us, as our fortress.

Psalm 46, being a song of faith amid troubled time, has inspired similar songs of faith that have also been used of God to sustain the faith of God's people in troubled times in countless generation. One such hymn was written by the German reformer, Martin Luther: "A Mighty Fortress is our God". It was his testimony of God proving to be an ever-present help in the many troubles he faced for his stand for the truth of the Gospel and was an application of the truth of Psalm 46 to his personal circumstance. I am also reminded of two incidents in which the truths of Psalm 46, as expressed in Luther's hymn, have wonderfully sustained the faith of God's people in hard times.

Imagine a church community in occupied France during WWII that, in defiance of Nazi rule, ran an operation to protect and smuggle to the Swiss border Jews and conscientious objectors unwilling to fight for the Nazis. The

one thing they would have dreaded the most would have been a knock on the front door by the Gestapo. But that is exactly what happened to Pastor Andre Trocme as pastor of a Huguenot congregation in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, in the Haute Loire plateau region of southern France.

Ever since the Vichy government was appointed, Trocme had led his congregation in faith to resist the evil of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. They developed a sophisticated operation that produced counterfeit identity papers and systems for protecting, housing and smuggling to the border 1,000s of mainly Jews fleeing Nazi oppression. But finally the Gestapo caught on to what was happening. Multiple Gestapo vehicles pulled up outside the Manse and interrogated Trocme for most of the day. Late in the afternoon, they determined to take him into custody to a detention centre in Lyon. But as the day wore on, news of what was happening at the Manse spread like wildfire throughout the community. When finally the Gestapo opened the front door to lead Trocme to the car, they were confronted by a guard of honour filling the front yard, lining the pathway to the street, almost the entire community was there, and as Trocme was led along that path, the crowd that had gathered spontaneously began to sing Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God" over him. It must have been a spine tingling moment for everyone. On the day they most feared, when trouble of the most extreme kind came knocking at their door, belief in God as our refuge and strength, our fortress, our shield and defender was what sustained their faith and enabled them to not give way to fear but to keep on believing and to still their souls in Him.

When Ken and Joni Eareckson Tada learned that Joni had been diagnosed with breast cancer, on top of all the other health issues she had to deal with as a result of her quadriplegia, it was hard news for them to hear. As Joni was returning home from hospital after a radical mastectomy, the Holy Spirit brought to their remembrance the truth of Psalm 46 and the expression of that truth in Luther's hymn. One Sunday, as they were seeking God together, they took an electronic keyboard out onto their back patio, and with Joni's arm propped up on a chair, they sang together that hymn written in 1529, and yet somehow, it seemed to have been written just for them, for that very day. They testify to the fact that God must have had their situation in mind when He inspired Luther to dip a quill into his inkwell and scratch out these lyrics on a fresh sheet of parchment almost 500 years earlier. We could well say, God must have had their situation, our situation in mind, when He inspired the sons of Korah to write Psalm 46 just for us, just for our need today.

May you also be granted the grace to still your souls in God as your fortress, your refuge and strength, amid these troubled times, in the sure knowledge that He will meet you in your need and shelter you with His love.

43. Making Sense of Suffering. 17.07.2020

In I Peter 1:3-9, the Apostle Peter explains the purposes that God has for us as people of faith in the experience of suffering, grief, and trials. It is vital that we all come to a clear understanding of these things so that when they happen to us, like now for instance, we will be enabled to respond in such a way that the good purposes God has for us by them are achieved, and that we do not miss out on anything of the good plans God has for us by them.

Peter identifies several clear goals God seeks to accomplish for us in our experience of suffering and trials. The first is to test and prove our faith genuine (v7a). There is a difference between faith and saving faith. The only faith worth having is a faith that saves for all eternity, which is itself a gift from God, rests entirely upon the finished work of Christ, and comes to us by means of the new birth (v3-5). Faith can be counterfeited and therefore false, while appearing to be very little different from the real thing from an external perspective. Jesus said: "Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of Heaven". Trials will test the reality of saving faith and prove it genuine by demonstrating its capacity to withstand the test and come through stronger, more persevering, more trusting, dependent, and devoted as a consequence. Saving faith is likened to gold, a precious metal that may be dug out of the ground with a variety of faults and impurities associated with it. However, the smelting process of applying extreme heat to the precious metal only serves to improve it by removing all the dross and purifying the gold, and in so doing, reveals its true beauty and worth. Trials are like the refiner's fire when applied to our faith. They are sent by God to test and prove our faith genuine, to purge us of any touch of sin or worldliness, and to bring us forth as pure and holy in His sight. By contrast, that same furnace of trial and testing may cause some to get against God, to give in to unbelief, to turn away from faith. But as Hebrews reminds us, only those who persevere to the end will be saved. The genuineness of saving faith will be proven by its capacity to persevere through every trial and come through with a pure love for Christ and a determination to follow Him without compromise all our days.

A second goal God seeks to accomplish for us through suffering is to prepare us for the return of Christ, to get us ready for the joy of that occasion, so as to participate in and indeed be part of the reason for the praise, glory and honour that will result when Jesus comes again (v7b). Suffering is intended to not just purify us in the present but

also prepare us for the future coming again of our Lord and Saviour. On that day, He will see the travail of His soul in us and be satisfied. He will see the outcome of His sin-bearing suffering and sacrificial death in we the redeemed, robed in His righteousness, washed in His blood, prepared as His spotless bride, the accomplishment of all His atoning work of grace and it will issue forth in praise, glory and honour at His appearing. In that glorious moment, the work of grace will be fully and finally accomplished in each one of us. Instantly, we will at last be saved from the not just the penalty, but also power and presence of sin forever. We will be presented blameless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. On that day, every victory won, every trial endured, every touch of the refiner's fire in us will be shown to have been worth it, indeed will ultimately make sense. We cannot fully comprehend the mystery of God's providence in this life. We cannot fully understand why He permits certain things to happen to us. But on the day of Christ, when He is revealed, coming on the clouds of Heaven, with power and great glory, we will know and understand and join in the chorus of praise as we give all honour and glory to our Lord and King.

Peter's teaching on the purposes of God in suffering are vital for us to grasp and respond to in the present so as to experience the purifying and preparatory effect of them in our lives. This alone will enable us to live well to the glory of God in the here and now, and be prepared for the return of Christ, not just unashamed at the last, but fully engaged in and a part of the praise, glory and honour that will result when Jesus Christ is revealed.

44. Everything we need for life and godliness. 21.07.2020

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called upon to walk by faith and not by sight. The imperative to do so is heightened when a microscopic organism invisible to the naked eye stalks our neighbourhood and threatens to do us harm or worse. Understanding the need of the hour to stand firm in the faith should come naturally to us in that we constantly battle against an invisible foe in principalities and powers, the forces of evil that constantly wage war against God and His people. 2 Peter 1:3-11 helps us to understand how best to stand firm in the faith no matter how fierce the opposition or adverse the circumstance.

The first thing we are urged to do is to make full use of God's generous provision for our every need (v3). He has "given us everything we need for life and godliness". Our Heavenly Father has not withheld a thing that is necessary for us to stand firm in the faith, even in the midst of a pandemic. Everything needful for life - for our physical wellbeing, and for godliness - our walk with God, He has given us. It is an accomplished fact. Abundant resources are supplied to enable us to rise to meet every challenge and not just endure but overcome by the grace freely made available to us. When Burke and Wills set out on their epic exploration of the Australian continent, seeking a route from south to north, they took everything they thought they needed for the journey. It was an absurd and farcical amount totalling @ 40 tonnes requiring multiple horse drawn carts and a team of camels just to carry it. As they journeyed on they were forced to jettison so much that was slowing them down and clearly unnecessary. By contrast, we are assured that as we walk by faith, we can travel light, in the sure knowledge that whenever a need may arise, God's provision for us will be more than sufficient for each circumstance and need.

The second thing we are urged to do is to claim His "very great and precious promises" (v4). The Scripture contains so many great and precious promises in which our Heavenly Father makes commitments to us that we simply need to claim by faith in order receive the fulfilment of in our personal experience. Promises are a pledge of God's love and kindness made in advance of and in anticipation of our needing them. When a need arises, we can simply approach God in prayer and by faith claim the specific promise He has made that applies to our circumstance and need at that time. As we do so, we are doing nothing more than reminding our Father of commitments He has already made to us and seeking their performance and fulfilment in that moment and for that need. In doing so, we come to participate in the divine nature, we become recipients and beneficiaries of divine grace, and we overcome in the spiritual battle (v4b).

Because God has made such generous provision for us, and has given us such great and precious promises, our experience of God's goodness in life is only limited by the measure of our faith to be able to lay hold of all that God has provided. By faith we receive God's provisions and claim God's promises. Little faith will believe for little reward. Bold faith will believe for big things. As John Newton wrote in his hymn: "Thou art coming to a King; Large petition with thee bring. For His grace and power are such; none can ever ask too much." Jesus rebuked His disciples as being "of little faith". Likewise, Paul made plain that we must grow up in our faith, from childhood to adulthood, from desiring milk to feeding on meat. Peter expresses the same idea here when he says: "make every effort to add to your faith". As Christians, our faith needs to grow. Proving God's faithfulness in the little

things will lead on to being entrusted with greater responsibility, which in turn calls for the exercise of greater faith. None of us can afford to rest on past accomplishments or stand still in our faith.

Peter here provides us with a list of additions or improvements to faith that we are to actively pursue and seek God for. Seven qualities are identified as necessary for us to add to faith. Peter's list has parallels with the nine-fold fruits of the Spirit outlined in Galatians 5, with four qualities common to both: goodness, self-control, kindness, and love. Unique to Peter's list are: knowledge, perseverance, and godliness, although it may well be shown that these are simply different ways of expressing the same ideas as patience, faithfulness, gentleness, joy, and peace. These seven qualities, like the nine fruits of the Spirit, are evidence of an inward transformation worked in us by the Holy Spirit, conforming us more and more to the likeness of Christ. Each of Peter's seven qualities we are to seek to add to our faith perfectly describe the Lord Jesus. Wanting to be more fully conformed to the likeness of Christ, asking ourselves: "What would Jesus do/have done in this circumstance?" creates the space and the willingness for the Spirit to work in us and form these Christ-like qualities within our renewed and transformed temperament. We must want this inward change, actively seek it, and do all in our power to add these qualities to our faith. Eagerness to make our calling and election sure by possessing these qualities in increasing measure will keep us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. To be an ineffective or unproductive as a Christian, to be nearsighted and blind is a prospect that ought to so grieve us that we strenuously guard against such by actively seeking to grow up in our faith in pursuit of these Christ-like qualities. And there is no better time to give ourselves to such a pursuit than now.

45. Words of Wisdom. 24.07.2020

The crisis we presently find ourselves in calls for wisdom beyond ourselves. That there is a right and wrong way to behave in a pandemic ought to be self-evident to all. That certain choices and courses of action taken in the midst of a pandemic are either wise or foolish ought also to be self-evident to all. But to choose the right and reject the wrong, to embrace the way of wisdom and to shun folly is not as simple as it sounds. To do so assumes that one first believes in an objective standard of right and wrong and possesses a moral compass to guide one in making such choices. But that is an assumption that is simply no longer reasonable to make in this present day and age. Concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, wisdom and folly are defined by revelation from God and are embraced by faith. But in this age of apostasy, when so many have turned away from God, there has also been a turning away from any collective agreement concerning what constitutes right and wrong, wisdom and folly, leaving people to make it up as they go along and muddle through as best they can.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom in the sense that to reverence God as holy will lead us to accept His standards of right and wrong, agree with His categories of good and evil, adopt His priorities in life, embrace what He regards as wise and shun all that He regards as folly. The Book of Proverbs is one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament and contains an extended revelation of what God regards as both wisdom and folly. It is written so as to help us embrace wisdom and shun folly, and in doing so, to find blessing and joy in life. One of the ways it does that is to introduce us to comic/tragic figures who personify the way of folly and in so doing, reveals to us the ruinous consequences of such a way of life. The first of these characters is the fool. What the fool lacks the most is wisdom. What the fool needs the most is the truth. As ch 1:7 reveals, fools despise wisdom and discipline. This combination of wisdom and discipline is significant in that it highlights the fact that the fool's folly is more moral than intellectual. The fool is not unintelligent but lacking in restraint. He wants to be free to give vent to his base instincts.

A fool is wise in his own eyes and relies on his own understanding. He is confident in his own opinions and expresses them strongly. One particular area in which the fool lacks self-discipline is in the control of his tongue. It is the way of wisdom to "Put perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips" (4:24). But a fool blurts out folly. The Proverbs call him a "chattering fool" (10:8) whose ill-disciplined tongue brings him to ruin. He spreads slander without cognisance of the fact that not only does he destroy his neighbour's reputation by doing so, he also contributes to his own ruin (10:18;11:9). It is the nature of fools to gush folly (15:2). There is no filter, no caution, no restraint in giving vent to his opinions. If ever a fool were to succeed in keeping silent, then "even a fool is thought wise" (17:28), but it is most uncharacteristic of him to do so. When there is an open, honest and respectful exchange of ideas and an earnest seeking after the truth, one would think the fool might have something to contribute, but in that situation, "he has nothing to say" (24:7). Normally, however, he "delights in airing his own opinions" (18:2). He even "answers before listening", which is to "his folly and his shame" (18:13).

The folly that is bound up in the heart of a fool is most commonly expressed in his lack of self-discipline in speech. The conspiracy theories, the blame shifting, the zombie apocalypse scenarios, the unfiltered venting and blurting out of base opinions that goes on in the social media are examples of an unwise use of words in the present context. We are all so far out of our depth and so much unable to control the spread of the virus that none of us can speak with authority, none of us has the answers, we are all in a position of very great vulnerability and need, and no amount of bluff or bluster will change that fact. The situation we all find ourselves in calls for the wise use of words, clear and intelligible communication of ideas, constructive and unifying speech

that rallies people to a common cause and that inspires a shared sense of patience, forbearance, compassion, humanity. Now is the time for the wise to speak up and find their voice. Words of wisdom are what we all need to hear and heed in this present crisis.

46. The Getting of Wisdom. 28.07.2020

You will all no doubt be aware that a pandemic doesn't happen in a vacuum. With little or no warning, it crashes in upon life as it is at the time, it disrupts our plans, upends our schedule, messes with our routine, and creates a sense of isolation, dislocation, and alarm. It tends to magnify pre-existing conditions. If there is tension or conflict in households or relationships, a pandemic tends to increase the degree of difficulty already experienced. A pandemic introduces an extra layer of complexity, making hard situations even more challenging. Dealing with a pandemic calls for wisdom in order to negotiate both the challenges it brings and the underlying challenges it compounds.

But how to get wisdom, especially in the midst of a pandemic? There is some truth in the saying: "You can't put a wise head on young shoulders". But it is not the whole truth. There is a form of worldly wisdom that comes only with experience, and that is learned, quite often the hard way, by the mistakes we make. But there is another form of wisdom that is not age-specific, that is accessible to all at any time, that comes to us as a gift by revelation. It is a wisdom that comes from God and is obtained through prayer. As James 1:5-6 says: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt.*" Whenever we feel our need for wisdom in any situation, we can ask God for what we lack, and He promises to give to us wisdom beyond ourselves, sufficient for the needs we face. The only condition is that we believe God for this, trusting that He will come through for us as He promised. This is very good news as we find ourselves in a one in 100 year event the likes of which none of us have ever experienced in all our lifetimes.

That there is a wise and an unwise way to conduct ourselves in a pandemic is fast becoming apparent to all. Daily news reports of clumsy attempts to smuggle people over closed interstate borders, people skipping quarantine for selfish reasons without regard to the consequences of spread of infection for other people or the community at large, others insisting on not wearing masks based on some spurious appeal to an international declaration on human rights, others insisting on going to work while symptomatic because they are casual employees regardless of the consequences for other people, are all examples of folly, stupidity, or worse. We have already considered the need for a wise use of words. It is so unhelpful, so counter-productive to play the blame game, to find fault, to accuse, especially when targeted at care-givers and health professionals, at a time like this. But what constitutes wise action?

The Book of Proverbs reveals to us what our all-wise God considers to be wise and foolish in terms of human activity. It does so by introducing us to several tragic/comic figure who personify folly in order to help us see the ruin that such a life leads to in order to avoid it. We are introduced to the "Fool" with his undisciplined tongue, the "Mocker/Scoffer" who is a law unto himself, and the "Sluggard" who is a danger to himself and everyone else. A Mocker or scoffer responds to a pandemic by concocting conspiracy theories, by dismissing or trivialising public health orders issued in the midst of a declared medical emergency, by defying authority. Proverbs 21:24 introduces us to the scoffer/mocker: "*The proud and arrogant man - "Mocker" is his name.*" The dominant characteristic of the Mocker is that his overweening pride, his assertive arrogance prevents him from accepting or submitting to lawful authority. He knows better. He is right and everyone else is wrong. He holds in contempt all in authority, be it government officials, medical professionals, or law enforcement officers. He sneers at and finds fault with anyone who is having a go and is striving to do their best under extremely difficult circumstances.

A person becomes a "mocker" and rejects all God-appointed authority only after having first rejected God's authority over him personally. As Proverbs 14:9 reveals, "*fools mock at sin*". In other words, they deny the seriousness of it, the guilt of it, the judgment it deserves, or the right of Almighty God to hold them accountable for their own actions. To mock at sin is to hold God in contempt, and if one cannot or will not respect or honour God as their Creator and Judge, they are unlikely to show proper respect or honour to God-appointed human authorities.

Perhaps the most painful sphere in which the "Mocker" operates is in the home. Much of the Book of Proverbs is presented to us in the form of parental instruction: "*Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.*" (1:8). One would imagine that even a cynic and a rebel would at least show respect for their parents. But no. "*A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.*" (13:1). Such disdain for parental authority and guidance is not compatible with obedience to the fifth commandment, nor with the first commandment for that matter. A breach of the first commandment in failing to show proper respect for God inevitably leads on to disrespecting one's parents. And it is a relatively small step to go from

disrespecting one's parents within the home to showing disrespect for those in authority outside the home and acting as a law unto oneself, which in a pandemic, can have devastating consequences.

The "Mocker's" disrespect for God and for one's parents is also manifest in his wider social relationships outside of the home. He neither seeks advice or takes it if offered, and *"a mocker resents correction" (15:12)*. So *"do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you" (9:8)*. A wise person, on the other hand, *"listens to advice" (12:15)*. Indeed, it is the characteristic of the wise that they listen both to rebuke and counsel. At precisely the time when we are all being brought to realise our vulnerability and need a mocker's arrogant pride and self-assertiveness will likely bring himself and possibly others to ruin.

We desperately need the wisdom God promises so as to avoid the pitfalls of this present crisis and to be a help and a blessing to those around us. Even the "Mocker" can humble himself and get the wisdom he lacks by seeking God for it. God graciously promises to give us the wisdom we lack sufficient for the needs we face. And He promises to do so generously and without finding fault. In other words, no matter how foolish we may have been, despite our past performance, help is at hand, wisdom is available and accessible. We just have to be humble enough to acknowledge our lack of it and God's willingness to make up for our lack by granting to us wisdom beyond ourselves.

47. Work during Lockdown. 30.07.2020

The disruption to normal working conditions posed by the pandemic has led to the biggest changes in the way we go about work in most of our lifetimes. Working from home has become the norm. Finding creative new ways to get the job done has been the order of the day. Such has been the innovation of our working from home that it is hard to imagine a full return to work as it once was. In relation to work and the economy more broadly, some have likened the periods of lockdown to hibernation in animals. There is no doubt there has been a slowdown in economic activity. The one issue with that comparison is that in hibernation, animals go into a deep sleep and do no work at all for the entirety of that time. Hopefully, that is where the analogy breaks down. Hopefully, we are resisting the temptation to laziness, inactivity, and slackening off during lockdown. Needless to say, such radical changes to our working conditions carry with it challenges for us all. Its harder to stay focussed and motivated, especially for those with a tendency to not like work in the first place.

The "sluggard" or "lazy person" is one of several comic/tragic characters introduced to us in the Book of Proverbs. The "sluggard" personifies the way of folly and describes the ruin that results from leading such a life so as to urge us to shun such folly ourselves. Lest we be in any way tempted by the present circumstance to slide into lazy habits during lockdown, it is worth being reminded of the warning against laziness that the Proverbs issues. There is no doubt the writer makes fun of the sluggard to make an important point. Proverbs 26:14 gives us a vivid image of laziness: *"As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed."* He is too lazy to get up in the morning. He invents ludicrous excuses for staying in bed, like there is a lion outside in the street (22:13; 26:13), or it may rain. He is so lazy that he neglects his fields and vineyards until they become completely overgrown and entirely unproductive (24:30-31).

We are human beings made in the image of God for whom God's pattern of work and rest is a model for us to follow. That truth is made plain in the fourth commandment, which is not just a command to rest one day in seven, but also a command to work six days in seven. One method the writer of Proverbs uses to motivate us to fulfil our work obligation is to reference the work ethic of some creatures in the animal kingdom, and by so doing, to rebuke us whenever animals manage to do by instinct what we are supposed to do by choice. One of the best examples is the contrast between the ant and the sluggard: *"Go to the ant, you sluggard: consider its ways and be wise" (6:6)*. The level of industry and energy shown by the ant is phenomenal. While lacking human leadership or forethought, instinct prompts the ant to tireless activity, storing up food in the summertime (6:7-8; 30:25).

Having taken up bee keeping several years ago, I never cease to be amazed by the same industry and effort show by bees. The worker bee is female and has a lifespan of 4-6 weeks during the warmer months. Once a bee hatches out of its capped cell, the first work that it does is to clean up the cell that it just crawled out of for future use by the queen. It then works in the nursery caring for the unhatched brood. Then it moves on to foraging for pollen and nectar which it brings back to the hive for honey production. By instinct, a worker bee labours tirelessly from dawn to dark for @ 4 weeks flying up to 3 kilometres from the hive in order to collect the pollen and nectar needed to produce honey. The entire productivity and industry of a worker bee for its entire working life consists of 1/2- 1 teaspoon of honey. It is humbling to think that one bee toiled its entire lifetime just so you and I could have honey on toast for breakfast. After @ four weeks of tireless effort, a worker bee's wings become worn out and they die. No wonder they are known as "busy" bees.

What creatures do by instinct we humans are urged to do by choice. Without anyone watching over our shoulder, we should desire to work cheerfully and industriously, as unto God. Our desire should be to give a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, whether our boss is watching us or not. To do all for the glory of God and with a view to receiving His commendation should motivate us to give our best at work. If anything, lockdown ought to be an opportunity to be innovative and creative in our work rather than slackening off or scaling back.

48. On the Wearing of Masks. 31.07.2020

Apart from wearing the occasional dusk mask when woodworking, or a veil when beekeeping, these past days since the wearing of masks in public became mandatory marks the first time that I, and I suspect most of us, have worn a mask publicly. It is a strange feeling to walk among other people with one's face covered and one's identity concealed. To meet someone for the first time, yet to not be able to see their face or know what they look like is just plain odd. The wearing of masks adds an extra layer of complexity to human interaction. Unless we choose to reveal our identity some other way, we are able to maintain our anonymity behind the mask. For most of us, the wearing of masks has long been associated with deliberately attempting to hide one's identity while engaging in criminal activity. It does not come naturally to us to cover our face. And yet remarkably, the vast majority of the population has acted responsibly and compliantly by doing what seems so unnatural to us. In the interests of public health and safety, for our own protection, for the welfare of others, and for the good of all, we will do it. That doesn't mean that we like it necessarily or that we would ever do so by choice. There will be a few who have a legitimate reason or medical exemption for not doing so. There are also the belligerent few who simply refuse to comply for spurious and selfish reasons. But we are willing to do so as a matter of necessity.

Facial recognition is part of what it means to be distinctively human. We are all unique individuals and our individuality is bound up as much in our appearance as anything. To wear a mask covers over our individuality and has a dehumanising effect, it creates a disconnect between people at a time when we are already starved of personal contact with those outside our family circle. So the wearing of masks, while beneficial in the present context of a public health emergency, also has down-sides that make it highly unlikely to ever catch on as normal practise in our free and open society.

Part of the awkwardness associated with wearing a mask stems from our unique identity and heritage. The Bible explains for us the reasons why. In Genesis, we discover that we were made for face to face fellowship with God our creator and with one another. But sin brought a separation that led Adam and Eve to hide from the presence of the Lord, and which led the Lord to cast them out of the garden and from His presence. This separation creates a lack in us that we all feel, whether we fully realise it or not, that will only be fully and finally resolved when in Heaven, we shall meet God face to face for the very first time.

In the Old Testament, there are two conspicuous stories that involve veils or disguising one's own identity for sinful reasons, that were nevertheless wonderfully redeemed so as to fulfil God's purposes. Genesis 27 tells the story of deceit involving Jacob engaging in identity fraud in order to secure Isaac's blessing. He put on animal skins and concocted a lie to deceive his blind father and obtain his brother's blessing. Genesis 38 also tells a story of deceit in which the widow Tamar covered her face with a veil and disguised herself as a prostitute in a successful attempt to seduce her father-in-law Judah. In both instances, the deceit of wearing a veil or disguise to hide one's true identity, while sinful in itself, was nevertheless redeemed by Almighty God so as to fulfil His eternal purposes, to the extent that God was not ashamed for Tamar's child to be incorporated into the family line of Jesus through His mother Mary.

Exodus 34 tells the story of Israel at the foot of Mt Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments carved on two tablets of stone. After Moses smashed the first stone tablets in disgust when he saw the golden calf they had made in his absence, he went up onto the mountain a second time to receive a replacement set. As Moses spent time in the presence of God, it changed his appearance and his face began to shine with the glory of God. As he went down the mountain, Moses' face continued to be radiant with the reflected glory of God. Upon his return to camp at the base of the mountain, the Israelites pleaded with Moses to veil his face as the glory of God reflected in his face made them afraid. Moses did so, while removing it and meeting unveiled and face to face when he went into the presence of the Lord.

In 2 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul picks up on the episode with Moses veiling his face to explain a deep spiritual truth. For all who are under the law, it is as if there is a veil that covers their heart, preventing them from seeing and believing the wonder of the Gospel. But the moment anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Only in Christ is it taken away. In Christ, we with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, and are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory. A spiritual veil or blindness afflicts fallen humanity, preventing them from seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ. Only the Spirit can bring life and freedom from

such bondage. By the Spirit, the veil of spiritual blindness that binds us up in unbelief is taken away and we are enabled to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

As we comply with the mandated wearing of face masks in public, understand that from a spiritual perspective for all who repent and believe the Gospel, the veil of unbelief has been taken away once and for all, and we are now free from bondage to sin and the law. We are now free in the Spirit to approach God's throne of grace with confidence, and we are free to anticipate that great and glorious day when we shall see God face to face.

49. Getting Married in Hard Lockdown Romans 12:12. 04.08.2020

As a testimony of their journey to this point in time, Dean and Anne have requested that I share with you a message of hope that declares God to be a prayer answering God. To that end, I direct your attention to Romans 12:12, where we are encouraged to live together joyfully and hopefully under God's reign of grace. Three simple truths are impressed upon us: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer". I would suggest to you that here are three aspirational goals to underpin the strength of any marriage relationship.

The first imperative to living together under God's reign of grace is that we "be joyful in hope". The reason we are here today is because a joyful hope has sustained you both to this point in time. You have both held on to hope that God has a plan for you, that God has made provision for you. Through days of sorrow and loneliness you refused to give up hope. You chose to believe that it was only a matter of time before you made the joyous discovery of the person God had prepared for you and wanted to join you to. That day has now come. All those hopes have now been realised. God has proved faithful. His plans have always been to prosper you and not to harm you. Now the realisation of those plans will have been well worth the wait. But the Scripture urges you to keep on being joyful and to keep on hoping. Never cease being joyful in hope. Never stop being awed by His goodness to you. Never stop being amazed by His grace. Live every day of your life together joyful and hopeful for all that has been, and for all that shall yet be.

The second imperative to living together under God's reign of grace is that we be "patient in affliction". No doubt you have both experienced hard times leading to today. Discouragement, loneliness, rejection, misunderstanding - we all experience them, but it's what we do with them that really matters. Patience in affliction is the way of grace. Refusing to give in to frustration, resisting the temptation to self-pity or despair are key to staying the course, standing our ground, not being knocked by hardship and affliction when it comes, but growing stronger and kinder for having lived through it. Patience in affliction has stood you in good stead to this point in time. Let it continue to be your default setting when troubles come, and they most surely will come. But you now have the privilege of being able to share them and to support one another through them. Patience is a virtue. Patience in marriage is essential. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. So, if you lack patience, seek more of the Holy Spirit and the change He will produce in you will bring forth the patience you need for each trial and hardship that comes your way.

The third imperative to living together under God's reign of grace is that we remain "faithful in prayer". There have been many prayers offered by you and for you that have found their answer in this ceremony today. Of those prayers, one that I am particularly aware of was offered by Anne when she posted a note in the western wall in Jerusalem during our Bible-lands tour of 2018. In it she simply asked God for a husband. Within 6 months of doing so, Anne and Dean had met via the internet, and quickly discovered that they were a good match, they were equally yoked as the Bible puts it, they shared the same faith and love for God and the same zest for life. It has been a joy to see their love for each other blossom and grow to the point where they are about to enter into a lifelong commitment to each other in marriage. And it's all in answer to prayer. Having proved the power of prayer to this point in your relationship, don't stop now. Press on. Make prayer a priority. Seek to be agreed together as you cast all your cares upon God, who loves you, who gave His Son for you. Prayers of faith are always heard and answered, perhaps not how or when we would have chosen, but always far better than we could have expected, and always right on time. Walk humbly together by remaining faithful in prayer. By prayer all the resources of Heaven are at our disposal for every challenge we will ever face. So as you are about to be married, as you start out on life together, I urge you to remain joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

50. Let us not give up meeting together. 06.08.2020

Every sincere Christian will be aware of the exhortation contained in Hebrews 10:25 - "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" Not only do we know it, but for the most part we have spent all of our Christian lives taking it

seriously by actively prioritising the gathering together of believers on the Lord's Day and at other times. At its highest and best, the fellowship of believers is the most thrilling, joyous, life-giving, faith-building activity we can engage in. When we are a part of the body of Christ that is functioning as it should, there is nothing that can compare, or compete with, or take the place of the fellowship of believers. It is a most precious gift to be part of a community in which we are free to give love and receive love unconditionally, to serve and be served, to accept and be accepted. So it is a huge challenge and a sacrifice for us all to have that freedom of choice curtailed such that we simply cannot meet together in the usual way, which is to be all together in one place. We reluctantly accept this temporary constraint on the exercise of our freedom of religion, out of respect for the governing authorities and in support of their collective efforts to prevent transmission of the virus and thus minimise loss of life amid this pandemic. That is not to say we would ever want to or get used to doing church remotely on a permanent basis.

The fact is, twenty weeks into our lockdown and forced closure of Trinity Church is telling on me, and I expect on you also. It is wonderful to have all the electronic means of communication that are available to us as an alternative way of staying connected. But Zoom is no substitute for face to face fellowship and worship. Please don't misunderstand me, I do not begrudge the government's efforts at keeping the community safe. But the fact remains, as blood-bought believers, we have a spiritual obligation under God to seek out and give priority to Christian fellowship and worship, and that is best shared person to person, face to face, heart to heart, spirit to spirit, when we are all together in one place, where God's Word can be declared in our hearing, and where the Holy Spirit can move among us and be poured out upon us collectively. I miss that very much and I expect you do too.

Hebrews 10:25 make clear that the Christian life is not intended to be lived in isolation, but in community. Those who do isolate themselves by choice from the gathering together of believers are likely to come to grief. Like coals in a fire, when we are surrounded by people of shared faith and conviction, we are able to maintain the glow and heat of our spiritual fervour in serving the Lord. But to choose to separate from fellow believers is like taking a coal from the fire and placing it on the hearth all by itself. It quickly loses its heat and glow. It becomes cold and black. So too the faith of a person who forsakes the gathering together of believers rapidly diminishes. Not only so, but an isolated Christian is a prime target for satanic attack, much like a lost sheep is so much more vulnerable to predators. Being part of a body with many members, we all need each other. We were never meant to walk alone. We are part of the family of God, we belong to the household of faith, we are citizens of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. With spokes in a wheel, the closer they get to the hub, the closer they get to each other. So too, in the Christian life, the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we should be getting to each other. If that is not happening, something is seriously wrong.

We live in an age of rampant individualism where people want to do their own thing. So it is tempting to choose a friendship group whose ideas, styles and interests are similar to our own. But in a church, we don't choose who is in. God chooses, and in so doing, He puts people together from different racial, social, age and professional backgrounds all in the one church family so we can care for and learn from and support one another. In so doing, the Church beautifully reflects God's grace and is a foretaste of Heaven, which will be comprised of people from every nation, tribe, language, and tongue. The spiritual gifts are given by God's sovereign choice to each individual. But they are not given for our own individual benefit primarily. Individual gifts are rightly used to build up the body. Basic to the Christian life is the call to discipleship where to be great in God's kingdom is to be servant and slave of all. That can only be done in community, not living as a solo Christian. Most of the New Testament was written to church communities. It is not possible to "privatise" its message.

When Christ returns, he will come again for His bride, the church. Part of being ready for the return of Christ is being part of the bride of Christ, the church, in the here and now, so as to be caught up in the blessing of Christ's return whenever that may be. Our primary focus with respect to each other within the church ought to be a source of encouragement to faith and godliness. We can encourage one another by our perseverance, by our sacrifice, by our living testimony, by our stand against compromise, by our willing and joyful service for Christ, by our love. We can encourage each other just by standing firm in the faith and being present on the Lord's Day. We don't need to have an upfront role to be an encourager. The world is increasingly hostile to all who profess Christian faith. We will receive little or no encouragement from the world to stand firm in the faith. So when we come together, it should be with the clear intention of being an encouragement, to spurring one another on toward love and good deeds, to build one another up in faith, hope and love.

The challenge of our present circumstance is to seek out and find ways of doing that remotely while in enforced isolation from one another. But that we need to be intentional about doing so is bound up in the exhortation of Hebrews 10:25, in joyful anticipation of the day when restrictions are eased and we can resume not only meeting together, but fulfilling our obligation to be the body of Christ and to encourage one another in anticipation of the return of Christ.

51. The Steadfast Love of God (HESED). 07.08.2020

In times of crisis as we are all presently experiencing, it is wonderful to be both reminded of and to be able to rest in the unchanging, unfailing character of God as the rock we can stand on in the midst of this storm. The attribute of God that is the primary revelation of His character and heart toward His redeemed in the Old Testament is His steadfast love and faithfulness. The Hebrew word is HESED, it appears 249 times in the Hebrew Bible, and is variously translated unfailing love, or lovingkindness, or steadfast love. It is the nearest Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament word for God's grace or unmerited favour - CHARIS, and also has links to the Godlike love of AGAPE.

The most wonderful expression of God's HESED or steadfast love is to be found in Exodus 34:6-7 *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."* This represents God's self revelation to Moses at Mt Sinai on the occasion of Him giving the law on a second set of stone tablets. This revelation of God's own heart for His redeemed people expresses in a wonderful way the depth of His love for us and loyalty to us. It comes soon after the golden calf incident, and by reaffirming in this way His heart of love for His people despite their wilfulness and rebellion against Him, the Lord demonstrates that quite apart from the fickle nature of our hearts toward Him, His commitment to us remains strong and constant. We can rest in and rely upon the steadfast love God has for us - even when He tests us or disciplines us. We can trust in the steadfast love of God to continue toward us, no matter what our situation or condition may be.

Psalms 136 is unique among the psalter because of its structure. 26 times throughout the psalm the declaration rings out: *"His love (HESED) endures forever"*. It is interspersed with 26 one line descriptions of God's mighty acts that manifest the steadfast love of God for His people in time and history. The psalm seeks to quantify the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God. It describes the glory of His nature, the wonder of His works in creation, His deliverance of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, His bringing them into the promised land as their inheritance, His sustaining power from day to day. Indeed, the very existence and survival of Israel as a nation is due entirely to the steadfast love of God. And we could also say, the very existence of the church down through the history of the world, is due entirely to the steadfast love of God toward us.

In Lamentations 3:22-23, the prophet Jeremiah puts his hope and confidence in the steadfast love of God, even amid the ruins of the destruction of Jerusalem and exile in Babylon. *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness."* Even a rebellious people can cast themselves on and rely upon the unchanging character of God. The HESED love of God is so enduring, it persists beyond any sin or betrayal so as to mend brokenness, to redeem failure, and to make things better than if the sin had never happened to begin with.

God's HESED love for Israel is a love that sought and found them when they were not looking for Him and maintained His loyalty to them long after their persistent breaking of the covenant had destroyed any reason or hope that it should continue. God's HESED love remains ever faithful, dependable, unchanging, and loyal, even to the most undeserving of His people.

In the 23rd Psalm there is a familiar line which reads: *"surely goodness and mercy (HESED) will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* God's steadfast love and faithfulness are here described as relentless in their pursuit of us. The idea is much stronger than merely following along behind. The word follow/pursue here is the word used of a hunter pursuing his prey, or of an army pursuing the enemy as they flee the battlefield. Except in our case, instead of seeking to do us harm, God's love pursues us relentlessly, down every wrong turn, in every mess we make or disaster we inflict, in every day of our life, His love pursues us relentlessly to do us good, to rescue us from danger, to bring us back to Himself, much like the shepherd in search of the one lost sheep.

The fullness of God's steadfast love for the lost is most wonderfully displayed at the cross. As John 3:16 puts it: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"*. Jesus Christ is the only human being ever to have maintained loyalty to God and to His neighbour in every respect. Yet as the sinless one, He was treated as a sinner and a law breaker and was made a curse, a sin-offering so that we, the unrighteous, may be robed in His righteousness, and we the unfaithful, may be clothed in His faithfulness. God's HESED love for us was willing to curse His only Son in order to win our pardon.

In the midst of life's trials and tragedies, we may cry out in our need to our loving Lord in the confidence that His character does not change, His love and loyalty toward us have not diminished, despite our wilful departures from Him. Nothing in all creation is able to separate us from the loyal, sacrificial love that led Him to choose us in Christ from before the foundation of the world, that will continue to keep us from falling in the present, and that will one day present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

On our darkest and most difficult of days, it is God's HESED love that we can hold onto and rely upon, a love that stick to us no matter what, a love that will see us through, no matter the hardship or opposition we may experience along the way.

As a postscript to this devotion, our testimony all through life has been an experience of the steadfast keeping power of God's love, such that when we were blessed to buy a home of our own two years ago, we decided to give it a name, we chose to name it "HESED", and we had a plate made bearing that name that we have attached to the front of the house. Our hope is that whenever the opportunity arises, we can explain our choice of name by declaring the wonders of God's love.

52. PPE and the Coming Judgement. 12.08.2020

The mandatory wearing of masks is just another application of PPE or personal protective equipment that is so vital to preventing the spread of the virus. Initially identified as the domain of health care clinicians particularly, now the wearing of masks has become part of a community wide endeavour to combat further spread of the virus. The high rate of infection among health care clinicians however has highlighted the absolute necessity for vigilance in the correct wearing, removal, and disposal of PPE. Any lapse in best practise creates the opportunity for transmission of the virus to occur.

The virulent and contagious nature of the virus is such that without PPE, we would all be extremely vulnerable to infection. We are not used to living in such an environment. However, until a vaccine is developed, a high level of care needs to be exercised if we are to be kept free from infection.

When the danger is invisible and undetectable, as is the case with this virus, the use of PPE, social distancing, and personal hygiene measures are essential for us all to follow in order to stay as safe as possible and to care for one another. Pride and complacency are to be strenuously resisted. None of us are immune. We all need protection that is properly applied.

This ought to come as no surprise to any of us. There are so many activities and situations in life where danger is present and protective equipment is required in order to engage in that activity safely. For example, no cricketer would take to the field and commence their innings without as much of the available personal protective equipment applied to their person as considered necessary. Likewise, all the protective systems now mandatory for motor vehicles have made driving a much safer activity than it once was.

What is true in the physical realm is also true in the spiritual realm. The greatest threat to our spiritual and eternal wellbeing is to go all through life and on to judgment, there to face the reality of the wrath of God against human sin, without the one means of protection that will enable us to withstand such an experience. God is a holy and just God, He is of purer eyes that to look upon sin. He cannot turn a blind eye to sin in people, He must judge it. But not one of us could endure the judgment of God upon sin and survive in our own strength. God has rightly determined that the wages of sin is death and the soul that sins shall die. Added to the severity of the threat, the reality that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God means that we are all by nature subject to judgment and we have no natural protection against that looming threat. As the Book of Hebrews puts it: "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes judgement." Avoiding death and judgment are impossible for any one of us. So possessing the one and only sure means of protection against the wrath of God in judgement is absolutely vital to our eternal future.

The shed blood of Jesus applied to our hearts and lives by faith is the one and only form of PPE that will protect us against the wrath of God and His coming judgement. That is so because God Himself has made that provision and has declared Himself satisfied with it. The death of a sinless substitute in the sinner's stead will satisfy all God's wrath against our sin and turn aside God's just anger from us, enabling Him to accept and welcome us based on the atoning sacrifice of Christ His Son, deemed ours by faith. The transfer of our sin and guilt to Jesus and His full atonement for our sin in His pure and holy sacrifice, the shedding of His blood, the merits of which are applied to us by our repentance and faith in Christ, provide us with all the protection we need to survive the coming judgment. The blood of Jesus when applied to our hearts by faith, serves as a propitiatory shield that protects us from the severity of God's wrath in judgement.

The reality and power of the shed blood of a sinless substitute acting as a propitiatory shield against the judgement of God was visually demonstrated in the passover lamb that was slain by the Israelites in Egypt. Its blood, when applied to the doorposts and lintels of their houses, shielded those within from God's final act of judgement. Whenever the angel saw the blood of the passover lamb on the doorposts of a house, he passed over that house and the family was spared the plague of the firstborn. The Jewish Passover, which became an

annual celebration of such a mighty deliverance, foreshadowed and anticipated the coming of the True Passover Lamb, the Lord Jesus, whose shed blood delivers us not just from physical death but from eternal death and judgement by turning away the wrath of God from us and satisfying His justice concerning us.

In all its space exploration missions, NASA has developed what they have described as a propitiatory shield, made of foam tiles applied to the nose cone of their returning aircraft, in order to shield the craft and its crew from burning up on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. A space ship reaches speeds of @20,000 mph and when reentering the earth's atmosphere, the friction causes an intense buildup of heat to @ 4,000 degrees F. Under such conditions, no craft or crew could survive without protection. The propitiatory shield, comprising propitiatory foam tiles, was their answer to that problem.

Just how critical the propitiatory heat shield is for spacecraft on re-entry is to be seen in the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster of 1st February 2003. Having safely carried out its full mission in space, Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry into the earth's atmosphere killing all seven crew members on board. The disaster was caused by damage to the propitiatory shield that occurred right at the start of its mission when an external tank struck the left wing on take-off. The damage caused to the foam shield was not a problem until re-entry, but at that crucial stage, it allowed super-heated gases to penetrate the internal wing structure of the shuttle, causing the entire spacecraft to become unstable and break apart. For a spacecraft re-entering the earth's atmosphere, the propitiatory shield is so critical that even the slightest damage to or breach of it poses an extreme risk to both the spacecraft and its crew.

Likewise, for sinners seeking to enter the presence of our Holy God, the heat of re-entry caused by God's righteous anger against human sin is such that nothing but a propitiatory shield in the form of the sacrifice of Christ applied to our hearts and lives by faith is sufficient to protect us from burning up in the holiness of God's presence. Only the sacrifice of Christ, applied to our hearts by faith, can shield us from the wrath of God, can enable us to stand in the presence of a Holy God and not be consumed. Our God is a consuming fire. His anger against human sin is just and no one can withstand it in and of ourselves. We need a shield of protection to turn away the fierceness of the wrath of God against our sinfulness, and in all the world, the only thing that is able to achieve that is the shed blood of Jesus, applied to our hearts by faith. When God the Father looks upon the blood of His Son, applied to our hearts by faith, His justice is satisfied, His anger is quenched, he has found a way to be both righteous and merciful. He looks on the sacrifice of His Son and is satisfied so as to pardon us all our unrighteousness and accept us as His blood-bought child. The cross is where God's love and justice meet, where His righteousness and peace embrace.

53. If you thought Stage 4 was hard. 13.08.2020

Stage four restrictions are hard going for all of us in different ways, especially given that this is the second time we have had to do this and it is not what any of us would have chosen. But rather than focussing on the down side of lockdown, it is vital that we seek God's will for us in our present circumstance and learn to give thanks in it. There ought to be no doubt about the fact that God, in His gracious dealings with us, often chooses seclusion, isolation, or solitude for us as a vital means of training us in righteousness and equipping us for future service for Him.

The Bible contains numerous examples of people enduring prolonged periods of social isolation as part of God's plan for them and for the world. Noah and his family were "shut in" to the ark. Moses spend forty years tending sheep in the deserts of Midian as part of his equipping to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to prepare them to take possession of the promised land. Jesus spent 30 years in obscurity prior to the commencement of His public ministry, and then forty 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Paul spent years in prison for the sake of Christ, where numerous of his New Testament letters were written. It was most often as God's people accepted the isolation as God's will for them that they were released to make maximum use of it for God's glory.

When John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned in the tower of London for his faith, instead of getting depressed, he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress", the most widely read book of its day after the Bible and an allegory of the Christian life that still speaks powerfully to our condition in Christ to this day.

A striking example of God appointed lockdown happened to the prophet Elijah. Elijah's three plus years of total solitude in Kerith Ravine does not sit comfortably with us given our western mindset and our busy lifestyle. Three plus years of complete seclusion seems to us needless and pointless. But it speaks directly to the enforced isolation we are all currently experiencing.

Elijah was a prophet of God who, upon completion of his first prophetic assignment, was sent into hiding and secreted away from everyone. For more than three years, Elijah would be bereft of all human company, deprived of all creature comforts, and experience untold privations and hardships as he remained hidden away. It was a tough and lonely assignment, but Elijah accepted it immediately without hesitation or complaint. Elijah's solitude was for his own protection, but it was also to prepare him for future service, by teaching him trust, and by training him to do battle with a treacherous enemy.

Elijah's complete submission to the will of God to go out into the wilderness in the midst of a declared drought rested in God's promise of water from a brook and a daily food supply delivered by ravens, as unlikely as that must have sounded. Not a day of Elijah's seclusion would be wasted. It all had a purpose. God's plan involved Elijah's seclusion. God had not forgotten Elijah. God was with him in the seclusion. God knew what He was doing.

From Elijah's experience, we learn that God sometimes uses isolation and solitude as part of His plan for us and for the world. In light of this, we need to be as willing for God to isolate us as for Him to use us and be willing to simply be still and discover the plans God has for us in our isolation. When God chooses to isolate us, understand that He has a purpose for us in it and learn to listen to His voice in the stillness. God's isolation always comes with God's provision. When God directs, He also provides. But He does so one day at a time, making sufficient provision for each day on that day. This calls for us to trust God by living one day at a time, and not worrying about tomorrow. Elijah was miraculously sustained by God while in isolation, and only when the brook dried up did God announce step two of His plan for Elijah.

No doubt Elijah would have been tempted to go into action. His mind must have had thoughts of what he could be doing rather than sitting by a brook in a lonely wilderness. But all such thoughts are futile when God's plan for us in isolation is not to "do" a whole lot of things but for us to stop and listen and learn and be prepared for what God has for us next.

54. Present Sufferings - Future Glory. 14.08.2020

In Romans 8:18-28, Paul urges us to be clear about the glorious future that awaits us in Christ, and then, from that eternal perspective, to better understand and respond to the present sufferings we are called upon to endure. When we get that balance right, the only conclusion we can come to is to see our present sufferings as not worth comparing to the eternal glory that awaits us and will be revealed in us. It is not that our present sufferings are either trivial or insignificant, but they will rightly be seen to be so in light of the immense glory of the eternal future that awaits us.

How does Paul describe the future glory that awaits us? He does so in terms of us waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons (v23), the redemption of our bodies, a reference to our being raised bodily to eternal life (v23), and the glorious freedom that will be ours as children of God (v21). In other words, we will enjoy all the privileges of adoption as God's blood-bought children, we will be released from every bondage and weight that we experience in this life, and we will be truly free – free to be the best we can be and were made to be by God's grace. Not only so, but we will do so in a renewed, resurrected, eternal body. And we shall live in a renewed creation, a new heaven and a new earth, at last shining in all its brilliance, released from its frustration and bondage to decay. Our eternal future will be the best life possible in the best of all possible worlds, within the unbroken love of our Heavenly Father, and with cursing, sin, and evil dealt with and done away with forever. That is our inheritance, by grace, through faith.

How should such an eternal perspective influence our life in the here and now, and particularly, our response to suffering? We need to understand that the brokenness and frustration of this present world is neither its original state nor its eternal state but its fallen state. The whole creation, being our lived environment, has currently been subjected to frustration and bondage to decay (which includes viral and bacterial diseases). That is the world's fallen state, not its original state. That brokenness impinges physically upon us in our fallen state and condition. Life is hard in a fallen world. But while the world is currently in a fallen state, Paul personifies the creation and indicates that it waits in eager expectation, literally it stands on tiptoes, full of eager anticipation for the sons of God to be revealed. In other words, the future renewal of this world and all the created universe is somehow bound up with our eternal future and will enter into its pristine eternal state only as and when we as God's children enter into our eternal state.

These wonderful truths are further explained by the repeated use of the word "groaning". The creation groans (v22), we groan (v23), and the Spirit groans (v26). The creation groans as in the pains of childbirth right up to the

present time. A random sample of the nightly news will confirm that we live in a groaning universe. However, it is not a groan of defeat, but of hope. It is the pain not of death, but of new birth. A whole new life is about to begin, a world more wonderful than we have ever known. Not only so, but we also, God's redeemed, groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption as sons. We know that we are not yet all that we shall be, we sense that the best is yet to come, we feel frustration with the way things are, only because we know that there is a brighter and better future that awaits us. The Spirit also groans along with us, He intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. The Holy Spirit is continually praying for us as we live in this fallen world, He intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. His prayers for us are heard and answered, and in so doing, we are sustained in life and kept for the future inheritance that is ours in Christ.

Well may Paul conclude by declaring that "God works all things together for good". Even the bad thing, and the hard things, and the painful things that happen to us in this life, God works together for the good of His people, to prepare us for Heaven, to conform us to the likeness of Christ.

55. **The Secret of Contentment. 19.08.2020**

One alarming side effect of the pandemic is the impact that prolonged social isolation, lockdown, and work closure is having on the mental health of people. The call on services that seek to help people experiencing a mental health related crisis has skyrocketed over the past several months. There is no doubt that many individuals and families are struggling to cope.

One factor that contributes towards mental health is one's capacity for resilience in the face of hardship. Resilience in turn is empowered by a capacity to deal with and get through feelings of discontent so as to make the most of a bad situation. Contentment is a largely lost art in our day and generation. If things are not as we would want, if our freedom is curtailed or our will is blocked, discontent can quickly take hold and trigger a downward spiral in one's mental health and wellbeing.

Within this context, it is important to recognise that one of the marks of true Christian discipleship is to have learned the secret of contentment in any and every circumstance. There is presently no sterner test of character that will enable our faith to shine in this pandemic, where for all of us very little is as we would have chosen or would want. When our schedule has been disrupted, our routines upended, our plans frustrated, our hopes deferred, our employment and income jeopardised, and our health endangered, the grace of Christian contentment will make us stand out from the crowd, and will serve as a witness to the world of the power of the Gospel.

In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul testifies to having learned the secret of contentment: *"... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."*

Here Paul identifies contentment as a learned behaviour, as a secret to be discovered. It is certainly not a natural reaction in the face of adversity. As Saul, contentment was not part of his makeup. But as Paul, the indwelling Christ strengthened him to learn contentment and to be truly content in the face of all manner of adversity. Paul's was no ivory tower intellectual contentment but real and practical. Writing this as he was from prison in Rome, enabled as he was to see his chains as beneficial for the advancement of the Gospel, Paul adorned the very gospel he professed. Contentment, perhaps more than any other thing, manifests that one is walking by faith and not by sight, that one is trusting in the never-changing faithfulness of God rather than the ever-changing nature of the world around us.

How does one learn the secret of godly contentment? Only through the indwelling presence of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. One begins to learn contentment from a position of glad and willing submission, full and complete surrender, where we yield to the sovereign will of God, even when it crosses our own. To trust that God is sovereign and in control, that God is all-wise and never makes mistakes, and that God's timing is perfect means that we are set free from every touch of complaint or blame, or feeling hard done by, or thinking that we somehow deserve better. We are released from every touch of self-pity so as to say along with Jesus: "Not my will but Yours be done." Selfish ambition is given up. Our one ambition is for God to have His way in us and to be glorified in our lives.

Another key to discovering the secret of contentment is to refuse to go down into comparisons or give way to envy, jealousy, or self-pity, especially in relation to our peers. So much of the modern advertising industry sales strategy is to ferment a spirit of dissatisfaction with what we have in order to instil a desire for something more. Keeping up with the Joneses is a fruitless and endless pursuit. Walking by faith and not by sight will teach us to rejoice in the happiness and success our peers/siblings and be grateful and content with what God has been pleased to give us. And when it comes to dealing with the gifts God has given us, it is only as we have proved faithful in the little things that we will be entrusted with much. The more we do with what we've been given, the more God gives us to do it with.

There is perhaps no greater opportunity to shine for Jesus right now than to show it through our contentment in Him, with all that He has done for us, and with all the gifts He has given us. John Piper captures the secret of Christian contentment in his description of the essence of the Christian life: "**God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.**" We cannot achieve this by our own striving, but we can do this through Christ who strengthens us.

56. Growing closer to God through Suffering (Job 42:1-6). 20.08.2020

For believing people, the purpose of human suffering is to strengthen faith and love for God and to grow our trust and dependence upon Him, so to lead us to know His love and faithfulness in a deeper and more personal way. However, due to the fact that we have an enemy, the devil, who wars against our souls, human suffering can also be hijacked by the evil one to seek to destroy faith and love for God. Our enemy maliciously and opportunistically crashes in on top of tragedy to seek to break our faith and cause it to fail. It is vital that we come to understand this in order to resist the devil and flee to Jesus whenever disaster strikes.

These profound truths are revealed to us most clearly in the Old Testament Book of Job, which tells the deeply moving story of how a blameless and upright man, who feared God and shunned evil, dealt with the most profound personal tragedy and loss so as to glorify God and grow in his faith and love for God through it.

Unbeknown to Job, there was a spiritual battle taking place in the heavenly realms concerning him that alone explains the origin and purpose of his suffering. Satan proposed Job's suffering in an attempt to prove his faith false, but God, who is sovereign in such matters, permitted and limited the suffering to vindicate His holy name and to prove Job's faith genuine. None of the human participants in the drama knew of these spiritual realities. Both as participants and observers of the tragedy, each one tried to make sense of Job's suffering and sought to explain it with the light they each possessed. As such, the book provides a stark expose of much that passes for worldly wisdom with respect to suffering and reveals the truth when it comes to why the righteous are permitted to suffer in this life.

There is no doubt that right from the start, Job was a man of God and possessed saving faith. It was because of his faith that Satan targeted him, and it was because of his faith that God permitted him to endure the most intense suffering imaginable. Human suffering is thus seen as a test in which Satan seeks to destroy faith, while our Gracious God seeks to strengthen faith and prove it genuine. Job passed the first two tests set for him with flying colours. Although the tests involved the loss of his entire wealth, being bereft of all his children, and being stripped of his health, Job remained full of faith, humbly accepted heartbreaking tragedy, and worshipped God in the midst of it, refusing to charge God with wrongdoing or to sin in what he said.

But then came the compounding of Job's grief as first his wife urged him to curse God and die, and then three of his closest friends came to him with the intention of comforting him in his grief, only to begin a relentless campaign of heaping false guilt on Job, alleging that his suffering was caused by some secret sin which had finally caught up with him, and that the only way for him to experience relief would be for him to repent of it. On and on they went, there was no let-up. Job found them to be cold comforters indeed, but so confident were they of their own opinions that they persisted in expressing them without fear of contradiction, wearing Job down in the process and bringing his faith almost to breaking point. Never did he curse God, but he did speak rashly, despairingly at times. He wished he had never been born. He just wanted to die. That seemed to him at the time to be the only way to end the pain he was going through.

It was then that God mercifully called time on this most severe of tests by revealing the truth of the matter. In no uncertain terms, the views of Job's three friends were repudiated completely. There was no sense in which they had spoken truly of God or concerning Job. Job likewise needed to see the limits of his own understanding,

which he was brought to by means of a long interrogation in which God asked him a heavy list of unanswerable questions.

Finally, in chapter 42 Job replied to the Lord, and in doing so, he proved quick to humble himself before Almighty God, quick to confess his own folly and pride, quick to acknowledge the limitations of his own understanding, quick to retract any rash or ill-advised words spoken. But most significantly, he compared and contrasted his experience of God before the testing of his faith to afterwards. As a result of his suffering, Job testifies to having grown deeper in his faith. He likened his faith prior to suffering as like a second-hand hear-say faith compared with the eye-witness first-hand faith that he had afterwards. In this, God was vindicated, and Job was restored to health and granted even greater prosperity in his later life.

Human suffering is for the Lord's people designed with but one purpose in mind, to grow our faith in and love for and dependence upon God. It is vital that we understand this so as to receive the love God has for us in suffering and to resist the devil and cause him to flee.

57. Whatever is lovely. 21.08.2020

In Philippians 4:8-9, the Apostle Paul helps us understand the nature of the call to practical holiness that confronts us every waking moment of each day. *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practise, And the God of peace will be with you."*

Here, Paul rightly identifies worldly interests and pursuits as having a moral value attached to them. There are things that are true and there are things that are false. There are things that are noble and there are things that are shameful. There are things that are right and there are things that are wrong. There are things that are pure and there are things that are impure. There are things that are lovely and there are things that are offensive. There are things that are admirable and there are things that are detestable. There are things that are praiseworthy and there are things that are deplorable. Everything that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and praiseworthy is of God and is good for us, for building character and refining temperament. Everything that is false, shameful, wrong, impure, offensive, detestable, and deplorable is of the devil and is bad for us, corrupting character and temperament. The challenge that faces every child of God in every waking moment of every day is to consistently exercise our free will under God so as to reject the wrong and choose the right.

What Paul advocates for is Spirit empowered personal censorship of what we permit into our hearts and minds. Clear spiritual discernment needs to be exercised by us constantly so as to identify the difference between truth and falsehood, purity and impurity, so to embrace the one and repudiate the other. This calls for us to discriminate in the best sense of that word, so as to filter out anything that will be harmful for us and drink deeply of anything that will be good for us. This world is full of wonder and beauty. There is so much that is truly good in this world that we can give ourselves to, that we can invest our time and attention in. So wide and wonderful is the goodness of all God has made that were we to live a 1,000 lifetimes, we could never exhaust the wonder of it. We have no excuse for being bored or idle, or for going over to the dark side and meddling in those things that are impure and offensive. Sadly, due to the activity of the evil one, there is much that is the antithesis of good, that is a counterfeit of the good. As blood-bought children of God, we need to be drawn to that which is good in life and recoil from all that is not. A spirit of compromise, where we dabble in things that we know are suspect and have a reserve about, but go ahead anyway, is to step out onto a slippery slope from which there may be no turning back. The only way to live as true children of God is to make a clean break with any interest in or involvement with things that are false, or shameful, or wrong, and replace those interests with a whole new affection for what is pure and lovely and right and good and true.

This Scripture was written by the Apostle Paul while a prisoner in Rome, with lots of time on his hands, with many idle moments needing to be occupied. In other words, Paul knew both the temptations that free time presents and the need to redeem the time by actively seeking out good ways to keep ourselves occupied. What was a practical necessity for Paul should be similarly seen to be a necessity for us also. How to do that consistently is the challenge. A good place to start is to submit all your interests, activities, involvements, passions to the searchlight of God's truth and the convicting power of God's Spirit. Anything that involves compromise, that you know does not truly glorify God, that dabbles in either falsehood or impurity must be repudiated. Make a clean break with it. Be ruthless. It made be hard and costly but taking that stand will be so worth it. And going forward, pray that your senses will be trained in godliness so as to be drawn to good and godly influences and to recoil from all impurity. Eric Liddell, missionary to China and famous olympian, developed a personal diagnostic tool to help him make good and godly choices in life in pursuit of holiness. He would constantly ask of any interest or

involvement: “Is it true? Is it kind? Is it needful?” Asking that question gave him the time to live a discerning and reflective life and the space to avoid snap decisions that involved ungodly compromise.

One of the effects of living under stage 4 lockdown is that most of us have more disposable free time on our hands than usual. How we spend that time and what we give ourselves to is vitally important not only for our mental health, but also for our spiritual wellbeing. As my dear Mum used to drill into us as kids: “Satan finds work for idle hands to do”. Idleness does create the opportunity for Satan to get passed our guard and do us harm by seeking to poison our hearts and minds with unhelpful influences. That is not to say we ought to become his next victim. It is true that for God’s people, we have all the resources needed to resist the devil and have him flee from us. But that involves being consistent in making godly choices about what we permit our eyes to see, our minds to consider, our hearts to dwell upon. Every waking moment of each day presents us with a myriad of choices about how we will spend our time and what we will give our attention to. The choices we make and the consequences that flow from those choices will shape our lives for better or for worse. We need to be conscious of that fact, take responsibility for the choices we make, and in so doing, reject a victimhood mentality that seeks to blame others for the painful consequences that flow from any bad choices we make.

58. The Quiet Life. 25.08.2020

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 we read: *“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent upon anybody.”* We all need to be reminded of these home truths, because we are prone to both busyness and to be busy bodies. We all have but one master and we need to continually learn the lesson to walk before God and not man.

When Paul urged us to make it our ambition to lead a quiet life, I’m sure he didn’t have stage four restrictions in mind. However, the enforced quiet of our present existence gives us both the time and the opportunity to put God’s Word into practice and experience the benefit of doing so. In quietness and stillness it is possible to prioritise what is truly important like seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness, like loving God and one’s neighbour. To immerse oneself in this modern life with its popular culture is to be continually bombarded with mixed messages. We get so swept along by the busy pace of life that we often long for some form of reprieve or escape. We have ambitions that take us in many different directions but being ambitious for a quiet life is not common even amongst God’s people. But the enforced quiet and imposed simplicity of our present circumstance may teach us to become intentional and truly ambitious for such a life on a permanent basis.

For home-schooling parents, you may feel like your life is not quiet but busier and more hectic than ever. But in the broader scheme of things, when you look back on life, one of the things you will wish you did more of will be spending time with your children, getting to know them better, having more of an input into their lives, giving and receiving love. This lockdown creates the space for that to happen. Even though it places demands upon you as parents, it also gives to you a precious and unique opportunity to do those things and do them well, such that in the future both you and your children will be able to look back on this time with fondness and gratitude.

It is also good to be reminded that the exhortation to “mind your own business” is an entirely biblical and practical way of honouring God on a daily basis. God wants us to be busy with our hands, busy with our own responsibilities, mindful that we are answerable to God and to God-appointed authority. We have a responsibility to get our own house in order, to remove the plank from our own eye before we seek to help remove the speck from our brother’s eye. Being a busybody and meddling in other people’s affairs does not honour God or commend the Gospel. Lockdown has seen a boom in home maintenance with Bunnings doing a roaring trade. From a spiritual and personal perspective, we ought also be prioritising getting our own house in order, whatever that means for each one of us.

59. A Hope that Perseveres. 26.08.2020

Living with hope for the future is vital to pressing on, persevering through hard times, not losing heart or giving up when the going gets tough. The prolonged nature of our present crisis represents just such a challenge. Hope of a vaccine, hope of an end to stage four restrictions, hope of a return to “normal”, hope of an end to community transmission of the virus are what people are holding out for. To be sure, this time of emergency will pass. But what if it takes a whole lot longer than we expect? My Dad reminded me that it took 25 years after the first polio epidemic in Australia for a polio vaccine to become available, during which time many lives were lost and over 400,000 survivors were left with life long disability. It must have been a deeply concerning time for everyone, as there was no telling where the virus would strike next, and it continued that way for such a long time.

In this context, it is important to realise that Christian faith supplies us with a sure hope that is able to sustain us through the fiercest trial, the darkest day, the worst case scenario. Quite apart from the temporary relief of hardship that may come through earthly means, the fact is that in Christ, our eternal future is now secure, and all our present difficulties are part of God's plan to prepare us for Heaven to live with Him there. That wonderful fact ought to incentivise us with hope to press on undaunted, unbowed, irrepressible in the face of all life's adversities. The eternal hope that we have in Christ will enable us to live as overcomes, more than conquerors, in the present, quite apart from whether a COVID-19 vaccine can be developed quickly or not.

This truth finds expression in Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for the Thessalonian Christians in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3. Here Paul points to three practical manifestations of true faith that will result in praise to God in every generation of God's people. *"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work prompted by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

The three reasons for giving thanks are: 1) they have a faith that works; 2) they have a love that labours; 3) they have a hope that perseveres - a faith that work, a love that labours, a hope that perseveres. A faith that is real is a faith that works. A love that is real is a love that labours. And a hope that is real is a hope that perseveres.

Paul's third cause for thanksgiving is the evidence of a hope that perseveres. Christian hope is always "in our Lord Jesus Christ". It always flows out of what Christ has accomplished for us by His finished work upon the cross, and continues undiminished by the fluctuations of our earthly existence. Christian hope holds onto the promise of God that He has our future secure and sorted. With Him we have a future and a hope that nothing or no-one can take away. Our hope is sure, kept in Heaven for us, and this reality ought inspire us to persevere through trials, hardship, affliction. We will see our present troubles as light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory kept in Heaven for us. We will learn resilience and perseverance in the face of all life's adversities because of the sure and certain hope of Heaven held out to us in the Gospel. Our future hope will inspire us to persevere unbowed and undaunted through every hardship life may bring, in the full assurance that nothing and no-one can take away from us all that God has prepared for us in Christ.

We need a real hope, a future hope in order to be able to persevere in the present. We have such a hope. God's plans for us are for our good and our welfare, to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11). We have an inheritance stored up for us in Heaven, a crown of life, our eternal reward. Let that hope inspire you to rise to the challenge of the present and to persevere to the praise of His name.

60. A "Can do" attitude. 27.08.2020

When I was a child growing up in my father's house, my parents used to teach me Bible memory verses and one of the Scriptures they taught me was Philippians 4:13: *"I can do all things through Him (Christ) who gives me strength"*. By doing so, they sought to awaken faith in me to believe that with Christ nothing is too hard, nothing is impossible, with Christ I can do everything that is in front of me, everything that is reasonably expected of me. Such simple truths are vital for us to learn and remember for the simple reason that growing up as a child and even on into adulthood, one has the perception that there are so many things in life that are just too hard, that I cannot do. While it may be true in that moment, it need not be true for all time, and it certainly is not true when one is reliant, not merely on one's own strength and resources, but on the limitless strength and resources of our Lord and Saviour to see us through. This Scripture busts those secret agreements we make with ourselves about what is doable and what is not.

This Scripture teaches so much more than a mere "can do" attitude, a kind of worldly positive thinking. There is a youthful brashness and bravado that thinks we are invincible. There is a worldly pride that talks up our own ability but usually over-promises and under-delivers. However this Scripture speaks of something entirely different. It identifies the source of our strength, the reason for our confidence as lying not in ourselves or our own abilities, but in Christ and His limitless resources and power. It is Christ in us who lifts us up to be so much more than we could ever be in our own strength. Trusting in Christ within, we can rise to every challenge and overcome by the grace of God. We are victors, more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Paul could do prison and all the privations of apostleship through Christ who gave him the strength. We can do a pandemic, solitude, isolation, home schooling, lockdown, through Him who gives us strength. With Christ we can do this. With Christ we can do all things. His strength is made perfect in our weakness. His grace is sufficient for our every need. When we are reliant upon Christ within as the secret source of our strength, we can humbly yet bravely look every challenge in the eye and say: "I can do all things through Him (Christ) who gives me strength".

61. Benefitting from Adversity (Job 42:5) 28.08.2020

The testimony of Job contained in chapter 42:5 demonstrates that the greatest benefit to be gained by experiencing adversity is in the deepening of our relationship with God. And because adversity can have that benefit, because God permits adversity in order to deepen and grow our faith in Him, when we ask for suffering to be taken away, God does not always grant our prayer, either in the way or in the time frame that we would want. Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh. We are not told specifically what form of adversity Paul was afflicted with, but God's answer was to permit the affliction to remain so that Paul might learn humility through relying on God's grace proving sufficient for his need and so that God's strength may be made perfect in his weakness. Through adversity, it is God's will for us that we learn to submit to His sovereignty, trust in His wisdom, and experience the comfort of His love, until we come to the place of knowing God in a deeper and more personal way, where we can say with Job - *"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you"*.

Job's testimony at the last vindicates the wisdom of God in permitting Job to suffer as he did. Throughout his extreme adversity, Job grew in his faith and love for God, his relationship with God deepened and became more personal and real. So much so that at the end of it all, Job was able to look back on his life as it was before the suffering began and compare his experience of God then with his relationship with God post suffering. His testimony was that, despite being known prior to his suffering as a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil, the reality was that his relationship with God was relatively shallow. He likened it to a hearsay second-hand kind of faith, a kind of head knowledge gained from the teaching of others. But having endured such extreme adversity, Job's testimony was that his faith became stronger, his love for God grew deeper, his relationship with God was so much more real and personal for having gone through that harrowing experience. In other words, Job testified to the fact that he had benefitted from the adversity he had been called upon to endure and having submitted to it and not short circuited or fled the process, he was so much better off as a result. A closer and more personal walk with God was the benefit he gained by submitting to the discipline of adversity, a benefit that he may never have obtained any other way.

While God permits suffering and adversity to grow our relationship with Him and to experience the comfort of His love, it is not just for our personal benefit that he does so, but so as to equip us to share God's love with others who are also experiencing adversity. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Paul writes: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."* The truth is everyone faces adversity at some time in their life, and when that happens, they will need a compassionate, caring friend to draw alongside of them, someone who is able to empathise, to sympathise, to understand, to comfort and to encourage. As we enter into the personal experience of God's comfort and encouragement in our adversities, we will be better equipped to be instruments of comfort and encouragement to others. Having received the love of God in our own dark days, we will be better placed to be a conduit of God's love and mercy to others in a similar condition.

Through adversity, God wants to not only bless us but to make us a blessing to others also. He wants us to experience first-hand the wonders of His love so as to be best placed to pass on God's love to others in their hour of need. So be sure to not waste your sorrows. Learn to benefit from adversity. It is God's will for us that through adversity we learn to submit to His sovereignty, trust in His wisdom, and experience the comfort of His love, so as to come to know Him in a deeper, more personal way, and so as to be best placed to be a real help and blessing to others experiencing hard times.

62. The Fellowship of Christ's sufferings. 01.09.2020

In Philippians 3:10, Paul speaks of the fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ: *"I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead"*. This verse gives expression to what has been the heart cry of believers down through the centuries right up to the present time, namely the desire to know Christ in an ever-increasing, deeper and more personal way, to fully identify with Him in His death and to share with Him in the joy and liberty of His resurrection life. An integral part of coming to know Christ in a deeper and more personal way is to suffer along with Him and to fully identify with Him in His death. We are drawn to the joy of sharing in the victory of the resurrection life of Christ, but we tend to shrink from the prospect of suffering and dying. But the two go inseparably together. They are a package deal. If we are to experience the power of His resurrection, we must also share in the fellowship of His sufferings.

But what does it mean to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and to become like Him in His death? Firstly, it means for us to see the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus as an expression of His redeeming love for us. It should have been you, it should have been me that suffered and died there upon the cross. It was our

sins that held Him there. It was our sins that were laid on Him. It was our anguish that He suffered. It was our death that He died. He who knew no sin, He who was the spotless Lamb of God, who had been tempted in every way just like us, yet remained without sin, willingly took our place in judgment and as our substitute offered up His pure spotless and unblemished life as a sacrifice for sins not His own, for your sins and mine. There what happened to Him should have happened to us. Only as we identify with Christ in His suffering and become like Him in His death are we set free from our sins and the due penalty they deserve. Because God is just and so will not punish the same sin twice, having paid the price of our sin in the sacrifice of Christ, God the Father is now pleased to look on Him and pardon us all our sins and failings.

When we identify with Christ in His death like this, we are released from all confidence in the flesh, and the prideful boasting that goes with it, so as to rest in the finished work of Christ alone. Paul is a supreme example of what he is talking about. In verses 4b-6 Paul explains that his Jewish heritage was impressive and just how proud he was of it. He could not have progressed any further in Judaism than what he had achieved. His CV ticked every box when it came to the pursuit of a works righteousness through Pharisaical legalism, even to zealously persecuting the church. But having come to know the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, whatever Paul once regarded as to his profit, from that day on he regarded as loss, even more, as rubbish, as excrement, to be abandoned, put away, disposed of, for the sake of knowing Christ. No more boasting in the flesh, no more pride in performance or achievement. From that day onward, Paul regarded himself as the worst of sinners. He knew that he deserved only God's wrath and judgment, but by identifying with Christ in His death, he possessed the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

A second sense of what it means to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings is to so identify with Him in His suffering and death that to suffer the reproach He bore, to join Him outside the camp, to be hated and despised for the sake of Christ becomes a badge of honour we are willing to bear for the sake of the name of Jesus. But the suffering Paul here envisions is not limited to persecution for the sake of the Gospel. It includes all adversity that overtakes us as believers and that has as its ultimate purpose our conformity to Christ, becoming like Him in His death. All forms of adversity are for the follower of Christ, an opportunity to die daily to sin and self and pride and independence in order to humbly acknowledge God's grace as the sole ground of our acceptance with a Holy God, and to submit to His will in shaping and moulding us by adversity to prepare us to meet Him face to face. As was the case with Job and so many other heroes of faith, it is God's will to draw us into a deeper trust and dependence upon Him, a more personal experience of His love and compassion, through the experience of adversity. Abraham's long wait for a son brought him into a much deeper relationship with God. Joseph's hardships and privations, betrayal and imprisonments were permitted in order to take him deeper in his trust and dependence upon God for himself and for his people. So many of the psalmists expressed that cry of the heart from the depths of despair that one can only identify with have experienced adversity personally, all of which are intended to drive us deeper in our trust in God to see us through.

It is folly, as some have done, to actively seek out adversity just so we can develop a deeper relationship with God. But when God appoints adversity, we will humbly accept it, in the sure confidence that by it God is drawing us into a deeper relationship with Himself. Instead of resisting or fighting against adversity, as we seek to cooperate with God in it and the good He seeks to do for us by it, we will be drawn into a deeper walk with God, we will by sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings come to attain to the resurrection from the dead and share in the joy and the victory of that.

An authentic participation in the Lord's Supper is one way believers in every generation have been able to renew our commitment and reorder our priorities so as to identify with Christ in His death, by keeping short accounts with God and with one another and by dealing with every touch of pride in us so as to fully identify with Christ in His death and so to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

63. The Lord's Supper and Stage Four Lockdown. 03.09.2020

This coming Lord's Day we shall celebrate the Lord's Supper as an element of our online worship service. The celebration of Communion remotely from our own homes, with couples and singles presently unable to join with others so as to share corporately in any physical capacity, unlike at the time of the June Communion, is far from ideal and not what we would have chosen. Participating remotely as singles or family units is certainly foreign to our experience. However, current stage 4 restrictions make it a necessity. With that in mind, the purpose of this message is to encourage you all to make preparation for our sharing together in the Lord's Supper remotely this Lord's Day such that it is as real and meaningful and beneficial as it possibly can be under the circumstances.

The Lord's Supper is the meal that celebrates our union with Christ, that we have been loved, accepted and forgiven through the cross, the saving effects of which becomes ours and are applied to us by the Holy Spirit when we repentance and believe in Jesus. We now share together in the life of Christ. The life that we share together is the life of Christ within us and flowing through us, like branches in a vine. The elements of bread and wine remind us of the broken body and the poured out blood of Jesus, given for us upon the cross, that has made that union possible. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we primarily give expression to our love for Jesus in grateful thanks for His redeeming grace toward us. That is something that remains constant through all the change and uncertainty of our present circumstance, which is reason in itself for celebrating the Lord's Supper together at this time.

The Lord's Supper is also the meal that celebrates and strengthens our unity together as the blood-bought, Spirit-filled, Heaven-bound children of God that we are. Nothing about our current isolation from one another can change those spiritual and eternal realities. Our usual practice is to celebrate the sacrament corporately on each quarter-Sunday with everyone giving priority to the assembling together of God's people in order to experience and give expression to our common faith and our shared life in Christ in order to strengthen the ties that bind us together, and hopefully deal with anything in our midst that would threaten to cut across our unity in Christ. Historically, we do that by a season of self-examination prior to eating the bread and drinking the cup, and by a corporate seeking after God together through a season of prayer and seeking to put things right with one another. The ritual nature of our corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper also seeks to give expression to the spiritual realities that we are all one in Christ Jesus, that we all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross, that in Christ there is true unity and equality, and that we all are an essential part of the body of Christ.

But while the corporate and physical aspects of our quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper are significant, there are further and deeper spiritual dimensions to our celebration of the Lord's Supper that are real and present no matter how our celebration of the Lord's Supper finds expression. First, when we participate in the Lord's Supper with fellow believers in our local church, we also partake of a worldwide fellowship that transcends all racial, social and national boundaries. We share in the real union that Christ Himself has established between believers in all lands and that extends throughout all the earth. There is but one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all. There is but one loaf and one cup, of which we all share. Whenever we travel to distant lands and join in the fellowship of believers there, we experience something of the reality of this wonderful fact in an immediate sense of connection and identification due to our shared faith in the Lord Jesus. In that sense, although we live far removed from and thus are remote from such people in a physical sense, we are nevertheless all part of the one universal church, we are all branches in the same vine, we all derive our life and fruitfulness from the life of Christ flowing through us, and we recognise and thrill to the wonder of that whenever we meet believers from distant places for the first time. Our celebration of the Lord's Supper is to give expression to that wonderful fact.

Not only so, but as a part of the church of Christ on earth, we also share a mystical communion with the saints now in heaven. That is an awesome reality that stretches back to the beginning of time. Saints from the period of the Old Testament were saved by grace through faith as they longed for the things promised without experiencing the fulfilment of them in their own lifetime. They were saved prospectively as they lived by faith in the perfect sacrifice for sins to come. We, along with every generation after Christ, are saved retrospectively as we come to believe the Gospel, at which time the benefits of the work of Christ upon the cross accomplished once and for all in time and history are applied to our hearts by faith. So, when we participate in the Lord's Supper, we join with the saints in all ages and in all lands to celebrate the power of the blood of Christ which saves us, which makes us one, by which we shall all be gathered at last around the throne in Heaven to behold our Saviour's face. Our celebration of the Lord's Supper is to give expression to the wonderful fact that we are one with all the saints who have died in Christ, we are one with all the host of Heaven.

With every celebration of the Lord's Supper, there is an element of remoteness and distance that exists and that needs to be overcome by faith in order for us to enter in to the fullness of all that the Lord's Supper signifies. We are remote from Jesus in a physical sense given the fact that He has ascended to the right hand of the Father, from where He has poured out His Spirit upon us. We are remote from all blood-bought believers outside of our local fellowship. And we are remote from all believers past who have finished their earthly course and who are now in Heaven. But the wonderfully unifying element of the Lord's Supper is that it links us all back in time to the blood of Christ that saved us and the Spirit of Christ that indwells us, and it links us forward in time to that moment when all saints from all lands, that great multitude that no one can number, gathered in from every nation, tribe, language and tongue are assembled around the throne in Heaven and united in worshipping the Father and the Son for so great a salvation accomplished for us.

While the elements of the Lord's Supper are physical, the realities they signify are spiritual and eternal, and may only be comprehended and appropriated by faith. While it would be much preferred to be meeting with each other in person so as to be able to see in each other the deep spiritual realities signified by the Lord's Supper, the truth is we can do that by faith, and although we cannot meet in one place, we can meet at one time, with one heart,

for one purpose, and I encourage you to do so for the strengthening of faith, hope, and love in the present, until such time as we will be free to meet again in person and experience the joy of physically gathering around the Lord's Table together. The benefits of the Lord's Supper are appropriated by faith. We can appropriate those benefits as much from the remoteness of our own homes as from a single place of worship. The truth is, wherever we start from, so long as we journey by faith, we all arrive at the same destination - the throne of grace - and we there receive from Him all the help we require for the needs we currently experience.

One last practical preparation required for participating in the Lord's Supper will be for heads of households to obtain and have ready the elements of bread and wine so as to be able to partake at the set time.