

***The Wonder of It All: Rediscovering the Treasures of Your Faith***  
**Bryan Chapell; devotional adaptation by Esther L. Meek**  
**Mission to the World Devotional**

**TO THE LEADER:**

Based on the first part of Bryan Chapell's, *The Wonder of It All*, (Crossway, 1999) this devotional study guide was developed for interactive small group use. An interactive version of the second part of *The Wonder of It All* is also being published in a separate devotional guide of similar length.

Bryan Chapell's purpose in compiling the messages of the book, *The Wonder of It All*, is to help believers appreciate the significance of a number of essential truths of the Christian faith. His foremost concern, he says, "has not been to prove, define, or defend those beliefs, but to attempt to show *why* they are important." His reason for doing this is to help believers fall in love again with their Lord.

Your goal for your group will be the same: to help each participant apprehend these great truths in such a way that greater appreciation and deeper love is kindled or rekindled. Each participant should also gain a concrete sense of how to live in light of these truths.

This devotional study guide is divided into twelve studies, one per day. The preface, "Falling in Love Again," is also written as an interactive study. It may be completed before your time together, or it may be used as an additional group study. The studies correspond to the following portions of the first half of *The Wonder of it All*:

Preface	Falling in Love Again	Preface
Day 1	Do You Believe in Magic?	Introduction
Day 2	The Revelation of Truth, Part 1	Chapter 1, part A
Day 3	The Revelation of Truth, Part 2	Chapter 1, part B
Day 4	The Vindication of the Fall	Chapter 2
Day 5	The Perfection of Providence, Part 1	Chapter 3, part A
Day 6	The Perfection of Providence, Part 2	Chapter 3, part B
Day 7	The Elegance of the Law, Part 1	Chapter 4, part A
Day 8	The Elegance of the Law, Part 2	Chapter 4, part B
Day 9	The Extravagance of the Atonement, Part 1	Chapter 5, part A
Day 10	The Extravagance of the Atonement, Part 2	Chapter 5, part B
Day 11	The Sweetness of Grace, Part 1	Chapter 6, part A
Day 12	The Sweetness of Grace, Part 2	Chapter 6, part B

The devotional study guide may be adapted in a variety of ways to fit your own team's time together. Choose one of these alternatives, or devise your own strategy:

- for a 13-day trip, use the Preface on the first day, and do the next study on each day thereafter;
- for a 12-day trip, use one study per day, having had participants complete the Preface before the trip begins;

- for an 11-day trip, assign the Preface and Day 1 to be done individually before your trip, and use Days 2-12 in your group studies;
- for a trip of shorter duration, you may combine, and select highlights from, the days which represent Parts 1 and 2 of the same chapter, or you may omit the studies that pertain to a particular doctrine.
- for a 5-7-day trip, you may do two studies on the same day, perhaps morning and evening, perhaps one individually and the other corporately.

Each day's devotional has been structured to begin with a "warm up" and end with a "cool down," with the bulk of the study being cast as a "work out." Obviously this lingo reflects aerobic exercise. It serves to indicate to the participant that the study should be expected to take some effort, that the effort is critical to spiritual health, and that the greater the effort expended, the greater the benefit reaped. *Warm Up*, *Work Out*, and *Cool Down* also serve to orient participants to the overall flow of the study. The headings also indicate the intention of their contents:

- **Warm Up:** to engage the participant's interest and help him or her see the value of the study;
- **Work Out:** to lead the participant in vigorous study and personal application;
- **Cool Down:** to help the participant step back and reflect on what has been gained, assessing its value and considering fresh implications.

In this devotional study guide, words such as **DISCUSS**, **READ**, **STUDY**, **JOURNAL** and **TAKE ACTION** will direct you and your group's activities.

- **DISCUSS:** Your group can discuss these questions together. Or if you have asked participants to work on these portions individually, personal responses to these questions may be recorded in the devotional book or in a personal journal.
- **READ:** Your group may read these paragraphs out loud together. Or they may be read silently or individually.
- **STUDY:** This indicates that you are to look at the Bible passage named to respond to the questions given. Responses may be written in the devotional, or they may be discussed orally, or both.
- **JOURNAL:** Responses should be written individually and privately. While space has been left in this workbook for journal responses, separate notebooks might enhance the privacy that is required for honest reflection. Assure participants that they will never be asked to share journal responses.
- **TAKE ACTION:** Here will be some other activity for you or your group to perform.

As you prepare to lead this study, please determine ahead of time how you will employ these various aspects of the studies. Decide, for example, whether your group will discuss every question written for discussion, whether the group will have worked through the study individually before coming together to share responses, whether individuals will write their journal responses during your group devotional time, or as a "homework assignment."

Please supply each participant with a colored marker. Each participant may use his or her copy of the devotional book for all written responses, including journal responses. If you like, however, you may supply each participant with a blank journal for recording responses.

## **PREFACE: FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN**

*We love because he first loved us.*

—1 John 4:19

### ***Warm Up***

**READ** “I fell in love with Jesus.” That is the way one of the dearest Christians I know explains her conversion. She does not use traditional terms such as “being saved,” “coming to faith,” or “accepting Christ as Savior and Lord.”

Now mature in years, this woman has been in and around churches all her life. But when she tells how a neighbor long ago helped her understand who Jesus is and the kind of life he offered despite her flaws, she says she “fell in love with Jesus.” “That he would care so much for me when even I hated who I was made me fall in love with Him,” she says.

The genuine glow that envelops every aspect of her demeanor when she says these words not only confirms the woman’s sincerity, but it also makes others long for the love she knows.

**DISCUSS** What do you think makes this woman want to describe her faith as “falling in love with Jesus?” Why would others long for the kind of faith that she has?

**DISCUSS** For many of us, love for Jesus that is fresh and refreshing seems remote, inaccessible, and unreal. What kinds of things can diminish a vibrant love for the Lord?

**DISCUSS** Think about the current state of the church of Jesus Christ in America. What kinds of behavior indicate many Christians’ lukewarm attitude toward the Lord?

### ***Work Out***

**READ** Many people have lost this kind of love because they no longer know clearly what it is they believe. It is hard genuinely to love someone whose character and ways are unfamiliar or obscure. Yet that is precisely the situation many of us confront when we honestly examine our knowledge of the truths in the Bible that are supposed to reveal God to us.

**DISCUSS** Give some examples of relationships that are improved by greater knowledge of the person to whom you are relating.

**READ** Recent studies and surveys from a variety of perspectives and camps confirm what we hate to confess. With the well-documented erosion of biblical literacy over the past two generations has come a corresponding decay in the understanding Christians have of their faith distinctives. Cultural analyst Russell Chandler writes, “As Christian believers are barraged by secular

influences which in subtle and not-so-subtle ways threaten to drain the credibility of their witness, many are uncritical or even unaware of the distinction between culture-based values and values that derive from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

**DISCUSS** What experiences have you had that support the claim that many people do not know the difference between values derived from our culture and those derived from the Gospel?

**READ** Efforts to halt the deterioration of a biblical worldview among Christians have not succeeded according to any large-scale measurement available. “Doctrine” reverberates like a dirty word in our sanctuaries. The result has been to replace preaching and teaching on the great truths of the Christian faith with “practical lessons” that show what the latest psychological therapies, relational cures, or management techniques echo in biblical passages.

**DISCUSS** A *worldview* is a basic philosophy of life that shapes all the way we live and think. The Bible offers a worldview. Other worldviews include naturalism, new age philosophy, humanism. Everyone lives by a worldview. But not everyone is aware of this, or could specify what their own worldview is.

Why would merely teaching doctrine not necessarily halt the deterioration of a biblical worldview? Why would merely offering practical lessons not necessarily halt its deterioration either? What is often missing from each of these alternatives?

**READ** Using Scripture either merely to teach doctrine or merely to offer practical lessons reinforces the notion that the Bible on its own has no immediate application to everyday life. It also robs people of the ability to think “Christianly” about their lives. When they have poorly developed biblical reference points by which to orient their lives, decisions, and views, Christians are forced to navigate the world according to secular considerations. Deprived of commitment to clear faith concepts, Christians think about life no differently from the way the rest of the world thinks.

**DISCUSS** In the absence of a solid grasp of what the Bible teaches and how it applies concretely to people’s lives, what are some of the common secular values which shape people’s choices?

**DISCUSS** When people do not see the relevance of Scripture to shaping their worldview, what are they likely to think is the purpose of church?

**READ** What is the solution to the demise of Christian convictions in our society? Many will argue that the solution is a resurrection of “solid” Christian teaching on the distinctives of our faith. “Solid” in this case means in-depth, systematic, and regular instruction in the Church’s historic understanding of Scripture. While I sympathize with such sentiments, I must also admit

that I believe they are naive. Trying to beat into people's heads more details of what they have already indicated they do not or cannot appreciate is a doomed enterprise.

People will seek a deep understanding of Christian truth only when they appreciate its significance for their lives. That conviction is the catalyst for this book. I defer to other writers for the formulation and systematization of the Bible's affirmations. While I deal with a number of the essential truths of our faith, my foremost concern has *not* been to prove, define, or defend those beliefs. I have attempted to show *why* they are important.

Throughout the writing of *The Wonder Of It All*, I have kept one question foremost in my mind: "What difference does it make?" Whether the issue is as apparently remote as "heaven" or as seemingly abstract as "revival," I have tried to put myself into the life situations of everyday Christians and there expose why it is important for them to know what Scripture teaches. I want people to understand clearly what they will lose if they do not claim God's instruction. I want them to appreciate how much richer their lives will be with a firm grasp on the treasures in his Word.

My goal is nothing less than to encourage Christians to fall in love with their faith again.

**DISCUSS** How does this approach, namely, showing how Christianity's essential truths make a difference in our lives, differ from teaching raw doctrine alone on the one hand and from replacing doctrine with practical lessons alone on the other?

**DISCUSS** In what ways might this approach address the deterioration of the Christian worldview among Christians?

**DISCUSS** How might this approach rekindle our love for our faith?

**JOURNAL** Here is a list of great truths addressed in the book, *The Wonder of It All*, from which these studies are taken. Which ones do you feel that you understand and that make a difference in your life? Which ones could you profit from knowing more about? Which ones inspire your love for God, and which ones "leave you cold"?

- Truth
- The fall
- Providence
- The law
- The atonement

- Grace
- Faith
- Heaven
- Hell
- Discipleship
- Mission
- Reformation and revival

**JOURNAL** Assess your own level of “falling in love” with the Lord. On a scale from one to ten, where one is “little love” and ten is “much love,” what number expresses your own degree of passion?

### ***Cool Down***

**READ** Only when we appreciate the significance of what the Bible teaches about, for example, truth, the fall, and providence—only when you and I see the difference they make in your life and mine—only then will we fall in love with our Lord again. My goal is nothing less than to encourage you to sing: “Oh, the wonder of it all, the wonder of it all! Just to think that Jesus loves me!”

**JOURNAL** Write down what you hope to gain from this daily study. Express this by writing a prayer to God, asking Him to accomplish this in your life.

## DAY 1: DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

*Preach the Word...  
correct, rebuke and encourage—  
with great patience and careful instruction.  
—2 Timothy 4:2*

### *Warm Up*

**READ** When my son Jordan was little, he sometimes said that he was so tired that he could not clean up his room. Yet if his mother draped an ordinary bathroom towel over this child's shoulders, suddenly he became "Super Jordan," able to clean up bedrooms in a single bound. It was almost like magic.

**DISCUSS** When you were a child, what sorts of magical experiences did you have?

**READ** Do you believe in magic? Most of us do not hesitate to deny serious faith in a stage show's "amazing" wizardry. We do not really think that top hats produce rabbits, that pigeons materialize under shirt sleeves, or that people will levitate at a wand's wave. Yet despite these mature denials, something childlike in each of us still longs for some magic transformations of reality in our lives.

**DISCUSS** What sorts of magic do adults look for? Consider the expectations we sometimes have of ball players, stockbrokers, counselors, doctors, vitamins.

**DISCUSS** Do some people also expect magical results from church, from pastors, from missionaries, from God? How are these expectations expressed?

**DISCUSS** Can this view even characterize mature Christians? Give some examples.

### *Work Out*

**READ** I came face to face with my own magical view of ministry the first time I tried to minister to a couple whose child was dying. For me, part of the horror of the cancer was how slowly it seemed to creep through the child's body. Yet for the parents I know the disease advanced terribly fast.

As their child grew worse, I talked frequently with the parents about the truths of the Bible. They are believers. They accepted what I said and responded with a godly faith I still

find inspiring. Not the parents' reactions but my own put my heart in anguish. My words could not "fix" anything. I was accustomed to having my speaking facility smooth over difficulties, avert problems, and control my situations. I hated facing the fact that I could not correct *this* horror.

This family's crisis was greater than my abilities to control. Even if my expressions of biblical care could make the parents feel some comfort and even smile for brief moments, I could not make their hurt or its cause go away. Their grief was too profound, deep, and prolonged for any quick fix or smooth words to cover.

Returning from the hospital one evening, I shared my distress with my wife: "Kathy, I feel so useless. I can't make this right, and I can't make it disappear." I cannot now adequately express the degree of despair I felt. I desperately wanted to help. I wanted so much for this awful disease not to hurt, not to scar, not to grieve. Yet the cancer did all of these at a depth I had not previously known.

I did not become a minister to sit by and watch people hurt. I wanted to make a difference. I needed to change things. Now this situation forced me to ask, "If my words won't avert such hurt—if I can't make this right—then why am I here? If God gives no magic, then what am I supposed to do?"

**DISCUSS** Have you found yourself in a situation like this, looking for some divine magic? Share some of these experiences.

**READ** In analyzing our own approaches to others' trials, many of us will discover how readily we, too, resort to a magic view of Scripture and of our ministry of it. We long for quick fixes and instant solutions. Sometimes we get to thinking that if we can remember just the right verse and say it just the right way, we will conjure a solution to every ill. We sometimes use a single verse, such as Romans 8:28, as a magic wand, waving it over everyone's problems. It's almost as if we said, "*Abracadabra—feel better now?*"

While it is true that the Word has amazing power, and that we are to expect great things of God as he uses it, we are mistaken to think of the Bible as possessing magic. A magic view of Scripture sells God short, while wrongly exalting our own power and knowledge. God becomes a cosmic genie in a bottle, energized only by our command. Such a view can damage people, too. Sometimes the Romans 8:28 wand feels more like a two-by-four to others—troubled people can feel slammed over the head with our "all-things-work-together-for-good" incantation.

**DISCUSS** Just what is a magical view of Scripture?

**DISCUSS** Why is this view a tempting one to hold?

**DISCUSS** How can this view easily lead both the hurting person and the would-be minister to despair, as with the dying child?

**READ** We can easily despair if we do not understand exactly what God expects. But God tells us in his Word how he expects us to minister his Word.

The Bible is not *magic*. Nor is our ministry of it. Yet if Scripture is rightly used and correctly understood, Scripture possesses *amazing power* to help us face life's greatest challenges.

### ***Confident Proclamation***

**STUDY** Read 2 Timothy 4:1-2.

What does God command us to do with his Word?

Think of this command as an *authorization*. Greater authorization usually indicates that greater power is at stake. For instance, only the United States president can *authorize* launching an atomic weapon. So what does the fact that God *authorizes* our use of His Word indicate about its power?

How far-reaching are the consequences God anticipates of our obedient proclamation of his Word? (verse 1) See also Romans 1:16.

Is there anything of human origin that is this powerful?

**READ** The fact that the power needed to carry such force is contained in mere words makes it even more amazing. I can never escape an “eerie” feeling when greeting those who have come to know Christ as Savior in our church. Some come from complacency, alcoholism, or abuse. Still others have waged philosophical war against the faith or once ridiculed its claims. Now they all come to join themselves to the body of Christ. How can this happen? How can mere words voiced with human frailty draw such people from a lifetime of wretchedness to desire eternity with God? The transitions almost seem like magic, but they are not. They are evidence of the divine power present in the Word.

**DISCUSS** Share your own experiences of the power of the Word transforming lives—perhaps your own, perhaps someone else's.

**STUDY** How is it that “mere words” can have amazing, transforming power? Read 2 Timothy 3:16a.

**READ** God breathes his own power into the Word. Its truths hold his creating, life-giving, transforming force. Where God’s Word is proclaimed, God’s own power is engaged. The Word is surrounded by, permeated with, propelled by God himself. Thus, since God works by and with his Word, he (and we) can rightly expect the Word to influence eternity.

Hearts change, lives turn around, confidence in God’s perfect plans grow, and souls destined for heaven multiply as God fulfills his intention of pouring the power of his Word through our frail expressions. Since this is what God expects to do with his Word, we can *proclaim it with confidence*. Hardship need not intimidate us, nor should discouragement overcome us when we respond to God’s charge to proclaim his Word.

**DISCUSS** How does the fact that God has commanded us to proclaim His Word, along with the fact that He promises to empower such preaching, give us confidence as we do it?

**DISCUSS** How does knowing God’s command and promise concerning his Word keep us from intimidation and discouragement even when encountering hard times?

**DISCUSS** How is confidence in the *amazing power* of God’s Word different from a *magical* view of it?

### ***Careful Proclamation***

The apostle Paul uses the Greek word *dunamis* to describe the power the Gospel holds (Romans 1:16). We derive the English word *dynamite* from this same term. This word comparison reminds us that the amazingly powerful truths of God, like dynamite, must also be handled with the greatest care. The Word’s power to transform lives does not give Christians the right to bypass, manhandle, or abuse the dignity and thought of others. We proclaim God’s Word because it is amazing, but not as if it is magic.

**STUDY** Look again at 2 Timothy 4:2. What does the apostle say about our manner as we preach the Word?

**STUDY** God requires us to speak with conviction, but he never allows us to abandon compassion. The Bible is rich with examples of this balanced presentation of divine truth. Compare the following passages. How do the pairs reflect conviction on the one hand and compassion on the

other? You can label each passage with “conviction,” “compassion,” or “both,” as you discuss the balanced ministry that together they represent.

- Matthew 16:22-23
- John 21:15-17
- Matthew 8:26; 16:8; 17:20
- John 16:12
- Galatians 3:1-3
- Acts 16:1-3
- 1 Corinthians 5:1-2
- 2 Corinthians 2:1, 5-8

**READ** There are no *Abracadabra*'s in these inspired accounts. The proclamation of the Word that sparked amazing results combined courageous statements of biblical truth with compassionate expressions of human understanding. Through Scripture we learn that we have no right to compromise truth, but we also learn that patience is not compromise—it is one of God's commands. Harried belligerence and impatient bombast betray Scripture even if they intend to support its truths.

**DISCUSS** How is it that “harried belligerence” goes hand-in-hand with a magical view of Scripture and ministry?

**DISCUSS** Why do we need patience in proclaiming God's Word?

- How does such patience do justice to God's nature?
- How does such patience show respect to the individual to whom we minister God's words?

- How does such patience take honest measurement of the extent of sin and brokenness to be overcome?

**READ** Magical views of Scripture that offer quick solutions for the deep trials of the soul and the great battles of the heart simply do not take sin or Scripture seriously enough. Though it may sound very sanctified to suggest that a verse quoted just the right way at just the right time will instantly fix almost anything, this parade of orthodoxy will lead to heartache. The work of faithful proclaimers is never ceasing, rarely easy, and often lengthy. If we blind ourselves to Scripture's expressions of how deep, entangling, searing, and hard sin can be, then we will either grow disillusioned with the magic that is not working, grow to reject the people that resist its powers, or grow to distrust our own misplaced convictions.

The Word can conquer sin in a moment, but it may require a season, or a lifetime, or generations. Our task is not to project when God's Word will work but to trust that it will perform God's purposes when faithfully proclaimed. The Lord will work through his Word in the way and time he knows is appropriate. Human assessment of the timing of God's work is not a measure of its glory. That the Word breaks hearts of stone and brings eternal life to those spiritually dead confirms its amazing power. But let us think of these results as amazing; let us never think of them as magic.

**DISCUSS** How does this view of the power of the Word both sober us and encourage us in our ministry of it?

**DISCUSS** How would the magical view in the long run be discouraging to ministry?

**JOURNAL** Think over your experiences ministering God's Word. Have you sometimes wielded it like a two-by-four, expecting magical results? Write down a brief confession to God of your sin against him and against the person or persons to whom you were attempting to minister. Offer this confession to the Lord. Thank him for his forgiveness.

**TAKE ACTION** Sometime today pair up with another member of your group. Each of you tell the other about a person to whom you would like to minister God's Word with both patience and conviction. Each of you pray for the other in this venture.

*Cool Down*

**READ** Sometime ago I witnessed the amazing power of God's Word at a small church struggling for survival in the shadow of the Appalachians. A sagging local economy accompanied by a shrinking population base had crippled the little congregation but had not sapped its affection for ministry. I witnessed their commitment which preaching a week-long Bible conference they had designed to reach the discouraged people of their town.

As the conference progressed, a larger-than-anticipated crowd came, and the little congregation was thrilled. We prayed nightly for the different persons who visited, and we asked the Lord to open their hearts to his Word. Yet as we prayed, I noticed that one attendee was never mentioned. She was hard *not* to notice. Though the punk rock movement had seen its day, this young woman came every night with spiked hair in an array of bizarre colors, and on some nights she brought a friend similarly attired. When those who gathered to pray repeatedly failed to mention this "obviously" unchurched woman, I grew concerned. Were we not praying for this young woman because the church really did not want her around? I summoned my courage and mentioned my fears to the pastor. He put my mind at rest and thrilled my heart with his explanation.

"Don't worry about her," he said with a smile. "She's not a visitor. That's our Maria."

The story unfolded. The child of disinterested parents, Maria had grown up on the streets of the small town. She had come to the church's Vacation Bible School as a child, but that was the extent of her church experience. As she grew older and her street life became more sordid, various women in the church tried to help her. Maria ridiculed and rebuffed them, but they did not stop praying for her.

In her sophomore year of high school, Maria took a field trip with her class to a state university. As she made her way through the cafeteria line there, the college student working as cashier asked the attractive and street-matured fourteen-year-old for a date. She accepted and too soon became convinced that the charming young man was the answer to her misery. Weeks later the two were married.

Only days after the wedding Maria discovered that her young husband afforded college, a beautiful apartment, and a nice car by dealing drugs. The drugs brought to her door the street life that Maria was trying to escape. She told her husband that he had to quit dealing or she would leave. Her street smarts had not prepared her to recognize, however, that she was dealing with a psyche more fragile than her own.

Maria's husband told her that if she left, he would kill himself. She left anyway. He did.

At age fifteen Maria found herself uneducated, unemployable, a widow, and expecting a child. In desperation she turned to the only people who had ever tried to care for her. The families of the church became the family she never had. The seeds of care they had sown in her heart over years without apparent results finally germinated. As the church instructed Maria in matters of life and the Lord, her spirit blossomed. Now she not only came to a nightly Bible conference designed to reach people in the town that had often spurned her, but she even brought a friend to hear the Gospel.

There was no magic here. Maria still has much to learn, but the amazing power of the Word has done and is doing its work through great patience and careful instruction.

**TAKE ACTION** In your faith history lies the record of at least one person who cared for you when you did not understand your faith, who loved you when you did not love the Lord, and was patient with you when you did not claim his truths for your life. Take turns in your group

thanking the Lord in prayer for that person, and asking the Lord to help you reflect in your own ministry the balance of truth and patience he or she exercised in ministering to you.

## DAY 2: THE REVELATION OF TRUTH, PART 1

*You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman.*

*How can you ask me for a drink?*

—John 4:9

### *Warm Up*

**READ** “I’ll never go back,” said the woman seated next to me on the plane. For years she had worked for an architectural firm as a highly successful single woman. Then abruptly she had left the business and married. She wanted a different life. Her actual words were, “I wanted a *real* home and a family.” Sad to say, the family she and her husband so desperately wanted never grew.

Because the couple was affluent, they sought the best that medical technology could offer to help them conceive. But the drugs, the treatments, and the operations produced no child. So they turned to a church that also took their money and promised them a miracle in return.

For a time it seemed their sacrifices and faith would be rewarded. The doctors said that a child was on the way. Then a miscarriage at five months dashed hopes again, and the doctors said there was little reason to expect a different outcome in the future.

All the disappointments and frustrations took their toll on the marriage. The couple stopped planning for children. She returned to work. They were considering ending the marriage.

I prayed with her, tried to explain that God’s eternal love was not denied by a world of pain, and pleaded with her to return to a church that would really help. That was when she said, “I will never go back.” Knowing what she had experienced, I found it hard to blame her.

Another trip, an earlier time. The man on the plane next to me watched as I opened a Bible to continue frantically and belatedly preparing a message for a conference in another city.

“Are you a preacher?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“So am I,” he said.

He went on to explain that he was a businessman who had just been ordained by an organization in Asia. He was putting up the money for a national campaign to establish this group in the United States. When I asked what the religion taught, he said that they told people that they could be as successful as he was if they would plug into the positive powers within them that conquer life’s negative influences.

One more trip. More recently I flew to the West Coast to attend an interdenominational meeting of religious educators. As I left the airport, the taxi driver asked me what I did for a living.

I said, “I’m a preacher.”

“Oh, yeah?” he replied. “That’s great. I think a little religion is good for you. I tell my kids, ‘Religion will keep you out of trouble.’”

“What church do you and your children attend?” I asked.

“Oh, we’re not particular,” he said. “I was raised an Irish Catholic, but my kids got tired of that, so we tried the Adventists for a while, then the Baptists, but now we mainly watch the preachers on the TV. It’s a lot more convenient, you know.”

I confess I thought his approach to faith was a bit zany, but it was hard to fault him when I later observed the “worship service” of the religious educators. The program began with a hymn of praise played on a Cherokee flute and dedicated to the rising sun.

**DISCUSS** Describe an encounter of your own with a person whose religious beliefs seemed far afield from biblical Christianity.

**DISCUSS** In that encounter, did you experience some difficulty knowing how to share the Gospel?

**READ** Dead churches, living cults, the new paganism—we seem to confront the same morass of differing beliefs everywhere we go. Recently leading evangelical apologists met near Washington, DC, to try to determine how we can reach an increasingly confused culture with the true message of the Gospel. Os Guinness, the Christian writer and cultural critic, commented, “The ideas and movements of our culture are in such a swirl, Christians simply don’t know what approach to take. As hard as it is to determine what others believe, it is even harder to decide what we should do to reach them with the truth.”

The accuracy of Guinness’s “swirl” analysis is born out in recent studies showing the increasing ineffectiveness of traditional evangelism. The old methods of preparing answers to questions people once tended to ask simply are not working. People in our culture are not asking what they did a generation ago. They are not concerned about the same issues or even reasoning the same way. Our society possesses no consensus of values. Culture races not one way but a thousand.

As a result our churches search for ways to share Christian truths with increasing trepidation. We cannot but feel timid about sharing the Gospel when even our experts say they are unsure what will effectively communicate.

**DISCUSS** Does this description fit your own and your church’s experience?

**READ** So what are we supposed to do? We have neighbors and family members who need to know the Lord. Even if our experts are confounded, we cannot sit idle while the hearts of loved ones lie in eternal jeopardy. What are we to do? *How can we penetrate the swirl that swallows souls?*

The Lord answers our questions in today’s Scripture where he presents himself to a woman in a culture no less confused than our own. His words remind us that no matter how much confusion swirls in our culture, we can anchor the Gospel to basic truths that do not shift.

### ***Work Out***

**READ** Read John 4:9-26.

**READ** In the account of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman, God shows us timeless truths about people, about his Word, and about his Holy Spirit—truths that will enable us to penetrate the swirl of confusion to reach people for Christ. Today we will discuss the truth this passage shows us about individual persons. Tomorrow we will consider the truth about God's Word and Spirit.

### *The Truth About Persons*

#### **WE MUST SEE OTHERS FOR THE PERSONS THEY ARE**

**READ** Jesus helps us understand how the Gospel can have meaning in a swirling culture by revealing to us the nature of a person. "Culture" boils down to persons living and acting together. For our Gospel to have power, we have to sense the brokenness of each person. Our gaze may scan masses, movements, and generations, but every culture consists of individuals whose hurt is real and who cannot be touched with the healing of the Gospel until we see the wounds each bears.

**DISCUSS** In John 4 Jesus demonstrates his concern for the Samaritan woman and his awareness of her unique brokenness. Can you think of other individuals with whom Jesus showed his insightful care?

[Leader: Answers may include the man with leprosy (Matthew 8:1-3); the centurion (Matthew 8:5-13); the paralytic (Matthew 9:2-8); the woman with chronic bleeding (Matthew 9:20-22); the demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1-17); the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-29); the deaf man (Mark 7:1-37); the blind man (Mark 8:22-26); the little children (Mark 10:13-16); the widow's son (Luke 7:11-16); the sinful woman (Luke 7:37-39) Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10); Nathanael (John 1:43-51); Nicodemus (John 3:1-21); Lazarus and his sisters (John 11:1-43; 12:1-11); his mother (John 19:25-27); Thomas (John 20:24-31); Peter (John 21:15-23).]

**DISCUSS** What are some ways that we can prompt ourselves to think specifically about the individuals we encounter?

**READ** The Lord paid attention to individuals. The consistency of his personal approach tells us how important individual care remains. In this account he merely sees a woman collecting water at a well. The routine would hardly have captured the attention of anyone in that culture. Her activity is roughly equivalent to our washing dishes, picking up a newspaper, or dropping kids off at school—nothing special.

For us this woman would likely disappear as a speck of humanity on the background of her society. We would take no more notice of her than we do of a person in a neighboring checkout line at the grocery store. But she cannot escape Jesus' attention. He will not just pass her by. She possesses a face to recognize, a life to heal, and a heart to save. Jesus sees her

deepest needs as clearly as we see more obvious externals of her situation. What precisely he sees in her we learn by specifics the Holy Spirit records.

**STUDY** In John 4 what clues indicate how society would have perceived this woman? (see especially verses 9, 17-18, 19, 27, 42). As a result of this societal pressure, what would the woman's needs have been?

**STUDY** How does Jesus demonstrate his awareness of these societally imposed needs? How does he address them?

**STUDY** What clues indicate that the woman had unsatisfied personal needs as well? (see especially verses 16-19). What adjectives would describe how she might have looked or felt?

- physical needs (verse 15):
- relational needs (verses 16-17):
- spiritual poverty (verses 19-23):

**STUDY** How does Jesus show that he understand the woman's personal needs? How does he respond to them?

**DISCUSS** Think about people that you see as you go about your daily affairs. What indicators reveal their social and personal needs?

**READ** Each face mirrors a deep, deep need of the Gospel. But maybe you think you cannot read these faces. The persons behind the faces are not obvious to you. You say to yourself, "How can I know what really characterizes other persons? I do not have Jesus' X-ray eyes. I cannot just look at a person and determine, 'You've had five husbands, and the one you're living with now is not your husband.'" Such reasoning is wrong. If you are willing, you *can* see the face behind the masks. How? Look in the mirror.

**WE MUST SEE OURSELVES FOR THE PERSONS WE ARE**

**READ** By his dealings with the woman at the well, we learn that Jesus came to rescue her from her sin. For whom else does the Savior come? When Jesus says, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst” (verses 13-14), his words embrace more than this one woman. The “everyone” and “whoever” are broad enough to include you and me. The needs she has, we have. The thirst-quenching he offers, we need.

**JOURNAL** Identify your own needs. How are they similar to the Samaritan woman’s?

- socially imposed needs:
- physical needs:
- relational needs:
- spiritual needs:

**READ** We share something else with this woman. We share her personal inability to find ultimate satisfaction in what *she* can do about any of these needs. When Jesus says that he can provide an eternal, internal source for satisfying the needs of this life (verse 14), he highlights the limitation we all must face. Apart from what Jesus supplies, we will always be dissatisfied, needy, and longing for more. We are all in need of him. In this way we are not different from this woman. She does not appear in Scripture for our pity, our amusement, or our scorn. She is the mirror in which we should see our own faces so that we will recognize in us the needs of others. As we are like her, they are like us.

**JOURNAL** Choose one of the needy people that you thought of as being like the Samaritan woman. Write down some ways in which you and that person share the same needs that only Christ can fulfill.

**DISCUSS** How does this exercise increase your understanding for that person and your desire to share Christ with that person?

**READ** Only by the grace of God does anything good characterize me. My faults are deeper than I care to imagine, but I will never see the need others really have until I dare to consider my own true nature. If I do not consider my own causes for shame, I will judge others instead of loving them. I will distance myself from them instead of recognizing how our mutual needs unite us. I will look down on them instead of embracing them. I will stand aloof, rather than eye to eye. If

I stop seeing the person I really am in my mirror, I will stop seeing the faces of others; and then the care that is the vehicle of the Gospel will not flow from me.

When we see that the people around us are just like us, we may for the first time shun them less, judge them less, retreat less, and love them more with the love that carries the Gospel. Let us make no mistake, whatever reasons or rationales we think ought to motivate people to embrace our faith, the door through which the vast majority will enter is not doctrinal or denominational but relational.

This is how we penetrate the swirl of cultural problems that swallow souls. We pluck souls from the swirl by loving people who may at first glance seem far different from us. We are to learn to see our neighbors, fellow workers, relatives, peers, and passersby for the persons that they really are. They are just like us—sinners in need of a Savior.

**DISCUSS** What are some ways that we can continually remind ourselves of our own need of Christ?

**DISCUSS** Explain the comment that care flowing from me is “the vehicle of the Gospel.”

### ***Cool Down***

**READ** The limitations that stem from my arrogance surfaced a few years ago when a family visited our church. Their son met our son in Sunday school, and the new boy asked to sit with us in the following worship service.

I said, “Okay,” and almost instantly regretted the decision. The new boy was not familiar with church, and it showed. He was dirty. He smelled. He talked incessantly. He ignored my corrections. He punched my son. He got my son in trouble for punching back. During the sermon, for reasons obvious to no one, the new boy decided to stand on the back of the pew. My anger grew and grew.

By the end of the service I wanted nothing less than the electric chair for this little demon possessing our pew. Finally, after a sermon I thought lasted for thirty hours rather than thirty minutes, we stood to sing the final hymn. The little monster found the page number in his hymnal, ripping pages as he turned. Finally, he stood up—late—and sang with us, “Jesus, what a friend for sinners, Jesus lover of my soul.”

I confess: My first thought was, *Why, you little stinker, how dare you sing so sweetly and innocently.* Then I *heard* the words of the hymn I was singing. I had to face my own guilt. I had been growling inside at a child who needed my Savior. Jesus dies to befriend such children, and yet all this child had known throughout the service was my anger, my frown, and my scowl.

I had to question who had really been the rebellious child in this service. How sinful I had been to care so little for one who so needed the grace I was supposedly there to praise. When I saw my sin, suddenly I could see that little boy as he really was. The barrier of my arrogance between us melted, and I saw a hurting child in an awful family situation, already out of control, desperately in need of my Savior—and as such, reflective of me. Though I had glared

at him through much of the service, as he sang more of the hymn I felt as though I saw his face for the first time. Now when I looked at that rebellion-smudged face so mirroring my own sin, I could see past his antics and my discomfort. I could love him because I could see he was like me. He was just like me.

**TAKE ACTION** Prayerfully sing this hymn together, placing yourself in your mind alongside other sinners whom you might have been rejecting. Ask God to reshape your estimate of them. Embrace the Lord's forgiveness.

*Jesus, what a Friend for sinners!  
Jesus! lover of my soul;  
friends may fail me, foes assail me,  
he, my Savior, makes me whole.*

*Refrain: Hallelujah! what a Savior!  
Hallelujah! what a Friend!  
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,  
he is with me to the end.*

*Jesus! what a strength in weakness!  
Let me hide myself in him;  
tempted, tried, and sometimes failing,  
he, my strength, my vict'ry wins.*

*(refrain)*

*Jesus! what a help in sorrow!  
While the billows o'er me roll,  
even when my heart is breaking,  
he, my comfort, helps my soul.*

*(refrain)*

*Jesus! what a guide and keeper!  
While the tempest still is high,  
storms about me, night o'ertakes me,  
he, my pilot, hears my cry.*

*(refrain)*

*Jesus! I do now receive him,  
more than all in him I find;  
he hath granted me forgiveness,  
I am his, and he is mine.*

*(refrain)*

### **DAY 3: THE REVELATION OF TRUTH, PART 2**

*Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.  
Could this be the Christ?  
—John 4:29*

***Warm Up***

**READ** When Arab extremists freed Church of England envoy Terry Waite from five years of hostage captivity in Lebanon, he spoke of the healing ministry of one who would not retreat from him. The aid came from the other hostage named Terry—Terry Anderson, the Associated Press employee held the longest of any of the hostages.

Anderson is a committed Christian who, when he was released, responded to a reporter's question about his attitude toward his abductors by replying, "I am a Christian. I am required to forgive; there is no other choice."

Waite later said that Anderson was as faithful to his convictions during his ordeal as he was before the world's press. Waite had firsthand proof of Anderson's faithfulness. The British churchman told reporters that he had a serious lung infection at one point during his captivity. Because the terrorists provided no medical care for the hostages, Waite's infection went untreated. His incessant coughing became a source of great irritation for some of the other hostages not only because it was disturbing, but because it threatened to spread the infection.

Only one hostage was not put off by the coughing—Anderson.

Waite said later, "I was near the point of death, and though he could do nothing for me medically, Terry Anderson sat by my bedside for endless hours. I learned then the amazing healing power of a caring presence. I believe he saved my life simply because he would not leave me."

**DISCUSS** How does Anderson's persistent presence beside Waite compare with Jesus' behavior toward the Samaritan woman in John 4?

**DISCUSS** How can a caring presence start a process of physical or spiritual healing?

***Work Out***

**READ** Reread John 4:9-26.

**READ** In the account of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman, God shows us timeless truths about people, about his Word, and about his Holy Spirit—truths that will enable us to penetrate the swirl of confusion to reach people for Christ. Yesterday we saw that we can reach people as we see their needs and understand those needs in light of our own grace-met neediness. This is the truth this passage teaches about persons. Today we consider the truth about God's Word and Spirit.

## *The Truth about the Word*

**READ** Love is not enough, though, to rescue souls from the swirl of confusion in culture. While compassion must characterize our approach to non-Christians, we have no monopoly on demonstrations of affection. Kindness alone cannot secure souls in a world where everyone from cults to K-mart builds constituencies with promises of care. Love that lasts—love with eternal consequences—requires a foundation of truth. Jesus leaves no question about the source of that truth. He alerts us in this passage that we must not only recognize the true nature of persons, but we must understand the nature of the Word meant to reach them.

Matters of spiritual consequence require integrity. Jesus will compromise none of the truth he needs to say to this woman. He states his facts definitely and without apology. This is surely a passage for our relativistic times when truth seems so malleable, and no one can claim to grasp it firmly without ridicule or assault. Against the swirling tide of a culture that says you can only know what is personally true for you, Jesus assures us that his Word is true.

### **THE IMPACT OF TRUTH**

**STUDY** In what verses do we see Jesus speak painfully true words to the woman?

**DISCUSS** If you were the Samaritan woman, how would you respond to Jesus' statement in verses 17 and 18? How do people in this culture respond to a charge of immorality?

**STUDY** How does the woman respond to Jesus in verses 19-20? How does this compare to the current response, "What's true for you may not be true for me...?"

**DISCUSS** If truth were relative, how would the woman be "off the hook" as far as Jesus' accusation is concerned?

**STUDY** If what the woman was doing was trying to claim that truth is relative, how does Jesus' response show that truth is not relative? (verses 21-24)

**STUDY** Since Jesus will not accept her contention that he holds only relative truth, the woman takes the next obvious step for one who wants to evade the obligations of truth. What is that step? (verse 25)

**STUDY** Why is it appropriate that Jesus' response to her in verse 26 ends the discussion?

**DISCUSS** Describe how, if you were the woman at the well, you would have reacted to Jesus' "You're speaking to him!"

**READ** His message is simple: His standards are authoritative because he is Lord. Right and wrong are not indistinguishable. Everyone's truth is not as good as everyone else's. God's Word obligates everyone. Truth is not relative. You recognize the earth-shattering impact of these claims only by noting how rare it is for people in contemporary culture to say they really know what is true.

#### **THE SHOCK OF TRUTH**

**STUDY** How does the woman respond to her conversation with Jesus? (verses 28-29) (Is leaving your water jar similar to leaving your basket of groceries by the checkout?)

**DISCUSS** Before this point, the woman was resisting Jesus' outreach. After he tells her that he is the Christ, she appears to embrace his message with eagerness. What do you think has prompted the change of heart?

**READ** The woman's well-studied indifference to what others think vanishes before Christ's truth claims. But her shock must be a product of more than a philosophical challenge. She must realize that if what Jesus says is true, then the King of the Universe who knows the deepest, darkest truths of her life has loved her enough to come sit by a well and tell her of his salvation. *This is the most shocking truth of all: The God who knows us truly, loves us still.*

**DISCUSS** How does this last sentence capture the most amazing part of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well? Could this have been what won her heart?

**DISCUSS** How does Jesus model the approach we are to take in reaching unbelievers for him?

**READ** All too often the world expects people who claim to hold to some exclusive truth to be intolerant, bigoted, and hardhearted. Too often we fulfill their expectations. Christ exemplifies another approach. His words and actions demonstrate how we are to speak without compromising truth *or* love.

I recently witnessed the effects of such a courageously balanced witness at a spiritual life conference for university students. Over 300 young people from four universities attended. Some were Christians; many others were not. When I learned the number of non-Christians present, some who drove as much as five hours to attend, I asked the organizer of the conference what made them come.

“It’s simple,” he said. “From the time these young people are in high school, they are taught that they can trust nothing to be absolutely true. Virtually no professor on any of their campuses would dare even to suggest universal moral values or transcendent truths. University life reserves only scorn for those who say they believe in any absolutes and labels such people as intolerant bigots. So when we tell these young people unequivocally that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is true and yet we love them, it blows their socks off.

“They are a generation without ideals living for the pleasures of the moment because they have been taught all their intellectual lives that nothing is really dependable or consistent. Most of them have stopped believing anything could be ultimately true. They recognize the despair and hopelessness of what they are taught in the universities, and they know how purposeless their lives will be if their professors are right. So, though many disagree with us, nothing attracts their interest and stimulates their hope more than someone who claims something is absolutely true and still loves those who differ.”

Individuals who will present God’s truths with the authority he grants and the love he commands can take advantage of powerful cultural forces to compel a hearing for God’s Word.

**DISCUSS** Consider this last statement: just how does Jesus’ approach used today “take advantage of powerful cultural forces to compel a hearing for God’s Word?”

**DISCUSS** Have you experienced the effectiveness of blending truth with love in dealing with people in your life? Share some of these experiences.

**JOURNAL** It can be very difficult to balance communication of God’s truth while demonstrating his love! Think over your interactions with people in recent years. Are there some to whom you’ve shown love while withholding truth? And are there some to whom you’ve expressed truth in an unloving way? Write down the names of the people of each sort, making two columns. Ask God to allow you to assess your behavior honestly. Confess these aberrations to God. Claim his forgiveness. Ask him for wisdom and grace to achieve the Christlike balance of presenting truth in love.

## **THE OBLIGATIONS OF TRUTH**

**READ** The power of a Gospel that refuses to segregate truth from compassion always hangs in jeopardy. The Church remains forever poised for a fall into intolerance fueled by a commitment to purity, or for drift into compromise provoked by a desire to be winsome.

Preaching about sin seems the sure kiss of death for a growing church. But Jesus teaches us in this passage that penetrating truth is more important than shallow friendliness in the battle for souls. Sacrificial presentation of truths that may lack popular endorsement is the ultimate gift of love, and the ultimate cruelty is to deny others the truths that will save them from hell for fear of offending them. Greater love speaks unflinching truth in unflinching love and then lets the power of the Gospel do its work.

Nothing offers the swirl of ideas that dominates our culture a greater challenge than the simple truths of the Gospel. At the conference in Washington, DC, when the nation's leading apologists gathered to address "the swirl," no ultimate evangelism plan surface. Nor final solution emerged that would answer every question of our culture. In the final speech the conference leader concluded, "Apparently there is nothing more effective we can do than to tell the simple story of the Gospel." Somehow I felt Jesus must have smiled at that moment.

### ***The Truth about the Spirit***

**READ** Is the simplicity of the Gospel too simple? Is it not foolish to expect culturally calloused people to respond to so unsophisticated a message? No. Our expectations remain valid not because our words burn with convincing eloquence, but because of the Spirit who ignites them in the soul.

**STUDY** How quickly does the woman's opinion of Jesus change over the course of Jesus' first day in Samaria? Compare the passage's 9s (verses 9, 19, 29, 39):

- verse 9:
  
- verse 19:
  
- verse 29:
  
- verse 39:

**STUDY** What was the message that the woman gave to the townspeople? (verses 28-29)

**DISCUSS** How would she have scored on a test on how to share your faith?

**DISCUSS** Consider the strikes the woman had against her—why would few people in that town ordinarily have listened to her?

**STUDY** How many people did come to Christ through her message? (verse 39)

**DISCUSS** How do these facts demonstrate that the Holy Spirit was at work?

**READ** The Spirit of God makes simple words spiritual dynamite. God reveals the power of his Spirit in this account to encourage us. We can confront the swirl of culture with the message of the Savior even if our words are simple, because the same Spirit helps us. We do not limit the Spirit by our frailties. The Spirit accomplishes what our best words could not.

God does not desire an uninformed testimony. He commands us to pursue knowledge, but he requires witness who depend on him. The reason for this Jesus has already explained—”God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” (verse 24) Salvation efforts that focus on human abilities are doomed to fail. While we must engage all the resources of heart and mind in giving a reason for the hope that we have, we must remember that we battle for souls on a spiritual plane. We cannot affect this dimension of human existence solely by our own efforts. The spiritual realm is God’s. Only when God unleashes forces deeper than our emotions and higher than our thoughts do our strategies for salvation really work. His Spirit makes a simple Gospel effective.

**DISCUSS** Describe some of your own experiences which show the miracle of the Spirit blessing God’s words. Describe some which show that the best human efforts often are not enough.

**DISCUSS** If, while God calls his people to speak the truth in love, such efforts apart from the work of the Holy Spirit are ineffective, what one word expresses the most important thing that we can do? Use this word and related words to fill in the blanks in the following paragraph:

The Word of God reminds us that the best evangelism is still done on our \_\_\_\_\_. We must \_\_\_\_\_. Understanding the necessity and the power of the Spirit, the Puritan preacher Thomas Chalmers wrote long ago, “\_\_\_\_\_ is not preparation for a greater work of God; \_\_\_\_\_ is the greater work of God.” When we \_\_\_\_\_, iron wills yield, hearts melt, minds change, the swirl gets swallowed by the Spirit.

[Leader: The key concept here is *prayer*.]

**JOURNAL** For what person or persons in your life would you like to pray more frequently? How might your prayers be recast in light of what you have learned in this study? In your journal, write such a prayer and offer it to the Lord.

***Cool Down***

Read John 4:35-38.

**DISCUSS** How do these words of Jesus encourage you in your current task?

## DAY 4: THE VINDICATION OF THE FALL

*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*

—Romans 16:20

### *Warm Up*

**READ** Harvard anthropologists tell us that in our cultural heritage are people who once worshiped the moon. At each new moon the women of the Nuer tribe would look up from their cooking fires with dread. From each fire's edge the women would then grab ashes, throw them at the moon, and mark their faces with ash-soiled hands. Then, as a final expression of their fear and homage, the women would chant: "Ah, Moon, we pray that you would appear with Goodness. May all people honor thee. O God, let us be."

"God, let us be." The words sound so primitive—so far removed from our experiences—unless you listen closely. You need not go far to hear the prayer to a savage god: "O God, please, just let us be." It echoes the thought of many who suffer and do not understand the God of the Bible nor the world he has made. They may echo the cries of a heart like your own.

A forty-two-year-old father of four, including a three-day-old infant, dies of a heart attack. His three teenage children are told the news by a well-meaning grandmother who says, "God has a reason; God took him for a good purpose." The oldest daughter cries, "Why doesn't God do his good somewhere else?"

A nineteen-year-old scholar-athlete goes to college. He makes the Dean's List, the basketball team, and he makes his parent proud. But in the fall of his junior year, he contracts viral meningitis. In thirty-six hours he dies. The preacher says, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." A grieving father responds, "I will not bless such a God."

My young brother and his wife, having experienced the loss of their first baby, born missing several vital organs, experience tremendous anxiety as they await the birth of another child, eighteen months later. I listen to my brother's well-guarded expressions of worry. He is too concerned about offending me as a preacher and big brother to say what he really feels, but I sense the questions written in the pain on his face: "Is this God's doing? What is God doing? Why?"

Then the day of delivery comes. My brother welcomes a new daughter that is perfect in every way, and the young couple voice their relief in a hardly audible sigh mixing joy and grief: "Thank God, he let us be this time."

You need not go to a primitive land or a far-off place to find a savage God in the hearts and minds of ordinary people searching for reasons for their hurt. How should we answer them or the questions we have? Does God not care about us? Can he not take care of us or his world? Is he simply as unresponsive as the moon? The Bible answers each question without equivocation. God is not silent; he is not savage; he is not still. Our God consistently acts to bring about his good in a world corrupted by sin .

**DISCUSS** For many people, perhaps including yourself, some particular experience of pain or evil has at some time made them wonder if God is savage. Because of suffering, some people have had difficulty believing the gospel. Give some examples of these experiences.

**DISCUSS** Why is it important that we answer this question for ourselves and for others?

### ***Work Out***

**READ** We should be eternally thankful as Christians that we do not need to dread questions about the source of life's afflictions. Genesis 3:14-19 clearly explains how evil entered our world and why it stays. The explanation that God offers is the only one that will not lead to greater frustration and despair. In this familiar passage that follows the account of Adam and Eve succumbing to Satan's seduction, God graciously provides Christians with sufficient light to rescue our faith and our lives from the darkness of a senseless world, a savage god, or an impotent god, the only alternatives to this biblical Truth.

### ***God is not Silent***

**STUDY** Read Genesis 3:14-19.

- What does this passage say is the *cause* of evil in this world? (verse 17)
  
- How far-reaching is the impact of Adam's disobedience? See also Romans 8:20-22.
  
- Note some of the consequences of man's evil in the following areas:
  - \* the influence of Satan on the world (verses 14-15)
  
  - \* human birth (verse 16)
  
  - \* human relationships (verses 17-18)
  
  - \* human labor (verses 18-19)
  
  - \* human life (verse 19)

**DISCUSS** Why might this explanation of human suffering be difficult for some people to accept—namely, that Adam's disobedience to God's word caused all evil and human suffering?

***God is not Savage***

**READ** In recent decades many people have come to doubt the historicity of Adam. Perhaps we all should confess that at times the biblical account of the Fall seems preposterous. Could those, such as Carl Sagan, who have spoken so “scientifically” of a universe devoid of Eden, Adam and Eve, be right? Have we Christians abandoned thought for dogma? Have we been blinded by fundamentalist religion? Are there no better, more sophisticated answers to a troubled world than an ancient garden tale?

So called sophistication that questions the fall of Adam forces God into the role of a merciless tyrant or a beneficent incompetent whose worship is a senseless sham. I never saw this more clearly than when I took an orientation tour of a local hospital in the small town where I first ministered. A local pastor from another denomination who was visiting some of his ailing members saw me wandering the halls and generously offered to show me the location of the nurses’ duty stations, patient roster, and counseling rooms. I gladly accepted, and we struck up a conversation as he led the way.

My guide soon asked what church I represented. When I told him I was Presbyterian, he made an immediate wrong assumption. “Oh good,” he said, “I was afraid you might be one of those fundamentalist Baptists.” (Maybe something about the way I dressed.) He laughed and then caustically referred to the struggles over inerrancy Southern Baptist brothers and sisters have faced. “Can you believe it,” he said, “some of those clowns are still arguing for the historicity of Adam!”

I told him I was not Baptist, but I was one of those clowns. We changed the subject. I felt a bit deflated. I want people’s respect. I want to be thought of as a person with an intellect and a few brains. Yet for my belief in Adam, here was a man who considered me an utter fool.

I had to think on our conversation awhile before seeing who was really acting more foolishly. If the Bible is right and there was an Adam who caused the Fall of creation, I had some basis for going to a hospital to try to comfort people with truths about God. The God I represented lovingly created a perfect world for our nurture and enjoyment. Yet even after humankind marred his wonderful creation by selfish sin that causes unfathomable heartache, my God remains loving and faithful. He continues to use all things in this broken creation to lead people to seek his forgiveness, experience his grace, and gain access to a future, more glorious world. I had hope to share with people from our church—I offered a sovereign, good God to comfort them.

But what God did this other pastor share while visiting his parishioners? If Adam did not fall, why were these people in the hospital? What kind of a God would create such a world of suffering? Only a terrible God would intentionally set up such evil. Only an impotent God could not control it. For all his intellectual sophistication, this *Adamless* preacher became an advocate of the most savage of gods. By denying Adam, he degraded God. If Adam did not fall, God did. Without the Fall this world’s misery stands as absolute proof of God’s savagery.

**DISCUSS** Explain the statement: “If Adam did not fall, God did.”

- If one denies the historicity of Adam, who is responsible for human suffering?
- If one denies the account of the Fall, what must be concluded about God’s original design of the universe?

- What adjectives aptly describe God if He intentionally causes evil?
- How would you feel about worshiping this kind of God?
- Which offers greater comfort: to say that your suffering results from human disobedience to God and the world's resulting brokenness, or to say that your suffering is part of God's original design?
- Discuss this claim: "Ultimately, if there is no Adam, there is no God. God is not really God if evil comes from him. We are hopelessly alone in a bleak existence with no real cause to expect aid from a God who creates misery."

**DISCUSS** Why all this talk about the historicity of Adam? If Adam did not fall, then God did. But if Adam did fall, then God is not savage, morally responsible for evil. He is good. While many questions remain, and while having answers to them never eliminates the suffering, how does God's goodness offer hope to suffering people?

**READ** Sophisticates may scoff at Scripture, but we must refuse to believe they have superior answers. The young mother with a retarded child, the elderly spouse of an Alzheimer's patient, the businessman destroyed by dishonesty, the teenager disillusioned with adult hypocrisies, the pastor dismayed by personal ineffectiveness, the parent who just received the phone call about an accident—all need a God who is not savage. The Nuer women called the god they worshiped "Wak na-a na." The name means, "the god who kills people." We must proclaim another God. His name is not Wak na-a na. The Bible says his name is "Wonderful."

Our God is no impassive celestial observer—no imperious deity in the sky unmoved by his creatures' pain. The Bible tells of a God so unswervingly affectionate and sovereignly able that he provided eternal life to the very ones whose sin brought all the disasters, disease, and dying upon the creation he made and the creatures he loves.

**STUDY** Study Genesis 3:15.

- Who in particular is the seed of the woman?
- What two things does this verse prophesy concerning the confrontation between the serpent and the woman's seed?

- How have these two things come to pass in Jesus Christ?
- How does Christ's suffering demonstrate that God is not savage or indifferent to human suffering?

#### **HIS HEART MOVES**

**READ** Knowing that the actions of humankind would lead to the horrible suffering of the One he most loved, God still promises to forgive, redeem, and glorify us. This is no savage God. Our God's love and care are beyond our capacity to quantify. Such measureless mercy must eradicate all notions of an apathetic God and erase all mental pictures of a God who sits in heaven cavalierly throwing tumor switches or dispassionately arranging automobile accidents. For our faith to remain valid (and sane), we must know at the deepest level of our being that our God sees our afflictions and is not deaf to our cries.

**STUDY** How does God respond to our suffering? What do the following passages tell us?

- Psalm 34:15-18
- Psalm 56:8
- Hebrews 4:15-16
- John 11:35

**READ** Perhaps the most memorable political cartoon ever drawn followed the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The cartoon depicts the Lincoln Memorial with the normally statuesque Civil War president bent over in his chair, head in hands, weeping. The picture appropriately reminds us of the attitude of our heavenly enthroned God when the corruption of this world strikes us. He aches for our suffering with a divine grief more profound, pure, and deep than our own.

**JOURNAL** Briefly describe an example of your own personal suffering. Is it more biblical to think of God as grieving with you over it, or to think of him as being pleased about it? How does picturing God grieving (similarly to Lincoln) help us think biblically about our suffering? Write your responses to these questions.

#### **HIS HANDS MOVE**

**READ** Still our questions are not at an end when the Scriptures affirm the care of our God. If we are honest with our intellects and our emotions, we must confess that we wonder why a God who cares so much does not do more.

Another defective explanation for evil is to think that God, while grieving over our suffering and powerful beyond human measure, still is not capable of handling everything in this world. He rules over his little domain as best he can, but he can be fooled, make mistakes, and lose control.

Such a finite God can be compared to an invalid grandmother who sits at her kitchen window tapping on the pane with her cane because squirrels are stealing food from her bird feeder. “Go away,” she says. “Shoo!” Sometimes the offenders go away, but other times they do not. She means well. She wants to provide for her birds, but she cannot go out into the cold every time squirrels come along. She will just put some more bird seed in the feeder for her loved ones another time. The birds must simply pray that she has enough seed, does not forget, and that not too many squirrels come.

**DISCUSS** Does this alternative offer more comfort than that of the savage God untouched by, and authoring, our suffering?

**STUDY** In Genesis 3:15, in addition to indicating his own Son’ suffering, what does God say will happen in the struggle with the serpent?

**READ** In this passage, God not only tells of his identity with us in our suffering; he also promises that suffering will finally be overcome. The Lord prophesies that his Son will utterly crush the enemy. With this prophecy the Bible assures us that though this world’s corruption will continue till the day of Christ’s final victory, God presently is neither uncaring nor inactive. His hands move in our behalf. He now uses all events (even those that are the consequence of a broken world) to destroy Satan and bring about the ultimate victory of Christ Jesus.

**STUDY** The life of Joseph is a wonderful example of God’s management of the evil he condemns to accomplish the glory he intends. Refer, if you need to, to Genesis 37-50 to respond to these questions. See especially Genesis 50:20.

- What evils did Joseph experience?
- How did God use evil events to accomplish his own good purposes?

**READ** Our finite minds reel before the scriptural assertions that an all-knowing, all-powerful God can use evil for good without himself becoming responsible for the evil. It is not sinful to acknowledge that our sufferings and the afflictions of loved ones often seem senseless and without purpose. But true discipleship requires that we order our thoughts in accord with the thoughts of God. As water runs in the constraints of a furrow, our minds should follow the contours of Scripture. In order for our faith to stay strong and our vision of God to remain sane, Christians must believe that our affliction is always an assault of Satan and never an attack by

God. The Bible says God never intends evil, never delights in suffering, never abuses his children. His love should never come into question. The undeniable evidence of that love is the supreme sacrifice to which Genesis 3:15 points. The God who would send his own Son to the cross to die for the evil of which he was innocent to save those who are guilty must love the people he saves. God does not author evil, but he assigns each event its place in his eternal plan to crush Satan, renew this world, and save souls.

**STUDY** What do the following passages teach about the goodness of God?

- Romans 8:28-32
- James 1:13-17

**DISCUSS** Why is it unbiblical, inappropriate and damaging ever to say to a suffering person, “God wants this”? Discuss appropriate ways to respond as we comfort those who suffer.

### ***Cool Down***

**READ** Faith went on trial one October evening in our town when a distressed father sat at the bedside of his comatose son. The young man had been hurt playing basketball at a church picnic. Desperate to save his team’s possession of the ball at a crucial point in the game, the sixteen-year-old lunged for an errant pass going out of bounds. He missed the ball but not a spectator’s chair. As he toppled over the chair, one of its legs caught the young man in the stomach and damaged vital organs. Because he felt little pain, the teen continued to play the game’s final minutes while he hemorrhaged internally. By the time the pain grew enough to warrant a trip to the hospital, it was almost too late. The doctors worked frantically to save him. When they had done all they could, the outcome was still uncertain. The family began its bedside vigil, waiting hour upon hour for slightest signs of recovery.

Though the son would eventually recover, those awful hours of waiting forced family members to ask questions they had never before faced. The father was alone on his bedside shift one evening when the pastor visited. They talked quietly about particulars of the son’s care before the conversation turned to the deeper concern on the man’s heart. Trembling with emotion and a level of spiritual wrestling the pastor had never heard him express, the father asked the question that put his faith and his God on trial: “Will God kill my son to punish my sin?”

This father was a leader in his church. Neither he nor the pastor knew of any awful sin in his life that would require the life of his son for divine recompense. Still in this moment of crisis he needed an explanation for his pain. He dared to question out loud if his God would cruelly strike a child to wrest his pound of flesh from an imperfect parent. The man asked simply if his heavenly Father could act like Satan.

We should not blame the father for his question. Such wondering comes to the minds of most when we face suffering. God will surely not blame us for the question for which he so

carefully prepares an answer in his Word. In a world so full of pain God knew we would have to ask.

The answer appears here at the dawn of creation and the downfall of man. God's people horribly corrupt his world. Their actions, not God's, lead to an existence in which misery and pain fall upon the unjust and the just as long as this creation exists. What is God's response? Grace—the promise of his Son to satisfy divine justice and redeem sinful man. This is not a God who would willingly hurt any of his loved ones.

The pastor now trembled to say all this in words that would comfort and grant renewed trust in the God this father now so desperately needed at his son's bedside. Somehow the Holy Spirit provided the words. "No," said the young minister, "the Lord is not punishing *your* son for your sin. He could not, because God punished *his* Son for your sin."

In moments when answers seem beyond reason, we must draw our hearts to the cross to gaze on the proof of surpassing and conquering love. At Calvary are the answers to quiet our objections, calm our hearts, and confirm our faith. Pierced hands, feet, and side defy us to question our God's care or challenge his actions in our behalf.

**JOURNAL** Think again about your own experiences of suffering. Write a prayer to the Lord, affirming His goodness demonstrated in Christ's suffering. Thank him for how He even accomplishes good in your life through your suffering. Express your hope in his promised conquest of evil.

Perhaps you are not at this time able honestly to pray this. Take time to "draw your heart to the cross" in meditation. Pray that God will help you to understand his care and power.

## DAY 5: THE PERFECTION OF PROVIDENCE, PART 1

*My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
—Job 42:5*

### *Warm Up*

**READ** Missionaries David and Hazel Knowlton claimed the wonderful truths of divine providence in the deserts of Africa when they built a clinic to care for the needs of impoverished people. Initially their building plans were thwarted by the absence of gravel for a needed concrete foundation. Though sand extended for hundreds of miles, gravel was so scarce that local builders treated it like precious stone.

After weeks of futile efforts to locate enough gravel for the project, David wandered into the desert one evening praying about his predicament. Shuffling his feet as he contemplated his situation, he struck his toe against a small stone in the sand. He stopped short. What was the rock doing here? He rushed back to the compound for a shovel, pushed away the surface sand, and found gravel!

The next morning David rounded up wheelbarrows and hired workers to take the “worth-their-weight-in-gold pebbles” to the building site. The laborers transported all the gravel they could find—enough for the clinic foundation as well as for the mission quarters and a storehouse.

In future weeks word of the gravel find spread to neighboring villages. Gravel “prospectors” descended on the site to take out claims. The government even sent representatives to manage the discovery of the new resource. But no one found any more gravel. Millennia earlier when God created the world, he planted that little pocket of gravel in an ocean of sand for David Knowlton to find for this mission project. Then at just the right time, God exposed those pebbles to encourage a heart, to establish a mission, and to turn back the forces of darkness. Such is the nature of providence.

God’s *providence* is his infinitely wise governance of all things that affect his people. Our all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, sovereign God uses all things, across time and space, as he knows best to accomplish his good purposes.

**DISCUSS** Tell about a time when you experienced God’s providence in an obvious way.

**DISCUSS** Is God’s providence always so evident? What are some experiences that can feel especially meaningless?

**DISCUSS** Does God’s providence operate intermittently, or does it pertain to all times and circumstances?

## ***Work Out***

**READ** You may think that the book of Job is the wrong place to look to seek the comforts of divine providence. Job, a decent man by everyone's account—himself, friends, even God—experienced agonizing, apparently meaningless suffering. No book more greatly challenges the judgment of God.

Yet if God can demonstrate his providential care in the face of such apparent unfairness, then our basis for trusting him grows more sound. It is easy to trust God's care in surprisingly happy circumstances. It is a greater feat to see God's perfect hand in difficult ones. No book more certainly confirms God's perfect providence, even in the worst of circumstances. We need the explanations of this most ancient of biblical texts to assure us that God governs *all* things that affect his people.

**STUDY** Skim Chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Job. List the difficult things that befell Job.

**READ** Troubles more than any other occurrence prompt us to question God's providence. Is God just, or is he just there?

A grandfather works for an engineering firm for thirty years. Two years from retirement, without a real chance of being rehired, the firm succumbs to economic pressures and closes his department. The company hands him a pink slip just when the children of a son's broken marriage are due to move into his home. Does God know what he is doing? Is this right?

A nineteen-year-old college student is thrown from a car as it plummets into a ditch. The friend who fell asleep at the wheel walks home from the hospital within days. But many days dawn before the young man propelled from the car awakes from his coma to hear a doctor say he will never walk again. Can this be just?

**DISCUSS** Have you had or witnessed an experience that, like Job's, seemed especially unfair?

**DISCUSS** Describe feelings and thoughts that are common in such circumstances.

**READ** Job also exhibits some of these common responses. His story gives us the framework we need to interpret them.

A common, initial response to suffering is to assume that it results directly from some sin we have committed. Another response is to think that God is being mean. A third is to think that life is meaningless, in effect to deny God's providential care. In this study and the next, we will look at these responses more closely.

## ***Trouble Does Not Always Mean Sin***

**STUDY** Read Job 1:8. Was Job suffering because he had sinned?

**STUDY** Did Job's "friends" believe that Job was suffering because he had sinned? See Job 11:1-6, 13-20.

**STUDY** Job's friends were not the only people who ever made such a connection. See John 9:3.

**DISCUSS** Why is it a common human response to think that a person suffers because he or she has sinned? Explain how this response reflects a performance-based religion.

**READ** At a minimum the book of Job impedes the swiftness with which we draw this conclusion. Neither Job's blessing nor his afflictions are unalterably tied to his actions in this fallen world. Any attempt to press the providence of God into a mathematical equation based on our works will fail in the book of Job. This is an important first principle we must learn if our trust in God will outlive our difficulties.

We need not automatically assume guilt for the troubles we face. We live in a fallen world. While God may use its troubles to convict of wrong or even punish sin, personal trouble does not automatically imply personal guilt. Good people living in a fallen world may experience its pain through no fault of their own. We must recognize that to some degree all people face the consequences of living in this world, or else at the very moment we need assurances of our God's providence, we will presume his hatred.

While laying asphalt during my college summers, I met a man whose life and faith were shattered by his failure to recognize that trouble was not an automatic indication of God's wrath. He was a huge, hard-working truck foreman named James Hildebrand. James cultivated a tough-as-nails image with a crusty, iron-hard exterior that barely hid a very large and pudding-soft heart.

During my second summer of working for the paving company, James's son had his seventeenth birthday. He received what every son of an asphalt trucker must want most in this world. A new dump truck—not the kind Tonka makes. The truck foreman father gave his only son a shiny new thirteen-gear, eighteen-ton mountain of motor and steel on wheels. It was the pride of the young boy's life—and his demise. One day as he hauled a heavy load, the truck developed a brake problem. The boy crawled under the truck to fix it. The load shifted unexpectedly. He was killed.

Months later James came into the scale house where I was now weighing trucks. He sat down and uncharacteristically began "wasting time" by shooting the breeze with me. I kept

wondering what he wanted as we talked about meaningless things. Then I saw his eyes cloud and begin to tear. I realized that he was no longer talking to me. In my youth and in my features he was seeing his son.

A tear rolled down his cheek and unleashed the pain he could constrain no longer. “Oh, Bryan,” he said, “I should never have let him do it. It’s my fault.” Then he explained how the Sunday before his son was killed, James had let the boy go help a friend who was in a pinch unload a truck rather than go to church.

James believed that trouble meant sin—that his son’s death must mean that he had done something sinful. He expected to have to pay for his sin with his sorrow.

What a load of guilt could have been lifted if James had known that sin need not be the only explanation for affliction. I wanted to hug him and say the words that would comfort him, but I was too young and did not know how. The words I needed God now provides. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) The God who put the penalty of our sin on his own Son spares us from the automatic conclusion that trouble we face always represents his punishment.

**JOURNAL** Describe a time when you or someone you know thought that something unfortunate happened as a punishment for personal sin?

**JOURNAL** Try now to reinterpret this event in light of Jesus’ death for us on the cross. How does the message of the gospel, that Christ took the punishment our sins deserved, encourage us about hardships in our lives?

### ***Trouble Does Not Always Mean God is Mean***

**READ** James Hildebrand believed that God was punishing him for a specific sin he believed he had committed. Sometimes, however, a suffering person cannot identify a particular sin, or a “crime” large enough to fit the “punishment” he or she is now experiencing. In a case like this, that person is still wrongly making an automatic connection between trouble and sin, but having failed to find the “match,” he or she perceives God as mean—vindictive, harsh, hostile, punishing for reasons impossible to determine.

Perhaps we have all explained our difficulty by assuming God’s caprice. When I played little league baseball as a child, I was what you would call an average player. You know what being an “average” little leaguer means. It means some days I literally shined on the field, and other days I was about as spectacular as the nearest clod of dirt. I remember one of the latter days. I started at third base. Then after a few less-than-spectacular plays, I was exiled to right field. There I determined to do better—to redeem myself.

Soon I got my chance. A lefty hit a lazy fly ball right to me. I took a bead on the ball arcing toward me and knew I could not miss. The ball came closer and closer. I raised my glove into position and shielded my eyes against the sun with a professional flair. Then just as the ball arrived—in a last horrible instant—I realized I had misjudged, again. I made a

desperate lunge at the ball as it passed over my head. All my teammates then saw was my flashing heels as I turned to chase the ball. What they did not see as I ran deeper into the field to retrieve the ball bouncing toward a distant fence was my tears. I cried as I ran and shouted to the sky, “Oh, God, what did I do?”

**STUDY** Read Job 27:2. If a person thinks that God has punished when no wrong has been committed, what is the obvious conclusion about God?

**STUDY** Read Job 40:7-8. When God reveals himself to Job, to what does he object in Job’s behavior?

**STUDY** Read Job 30:23. As Job shows, it is possible still to obey a tyrant. But what important aspect of God’s character and our relationship to him goes missing?

**JOURNAL** Have you ever felt, in a time a trouble, that God is mean?

**READ** As a little boy, I knew about God. I knew he expected me to abide by his standards. So when I faced a little-boy’s nightmare, failing to come up with the fly ball, I thought that I must have offended the bogey man above. I had pictured God as he could never be—capricious, vengeful, punishing for reasons impossible to determine. Though it was a child’s impression, I need to remember what I felt, because we can all mature with such a false perspective planted in our hearts, and it will blossom later in our trials. Job’s attitude was the same as the little leaguer’s.

If trials can only be explained as God’s slap, then as long as our imperfections exist, we will fear ever to face God. Instead, God invites us to turn toward him with the promise of his relief in trial. Because these attitudes of job too easily breed in our own hearts when we face trial, God uses the occasion to clarify his nature to this servant and to future generations. The patience of God now unfolds with penetrating power to reveal that he *never abandons* his own, he *never abuses* his children, and he *always redeems his people*.

**STUDY** Read Job 38:1, 40:1. How do these passages show that God *never abandons* his people?

**STUDY** God *never abuses* his children. God could well have abused Job. Consider his power in the following verses:

- Job 38:8

- Job 38:14
- Job 38:35
- Job 39:27
- Job 41:1
- In Job 2:9, what did Job's wife expect would happen if Job cursed God?
- Read Job 40:7, 42:1-6. How did this all-powerful God actually treat Job? Did God compel Job's submission?

**DISCUSS** What adjectives describe the God who deals with Job?

**DISCUSS** Contrast God's treatment of Job with what you might expect of a God who is a vengeful, capricious tyrant.

**JOURNAL** Describe a time in your life when you believe that God has shown his patient gentleness with you, even when you had failed to trust and obey him. Perhaps you struggle now to see his good hand in a difficult situation. How does Job's experience encourage you to trust God's providential care?

**READ** God *always redeems* his people. In tomorrow's study we will see that this expresses God's true nature, as well as his providential purpose operating even in our trouble.

### ***Cool Down***

**JOURNAL** Reflect on Job 38:1-42:6. Imagine (truly!) that it is you to whom God is speaking. Try to see your current difficulties in light of God's self-revelation. Write a response of your own to God.

## **DAY 6: THE PERFECTION OF PROVIDENCE, PART 2**

**He knows the way that I take;  
when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.**

—Job 23:10

### *Warm Up*

**READ** God's *providence* is his infinitely wise governance of all things that affect his people. Our all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, sovereign God uses all things as he knows best to accomplish his good purposes.

While we are able to see God's hand in near-miraculous occurrences, the greater challenge is to trust his providence in times of trouble. That's why the book of Job offers the insight and encouragement we need by showing us God's sovereign, purposeful control of all things.

A common human response to suffering is to reason that it is God's punishment for our sin. Another is to believe, if trouble occurs in the absence of a proportionate sin, that God is a vengeful tyrant, promoting evil capriciously to "keep us in line." The book of Job considers both of these misguided responses and shows that they dangerously misrepresent God's true character.

When people believe that they are being punished for a sin, they forget that Jesus took the punishment that fits our crimes. They forget that our efforts, our suffering, would never have satisfied divine justice. They forget that his sovereign love never depends on our efforts.

Under the pressure of prolonged suffering in the absence of awareness of obvious sin, Job comes to misrepresent God as merciless, vindictive, abusive. But simply by speaking to Job, the Lord declares his unwillingness to walk away from an angry heart. The Lord never abandons and never abuses his children.

Those who perceive God either as punishing us for our sin or as punishing us for no reason at all are thereby deprived of the comfort and help they most need in times of trouble: the confidence in a compassionate, all-powerful God who ordains all events for our redemption.

The picture of a God who refuses to turn his back on a fist shaken at heaven needs to wrap itself around our minds. When we remember that our fists have been raised, we may doubt that God would ever care for us again. Against such doubt we can thrust these abiding truths our God so carefully plants in Scripture to remind us that he refuses to abandon or to abuse his own.

But now let us complete the picture. If trouble is not God's abandonment, nor his abuse, what is God's purpose in our trouble? Today we see that God's ways are not meaningless; his purpose is redemption.

**DISCUSS** Scan the lines of William Cowper's hymn. Could this have been Job's testimony? What phrases reflect Job's story?

*God moves in a mysterious way  
his wonders to perform;  
he plants his footsteps in the sea,  
and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
of never-failing skill  
he treasures up his bright designs,  
and works his sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
the clouds ye so much dread  
are big with mercy, and shall break  
in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
but trust him for his grace;  
behind a frowning providence  
he hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
unfolding every hour;  
the bud may have a bitter taste,  
but sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
and scan his work in vain;  
God is his own interpreter,  
and he will make it plain.*

### **Work Out**

**STUDY** To see God's unfolding purpose of redemption in Job's life, we must look closely at Job's conception of God, and how it changes through his trials.

- Read Job 1:1-5. What verse indicates that Job, before his trials, might have believed that God's blessing depended on his own performance?
- Read Job 1:20-22 and 2:9-10. What attitude did Job initially resolve to have toward his sufferings?
- Read Job 31:35 and 40:2. Does he maintain this attitude throughout his sufferings? How does it change?
- Read Job 13:23; 30:19-22; 31:35-37. What are some phrases that suffering Job uses to describe God?

**DISCUSS** What do these passages show that Job needs to learn about himself?

**DISCUSS** What do they show that Job needs to learn about God?

**STUDY** What is God's assessment of how Job thinks of him? See Job 38:2; 40:1-8; 41:11.

**STUDY** In Job 40:9-14, what does God teach Job about Job's power to save himself? Who alone can save Job? Why is it absolutely critical that Job learn this?

**READ** God's words sound harsh, but they have a specific purpose. They confront Job with the limitations of his fallen nature. Despite Job's protests of the sufficiency of his own goodness prior to what he assumes are heaven's assaults, he must recognize that "his own right hand" cannot save him. By allowing Job to see his own helplessness in the face of affliction, God enabled Job to see that his salvation was not in his own hands. By refusing to respond with rage to Job's accusation, God confronted Job with the mercy that is the true source of his blessing.

This is the God who neither abandons nor abuses, who rather carefully reveals our own inadequacies so that we will never try to depend on ourselves to escape this world's evil. God uses the trials that Satan brings to redeem Job from false perceptions of his own ability and to point the complainer toward his real hope. Consistent with his true nature, God responds redemptively to Job's accusations.

**STUDY** Read Job 19:25-27. Did Job have some concept of God as his Redeemer? Do you think at the time he said these words he understood fully what he was saying? See Job 42:5-6.

**STUDY** How does God show Job the gospel—that God redeems the rebellious, and that his care depends not on our righteousness but solely on his mercy? See Job 42:5-6, 10-17.

**READ** The result: Job begins by contending with a god of his imagination; he ends by worshiping the God of his redemption. Through trial God providentially brings Job to spiritual health. God used trials to reveal himself to Job, as our Lord must be seen by all who would know an eternity of blessing based on his grace alone. Our Lord made clear to Job what all who experience his salvation must know: God's love is not based on our righteousness but on his mercy.

**DISCUSS** Is it possible for us, like Job, to know of God's redemption and yet not to have it impact the way we live?

**DISCUSS** Is it possible to believe that God has redeemed us and in some areas still to believe that his care depends on our performance? What would be some common areas in which we believe we need to perform in order to merit God's blessing?

**DISCUSS** How is it that "knowing an eternity of blessing" depends on understanding that God alone redeems us? Is it fair to say that to the extent that we tie God's love to our performance, we limit the blessing that could be ours?

**DISCUSS** Is it an overstatement to say that God's ultimate providential purpose in Job's life, and thus also in ours, was redemption? Consider Romans 8:29-30.

**DISCUSS** Why is redemption enough for God to accomplish?

**DISCUSS** Consider the words of Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

*What is your only comfort in life and in death?*

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

How does the answer offer the comfort promised in the question, in life, in death, and in times of trouble? Would it have helped Job, sitting and suffering among the ashes (Job 2:8), to have meditated on this answer?

**JOURNAL** Examine your own Christian life. While you trust Christ for eternity in heaven, do you think that you still believe that in your Christian life his blessing depends on your efforts?

**JOURNAL** On a scale from one to ten, where *one* stands for performance (thinking that God's affection depends on your performing well) and *ten* stands for redemption (thinking that God's love does not depend on your effort in any area, but rather solely on his mercy), what number represents how thoroughly you have embraced Christ's redemption?

**JOURNAL** Has this attitude impacted your response to suffering in the past? In what way?

**JOURNAL** What do you need to learn about God from this lesson?

**JOURNAL** What practical steps can you take to apply this way of thinking?

**READ** While providence works redemption of a person, providence also works redemption of a people. God uses his work in one person's life to model his redemptive ways to many others. This is also part of his providence.

**STUDY** Consider the impact of Job's experience.

- As God was teaching Job of redemption, through his self-revelation and through his blessing after Job admitted his own inadequacy, what people were "taking notes"? See Job 42:10-11.
- To how many people would Job have been able to testify of his experience of God's redemption during his lifetime? See Job 42:12-17.
- Consider that the book of Job is the most ancient book of the Bible. To what people that we read about in the Bible has the message of redemption been available?
- Consider that the book of Job has been part of the Bible for centuries, and that it is in your hands today. What people have heard God's testimony that he redeems rebellious people and loves us, not according to our efforts, but according to his mercy?

**DISCUSS** In his dealings with Job, did God providentially intend to save only Job, or to save millions? Were we part of his plan when he dealt with Job?

**READ** The parents of a twenty-one-year old son injured in a car accident met me in the waiting room of the Intensive Care Unit. As we sat down, they introduced me to a friend of their son who was also visiting. Then with unrestrained gratitude the parents told of all the people who had called or sent messages saying they were praying. Christians they had not seen in years, church friends from many hours' distance, as well as local believers had called.

As the couple spoke about the many who were praying, I noticed that they kept directing their comments to their son's friend who did not herself participate in the discussion. As our conversation progressed, I realized that the parents were testifying to the young woman by what they chose to discuss. They were using their own trial to make sure this friend knew their God.

Later when we talked, the mother also asked me if I remembered an exchange student from Germany who a couple of years earlier had stayed with their family. I remembered the polite young man who attended each church service with a slight look of bemusement on his face. She told me that when the exchange student heard of the accident, he flew to their home. He was there as the phone calls and prayer messages poured in from all over the country. The Christian response awed him. "Nothing like this would happen in my home," he said. The mother asked if he wanted to know why it was happening. He said, "Yes," and then she explained the hope of the Gospel to him again.

I marveled at the faithfulness of this couple who knew their trial was an opportunity for the providence of God to work in other hearts. Their testimony blessed me, but my greatest blessing and amazement was yet to come. As I left the ICU, a man spoke to me while we were waiting for the elevator. "Are you a neighbor of those people?" he asked, nodding his head toward the family I had just visited.

"No," I said, "I'm just a friend."

"Those are some special people," he said. "Their son's accident was only half a block from my home."

I said, "Oh, it was nice of you to come all this way to visit after just meeting the family that way."

"You don't understand," he said. "I didn't come to see them. A couple of nights after their son was in his accident, the same thing happened to my daughter. She's here, too. I don't know if I could have made it without those people praying for us. Only because I know they understand what my family is going through was I able to believe what they are saying."

What an incredible chain of events! By tragedy God put this Christian family in another man's life just days before the neighbor faced the tragedy of his own that pierced him with his need of the Lord. Because of unique circumstances, the Christians' testimony had a power the man himself could not fully explain but definitely appreciated. Others might call the situation a fluke, but Christians see the providence of God at work.

**DISCUSS** Describe some experiences in which you have seen God use a believer's trials, perhaps your own, to help others know him better.

**TAKE ACTION** Is there someone in your life now who is watching God's dealings with you, who may also be part of God's providential working in your life? As you are able, share about this person and lead the group in praying for him or her.

*Cool Down*

**DISCUSS** Why do trials offer a good arena in which to grow to understand the providence of God?

## DAY 7: THE ELEGANCE OF THE LAW, PART 1

*Oh how I love your law!  
I meditate on it all day long.  
—Psalm 119:97*

### *Warm Up*

**READ** Only weeks ago a pastor in my denomination stood before his congregation and announced that, though he was married, he was a practicing homosexual and had been since adolescence when his own family introduced him to this lifestyle.

In the past three months, six pastors from various denominations in our city have been dismissed from their pulpits for sexual sin.

Josh McDowell's recent national survey of the sexual habits of teens in evangelical churches indicates that almost 45 per cent of *our* teens are sexually active prior to marriage.

This past year I preached a sermon in a large, well-known evangelical church on the need for reconciliation in Christian families. When I finished, the pastor asked people to come forward who wanted prayer for reconciliation. Scores came. So many wanted personal prayer that the two staff members and I had trouble speaking with them all. When we compared notes later, we discovered in *every* case where we spoke with spouses that one or both parties of the marriage had been involved in one or more extramarital affairs.

Two years ago I spent two days with the head of the largest civil litigation firm in a neighboring state. He said his fastest growing caseload involves suits against churches—specifically suits brought by parents of children who have been molested in church day care centers, parochial schools, and Sunday schools.

**DISCUSS** Among people and churches of your acquaintance, how prevalent is immorality such as this?

**DISCUSS** What does the prevalence of serious sin say about our need to honor God's law?

### *Work Out*

**READ** The pervasiveness of the evil in our culture and among us would seem to demand our return to honoring God's law. Yet even in our churches such an imperative often goes unheeded because we cannot agree on how the standards of God should govern our lives.

Some Christians feel they must challenge fellow church members "not to be so legalistic." If this challenge means we should not judge one another over matters of cultural preference and Christian liberty, then I say, "Amen." If the caution against legalism further means that God's people should not believe or act as though God bases our ultimate standing before him on some righteous code of conduct, then again I say, "Amen."

However, if the admonition not to be “legalistic” really means that Christians should not consistently honor, carefully study, and conscientiously obey the standards God’s Word has given for all ages, then I say, ”Whoa.”

Do I want “legalism?” No! Do I want the law? Yes!

Having trusted Christ for salvation, many believers remain confused concerning the role of the law of God in their lives. Well meaning but distorted teaching can either dismiss the law as irrelevant to the believer or cast it as a code of conduct on which God’s ongoing affection depends.

The law of God, as we learn today and tomorrow, not only tells us what God commands. It also reveals God’s glory and grace. When we understand this, we can sing with the Psalmist, “Oh how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97) And only when we see the elegance the law of God can we honor it in a way that brings hope, in our own lives, and in a perishing culture.

**STUDY** Read Psalm 19:7-14. As you read, remember that the actual word translated as “law” at this passage’s opening is *Torah*, a general term for all God tells us about how we are to conduct ourselves. Torah includes the various types of divine instruction mentions in the later verses—statutes, commands, precepts, ordinances, and even the restraining fear (awe or respect) of the Lord he plants in our hearts.

- How might you describe the Psalmist’s attitude toward the law of God?
- Is this a surprising attitude? Why might it not be shared by some people?

### ***The Law Reveals the Glory of God***

**STUDY** Read verses 7 to 9.

List the characteristics and the consequences of God’s law.

#### ***CHARACTERISTICS***

#### ***CONSEQUENCES***

- v. 7a:
- v. 7b:
- v. 8a:
- v. 8b:
- v. 9a/10a:

- v. 9b/10b:

In your own words, express what it means to say that the law of God is...

- perfect:
  - trustworthy:
  - right:
  - radiant:
  - pure:
  - sure:
- Skim verses 1 to 6 of Psalm 19. According to this first part of the Psalm, what declares the glory of God?
  - According to verses 7 to 9 that we just studied, what else declares the glory of God?

#### **A GOD OF SURE STANDARDS**

**READ** The word, *sure* (verse 9b), summarizes all the preceding descriptions. We do not have to wonder if God's basic standards for us are imperfect, flawed, mistaken, veiled, tainted, or subject to variation. God's standards are perfectly crafted and eternally correct. We need harbor no questions about the faithfulness of the Lord's guidance. When we go where he directs, we walk on solid ground.

No conclusion about God's law could be more relevant to our contemporary situation and more important for ministers of the Gospel. The defiant modern heart shouts, "No one knows for sure; so no one has the right to tell me what to do." Our response must be strong and unwavering: "God's Word is sure; so he has the right to instruct."

Regardless of their natural abilities, preachers may speak with authority when presenting biblical standards because of God's assurance that his Word is right. This holy boldness—which comes from confidence in God rather than reliance on one's personal gifts—must well up in the hearts of all who are stewards of God's truth. Conviction of the eternal integrity of God's law

grants the liberty to speak as God requires in the face of spiritual resistance. Pastors who speak with the assurance that their words are true minister with divine power.

**DISCUSS** How is the right to instruct connected to sure and unchanging truth? How do the statements of both rebellious and believing hearts reveal this connection?

**DISCUSS** What should be the basis of confidence and authority when someone proclaims God's Word? What is "holy boldness"?

**DISCUSS** How does the fact that God empowers, not dramatic eloquence, but His own sure Word, encourage those who proclaim his Word?

**READ** A pastor recently received a call from a good friend and former parishioner whose unmarried daughter has begun living with a man. "Would you please call her and try to make her see that this is wrong?" the father requested. He acknowledged that he had run out of arguments and influence with his daughter. The father's precise words were particularly revealing of our age. "She has an answer for everything I say," he wept.

Most of us know what this grieving father was experiencing. We, too, probably have friends or loved ones who say, "Why shouldn't we live together for a while before we get married? Why not see if we can get along before making a lifetime commitment?" These arguments sound so reasonable. They *do* make a certain degree of sense.

We may try to counter such worldly logic with our own arguments: "Your lover is just using you"; Statistics indicate that these relationships will not last"; "Intimacy prior to marriage often deprives the marriage itself of deeper intimacy, stability, and trust"; etc. Unfortunately, no matter how accurate such observations are, others can almost always counter with reasoning from their own perspective.

Similar "reasonable" arguments will accompany every sin a society has grown to accept. Ultimately the defense of our actions must lie beyond human debate. Sin is wrong because God says so. His standards are perfect, trustworthy, right, good, and pure *because he is all of these*. Variance from his instruction is always ill-considered because his law is *sure*.

**JOURNAL** Examine your own life. Is there some behavior or attitude which you are justifying with worldly logic, when you know that God has forbidden it? Ask God to help you to be honest as you think about this. As you are able, write down a brief description of this behavior. Then, in colored marker, write across it: "Sin is wrong because God says so." Ask God to help you reject the sinful behavior and keep his sure law.

**READ** Perhaps the psalmist echoes the sureness of God's law so repetitively because he knows no one is exempt from questioning the necessity of obedience. The hearts of those most familiar with Scripture are often the most skilled at reasoning around its standards. The moral failure of famous preachers is no new phenomenon. Three centuries ago the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter cautioned pastors, "Take heed to yourselves because you have greater temptations and more exposure to them than other men." I am frequently amused by people who talk about pastors being insulated from evil. Every caring pastor's office floods with people taken in sin. Great spiritual danger lies in this constant exposure to evil. This is because the exposure dulls the sensibilities to the repugnance of sin.

**DISCUSS** Perhaps it is new to you to consider that a pastor or spiritual leader is both exposed to and vulnerable to sin. How can a pastor equip himself to meet this challenge? How can others like you help him?

#### **A GOD OF SAFE STANDARDS**

**DISCUSS** What reasons have you heard given, by parents, pastors, teachers and friends, for why we should keep the law?

**STUDY** Look again at Psalm 19:7ff, especially verse 11. What reason is given here for keeping the law?

**READ** As the psalmist further considers the nature of the law's leading, his praise expands. Reflection on the care evident in the life path God's instruction prepares leads the writer to extol the goodness of divine ordinances. They are "more precious than gold" and "sweeter than honey" (verse 10).

But what happens if one wanders from this precious path? The psalmist's thoughts naturally turn to consider the consequences. Great danger lies of the path God provides. With this caution, in mind, the psalmist launches a new theme. Not only are the ordinances of the Lord sure, but they are also *safe*: "By them is you servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward" (verse 11).

We rarely stress this theme enough. Too often Christians try to spur others (including other Christians) to obey God with the simple reasoning that good people are supposed to be good. Our moral imperatives and holy exhortations get couched in terms designed to shame others into shape. We seem to believe that by encouraging people to protect their personal reputations, they will please God. In doing so, we imply that God loves us more because we are respectable. Such teaching makes maximizing the honor of one's self the measure of holiness. The law of God then degenerates into arbitrary rules of religious etiquette that corral the spiritually elite into self-serving paths. As a result it is no wonder that so many consider obedience a bitter pill.

In moments of opportunity and temptation, no one's pride offers protection from the allure of such intensely self-satisfying sins as sexual indulgence. A shield of self-serving self respect offers little defense against the compulsions to promote one's peer standing, to preserve romantic relationships, to experience sensual pleasure, and to answer questions of sexual orientation or adequacy. When concerns for self offer no clear guidance away from sin, the Bible offers no more powerful dissuasion than this assurance: "God has designed a sweeter course for you than this."

God would seem far less capricious and holiness far less prideful if Christians more conscientiously offered the biblical perspective—God intends for his law to protect us from harm. A life ordered by his standards knows the most blessed existence divine love can design.

**DISCUSS** Here we see contrasted two ways of presenting the law of God—two ways someone might use to influence another to keep God's law. What is the wrong way? In what ways is it unbiblical and potentially dangerous?

**DISCUSS** What is the biblical way to present God's law?

**DISCUSS** The Bible teaches us that there is great reward in keeping God's law. So why is it so strategic of Satan to try to make us believe that keeping God's law is personally restrictive and unpleasant?

**JOURNAL** Can you think of times in your life when you have

- attempted to keep God's law for the sake of your own personal reputation?
- exhorted others to do the same?
- found that your own concern for your personal reputation was inadequate to keep you from willful sin?
- found that your attitude towards keeping God's law was negative, thinking that keeping his law would keep you from "great reward"?
- Confess these errors to God. Ask him to reshape your outlook concerning his law.

**DISCUSS** Share examples of experiences that confirm that in keeping God's law there is great reward.

#### **A GOD OF GREAT HEART**

**STUDY** Look again at Psalm 19:7-11, or at your analysis of these verses at the beginning of this study. What do the characteristics and consequences of the law of God tell us about the character of the One who made the law?

**DISCUSS** If the law reveals a perfect, trustworthy, righteous, radiant, pure, sure God, is it reasonable to think that we might love the law for revealing this sort of a God to us?

**DISCUSS** Suppose there were a miracle drug that revived the soul, made the simple wise, gave joy to the heart, gave light to the eyes, was more precious than gold and sweeter than honey—would you want to try that drug?

**DISCUSS** Suppose you found that a certain person wanted to give you life, wisdom, and joy—how would you describe that person's concern for you?

**DISCUSS** How does knowing that God intends life, wisdom, and joy for you, and that he actually provides for you to experience them, help you feel about God?

#### ***Cool Down***

**JOURNAL** How has this study changed your attitude toward the law or toward God?

**TAKE ACTION** Share with another person your change in attitude. Each of you pray for the other for God to enable him or her to implement this attitude in the future.

## DAY 8: THE ELEGANCE OF THE LAW, PART 2

*...Thy justice like mountains;  
High soaring above  
Thy clouds, which are fountains  
of goodness and love.  
—Walter Chalmers Smith*

### *Warm Up*

Yesterday as we reflected on Psalm 19:7-11, we saw the elegance of the law of God. The written law of God, like the heavens, declares the glory of God. It reveals to us a God with a great heart, who has designed his law to reflect his own character and to insure the good of his image bearers. We saw that God's standards are both sure and safe: sure, in that their changeless authority offers the only reason we need to obey them; safe, in that keeping them brings great reward, saving us from danger of all kinds, giving us life, wisdom, and joy. We saw, finally, that Christians commonly misunderstand and misrepresent the reasons we should obey the law, doing damage to themselves and others. Because the law reveals a great-hearted God and ensures abundant life for us, we love this law.

But even as the law is like a glass window through which we see God, it is also a glass mirror in which we catch an unsettling glimpse of ourselves. What the psalmist sees in the law's reflection dramatically changes his tone.

Today we see that the law of God not only reveals his inimitable glory. The law of God also exposes his inestimable grace.

**DISCUSS** Why do we hesitate to love the law, even though it reveals a faithfully good and righteous God? What does the "mirror, mirror, of the law" reflect about ourselves?

### *Work Out*

#### *The Law Reflects Our Condition*

**STUDY** Re-read Psalm 19:7-14. In what verses do you detect the psalmist's concern about his own reflection in the mirror of the law?

**STUDY** The psalmist speaks of three different kinds of sin in verses 12 and 13. What are these?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

In the space beside the blanks above, describe in your own words what sins of each category are like. Keep in mind that when the psalmist speaks of “errors,” he uses a technical term meaning, “involuntary sin.”

**DISCUSS** Why is it so frustrating that sometimes we sin involuntarily—that we can’t help sinning?

**DISCUSS** Why is it so frustrating that sometimes we don’t even know that we are sinning?

**DISCUSS** Why is it so frustrating that sometimes we sin even though we know that we are sinning?

**DISCUSS** How is it that the fact that we do all these things—sin compulsively, sin without recognizing it, and sin even when we are fully conscious of it and capable of restraining ourselves—reveal the scope of our fallen nature and our utter spiritual helplessness?

**DISCUSS** Describe how recognizing these dimensions of sinfulness in your own life makes you feel about yourself, about God, and about your relationship to him.

**DISCUSS** In light of our spiritual helplessness, why is it damaging and discouraging for Christian teaching about holiness simply to admonish Christians to obey God?

**READ** When I worked as a novice newspaper reporter during my college years, I had the mixed blessing of working under an incredibly demanding editor. Though his vocal criticism made me conscious of a number of writing techniques I could correct and improve, I began to doubt I could ever write a story that would satisfy him.

One day my editor stood at my elbow while I tried to type a report of a city council meeting. I could not get through one sentence without a barrage of “suggestions,” corrections, and scowls. After the first paragraph my attempts had slowed to a crawl (causing more criticism), and before I was halfway through the account, I was paralyzed. So much did I now

doubt that I could write anything well that I lost the ability to write at all. Instead of improving my work, my editor's constant reflection on its inadequacies destroyed that small ability I had.

As constant criticism only increases our propensity for error, overemphasis on the requirements of the law that highlights our failures will plunge us into greater spiritual destitution.

**DISCUSS** Perhaps you have experienced this personally—trying sincerely to keep the law expected of you by parents, employers, churches, or yourself. Often we live with the discrepancy our lives demonstrate by “turning off” the one speaking. But what happens to those who sincerely endeavor to keep what is expected of them? How is their experience like the novice reporter in the story above?

**READ** A right understanding (and use) of God's standards must take into account the traits that the Bible itself reveals are characteristic of the law. Not only do God's ordinances glorify the Creator, but they also hold the potential to devastate the creature. At the same moment that the law affirms the greatness of God who provides such perfect paths, it testifies to the helpless condition of any person who attempts to walk them.

There is great benefit in the realization of one's own spiritual insufficiency. The confession of personal inadequacy is the first real step to spiritual health. Still the joint attestation of the law and of our hearts that we are incapable of perfectly walking God's paths cannot be the only message that the law communicates. Those who listen to that testimony without any counter harmony will despair despite the words of security and safety in the song the psalmist lisps. What good comes from singing of the goodness of One who created a safe path that no one can reach? Why praise the hand no one can satisfy?

**JOURNAL** Have you ever felt hopeless and frustrated because you were not able to live up to God's standards? Briefly describe one such experience: what standard were you falling short of, and what was your response?

### ***The Law Rescues From Despair***

**DISCUSS** Is there any place we can turn for help in our spiritual helplessness?

**DISCUSS** There is only one source for the kind of spiritual help we need: God Himself. But why does this fact, at least on the face of it, present us with a dilemma?

**READ** In Psalm 19, the very law that exposes enough of its Creator's nature to make the psalmist want to approach his God, also reveals the creature's inability to draw near. On the one hand,

the law draws the writer toward God. (verses 7-11) On the other hand, it holds the author at a distance. (verses 12-13) On the basis of the law the psalmist must question whether he or anyone can have a sure or safe standing before his God. In the light of these questions what assurance does anyone have of God's acceptance?

**STUDY** The psalmist longs—as do we—for a relationship with God. He knows he cannot appeal to his own performance. In verse 14, what two qualities does God bring to such a relationship that makes the relationship both possible and utterly secure, saving the psalmist from despair?

- God is my \_\_\_\_\_.
- God is my \_\_\_\_\_.

**DISCUSS** What does it mean to say that God is “my rock”? What qualities does such a God bring to a relationship?

**DISCUSS** What does it mean to say that God is “my redeemer”? What qualities does such a God bring to a relationship?

**DISCUSS** Given our own spiritual helplessness, where must the initiative lie for such a relationship?

**READ** The psalmist does not appeal to his own adherence to the law as the basis for confidence in his relationship with the Lord. He turns to the Lord himself as a Rock and Redeemer to secure the relationship. The *support* God provides as a divine Rock makes the psalmist sure. The *supply* God offers as a spiritual Redeemer keeps the writer safe. What God brings to this relationship saves the psalmist from despair. The law has revealed enough of God's goodness to allow the psalmist to love the Lord and place faith in him. Thus this scriptural poem that extols the law makes the relationship God establishes the focus of our praise. In the relationship God secures we find refuge. Only in the divine initiative—he loves us unconditionally first—is there hope.

**JOURNAL** Reflect on God's initiative in your life. Review your own failure to meet God's standards. How does it affect your outlook to recall that he is your rock and your redeemer—the one who initiates redemption and relationship with you? Try to express your feelings in words.

**READ** Does God's redeeming initiative mean that the law holds no value? No. As God intended from the beginning, the law leads to grace by teaching us of our dependence on him. The glory of the law is that it reveals the character of One who delights to lay this path for our spiritual safekeeping.

Because the path does not lead back on itself, does that mean we should abandon it? Should we walk away from the law simply because it leads away from self-sufficiency? No. If we were to abandon the Lord's guidance, we would annul all the psalmist has used to understand his God. The psalmist shows no inclination wander from the path that evidences and honors the love of his Lord. Why should he leave the course so faithfully laid to protect him. The grace he perceives in his God makes the psalmist all the more desirous of staying on the path his Lord designed.

**DISCUSS** Reflect again on the assurance and comfort it gives you to know that God has redeemed you. How does this hope and comfort make you feel about doing what he wants?

**READ** What is the connection between rules and relationship? Between God's law and our relationship to him?

A new father once confided that he hoped to avoid his own parents' errant attempts to force love into their family. His parents had decided in his early teen years that he was not paying enough attention to them. To correct this problem they designated times during the day when the son was to greet them and engage them in conversation. For months at the appointed hour he dutifully sought out the appropriate parent and said, "Hello." Unfortunately, the discipline only further damaged the relationship. The enforced expressions of love soon degenerated into artificial gestures, minimal efforts, and resentful obedience. The relationship itself faltered by trying to forge a bond through a set of compulsory behaviors rather than through actions genuine love engendered.

After months of increasing difficulty, the family again discussed the importance of expressing care for one another, but they dropped the scheduled conversations. The relationship eventually prospered again as the parents emphasized the importance of natural expressions of affection without making them the basis of the relationship. Today the young man again delights to speak with his parents. Though he lives some distance from them, he phones at regular intervals to keep their lives knit together. No one forces him to call. His own appreciation for their relationship spurs him to maintain the contact. He recognizes that although the rules of the past could not form a good relationship with his parents, the relationship could not exist now without meeting expectations that keep them close.

**DISCUSS** How does this young man's experience with his parents help us understand the connection between obeying God's law and having a relationship with him?

**READ** Perhaps we can express the connection between our relationship to God and our keeping his law by saying, God's love is the motive for our obedience. We must honor God's law

because his love constructed this path around the dangers of ungodliness. His provision rather than our performance must remain the focus of our faith.

Two great errors can characterize various churches' teaching concerning the law. The first error is simply to discredit the law, so isolating the believer's focus on grace that the standards of God mean nothing. Not only does such an emphasis deny what Scripture says about the eternal goodness of the law (verse 9), but this approach also denies the believer a path to grace. If the law holds no righteous standard that can convict our consciences, then we have no awareness of sin, and God's mercy really saves us from nothing. Without regard for God's moral precepts, every person becomes a law unto himself or herself.

The second major misuse of the law occurs not when churches de-emphasize the law, but when they overemphasize the divine ordinances. God did not design the law to lead to itself, nor did he create the Church to march back to Sinai. The culminative intent of all scriptural statutes and institutions is the proclamation of the Savior. We honor our Lord by living as he directs, but we dishonor Jesus when we concentrate the energies and efforts of his bride (the Church) on the task of his messenger (the law). Jesus is the purpose of the Church. Despite their usually well-intended efforts, groups whose primary focus is law rob Christ of the glory due him.

**DISCUSS** While it would not be possible to assess a particular church's primary focus on the basis of a single sermon or service, over lengthening periods of time, we can discern that focus by looking at the themes, echoes, tone, and fruit of a church's ministries. (Matthew 7:15-20) Have you personally experienced a church's overemphasis on love without law, or law without love? Which of these two overemphasis are revealed in each of the following behaviors?

- unwillingness to "judge" others' sinful practices;
- judgmentalism;
- talk about love with little grief for sin;
- spiritual pride;
- personal despair.

**JOURNAL** As you personally have disciplined others, have you tended to offer law without love or love without law? Write down some concrete ways in which you might balance your message. Claim God's love and acceptance as the motivation you need to make this adjustment.

**READ** When the pastor in my denomination, mentioned at the outset of our study of the law, confessed his sexual sin to his church, the leaders there lovingly disciplined him as the Bible instructs. When he felt the genuine care in their chastening, the minister's trust of his brothers in the Lord grew enough to tell them that there had not been a single day within the past several years that he had not contemplated suicide. His failure before God's law, and the judgment it contained, bore down upon him with such weight that he nearly lost all regard for the life he could not control. In the light of these years of despair while his sin was secret, he related how strange it now felt for his heart to break free with the confession he had felt sure would destroy his reason to hold to life.

Though he did not request nor receive the continuation of his ministerial status, the now-former pastor has begun to share with others the tremendous release he is experiencing. He says, "For the first time in years I am not thinking of suicide, because I know I have the forgiveness of my Lord. And, for the first time in my adult life, I believe I have power over my sin because I have come to see how much my God wants to help me." With these words my friend has expressed in the most personal terms what the psalmist told us many centuries earlier about the goal of our Lord's statutes. Those who do not turn from God's way but follow it to the heart that gave the law find grace.

**DISCUSS** Did this pastor's confession of sin, experience of grace, and renewed obedience lead to a revived soul (Psalm 19:7), wisdom (verse 7), a joyful heart (verse 8), enlightened eyes (verse 8) and great reward (verse 11)?

**READ** When the law of God leads to its right conclusion, the beauty of the Lord breaks upon the human soul. The psalmist has described the process. The biblical statutes first obligate us to behaviors that glorify God. The loveliness and safety of life ordered by these precepts then reveal the nature of the one who designed them. God is love. He never intends for his ordinances to serve as capricious boundaries on human behavior that can exile us in regions beyond divine care. The paths that guide to holy goodness challenge our abilities and make us aware of our own faulty footing. Our best efforts cannot keep us from falling from heaven's ways. As a result the law that leads to blessing performs the added function of convicting us of our need for aid beyond our own strength.

Were the paths that convince us of such personal failing characterized by vicious challenges and cruel hurdles, then despair would await all who traveled them. Yet because what truly identifies these paths is infinite wisdom and undying care, the paths naturally lead us to seek the aid of the very hand that designed them. So the law instructs. It not only reveals the sure Rock on which we can stand, but also the Redeemer whose safekeeping we need when we slip.

Assured of the surety and safety of their Savior's intent, even those who have fallen will find the strength to rise again. The burden of a law that leads only to dread and depression will melt in the realms where the full light of God's Son reaches. At that altitude the clouds of the world's distortions dissipate, and we share the clarity of the psalmist's vision. The law no longer appears as a thundercloud darkening the human landscape with capricious threat and arbitrary rule. Instead, above the world's mists it reveals itself to be a stream of mercy flowing from the heights of God's love to nurture and guide all who follow its flow. Those who will trail this

stream back to its source may be amazed not only to discover that its pools of refreshment for their journey, but that they reach their destination deep in the heart of God.

In this heavenly vision that the psalmist provides is the grace that allows us to love God's law. Through biblically enlightened eyes, we discover that this law is neither the club the world portrays nor pretense anyone can ignore. God's standards ultimately lead us to the safety Christ offers. From the security his arms provide we find we can embrace the law as he desires. That which witnesses to the glory of God and testifies to the grace of our Savior will still elicit the ancient song from our lips" "O how I love your law!"

**DISCUSS** As a short review of our study, express the elegant process of the law to its right conclusion, drawing on these last paragraphs above.

1. God's \_\_\_\_\_. (line 3)
2. God's \_\_\_\_\_. (line 4)
3. My \_\_\_\_\_. (lines 7-8 )
4. God's \_\_\_\_\_. (line 17-18)
5. My \_\_\_\_\_. (line 20)

**DISCUSS** To what does the law lead?

### ***Cool Down***

**TAKE ACTION** As a group, compose a psalm of praise to God for his law. Each of you compose a couplet by supplying words for the blanks in the following form. Offer the psalm in praise to the Lord, each of you reading your couplet out loud in turn. If you are able to compile these and circulate photocopies, read your entire psalm out loud as a group the next time you meet together.

Lord, I love your law; for \_\_\_\_\_.

## DAY 9: THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE ATONEMENT, PART 1

*He has sent me...to bestow on them  
a crown of beauty instead of ashes....  
They will be...a planting of the LORD  
for the display of his splendor.  
—Isaiah 61:1-3*

### *Warm Up*

**DISCUSS** What are your favorite Christmas decorations?

**READ** As we have seen in the last studies, God’s call to holiness can seem so unattainable, or we can be so aware of our sin and failures, that it brings us to the point of despair. “What does the Lord require of you?” the prophet Micah asks. His answer comes quickly to mind, and rolls readily off the tongue: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) But when we begin to meditate deeply upon the full implications of these standards, however, we will be tempted to despair.

**DISCUSS** Why might such a despairing person not necessarily be comforted by cheery Christmas indicators of God’s coming into the world?

**READ** When the prophet Jeremiah spoke through his tears to warn a sinful Judah of impending punishment, cheering them with the message of the Lord’s coming, he did not use cheery images of a Christmas tree. Under God’s inspiration he spoke rather of a tree stump sending up a tiny shoot.

As the psalmist in the preceding studies would not describe God’s law without a reference to our Redeemer, Jeremiah will not tell God’s people of a coming discipline for their failures without reminding them that God must provide the righteousness they lack. This prophetic reference to Christ’s taking the place of a failed people in order to provide a righteousness they lack is the germ of the message of the Atonement. When God atones for our sins, he makes a provision to cover the guilt that is rightly ours with his own goodness. Jeremiah’s message, and the heart of the Christian Gospel, is that God not only requires our righteousness, but he also provides it. As a result, his promised love may grow in the unlikely places.

**TAKE ACTION** Read out loud together Jeremiah 33:14-16. Also read Isaiah 11:1 to learn a little more about the Branch in the Jeremiah 33 passage.

**DISCUSS** What would be your neighbors' reactions if at Christmas you decorated your front lawn with an old tree stump with a tiny shoot?

***Work Out***

**READ** In our town at the intersection of streets named Clayton and Ballas, a tree is growing. It is not a very grand tree. It really is just a sprout growing out of the concrete. On the little triangular island of raised curb where they mounted the yield sign for traffic turning right, this twig has somehow taken root in a crack in the concrete. In the winter this little tree is so forlorn looking that you cannot help but doubt that it will survive till spring. Surrounded by yards and yards of barren concrete and dwarfed by the traffic signs that tower above it, the twig gets de-leaved by the winter cold and whipped mercilessly by the winds of passing cars. It is the most ignorable little stick you could imagine. And yet I noticed it.

We were driving home from Christmas shopping at the mall where the lights glittered and the music blared when the twig caught my eye. A piece of tinsel had been blown from some neighboring trash can or outdoor display and had entwined in the tiny branches of the twig. The wind from passing cars repeatedly lashed the sprout into frenzied flutter. No one else in the world seemed to notice, but as that little tree waved its tinsel banner, it spoke to me more clearly of the real import of Christ's coming than any of the glitz we had spent the day enjoying.

Though the tinsel was just a castoff of the season, its presence on the little tree signaled what Christ's coming was all about. Sure it was just tinsel, but its presence meant that God had not gotten so busy in his workings of the universe that he could not pay attention to this insignificant, ugly little sprout. God had picked up that discarded sliver of silver and woven it in the hair of an ugly twig to make to beautiful to himself. That act is so typical of our God—to make the forlorn glorious. As the tinsel on the twig signaled the nature of God's care, it also served as a wonderful beacon of hope for any who would notice. The intention of this passage and of the prophet Jeremiah is to make us notice that God provides tinsel for twigs of all types—the ignored, the ugly, the despised of this world. When our actions or the estimations of others cause us to think that there is no beauty left in us, God reminds us of the hope that is in his own nature. He loves to decorate. Through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, our Lord drapes us with his purposes, covers us with his love, and makes us sing with his glory. Faith in these designs can again make the forlorn glorious.

Our study today focuses our attention on the twig, so to speak; tomorrow we will think about the tinsel.

***Draping the Despicable***

**STUDY** Consider the following in the light of the Old Testament prophesies that you have read.

- From what has the Branch sprung?
- What does the stump represent in the prophets' picture?
- How and why has the original tree become a stump?

- To what or whom does the branch or shoot refer?

#### USING THE INSIGNIFICANT

**READ** When Jeremiah personifies this Branch— “*he* will do what is just and right in the land”— we recognize the promise of the coming Messiah. But it is important to see what the words can also signify for us.

God is always doing this sort of thing: God uses the lowly things of this world—and the things that are not (significant) to nullify the things that are, as the apostle Paul says (1 Corinthians 1:28). To display his care for the world’s despised, God uses the insignificant things of this world to do amazing things for heaven’s purposes.

**DISCUSS** Consider the insignificant things in this prophecy that God has used to accomplish his purpose.

- In what ways, at the time Jeremiah wrote, was the nation of Israel insignificant?
- In what ways was Israel insignificant at the time of Jesus’ birth?
- What features of Jesus’ birth and life and death were considered insignificant or despised?

**DISCUSS** How does the fact that God uses insignificant things display his care for the world’s despised?

**DISCUSS** In the large scheme of things, in what ways are you insignificant? How does God’s promise to the stump of David’s line encourage you that God is using and will use you?

**DISCUSS** If God chooses to use you in your insignificance, how does this show his care for you?

#### USING THE FAILURES

**STUDY** The prophets depicting Israel use an image of a tree *stump*, not an image of a small tree. How does the stump image show that the nation was not merely insignificant, but also a failure?

**STUDY** There were also some aspects of Jesus' life that were considered shameful. What were some of these? Consider, for example that the word *branch* is actually the root word behind the name of Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up. God saw to it that the prophesied Righteous Branch grew up in "branch town"! What was the general opinion of Nazareth, expressed by Nathanael in John 1:45-46?

**READ** Some time ago I traveled to speak at a conference for a well-known church in the evangelical world. I stayed in the home of the pastor—by all accounts a very devoted man. During one afternoon as I was preparing my message for that evening's meeting, I could not help hearing the sounds of the pastor's children playing outside. I guess you could call it playing. One child, the nine-year-old son, dominated the rest of the children with cruelty, profanity, and intimidation. It was hard to listen to and even harder to study through, so after a while I walked out of the study to take a break.

My room opened at the bottom of a stairway. As I stood at the door, a movement caught my eye. I looked up and saw the mother of the boy watching him out the window at the top of the stairs. She was almost a silhouette against the window, which made her obvious pain a more poignant picture. With her shoulders drooped and head down, she flinched at the latest profanity shouted by her son. Then she turned toward me, and I realized she was crying. She knew that I must have heard her son, and through her tears she said, "I don't know what to do with him. My husband doesn't know either; all we know is that we have failed. He's only nine years old, and we have already failed."

I have a friend who manages a retail franchise at a local shopping mall. A year ago the shopping center had extensive renovation, and the crowds flocked to his store. Though he was new in the business, my friend's store was a huge success, and he set company sales records. But after the Christmas crowds diminished, local gangs moved in. Six months ago a murder at the mall received extensive news coverage. Area shoppers, fearful of more gang violence, came in increasingly fewer numbers. Store operators at the mall speculated that another murder would ruin all their businesses. Recently there was another murder. The shoppers have not returned. Thus in one year my friend has gone from having phenomenal success to being a business failure.

Knowing that God does not abandon us in failure does not necessarily make the problems melt away, but it does keep us from measuring our potential by our pasts. God can always use failures for his purposes. Nothing is more true of him. We may be tempted to give up on our selves, but as long as the God of Israel lives, so do his purposes. If he had no purpose for us, then he would have no reason to continue our lives, let alone make us aware of his Word, and give us relationships with others whom we can help know him and his blessings. Simply having life today assures us that God is preparing us for his purposes tomorrow.

Even if past failures cannot be addressed, knowing that God has not limited our futures by our pasts enables us to move on from negative experiences with greater wisdom for positive contributions to the people and purposes God will yet put in our lives. Our God uses earth's failures for heaven's purposes.

**DISCUSS** If you had to comfort the parents who failed in raising the nine-year-old, or the young man whose business went bankrupt, how might you use the image of the shoot from the stump? **JOURNAL** Draw a sketch of a stump and a shoot, large enough to write on both. On the stump, list some of the abject failures of your life. On the shoot, write: “My God delights to use my failures for heaven’s purposes!” As you prayerfully appropriate this message of the atonement, try to list, on the shoot, one or two things that you believe that God might intend to use you to do.

### ***Loving the Unfaithful***

#### **USING THE FAITHLESS**

**READ** God underscores his willingness to use those who may even be despicable to themselves by showing that he can use those whose shame is their own fault. The promised care for the people of Israel is all the more remarkable when you realize that their plight is a result of their own sin.

**STUDY** Scan Chapter 2 of Jeremiah. Why was the nation of Israel being cut down? Were the failures their own doing, or were they being victimized because of someone else’s failure?

**DISCUSS** Is it more difficult to believe that God will use you in spite of failures of your own making than if the failures are caused by someone or something else? Why?

**DISCUSS** How does the fact that God does bring the Righteous Branch from the stump of a tree that “felled itself” display more gloriously the splendor of God’s grace?

**JOURNAL** List a failure or two of your own doing that have prompted you to think that God won’t use you for his purposes. If you like, again list these on a sketch of a stump. Express in your own words, on the shoot, the hope that the prophecy gives you. Prayerfully ask God to help you to trust that his grace is far greater than your sin.

#### **USING THE PUNISHED**

**READ** Perhaps even more surprising about God’s unfailing love is the fact that he promises it to his people even though they are expecting punishment. Jeremiah rightly weeps for the discipline that will come in the form of the enemies who will chop Israel down. Yet despite the devastation

he sees, he prophesies God's continuing love and the promise of future restoration with the repentance they both stimulate.

Jeremiah's words contain the vital scriptural truth that *the presence of divine discipline is never an indication of the absence of divine love*. Even if our failure is the result of our sin, and even if we interpret our situation to be a revelation of God's wrath, we should never assume that God's love departs from his people.

**JOURNAL** Have you ever experienced both divine discipline and divine love? Or have you always interpreted God's discipline as his washing his hands of you? How does it encourage you to see that God used the very people he punished to accomplish his grand purpose?

**READ** One of my great disappointments in the pastorate was to see the slow ruin of a young woman as she moved through her adolescence. I'll call her Joan. She was at one time one of the glories of our church. She was radiant, bright, fun to be around—in love with the Lord. And, then, slowly at first, something seemed to change about her. A certain slyness crept into her eyes. Her bright expressiveness colored with a dark evasiveness. Her warm, endearing smile seemed to solidify into a studied stoniness and hardness of expression.

Eventually the evasiveness became lies. The slyness became rebellion. Broken curfews turned into Saturday night drunks. Stony silence turned into angry yelling. A close family seemed to go to war with itself with an endless round of arguments, tears, and slammed doors.

After a four-year nightmare of drunkenness, drugs, and increasingly prolonged absences, this prodigal daughter returned to her parents' home one night with the announcement that she was expecting a child and needed their help. The help she had spurned she now begged for. They took her in knowing that she probably planned to take advantage of them again. In many ways she did. She considered her pregnancy a punishment of God—a biologically imposed grounding—and in many ways she lashed back at God by the demands she made on her parents.

Still the change of lifestyle required by her pregnancy slowed the young woman down just enough for those who loved her to remind her of the God she had once loved and who still loved her. She had trouble accepting those words. She considered the sins she committed too great and the infant she carried too clear an indication of God's displeasure to spell anything but rejection.

Her parents believed that for them to deny the possibility that God was disciplining their daughter was not in her best interests. They affirmed that God does allow us to experience the consequences of our sin and that he turns us from paths of disobedience that will cause us or others harm. At the same time the parents affirmed as clearly what the Bible says unmistakably: "The Lord disciplines those he loves." (Hebrews 12:6) God is forever seeking to protect from greater danger. He is always drawing his own back to himself. The presence of discipline does not indicate the absence of divine love. Even when God judges rebellion, his love pervades his every action, and his blessed intent covers us in the darkness of our sin.

Eventually, by God's grace, the young woman understood God's care and acknowledged it. Later when she brought her child for baptism, I am sure some saw the young mother's child as a symbol of shame, perhaps even a symbol of punishment. But not I, and not her family, and not she. As the waters of the sacrament trickled down that infant's little head, we saw in the streams of water the tinsel of divine love covering shame and sin. The message to all: "God

covers even the unfaithful with unfailing love.” He makes beautiful what the world has made ugly, because he loves to decorate.

**DISCUSS** Think about the word, “extravagance.” How does describing God’s atonement and his character as *extravagant* offer surprising insight into his nature and ways? How does it prompt you to worship him?

### ***Cool Down***

**TAKE ACTION** Together decorate your own homely tree with indicators of God’s extravagance.

- Find such a tree close by.
- Think up some sort of decoration on which you can write, and which you can hang on the tree. If you have no more creative and colorful options, you can cut ornaments out of paper, or make streamers out of tissue.
- Each person write on an ornament or streamer a sentence beginning something like this: “God has decorated my insignificance (or failure, faithlessness, or punishment) by \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Together decorate your tree.
- Praise God together in prayer for his extravagant decoration of your lives.

If these resources are unavailable to you, improvise your own concrete way to display God’s extravagance in your lives.

## DAY 10: THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE ATONEMENT, PART 2

*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming  
from tender stem hath sprung...  
This flow'r, whose fragrance tender  
with sweetness fills the air,  
dispels with glorious splendor  
the darkness everywhere.  
True man, yet every God;  
from sin and death he saves us  
and lightens every load.  
—From a German Hymn*

### *Warm Up*

**READ** If your group was able yesterday to find and decorate a homely tree with ornaments describing God's extravagant decoration, or improvise your own concrete display, you have a tangible illustration of God's nature: God loves to decorate the homely and despised. We also used the prophet Jeremiah's own picture of the stump from which springs a shoot to describe how in our own lives God shows his extravagant love for his insignificant, despised, failing, faithless, and even divinely disciplined people by developing his purposes through us.

But how can God act this way? How can he be loving to those who possess nothing that could make them respectable to before him? By every account we fall far short of God's own standards of holiness, and he would compromise his own standards and character were he to waive our offenses.

Anyone who has trusted Christ for his own salvation will quickly recognize that it is because of the Atonement that God, without personal compromise, lavishes his love on us. Yesterday we focused on the branch coming up from the prophet's stump that represented the failings of God's people. Today we focus on the sad tree's decoration - the tinsel in the story: the divine adornment of grace. When we examine the ornament of God's grace, we also see the divine substitution that makes this extravagant love possible.

**DISCUSS** Take another look at your group's decorated tree. What is the promise of the prophet's stump picture that we discussed yesterday? Whom does God promise to use to work his divine purposes?

### *Work Out*

#### *Making the Shameful Shine*

**HIS NAME**

**STUDY** Reread Jeremiah 33:14-16. In the last sentence of this passage, what does God give, and to what does he give it?

**STUDY** Compare this to Jeremiah 23:5-6. Here we see the name, “The LORD our Righteousness,” again. In what respect do the two passages differ from each other? Who has given his own name, “The LORD our Righteousness,” to Israel?

**READ** Some friends of mine recently got a new puppy. They gave their dog the name Josephine Chateaubolier Sofrier St. Vincent. By the name you know that this is a special puppy. Its breed is officially listed as Heinz 57—it’s a mix—a mutt. Our friends gave their dog this wonderful name to make a statement of how special it is to them regardless of what others may think of its heritage.

Due to weaknesses, failures, or sin in our pasts, we may not feel very significant to God, but he wants us to recognize how special we are to him. So he gives us a special name. God not only plans to save his people, but Jeremiah announces that he will call the despised and sinful nation by his own name. These people are such a mix of sinful failure, but they remain special to God, and to make sure they know that, he gives them his own glorious name.

**DISCUSS** Josephine’s grand name glorified her rather plain heredity. Can you think of similar examples from your own experience?

**DISCUSS** Consider the act of adoption, in which a family bestows its name on someone to whom it does not naturally belong. In what ways can giving a name bring special blessings to its recipient? (If you have seen or read it, think, for example, of the story of Ben Hur, who, though formerly despised, is adopted by the Roman official whose life he has saved.)

**DISCUSS** We are called “*Christ-ians*”—believers are called by Jesus Christ’s name. In the passage in Jeremiah, God’s people (including us) receive Jesus’ Old Testament name, The LORD (is) our righteousness. How does the fact that you have received his name remind you of how special you are to God?

**JOURNAL** Write your own name in your journal. Add to it “The LORD is my Righteousness.” Picture yourself celebrating your Father’s bestowing his name on you. (If you have read the story of Ben Hur or seen the movie, picture something like the slave’s celebration of his adoption by the

high Roman official.) Remember your undeserving ways and express your gratitude to the Lord for the glorious blessing he gives you.

## HIS NATURE

**READ** God gives his people more than his name to make them shine with his glory. He gives them what the name means. The Branch that is to come, the Messiah, is called “The Lord is Our Righteousness.” Christ will provide the righteousness this sinful people could not provide for themselves in two ways—by his obedience and by his sacrifice.

**STUDY** In Jeremiah 33:15, how does Jeremiah describe the behavior of the righteous Branch?

**READ** The Bible teaches that in order to pass to his people a righteousness that they had not lived, the Messiah would have to live in a way that they had not. Each obligation they did not meet, the Lord would have to meet by his own *active obedience* in order to provide the kind of righteousness that God requires. Not only does God substitute Jesus’ death for our death, he also substitutes Jesus’ lived righteousness for our unrighteousness.

**STUDY** Read Matthew 3:15. What is Jesus looking to accomplish while he is on earth?

**STUDY** Read 1 Peter 2:21-23. In describing Christ’s life, Peter relates the perfection of the Savior’s service in each dimension of human obligation.

- How did Jesus respond to earthly authorities?
- How did Jesus respond to suffering, false accusation and profound injustice?
- In the midst of this awful situation, how did Jesus respond to God?

**JOURNAL** Think over your own responses to difficulties and injustice and suffering. List a few instances that come to mind. With your colored pen, write across your list Peter’s descriptions of Jesus. Is it a comfort to know that God substitutes Jesus’ righteous obedience for your own behavior? Express your gratitude to Jesus for his obedience, and to God for his substitution.

**READ** To make his supply complete, the Lord had to make provision for our failures as well as fulfill our obligations. Simply because Jesus met the obligations we owe does not negate the consequences of our sins. Whether by willful transgression or personal weakness, we all stand before God guilty of failure to live as he requires. A holy God cannot ignore these faults. Since he could not retain his own holiness by approving of, or uniting with, what is sinful, unloving, or

unholy, God must penalize us who cannot meet our human and divine obligations. That penalty is separation from God.

**STUDY** Consult Genesis 2:17 and 3:19. What human event results from and more than anything else epitomizes our separation from God?

**STUDY** If this is so, how does God use Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin? Consider the following verses. In each passage, underline or copy the words that indicate the *substitution* that God makes. Theologians have referred to Christ's suffering death as his *passive obedience*.

- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Isaiah 53:10
- I Corinthians 15:3
- Romans 3:25-26

**READ** Jesus Christ obeyed the Father passively and actively. Christ obeyed passively by yielding to suffering out of submission to the will of his Father. He obeyed actively by meeting the standards of the law. How do these two combine to fulfill the righteousness we could not achieve and to satisfy the penalty that we could not pay?

**JOURNAL** Take a moment to visualize or draw a picture of your sins as so many entries in red on a page in an account book. The total debt at the bottom of the page is an untouchable and dooming amount. Across the page, now draw in colored pen an outline of a cross, and write underneath it, "PAID IN FULL." Prayerfully and thankfully meditate on what Christ has done for you.

*My sin—Oh! the bliss of this glorious thought!—  
My sin—not in part, but the whole—  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more!  
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!  
—H.G. Spafford*

**READ** Thus the result of Christ's obedience and suffering in our behalf is that his righteousness is passed to his people. We can have his name because he grants us his nature. He substitutes his righteousness for our sin and cancels our guilt by his suffering. In these ways the Lord *is* our righteousness. His name portrays both what he has done and what we now are.

**STUDY** Read 1 Corinthians 1:30. List the things that Jesus has become *for us*.

### **HIS GLORY**

When God gives us his name and nature, he actually shares Christ's glory with us. From God's perspective we are robed in the righteousness of Christ. We cover our Christmas trees with tinsel that is supposed to look like silver, but it's really just tinfoil or shiny plastic. The tinsel is not really what it is supposed to represent.

But when God represents us to the world by calling us by the name of his Son, he actually makes us what he calls us. He gives us the nature of his own Son and, thereby, makes us his own sons and daughters. The glory he puts on us is not just a tinfoil image. It's the real thing.

Recognizing that God truly allows us to bear the name and the nature of his own Son can change the way we look at ourselves. And it can change the way we look at others.

**DISCUSS** How can knowing that we bear Christ's name, his nature and his glory change the way that we look at ourselves?

**DISCUSS** How can knowing that another believer bears Christ's name, nature and glory change the way we look at him or her?

**DISCUSS** How can knowing what God has done for us shape the way we think of unbelievers?

**READ** I remember some months ago sitting in a worship service and listening to a young woman sing. Hers is one of the most beautiful voices I have ever heard. People listen to her and are moved to tears by the splendor of her music. But I have heard her weep at other times as we have talked about her struggles with sin. In the past she has been unfaithful to her husband, and as a result she has felt terrible guilt. To escape her guilt she sometimes drinks too much. When she drinks too much, she loses control. And when she loses control, her own children too often reap the consequences. Then with the guilt of that sin on her conscience, the cycle repeats itself again and again.

Her weaknesses have made her family a modern horror story, and yet there she sang of the wonderful grace of Jesus. I confess that there was a piece of me that considered this an offensive hypocrisy—a bitter irony that one so flawed could sing so flawlessly. Then I realized that once again I was looking at the tinsel that God draped on a twisted tendril of humanity. Her voice, like the tinsel, was the Lord's banner for all the world to see. By it he said, "I give the despicable my name and my nature. No one is holy enough for me, so I have to gift my people

with my holiness. I make the ugly beautiful. I make the inglorious glorious. I make that which is dark with shame shine like gold.”

**JOURNAL** How would you have responded if you were listening to this woman sing? Are there people in your life whom you are condemning as hypocrites, when you could be seeing them as despised twigs adorned with God’s tinsel? Confess this to the Lord, and ask his help in reshaping your thinking.

**READ** Because God does not reject what is despicable but desires to make it special, useful, and glorious to himself, we who have been unfaithful, weak, and failing can turn to him again. Knowing that he loves to make the forlorn glorious gives us the courage to take our sins to him in open confession and humble repentance. His forgiving heart urges us to come to him again to ask for fresh cleansing, new power over sin, and new usefulness. He who used stable straw for the King’s bed can again use a sinner’s heart for the King’s throne.

### *Cool Down*

When my son Jordan was seven, he became enamored with Christmas poinsettias. Something about the brilliant splash of red in the dead of winter fascinated him. He wanted a poinsettia so badly that we got him his own. Driving home with it, Jordan was the picture of a child in entranced contentment. He nestled the little plant into his lap to examine every detail. He pressed his face close to smell its center and traced the edge of each leaf with a finger. He even petted the plant as though it were a puppy. And then our car came to an intersection requiring a fast brake, and the “puppy” poinsettia fell forward out of his lap and spilled into a pool of crimson petals on the floor of the car.

Jordan looked up with horror and grief and guilt on his face. To know my Jordan is to know that he said it all with the motion of his hands. Held up in exasperation and pain they said, “Oh no, what have I done? I should have held it tighter; I should have prepared; I should have protected it more. I should have done better.”

When his mother saw the gestures of hurt and shame, instinctively she reached out her hand to touch Jordan. In her touch she draped those hands and her son with her love. He had been wrong to be so careless. But his expression of shame and hurt was not greater than that of hers who hurt for him. To show her care, she brushed away the dirt that now covered him with her own hands, righted the crimson petals, and put the plant into his hands again.

Our God’s care holds similar tenderness. He shows it not by offering us a plant but by offering us the promise of an infant, the Branch that would shoot up from the stump of Jesse. Our tendency at Christmastime is imaginatively to hold this manger babe as we would a little puppy—to coo over him and pat his head. But our errors brought him here, and our faults would spill his blood. What horror! On our hands is the guilt of what we have done.

Because of us crimson droplets would fall in a rain of grace to pool on the earth beneath a cross. They fell not from a flower’s hurt but from a Savior’s wounds—wounds that we deserved. When we see what we have done, our hands go up to blind us to the horror of our own actions and to hide us from the shame of our own sin. But when our heavenly Father sees the

expression of our pain, his automatic gesture is to reach out to touch us with his love. The dirt on us does not distract him. He brushes it away with the handiwork of his Son. And with the body and blood of that same Son, he drapes us with his purpose, covers us with this love, and makes us shine with his glory.

As tinsel can decorate even a twig with beauty, our heavenly Father covers our shame with his splendor. Despite our past carelessness and failing, our God loves us so much that He puts his precious Son into our hearts to receive and to cherish. Our faults and failures may make it seem improbable, even impossible, that he would deal so beautifully with us. But we must remember the message that God's Spirit blows throughout his Word: Ours is the God who loves to decorate. He sent his Son for sinners, and he still puts tinsel on twigs—such as you and I.

## DAY 11: THE SWEETNESS OF GRACE, PART 1

*But by the grace of God I am what I am,  
and his grace to me was not without effect.  
No, I worked harder than all of them—  
yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.  
—1 Corinthians 15:10*

### *Warm Up*

**DISCUSS** What is your least favorite task? What is your most favorite one?

**READ** Have you ever used a carpenter’s plane? When as a kid I learned a little bit of woodworking from my dad, nothing pleased me more than using a plane. It seemed almost like magic to take a crooked, rough piece of lumber and, by waving this tool back and forth over it, take away its defects. Curly ribbons of paper-thin wood would rise almost effortlessly from the blade, and before my eyes the board would transform, becoming straight and smooth as silk. It was great fun. So when a carpenter came to my office recently to install a door, I could not help reminiscing a bit as he took out his plane.

When he began making those curly ribbons of wood, I said, “Isn’t that the funniest thing in the world?”

He looked at me like I was nuts. “Not when you do it every day for twenty years,” he said gruffly. “It’s been a long time since I considered this fun.”

Of course, then I felt foolish for asking. I also felt sorry for the carpenter who apparently took so little joy in his work. His lack of enthusiasm showed. When he left that day and I tried out my new door, it stuck. He had not planed the door properly. The task that he took so little joy in, he did not do well. This was no surprise, of course, because whenever our hearts are not in our duties, the work suffers.

All Christians have a job. We are to participate in the construction of a kingdom—God’s kingdom. This kingdom under construction requires much of us.

In the chapter containing the Scripture passage we study today, the apostle Paul details the job all Christians have. Paul knows, however, that we will not be able to perform our tasks well if we take no joy in them. So before he tells us what to do, he provides these words of encouragement to help make sure our hearts stay in our work.

**JOURNAL** List some of your own kingdom tasks. Remember that kingdom work is not restricted to “religious” tasks, but includes ordinary work as well.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

**JOURNAL** Assess your own level of joy in your kingdom tasks. After each of your entries in the previous question, write a number, 1 to 5, where 5 represents sheer delight and 1 represents no delight whatsoever.

**DISCUSS** What sorts of things, good or bad, commonly motivate believers in kingdom work?

**READ** There is so much to be done for the kingdom, but for you, perhaps duty has become drudgery, God distant, and your love cold. Do you know the loss of which I speak? Do you know what it means for your worship to seem terribly important but painfully dull? Can you sympathize with those learning more and more about God but caring less and less? You may still be trying to serve God, but you find yourself doing so increasingly with bowed neck, gritted teeth, and weary resolve.

Longtime lives of faith do not have to be this way. You can love the Lord and his purposes with a burning zeal again. God's work can excite you again. A longtime Christian servant, the apostle Paul, tell you how to rekindle your *desire* and ability to serve in the building of God's kingdom.

### ***Work Out***

### ***Make Mercy Your Motivation***

#### **THE EXHORTATION OF MERCY**

**STUDY** Read Romans 12:1-2. In verse 1, what does Paul urge us to do? For what reason or motivation are we to do it?

**STUDY** Scan the rest of Chapter 12 and Chapter 13. What are some of the things that Paul lists among opportunities for body-presenting, life-sacrificing, kingdom work?

**READ** God gives us so much to do that we might lose heart. Paul must have known the likelihood of our discouragement, so he precedes all these work assignments with this

exhilarating exhortation: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy” to serve him (verse 1). Paul wants to make sure our hearts are in our work, so he encourages us with God’s love rather than driving us with any other motivation.

**DISCUSS** Consider by contrast how Paul might have motivated us:

- “I urge you by the guilt you will assume if you are negligent.”
- “I urge you by the rejection you will face if you fail.”
- “I urge you by the love you will lose if you fall short.”
  
- How do these motivations—guilt, threat of rejection or loss of love—affect performance of a task?
  
- How would motivation by mercy, grace or love affect performance of a task?
  
- Which sort of motivation produces long-term joyful service?

#### **THE ABUNDANCE OF MERCY**

**READ** Even the word *mercy* is special. The translators of the King James Version of the Bible rendered the word in the plural: “I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the *mercies* of God...”. The contemporary translations that render the word as a singular noun actually add a richness to our understanding. The word for “mercy” communicates a truth that Paul presents in the preceding chapter (11:27). In his grace God made a covenant to take away sins. Once it applied to the Jews only. Now it applies to all who claim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s mercy now applies to many. The mercy has multiplied (11:30-32). One word can hardly contain so much love. This rich, overflowing, and abundant grace is a mercy of mercies.

**READ** It’s so easy to forget the magnitude of this mercy. We become so familiar with the words that we forget their import. We become so busy in our work that we don’t have time to remember his work. And we are quick to distort the gospel by downplaying God’s role and magnifying our own.

The first step to being motivated by mercy is to keep it “in view.” (Romans 12:1) The abundance of mercy should overwhelm us. We should delight to serve him who provides so much for us. But we struggle to keep his mercy in view.

So God graciously gives us opportunity after opportunity in our lives to see the wonder of his love—if we will but open our eyes.

I saw that mercy afresh during one of the most difficult weeks that my wife, Kathy, and I have ever faced. We heard a word we had dreaded applied to one of our children. That word was *asthma*.

Our son coughed a little during a Saturday night. At church the next day he started running a fever, and as his temperature went up, he started having trouble breathing. We left the service early, and by nightfall he was struggling to draw each breath.

No doctor had officially labeled the problem yet, but I knew what was happening. I grew up with asthma. I knew all about the days missed from school, the constant medication, the innumerable trips to the doctor. I have known the bitter disappointment of preparing for months for a sports event only to experience a sudden attack that wiped strength, breath, and opportunity from me.

I thought of all of this as I tried to help my son get to sleep that night. I rubbed between his shoulders that were hunched in the way that asthmatics naturally roll their shoulders to take pressure off their lungs. I listened to him inhale in wheezing misery and exhale through lips pursed as his body instinctively tried to create back pressure to expand bronchial tubes another micro-millimeter. Still the difficulty he was having was no greater than the pain I felt. I had already experienced each of these asthma reactions a thousand times, and my heart lamented, “Oh, my child, how I wish I could spare you what I went through.”

Then I thought of the mercy. I remembered another who went through such misery that it took his breath away. I thought of other shoulders rolled in suffering against the wood of a cross. I recalled the one whose weight hung on nails so cruel that each breath was torture. He willingly took the agony my sins deserved, all so his lips pursed with pain could express, “Oh, my child, now I will spare you what I go through.”

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1) Such mercy eclipses all other motivations for our service. His mercy should so fill our vision that gratitude floods our hearts with the longing to do his will. If thankfulness does not move us, then we do not truly understand who our God is and what he has done in our behalf. Without gratitude for Christ’s sacrificial love, our duty will become nothing more than drudgery and our God nothing more than a dissatisfied boss. This is why Paul tells us at the outset to serve “in view of God’s mercy.”

**DISCUSS** What are some experiences through which God has reminded you of his mercy? Share some of these.

**JOURNAL** Quietly reflect on God’s demonstration of mercy in Jesus Christ. Picture what he has saved you *from*, and what he has saved you *to*. Write a prayer expressing this and your gratitude for what he has done.

### **THE CHALLENGE OF MERCY**

**READ** Despite God’s overwhelming love, mercy can quickly fade from view. Other motivations that make our service to God distasteful and destructive all too easily preoccupy us. We can begin to focus on reasons to serve God that spoil our view of the cross almost without our ever really intending it.

**DISCUSS** How does motivation by guilt, threat of rejection or love loss obscure the gospel of God's mercy?

**DISCUSS** How does such a distortion of the gospel affect our own and others' spiritual health?

**READ** I had been a pastor for about five years before I began really to struggle with the recognition that so many Christians, including those in the church I served, seemed so far from the Lord because of mercy deprivation.

Why were my people so spiritually empty? Both churches I have pastored are well over 100 years old. Many families have been members for generations. Nothing in their outward actions signaled problems. Almost everyone knew very well how Christians should act. They faithfully observed a code of community conduct: they were faithful to their spouses, they did not smoke or drink to excess, nor cuss in polite company. All of them took their Bibles to church, and many could put me to shame with their Bible knowledge.

The matters I struggled with were their attitudes. I could not understand how people who were so knowledgeable about God could be so bitter, so guilt-ridden, so often depressed, so cold to each other, and so intolerant of the faults of newer Christians. These longtime church people said they were followers of Jesus (and many of their outward actions would give their professions some credence), yet love, joy, peace, patience and long-suffering seemed so far from so many.

I used to get so angry at those people for their lack of heart response to the Word they said they loved. Then I began to realize the problem was not so much them as it was me—and others like me.

I had been motivating them by guilt rather than by mercy. There is nothing more *effective* than guilt to get people to obey the standards of God and nothing less *efficacious* in sanctifying them to God. Make people feel bad enough, fearful enough, guilty enough, and you can get them to change (or else they will leave your church, and then you will not have to worry about them). Yet nothing is less biblical than motivating believers by the guilt that makes God's love conditional upon human performance.

Early in my ministry I did not recognize how damaging such guilt is as a primary means for motivating Christian obedience. I used lots of guilt as a pastor. And I saw people's behaviors change—for a while. Still so often I found that these people did not mature. They did not grow in faith nor seem more spiritually whole even though their outward actions may have changed.

It took me a few years (we preachers can be notoriously dense), but finally I figured out what was happening. I was telling people that the way to get rid of their guilt before God and assure his love was by changing their behaviors. But what did this imply? If people expect behavior change to get rid of their guilt, whom are they trusting to take their guilt away? Themselves!

I was forcing people to ask, "What action of mine will make me right with God?" No wonder their faith did not mature. Their faith was in what they could do to fix their own situations. I was encouraging people to look to themselves rather than to the cross as the place to

erase guilt, driving a wedge of human works between them and God. The people who listened to me, though they may have changed some aspect of their lives to get my approval and secure God's affection, were actually further away from God spiritually than when I began to "minister" to them. I had let the mercy get out of view.

**DISCUSS** What ideas, attitudes, or actions characterize "mercy-deprived" persons?

**JOURNAL** Do you see these attitudes, ideas and actions in your own life? Consider your main sources of spiritual growth, including parents and churches and books and friends. Has God's mercy been kept in view by those who teach you?

**JOURNAL** Have you perhaps received the message of grace, but have yourself distorted it as you apply it to yourself? Do you find it difficult to believe God's grace, even though you hear it again and again?

**JOURNAL** Think now of those whom God has entrusted to you to motivate for kingdom ministry. Have you been able to keep God's mercy in view?

**DISCUSS** It is often difficult to identify a distorted way of thinking. It can be even more difficult to replace it with a right way of thinking. Think of some practical ways we might interact with others, or some concrete things we might say that would motivate people by mercy rather than guilt.

#### **THE GOD OF MERCY**

**READ** What a cruel God I had painted for my congregation. What grace I denied those in our church by teaching them that God's love was dependent on their goodness. I was the one who had veiled the mercy.

Family relations expert Karen Sanheim tells of a teenage daughter whose mother gave her a new hair drier. But even as she presented the gift, she said, "Your father and I give up so much so that you will have things like this to enjoy." The girl later said that at that moment she wanted to take the new hair drier and throw it out the window. She knew that every time she dried her hair, she would have to face the guilt of depriving her parents of something. Of course, she did not throw out the hair drier. That would only hurt her mother and lead to another round of guilt. Instead, the daughter cut off her hair. She did what she had to do to keep from feeling guilty. She punished herself.

Many Christians respond this same way. They punish themselves to get rid of their guilt. They will substitute the penance of depression and self-hate for confession. They think that making themselves feel bad enough and carrying a burden of guilt long enough will surely make them right with God.

But who really wants us pressed down and paralyzed by a burden of sin? Satan. He is our accuser (Revelation 12:10). Nothing pleases him more than for Christians to beat themselves down into idle depression or unproductive despair. The Bible does not say that our guilty feelings or compensating recriminations will make us right with God. God makes us right with God. He does not want us bowed down in despair. He is the lifter of our heads (Psalm 3:3).

No one can serve a God who only loves us when we are good. If God's love is conditional, if he is only waiting to get us when we step out of line, if avoidance of his rejection or relief of our guilt is our reason for serving him; then we may obey him for a time, but we will not like him very much. Unfortunately, a failure to love God only makes us feel more guilty and forces us into a downward spiral of greater despair and more futile resolve to make things right with him. When we sin, we decide to let the guilt consume us more. We wallow in our guilt to punish ourselves with it. We intensify our disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and church attendance so that God will forgive us.

Despite this well-intended penance, we find we love this never-satisfied God less and less, even as we try to please him more and more. Eventually it all becomes meaningless. We become hard, cynical, judgmental, bitter, or despairing because we have made God what he could never be, i.e., a heavenly ogre intent on extracting his pound of flesh from whomever crosses him.

If we try to compensate for the guilt that only Christ can remove, then we will lose the capacity to love him and to serve him rightly. God does not want us to punish ourselves to erase our guilt. He punished his Son to cancel our guilt. God will not build his kingdom on our pain because he is building it on his mercy.

**DISCUSS** Fill in the blanks:

\_\_\_\_\_ cannot make me right with God.  
(a person)

\_\_\_\_\_ cannot make me right with God.  
(an action, or actions)

\_\_\_\_\_ will make me right with God.  
(a person)

\_\_\_\_\_ will make me right with God.  
(an action)

**DISCUSS** List some of the consequences of believing that God loves me only when I am good.

**DISCUSS** How does what we think of God affect our enthusiasm for kingdom service? Complete these sentences:

- If God’s love for me depends on my performance, then I feel...
- If God’s love for me depends on Christ’s work, then I feel...

### **THE GRATITUDE OF MERCY**

**READ** Mercy stimulates the gratitude that is the only enduring motivation for effective Christian service. Gratitude recognizes the love that never fades and restores confidence in our relationship with God. Here is the only true source of Christian power. How can you build if you are paralyzed with dread, beaten down with remorse, burdened by guilt, made miserable and sad? Such a condition cannot be what God intends. God intends for you to take all your sin and guilt, bring it to the foot of the cross, and lay it down. Now stand up. Lift your head. Believe that you are free of your guilt and trust that you can now do what he asks of you with joy because God’s grace has released you from your burden. Lasting service comes when we serve God *from* acceptance, not *for* acceptance.

**DISCUSS** Does guilt have any role among God’s kingdom-builders? Consider this statement: “Guilt must drive us to the cross, but grace must lead us from it.” See also 2 Corinthians 7:8-11.

**STUDY** Read 2 Corinthians 5:14. What is it that compels us to do God’s will? Read verse 15. Does his love motivate us by making us fear we might lose his love, or does his love motivate us by assuring us that we already and always have his love?

**DISCUSS** Discuss this claim: “Loving gratitude is the only true source of Christian power.” If this is true, how important is it that we and others understand and keep in view the mercy of God?

**JOURNAL** Consult your list of kingdom services at the beginning of this study, and the “joy rating” you assigned to each one. Using the chart below, list those tasks and their ratings again, in the first and third columns. For each task, in the second column below, describe what has been your primary motivation to perform it. Then try to imagine what it would be like to perform this task “in view of God’s mercy.” Does this mercy motivation cause you to revise your joy rating? List any fresh ratings in the fourth column below.

TASK	MOTIVATION	JOY RATING #1	JOY RATING #2
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

**JOURNAL** What concrete steps do you plan to take to maintain a mercy motivation? Thank God for his great mercy. Ask him to reshape your attitude.

### *Cool Down*

**READ** Paul calls us all to the building of God’s kingdom. But before we lift the smoothing plane of the gospel or hammer the first spiritual nail, he makes us pause to ask ourselves this question: “Why do you do what you do?” Our fallen minds and twisted consciences might supply a variety of answers to that question—guilt, fear, pride, or personal gain. So lest we damage the kingdom or ourselves with ill-conceived notions, Paul supplies our motivation. He says to build “in view of God’s mercy.” If we chiefly serve him so that we will not feel bad, guilt motivates us. If we serve him principally so that we will gain his affection or avoid his punishment, self-interest motivates us. Mercy should motivate all we do, for then the grace of God motivates us.

**DISCUSS** Share with the group one task that you know that you do joyfully in view of God’s mercy or that you would like most of all to carry out in response to God’s mercy. Pray for each other in this kingdom service.

## DAY 12: THE SWEETNESS OF GRACE, PART 2

*His divine power has given us  
everything we need for life and godliness  
through our knowledge of him  
who called us by his own glory and goodness.  
—2 Peter 1:3*

### *Warm Up*

**READ** Missionary leader Paul Kooistra tells of a study a state Department of Education once conducted to determine why remedial studies programs throughout the state were failing. The programs were supposed to supply extra help for students who were struggling academically in order to bring them up to the performance levels of their peers. Unfortunately, whenever children entered the program, they were stigmatized in their schools and in their own minds as problem students. Because they were put in a program for slow students, the children labeled themselves as failures. Children simply gave up once the school assigned them to the special classes. The program that was intended to promote their learning instead became an academic whirlpool. No student who entered the remedial studies ever got out of the program—with one exception. Her name was Edy.

Edy was a track star, and everyone called her “Speedy Edy.” Everything about her was fast except her academic progress. She was put in the program for slow learners, but somehow she broke free of its whirlpool effects. When Edy’s scores indicated she was back on peer level academically, the state officials wanted to know what was different about the instruction that made her succeed in the remedial program when so many others failed.

The researchers talked to Edy’s teacher to get details.

“What did you do in class with Edy that was different from what you did with the other children?”

“Nothing,” the teacher replied.

The researchers pressed, “Did you use different books or vary the assigned curriculum?”

“No,” said the teacher. “We all used the same materials.”

“You must have done something different with Edy,” said the researchers. “Think what was different about the way you interacted with her.”

The teacher thought, and then almost as a question offered the answer. “Do you know that Edy runs track?”

“Yes,” said the researchers. “We’ve heard all about Speedy Edy.”

“Well,” said the teacher, “when Edy runs, I go to her meets and cheer for her.”

**DISCUSS** What helped Edy succeed at the remedial program when no one else had?

**DISCUSS** Tell the group about someone who has always rooted for you, perhaps even when no one else was rooting. Has this person’s support ever empowered you to do something you might not otherwise have done?

## **Work Out**

### **Make Mercy Your Power**

**TAKE ACTION** Out loud together, reread Romans 12:1.

**READ** In yesterday's study of Romans 12:1, we saw that mercy and mercy alone motivates joy in the Lord and kingdom service. Mercy affects our *attitude*. Today we learn that mercy also enables our *abilities*.

When we recognize all that God requires of us in the building of his kingdom, we may quickly get overwhelmed. We readily fall into a mental conversation that sounds something like this: "I would like to help, but I'm not sure I can. I'm not sure that I'm able. I don't think I'm strong enough to do kingdom work."

Such thinking is not necessarily ill-considered. We are wise not to attempt tasks that we do not have the ability to complete. We need more than desire to do a good job. We need the energy to see the task through, and we need resources to accomplish it. Paul tell us where we can get both.

**JOURNAL** Is there any task about which you have carried on this mental conversation? Briefly describe what you were asked to do and how you eventually responded.

**READ** Mercy holds the power we need. In mercy resides the encouragement needed for our drive, and the enablement needed for our service.

A generation ago young people recited the first verse of this passage from the King James Version this way: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, *by the mercies of God*, to present your bodies as living sacrifices...." The phrasing "*by the mercies*" captures a rich dimension of the biblical writer's original intent. In the following verses the apostle Paul indicates that God will require much of us in his kingdom work. But before he describes the tasks before us, Paul gives us the tool we need to do the job. Mercy is the instrument, the leverage, that gets the job done. It is *by God's mercy* that we can accomplish what God requires. We are not only to keep mercy in view, but we are to keep it in use.

#### **ENCOURAGEMENT POWER**

**READ** Mercy becomes our power when first we recognize the freedom it provides. We cannot expect to serve God very effectively when we are carrying a load of guilt on our backs—even if we think that by carrying the load, we are somehow pleasing God. Our service becomes powerful as we recognize that Christ has released us from the burden of sin. Grace makes us truly able. We stand tall, ready, and free to do God's will when we understand that he loves us enough to take the burden from us—the burden that we could not remove even by our best efforts.

**DISCUSS** Have you ever offended someone, and then experienced that person's unconditional forgiveness? Do you remember your feeling of relief and gratitude?

- Compare your emotional energy, resilience and capability in all life events before you are forgiven with their counterparts after you have been forgiven.
- How does “freedom” aptly describe your state after you have been forgiven?

**DISCUSS** How do these human experiences compare to experiencing God’s forgiveness? Check Psalm 32:1-7.

- In particular, in what ways does our salvation set us free?
- How does this freedom empower kingdom service?

**READ** Mercy not only empowers through granting freedom. It also empowers through offering unwavering encouragement. Mercy is the good news that God is for us. He is on our side. He is in our corner. The mercy of God’s continuous support is a powerful source of the believer’s strength in the face of his own faults and frailties.

Think of the strength another’s support can provide in the context of the amazing feats of our nation’s Olympians. Because St. Louis has become a Mecca for young boxers, our town follows the Olympic boxing competition closely. Despite the great talents of these fighters, the youth of most of them makes them particularly prone to mistakes. Yet even when a boxer’s own “showboating” sets him up for a sucker punch, I have never seen a coach walk out on his athlete. No matter what the fault, the coaches stay in their fighters’ corners.

God’s grace reminds us that he always remains in our corner. Even when we, like some of the young Olympians, have taken a blow to the chin due to our own mistakes and pride, God never turns his back on us. When we have boxed with sin, failed, and fallen, God is still for us. He does not wait for us to lift ourselves off the mat before he encourages us. God shouts from our corner, “Get up, child. Yes, you forgot what I told you, but I’m still here for you.” Were God to walk away when we go down, leaving us alone and ashamed, there would be no reason to get up again. But God promises never to leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5) His encouragement lifts us from the paralysis that our own guilt would impose and makes us the vital warriors he desires for the kingdom’s battles.

**STUDY** Read Romans 8:31 and 37. In what ways does the analogy of the boxing coach, who is always in our corner, accurately represent God?

**DISCUSS** How does it empower us to realize that God “does not walk away from us when we fall down, nor wait till we pick ourselves up off the mat before he encourages us”? What sorts of things might be different in our lives if we think of God in this way?

**JOURNAL** Picture God as the coach in your corner. Or picture your race of life like Edy’s, running while hearing God, like her teacher, cheering you from the sidelines.

- In the past, have you thought of God as cheering for you?
- What practical steps can you take to insure that you continue to think of God as cheering for you?
- What concrete difference will it make in your life for you to think of him from now on as cheering for you? List a few things that you believe God might be calling you to do, that knowing his unwavering support might empower you to do.
- Write a prayer expressing your gratitude to God for his always being in your corner. Offer this prayer to the Lord as you write.

**READ** Christians gain spiritual power from the certainty of God’s support. Self-preserving human efforts may result from fear of a God who will get you if you get out of line. But “spiritual worship”—the selfless inner desire to honor God—cannot come from threats. Spiritually vital and enduringly vibrant service flow from a heart that sings, “I am his, and he is mine forever and forever. I cannot be taken from the palm of his hand. He is for me. Mercy claimed me, and though I may lose my grasp on him, my God will not let me go.”

#### **ENABLEMENT POWER**

**READ** In view of this divine mercy, we sometimes must confess that we feel pain rather than hope. If we have been guilty of serious, long-term, or repetitive sin, we feel worse because we have not done better. Our consciences may cry out, “Lord, I would love to serve you better in view of your mercy, but you know me. You know how weak I am. You know how I keep on failing. You know my temper and my tongue and how temptation seems to get the best of me. Lord, I wish I could honor you with my life. I wish I could serve you, but I can’t. I just can’t.”

Yes, you can. By God’s grace the power is already yours, and you need only understand how to plug into it. The resources for accomplishing God’s purposes come in two forms—*provision* and *assurance*. As we’ll see, God already provides the holiness we need, and he assures us that we are already pleasing him.

#### ***God’s Provision***

**JOURNAL** Search your own heart. Name, to the extent that you are able, any sin that you have thought you are unable to change.

**STUDY** Re-read Romans 12:1. Why might the clause, “holy and pleasing to God,” appear to prevent a person who sins repetitively from making the living sacrifice that God calls for?

**READ** Most of my life I believe I read a key phrase of this passage the wrong way. I think that I read the verse as if it said, “In view of God’s mercy, present your bodies as living sacrifices, *and then you will be* holy and pleasing to God.” I believe that many others read this verse the same way. We think that by presenting our bodies as sacrifices to God, we will please him. But the verse does not talk merely about our pleasing God; it also talks about being holy. That word *holy* should give us a clue that my former reading was wrong. No matter how much we sacrifice, we cannot make ourselves holy to God. God’s standard of holiness is as high as the heavens. our best efforts will not make us “holy.” If we are to be holy, it is only by God’s provision. That’s the point! The words *holy* and *pleasing* are not conditions of God’s acceptance; they are declarations of his mercy.

By Jesus’ cleansing work on the cross, God declares us to be holy and pleasing to him. The offering of our bodies as living sacrifices does not make us holy and pleasing to God. He has made us holy and pleasing to himself by his merciful *provision* of Christ. This is the fundamental truth that enables us not to be conformed to this world nor to succumb to its temptations.

**STUDY** Read Romans 10:1-3. In verse 3, what did Paul say that his own Jewish brothers were mistakenly trying to do?

**DISCUSS** If your holiness and God’s pleasure depends on your sacrifice in any measure, what happens to the gospel of God’s mercy?

**STUDY** Read Romans 12:2. “Conforming to this world,” in light of verse 1, may well mean failing to live in view of God’s mercy, mistakenly believing that God’s love for us depends on our performance. “The renewing of your mind,” then, refers to grasping that my holiness and God’s pleasure depends on God’s sacrifice (already accomplished in Christ), not mine. What word in this verse describes the result of this new perspective?

**DISCUSS** Think of an electric train set.

- What does the set’s transformer supply?

- Our spiritual *transformation* results from the realization that my holiness and God's pleasure depends on God's sacrifice (already accomplished in Christ), not mine. How does it put our living sacrifice in a different light to know that we already are holy and pleasing to God before we ever make our own sacrifice?
- What can we expect this spiritual transformer to supply?

**READ** My father has worked with third world farmers as an agricultural adviser. He says that often it is nearly impossible to get these farmers to use advanced farm technologies because they live so close to the edge of their existence. If some new farming technique fails, they will starve. For them it is better to keep struggling along with what little they have than risk everything on something untried. Abundance beyond their dreams is within their reach, but they are paralyzed because they are so conscious of their poverty.

**DISCUSS** How might Christians who have not fathomed the riches of God's mercy be like the impoverished farmers?

**READ** God does not want us to be caught in the paralysis of spiritual poverty. God says in essence, "I have already declared to you that by the work of Jesus Christ, you are rich in mercy. Now build my kingdom with the energy and effort that befits those with unlimited resources. Be done with the self-doubt and fear of loss that cripples those poor in faith. I have declared you holy." We who are rich in mercy have God's business to do, and no one can say that we are under-financed. God's gracious *provision* empowers us for his service.

### *God's Assurance*

**READ** In addition to *providing* our holiness, God also *assures* us that we are already pleasing to him. Do you find yourself saying, "Lord, thanks for the wealth of mercy. You surely know I need it. But I still can't do what you ask me to do. I still can't please you."

"I have already made you pleasing to me," declares the Lord.

"Me? With all my sin and shame?"

"Yes, you. You have already pleased me," says the Lord

It sounds amazing, but God says that sinful people please him. He has made us living sacrifices, holy and "pleasing" to him (verse 1). Because we are holy through the work of his Son, God declares that we already please him despite our imperfections. This is a wonderful assurance, and again the result is power.

**DISCUSS** Think about the impact it can have to be told that you are already accomplishing the very thing you've been asked to do. In the 1980 Olympic games, Soviet coaches tricked one of

their weight lifters. They *told* him the weight that he was lifting on his final lift was 499 pounds, a weight he had lifted before in practice and knew he could handle. However, in fact, the coaches had instructed Olympic officials to put 500 1/2 pounds on the bar. This was a world-record weight that the athlete had never been able to hoist before. He stepped to the bar. Believing that he could do the task, he did it.

Think also about the maxim, “Nothing breeds success like success.” How does it empower our efforts to please God to know that by his grace we’ve already won, to know that our living sacrifices will meet with his pleasure?

**DISCUSS** Does this confident expectation empower us even to forsake recurring sins? Are efforts to forsake recurring sin included in “kingdom service”? Are they “living sacrifices”?

**JOURNAL** Think about the recurring sin that you named earlier in this study. Reflect on God’s provision of holiness and assurance that you please him. Do you believe that this empowers you to forsake this recurring sin—not for fear of falling short of the mark, but for confidence that in Christ you have already made the mark? Express your thoughts to God.

### ***Cool Down***

**READ** She took her children to the park to break the monotony of summer days, and instead she broke her own heart. She watched her children run to the playground equipment as another car drove into the parking lot. The new car ground to a quick stop. A young, attractive woman with a beaming smile leaped out of the driver’s seat and virtually skipped to a secluded picnic table near an adjoining lake.

The imagination of the mother began to race. Who could this attractive young woman be meeting in such a secluded spot with so much enthusiasm? Was this a long-awaited and carefully planned rendezvous with an over-busy husband, a lunch date with a best friend, or a tryst between secret lovers? The young mother determined to stay on the lookout for whomever got out of the next car.

No one else came immediately. The mother soon grew preoccupied with her children and forgot to watch the young woman. When she did finally glance again at the secluded woman, what the mother saw made her own heart hurt.

The woman was reading a Bible. The person she had leapt from the car to meet with such enthusiasm was the Lord.

The mother recognized with pain that penetrated her spirit that she no longer had that same enthusiasm. Once the excitement of her relationship with the Lord had overwhelmed her. Once the joy of her salvation had burned warm and bright. But the fervor was gone. Faith had become dreary duty; God had become a detached, frowning bystander. Something had happened over the years of her walk with the Lord. She did not know what it was, but she did know that

she would not now be one to skip to meet him. She had lost something wonderful, and she wept there in the park for her loss.

The next day, the young mother again sought some relief from the summer monotony. She took her children to vacation Bible school. When she went to pick up her children at noon, the program was running a little late, so she sat in her car listening to the voices of the children waft out the church windows. Their singing and laughter did *not* lift her spirits. Instead, the children's cheer made her remember the joylessness of her own walk of faith, and again melancholy gripped her.

She remembered when Jesus was another word for joy, when folding your hands to pray meant you were talking to God, and when you said, "Lord, I'm sorry," you really felt forgiven. Recognition of the things that once filled her heart now only made her feel more empty. Her head fell to the steering wheel, and the tears came again with a silent sigh of spiritual longing.

So quiet was her grief that she could still hear the children's songs. The closing exercises of the Bible school were ending, so the children were singing their marching song—the song that was supposed to take them into the world with zeal for the Lord. When the words penetrated her consciousness, the mother drew in her breath with a startled gasp.

From a familiar song the children sang, "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever, I will sing, I will sing; I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever..." Sudden realization flooded over the mother like a shock wave from heaven. The words of mercy lifted her head from the wheel. "*That's it,*" she thought. "*That's what I have forgotten.*"

Once she had sung that song with the joy the children now echoed. But somewhere, somehow, life with its busyness, along with the guilt of a thousand failures, the negligence of ten thousand duties, and the pursuit of a million priorities other than God's had taken the words from her lips and the truths from her heart. More and more she had performed the duties she could manage for divine favors and out of human dread. Now in the song of the children, she saw a way back to the warmth she had known. Affirmation of his mercy was the way back into his arms and all the joy that was there.

She sang with the children as new joy flooded into her heart: "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever..." Now there was cause for loving zeal again—here was new strength. She knew that in view of this mercy, she could seek him again, serve him afresh, and love him anew. By mercy God clasped her heart, captured her commitment, and reclaimed her joy.

By mercy God again made this woman's service sweet and her heart strong. Such grace God will grant us, too, as each of us questions, "Why do I do what I do?" and as we each answer, "Because of God's mercy."

**TAKE ACTION** In this study we have seen that joy in the Lord and power for kingdom service is restored as we grasp the radical depth of God's mercy. This young woman's story confirms the sweetness of grace. But it also returns us to the main theme of this entire series: rediscovering the treasures of our faith.

Remember that we said at the outset of these studies that we will fall in love with our Lord again only when we appreciate the significance of what the Bible teaches about such matters as truth, the fall, and providence—only when you and I see the difference they make in our lives.

Has this series helped you to fall in love with the Lord in a fresh way?

- Skim back over all of our studies. With your colored pen, designate points at which you rediscovered treasures of your faith. You may, for example, make a big star in the margin, or circle the parts of the discussion that especially prompted you to respond in love to God.
- In the prefatory study, you described your attitude and understanding about various doctrines that are dealt with in *The Wonder of it All*. You also assessed your own level of love for the Lord. Have there been any changes in your attitude and understanding over the course of this series of studies? Briefly describe these changes.

**DISCUSS** Share with the group one thing that God has taught you in these studies that has caused you to love Him afresh.

**TAKE ACTION** Join together in thanksgiving and worship, praising the Lord in prayer and in song for his work in your life.