



Paul's letter to the Ephesians highlights the power of God at work in us, to the glory of God in the church and in Christ Jesus (*Ephesians 3:20-21*).

We spent six months exploring the riches of this book in sermons, small group discussions, and Bible studies. We expanded our view of God's eternal plans and divine power, we worked toward a truer understanding of our identity and purpose in Christ, and we gained practical insight into what it means to be the people of God who "walk in a manner worthy of our calling" (*4:1*).

This letter uniquely emphasizes the glory of God in the church. We are the body of Christ, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (*1:23*), and "through the church the manifold wisdom of God is now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (*3:10*).

Remarkably, the church grows as each member of the body does its part, speaking truth in love so that the body builds itself up in love (*4:15-16*).

Nothing could be more fitting for this work that you are now reading—a collection of devotionals in Ephesians written by members of our body.

These devotionals were written in real time, two a week, as we made our way through the sermon series. They offer unique insight into the text itself, and provide such a rich variety of personal experience and wisdom. When we reached the end of our series, we were so impressed by the quality of these reflections that we wanted to compile them into a complete work.

This collection represents the diversity, creativity, and beauty of our body. It is an evidence of God's grace among us. So, "to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (*3:20-21*).

WHY DOES THE SUN FOLLOW ME?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. -Ephesians 1:3-5

As a mom of preschoolers, my day is full of questions like “Why are ants so mean?” and “why does the sun follow me?” and “... but how does a caterpillar turn into a butterfly?” Often, I answer these questions with an exasperated sigh and an “I don’t know, ask Alexa.” But sometimes, I am reminded to take a moment and marvel at the mysteries of the world God has created.

Just as my girls remind me that there is far more to this world than I could ever hope to understand, Paul’s words in the opening of Ephesians jolt me out of my complacency about the Gospel and God’s mysterious plan for His people. It is easy for me to put the Gospel in a box that I can easily understand- I recite John 3:16 and accept that God loves me and He saved me, but that’s where I stop. I don’t dig in to the weight of those words. I don’t stop to consider what God gave up for us. I forget that the Gospel is not just about me and my salvation - it’s about Christ, what he has done for all people, and what he will do in eternity. God has not only saved us all, Jews and Gentiles, through the blood of his son, but he will unite us all. His mysterious plan is to bring everything in heaven and earth together under the authority of Christ. I find myself asking God “but how will you unite this broken world?” with the same incredulousness my girls reserve for caterpillars and cocoons.

When I take a step back from my small world and consider the magnitude of the kindness God has poured out on us, the grace he has given us, the love he has lavished on us - how could my response be anything less than to give all praise and glory to our God?

REFLECTION

What are some of your “but how?” questions, and how can you turn them into a declaration of praise for God today?

THE WILL AND WISDOM OF GOD

... in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. –Ephesians 1:9-10

I think about the ways that I often invoke God's will: "thy will be done" or, "God, if it's your will, let x happen." If I'm honest with myself, when I pray for God's will to be done it is thinly veiled language for my will to be done: Surely God wills this thing that I want. He's a loving God. But God's will is not my will. He has willed one thing from the creation of the world—His plan that He set forth in Christ. Jesus is the will of God. What God wills, we see in Christ. And, mark this, what God wills for Christ is not an easy life, not worldly success, no domestic bliss or contentment in family and friends; what God wills for Christ is his death. When Christ taught us to pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and indeed when Christ prayed that prayer himself in the garden, the response was "it is my will that you die."

But our God is not a bloodthirsty god. This is not cruelty. It is "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." God's will, Christ's death, is the rescue mission for creation. And, O my soul, I know that this is God's will for me. I too am to die. So many things in my life need to be put to death, strapped to the altar and given over to God.

Lord God, help me—like Christ—to live this life of death-to-self so that I can help bring forth your ultimate will: to unite all things in you.

REFLECTION

How is God's will beckoning you to die to yourself in a specific way?

A BEAUTIFUL HISTORY

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace. –Ephesians 1:5

One evening after dinner I asked my son, “John, what does ‘adopted’ mean?”

John is six now, and we had prepared “My History” presentations for school that afternoon. We had included that he was adopted, and I was curious how he would define that in his own words. The wheels spun in his head as he wiggled side to side in his dining chair. Finally, he said:

“It means ... you get to be someone people want.”

I stared at him in disbelief for a few seconds and then turned my face back to the dishes I was washing in the sink, not wanting him to see all the emotions on my face.

My heart was shattered and mended in that one statement. Oh my son. Do you understand the implications of your definition? I wondered. A knot formed in my throat as I thought of sweet little baby John ... had he felt the pain of being unwanted? And by his same definition, had he felt redeemed by being adopted?

David was sitting at the table with our boys, and I heard him tell John that even before we adopted him—even before we knew him—we had wanted him.

Yes.

“He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.”

In David's words I heard the heart of our Father: I always wanted you. You were never unwanted. Though we may have spent years of our lives not knowing him, not feeling loved, looking for love in all the wrong places—He has wanted us all along. Making us His was always a part of the plan. That's a beautiful history.

REFLECTION

How does the idea of being wanted by God impact you emotionally?

THIS NEW FAMILY

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us. –Ephesians 1:7-8

We knew adoption would not be easy. We prepared and prayed and hoped. And yet, this has been the most difficult challenge and disruption to our comfortable lives we've ever experienced.

Adopting a child who has experienced such loss requires a level of grace, patience, and loving-kindness that we quite simply do not have in ourselves. While it is hard to face our limitations, it has given us a new appreciation for the boundless love of God. Our Father is not deficient in any of these things. He loves us "according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us."

For our new son, adoption requires a level of trust that he has never known. He is healthy and adorable and delightful, but he also has trauma. He doesn't understand what it means to be the child of a forever mother and father. He doesn't naturally trust us or expect us to provide and care for him. His struggle to be at home in our family is exhausting, for him and us.

How we long for him to rest in our love.

As we've watched him grapple with his new reality, we have seen how our own trauma has affected the way we relate to God. We are rebellious and restless, constantly trying to take control, always vying for attention and acceptance. We are slow to believe that we really are His sons and daughters, and even slower to live that way.

How the Father must long for us to draw near to him and trust him.

Growing into our new identity, this new family, it doesn't happen overnight. We are all still in the struggle. Daily we take our fears, frustrations, and hopes to God, and with all the faith we have, we try to settle into his Fatherly love.

REFLECTION

Given your limitations and struggles, what would it look like for you to rest in God's love today?

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

... having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. –Ephesians 1:18

More often than not, I find myself coming to God armed with a wish list of things for Him to do for me. This list varies from time to time, but generally consists of asking for blessings to be given or burdens taken away. I pray for strength with my struggles and failings, for help in being a better husband and father, for school or work assignments to go well. How much better, I tend to think, would my life be if God just took these few problems away or fixed them?

This passage forces me to rethink how I approach God in prayer.

When Paul brings these people before God in prayer, he doesn't ask God to remove their pain, give them material blessings, or fix their problems. It wouldn't be wrong to ask for those things, but Paul's primary concern for those he loves is that they would know God better. That is, that the Spirit would open their minds and fill their hearts with the full knowledge of what God has done, is doing, and will do for them in Christ.

Paul doesn't treat God as a self-help guru, and he isn't preoccupied with the immediate and urgent. First and foremost, Paul prays for the Ephesians to continually pursue knowledge of God, suggesting that this ought to be one of the pressing goals of the Christian life.

*Is this the most pressing thing for me?
Do I ask God for this?*

This prayer reprioritizes my prayers. Rather than only asking for help in my current circumstances, I'm encouraged to focus on knowing and understanding God, and being in communion with Him.

REFLECTION

How can you use this prayer to pray for others today?

A GLORIOUS LIFE

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him. –Ephesians 1:15-17

I am struck by the origin of this prayer. Paul is celebrating what he has heard about their faith and love, and those thoughts blossom into a prayer for them. Most of our prayers begin with self-concern or crisis, but this begins with thanksgiving and encouragement. Good things are happening, and it motivates him to ask God to multiply those good things even more.

Two things stand out to me about this. First, Paul is praying to a big God: “the Father of glory.” The vastness of God’s grace and love means there is always room for more faith and love in our community. Paul does not lay this on them as a burden, but as a prayer. It is a vision for life that only comes as “the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation” reveals God to us.

The second thing is that Paul is praying for big things – hope, glory, and power! (1:18-19) Too often, I am only praying for things in my own life, which portrays a rather small God who shares my obsession with relatively minor things (like an easy commute from Austin to Dallas, which may not be that minor of a request). But the Father of glory and the Spirit of wisdom invites me into a life that is far more glorious than easy commutes. I have been invited into a life, and a community, of hope and glory and power.

I find Paul’s exuberance contagious. I want to pray to this big God, and I want to ask him for big things. May the Lord give us the relationships and faith and love that bring forth this kind of prayer for each other.

REFLECTION

What is it about God, specifically, that gives you confidence to ask big things of him? And what are some big things that you can ask God for today?

AN INVITATION INTO HIS VICTORY

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. –Ephesians 1:22-23

It's hard to comprehend the spiritual world as a modern person, so I find it hard to feel the deep assurance that Paul offers to the Ephesians. God has placed Christ above all powers, Paul writes, above all names named. The Ephesians lived in a city filled with shamans, witches, and temples to the goddess Diana. I spend my days finding cafes with the fastest wifi.

But, I can remember, as a kid, flipping through the big gold-edged Bible that lived, propped up, on the altar of our old church. There were large Gustave Dore illustrations of the Creation, Christ's birth, and the Ascension. Personally, I was fascinated by the visitation of the two angels to Sarah and Abraham. What beautiful, magnificent creatures. I was also fascinated by the threat of hell, the Final Judgment, and the temptation of Adam and Eve. Those depicted demons, I was certain, lived in the corners of my room at night. Often, I stayed awake, looking for them and imagining their hellish limbs. I was wondering, what power do I have against those dark corners, when it's just me and a blanket to do the fighting?

In both mentalities, that of a fearful child and that of a dismissive adult, I've missed Paul's assurance. Today, I hardly think about my placement in the spiritual world. As a child, I focused too much on it. Paul, however, writes that my position is guaranteed by Christ's death and resurrection on earth, and then it is solidified by God's placement of Christ on the right hand of the throne. And, I am invited into that victory.

What I am also reminded of in the passage is that the mystery of the spiritual is no less diminished by my assurance in my salvation, or vice versa.

My Dad recently told me about a revelation he had, while sitting at a school crossing lane, watching an old woman hold up a stop sign. He lives in Midlothian, Texas, where everyone drives a suped-up truck. He was driving along, in his huge Dodge Ram, and slowed to a stop when this small woman stood in the middle of the road with her wooden stick and cardboard stop sign, so that the children could cross. Was the woman more powerful than his truck? No. Quite the opposite. But she was operating under the authority of the city rules and the state rules. He stopped his truck for her and her wooden sign.

Paul does not diminish the powers that exist in the world. 'Rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked.' But he stresses our relationship to God through Christ, and Christ's position in the spiritual. 'And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.' I am saved through Christ's good work on the cross. It is under his authority that I live in my day-to-day. And I am very thankful that I have been invited into his victory.

REFLECTION

Where have you felt burdened by the powers of the world? And how does Christ's authority invite you into victory over that?

HE BRINGS ORDER TO ALL OUR LOVES

... and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe ... that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named. –Ephesians 1:19-21

My husband, Willie, and I have been talking about how we spend our time. Not just in the big things, but also in all the small moments that add up to our daily walk with God.

Do I say yes to that invitation on Saturday morning that will affect my time in God's Word? Do I make this impulse purchase because I suddenly have to have this new gadget or piece of clothing? When I see my neighbor out working in her yard, do I make a point to go ask how she is doing?

These small decisions shape our lives more than we realize. The hard part is that life doesn't present itself in a decision tree vacuum; these countless choices come amidst all kinds of pressures and circumstances. So how do we do this? How do I manage to be a fruitful wife, mom, friend, daughter, sister, neighbor, employee, and church member, all at once?

I'm tempted to regroup, get more organized and create more margin in my life. But the real issue, as I have been learning, is that our priorities and all the little decisions that shape our lives are actually informed by what we love. What am I really chasing in my everyday moments?

When I read these verses through that lens, I see that God is telling me how to order my loves.

Christ is "far above all rule" and "above every name" and "all things are under his feet" and he is "head over all things" ... okay, Paul, point taken. My highest priority is to cultivate a love for Jesus. In all my roles and responsibilities, my highest ambition (and greatest joy!) is love and obedience to Jesus. Any other name I utter (husband, friend, child, parent, boss) is under His feet, and therefore second to Him. Every other pursuit (hobbies, travel, work, rest) is also under his feet, and second to Him.

When Jesus is our first love, He brings order to all our other loves. Our work becomes more fruitful, not less; our relationships more life giving; and even our hobbies more enjoyable. When I am submitted to Jesus, His rule finds its way into all the little decisions, often in ways I am not even aware of.

Thank you, Father, for Jesus' perfectly ordered loves. May we grow to submit more and more to His authority, believing it is for Your glory and kingdom, and our freedom and joy.

REFLECTION

Where have you seen your loves disordered lately? What is something specific you can do today to turn your attention and affection toward Jesus?

HIS GLORY AND GRACE

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. –Ephesians 2:8-9

I have some friends that, in this past year, have really pushed back on the idea of God saving us as we are, not expectations or pre-requisites. These friends clearly see their brokenness and their separation from God. It's like they're reading Ephesians 2 and they get what Paul is saying in verses 1-3. It's not an easy pill to swallow, but they get it.

And then they just stop reading.

They don't get to God's grace. They know about grace, but what they really believe are these lies that Satan, our culture, and maybe even some people in the Christian church, tell them.

“Don't you think you should understand more doctrine before you can be saved?”

“Don't you think you should be following more of God's commands before you can be saved?”

“Don't you think you should be a nicer person before you can be saved?”

My friends aren't alone in believing these things. I have followed Jesus for almost 20 years and it feels like I struggle on a daily basis to not believe these lies. And I know there are plenty of people who are on the verge of following Jesus, but are weighed down and tripped up by these lies.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says: “God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”

I want to shout this verse from the top of my condo building. God doesn't require anything from us to receive his grace and be saved!

Because of his rich mercy and great love for us, He gave us salvation when we were still dead in our sins, still living a life of disobedience. And God has no expectation that we would be, or even could be, anything else when he saves us. If he expected us to be “better” or to understand more holy things before we accepted salvation, He wouldn't get all the glory. And God deserves all the glory. He is fully kind and fully merciful and fully loving and all he wants is for us to know that. This is why he saves us by his grace, “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

REFLECTION

What lies do you wrestle with that might keep you from living in God's grace?

WHAT IS THE POINT OF ME?

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. –Ephesians 2:10

What is the point of me? I find myself asking this dangerous, rhetorical question on particular days when the curse of the ground springs up in my work and in my heart. Maybe you ask it, too.

There doesn't have to be a major life crisis. All it takes is a little frustration or failure, like when I can't reach a child's heart in correction; or when I forget to get milk at the store (*again!*); or when I get unreasonably behind on projects. Any one of these things at the "wrong" time could bring my purpose and value into question.

It's irrational, I know. So why do I respond to frustration and failure like this? At some level, I have staked my sense of self in meeting my own expectations and feeling competent.

At a deeper level, I have forgotten my Maker's goodness to me — how I was once a slave to sin, spiritually dead and deserving of wrath. And how, from that state, I was made alive with Christ, raised and seated with Him, a new creation! I have forgotten that He has laid out good works for me to just WALK in.

This sheer, immeasurable grace means I have been saved from being defined and judged by my failures and sins. This faith I have, it too is a Spirit-wrought gift. And these good works so thoughtfully prepared for me, grace upon grace.

When I remember all of this, the 'point of me' is clear. "*We are his workmanship.*"

As Christ followers, we live straddling the muscle memory of our old selves while we burst into the territory of new life. In the face of frustration and failure, may we remember who we are, and respond with profound gratitude for the new life blooming so abundantly in us because of Christ.

REFLECTION

How have you tied your sense of worth to your performance? Take a moment to give thanks for God's grace toward you in Christ.

THE KINGDOM AND OUR IDENTITY

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. –Ephesians 2:14

At first glance, this text seems obscure. Surely, Paul is addressing a problem unique to the early church, yes? I don't need to be Jewish to be a Christian. Got it! This passage seems no longer relevant to the modern (and mostly Gentile) church, so let's move onto Ephesians 3.

Well no. This passage is not a Jew-versus-Gentile passage. Notice that God doesn't say, "Let there be Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians," but rather "Let them become one people in the place of two." God is dissolving ethnic distinctions in Christ—there is neither Greek nor Jew, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). So it is not "I am African and she is Asian," or even, "I am Nigerian and she is Chinese," but rather: "We are fellow-citizens in the Kingdom of God."

Other passages, to be sure, suggest that we should not completely disregard ethnic distinctions. But those distinctions must be viewed in light of our union with Christ and our superior citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

On that reading, this passage is very relevant today, and you'd be hard pressed not to find an application.

Here's one: We should not wrap ourselves too tightly in any identity (ethnic, political, social, economic), unless it is our identity in Christ. Rather, we should be prepared to be all things to all people in our mission, which is to advance the kingdom of God. And when God blesses us with an identity, we should seek to use that identity to advance the Kingdom of God.

REFLECTION

Which identities do you tend to wrap yourself in? What would it look like to offer up that identity to advance the Kingdom of God?

WHAT WILL YOU SPEND YOUR LIFE CHASING?

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. –Ephesians 2:12-23

Sometimes we think that a hopeless situation is not having enough of what the world has to offer; money, comfort, approval, pleasure. But real hopelessness is not having God in the world. That is why Jesus said it is possible to gain the whole world and yet lose your soul.

When I was 11 years old, I attended a dinner with my father at the house of a very wealthy man. It was the first time I had been exposed to that kind of opulence. The rooms in the house seemed unending to a young mind, the hall in which we ate was larger than where I lived, the pantry larger than my room. Unable to reconcile this environment with what I knew of the world I was eventually overcome and cried quite embarrassingly there at the dinner table.

I did not come from such a great inheritance, you see. Ours was struggle and sacrifice, hand-me-downs and self-made dinners. The disparity between my world and that world was too much for me. I didn't belong.

A week later my father pulled me out of school for lunch. It was to be a picnic. We drove for an hour to a place I had never been before, paid entrance and ascended along a windy road to the crest of a grassy hill, which revealed itself to be a mountain of trash. We had driven to the city dump. With a humble meal laid out before me on the refuse of a city, my father asked me to describe in detail the contents of where we sat. So, in my best effort I listed the clothes, extra food, electronics, toys, and other used sundries as best I could. At the exhaust of my attempt, my father said to me, "Son, people spend their whole lives chasing these things, and they are all laid to rest here. What will you spend your life chasing?" That was the last he ever spoke of the dinner at the rich man's house.

Now many years a man I see more clearly the deceptions of false hope and identity I experienced in the rich man's house. Jesus came to bring us true hope, to make us members of God's great household, and citizens of a kingdom that never fails and never ends, heirs to an imperishable inheritance.

REFLECTION

What false hopes are you believing? What is one way today you can turn from those false hopes to the true hope in Jesus?

THE CALL TO DRAW NEAR TO ONE ANOTHER

In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. –Ephesians 2:21-22

So much metaphor. What strikes me is how Paul describes the church as a structure, being “joined/fitted together” and “built together”. The church is not a literal building—it’s a people, as we say— but it is like a building. We are “living stones” (1 Peter 2) whom God, right now, is tightly fitting together and aligning to the cornerstone, Christ. This is tough work. Back in Paul’s day, fitting stones together involved tedious chiseling, sanding, shaping. I see a parallel between this and our sanctification. God is shaping us, so that we can effectively support and be supported by others in the church.

We don’t get to choose all the stones God places next to us, and sometimes they’re annoying, with different priorities and interests, different ways of speaking. Sometimes we don’t “click”. I’m frequently tempted to distance myself socially or emotionally from these folks in pursuit of comfort and control, and I imagine the Jews and Gentiles felt this to an extreme. But that’s not God’s plan! The church isn’t like Stonehenge, a bunch of freestanding rocks, each doing their own thing. Christ’s church can’t have gaps. Its structural integrity would be compromised. No, God calls us to be tightly fitted together, to draw near and encourage and challenge one another, and to welcome the same from those around us, despite our differences.

This holds true whether God places us in a highly visible role, or an unseen position in the structure, below the floor or in a corner. Being a stone is often not glamorous, but it is always of critical importance. As I write this the foundation of my house is shifting, and while I can see the effects, the weakness is below and unseen. When we shirk our responsibility to our fellow stones/citizens/siblings, the lack of support can have far reaching effects. On the flip side, God can use our pursuit of those nearest to us in community to build up those we don’t even know!

Is it a difficult process? Yes. But, because we are being aligned to Christ, the cornerstone, by an “immeasurably great power” (1:19), we have a great hope that God will accomplish his purpose in us!

REFLECTION

What opportunities do you have this week to support/encourage/challenge those around you in the church, in your GC? How are you tempted to distance yourself?

STRANGERS AND CITIZENS

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. –Ephesians 2:19

In French, the word for “foreigner” is “étranger” which literally means “stranger”. When I was in my early twenties, I lived in France for three years, and though I spoke French and blended in fairly well, it didn’t change the fact that I was a stranger living in a foreign land.

This passage in Ephesians made me think back on my time in France and how it felt to be a foreigner. I knew my place within the society: I was accepted, but I was still an outsider. I could rent an apartment, eat at cafés, stroll along the Seine ... but that didn’t make me French. I didn’t have the same rights and privileges as French citizens. Despite the friendships I’d formed, my language skills, and adapting to French mannerisms, I was always acutely aware of the fact that these were not my people, and I did not belong to them.

However, while being an expatriate in a foreign land, I found a church of godly believers. The church was largely made up of people from all around the world. Each Sunday, as I made my way to church, my excitement grew, because I knew what I was going to find when I entered the church: fellow citizens of heaven.

The church was my home; the people were my family. The body of Christ is powerful, especially when united in worship. It no longer mattered that I was a stranger in a land that was not my own, because the body of Christ is not limited to a country or a building. We are members of the household of God. Whatever our circumstances, we have direct access to God like children have access to their parents. Wherever we are, we are citizens of heaven, with all the blessings and promises that brings. That is so comforting!

Even today, when I feel like an outsider at times in various circles of life, I remember that it is normal to feel that way, because this world is not my home. I am a stranger in this land, but I belong to Jesus. He is our rock, our fortress, our cornerstone.

REFLECTION

How have you identified with the world rather than as a member of Christ’s body?

THE LIFE-ALTERING STORY

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. –Ephesians 3:6

My family tells a story:

It was early in the summer of 1994 and we were camping in Colorado for family vacation. We settled into a campsite that would be our home for the next week, but a particularly bad night hit us about three days in. The temperature dropped like an anvil, our clothing and gear were soaked by freezing rain, and none of us slept a wink.

As we miserably made the drive back into town to dry our clothes, my parents pondered which direction they should take to find a laundromat. “How about towards the beach?” my mom joked. My dad turned to look at her and a smile slowly grew across his face.

Our baby blue mini-van took a sudden turn west on the highway, making its way towards the California coastline and what ended up being one of our favorite family vacations.

Many hours later, somewhere in Utah, I finally looked up from the book I had been immersed in and said, “So how far is this laundromat?”

I think part of the reason my family repeats this story is because it is a statement about who the Coulters are and what we value. As a young kid in this family, stories like this also informed me of how I should interpret the things that happen to me—like viewing interrupted plans as holding the potential for adventure.

The story we believe we are living in provides the filter through which we see the events of our day. For instance, Paul knows that his readers are distressed about his imprisonment. But perhaps the problem is that they don't have the story right. So, in 3:1-13 he sets it straight:

Paul says that ever since Jesus arrived on the scene, eternal secrets have been spilling into view. God is revealing His plan to reconcile all things to Himself through Jesus, and that He has appointed Paul and the Church to declare this Good News to the world. In other words, the story of Paul's imprisonment is not that he is the victim of an unfortunate set of events; the story is that he is a part of the Maker of the Universe's plan to rescue His kids.

This is a massive change in perspective. But it is not just a clarification for the Ephesians, it is an invitation for you and me. Because nestled in that passage is a stunning detail: that we, as part of the Church, have also been invited into that same purpose-giving, life-altering Story.

REFLECTION

Where do you see yourself not living in the story of the Gospel? Spend a few moments in prayer asking God to reorient our lives around Him.

HOW CAN I APPROACH THE CREATOR OF ALL PEOPLE?

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. –Ephesians 3:11-12

Do you ever think about how many people live on Earth? 7.7 billion humans is the current estimate. That is a number I can't really wrap my mind around, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about it for the past week. Combine the number "7.7 billion" with the diversity of languages, cultures, religions, political structures, and I can easily find myself feeling small and overwhelmed. My thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and convictions are just one of billions. How can I be sure of anything? What gives me the right to approach the Creator of all these people?

Paul speaks to this mystery: through the gospel, people from all over the world are members of one body and receive the promises of God by believing in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In and through Jesus, we can "approach God with freedom and confidence" (verse 12).

My family told me this truth since I was a baby and it still mystifies me. I am just a woman typing at a computer on her lunch break and I can go to the Maker of the Universe. With the blood of Christ flowing through my veins, I have everything I need to freely approach my God knowing that He hears me and loves me.

The mystery doesn't end there. Christ also unifies us with people all over the world. Clothed in grace, we are the church, his church. Our faith and unity displays the "manifold wisdom of God" to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." This access we have to God is what empowers us to do his work.

2.3 billion people identify themselves as Christians in our world today. That is a large church. A diverse church that is actually one body because of the unity we have in the Spirit. May we, as part of this global church, embrace the mystery and glory of it all, and work together with grace and humility to "bring to light for everyone" the riches of Christ.

REFLECTION

What is one way you, or the church, can walk with grace and humility to display the wisdom of God?

TO KNOW AND GIVE THE LOVE OF CHRIST

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love.
 –Ephesians 3:14

I've recently had a friend become a Christian after more than a year of praying for her. It's an exciting, thrilling thing to watch happen before my eyes. Yet, as I read these verses, I feel the conviction of the types of simple prayers I've offered to God for her. On one hand, I want to tell myself "God just loves that I'm praying. He doesn't need any pomp and circumstance to the prayers." And this is (of course) true. The simplest of prayers are heard, loved and wanted. Yet I think the conviction I feel has more to do with realizing that a person's prayer life can often be a good barometer for the state of one's heart.

In these verses, we read a prayer for the Ephesians from a man imprisoned for his faith. Paul is not a Pollyanna figure who just sees the sunny side of life. Instead, what we read is derived from the faith of a man who has walked with God both through times of immense suffering and gentle respite. Therefore, the overflow of his heart – a heart which has been made alive with Christ because of the love of God – is a prayer of richness and beauty.

Paul can write from the depths of his soul that God "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" *Ephesians 3:20* because he has experienced this! He believes this in his marrow, so he asks boldly for God to be at work in his brothers and sisters in Ephesus.

What does Paul pray for them? Well, it's a usual Paul prayer that is beautiful but wordy, theologically rich but a bit hard to sort out (at least for this humble reader). The heart of his prayer is for the Christians to be strengthened by the Spirit to love – to know the love of Christ and give the love of Christ – so that they may experience the fullness of God himself. As John Stott puts it in his commentary, Paul "prays that his readers may be given the strength of the Spirit and the ruling presence of Christ, the rooting of their lives in love, the knowledge of Christ's love in all its dimensions, and the fullness of God himself." (*The Message of Ephesians*, pg. 139)

Love is at the heart of Paul's prayer and should be at the heart of our prayer life – to know the love of Christ so that we can give the love of Christ to others. How can we love others well unless we believe "that the love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass all mankind, 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven?" (*The Message of Ephesians*, pg. 137) We cannot. So this should take us to our knees praying for God to fill us with more of himself so that we can love.

REFLECTION

How would knowing the love of Christ change the way you pray for others? Spend a few moments asking God to "fill us more with himself" so that we may love others.

BEAUTY FROM ASHES

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. –Ephesians 3:20

We have all wished that another person would just accept something: that they were wrong, or are forgiven, or are loved even though they messed up, that they are no longer in a relationship with us, or that they are and that that's a good thing. But there's no magic switch that we can flip to make it so.

By this point in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he had already explained the incredible mystery that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs with Israel, and that they are all now members of one body. I think of a blended family—a new husband and wife bringing their children from their previous marriages into one big, new family. It is beauty from ashes, so it comes with challenges: how long before those kids believe their new parent loves them? (How long before the parent believes it?) It's hard to believe you're loved, as is evidenced from our own daily challenges to function out of that belief.

Paul knew the gospel and its implications were literally incredible. They couldn't just be accepted easily. So in this letter he told the Ephesians of the big—huge—things He was asking God for on their behalf: that they would understand the incomparably great power available to them; that they would be strengthened so that Christ could dwell in their hearts—not inhabit as a stranger in a new place, but rather reside as a master within his own home. Paul wanted the Ephesians to be strong enough to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ! Are we strong enough to believe that when sorrows, like sea billows, roll?

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us ...”

I usually only hear the first half of that verse quoted, and it's usually in the context of receiving material things. “Don't worry. God's gonna come through! He can do far more than we can even imagine!” Meaning, I shouldn't sweat these doors slamming on my desires because God has something incredible behind Door #37!

But if that's how we interpret Paul's description of God, then we feel cheated when things don't go well: when jobs are lost, when relationships end, loved ones die, and beloved children suffer. No, Paul isn't saying God will give us a deluxe version of our dreams on this earth. I find hope in Paul's prayer because it shows me a God who can strengthen my heart to believe—according to the power at work in me—in His goodness and unfailing love even in this momentary suffering on this fallen world. When my world is shaken and my heart is shattered, I honestly don't feel strong enough to believe in His love and goodness. But Paul's prayer reveals yet another incredible mystery—not only can God blend all people into one family, but He can strengthen anyone in that family to believe the truth that He loves them, no matter the circumstance.

REFLECTION

Where have you felt the need for God to strengthen you recently? Spend a few moments giving that to God in prayer.

THE WORK OF UNITY

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. –Ephesians 4:1-3

Unity takes work. We have unity in the Spirit, but we also have to work it out in concrete and visible ways. Paul begs us to be “eager” for this work. The word means “to exert oneself” or “make every effort.”

I exert myself when it comes to personal hobbies or goals: like running faster than normal during the Cap 10K, or studying hard to finish up a class, or spending hours working on our old popup camper so our family can take a long trip together. I tend to work hard because I believe in a job well done, especially in areas where I get to enjoy the fruit of my labor.

As I think about it, my eagerness and exertion usually centers on myself– my agenda and privileges. My pride lurks underneath. I don’t often find myself eager to strive for the good of others, especially if they are very different than me, annoying to me, or heaven forbid, I’m in conflict with them. In these cases, I am more often eager to steer clear, wish them well and be on my way, thank you very much.

But Paul says that we are to exert ourselves in a very others-centered way, to turn our attention and energy to the greater good of the Church– the very BODY of Christ. I’m reminded that there is a greater story that I’m a part of, a story which calls me to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.”

People will be different than me. People will annoy me (and I will annoy them). Conflict will happen. The question is: Will I respond in self-centered pride or with humility and eagerness to maintain unity?

It takes effort. But we look to Jesus, who exerted himself unto death so that we who were far off could be brought near by his blood, “for he himself is our peace” (2:13-14). The same Spirit that was at work in Jesus is now at work in us, giving us wisdom and power to do the work of unity.

REFLECTION

What relationships need your attention and energy right now?

KNOWING GOD IN GRIEF

*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.
-Ephesians 4:11-13*

This past summer was one of the hardest summers I have had to endure in a long time. We were facing some parenting challenges, and for some reason, that triggered a deep, dark grief in me that came out of a tragic loss in my childhood. My mother died suddenly when I was 6 months old, and I had never really grieved that loss. But last summer the power of that grief rocked my world for a few months. I was tossed back and forth by the waves of grief, and I felt like I couldn't catch my breath or focus on anything else other than the waves. It's hard to hold on to what is true when you are overwhelmed by such strong emotions.

In the midst of that, we went on a long family camping trip. I had considered canceling it, not knowing if I was emotionally up for the complexity of it. But we took a step of faith and decided to go anyway. While away, I was able to spend unhurried time with God – reading His word, being still in prayer, journaling & allowing God into my grief in new ways.

Really what was happening was I was knowing God in grief, in a space I had never really been before. And in that knowledge the Holy Spirit ministered to me, and reminded me of the firm foundation I had in the midst of all the waves. I just had to put my feet down and stand up.

When I returned from that trip, the grief wasn't erased. Grief doesn't work like that. But when I realized that I really could stand on the foundation of knowing God – his character, the identity he had given me, his purposes for my life (all the things that Paul prayed for the Ephesians & lays out for them in Chapters 1-3), I was able to reengage in the life & ministry that the Lord had given to me.

Whether it is grief or hardship or cultural pressure, there will always be waves that threaten to overwhelm us. But we don't have to be tossed around by these things. We can put our feet down and stand up on the firm foundation of God's word, and we can rest in his love.

REFLECTION

What are you feeling overwhelmed by lately, and what truths in God's word do you need to stand on?

I WANT TO BE COMPLETE

To the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. –Ephesians 4:13b-14

I'm in a season of life where I have been desperately longing for intimacy with Christ, fellowship with believers, and to see those that are broken or lost restored by the joy of the gospel. Essentially, what I'm longing for is the kind of maturity that Paul envisions in this passage. In verse 13, the word for maturity means "brought to an end", "finished", or "complete." I want to be complete.

Paul contrasts the completeness and fullness in Christ (v.13) with "being a child tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (v.14).

What deceives me? My heart believes that the things of this world will bring about maturity, completeness, or satisfaction. The right career, relationship, financial status, amount of approval, or comfort will give me that sense of completion or wholeness.

The sin hidden underneath it all is a desire to want these things more than God, and even to use God as a means to obtain them. But Paul says maturity is not to fulfill my shallow desires, but to "attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (v. 13). This completeness takes place within the body of Christ and through intimacy with Jesus.

Something God has put heavy on my heart this past season is that God is not a means to an end, but He is the end Himself. What comes to mind is a quote by C.S. Lewis: "Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

My prayer is to be complete in Christ and to have the attitude we see in Paul when he says, "not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12).

REFLECTION

What are you holding onto in hopes it will satisfy or complete you?

THE CALLING TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.
–Ephesians 4:15*

When I was younger, I thought I knew what growing up meant. I was so sure that it involved learning to drive, going to college, getting a job, getting married, having kids. And while many of those things do happen as you grow up, life doesn't always follow a certain timeline or turn out how you thought it would.

I think we have to be careful not to fall into similar misconceptions when reading this particular passage. Paul is calling the church to grow up in Christ. I don't think he's talking about things we tend to consider signs of becoming an adult: financial responsibility, getting married, etc. He is calling us to spiritual maturity. So then, what does it mean to "grow up into him?"

These verses connect maturity to "the knowledge of the Son of God," but it isn't the mere accumulation of knowledge. Too often I think that a book, video series, podcast, or even a Bible study or course, will alone get me to the next level of maturity. In doing so, I am disregarding the one who has the power to transform my heart and fill me with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual maturity requires relational and experiential knowledge, and there just aren't any shortcuts for that. It takes time and intentional pursuit, and it most likely won't come automatically or quickly.

Becoming more like Jesus is a continual process. We certainly shouldn't disregard the pursuit of knowledge, but Paul makes it clear that our lives must first be rooted and grounded in love. Then we will be able to more fully "grow up in love."

REFLECTION

How might you need to adjust your concept of spiritual growth?

GROWING IN CHRIST WITH ONE ANOTHER

... from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. –Ephesians 4:16

The idea of connection has jumped out to me as we have been reading through Ephesians. Paul keeps returning to its importance, not only in our relationship with God, but with each other.

We are connected to the Father, who loved us while we were still far from Him, adopted us into His family, and blessed us with every spiritual blessing. And to the Son, who is our peace, our head, and vision for maturity. And to the Spirit, who seals us in Christ, gives us access to the Father, and strengthens us in our inner being so that we can comprehend the love of God.

In each of these, the relational connection allows us to experience the fullness of God's power and purpose in our lives. This is important to remember as we reach Paul's other relational focus: to each other. He says that this connection, to each other as the church, is what helps us grow.

Having received every spiritual blessing in Christ, we can turn to give and receive blessing from each other. Being connected is more than just the intellectual understanding that we are linked. It means we are known, and that is a mutual process that requires real presence and vulnerability. By God's design, our growth is dependent on this messy, relational work of giving and receiving from one another.

I've always loved the analogy of the body of Christ because it translates so beautifully into practical takeaways. Our bodies are holistic - operating as one entity, yet made up of many parts. Our health and growth depends on each part working properly.

The beautiful truth is that each of us is uniquely created and necessary to each other's growth. If we don't lean in, we don't just miss out – we stunt the growth of ourselves and the rest of the body we are meant to build up. As we close out Chapter 4, I love how the NLT translates 4:15-16 and sets a vision for our church: Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

REFLECTION

Where have you felt stunted in your growth recently? What is one way you can lean into the body of Christ?

THE COMFORT OF OUR FORMER WAYS

But that is not the way you learned Christ ... to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self. –Ephesians 4:20-24

As we walked through the ancient city of Ephesus, the tour guide pointed out what we were seeing. Some of the first running water toilets: stone benches with cutouts used as ‘toilet seats’ and streams of running water underneath carrying away the waste. A series of engravings of a woman’s footprint carved into the marble sidewalks, which led the ‘women of the night’ to where affection could be bought. A stadium carved into the side of a hill where locals would watch Christians fight wild animals for sport.

When I sit down and read Ephesians now, it is startling to think about the environment where this was first read and how they lived. And, at the same time, it is eerily familiar: innovative convenience, secret pleasure, and base entertainment.

I am definitely prone to believe that an easier life or modern convenience will bring me happiness. I would rather look for comfort in the immediacy of relationships than pursue a God I can’t see or feel. The default of my heart is to pull away from and blame God for my circumstances instead of trusting Him in my circumstances.

Their “former manner of life” is not all that different from ours, and that gives us fresh motivation to heed these words: “put off your old self” (4:22). But we can’t forget about the prior verse: “assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus” (4:21). The reason we put off the old self is because we have been taught in Christ. He is the standard and source of our new life with God.

I have to fight the urge to just ‘buck up’ and do better, because this kind of change does not start with changing my actions. Rather, it starts with knowing our God, sitting under His teaching, being in relationship with Him, and being changed by Him.

This New Year we are faced with age-old questions: Will we resort to the comforts and pleasures of our former ways, or will we run to our God and Father and be transformed by Him?

REFLECTION

What is one aspect of your "old self" that you see Christ teaching and forming you to put off?

TO PUT OFF THE OLD AND PUT ON THE NEW

... put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and ... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. –Ephesians 4:22-24

As is tradition, I spent December 31st reflecting on my year. If your 2018 was anything like mine, it was full to the brim with contradiction: joys and sorrows, wins and losses, focus and confusion.

There were moments of spiritual breakthrough and rest in the Father's arms. Praise, God is near! He provides and cares for me! He instructs my heart! He is in control and He is GOOD!

And then, seemingly ten minutes later, there were moments of selfishness, self-righteousness, and despair. God, I hear you but I think I might know better. God, I hear you but I want that thing/job/relationship/attention/status more than I want to submit to you right now. God, I can't hear you. God, where are you? God, do you even care at all?

Christians live with constant tension between the desires of the flesh and the desires of God's Spirit within us. We are broken and bent in on self, but at the very same time, we are redeemed and being conformed to the likeness of Christ. No wonder Paul says we "groan inwardly as we wait" for our salvation to be complete (Romans 8:23).

Meanwhile, here in Ephesians 4, Paul tells us what do with this internal conflict. "Put off your old self" and your former ways (the desires of the flesh), and "put on the new self" (the desires of the Spirit).

Put off and put on. These words are so active. We are being instructed to intentionally, purposefully, and continually deny our selfish desires and destructive patterns. Likewise, we are told to actively replace those habits with the pursuit of Christ-likeness. Put off the old, ugly clothes of sin, and put on the new, bright clothes of "righteousness and holiness."

This will not make sense to a lot of people. It may not always make sense to us. That brings our attention to this little phrase between the commands to put off and put on ... "be renewed in the spirit of your minds" (4:23). Rather than something we are to do, this is something that happens to us. As we humbly and willfully submit to the Spirit's renewing work in us, we get a fresh perspective on life.

It's the second week of January. We are getting back into our daily rhythms of school and work and sitting in traffic and running errands and cooking and cleaning and, worst of all, pants without elastic waistbands. That is a different kind of groaning.

While many of our groan-worthy realities will always be there, the New Year reminds us to take advantage of a fresh start, to put off and put on, and eagerly invite the Holy Spirit to stir within us throughout the year.

In 2019, will we *groan*, indulging our flesh and destructive habits, or will we allow ourselves to be *grown* (cheesy, I know - forgive me) by God into the likeness of Christ?

REFLECTION

What is one tangible way you can "put on the new self" this coming week?

THE LIE, THE TRUTH, AND WHAT WE REALLY WANT

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. –Ephesians 4:25

It seems like “Don’t tell lies” is one of the basics of the Christian faith, yet I often find myself wanting to be less than fully honest. Recently, I have become more aware of this urge to bend the truth, and I’ve had to think about the real reasons that I desire to tell lies in the first place.

Often it comes from a desire to protect my image or to avoid conflict. I don’t want to be fully honest about myself because I don’t want someone to think I’m irresponsible or unwise or fearful. I don’t want to admit that I’m late (again) because I wasted (a lot of) time looking at social media, so I blame it on traffic. I want to be able to control how people perceive me and sometimes the reality just doesn’t back that up.

Maybe for you, the urge to tell a lie comes when you want to protect your status in your community or stay out of trouble with your boss, or maybe you just misrepresent the truth at times so a situation works out the way you want. In these moments, the root issue is that we are more concerned with what we want than with God’s command to be truthful.

“Stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.”

It’s a simple command with powerful implications. Paul is saying that lying to take care of our own self-interest is no longer consistent with who we are. We have been made new in Christ, and are part of the body of Christ. We belong to each other and have a new mission in life. Therefore, we are to look after the interests of one another and of the whole body, not just our own interests.

It is sometimes very scary to trust that God is in fact working in my best interest and that I don’t have to lie or hide things in order to accomplish what I think is best for me. But he has given me his Spirit, and a body to belong to that I can depend on to take care of me, if only I will show up and be fully honest about myself.

REFLECTION

Why do you find yourself bending the truth or lying? What is the idolatry at root when you lie?

WHY CAN'T I BE A LONE RANGER CHRISTIAN?

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another ... Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. –Ephesians 4:25,32

In Ephesians 4:1, Paul charges us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. Then he details how that can happen, as well as the many obstacles we will encounter. The context in which our calling is worked out is relationships with other believers. Why is that? Why can't I be a Lone Ranger Christian, or at least keep the distance I need from others? After all, relationships can be so messy!

We are susceptible to being deceived. Even though we're armed with the truth of Scripture and sealed by the Holy Spirit, in both thought and behavior we're still a work in progress. Old habits and particularly our besetting sins don't go away easily, especially when we isolate and stay in our heads, ruminating and despairing. The more we share our lives with each other in genuine relationship, the more we understand ourselves, including our blind spots and what motivates us toward (or away from) "true righteousness and holiness" (4:24).

God's will for our lives becomes clearer to us as the light of truth shines. Just before this command, Paul tells us to "be renewed in the spirit of our minds" (4:23). Sharing and speaking truth with one another, along with scripture and prayer, is the means of renewal. This is the antidote for the daily deluge of deception and temptations we encounter.

As "members of one another," we can both build up and call one another to account. And we must! The more time we invest in knowing and truly caring about each other, the easier and more effectively this happens. I can love you better if you let me in, and vice versa.

Strength in numbers – We improve the quality of the soil in which we live as believers if we grow beside one another. Keep in mind, God promises to be present and active when two or more are gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20). So be encouraged when you take the initiative to develop or deepen a relationship with another brother or sister in Christ: God has promised to join the conversation.

REFLECTION

Where have you seen the strength of community, either in building up or speaking the truth in love, recently?

SHOW BIG LOVE IN THE SMALL MOMENTS

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...
And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
—Ephesians 4:16,5:1*

I am a recovering people pleaser. I do and say things I don't want or don't mean in order to make other people happy.

These little lies used to make me think that I was loving others well. My words would settle people or make them happy, but I was saying things I didn't actually believe. I didn't want anyone to feel bad, or worse, to be upset with me. I also agreed to tasks that I had neither the desire nor the capacity to do, simply because I didn't want to let people down.

People-pleasers are fueled by the momentary happiness of others, but over time they end up feeling empty. After reflecting on this passage, God has shown me that this people-pleasing pattern has actually led me into a sin pattern that negatively affects those around me.

My intention is to build others up, but if they are not built up on the foundation of truth, they will not be able to withstand the inevitable storms of life. I want people to feel loved and cared for, but when I try to take on all the burdens, it undermines the need for each member of the body to do its part (4:16). Underneath my genuine desire to serve and love people lies a more illusive desire to build my own kingdom rather than God's kingdom.

This is a hard thing to realize, but it brings us to the place where we finally admit we need help. I cannot speak the truth in love in my own wisdom. I cannot serve and love others for their good in my own strength. I need God to build God's kingdom.

To use Paul's language, we have to choose— and keep choosing— to shed the old set of clothes, and put on the new ones we got in Christ. For me, this begins with reminding myself that loving people as Christ does requires me to look at the bigger picture, not to focus on people's immediate happiness, but rather on their long-term health and relationship with God.

I heard a song recently that resonated with me: Big Love Happens in the Small Moments by JJ Heller. The chorus says: "everything is sacred when you take time to notice, big love happens in the small moments." This has become my mantra for this season of my life; show big love in the small moments by speaking the truth to those around me, even when it might not make them happy.

REFLECTION

What is one conversation you can have this next week where you can speak the truth in love? Spend some time in prayer that God would give you a bigger vision of what it means to love others.

MORE THAN THERE ARE WAVES IN THE OCEAN

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” –Ephesians 5:1-2

Since I was a little girl, my mama has always said to her children, “I love you more than there are waves in the ocean.” It would take me over a decade to truly comprehend this vast love. This symbol of unending, enduring love.

You see, my life has always revolved around water. I grew up in a family of very talented swimmers, and I too would later swim on into a great NCAA Division I career. But it all began with my love for the water. I have a distinct memory of when I was about five: I was just floating in the water, the sun beating down on me, feeling God’s presence, so alive and welcomed by His light. It would become my safe place, where I would sit and feel His Spirit wash over me.

But I have also felt the very chilling darkness of the water. My coach was abusive. For years I held on to these deep dark secrets, and the water would take my tears.

When I was 19, he was arrested and sentenced to life in prison. I thought it was finally over. I was free to feel the water’s weightlessness again. But really, it was just the beginning. The darkness had consumed me; twisting my relationships and my view of reality. It pushed me into a valley so dark and deep only God could pull me out.

He saved me, He strengthened me, and He showed me what I never would have seen otherwise. Love. Unfettered, unending, pure love. Though I was so damaged, so broken, he gave himself up for me. He pulled me out of the darkness into the light, leading me back to Him, and giving me the courage to do the hard work of healing so that I could truly see.

The work of Jesus on the cross means that we are given access to the same water that He offered the woman at the well. Freely given, never to thirst again.

My path has not been easy, but it has been filled with so much grace. Forgiveness has been hard, but the love that results from it is true freedom. Sealed for eternity.

No matter your past, no matter your pain, no matter your current situation. He sees you. Always. And he loves you more than there are waves in the ocean.

REFLECTION

Read Psalm 107 and meditate on God’s steadfast love amidst our lives.

THE EXPOSING LIGHT OF CHRIST

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. –Ephesians 5:11-14

The negative command in verse 11 (“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness”), while certainly challenging, brings me less discomfort than the positive command which follows (“But instead expose them”). It’s this part that gives me the most heartburn, for two reasons.

The first is that the command directs us to confront sin in other people, the very idea of which makes me want to crawl inside of my shirt. In most things I do, I’m motivated by keeping the peace, and I will often try to avoid conflict to unhealthy degrees (there has been growth here, but the process is slow).

The second reason is an uncomfortable corollary to the first: if I’m called to expose darkness in the lives of others, that makes me, in turn, open to exposure. And I really fear exposure – either that the depth of my sin and failure is going to become finally known, or that everybody is going to one day find out that the façade I put up (consciously or not), is just the veneer of competency and respectability, not the real thing.

My heart twists at this implication, hoping for a kind of “exposure compromise”, where I can reveal most of my brokenness, but keep just a little bit hidden in the darkness – then, I could control at least some of the narrative, building an identity on unstable pride, hyper-focused on self. However, verse 8 (as well as 4:22) says that as a Christian, I am no longer afforded that opportunity – keeping my sin in the dark is just not consistent with who I am anymore.

I was thinking recently about life as a garden (reading a bunch of Wendell Berry probably had something to do with this), and asking some questions like: “What seeds did I sow today, in the things that I did? What relationships did I work to cultivate? Did I plant anything that will lead to future good, even if I don’t see results today?” The thing about a garden though is that it needs light for its contents to grow – and a garden doesn’t get to pick and choose where the light hits it.

In a similar way, Jesus, the “true light which gives light to everyone” (John 1:9), shines a light on every part of us, revealing just how sinful we are, but more importantly just how deep and unending are the riches of his grace (Eph. 2:7). There’s no hiding my sin from his light, but I don’t have to be afraid of that exposure because he took that sin upon himself. That’s when I begin to truly grow – I can confess my sin to God and to others, bringing shameful things into the light even when it’s hard.

REFLECTION

What’s an area in your life that you’ve hidden from the light? Spend a few moments confessing that to God in prayer.

THE INCORRUPTIBLE LIFE OF JESUS

Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. –Ephesians 5:7-8

As I read this passage, I am filled with both hope and struggle.

I have hope because the idealism of a simple spiritual life is there on full display. Not only am I in the light (as a nod to 1st John and an aging DC Talk song), I am a child of the light! My role is to bring the kingdom of heaven to the places around me. Kindness. Gentleness. Patience. Unwavering devotion to all that is good and just. This, I can get behind. Sign me up! Jesus work in and through me and let's do this thing.

But then the struggle comes. This passage says that being the light entails living in an undefiled way. This is about not compromising the practice of my faith, and acting as a wall against the culture around me. That sounds fantastic, but this isn't just about my intentions and interactions. For this to become real, I have to ask questions about what I believe, and allow, and actively do to participate in the world around me.

What if I am going too far in exercising my freedoms? How quickly can the things I enjoy become extravagance and excess?

What if I am burning the candle at both ends to make a "dent" in the universe, rather than working with God to reveal his kingdom in my little corner of the world? What if God's purpose for me is "small?" Am I being the light if I don't speak out against government officials who spin lies? What if I don't really align with any particular candidate? Who do I support and how do I vote?

Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of politics, or any number of topics, this passage seems to be about holiness and corruption. How can I hold steadfast to the pattern of God's ways, especially when it costs me something?

I struggle with questions like these.

As I look at the life of Jesus, my hope rises. He walked a path that was first about the ideal relationship, and then the ideal reflection of that into the lives of others. He did not become corrupted by political bargains (Matthew 22:21), family desires (Mark 3:31-35), or aspirations of earthly impact that he could justify or rationalize (Matthew 4:9). He didn't bow down in the desert, or even suggest a compromise. He was incorruptible.

As I let this passage sit, it compels me to cut away the things that request my compromise, and to devote my days to the things that are "good, true, and righteous". And it causes me to wonder if God's kingdom burns brighter in the world because of a few unflinching lights, than a million that have dimmed.

REFLECTION

As you reflect on the passage, what's one practical way you can bring the kingdom of God into a place or part of your life?

WHAT IS THE GOOD LIFE?

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart. –Ephesians 5:17-19

Paul is writing to a people who have passed from the darkness to the light, and his message is firm. He lives in the truth that if we accept Jesus as Lord, we must accept him as Lord over every part of our lives.

“Be careful how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”

Walking with Christ implies that we are doing the things he said to do and valuing the things he said to value. He does not leave us a middle ground. Disciples of Christ can't choose to follow him while deciding in certain areas our own plans are better. We must choose wisdom in Christ over wisdom in everything that is not Christ. We must live in the light and not in the darkness.

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

When I am acting apart from the will of the Lord, I am aware of it. There is some seed of discontent, or frustration, or anger that causes me to look at my situation and say I am going to do this on my own. Paul says this is darkness. I am replacing Jesus with another lord.

The solution Paul gives here is to look at our time and practice spending it in ways that will build up our faith for a long-term walk with Jesus. He uses drinking as an example. After long days of working and providing for their families, the Ephesians had little time to rest and recover. Alcohol was a common way to escape, and was probably seen as a key ingredient of the “good life”. Paul's alternative to a routine of drinking is to worship:

“Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with songs, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.”

Making music binds Christians together in a joyful, expressive way. It engages the mind and the heart. It translates between cultures, and is a means of uniting them. Corporate hymns and songs are uniquely positioned to communicate the works and power of the Trinity.

Of course, verse 18 is not a rule to follow. We are not meant to schedule a night of worship in response to every party on our calendars. Rather, it is a discipline we can practice so that we can become the kind of people we are called to be and say we want to be. We set aside time to worship God through music so that whether in a difficult family relationship, or in hours of anxiety, we can remember and hold fast to the truths that we have sung.

To follow a teacher and Lord who requires our obedience, we must give our whole lives. To leave the darkness behind, we must take joyful steps into the light.

REFLECTION

What is one situation in this past week where you chose “to do this on your own,” and not in Christ?

THE WORK OF SLOWING DOWN

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. –Ephesians 5:15-16

When God created humans in His own image and called that creation “very good,” He set us apart as His own. He imparted on us a hope and a desire that we can grow towards His likeness and become more like him. In Ephesians 5:15-21, the idea of growing towards God’s image, most noticeably His thoughtfulness and wisdom, is important to me right now.

As a counselor, I work with people in their different fears and anxieties, working towards maturity in faith as the foundation for thoughtfulness and then healing. We are called to walk wisely with understanding in all that we do, to push out foolishness and drunkenness and to allow room for fellowship, worship, thankfulness and submission—growing in Christ-likeness.

But why is this level of thoughtfulness so hard these days? I think it requires strong self-control, self-control that gets pummeled by phones, social media, busy schedules, ambition, boredom - all the things that grow our daily anxieties and worries. Thoughtfulness comes out of hearts at peace in God’s truth—out of hearts that choose to act out of the grace given to us to be more like Him. Daily distractions send us into a cloudy survival mode where it nearly impossible to be centered on God’s Truth.

So thoughtfulness requires an active slowing down. We are called to take active control, to be thankful in all circumstances. To do these things we must THINK—think through how to exemplify Jesus and his love, and to rest in that love. Rest where we have control because he has given us all the grace needed to take off our old selves (our anxiety, nervousness, reckless brokenness.) This is work. It takes accepting God’s greater vision as our own and working with the Spirit towards thoughtful living in all we do. Thankfully, this is not an individual endeavor, but something, as a church and as the body of Christ, we work through and fight for together.

REFLECTION

How can you slow down this week and cast your anxieties to Jesus? Where in your life can you practice finding space to think on the way of Jesus?

WHAT GLORY WE GIVE TO OUR GOD WHEN WE STAND TOGETHER

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. –Ephesians 5:21-23

When I read this verse as a new believer in college, I thought that I had an advantage because I had grown up with parents who held very traditional values and roles in marriage. My mom would wake up at 4:30 AM to make breakfast for my dad before he left to work 10 to 12-hour days. I figured that growing up with those kinds of examples of selflessness would make it easier to submit to my future husband.

But, I was naive. It didn't take long for me to struggle with "submission," or my understanding of what that was, as a 21-year old, newly married woman. David worked a full-time job and had to wake up early to make his commute. He thought we should both keep an early bedtime, but I wanted to stay up late or go visit my girlfriends on campus. I remember feeling so overlooked, but I "submitted" to David's early bedtime rule and quietly held it against him in my heart.

I'm sure you can guess the fruits of bitterness and grudges held in the heart.

Thankfully God has rescued our marriage time and again, filling us both with His Spirit and making us more like Him over the years. We have become better communicators, and God has transformed my mind through years of Bible study, prayer, community with the saints, and motherhood.

This verse reads so differently now that I understand submission is not culturally defined, but is a fruit of being filled with the Spirit. And though I know now that marriage is not meant for my fulfillment, the tendencies of that 21-year old still resurface because our enemy is relentless. Some days—or weeks, or months—I feel overlooked by my husband and the Lord, and the thought of submitting to them becomes infuriating. That's a nice red flag that alerts me that I need to put up a fight, but not with David.

When I notice discontentment overrunning my thoughts, I (eventually!) wrap that belt of truth around me: that Christ DOES see me, just as he took the time to see the bleeding woman who touched him. That he lovingly washes me, feeds me and cares for me, even if my husband fails to from time to time. (And he does the same for my husband!) I hold up that shield of faith as I choose to believe that even today God is using our marriage to make known His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms! And I pray and ask for prayer because our Lord uses that too. What glory we give to our God when we stand together, upheld by Him, against anything that this world or the enemy hurls at us. And how sweet is the fruit that grows from sowing love and respect--much sweeter than what grows from withholding it.

REFLECTION

Read Ephesians 1:15-23 and meditate on Christ's love and grace for the church.

TRANSFORMED INTO HIS IMAGE: A PERSON WHO LOVES OTHERS AS ONESELF

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies ... He who loves his wife loves himself ... let each one of you love his wife as himself. –Ephesians 5:28-33

I can't pinpoint when the change occurred, but somewhere in my journey of following Christ my experience of reading commands in the Bible altered. In my early days as a new believer I felt fascination and excitement to try this new way of life, but over the years the sheer quantity, the stark ugliness, and the Every Single Day-ness of my failures turned my excitement about Scriptural commands into wary, here-we-go-again futility.

Then I got married.

Sure, I knew by heart Paul's command to husbands: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25) Many times I imagined various dangerous scenarios, unrelated to the tranquil neighborhood we inhabited, in which I would voluntarily give my life for Stephanie's. I was IN! I realized that I could not know for sure until the situation occurred, but I was confident that I would die in her place.

Somehow I didn't know by heart the verses that followed: "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself ... However, let each one of you love his wife as himself." (Ephesians 5:28, 33)

Nothing shone a light on my selfishness like marriage.

Our culture is awash in self-improvement, but I've never needed a coach, mentor, book, podcast, talk, retreat or conference to assist me in loving myself. I excel at loving myself. It's what I do best. And Paul commands me to love Stephanie with the all-consuming love that I have for myself. This is a command that I break every day and cannot ever really obey on my own. Which brings me back to Paul's gospel: Jesus crucified, risen, ascended and with the Father giving the Holy Spirit to fill me. Jesus died to forgive my failures to obey this command. While I cannot obey this command, the Holy Spirit is helping me grow a tiny bit better at loving Stephanie like I love myself.

So, I ask the Lord to help me speak kindly, not impatiently and curtly, which is my ugly nature. To help me notice when I'm luxuriating in comfort when there is work to be done. To meet her cognitively and emotionally depending on what she needs. To work creatively to provide all that I can for our family. To care for the boys and lead them toward the Lord.

While the here-we-go-again reality of sin remains, the gospel reminds me that I'm forgiven, that I'm new in Christ, and that He's transforming me into His image—a person who loves others as oneself.

REFLECTION

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 and meditate on Christ's demonstration of love towards us.

GRACE AND DISCIPLINE

“Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. –Ephesians 6:2-4

“You’re talking out of your butt!” said my frustrated child. My blood pressure seizing, I rapidly clamped down on that sweetheart, issuing more furious lecturing and ending with the infamous grand finale of “you’re grounded!” Neither of us satisfied, we sat in stony silence as we made the ritual trek to school. This child left the car, mumbling a goodbye and an “I love you, Mom.” On the drive to my next errand, the LORD called to my mind the first four verses I’ve been pondering in Ephesians 6.

These verses are as familiar to me as the back of my hand. As a parent, I have heard the first three verses sung to childlike, catchy tunes primed to drill these truths into my children’s heads and hearts. I have recited in love, and in frustration, the lines of this first chapter of Ephesians countless times to my growing children. I have come weary in sin and seeking forgiveness to verse 4, seeing my inability to NOT provoke my children to (further) anger and to miss raising them in God’s loving discipline and instruction.

Thinking on these verses, I was struck anew by a simple but heady phrase tucked away in parentheses. The line “(this is the first commandment with a promise)” is spoken to children, who in God’s tender goodness sees fit to give them instruction on how to be a part of the family of God. He wants them to have a longer view of their life in mind. That though obedience be against their nature, there is good for them in the future if they follow His way. Through God’s instruction to children, I am brought to the realization that as a Christ-follower, I also have a slew of promises from God to cling to in this parenting journey. The idea of a promise seems inextricably connected to hope and hope, we know, does not disappoint. The hope of the promises of God are what kept the ancient fathers taking step after step when it all looked like failure.

God instructs parents to not push their children to anger and frustration knowing that we would be unbelievably tempted and tested to do that very thing. But, His promises can undergird us in these moments of trial. I can trust that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” I can believe that my children are works in progress that God is shaping through our faithful and sloppy attempts to discipline and instruct them in the LORD.

As a parent, I need to shift from functioning shortsightedly, as if this one moment is the only chance I have to change my child. That only results in frustration and extreme attempts to bring about the good outcomes I so desperately desire. I need to hope in the promises of God in my calling as parent; both to meet me when I fall short and to give me strength, motivation, and grace to discipline and instruct with lovingkindness.

REFLECTION

How do you function shortsightedly in your relationships? How do God’s promises allow you to see the long vision of that relationship?

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO HONOR?

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother." –Ephesians 6:1-2

This short devotional entry has been difficult for me to write. I'm stuck in my head with lots of thoughts on obedience and honor. For example, how do you talk about the difficulty of honoring your parents when you don't want to? Do I only honor my parents when it's easy? How am I supposed to honor them when it's hard and I am hurt by them?

With these thoughts buzzing around my head, I turn down the volume in the car and ask my five-year-old daughter, "*Why is it so hard to obey?*"

"Because there are so many fun things you don't want us to do ... Can you turn the music back up?" she sighs. There it is. She is right. I feel the same way. Sometimes honoring my parents can be fun and easy, but other times it is hard and confusing. I would rather not think about it and focus on something fun that makes me feel better.

Honoring a parent is easy when they are loving, kind and caring. But none of us are always loving, kind, and caring. Sometimes we are cruel, dismissive, and distant. God is not asking us to only honor our parents when they are worthy of honor or when it is easy. Honoring my parents means picking up the phone and having the conversation I'm afraid to have. It means setting aside time for my husband and I to grieve that his mom has been gone for twenty years. Honoring them is asking for forgiveness when I hurt them and extending them forgiveness when they hurt me. I remember the way they have loved me and the lessons they have taught me. I thank God for the prayers they have prayed for me and the songs they have sung over me. I pray that God would help me see my parents the way he sees them: bearing his image, living in a broken and fallen world, needing Jesus to restore and redeem them.

So this is my prayer. Father in heaven, help us learn to honor our parents. Fill us with your grace, mercy, and truth. Forgive us for the ways we have dishonored them in our thoughts, words, and actions. Holy Spirit we need you to move in us and give us the energy, time, and desire to remember our parents and love them as you do. As a church, may the way we honor our parents be a powerful and beautiful act of worship that points the world to you.

REFLECTION

What is one way you can honor your parents in this next week?

MY NEARSIGHTED VIEW OF WORK

... but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. –Ephesians 6:6-8

I know very well the feelings of discouragement when hard work is not rewarded, or even acknowledged, in the way I expect. I unknowingly slip into believing that a mediocre effort will be just fine to “get the job done.” When pleasing the people in authority becomes the goal, the bar either becomes just low enough to meet their expectations, or crushingly unattainable. My happiness fluctuates with their mood, and any larger sense of purpose goes out the window. This nearsighted view of my work diminishes my day into checked boxes and keeping up appearances.

Paul shows us another way. Our work exists in the context of the kingdom, in relation to our Father and in mysterious union with Jesus. Not only are we brothers and sisters to Christ, we are bondservants of Christ: we now work unto the Lord of love. So our work is always ultimately provided by Him, empowered by Him, and completed for Him. He is a good Master.

During times when we find no approval or reward in our work we can say, “when He has tried me I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). He is refining us by every challenge and difficulty in our work to look to Him, who made and adores us. He desires us to see how is He pleased with our work; that there is joy in living and breathing and having our being in Him.

So, fellow worker in the Lord Jesus Christ, your faithful, quiet, thorough work does not go unnoticed. There are hosts of spiritual beings that care deeply about your obedience in your work. Most beautifully of all, the King of kings, our Father, is pleased with you; who says, “this is my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased.”

REFLECTION

Where have you felt discouraged in your work recently? Spend time meditating and praying on God's provision and joy in our work.

THE TENSION OF WORK

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man. –Ephesians 6:5-7

The workplace has always been an area of tension for me. Even as I write these words I struggle to focus because I'm feeling emotionally spent after entering into some really hard situations this past week. Work is often the place where darkness constantly crashes into the light, lies bump up against the truth we profess, and brokenness is ever prevalent. I feel the tension. All the time. I can easily become overwhelmed, anxious, and even apathetic. I am caught between moments of wanting to toss my career out the window and then other moments when I run forward with enthusiasm, passion, and hope.

The reality remains that while there are joys, the somber weightiness of work requires much of me and challenges my heart's posture. As I read through this passage that follows out of mutual submission out of reverence for Christ, I am struck by Paul's language around the heart: sincerity, reverence, good will, and obedience. This is based on an understanding that we are all ultimately servants of Christ, whether we are in the role of "bondservant" or "master". Yikes.

This "heart" theme nags at me, especially when I consider the motivations that underlie my actions in the workplace in a given day. So often my varied emotions — frustration, apathy, anxiety, to name a few — are actually idolatry indicators. I am trying to look good, desiring the approval of others, or even seeking to somehow control the actions and behaviors of those around me. My heart is SO prone to wander.

And yet, "we are bondservants of Christ." When I reflect back upon Ephesians 1 and 2, where Paul unpacks who believers are: beloved children saved by grace, indwelt and empowered by His Spirit, and known by a love that surpasses knowledge! THIS is our identity and motivation for how we can begin to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. Which means that we can "work as to the Lord and not to man."

Because we are Christ's bondservants, we can rejoice in the truth that it's no accident He has placed us in our workplaces, homes, or wherever we may be serving. Our hearts rest secure because they have been freed and transformed by Christ. We have power to renounce other masters that compete for our allegiance. When we do this, it does not mean we rebel against our earthly masters or lord our influence over others, but rather we enter into whatever He has called us with hope, fully present and confident in the Lord

REFLECTION

What evidence do you see of your heart's posture to work and the Lord? Where do you need to remember your true identity in Christ as His bondservant?

LIVING IN THE POWER OF GOD

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might ... In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. –Ephesians 6:10,16

There was a time that I thought becoming a Christian meant life was going to be perfect. I thought saying I believed, joining a small group, and attending church on Sundays would take away all my troubles and fears. I knew nothing about reading scripture, praying, or being in real community. I was not prepared for what being a Christian really meant. I didn't know I was in a spiritual warfare, and that I had upset the enemy. I was not aware of the armor of God or know how to put it on.

I lived on a mountaintop for a moment. Then came the flaming darts of the evil one. These flaming darts consumed me and I fell hard. With no armor, I was living my life unprotected from the schemes of the evil one. I was trying to give up sin in my own strength without seeking the truth of how to give it up. In other words, I was trying to live on my own power and not God's.

By God's grace I was brought back into fellowship. My eyes and heart have been opened to the truth that it's His strength that I stand firm in. There are still times I neglect to put on the armor of God. I start to feel those flaming darts once again but I'm able to take up the shield of faith. I look to Jesus and see that He does not ask us to do anything He has not done himself. So I'm reminded that I still need to be prepared with God's word and prayer.

I now understand that when I don't put on the armor not only am I exposed but my fellowship, the body of Christ, is exposed. We are in this spiritual war together. I have to put on the armor not only to protect myself but to also protect my brothers and sisters who stand shoulder to shoulder with me.

REFLECTION

What is one area of your life where you feel "exposed" to spiritual warfare? How does the passage speak to that?

TRUE STRENGTH AND MIGHT

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. –Ephesians 6:10-11

Like many guys, when I encounter a broadcast bidding one to “be strong,” my emotional and volitional antennae are finely tuned to receive it. Similarly, the concepts of strength and might, particularly the physical variety (and all the more when armor is thrown into the mix), have an almost natural allure; I resonate with them, and they with me.

However, Paul’s bold charge regarding strength at the end of Ephesians is of a different sort than typically comes to mind. Unlike the countless directives to be strong that are given to us day-to-day—by society, others, and ourselves—Paul’s command is to look without, rather than within, for the strength we require.

This seemingly peculiar instruction, which cuts hard against the grain of worldly wisdom, is grounded in an accurate discernment of unseen spiritual realities. Though he employs the metaphor of a Roman soldier—renowned even today for their physical feats and stoic resolve—Paul cautions us that we are engaged in a fundamentally different type of battle: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

As such, the weapons of our warfare are likewise spiritual in nature. Just as each element of a Roman soldier’s physical armament occupied an indispensable place among the whole, so each element of our spiritual armament is vital to our success in “stand[ing] firm against” our spiritual foes. Though strength and might belong to the Lord, victorious obedience requires us to put on what God graciously supplies for our good and His glory.

And so, as is often the case in Scripture, we find that things are not as they seem, not as the world would have us believe. True strength and might, the provision of genuine fortitude in the face of otherwise insurmountable odds, come not from within, but without. Having been liberated from self, we can look with humble thanks to “Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (3:20).

REFLECTION

How does the world encourage a misplaced trust in self? How, as Christians, can we guard against the temptation to believe this lie?