

Weekly Devotional



July 4-8, 2011

Prayers

Monday: Pray for our Nation, our President, and those who serve us in our military and government agencies.

Tuesday: Pray for the VBS preparation, especially today as the staff trains 400 junior and senior high school students to work during the VBS week. Some of these youth do not yet have solid relationships with Jesus.

Wednesday: Pray for those who make use of our Shepherd's Pantry and those who serve there.

Thursday: Pray for those who serve as missionaries around the world. Pray for World Vision, Compassion International, our friends in Ecuador, India, and Chinle.

Friday: Pray for our VBS this next week, especially as the staff works hard this weekend preparing the campus for close to 900 children and youth.



Monday

Read 2 Chronicles 7:11-22; Amos 2:6-8; 3:14-4:13



My first trip out of the United States was in 1975. It was to the Soviet Union (now Russia) for six weeks. When I arrived at home, my dad's comment was that it was the best money he ever spent. I think it was because I came home more conservative than when I left. I can remember the whole time I was gone feeling very safe and secure. "After all," I told myself, "no one would want to start an international incident by harming American college students." Since that time I have often traveled outside the United States. Each time I come home counting my blessings. But increasingly traveling on an American passport feels less secure. Sometimes I find myself feeling like others actually might want to create a name for themselves by harming an American. Sometimes I find myself wishing I could travel on Lisette's Canadian passport.

I was a history major in college. I remember studying about the great empires of the world, empires that no longer exist. In seminary I studied church history. There was a time when the great center of Christianity was in Turkey, then Rome, then Germany, France, the British Isles, the United States. Today the great centers of world evangelism are found in Africa and parts of South America. What once seemed so imposing can easily pass away.

When we suffer loss, we often want to blame someone besides ourselves, sometimes rightly so. But God does not give us that option. He does not call us to point the finger at others but to get down on our knees and pray ourselves. We are called to do inventory in our own lives, asking God to point out our sins and then confess them along with the sins of others as if they were ours.

Israel was a great country under Solomon, and the temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. With Solomon's death, the kingdom was split in two and within a few hundred years the temple would be in ruins. The prophets give us a glimpse into the cause. People went through the motions of worship without ever letting the worship affect their hearts. People forgot the Sabbath. They forgot about the poor and only cared about their own riches.

Today as we celebrate our great nation, which can seem imposing to the eyes of the world, let us take time to do a heart check. Let's not point fingers at others, but only at ourselves, that God might heal our land and enable us to continue to be a light of love to the world.

Tuesday

Read Genesis 28:10-22; 30:25-43; 32:22-32



Family members can be embarrassing, but they are family and we are stuck with them. Bible characters are much like family members; in fact, they are a part of our family. Some of them we might like to disown. But in reality they are very much like us. And like us, if anything good comes out of their lives, it is not because of what they do; it is only because of God's grace and His work in their lives.

Jacob started off as a “mama’s boy.” Isaac loves Esau, but Rebekah took Jacob under her wing. Esau was a hunter. Jacob never ventured far from home. He had smooth skin, which meant he probably didn’t do a lot of work either. As we get to know Jacob, we see him as an opportunist and a deceiver who eventually runs to his relatives for protection, where he will continue to deceive and cheat as he seeks to obtain for himself great riches.

But as we read between the lines of the story, even though it appears that Jacob is in charge of his own life, what we see is God working to fulfill His promise, a promise He made even before Jacob was born. When Jacob eventually ends up running from his father-in-law, he runs smack into God; and in desperation he hangs on to God, demanding from Him a renewal of the blessing.

Looking into Jacob’s family, we see jealousy and dysfunction. His family is definitely not a family that one would use on a poster board advertising what a Christian family might be like. But from this family comes the nation of Israel.

The questions become, though: What part did Jacob play? What was the work of God? In our lives as in Jacob’s, we make a mess, God cleans it up, and He blesses us so that we might bless others. Our job is to hang on to God, to not let go, and to recognize that if any good comes into our lives or out of our lives, it is a grace gift from God for which we are to be indebted and grateful. Are you depending on yourself or your work, or are you relaxing and hanging on to God? Remember, it’s all a grace gift despite your hard work and ingenuity—and definitely not because of it.



Wednesday

Jonah 1-4

We first run across Jonah in Sunday School (for those of us who grew up in the church). He is a favorite story, being swallowed by a whale and all. But I am not so sure he is someone we want our children to emulate. Jonah is another one of those embarrassing relatives. But again, many of us can relate. Have you ever disobeyed God?

The story begins with God asking Jonah to go to Nineveh. He asks Jonah to call the Ninevites to repentance. If they do not repent, God promises to destroy them. Jonah's response is to run in the opposite direction. (Tarshish is in Spain—at the time the farthest point west in the known world.) Has God ever asked you to share your faith with someone? How did you respond? Have you ever felt God asking you to confront or tell the truth to someone and respond by figuratively running in the opposite direction?

What I love about this story is that those who are unbelievers are more responsive to God than Jonah. For example, the sailors try everything not to throw Jonah overboard, which is a rather loving thing to do, considering the circumstances. But recognizing God's judgment, they eventually do toss Jonah into the sea. When the Ninevites hear about God, they repent. And still Jonah pouts. He has been saved by a whale, and yet he gets mad at God because the Ninevites were his enemies. He had grown up praying that God would let loose His justice (translated vengeance) on the Ninevites; instead God brings them mercy.

Have you ever asked God to bring harm to someone, well, at least asked God to give them what you think they deserve? Have you ever refused to pray for an enemy? Have you ever held back forgiveness? Have you ever pouted because you did not like the way God was blessing someone?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf6f-8Kd50Y> is a link to a YouTube video that comes from the Veggie Tale version of Jonah. The refrain of the song is: "Our God is a God of second chances." Christians are often embarrassing. We are often an embarrassment to God. But God is patient. He works with us and in us, all the while using us to bring love, forgiveness and hope to others. What a great God we serve.

Who do you need to give a second chance to? Where do you need to let God give you a second chance? Is there something He is calling you to do today?

Thursday

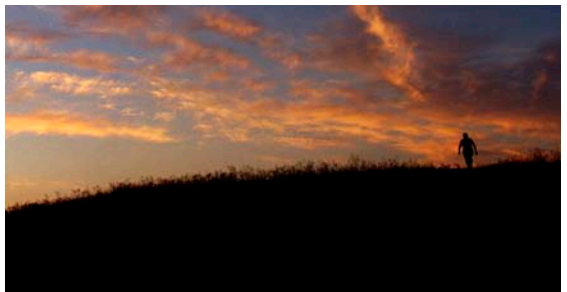
1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16

Have you ever felt foolish trying to share Jesus with someone? You are not alone. The Jews were looking for a conquering king as their messiah. The Greeks looked to their gods, and in comparison with the earthly Jesus, Jesus was lacking in so many ways. Our world today looks to follow people with good looks, wealth, power and influence. We Christians preach a Jesus who died, a Jesus who calls for humility and service to others. We love gifts, but at a certain level we want to earn what we have. We do not want to be beholden to anyone. And Jesus comes and says: *You cannot in any way earn my love; you can only receive it.* And we end up indebted to Him.

I have always loved that Jesus' first disciples were tax collectors and fishermen (cheats and simple working folks). But when it came to writing most of the New Testament, Paul, an extremely well-educated, gifted man, was called upon. God is not against wisdom; but He desires that our starting point is not the wisdom of the world, but the wisdom of His revelation. Paul, though, did not preach lofty philosophy. His message was simple: Jesus was crucified for our mistakes and waywardness.

Each generation thinks it has come so far and knows so much more than the last. In reality each generation only builds on its foolishness. Computers, cell phones, nuclear energy, going to the moon and back, and having the comforts we so enjoy in North America do not make one wise. Wisdom is found through a personal relationship with Jesus, and this starts not from knowing all things, but from admitting that we know nothing other than our need for a savior.

Here, though, is the good news. We might sound silly when we try to share the gospel with another person. But if another person comes to faith in Jesus, it will not be because of what we say. It will be because the Holy Spirit opens his or her heart to the wisdom of God. Our job is not to convince someone of the truths of Jesus; we are to be able to present them (and Paul did a great job of this). Our job is to present Jesus crucified. Our job is to let others see Jesus in us and to see the difference that His forgiveness, the cross, grace and mercy make in our lives.



Friday

2 Corinthians 4, 2 Corinthians 11:17-12:10



When I graduated from seminary, Lewis Smedes preached the baccalaureate sermon. His message was simple: “Be cracked pots.” He said that our temptation would be to try to blow people away with our knowledge, quote Greek and Hebrew, and strive to reason someone into the faith. He said that if we took that route, the route of earthly wisdom, we would fail miserably. Instead, He said, “Be cracked pots, jars of clay.”

The clay jars that Paul refers to here are jars that were used to carry around candles. They were actually lanterns, with the light of candles shining out of the cracks. The jars themselves were of little value; the value came from the light within. The challenge is to allow the light of Jesus to shine out of the cracks in our lives—the sin, the weaknesses, the areas of our life that are not together. Unfortunately, we spend more time making sure the jars look nice, and in the process we often try to cover up the cracks.

Oswald Chambers says it this way: “One of the greatest proofs that you are drawing on the grace of God is that you can be totally humiliated before others without displaying even the slightest trace of anything but His grace.”

Personally, I do not like being humiliated. I do not do well with showing people my weaknesses. Our world tells us continually to be strong, to get it together, and to lead from our strengths. But Christ shines the brightest in the lives of those who are broken. And so the question becomes: Do I want people to see me or to see Jesus? When people see any individual’s accomplishments, they might be a little impressed. But when they see what Jesus is able to accomplish through a broken person, they have to stop and ask whether there just might be some truth to Jesus’ claims.

Paul’s life was a great example of this. When he preached about himself, he never preached about his accomplishments. Instead, he always preached from his point of sin, from his point of weakness, declaring the grace, love, forgiveness and life of Jesus. Rather than being embarrassed about the cracks in our armor, Paul exhorts us to let the light of Jesus shine out. How are we doing?



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