



Monday

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

It has been said that our lives are the only Bible some people will ever read. In a sense, these verses say that the only glimpse of God that some people will get is in our own lives. What do our lives say about God and what does it mean to approach Him? Because the temple curtain has been torn in two, God is approachable. He is assessable to everyday simple folks. He is present and in the midst of whatever is going on in our lives. But if God is a Holy God, if He died to forgive us and empower us with the Holy Spirit, shouldn't our lives be holy? The early Christians were "noted for their fidelity, truthfulness, contentment, respect for parents, love for neighbors, purity, patience in the face of persecution and kindness to strangers. They cared for widows and orphans. They treated slaves with unusual kindness and they served the poor, often sacrificially. Such behavior, Aristides noted, brought prosperity to the whole empire."* Christianity grew during those first years under persecution, not because of high-profile evangelists and big-budget programs, but because of the attractive nature of these early believers and their network of relationships. The church lived by a different ethic, with different priorities. During the 5th century when Christians were no longer persecuted, when Christianity had become the "state" religion, the early Desert Fathers withdrew from society practicing periods of solitude, fasting, all night prayer vigils, and poverty in order to show that they were different because of Jesus. This was a little extreme, to say the least, but the question remains, does my life show that I serve a Holy God? What does my life say about who God is? Do people really see that I am different because of Jesus? Do people look at me and want what I have?

*Aristides, an Athenian philosopher who lived in the second century as quoted by Gerald L. Sittser in *Water from a Deep Well*.

Daily Prayer

Lord, forgive me for the ways I have not fully loved others, nor the ways I have not fully loved you.

Tuesday

Hebrews 4:14-18

Because the temple curtain has been torn in two we can come into the presence of God. Every sin in our lives has been taken care of. We are declared "clean", "pure", "holy". This is one of the areas in which faith comes to play. I do not feel that way, I know my inner thoughts, I know my secret sins, but Jesus says, "they are taken care of. Live as I see you, acceptable, worth dying for, valuable, and completely clean." But this Hebrews verse teaches another great truth; when we come into God's presence we are not coming before someone who does not understand. No, we are coming before One who has been through all that we have been through, tempted as we have been. One who understands not only our situation, but also our emotional pain and the longings of our hearts. We are coming before someone who not only died for us, but one who rules over heaven and earth and one who has the ability to answer our requests. Thus, when we approach God we should do so with a gracious boldness and a sense of confidence that God will hear and answer our requests. This truth is important when we sense a distance between us and God, for it reminds us that the distance is on our part and not His. Charles Spurgeon once said: "Faith enables us so to rejoice in the Lord that our infirmities become platforms for the display of his grace."* But it is also important when it comes to praying for others, especially those who are not yet believers or still young in their walk. We are called to boldly take the requests before God. What a great witness it is when we stop and pray for someone immediately upon their sharing a request. To receive mercy is to not receive what we deserve. To receive grace is to receive that which we do not deserve. What are you afraid to ask God for? God is not just interested in ministry (that which He is trying to accomplish long term in the world), He is interested in the lives of His ministers with whom He wants to be in relationship).

*quoted from the Life Application Study Bible.

Daily Prayer

God, we ask that you would enter into the lives of our loved ones that do not know you.

W e d n e s d a y

Hebrews 12:4-13; 1 Corinthians 11:31-32

The 1 Corinthians passage comes at the end of Paul's instructions about receiving the Lord's Supper. In the context of this letter, Paul is writing to correct some of the practices of the believers in Corinth. One of the practices was when they gathered in homes for worship and for receiving of communion the rich would arrive first, have a time of fellowship, eating and drinking, and the poor and the slaves would arrive later after their daily work was done. They would have to make do with the leftovers at the potluck, so to speak. On top of that, often the rich would end up eating and drinking too much. Thus, when they celebrated communion it was not in keeping with what the meal signified (unity with one another and God, sacrificial commitment and a desire to be filled and empowered by God's Spirit, along with being forgiven). Paul says if they would discipline themselves, they would not have to come under God's discipline. Like in Psalm 79, here and in Revelation chapters 2-3, we see God warning us that like a loving Father He wants more for us. He wants transformed lives and He will allow circumstances to transform us. In one sense, He disciplines us now so when at the final judgment God will be seen as fair. The question becomes: "Are we open to His discipline?" Often when I am disciplined I want to blame someone else or my circumstances rather than let God do His work in me. Not everything that occurs in life is part of God's discipline and yet it doesn't hurt to ask: "God are you trying to teach me something in this?" Confession is an important part of transformation. God wants to transform us, to make us more like Jesus; but if we do not pause and take an inventory of our lives, our behaviors, and priorities we will find that God will use other means to get our attention. Look back over the last few months. Where have you seen God trying to get your attention? In what ways have you changed because of your walk with God.

Daily Prayer

God, where were you in those moments that upset me these past few days?

T h u r s d a y

Hebrews 10

Many of the truths we have looked at this week and in Sunday's sermon are highlighted in this chapter. Jesus is the final sacrifice, the curtain is torn in two and we can approach God with confidence. But having said this, now that we are the temple of God's Holy Spirit our lives should be different. Because we have the Spirit within us, the law is now written on our hearts. The Spirit teaches us, speaks to us, and brings to mind the ways of God and we are called to obey those promptings. But this is all easier said than done. I love wood fires. But in order to build a good fire the logs need to touch each other. In order to have the fire of the Holy Spirit in our lives we need to be in touch with other Christians. This means that we need to discipline ourselves to gather on weekends for worship, to join a small group, to allow others to pray with us and on our behalf, and to help us. We cannot be encouragers if we do not know what is going on in each others lives. This means we need to be honest with each other. Becky Pippert (a Christian author) once said that when she was going to school to be a counselor they would often have group counseling sessions. During these sessions everyone was real honest, but no one (because Jesus was not brought into the midst) had answers to the problems they were facing. After these group sessions she would often drive across town to her prayer group. There people would pray for one another but they did not share honestly what was going on. This group had the answer and the power available to change the circumstances but they were not open about what was really going on. What about you? Is there some way you need to better engage with other Christians? Have you made gathering for worship a priority?

Daily Prayer

Deepen my friendships that we might spur each other on towards Christ.

F r i d a y

Psalm 40; Philippians 4:4-9

One of the trade marks of the Psalms is "praise". Even in the midst of difficulties we find the Psalmist either praising God, or promising to praise God. Think back for a minute. The last time something really wonderful happened in your life, what did you do? You probably immediately called (or texted) someone about how great the situation was. You probably found yourself singing praises about what was happening in your life. Often we lose sight of God's greatness because we do not spend enough time "praising" Him. We are often discouraged, perplexed, and weak because we see the glass of our lives half full. But when we begin to focus on all the great things God has done, when we focus on how great our God is, our countenance is lifted and not only do we discover the peace of God, but also a deep profound sense of joy. Nehemiah says that "the joy of the Lord is our strength." Take some time today and make a list of things you can be joyful about. Try writing a Psalm yourself. You might begin by being honest about the circumstances you find yourself in, but then, like the Psalmist, list the ways God might possibly use the circumstances to His glory, and your good. Conclude by promising to tell others about God's goodness.

Daily Prayer

God, you are gracious and these are the ways I have seen that . . .

God you are merciful and these are the ways I have seen that. . .

Psalm 79 and Places of Worship

When bad things happen to God's people the question always becomes, where is God? That is precisely the question Asaph addresses in this Psalm: "God, the nations who do not know you will think that you are weak, and that the Babylonian gods have defeated you". The reality is that God was disciplining his people. The people of Jerusalem believed that, because of the temple, their city would never be defeated; that God was in their midst and even if they did evil or ignored Him they were safe. But our God is not mocked. He does not dwell in temples built by human hands, though He has, at times, met His people in these places of worship. God's desire is for the whole world to come to know Him as He is, and if His people are giving the wrong impression of who He is, He is not above disciplining them. Discipline always has transformation as its goal, and not punishment for punitive sake.

The Psalm begins with the people of Jerusalem being defeated because of their sin and the temple in ruins (vv. 1-2). The surrounding nations laugh (v.4), and question God's power and presence. Verses 5-6 inform us that what is happening is in response to God's discipline. The psalmist then appeals to God to, in his mercy, restore the nation of Israel and to bring his vengeance upon those who have conquered her (6-12). The Psalmist concludes on a note of prophetic hope. Asaph says when God accomplishes this the people will again worship and praise God (v. 13).

Places of worship throughout history have changed. Adam and Eve met with God, in the cool of the day, while walking in the Garden. The early Patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob etc) built stone alters as places of worship. Moses met with God first in a burning bush and then on a mountain top. When the Israelites came out of Egypt God gave elaborate commands for the building of a Tabernacle (a large tent that surrounded a smaller one where the Ark of the Covenant was placed). It was thought that God was where the Ark was. When Israel entered the Promise Land the people continued to use the Tabernacle as a place of worship. When David became King, and built his palace in Jerusalem, he felt guilty that he lived in such a rich structure while God dwelt in a tent. In 2 Samuel 7 we learn that God did not mind dwelling in a tent because it allowed Him to move as His people moved. God allowed a temple be built but gave the job to Solomon because David was a warrior. Solomon's temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Babylonians destroyed it. It was rebuilt during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and destroyed again by the Persians, and again rebuilt by Herod just before the coming of Jesus. This third temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Though the Jews gathered in local synagogues, the temple was the place they went to meet with God. The Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem, is all that remains of Herod's temple. Jews pray there today because they believe it is as close to the "Holy of Holies" (the earthly presence of God) that they can go without desecrating it. The early Christians continued to worship God at the temple until the Jews kicked them out. They then met for years in homes. During times of persecution they met in underground tombs called catacombs in relative safety because the soldiers feared the dead spirits. As Jim mentioned, during the last two hundred years church buildings have changed tremendously and have been the subject of much theological debate. The overriding principle of the New Testament seems to be that God no longer dwells in one place, but in the lives of believers. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God is present when we gather in His name.