

NEW MORNING MERCIES

A Daily Gospel Devotional

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional

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Ben, you asked to be mentored and you became a substantial contributor. Isn't that just the way our God works?

INTRODUCTION

Each morning, I “tweet” three gospel thoughts. That is, I post three brief thoughts about the Christian faith on the social media site Twitter. My goal is to confront and comfort people with the life-rattling truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want people to see that the grace of the gospel is not so much about changing the religious aspect of their lives, but about everything in life that defines, identifies, and motivates them. I am calling people to see the gospel as a window through which they are to look at everything in life.

By the Lord’s grace, these tweets have been well received, and numerous people have encouraged me to use them as the basis for a devotional book, with 365 meditations on the gospel truths expressed in the tweets. The book you are holding in your hands is my response to those requests. Each day’s reading opens with one of my gospel tweets, lightly edited, and then a meditation that expands on it.

It is a daunting task to sit down and write 365 devotions. My willingness to attempt such a feat wasn’t rooted in my pride in my ability as an author, but in my confidence in the amazing breadth and depth of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. As I began writing, I was excited to do some spiritual spelunking, that is, venturing down into the cavernous depths of the faith that I hold so dear. I did so, not so much as an expert, but as a pilgrim or an explorer. I sat down to write, not thinking that I had the gospel mastered, but that there was evidence in my life that I needed to be further mastered by the very message of grace that sits at the epicenter of everything I do in ministry.

Now, I have to be honest here—I didn’t write this devotional just for you. No, I wrote it for myself as well. There is no reality, principle, observation, truth, command, encouragement, exhortation, or rebuke in this devotional that I don’t desperately need myself. I’m like you; familiarity causes me not to treasure the gospel of Jesus Christ as I should. As the themes of grace get more and more familiar and common, they don’t capture my attention and awe as they once did. When amazing realities of the gospel quit commanding your attention, your awe, and your worship, other things in your life will capture your attention instead. When you quit celebrating grace, you begin to forget how much you need grace, and when you forget how much you need grace, you quit seeking the rescue and strength that only grace can give. This means you begin to see yourself as more righteous, strong, and wise than you actually are, and in so doing, you set yourself up for trouble.

So this devotional is a call for you and me to remember. It’s a call to remember the horrible disaster of sin. It’s a call to remember Jesus, who stood in our place. It’s a call to remember the righteousness that is his gift. It’s call to remember the transforming power of the grace you and I couldn’t have earned. It’s a call to remember the destiny that is guaranteed to all of God’s blood-purchased children. It’s a call to remember his sovereignty and his glory. It’s a call to remember that remembering is spiritual war; even for this we need grace.

Introduction

The title of this devotional is not only a reference to the way the Bible talks about God's grace (Lam. 3:22–23), but also an allusion to a famous hymn that I think we should sing every day:

“Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
All I have needed thy hand hath provided—
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

One of the stunning realities of the Christian life is that in a world where everything is in some state of decay, God's mercies never grow old. They never run out. They never are ill timed. They never dry up. They never grow weak. They never get weary. They never fail to meet the need. They never disappoint. They never, ever fail, because they really are new every morning. Formfitted for the challenges, disappointments, sufferings, temptations, and struggles with sin within and without are the mercies of our Lord. Sometimes they are:

Awe-inspiring mercies
Rebuking mercies
Strengthening mercies
Hope-giving mercies
Heart-exposing mercies
Rescuing mercies
Transforming mercies
Forgiving mercies
Provision-making mercies
Uncomfortable mercies
Glory-revealing mercies
Truth-illuminating mercies
Courage-giving mercies.

God's mercies don't come in one color; no, they come in every shade of every color of the rainbow of his grace. God's mercies are not the sound of one instrument; no, they sound the note of every instrument of his grace. God's mercy is general; all of his children bask in his mercy. God's mercy is specific; each child receives the mercy that is designed for his or her particular moment of need. God's mercy is predictable; it is the fountain that never stops flowing. God's mercy is unpredictable; it comes to us in surprising forms. God's mercy is a radical theology, but it is more than a theology; it is life to all who believe. God's mercy is ultimate comfort, but it is also a call to a brand-new way of living. God's mercy really does change everything forever, for all upon whom this mercy is bestowed.

So read and remember God's new morning mercies and celebrate your identity as the object of mercy that reaches beyond the ability of the heart to grasp and the words of one author to describe.

SEPTEMBER 20

Hopelessness is the doorway to hope. You have to give up on yourself before you will be excited about the hope that is yours in Christ Jesus.

We tend to give ourselves far too much credit:

- We tend to attribute too much righteousness to ourselves.
- We tend to think we have more wisdom than we do.
- We tend to pride ourselves on having the “right” character.
- We tend to think of ourselves as being more patient than we are.
- We tend to regard ourselves as perseverant.
- We tend to think we are submissive and obedient.
- We tend to believe we are more committed to the kingdom of God than we are.
- We simply tend to see ourselves as more godly than we are.

Here’s the problem with this tendency: when you name yourself as righteous, when you attribute to yourself more maturity than you actually have, you don’t seek the grace that is your only hope. We don’t think we devalue grace, but that’s exactly what many of us do. Because we look at ourselves and conclude that we’re spiritually okay, we don’t tend to have a deep esteem and appreciation for the grace that is our only hope in life and in death. You see, only people who acknowledge how deep their need is and who admit that they have no ability whatsoever to meet that need on their own get excited about the grace that meets every one of their spiritual needs.

On the other hand, we don’t like to think of ourselves as needy, so we tend to minimize our sin. Sadly, many of us are far more concerned about the sin of others than our own. We pay far more attention to the spiritual needs of others than our own. Because we minimize our sin, seeing ourselves as righteous, we don’t cry out for and run after the rescuing and transforming grace that is ours as the children of God. As long as we still have hope in us—that is, hope in our ability to be righteous on our own—we won’t run after the grace that is offered us in Christ Jesus. It’s only when we are willing to give up on us that we seek the rescue that God offers us.

Yes, it really is true that hopelessness is the doorway to hope. Seeing yourself as hopeless and helpless if left to yourself initiates and ignites your pursuit of God’s grace. The fact is that we all give daily evidence of our continuing need for grace. Simply put, we have no ability to make it on our own. We still stand in desperate need of divine help. Are you willing to admit that and run to where grace can be found?

For further study and encouragement: Hebrews 4:14–16

SEPTEMBER 21

*Good is not good enough; complete conformity to
Christ's image is the plan of grace.*

Most of us are just too easily satisfied. It's not that we ask too much from our Savior. We have the polar opposite problem—we are willing to settle for far too little. Our personal goals, wishes, and dreams fall far short of God's plans and purposes for us. God will settle for nothing less than each of us being completely conformed to the likeness of his Son. He will finally and completely defeat sin and death. He will not abandon his purpose for any reason at any time. Our problem is that often we don't share his mind or buy into his purpose. Other mentalities capture us:

1. *The Consumer Mentality.* Here we're like religious shoppers. We really don't have functional loyalty to the plan of God. We're looking for a religious experience that is comfortable and meets our felt needs, and we have no problem in moving when we're dissatisfied.
2. *The "Good Is Good Enough" Mentality.* Here we're thankful for the changes that grace has brought into our lives, but we get satisfied too easily. We're satisfied with a little bit of biblical literacy or theological knowledge, a slightly better marriage, a little personal spiritual growth, and so on. We quit seeking, but God is far from being finished with transforming.
3. *The "This Bad Thing Can Work" Mentality.* Here we work to make the best out of what God says is not good. So, for example, a married couple is satisfied with marital détente; they learn to negotiate one another's idolatries rather than working toward a truly godly marriage.
4. *The Personal Comfort vs. Personal Holiness Mentality.* Here what captures our hearts is the craving for a life that is comfortable, pleasurable, predictable, and problem free. We tend to judge God's goodness based on how well life is working for us rather than on his zeal to make good on his redemptive promises to us.
5. *The Event vs. Process Mentality.* Here we are just impatient. We sort of want God to do the good things he has promised us, but we don't want to have to persevere through a lifelong process. We want God's work to be an event rather than a process, and when it's not, our commitment begins to lag.

Ask yourself today, "What do I really want from God?" Have you made the purposes of his grace your life purpose? Do you want what he wants or are you simply too easily satisfied?

For further study and encouragement: Philippians 2:1–18

SEPTEMBER 22

*There is no need to be paralyzed by the opinions of another.
God gives you the ultimate tool of self-assessment,
the mirror of his Word.*

It was twelve pages long, the kind of letter no one really wants to get. I didn't want to read it, but I knew I had to. She took me apart like a coroner doing an autopsy. Each paragraph was like a knife cutting into a different organ, searching for disease. The judgment was harsh and unrelenting. The examples of my failures in her eyes were many. There was little grace to be found in those twelve pages. When I got to the end of the letter, I felt that there was nothing left of me. I sat at my desk stunned. I was her pastor, but she had no respect for me whatsoever. I couldn't believe what I had read and I was paralyzed by the thought that others felt the same way. I felt glued to the seat, unable to move, without strength to continue. The next morning was worse. I woke up with a knot in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to run, to quit.

Now, no opinions of people should have that power, but often they do. Without knowing it, we put our identity and inner peace in the hands of the people around us. We look to them for what no flawed human being will ever be able to deliver. We ride the roller coaster of their views of us. We begin to do things not because they are right, but because we know they will please those whose opinion of us and acceptance of us mean more than they should. I think fear of man is a bigger motivation for many of us than we tend to admit.

The gospel of Jesus Christ frees us from this. First and foremost, it presents to us the only reliable standard of self-evaluation—the perfect mirror of the Word of God. Then it frees me from seeking my identity horizontally because I am given an eternal identity in Christ. It also frees me from being worried about being known or exposed because I know that nothing could ever be exposed about me that hasn't already been covered by the precious blood of Jesus. Further, it allows me to be approachable when people bring things to me that I need to hear and evaluate. I can do this because I know I'm a sinner and I know that the grace that has been given to me is greater than all of my sin. Finally, I am not worried about or haunted by what you think of me because I don't look to you for my inner sense of well-being. No matter how little I am appreciated by those around me, no matter how little I am understood, no matter how little I am loved, and no matter how little respect comes my way, I can go to bed in peace knowing that the one person who counts knows me thoroughly, but he will never turn his back on me even in light of his complete knowledge of my sin, weaknesses, and failures. Now, that's a reality that can free you from your bondage to the opinion of others.

For further study and encouragement: John 16:32

SEPTEMBER 23

*God's care comes in many forms. In his patience,
God cares enough to give ample time for his
grace to do its transforming work.*

When was the last time you reflected on the amazing patience of your heavenly Father? When was the last time you thanked him for his willingness to wait? Do you know that without God's incredibly patient heart, you and I would have no hope? God's patience is what gives time for his grace to do its work.

When I read through the Old Testament, I am blown away by the extent of God's patience. I have often thought that if I were on the joystick, given the degree of my impatience, Adam and Eve would've fallen in the morning, and Jesus would've come in the afternoon and then died and risen again that evening. But God's ways are not like my ways. Year laps upon year, decade upon decade, century upon century until literally thousands of years pass before Jesus comes to deal with the disaster of the fall. Yet Scripture says that Jesus comes at just the right moment (Rom. 5:6). This means that for all those years, God is preparing the world for the coming of the Savior.

I am also impressed by God's patience with Israel. We are hit with this when we read through the prophets. God doesn't just send one prophet to give one warning. No, in an amazing display of divine patience, he sends prophet after prophet, giving his children opportunity after opportunity to respond to his mercy.

I am also convicted by the patience of Jesus with his disciples. They never seem to get it quite right. Even as he is ascending, they are asking the wrong questions. But Jesus doesn't give up on them. He doesn't tell them that he has had it and that he is going to go out and pick new disciples. He gives time for his grace to transform this group of arrogant and confused men.

How can you and I not be grateful for God's patience with us? He doesn't demand of us instant maturity. He doesn't require that we get it right quickly. He doesn't teach us a lesson just once. He comes to us in situation after situation, each controlled by his sovereign grace, each designed to be a tool of transformation, and he works on the same things again and again. I don't like to have to repeat myself. I tend to want the people around me to understand quickly. I am grieved that my heart is still not like that of my Savior.

So God's care cannot be detached from his patience. It is his tender willingness to wait that allows his powerful grace to finish its transforming work. Thank God today for that patience. It is your hope. And as you are thanking him, pray that he will make you more like him—willing to give time for his mercy to do its work.

For further study and encouragement: 2 Peter 3:8–9

SEPTEMBER 24

*We wander. God pursues and reconciles. We stumble and fall.
God forgives and restores. We grow tired and weary.
God empowers us by his grace.*

It is a humbling and yet vital thing to acknowledge—you and I simply don't have much in our relationship with God and our growth in grace for which we can take credit. The fact of the matter is that we give daily proof of our ongoing need for that grace. The reality is that if we followed Jesus for a thousand years, we would need his grace as much for the next day as we did the first day that we believed.

He is the sun that gives us light. He is the refuge where we can hide. He is the water that nourishes us and the bread that feeds us. He is the solid rock on which we stand. He is the Captain who defends us against the enemy. He is wisdom, blessing us with the insight of truth. He is the Lamb that bore the penalty for our sin. He is the High Priest who daily brings our case to the Father. He is the faithful friend who will not forsake us even in our worst moments. He is the Giver who blesses us with spiritual riches that we could never earn. He is the One who makes us aware of our sin and brings conviction to our hearts. He is the Shepherd who seeks us when we have wandered and are lost, and brings us back to the fold of his care. None of these actions is a luxury for us. They are all necessary ingredients of our spiritual lives, yet they are not things that we could ever provide for ourselves. We are like babies, unable to meet our own needs and completely dependent on the love of our Father for life, sustenance, and health.

Thoughts of independent righteousness are a grand delusion. Taking credit for what only grace can produce is the height of spiritual arrogance. Thinking that the grace you once needed is no longer essential is a recipe for disaster. Without the patience, forgiveness, rescue, provision, transformation, and deliverance of his grace, we would have no spiritual hope whatsoever. We are not spiritually independent in any way. The opposite is true. Just as in the first moment we believed, we are always completely dependent on the grace of the Savior for every spiritual need. We cannot go it on our own. We have not produced fruit by our own righteousness and strength. There really is no good thing that we have that we have not received from God's gracious hand.

So there is no reason to boast. There is nothing for which we can take credit. All praise, honor, worship, and service go to God and God alone. He sought us. He birthed us. He sustains us. He matures us. He protects us. And he will finally deliver us. To him be the glory. Amen.

For further study and encouragement: Luke 15:11–32

SEPTEMBER 25

Discouragement focuses more on the broken glories of creation than on the restoring glories of God's character, presence, and promises.

What captures your mind controls your thoughts and dominates the desires of your heart. Outside of intentional moments of public or private worship, what occupies your private meditation? That which dominates your meditation shapes the way you view yourself, life, and God, and your view of those things shapes the choices you make and the actions you take.

Is your meditation kidnapped by:

- the disloyalty of that good friend?
- the sorry state of your finances?
- disappointment with your church?
- the dysfunction of your extended family?
- problems in your marriage?
- the daily struggles of parenting?
- your frenetic and demanding schedule?
- physical sickness?
- the daily hardships of life in this fallen world?

Now, you may be thinking: “Paul, what do I do with this stuff? How am I supposed to respond?” Well, one of the themes of this devotional is that biblical faith—that is, true faith in the existence, presence, promises, and provisions of God—never requires you to deny reality in any way. It is not biblical faith to try to convince yourself that things are better than they actually are. It is not biblical faith to work to make yourself feel good about what is not good. Biblical faith looks reality in the face and does not flinch.

On the other hand, there is a crucial difference between facing hard realities and allowing those realities to dominate the meditation of your heart (see God's counsel to Joshua, Josh. 1:1–9). Here's what biblical faith does: it examines reality, but it makes the Lord its meditation. It is only when you look at life through the window of the glory of the One who has been the source of your meditation that you see reality accurately. The more you meditate on your problems, the bigger and more insurmountable they seem to be. Meditating on God in the midst of your trouble reminds you once again that the God to whom grace has connected you is magnificent in his grandeur and glory. He is infinitely greater than any problem you could ever experience. Then your responses are shaped by his glory and not by the seeming size of your problems.

For further study and encouragement: Psalm 143

SEPTEMBER 26

*True faith lives on the basis of two unshakable realities—
that God really does exist and that he always
rewards those who seek him.*

Grace has positioned me
on two foundation stones
that have redefined
my identity,
redirected my purpose,
reshaped my desires,
rescued my thoughts,
and reformed my living.
I have new reason
to get up in the morning
and face my day
with courage,
hope
joy,
confidence,
and rest.
Your grace has changed
everything,
for it has made me
sure
that you exist
and that
you reward
those who seek you (Heb. 11:6).

For further study and encouragement: Hebrews 11

SEPTEMBER 27

No need to fear what God will ask of you, because in the asking is always the promise of grace to empower your heart and hands.

Consider God's call to Moses to lead the Israelites out of their cruel captivity in Egypt. In Moses's reply, we see a reflection of our frequent response when God asks something of us:

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." . . .

But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." (Ex. 3:7–12; 4:10–13)

Throughout this amazing encounter with the Lord, Moses does what we often do as we evaluate what God has put on our plates and how he has called us to respond. Moses omits the ultimate fact that changes everything about the way we think and should respond to God's call. That fact is not the difficulty of the calling or your perceived ability to answer that call. It is not the size of the situation or the size of your wisdom and strength. This life-changing fact is that the God of glory and grace, who calls his people to do his will on earth, always goes with them as they obey his calling. He never sends without going too. When he sends you, he doesn't give you a bunch of stuff to help you along the way. He always gives you himself because *he* is what you need and he alone can give you what is required.

When Moses finally says, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else," it is clear that he does not understand the present power of his identity as a child of God. Because he is God's chosen child, he is never, ever alone. Because he is God's child, God will never send him on a task by himself. Hope for Moses's success is not to be found in his personal strength and wisdom, but in the expansive glory of the One who sent him. Remember today that when God sends, he goes too!

For further study and encouragement: Deuteronomy 31:1–8

SEPTEMBER 28

Laziness is rooted in self-love. It's taking ourselves off the hook, opting for the comfortable instead of the best. Grace isn't lazy.

It's hard to hear. We want to think it applies to others and not us. It's bad news that we need, but don't really want to consider. Here it is—as long as sin lives inside us, laziness will be an issue for us all. Before you quit reading and skip to the next devotion, let me explain.

Second Corinthians 5:15 says that Jesus came so that “those who live might no longer live for themselves.” Embedded in this phrase is a diagnostic that applies to every person who has ever lived. Paul is arguing here that the coming of and sacrifice of Jesus were necessary because the DNA of sin is selfishness. Sin causes me to ignore God's existence and his rightful claim on every area of my life. Because God is not in his rightful place in my living, that is, in the center of it all, I then insert myself in that place. My life becomes all about me. The borders of my concern go little further than my concerns for me. I reduce my focus down to the small space of my wants, my needs, and my feelings. In ways that really do shape my living, I make it all about me. The desires of my heart are gobbled up by my ease, my comfort, my pleasure, and my success. I want what I want, and when I get what I want, I am happy.

Now, because as a sinner I tend to make life all about me, I work to avoid anything that is hard or uncomfortable to do. I tend to curse hard work, the need to serve others, the call to persevere, the inescapable reality of suffering, the requirement of daily labor, the call to engage myself in the work of a bigger kingdom than my own, or the moral requirement to use my gifts for the glory of someone other than myself.

There are ways in which sin makes us all work avoiders. It tends to make us all think that the good life is the life free of the need for labor. But the fact of the matter is that we were created to work, and not just for the good of our own lives, but in willing and joyful submission to the One who created us. Work is not a curse; it is our created identity. One of the reasons we were put on earth is to care for the physical world that God made. It is true that the work that we are called to do in submission to the One who made us has been made more difficult because we now labor in a seriously broken world; but before the fall of the world, Adam and Eve were instructed to work. So laziness is another one of those ever-present arguments for our need for grace. Until grace has completed its work, we will tend to find work more of a burden than a calling and a joy. Grace and grace alone is able to make otherwise lazy people industrious workers to the glory of God.

For further study and encouragement: Genesis 1–3

SEPTEMBER 29

God calls you to grow in your faith and then feeds you with the growth-producing nutrients of his grace and truth.

Are you growing in your faith? Do you care if you're not? Have you become satisfied with a little bit of Bible knowledge and a little bit of doctrinal understanding? Have you stopped feeding on the spiritual food of God's grace even though that grace has not yet come anywhere near to finishing its work in you? Do you hunger for the grace you've been given to continue to do its transforming work in the places where there's evidence that there's more work to be done? Are you satisfied with being a little more religious or a little more spiritual? Could it be that you claim to be a believer, but are satisfied to have parts of your life shaped by other values? Does your relationship with God really shape the way you think about and act in your marriage, in your friendships, in your parenting, in your job, in your finances, as a citizen or neighbor, in your private pursuits, or in your secret thoughts and desires? As you examine yourself, are you able to be satisfied in places where God is not? Are you pursuing the grace that you've been given because you know that you regularly demonstrate that you are not yet a grace graduate?

When I think on this topic, my mind immediately runs to two passages:

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:1–5)

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:11–14)

Be honest today—which passage best describes you? Are you that ravenous baby who can't get enough of his mother's milk or the person who should be mature enough to digest solid food, but isn't ready? Remember, you don't have to defend yourself or deny the evidence; the grace of Jesus has freed you from that. The cross of Jesus welcomes you to be honest because all the places where you need to be honest have been covered by the blood of Jesus. And remember too that it takes grace to admit how much you still need grace. That grace is yours in Jesus.

For further study and encouragement: Hebrews 5:11–6:12

SEPTEMBER 30

The life we couldn't live, he lived for us. The death we should have died, he died for us. The new life we need, he gives to us.

Only the amazing grace of God has the power to transport us from death to life. There is just no human effort that could accomplish this. Salvation is simply beyond our grasp. A relationship with God stands outside our reach. Moral perfection is a mountain too high for us to climb. Living to God's glory exceeds our finest motivation. Righteousness and wisdom fall outside the scope of our natural abilities. If left to ourselves, there is no way that we would ever be what we were created to be or would do the things we were made to do. We all fall short of God's standard and are all deserving of his penalty.

If you don't understand and accept the gravity of your condition and your inability to alter it, the Bible, and particularly the work of Christ, will make no sense to you at all. Why did God go to the history-shaping extent of sending his Son to earth? Why was it necessary for Jesus to live a completely perfect life for thirty-three years? Why was it important for him to walk in our shoes and experience the full range of the temptations that we face? Why was it vital for him to suffer and die? Why did there absolutely have to be a resurrection? Why? The answers to these questions can be found by tracing a thread that runs throughout the Bible. God went to this radical extent because there was no other way. We were not only hopelessly ensnared by sin and tragically guilty before God, but we were also completely unable to help ourselves. We were dead in our sin—about as able to help ourselves out of our condition as a corpse would be able to help itself out of its casket.

There had to be a Savior because we have no ability whatsoever to save ourselves. We can escape situations, locations, and relationships, but we cannot escape ourselves. We cannot run from who we are, what we have done, and what we deserve. The only hope is that God in redeeming love and glorious grace will move toward us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

So God sent his Son to be the second Adam. He would face the temptations that Adam faced, but he would not fall. He would obey perfectly where Adam disobeyed and he would willingly take on himself Adam's punishment. The second Adam would die in Adam's and his descendants' place. He would meet God's moral requirement and satisfy his anger, and in so doing, he would open the way again for us to have an eternal relationship with God. Everything Jesus did, he did as a substitute. Everything he did, he did for you.

For further study and encouragement: Romans 5:12–21

OCTOBER 1

*Because he is zealous to rescue you from you, God's care can be violent.
He rips you from what is dangerous to give you what is better.*

When you think of God's care, what picture comes into your mind? When you consider God's grace, what mental images does the term *grace* conjure up? Could it be that there are times in your life when you are crying out for the grace of God even though you're getting it? God's grace does not always come in the form of comfort and encouragement. His care doesn't always mean relief and release. Could it be that the "care" that we often cry out for is not the care that we really need?

There was a cycle in the life of the children of Israel that is very instructive. Remember that they were people just like us, and the accounts about them were written for our example and instruction, so that we would not fall into the same errors. In grace, God recorded for us their struggles with grace so that we would esteem and run toward the grace we've been given. Carefully examine the description that follows:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. . . . So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. . . .

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judg. 2:11–19)

The children of Israel were not on God's care agenda page. God sent the violent care of trouble in order to rescue their hearts from idolatry, but all that his children wanted was the situational care of freedom from their enemies, and when they got it, they turned back to their sinful ways. Today, what kind of care do you long for from the hands of your Messiah of grace?

For further study and encouragement: Judges 2–3

OCTOBER 2

*You simply must not underestimate sin
and you simply cannot overestimate grace.*

Think for a moment: whose sin do you tend to minimize? Your friends'? Your spouse's? Your children's? Your neighbors'? Your extended family members'? Your father's or mother's? Your boss's? For most of us, the problem is not that we underestimate the sin of others. No, we tend to do the opposite. We're typically all too focused on the failure of others. We find it all too easy to point out their flaws. We're all tempted to keep a running record of the specific sins of the people around us. If we were honest, most of us would have to humbly confess that we tend to be far more concerned about the sin of the people around us than our own. We tend to be hyperaware of the weaknesses of those living near us while we appear to be functionally blind to our own. For this reason, we begin to forget that we are more like them than unlike them, that there are few things that we can see in the lives of others that are not present in our own lives in some way.

Now, this outward concern/inward denial dynamic is not okay. Blindness to your own sin is a denial of the presence of personal spiritual need. Such a denial always leads to a devaluing of and a resistance to God's grace. Denying your need for grace and underestimating the power of what that grace can do never, ever leads to anything good.

Here's the problem—this side of forever, we are all very good at doing both. We're all very good at looking at our sin and naming it less than sin, and we all tend to degrade the glory of what grace has done, is doing, and will do. People who deny sin tend to not progressively conquer it, and people who devalue grace tend not to run to it for help. What we're talking about here are the two sides of a healthy Christian life. You confess that although you are in Christ, the presence of sin is still within you. However, it is being progressively defeated, and you humbly embrace the fact that you have been given glorious grace that can do for you what you could never do for yourself.

The admission of sin doesn't lead you somewhere dark and depressing, because you know you've been given grace that is greater than your sin, and your celebration of grace is real and heartfelt because it's done in the context of your confession of the very sin that grace addresses. Confession of sin without the celebration of grace leads to guilt, self-loathing, timidity, and spiritual paralysis. Embracing grace without the admission of sin leads to confident theological "always rightism," but does not result in change in your heart and life. So today, refuse to minimize sin, reject the temptation to devalue grace, and run to Jesus weeping and celebrating at the same time.

For further study and encouragement: 1 John 2:1–17

OCTOBER 3

*You don't have to understand everything in your life,
because your Lord of wisdom and grace understands it all.*

It is a paradox that many of us don't handle well. We were created by God to be rational human beings and we carry around with us a desire to know and understand, but we must not forget that we will never experience inner peace simply because all our questions have been answered. Biblical faith is not irrational, but it takes us beyond our ability to reason. As believers in our identity as God's image-bearers and the truthfulness of his Word, we do recognize that it is important to study, to learn, to examine, to evaluate, and to know. But we are not rationalists. We do not trust our reason more than we trust God. We do not reject what God says is true when it doesn't make sense to us, and we know that God's secret will leaves us with mysteries in our lives; mysteries that, even with the best of our theology, we won't be able to solve. Biblical literacy does not dispel all confusion and mystery from your life because while God reveals his will for you in the Bible, he does not reveal all the things he will do in your life for your good and his glory. God surprises you.

So you ask, "Where is peace to be found?" This question is answered clearly and powerfully in Isaiah 26:

You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.
Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock. (vv. 3–4)

This passage tells us where peace is to be found. It is never found in trying to figure out the secret will of God. It's not to be found in personal planning or attempts to control the circumstances and people in your life. Peace is found in trusting the person who controls all the things that you don't understand and who knows no mystery because he has planned it all. How do you experience this remarkable peace—the kind of peace that doesn't fade away when disappointments come, when people are difficult, or when circumstances are hard? You experience it by keeping your mind stayed on the Lord. The more you meditate on his glory, his power, his wisdom, his grace, his faithfulness, his righteousness, his patience, his zeal to redeem, and his commitment to his eternal promises to you, the more you can deal with mystery in your life. Why? Because you know the One behind the mystery is gloriously good, worthy not only of your trust but also the worship of your heart. It really is true that peace in times of trouble is not found in figuring out your life, but in worship of the One who has everything figured out already.

For further study and encouragement: Psalm 139

OCTOBER 4

Our struggle with sin is so deep that it was not enough for God to forgive us, so he also unzipped us and got inside of us by his Spirit.

Perhaps all good theology is meant to be both humbling and comforting at the same time. Why is this? God did not intend the theology of the Bible to be an end in itself, as if theological knowledge were the goal of grace. No, every part of the Bible's teaching is designed to be a means to an end, and the end is a radically transformed life. Having said this, the theology of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is particularly humbling.

Why doesn't God just save me in the beginning, welcome me into his presence in the end, and leave me to myself in between? Why is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit presented as an absolute gift of necessity for every believer? The answer is because of the utter gravity of my condition as a sinner. You see, justification deals with the guilt of sin and final glorification with the ultimate defeat of sin, but the presence and power of the sin that remains in between must be addressed or the work of grace will not be complete.

Sin does not leave us merely *guilty*; it renders us *unable*. It robs us of the ability to live in a way that pleases God. Sin kidnaps our desires and distorts our thoughts. It controls our tongues and rules our behavior. It saps our resolve and weakens our knees. It leaves us lame, weak, and unable. We don't just need forgiveness and ultimate deliverance; we also desperately need present help—help so that we will have the will to desire and the power to do what is good in the sight of God. Our struggle with sin is so deep that only God living inside us can give us the power to please him with our living. So God doesn't just forgive us, call us to do what is right, and promise us a final home with him; he comes to us in between. He gets inside us, working within us, because there is no possibility that we will desire and do what is right without the inner working of his power.

How humbling! Not only can we not take credit for our salvation, because it is all the result of God's justifying grace, but we also cannot take credit for any aspect or any instance of our obedience, because apart from the Spirit's presence, we would have neither the motivation nor the power to obey. Yes, we are new creatures in Christ, and yes, we are alive in him, but without the Spirit, we would have no power to defeat sin.

Where's the comfort in this? Here it is: if you're God's child, you already have the Holy Spirit inside you. You don't have to hope and pray that he will be there for you. He has come, and his convicting and enabling grace is his moment-by-moment gift to you.

For further study and encouragement: Philippians 2:1–13

OCTOBER 5

*Faith in God is more than believing the right things.
It's living the right way because you believe the right things.*

Hebrews 11:1–7 is a say-it-all description of what faith is and what faith does:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The belief of the heart and mind is an essential ingredient of faith, but it does not summarize all that faith is. True biblical faith is always something that you live. If your faith does not reshape your life, it is not true faith. Faith is not just intellectual assent to a body of truth. I'm afraid that's what faith looks like in evangelical academic circles. But real faith radically rearranges your life. This is why Hebrews 11 focuses more on what people did with their lives than it does on the details of their theology. Faith *is* deeply theological, but it is much, much more than that.

As the writer of Hebrews defines faith, he immediately gives three examples of how real faith in God transforms the way that you live. First, faith redirects and recaptures the *worship* of your heart (Cain). Second, it produces in you a heart of *obedience* (Enoch). Third, faith causes you to submit to the *calling* of God (Noah). Now think about it: everyone's life is shaped by what he worships, by the rules that she obeys, and by the life calling that he gives himself to. True, living, biblical faith causes you to submit all three of these shaping influences to God. He becomes the object of the worship of your heart. His rules define the moral boundaries of your life. And his kingdom work becomes your joyful calling. It's radical to believe that God really does exist and rewards those who seek him, and that radical belief does radical things to your living. Remember, you can't conjure up this life-shaping faith. No, it is a gift of his grace.

For further study and encouragement: Genesis 6–9

OCTOBER 6

Without eternity in the center of our thinking, our picture of life is like a jigsaw puzzle missing a central piece.

One of the themes of this devotional is that all human beings have a theological bent, whether they consider themselves religious or not. Everyone wants life to make sense. Everyone is a committed interpreter. No one leaves his or her life alone. We all pick our lives apart, trying to make sense of them. We all develop our own systems of theology, biblical or otherwise. We all develop particular philosophies of life. We all carry around with us worldviews that shape the way we think, the things that we desire, the choices that we make, the words that we say, and the actions that we take. None of us is passive. We all shape the way life looks to ourselves.

So God, knowing who we are and knowing that we are hardwired to make sense of our lives, has given us his Word. In it, he reveals who he is, he defines who we are, he explains the meaning and purpose of life, he unfolds the greatest of humanity's problems—sin—and he points us to the hope of his amazing grace. He doesn't tell us everything, because we would not be able to understand everything or deal with it in our daily lives, but he does give us all the necessary pieces of an "origin-to-destiny worldview" so we can live as we were created to live.

Essential to this biblical worldview is eternity. The Bible confronts us with the reality that this is not all there is. It tells us that this world is marching toward a final conclusion. You and I are eternal beings who will spend eternity somewhere. It will either be in the presence of God forever and ever or separated from him in a place of eternal punishment forever and ever.

The reality of eternity infuses the here and now with seriousness and hope. The way you live is important because there is an eternity to follow. The choices you make are important because there is a forever. The things you believe are important because the world is moving toward eternity. The things you surrender your heart to are important because there is an eternal tomorrow. You simply cannot hold to an "all that's important is the pleasures of the moment" view of life and believe in eternity at the same time. In light of eternity, it makes no sense to forget God and live for yourself. In the face of eternity, it is irrational to write your own rules and demand your own way. Eternity requires you to take life seriously.

But eternity also fills this moment with hope. Because I know that this is not all there is, I also know that the sin, trials, and sufferings of the present will not last forever. For God's children, eternity promises that sin will die, suffering will end, our trials will be no more, and we will live with God in perfect peace forever and ever and ever. You just can't make proper sense of life without viewing it from the perspective of eternity.

For further study and encouragement: John 5:19–29

OCTOBER 7

A thing I can't live without, such that I doubt God's love when it is absent, becomes a functional God-replacement, directing my heart more than he does.

Be honest right here, right now—what do you tell yourself that you don't have? What have you become convinced that you can't live without? What are the “if-onlys” that you carry around with you that shape the way you think about yourself, about life, and about the goodness of God? In the absence of what are you tempted to doubt the faithfulness of God? When you look back with joy at how things have gone in a certain situation or relationship, what gives you that joy?

Here's where all these questions are going: What things of this earth tend to capture your heart and, in so doing, control your thoughts, words, and behavior? The apostle Paul captures the struggle that we're examining here with these words: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2). Immediately after writing a beautiful depiction of the gospel of Jesus Christ, why does Paul lay out the call of this passage? The answer is that he knows his audience. He knows that even though they are God's children, the spiritual war is not over for them yet. There is a constant struggle for the rulership of their hearts. From a big-picture perspective, the heart can be captured or ruled by only two things. I'll use Paul's terms. Your heart is always living under the rule of “things that are above” or “things that are on earth.”

At street level, you and I are either worshiping and serving the creation or the Creator. The spiritual struggle is that we all tend to vacillate between the two. There are times when we get it right, and the deepest motivation and joy of our hearts is to live in a way that pleases God. But there are other times when we tell ourselves that there is some created thing that we have to have, and we functionally forget God and give ourselves to getting this thing that has captured our thoughts and shapes our desires.

This “above” or “earth” struggle is the great spiritual war between your conversion and your final homegoing. It really is fought in all of the situations, locations, and relationships of your daily life. It is not wrong to celebrate created glories. It is not wrong to want them in your life. It is not wrong to work to get them. But they must not be allowed to rule your heart and, in ruling your heart, to become your functional God-replacement. Not only is this struggle the big battle of the Christian life, it is also a principal argument for our ongoing need of grace—grace that can free us from our bondage to things that will never give us what God alone can give: life.

For further study and encouragement: 1 Timothy 6:17–19

OCTOBER 8

Corporate worship reminds you that hope is not a situation, location, idea, or thing. Hope is a person, and his name is Jesus.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. (Titus 3:4–8)

Everyone wants it. It's the thing that fuels what we do. It's the thing that stimulates courage and perseverance. It's what gets you through the tough times and keeps you from quitting. It's hard to be happy and hard to get up and continue when you don't have any of it. What is it? Hope, of course. Everyone craves hope.

Now, the radical message of the Bible, captured well by the Titus passage, is that sturdy hope, hope that won't ever fail you or leave you embarrassed, is only found vertically. The horizontal situations, locations, experiences, and relationships of everyday life are dangerous places to look for hope. Why? They all fail you. First, everywhere you could look horizontally has been affected by the fall in some way. There are simply no perfectly ideal situations, no paradise locations, no completely satisfying experiences, and surely no perfect people this side of eternity. Add to this the fact that all these things are fleeting. None of them lasts. Every horizontal thing, this side of eternity, is in the process of decay. So hope that addresses your deepest needs, that gives you reason to continue no matter how hard life is, and that promises you eternal good is only ever found vertically.

Perhaps it's not enough to say that hope is found in God and his covenant promises. That surely is true, but more needs to be said. Hope really does rest on the shoulders of the One who is the fulfillment of all those covenant promises. It's not enough to say that reliable hope is hope in Jesus. The message of the Bible is more powerful and pointed than even that. Reliable hope *is* Jesus! In his life, death, and resurrection, your life is infused with hope. The grace of the cross is not just grace that forgives and accepts, but grace that also supplies you with everything you need until you are needy no more. And what does this hope produce, according to the Titus passage? It produces a brand-new way of living. Because the One who is hope has infused my life with hope, I do not have to search for hope any longer and can now give myself to a life of good works. Do you know this hope? If not, a good first step toward finding it would be to gather with other believers this Lord's Day to worship the One who is your hope. To find hope, find Him.

For further study and encouragement: Romans 5:1–11

OCTOBER 9

Today you are called to abandon the purposes of your kingdom and give yourself to the will of a greater King. Grace makes it possible.

It is the view of life between the “already” and the “not yet” that every Christian needs to have. It’s captured powerfully by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:10–18:

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. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

Why does Paul end his letter to the Ephesians this way? He does so because he understands that on this side of forever, life *is* war. When he tells his readers to put on gospel armor and get ready for war, Paul is not introducing a new topic; no, he’s summarizing everything he’s said so far. Every directive he has given—that is, every application of what it means to live in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ—must be lived out in the context of a great spiritual battle. What is this war about? It is the great war for the rulership of our hearts. With sin still living inside of us, we are still torn between our love for the claustrophobic little kingdom of self and the grand and glorious purposes of the kingdom of God. We still are tempted to want our own way and to write our own rules. We still tend to value comfort and pleasure more than we love redemption. We are tempted to have more excitement in the things of this world than we do with the reality that we have become the children of God. We still complain when sanctifying trials come our way and we still tend to credit God with faithfulness only when things in our lives seem to be working.

This great spiritual war is not the rare, exotic experience of demons dancing on the table that we often think it is. No, it is the constant battle for our hearts that will rage between God and a seductive and deceptive enemy until that enemy is under the foot of Jesus. Ephesians 6:10–18 reminds you that you have been given ample grace for this battle.

For further study and encouragement: 1 John 2:15–17

OCTOBER 10

If you're God's child, you've been called to forsake your "my life" mentality and daily live with a moment-by-moment ministry mentality.

What do you want for your life? What are you really living for? If you could have the "good life," what would it look like? If you were to say, "If only I had _____, then my life would be _____," how would you fill in the blanks? Could it be that even though you are God's child, you still think of your life as belonging to you? When you think of your life this way, then ministry is about stepping out of your life, giving God a little bit of your time, energy, and money, and then stepping back into your life. In this way of thinking, ministry is something separate from your daily life. It tends to be structured and scheduled by the leaders of your church, and you support it for a while with your own efforts. But behind this view of ministry is the thought that your life still belongs to you, and you give moments of it to the Lord for his work.

The view of ministry in the New Testament is radically different (see Eph. 4:1–16; 1 Corinthians 12; Col. 3:12–17). The New Testament is quite clear in its call to us to understand that our lives no longer belong to us. We don't own our physicality. We don't own our emotionality. We don't own our spirituality. We don't own our mentality. We don't own our psychology. We don't own our communicative abilities. We don't own our relationships. We don't own our gifts or our experiences. We don't even own our possessions in the deepest sense of what ownership means. Paul gets at this when he says at the end of a discussion of sexuality in 1 Corinthians 6, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (v. 19). You begin to get close to what God has designed your life to be as one of his children when you understand that nothing that makes up you and your life belongs to you. You and all that makes up you were bought with a price, so you are owned by the One who paid that price.

But there is a second thing that the New Testament makes very clear. It is that God has called all his children not to be mere recipients of his kingdom work of grace, but to be instruments of that work as well. It is what I call the "total involvement paradigm," that is, all God's people all of the time. Every one of God's children has been given a call to ministry, and every one must think of himself that way.

Finally, the New Testament does not teach a separation between life and ministry. Every dimension of your life is a forum for ministry. Marriage is ministry. Friendship is ministry. Parenting is ministry. Being a neighbor is ministry. The workplace is a place of ministry.

You have been called to represent a glorious Savior, who has graced you with everything you need to live with a ministry mentality.

For further study and encouragement: Luke 17:7–10

OCTOBER 11

*God is not satisfied with you being a witness to his work of grace.
He's called you to be an instrument of that grace to others.*

The position God has chosen for us in the work of his kingdom is an amazing thing. All of his children have a mind-boggling calling. Sadly, many of them don't understand their position, and because they don't, they are quite comfortable being consumers and quite timid when it comes to being instruments.

So many people who attend evangelical churches on Sunday have little life commitment to the work of those churches. Most pastors would be thrilled if the vast majority of their people were every-Sunday attenders and committed to financially supporting the work of the churches. But all this sadly falls far below God's wise design for his church. Think about it: you will simply never be able to hire enough professional ministry people to cover all the ministry needs in a given week, no matter what size your church is. It is no wonder people reach outside the body of Christ for help. It is no wonder problems are left to grow until they reach intense levels of complication.

All God's children have been called to the same position. We've all been called to be his ambassadors. Remember, the only thing an ambassador does is represent. God's plan is to make his invisible presence and his invisible grace visible through his people, who incarnate his presence and carry that grace to others. That's God's call to every one of his children. There are to be no self-satisfied recipients, no consumers. The body of Christ is designed by God to be an organic, constantly ministering community.

If the church is ever going to be this, then God's people need three things. First, we need *vision*. We need to be reminded again and again of our place in the work of the Redeemer. Next, we need *commitment*. We need to be encouraged to make specific and concrete decisions to better position ourselves for the work to which God has called us. Last, we need *training*. We need to understand what it really looks like to represent the grace of the Redeemer in the lives of the people whom he puts in our paths. We need to be trained not to see those relationships as belonging to us for our happiness, but rather as workrooms in which the Lord can do his transforming work of grace.

What an amazing way to live! We have been chosen by God to be part of the most important work of the universe. We have been chosen to carry the life-changing message of the grace of the Savior King with us wherever we go. And we have been given the same grace to enable us to be the ambassadors that we have been chosen to be.

For further study and encouragement: 1 Chronicles 16:8–27

OCTOBER 12

Prayer is abandoning a life of demand and complaint, recognizing undeserved blessing, and giving myself to a life of thankfulness.

When you think of prayer, what comes to mind? When you pray, what is it that you want from God? What requests dominate your life of prayer?

True prayer happens at the intersection of *surrender* and *celebration*. Prayer is profoundly more than handing a wish list to God and letting him know that you're thankful that he exists and has the power to deliver. This kind of prayer puts you at the center and, in a real way, reduces God down to the divine waiter. It's not him that you want. It's not his wisdom that you see yourself as needing. It's not his grace that your heart craves. Wish-list prayer essentially says, "I know what's best for my life and I'd appreciate it, God, if you would use your might to make it happen." You pray like this when you forget that God, as Creator and Savior, knows infinitely more than you do about what you really need. But even more than that, this kind of prayer makes life all about your wants, your needs, and your feelings. This is not really prayer after all. In true prayer, you surrender your claim on your life to the greater and wiser plans and purposes of God. You submit your will to his will. It's not God signing your list, it's you surrendering your life to him.

Then prayer is celebration. In prayer, you bask in the wonder of what it means that you actually do have a heavenly Father. You find joy in the reality that he has chosen to give you his kingdom. You are blown away by the fact that he unleashes his almighty power to meet your needs. You celebrate forgiving, rescuing, transforming, enabling, and delivering grace. You find joy in your inclusion in his work of redemption. You find hope in the glorious future that is to come. You are amazed by the fact that because Immanuel has invaded your life by his grace, you are never, ever alone. You find peace in the fact that grace means you are never left to the small resources of your own wisdom, righteousness, and strength. You meditate on God's glory and goodness, then celebrate. You rejoice in the fact that you no longer have to look for life in the people, situations, and locations around you, but you've been given life—life that is eternal.

Does true prayer include making requests of God? Sure it does. God encourages us to cast our cares on him, because he really does care for us. But the requests of true prayer are always in the context of surrender and celebration. It is surrender and celebration that keep those requests from being selfish demands or bitter complaints. This kind of prayer is a tool of God's grace in your life. As you put God in his proper place and celebrate your place as his child, prayer becomes a tool God uses to free you from your bondage to you. Now, that's grace!

For further study and encouragement: Matthew 6:5–15

OCTOBER 13

*You can't hear him, but he's wiser; you can't see him, but he's more faithful;
you can't touch him, but he's nearer than whatever else you'd trust.*

It is one of the most amazing statements of what only grace can do. On the surface, it doesn't make any sense. If it were not rooted in the most important fact of the universe that you could ever consider, you would call the people involved “crazy.” It marks the fundamental dividing line of all human beings. The apostle Peter is talking about believers living between the “already” and the “not yet” when he says of their relationship to Jesus Christ: “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:8–9).

Now, allow yourself to consider the radical nature of what this passage says about the deepest motivations of the hearts of God's people. They have connected their deepest love, belief, joy, and faith to someone they have never seen, heard, or touched. They have staked the hopes and dreams of their lives to this invisible One. Their relationship to him is one of life-altering love. When they think of him, they experience joy, joy so deep that it cannot be expressed.

If it were not for the fact that the ultimate fact of human existence—the fact that gives meaning to every other fact—is the existence, character, and plan of God, none of this would make any sense at all. You would stand back, look at these “believers,” and conclude that they were delusional, crazy. But they are not crazy. They are the blessed ones, the enlightened ones, the ones whose hearts have been opened to the most important thing that your heart could embrace.

This is what grace does. It rescues us from our spiritual blindness. It releases us from our bondage to our rationalism and materialism. Grace gives us the faith to be utterly assured of what we cannot see. It frees us from refusing to believe in anything we cannot experience with our physical senses. But grace does more. It connects us to the invisible One in an eternal love relationship that fills us with joy we have never known before and gives us rest of heart that we would have thought impossible.

And that grace is still rescuing us, because we still tend to forget what is important, real, and true. We still tend to look to the physical world for our comfort. We still fail to remember in given moments that we really do have a heavenly Father. Grace has done a wonderful thing for us and continues to do more and more.

For further study and encouragement: 1 Peter 1:1–12

OCTOBER 14

*The battles of sanctification are many, but God's mercies
are new morning after morning after morning.*

The battle for your heart still goes on. Temptations exist all around you. The enemy lurks as a roaring lion. Falsehood battles with truth. The people of God live as an often misunderstood minority. Sickness and suffering enter your door. You need to grow in grace. In weakness, you give way to what you should resist. You are sinned against by others. Hopes, dreams, and plans fail. You experience corruption and injustice. There are times when you are tempted to wonder if it's all worth it. But in all this, God is still at work, molding you into the likeness of his Son. It is, in many ways, a multifaceted life of hardship—the hardships of life in this fallen world intersecting with the restorative hardships of grace.

Maybe you're reading and thinking, "Boy, Paul, this has been *very* encouraging so far." Well, let me ask you to reflect on something that is incredibly encouraging in the midst of the hardships that will not end until we are on the other side. It is captured by these words: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22–23).

Consider what this passage says about who you are and what you have been given as a child of God. God's steadfast, faithful, and never-failing love has been placed on you even though you never could have done anything to earn or deserve it. But there's more to say about this love. It never ceases. God will never give up on you. He will never walk away in disgust. He will never regret that he placed his love on you. He will love you just as much on your worst day as he does on your best day. This gift of love is yours forever.

But the passage says more. It announces that as God's child, you have been blessed with eternal mercies that are new every morning. Consider what this means. There are fresh mercies for you today, formfitted for all the things you will face, both those that you know about and may worry about, and those that you don't know about yet. God's mercy isn't generic. It is personal grace, situational care, and concrete help. It meets you right where you are and gives you just what you need. You get it as you need it and are given as much as you need. You don't have to wonder about the supply of God's mercy. It flows from a renewable font of grace that will never end. Yes, life this side of forever can be hard, but you're not alone; you've been given sturdy love and new morning mercies—just what you need right here, right now.

For further study and encouragement: Lamentations 3:22–27

OCTOBER 15

*Today, a war of love will be fought on the turf of your heart.
Will you be ruled by love for God or for some other lover?*

It's easy to give the right spiritual answer to the question above: "No doubt about it, my heart will be controlled by love for God above all else." The problem is that at street level, there is still a war of love in our hearts. We do lose our way. Love of the world and the things that are in the world still kidnaps our hearts. We forget God and tell ourselves that we must have _____. Love for God competes in our hearts with love of self. Love for God battles with our craving for the love of others. Material things and physical experiences command our affections and our motivations. Yes, the battle still rages.

I wish I could say this is not true of me, but it is. Sometimes I want my comfort too much, and I become an irritable and grumbling man because I'm not getting what I think I deserve. Sometimes I want to be right too much, and I become aggressive and argumentative. Sometimes I want the respect and affection of others too much, and because I do, I am all too controlled by their opinions. Sometimes I set my heart on a particular thing too much, and I feel bereft until I am able to cobble together a way to get it. Sometimes I want control too much, and I become more demanding than serving. Sometimes I esteem personal pleasure too much, and I invest far too much time in pursuit of it. Sometimes I crave the edible glories of creation too much, and I ingest more than I should.

I find that most of the things that lay claim to my heart and battle for the position that only love for God should have are not evil in and of themselves. The desire to be right, to be respected, to own possessions, to have some control, to experience pleasure, or to eat delicious things is not inherently evil. But here's the thing that you and I need to remember, what the battle for the love of our hearts is all about: a desire for a good thing becomes a bad thing when that desire becomes a ruling thing. When good things become controlling, they command the affection of our hearts and then shape our words and behavior. When this happens, they take the place in our hearts that only God should have.

You see, we are always placing the love of our hearts on something, and it is important to remember that there are only two places where we can invest that life-shaping love—on the Creator or on the creation. It's not wrong to love God's glorious creation, but it's a spiritual disaster to be ruled by that love. So here is yet another argument for our need for the grace we have been given. We are all in possession of fickle hearts. We all still need protecting and rescuing grace. Thank God that grace has been given!

For further study and encouragement: 2 Timothy 3:22–26

OCTOBER 16

The difficulties of your life are not in the way of God's plan; they are a tool of it. They're crafted to advance his work of grace.

Perhaps the two most important questions you could ask between your conversion and your final resurrection are:

1. What in the world is God doing right here, right now?
2. How in the world should I respond to what God is doing?

The way that you answer these questions determines, in a real way, the character of your faith and the direction of your life. Consider how James answers these questions in the very first part of his letter:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. (1:2–12)

What is God doing in the here and now? He is employing the difficulties of life as tools of grace to produce character in you that would not grow any other way. So your trials are not a sign that God has forgotten you or is being unfaithful to his promises. Rather, they stand as a reminder that he is committed to his grace and will not forsake it—it *will* complete its work. No, he's not exercising his power to make your life easy. No, he's not at work trying to deliver your particular definition of happiness. He's giving you much more than that—eternally faithful, forgiving, and transforming grace.

And what should your response be? James says, “remain steadfast under trial.” Don't become discouraged and give up. Don't listen to the lies of the enemy. Don't forsake your good habits of faith. Don't question God's goodness. Look at your trials and see grace. Behind those difficulties is an ever-present Redeemer who is completing his work.

For further study and encouragement: Hebrews 12:3–11

OCTOBER 17

Idolatry occurs when anything created to point you to God replaces God in the thoughts and desires of your heart.

This struggle goes all the way back to the beginning in the garden of Eden and has marked humanity ever since. What was designed to point us to God replaces God in our hearts. It is the sad tragedy of sin. Sin is fundamentally idolatrous. Because of it, we love something more than God. We look to what God made to do what only God can do. We surrender control to what was made rather than surrendering it to the One who made all. We celebrate the physical while forgetting the One who created every physical thing. We worship the gift and neglect the Giver.

Consider how the disobedience of Adam and Eve is described: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). Eve knew the boundaries that God had set. Yes, the garden was a gorgeous place. It was a place of beautiful sounds, smells, sights, and tastes. It’s hard to imagine what created perfection looks like in the world of nature; Adam and Eve were blessed to live in that perfection. But every wondrous physical thing that God created was intended to point to him. Every tree, flower, bird, stream, piece of fruit, and animal was meant to remind Adam and Eve of God’s existence, presence, love, and authority. God had embedded reminders in everything he had made so that Adam and Eve would remember who he was, who they were, and what life was all about.

When Eve ate the fruit and Adam after her, they weren’t experiencing boundary confusion. It wasn’t that they were uncertain about what God had commanded them to do and not to do in the garden. They knew that the tree was off limits, but at the moment of eating, they didn’t care. By the time they had sunk their teeth into the succulent fruit, they had already given away the love and allegiance of their hearts. Love for God should have given them the motivation and ability to say no to temptation and run away from the tree. But what ruled their hearts in that moment was love for something else. Their hearts, created for love of the Creator, had been kidnapped by love for the creation. It was the beginning of sin’s disastrous exchange—worship and service of the Creator exchanged for worship and service of the created thing (Rom. 1:25). Sadly, that exchange has taken place millions and millions of times since the garden. It is humanity’s great spiritual dysfunction; we allow the creation to replace the Creator in our hearts. No wonder Jesus had to come. No wonder his grace is so essential. No wonder God knew that he could not leave us to ourselves, that he had to send a rescuing Redeemer.

For further study and encouragement: 1 Corinthians 10:14–31

OCTOBER 18

Don't give way to discouragement, feelings of futility, or waves of fear, because the Father has graciously chosen to give you the kingdom!

There are so many reasons to be discouraged in this fallen world, it's a wonder that anyone is happy. It's discouraging to watch your marriage turn cold and distant. It's disheartening to be betrayed by a dear friend. It's disappointing to lose the job you worked at with such commitment. It's depressing to face a sickness that you're not sure you'll ever lick. It's hard to face the rebellion and rejection of one of your children. It's discouraging to hear so often about corruption in politics and government. It's disheartening to have to be concerned about crime and injustice. It's tough to deal with the weaknesses of old age. It's hard to be mocked and rejected for your faith. It's sad to see your church become more a place of controversy than gospel healing. It can seem as if everything in your life is in the process of decaying or in danger of going bad. People die, dreams die, flowers die, and marriages, churches, jobs, and friendships go bad. If you look around, this old world that God created isn't doing very well. In many ways, it's a hard, discouraging place to live. The downward spiral of the fallen world can get to you. It seems that everything is impermanent or in the process of falling apart.

But that's not all that is discouraging. It often seems as if you're powerless to make much of a change. You do everything you can to restore your marriage, but it just seems stuck. You know you don't have the power to change other people and you have limited power to change situations. It so often seems that you're a witness to or affected by things you have little ability to alter.

So where is encouragement to be found? It's found in grace, as depicted by these beautiful words: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). With these words, everything changes. These words tell you that it's not you against a world gone bad. Yes, you are a citizen of this world and you are touched by its brokenness, but as you are, you must remind yourself that you are the citizen of another kingdom. Your King rules over everything that would discourage and disappoint you, and he rules for your good and his glory. What is out of your control is under his rule. What you don't understand is under his careful administration. But there is more. While everything around you seems impermanent, this kingdom will have no end. Long after the kingdoms of this world have been destroyed, you will reign with your King in his kingdom forever and ever and ever.

For further study and encouragement: Luke 12:22–34