

DAILY NOTES

Acts to
Ephesians

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These notes are a very simple aid to your daily reading as you make your way through the New Testament. They have been written to accompany a reading plan that takes in one chapter of the New Testament each day. You'll find a simple reflection on each day's chapter followed by a short prayer in response. It is hoped that this will fuel your own prayers as you spend time with the Lord.

A suggested daily time with the Lord might look like this:

- **Read.** In our time with God, it seems right to let him speak first. Whether it's a chapter or just one line, it's all his word.
- **Reflect.** We want to understand what we read, and then think about what it says about God, us, life, and so on.
- **Respond.** Prayer based on what God has said to you through his word means that your prayers are shaped biblically.
- **Request.** God is glorified by our requests as we humbly acknowledge his power and grace.

Daily Notes

Acts to Ephesians

Acts 1 – Ready to Follow, Ready to Lead

Daniel 7 gives an astonishing view of heavenly glory at Christ's ascension, but seen from earth in Acts 1 the scene is less dramatic. From heaven, Jesus will send the Spirit to the disciples to begin his church. But before we get to the birth of the church in Acts, we need a "complete" Twelve apostles – a complete foundation with no gaps. Here we get a surprise. At least two disciples had also been there following Jesus the whole time, even witnessing his resurrection. Suddenly, Matthias was called by Jesus to be the twelfth apostle. The Lord had ordered it so from the start and Matthias rose to the Lord's calling. Jesus prepares us for the work he prepares for us.

Lord, as Peter and the others prayed for your will to be made known and followed, thank you that you still hear our prayers today. You prepare us in advance to do works prepared in advance. I pray for the power of the Holy Spirit for help and for strength to do your will in all you call me to do.

Acts 2 – The Power of the Spirit

Jesus promised his apostles the power of the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to the whole world. Peter's sermon is a demonstration of that enabling power, and the ability to speak in other languages is an indication of the global gospel enterprise. Joel spoke of the Day of the Lord, repentance, forgiveness, the Spirit coming to all God's people, and of judgment on the nations. As the gospel of Jesus is preached it brings life *and* death. Life to all who receive it and death to all who refuse it. For us, his people, we must speak of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that God will call some who hear.

Merciful God, thank you for calling me, showing me my sin, and leading me to repentance, faith, and life in Christ. I pray for the powerful help of the Holy spirit to speak of Jesus clearly, winsomely, and lovingly, so that you would call others as you called me.

Acts 3 – In the Name of Jesus

The image of this man walking and leaping and praising God is joyous. The key point is that Peter commanded him “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” to stand. An ambassador speaks for his or her head of state; anyone can authorise others to act on their behalf in all manner of day-to-day situations. But, to act in someone else’s name, that person must be alive. And that’s Peter’s point: Why are you amazed at what was done in Jesus’ name? Jesus lives and continues to exercise power! But Peter doesn’t then call all the sick people to come for healing; he calls everyone to repent and be blessed by God.

Lord Jesus, even as your own people we’re quick forget your activity and presence among us. We do things under our own steam rather than in your name and power. Lord, keep me close. May the Spirit ever prompt me to turn to you that I might do your will in everything.

Acts 4 – Continuity of Rejection

Peter stood before the same court that had tried Jesus just a few weeks earlier. His defence is entirely grounded in the resurrection of Jesus and makes it abundantly clear who was responsible for Jesus’ death. Within that, there is also a call to come to Jesus for salvation. The court rejects Peter and in doing so rejects the Holy Spirit’s word and the salvation to be found in Christ. The believers gather not to pray for freedom from persecution but rather for boldness to continue doing the Lord’s work, speaking his word. Bolder still, they ask the Lord to stretch out his hand to heal and create signs and wonders in the name of Jesus. It’s quite a prayer!

Living God, even as you dwell in unapproachable light beyond sight and imagination, yet you dwell among your people by your Spirit. Give me boldness to speak for you and stretch out your hand to save to transform lost and wayward people I speak to, that they would turn and praise you as is right. Lord, have mercy.

Acts 5 – Life and Death

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are a reminder that we serve the living, holy God. We might fool ourselves, but never him. Their deaths were supernatural – a judgment from God. The remarkable healings in Jerusalem (signs and wonders) were also clearly supernatural. The apostles' release from prison was also supernatural and achieved right under the High Priest's nose, as it were. Yet the court didn't weigh any of this. They just wanted not to be found guilty of Jesus blood (v28). Peter struck back with their guilt, but also reminded everyone that Jesus died to bring repentance and forgiveness. As long as we deny our sin, we won't confess it, and can't expect to be forgiven it.

Gracious God, you who sent your Son to us to bring us repentance and forgiveness of sin, thank you for opening my eyes to my own sin. Forgive me, Lord, for my dead ignorance and wilful disobedience, and help me ever to remember your great holiness and grace – that I might fear and love you as I ought.

Acts 6 – Serving

We might think that this fledgling church would be a sea of harmony so it's more than a little surprising to learn of complaints so early on. Not about the preaching, worship style, etc, but a wholly practical matter. This itself rings warning bells for us. The remedy is a lovely example of servant leadership. The apostles determine a wise path and explain both the plan and the rationale and then everyone is happy with it. The apostles underline their authority without lording it. The seven will "serve at tables" while the apostles will devote themselves to prayer and (literally) "serving the word." Church leaders must serve to lead.

Lord Jesus, you who came not to be served by to serve, who laid down your live for us, thank you that you are greatly to be praise for your condescension, humility, and service. Only in you do I have any hope. Help me then to learn to serve others. Work in me that I might do your work in your strength and grace.

Acts 7 – Theological Geography

Stephen's speech is long but highly selective in the material he covers. He's charged with speaking against the Temple and against Moses so those are the charges he tackles. Three things stand out: (i) The big events he recounts happen mostly far from the Promised Land. God is not constrained by geography. (ii) Whether it's the Patriarchs or the Israelites under Moses, there's a track record of Israel resisting God's work. (iii) While Moses promised a successor, is it a surprise that the Jews rejected him as they had all God's prophets? Whatever our religious heritage, we can make such an idol of it that it actually keeps us *from* God.

Living God, omnipresent and sustaining Creator, where you are is holy perfection. By your grace, you dwell in me by your Spirit. Grant me the living boldness of Stephen to speak your truth wherever I am and to live a life of holiness in your presence every day.

Acts 8 – Magic and Scripture

Simon the Sorcerer was clearly impressed by the signs and wonders being performed. He believed the gospel and was baptised. But when he offered the apostles money for the gift of bestowing the Holy Spirit we discover something previously unseen: He believed the truth but hadn't actually turned to Jesus. He had to ask the apostles to pray for him because he hadn't done so himself. He was attracted to Christianity but not to Christ. The Eunuch saw no signs or wonders. He read Isaiah 53 and understood what Jesus had done for him, It is Christ himself who is the object of our worship and source of our delight.

Lord Jesus, how could any sign or wonder eclipse the glory of what you have done for us in your death, resurrection and ascension? You gave the Holy Spirit to all your people gratuitously, liberally, freely. And you call us to know you. Lord, help me to keep my eyes fixed on you that you will be my heart's deepest desire.

Acts 9 – Fear and Encouragement

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is rightly famous. He met the risen Jesus! It would change him forever. All Saul's upbringing and training would be perfect preparation for what was to come (as it was for Moses, Ezra, and many others before him). But when he moved from hunter to preacher, he became hunted: Two immediate threats to his life are avoided. The impact of Saul's conversion on the early church must have been enormous, realising that the Lord can save *anyone* he chooses. That emboldened them both to risk their lives to help brother Saul and to continue to proclaim Christ themselves. In the fear of the Lord and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church grew.

Lord Jesus, you reveal much of your own purposes and grace in Saul's conversion. You work and prepare us for your service long before we come to you. You are greatly to be feared, revered, honoured and worshipped, even as the Holy Spirit gives great encouragement to do your will. Lord, work in and through me for your glory.

Acts 10 – Crossing Divides

The events of Acts 10 are spelt out slowly, carefully and precisely. The repetition is deliberate, and we'll hear the account again in the next chapter. It's a huge moment. In Acts 1:8 the apostles were told the gospel would go to the ends of the earth. Here in Acts 10 they're learning what that means as they move from Old Covenant distinctiveness to New Covenant unity. God does not show favouritism and the gospel is open to all who will come. It's sad, and not a little shameful, when one Christian 'tribe' looks down on another for their style of worship, culture, etc. Christ calls us to oneness in him.

Lord Jesus, as we are one in you, and have fellowship with the Father and each other with you, forgive me that I still have distinctions in my mind of different 'kinds' of Christians based on unhelpful categories. Help me to be more open and more gracious, joyously receiving all your people in warm fellowship.

Acts 11 – “Christians”

The Holy Spirit is drilling a lesson home to us readers by repeating the account of Gentile Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit – even repentance resulting in life. Underlying it further still, we read of Antioch with its range of Jewish and Gentile believers. All are saved by faith in Christ, and all receive the same Holy Spirit. Antioch becomes a crucial fixture in Acts precisely because it's not a Jewish city. What should its believers be called? The Way? A pseudo-Jewish sect? Jew and Gentile are one in Christ and proclaim him. They're happy to take his name.

Lord Jesus Christ, it's fitting that we should be publicly known as yours. We're not defined by law or creed but by the salvation you have granted. I pray for the Spirit's help to live a life worthy of the name “Christian.”

Acts 12 – Life and Death (again)

There's great sadness and comedy in Acts 12. Herod had James executed and planned the same for Peter. Such a waste of life, so brutally cruel. Later Herod had the guards executed out of petulance and a need to reassert his authority, having lost face at Peter's escape. Herod was too proud to see the truth and lost his own life as a consequence. Meanwhile we're told that many people had gathered to pray for Peter. Yet, when he was released and the hapless Rhoda left him outside, no-one believed her. They either weren't praying for release (unambitious) or they weren't expecting prayer to be answered (unbelieving).

Lord, it is clear that you permit terrible things to happen to your people in your own goodness and wisdom. Your glory is seen in the grace extended to Herod and others, if only they had turned. Help me extend your grace to others. And help me have an expectancy and faithfulness in prayer, knowing that you are always present and active.

Acts 13 – On Mission

The Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas for mission. Paul in particular was an exceptional Jew who had spent time in Antioch, a place where believers were neither Jew nor Gentile but rather known as Christians. Barnabas was from Cyprus. They were superbly prepared by the Lord to do the work he had for them. They boldly and clearly proclaimed Christ to the Gentiles in Cyprus using signs and wonders to convince those ignorant of God. At the synagogue, however, they reasoned from the Scriptures. Jesus is not “something new” but rather the fulfilment of all they ever knew.

Lord God, your good news is for all to hear, all to understand, all to come to you. Give me a sensitivity and wisdom to speak your truth with bold creativity depending on who I speak to. Help me today with those people I meet, that I may speak of you.

Acts 14 – Growth and Opposition

The visit to Iconium ends in deadly peril. Paul’s life is in danger. Things seem to go much better at Lystra until the people decide Paul and Barnabas are gods. Paul’s response is clear and robust, trashing their pagan worship and pointing to the grace of God. Under Jewish influence, the same crowd then stone Paul, thinking him dead. Finally they visit Derbe. It sounds an awful tour until we read of the return leg. There are believers and churches in each of the towns. Despite terrible opposition, the Lord has saved many and his church is growing.

Gracious Lord of truth and grace, there are no physical boundaries to your kingdom and no opposition that can halt your purposes. Thank you that your purpose is grace to us to your glory. Give me boldness to speak your word of grace to others, and grow your church to your glory. Help me to encourage and strengthen your people.

Acts 15 – Grace and Sensitivity

Some men had gone north from Judea to Antioch and were preaching the need for circumcision for Christians to be acknowledged as belonging to God. A delegation then went to Judea to check at source. The Council at Jerusalem aired differing views that were answered by Peter and Paul: The Holy Spirit had been given to Jew and Gentile alike on repentance and forgiveness of sin. James concluded the discussion showing from Amos that the gospel would always go to Gentiles. So why these ‘rules’ in the letter? They show sensitivity to others, both for fellowship and evangelism. Freedom from the law generates grace to those under the law.

Lord, every church has a culture of its own and ours is no different. Help us to live out faith in openness and grace, welcoming others who are ‘not like us,’ graciously accepting all your people irrespective of culture or background, reaching out in love to all your people.

Acts 16 – Gospel Progress

As Paul’s new journey progresses West, he’s joined by Timothy in the towns of such strong opposition last time round. The Lord Jesus then prevents them going North and the Holy Spirit prevents them going South. Instead of *waiting* for guidance, they keep going West. They end up in Philippi and Lydia’s conversion is a beautiful confirmation and blessing from the Lord. When the demon was cast out of the slave girl *in Jesus’ name*, Paul knew that what happened next was *also* in the Lord’s will. He was beaten and imprisoned so *that* the Lord could call the jailor and his family. Christ’s plans are not always what we’d choose.

Living God you will grow your church with unstoppable purpose and power. And yet you use such weak people to convey your precious gospel. Help me to be as aware as Paul was to your hand on my life, seeing gospel opportunities and open doors where I would only naturally see pain, darkness, or rejection.

Acts 17 – Always Opposed

There are a number of standout thoughts in Acts 17. Famously, it's a lovely example of how Paul varied his style depending on his audience. For those versed in Scripture, he *always* preached Christ from there. For more pagan hearers, he started where they were with their experiences of life and spiritual things. But notice also that whoever he spoke to he called people to repentance and salvation in Christ, always based on the certainty of the resurrection. That's the message everyone needs. Lastly we notice the varied opposition in return: Physical danger from zealous Jews, public ridicule from philosophers.

Lord Christ, your message of salvation has always been ridiculed and rejected – along with those who bear it. Foolishness to many as it once was to me. Many more are simply ignorant of your gospel too though they oppose it anyway. Help me, Lord, to keep the central things central when I speak about you, pointing lost people to you.

Acts 18 – Time and Travel

Paul's work rate in Acts 18 is remarkable. He travels hundreds of miles, spends some time as a part-time, self-funded missionary, and works hard in devoted ministry when enabled. We read much in one chapter and it's hard not to skim time. For Paul, these events took plenty of time and effort. Beautifully, the Lord gave Paul great encouragement to continue, confident of gospel success. Crucially, that spurred Paul on to work, not to sit back and see what the Lord would do.

Living God, you have prepared me to do the work you have prepared in advance for me to do. Give me wisdom to work well, without wasting time and energy on things of no benefit. Lord, I desire to be usefully doing your kingdom work for your glory.

Acts 19 – Riot in Ephesus

Again we read of Paul spending considerable time teaching and exhorting, in both synagogue and lecture hall. He was so effective “all the residents of Asia... heard the word of the Lord.” Christ was proclaimed and did wonderful things through Paul with many being saved – and many others fearing God. The craftsmen who made idols of Artemis were in losing their goddess and their business. To lose such for Christ is eternal gain, but they don’t engage with him at all. The riot is for a manmade god, against a man, refusing Christ the God man.

Lord, unbelief and rebellion take many forms and your word prepares us for that. Nonetheless, I pray that I and all your people would have the effectiveness of Paul to make you known far and wide. Help us and strengthen us in the face of opposition, Lord.

Acts 20 – The Whole Plan

Paul’s departure from the Ephesian elders is clearly a moving moment. There were many tears. For his part, Paul is satisfied that he had taught the whole plan of God, described as “preaching the kingdom” and testifying to everyone “about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.” The simplicity of the message is hugely encouraging, as is the language used to explain how far reaching it is. In speaking to others of repentance and faith, we give the very essence of the whole plan of God.

Gracious Lord, your gospel is beautiful and rich, simple and profound, and powerful enough to save all who will hear. Help me to proclaim it and live it for all to see, even to living in repentance every day, and living by faith for every need.

Acts 21 – Heading for Trouble

Again, the sense of travel is strong in this chapter, perhaps more so than before because of the added details recorded by Luke, travelling with Paul. Our attention is strongly drawn to the warnings given to Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: There will be trouble in Jerusalem. Our inclination would be the same as his friends: “Paul, don’t go!” But the Spirit didn’t say that. He merely warned Paul in preparation for what’s to come. That way, when the time came, he’d be ready. Sure enough, though the riot did take hold Paul knew what he would say and how.

Eternal God, dwelling outside time and space and acting within it for us, you prepare us by your word for opposition and trouble. In grace, you also equip us to face these things in the armour we wear and weapons we bear – your own presence and promises. Feed and strengthen me to be always ready in your name.

Acts 22 – Objectionable Objection

The Jerusalem crowd listened in silence to Paul’s explanations. They respected his learning pedigree, and some may have remembered his involvement in persecuting and hunting Christians in the early days. They listened to his remarkable Damascus Road account without interruption, even possibly wondering if this really is news of the Messiah. The explosion point is unexpected. While Jerusalem Christians rejoiced that Gentiles were being saved, the Jews there became the latest generation to fail to understand their missional purpose to make God known to the nations. They were elitist when they should have been evangelistic.

O God and Saviour, you who provided a gracious means by which we may approach you, and who has a world-wide church to reveal your grace to everyone, forgive me my prideful elitism and reticence to share your gospel. Lord, have mercy, and grow your church. Help me to be truly missional for you.

Acts 23 – Your Will Be Done

Paul's true claim that the basis of his situation in court stems from a belief in a general resurrection is deliberately aimed. He makes it so that, suddenly, half the room is onside. But there are still plenty who want him dead. Forty men take an oath before God not to eat or drink until they've killed Paul. There's no doubting their zeal. Yet it is the very God they pray to who has already promised Paul protection and preservation all the way to Rome. "Lord, bless our plans" is easy to say, when in truth we ought humbly to pray the much harder prayer, "Your will be done."

Living God, it is clear that your plans for humanity are vast in scope and intricate in detail. Your sovereignty is dazzling in light of human actions and responsibility. Lord, give me humility and wisdom to do the work you have prepared for me, and preserve me from the folly of trying to exert my will on you.

Acts 24 – On Trial

One of the structural literary features of Acts is how events in Jesus' life have echoes first with Peter, then with Paul, and (by inference) with the church. Trials are such a feature: Opposition from religious people on trial in a secular court – all within the Lord's own plans and purposes. We might lament time lost in productive ministry. Paul has travelled so much and established so many churches and yet here we find him languishing in prison for two years having occasional pointless discussions with officials hoping for bribes. Paul's wings were clipped but he was far from idle. Patience and self-control are fruits of the Spirit.

My God and Father, there have been times of spiritual richness and other times when I've struggled with impatience for answers to prayer. May the Spirit produce patience in my heart, ever confident of your certain promises, purposes and plans. May this be true in my life and in your church.

Acts 25 – Roll With It

When we're in a bad place we naturally find it all-consuming. We put other things on hold. It's tempting to think something like, "I can't wait for this to end so that I can carry on with God as before." The unjust system that executed Christ was the very means God used to accomplish our salvation. Likewise, Paul's predicament in Acts 25 doesn't make him a victim; he takes charge of the process, owning his task before the Lord where he is. When we find ourselves in grief, illness, unemployment, or struggling in any way, the Lord knows and has plans for our good.

Good and gracious Father, who cares for your children with infinite love, wisdom and tenderness, help me humbly to serve you in all the circumstances of life. Help me not to play the victim but rather to be victorious in Christ, overcoming all that is before me in his name.

Acts 26 – Who's Listening?

Once again, Paul is standing before the authorities speaking his case. As ever when addressing people with Scriptural knowledge, he explains how Jesus is the foretold fulfilment of all God has said and done. He also explains the inevitability of the resurrection of Christ and how by faith we can repent of our sin and know forgiveness. The core matters of the gospel are always proclaimed. Paul is addressing the king but knows that many others in the room are listening and he indirectly appeals to them too.

Sovereign Lord, I know you orchestrate events to bring about your plans for your glory. Help me to be mindful of my indirect witnessing, that others may see and hear truth from me in ways I didn't plan – but you did. Help me then to be holy, good, and wise in all my interactions whether in person, online, or by any other means.

Acts 27 – Faith in a Crisis

It's interesting to ask why Luke devotes so much time to describing the shipwreck. If we put the gospel of Luke alongside Acts there's a kind of climactic event here echoing the cross and tomb. In a sense, Paul's trust in God leads to a kind of 'death' and 'resurrection' leading to many souls being saved from destruction. The main observation for us though is how Paul's firm conviction and public testimony in dire crisis swayed others to act in trust. Rather than praying quietly in a corner he stood up and spoke of hope and a future.

Lord, there are so many storms in life! Some are large and some are small and we're often in them with unbelieving people. Give me both Pauls' own conviction of security in you and the bold clarity to point others to you. I pray that many would experience death to self and resurrection to eternal life in you.

Acts 28 – The Gospel Goes On

The epic journeys and events for the apostles and early church end here in Rome. We're not told how or if Paul got to Caesar as that's not important. We do find Paul with a freedom to teach Jew and Gentile the good news which he does with energy. As ever, there's a mix of opposition and acceptance. But now the gospel proclamation is happening in Rome with all its international travel, technology and infrastructure. In our own witness we do well to embrace and subvert that which useful for effective communication, even as we continue to meet locally together in the Lord.

Great God of all humanity, thank you for these modern communication opportunities we have to spread your fame and make known your goodness and grace. Have mercy, Lord, and use the power of your own words to speak into hearts. Not least, O God, help me to hear you always.

Romans 1 – Powerful Good News

Paul opens his letter warmly saying that he hopes to visit the church in Rome, having heard so much about it. As we look closely at his logic we see something of what drives him. People in general, he says, have rejected God in favour of idols in Creation, and God in turn has handed them over to their desires. It's an act of judgment. It's all displayed in the general societal/cultural rejection of God worked out in godless lifestyles. But for Paul, all this is reason to go to Rome to preach the powerful transforming gospel, the power of God.

Gracious Saviour God, so despised and rejected by so many of your creatures, you are of course just in all your judgments. How merciful and gracious of you to offer life to anyone. How remarkable and powerful that salvation should come by faith in Christ, and that you call us by grace to him. Help me boldly to proclaim this powerful gospel in word and action.

Romans 2 – All Under Law

This is one of Paul's more technical chapters. He's laying the foundation for Chapter 3 which explains how the gospel is for all humanity. Some are blessed to be born with access to God's written laws. Sadly, they don't keep those laws even while they look down on others who don't have them! And yet, even those without access to God's written word do still express common moral codes showing how we are all made in God's image, created as moral creatures with God-given consciences. We are morally equal, all across the globe.

God of all the earth, you know the bias to favouritism in my heart. You know how we see people of other nations, ethnic groups, colour, ages, social and educational backgrounds as 'different'. Not everyone registers with us as equally urgent for gospel work. Help me to see all people as you do: Precious souls, equally in need of a saviour.

Romans 3 – All Saved By Faith

Verses 20-28 are the heart of Romans and truly the heart of the whole gospel. Paul first levels all humanity together: All have sinned. But the response is that God has provided one Saviour and all may come, saved by faith, credited with righteousness by grace. God himself is vindicated at the cross, shown still to be just since justice is met in the punishment of Christ in our place. If salvation could be won or lost depending on our observance of the law, we'd all be lost. But faith in Christ, all may be saved.

Lord God, the vast scope and genius and wonder of your gospel is beautifully spelt out for us here. Thank you for Christ. Thank you that salvation is your gift to give, received by faith in Christ. Have mercy, then, Lord, and extend this grace further still to my unsaved family and friends, that they might praise you too.

Romans 4 – Always by Faith

It's possible for someone born into strict religion to think that salvation by faith is an alternative to works. Paul is at pains to show that righteousness before God has only ever been credited in response to faith. Even Abraham and his sons were only circumcised as a seal and sign of faith in God's promises, not as a work to secure God's favour in the first place. This is a beautiful, liberating truth. The gospel is for all people in all places of all cultures in all languages, irrespective of age or ability. We do a disservice by limiting evangelism by our own bias.

Lord God, it is beautiful to see how your gospel touches lives of so many very different people around the world. Your gift of salvation by faith glorifies you, humbles me, and liberates me from the debt of sin and weight of guilt. Help me to speak of you freely to all. Free those I know trapped under cultural and religious burdens far from you.

Romans 5 – Peace with God

Faith, peace, grace, and hope. Such great and precious words all intertwined and given to us in Christ. It's clear that life is hard in many ways, but the Christian's life has a sure foundation given by the grace of God, received only by faith in Christ, bringing peace with God now and forever. Therefore we have hope, knowing that God has already given us his love in Christ, confident that he'll finish what he's started. This is hope for life even when the day-to-day experience sometimes feels hopeless and lacking peace altogether.

O God, how much more could you possibly love us? You gave us Jesus, the most clear and powerful demonstration of love that there has ever been. How much more will you then lavish on us, completing the work you've begun! Heavenly Father, help me to keep this hope in sight when faced with problems and temptations this week.

Romans 6 – Newness of Life

It is sometimes argued that if we're saved by faith and not by keeping the laws of God then sin doesn't matter. Romans 6 addresses this head on. By faith we have union with Christ. He died for us, so we died with him. He was raised to life to God and we have newness of life in him. The life of sin's control is dead and buried. Now, in Christ, we are new and alive to God so that carrying on in sin makes no sense. The motivation to kill sin isn't one of obligation or payback but comes from a new character in union with Christ living in us.

Lord Jesus, what depths of shame and heights of gratitude are mine to contemplate how you suffered for my sins. Thank you for this miracle of grace whereby I died to sin with you and now have newness of life in you. Lord help me to live that life, to know the power of that union with you in me day by day.

Romans 7 – Conflicted Conviction

We clearly have a natural sense of justice, being created in God's image, even if our moral compass is twisted and often off course. God's written laws provide an absolute measure for us, clarifying sin and goodness. Its effect is to show us how sinful we are! Even as Christians we can grow in maturity, knowledge and experience in a way that increases our pride and sense of superiority. We remain sinful even though freed from sin by our union with Christ in his death. We will continue likewise until Christ himself frees us from these bodies of sin.

Lord Jesus, you know me so much better than I know myself. Even the best I attempt or do in your name is tainted by sin and pride. Oh Lord, help me to live in the newness of the Spirit, with desires and motives in step with your own. Live in the members of my body that I might do your will, your works.

Romans 8 – Abba, Father

What joy and privilege to know that the Holy Spirit of God dwells in us. What assurance of salvation he brings! He is the Spirit of adoption, in whom we pray even as Jesus himself did at Gethsemane: "Abba, Father." He knows us, feels and understands our emotions, and even conveys our wordless groans to the heart of the Father. My own sin cannot convict me for there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The world cannot break or sever me from God because I am in him and he is in me. Such is the joy of the indwelling Spirit.

Holy Spirit of God, your presence is precious and I'm grateful beyond words. Thank you. Please, as is your delight, show me more of Jesus. Lead me always to the Father in the Son that I might ever cry out, "Abba, Father" in the joy and dependence of adoption. Lord, grant me to know your love and presence always.

Romans 9 – Electing Mercy

After everything read so far it might be reasonable to ask some key questions: If saving faith is to everyone in Christ, are Israelites not God's chosen people after all? Worse, if God turned his back on them will he do the same to others? Paul will have none of it. The true Israel, the true children of Israel, are those who share Abraham's faith, not his DNA or ethnicity. Despite all the honour and privilege of the Old Covenant revelation of God, most people only paid lip service and remained outside the true Israel. In fact, everyone would remain outside except for the electing mercy of God who calls his own people.

Merciful God, I know that unless you had called me I would never have come to you. It's clear the privilege of upbringing is no guarantee and there is no scope for boasting or pride. Instead your electing grace brings you great glory as our rightful Creator and righteous Redeemer. Thank you for your grace to me.

Romans 10 – The Blessed Law

Paul continues his thoughts on the nation of Israel. How blessed they were to have the law of Moses! Yet even in the law there is an acknowledgement that we all sin: No-one can achieve righteousness by keeping the law. Rather, it highlights our sin to us and points us to God as we cry out in faith for his mercy and grace. His response is Jesus, the one the law points to. He alone kept the law, and he is the perfect sacrifice and High Priest to bring atonement for our sins. He is the fulfilment of the law, delivering salvation by faith to all who believe.

Gracious God, unless you acted towards us in grace and mercy no-one would be saved. Yet it is clear from your laws that it was always your good plan to call a people to yourself – people from every tribe, tongue, and nation – a world to praise you. Saved by faith, we will sing the saviour's praise for all time.

Romans 11 – Kindness and Severity

Paul himself is evidence of a remnant of the true Israel within the political nation of blood descent Israel. God has not abandoned them, though in his justice and wisdom and jealousy for his own honour and glory he has dealt decisively and severely with them. Since we Gentiles are no better, our salvation can only be attributed to God's kindness – though we do well to recall he is unchanging in kindness and severity. In the end, all we can do is join in the praise and wonder at God's infinite, sovereign, good, wise will.

Living God, Creator and Sustainer of all, you who redeem sinners according to your own will and pleasure, you are greatly to be revered, worshipped, and loved. Thank you for granting me repentance and faith in Christ, and adopting me as your child.

Romans 12 – Sincere Love

The ethics of Christian living flow out of the grace and mercies of God. Saved by grace, we have no grounds for boasting or thoughts of superiority. United to Christ, we're dead to sin and in newness of life and so we must be conformed more and more to his likeness. We are to be renewed in our minds; that is, in our knowledge, thoughts, and desires. This in turn must show in lives without hypocrisy. If we say we belong to Christ and his church, people ought to see our union lived out whenever they are on the receiving end of our conduct or words. Love is active goodness, not merely the passive abstinence of evil.

Gracious God, you have already transformed me into a new creature in union with Christ. As the Spirit is in me, I ask for his transforming work to continue, bringing sincere love in all I say and do, using the gifts you have given me to build your people up.

Romans 13 – Put on Christ

Everything here is an outworking of what it means to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). It may seem odd that being a model citizen might be an act of worship, and yet such diligent honesty is actually counter-cultural, not conformed to this age. As ever, we are urged not simply to avoid wrongdoing but to go much further, loving our neighbour. All this comes from “putting on” Christ and living in union with him. While we will still sin, we ought never to make plans to sin. Make plans to do good and to love with sacrificial sincerity.

Holy God, it is clear that you govern the affairs of empires, nations, and individual lives. You have called me to yourself in grace, that I might walk in the light of your presence for ever. Help me to walk that way today, keeping my thoughts from lingering over sin, but rather planning to do good in your name.

Romans 14 – Law of love

Elsewhere in the New Testament Christians are exhorted to urge one another to holiness and call out sin in the church. But what if someone is *more* strict than the Bible demands yet they do so for godly reasons before the Lord? Romans 14 says they must not judge other Christians, no more than they themselves are to be judged. Yet we do just this over things like Sunday/Sabbath observance, Bible translation preferences, music styles, and more. Paul gives us a better path: Love. Don't do anything that will cause another to stumble. Make concessions in love. Love always takes the initiative.

Lord Jesus, you know how much we identify differences with other Christians, often using these to determine who's 'right' or 'best'. Thank you for this reminder that the best path is love. Give us discernment, Lord, to be wise regarding secondary matters yet firm regarding more fundamental gospel issues.

Romans 15 – Welcome One Another

The Christians in Rome were a multi-ethnic mix of Jews and Gentiles (seen not least in the range of names in the next chapter). It's natural for us to gather together in cultural groups, but Paul has been at pains to show how we're all equal before God – both in sin and in salvation. So to overcome our real-world, lived-out differences takes deliberate effort from us and ongoing grace from God. Paul prays for harmony from God (v5-6) and urges them to welcome one another (v7) – all to the glory of God.

Glorious God, you are glorious in yourself and yet you grant creation and your church to be the visible theatre of your glory. Help us to be truly welcoming to all who come, celebrating your salvation having reached so many people. Help me to see, to love, and to welcome all your people in a truly Christlike way.

Romans 16 – Applied Theology

This is the kind of chapter that it's easy to skip past. To the original readers, Romans 16 was probably thrilling! For us, too, the list of names is exciting: Jewish names, Latin names, Greek names. It was a multicultural church in a cosmopolitan city – Rome, the centre of the western world at the time. The church had already embraced the theology of which Paul wrote: We are all sinners, all only saved by the same faith in Christ, to live in harmony together in union with Christ. By crossing ethnic, cultural, and even religious boundaries, the church brings glory to Christ.

Lord Jesus, you know how mono-ethnic and mono-cultural many of your churches are both in constitution and outreach. Forgive our narrow mindedness and give us grace to cross boundaries for your glory. May our local church bring you great joy.

1 Corinthians 1 – Power and Wisdom

If Romans 16 suggests unity in a multicultural church in Rome, 1 Corinthians 1 is a disappointment. In Corinth, the church is split into factions built around leaders. Paul highlights the pointlessness of that since no leader is anything at all. Paul wasn't as impressive as some other orators but who cares? There's no value in being the best speaker, but rather in pointing people to Jesus. Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God and he alone saves. That is foolishness to those who value highbrow speech and complex ideologies, but it's life to all who will humble themselves to hear.

Lord Jesus, your gospel is powerful enough and simple enough for a young child to grasp, yet lofty enough that we can never scale the heights of its glorious wonder. Thank you for saving me, and help me to be effective in pointing lost people to you.

1 Corinthians 2 – Spiritual Wisdom

The gospel of Christ is so simple a child can understand and be saved. So why do so many intelligent adults dismiss it? They think it's foolishness, but why? And, equally, why do some believe? Spiritual things can only be discerned by spiritually alive people and such life can only be granted by the Spirit of God. He is God, one with the Father and the Son, infinite in glory and divine in essence, and it is he only who opens hearts and minds to the power and wisdom of God, that is, to Christ and to salvation in his name.

Holy Spirit of God, you who bring life and understanding and lead us to Christ, you are worthy of thanksgiving and praise. Have mercy, O God, and open the eyes of those I love who do not know or love you. And help me more and more to know the mind of Christ in my life.

1 Corinthians 3 – God’s Temple

Factions and divisions within churches are never healthy. At Corinth, they formed around leaders but they can form anywhere about anything. Paul wants us to understand how awful that is. Picture a local church as a temple built by God for God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The foundations are secure: None other than Christ himself. Should we then build separate sanctuaries and sections on that foundation? Is the Spirit not more honoured when we are openly one with one another, giving him room to grow us, bless us, and shape us as he wills?

Lord Jesus, help me to see unhelpful factions and divisions in your church where you have placed me. Help me actively to work for unity and love among your people. May the Spirit grow us, bless us, and shape us in your likeness.

1 Corinthians 4 – Imitate Me

Our church culture is rather more like that of Corinth than we’d like to accept or own up to. Whether it’s Keller, Piper, Stott, Lloyd-Jones or Spurgeon, we love our celebrity pastors. We also (by implication) rather look down on lesser mortals! At Corinth, they even thought they’d progressed beyond Paul, not least because he was so unimpressive in his public speaking. Paul answers them with two things: First, he won’t be judged by them; he serves Christ, and Christ alone will judge his ministry. Second, they should imitate Paul, learning humility and service instead of seeking greatness and reputation. Counter-cultural stuff then and now!

Lord Jesus, you examine our hearts and see the pride within. You know how I rank and measure others when I should be listening and submitting to you. Help me to live and speak as someone accountable to you, not to others. And may I be someone who serves in humility and love, seeking your greatness – not my own.

1 Corinthians 5 – Expel!

If we expelled every Christian who still sins from our our local church there would be no-one left. We all sin and are all called to daily repentance. But what if someone openly, brazenly adopts a sinful lifestyle in the name of progressive gospel ‘freedom’? The Lord does not change and he has spoken. Beware those who call evil good and good evil. We must expel open, unrepentant sin from among us. The aim, however, is purity not condemnation. Anyone so expelled is always welcome back provided they abandon their sin in denial of self. We wish the sin to be expelled and left outside, not the person.

Holy God, sometimes these things are obvious, sometimes more subtle or hidden, and other times hotly debated among your people. Give me great wisdom among your people. Grant me a holy compassion knowing that we are all sinful. And help me to see the sin in my own life that I might grow in holiness and Christlikeness daily.

1 Corinthians 6 – Think (Theo)logically

At Corinth, some Christians were suing other Christians in secular courts. Others, claiming freedoms in the gospel, were using prostitutes for sex. Our reaction to Christians sinning is often a blunt, “Bible says ‘no’.” But while Bible prohibitions are for our good, it’s always helpful to go further and contemplate the theology behind them. That’s what Paul does here. You who will judge angels shouldn’t take one another to secular court. You who have union with Christ ought not join your body to a prostitute. Be who you are in Christ – a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Gracious God, you who have forgiven all my sin, help me to be who I am in Christ. Help me to understand more of your law that I might see the good you have planned for me. May all I say and do be pleasing in your sight, deliberately acting only for your glory.

1 Corinthians 7 – Holy Union

This chapter is the longest and most comprehensive treatment of marriage and divorce in the New Testament. It's a series of cases with teaching for each one. The most critical observation is to grasp the theological basis and priority which is union with Christ. For example, if an unbeliever is married to (in union with) a believer who is in turn in union with Christ, the unbeliever is sanctified, lest Christ be in union with unbelief. Whether married, single, engaged, divorced or widowed, our priority for eternity is union with Christ. Our choices, desires and relationships should all be governed with self-control rooted in union with him.

Lord Jesus, you graciously and wonderfully call us into union with yourself. We died with you and are now alive in you. Help me to grasp this truth as a governing priority for my life, desires, conduct, and self-control.

1 Corinthians 8 – Knowledge and Love

Suppose you try to persuade me to do something truly permissible for a Christian, but my background leads me to feel it's wrong. If I do it, I'll act against conscience (even though my conscience is misguided). To go against conscience involves a terrible step: "I think this is wrong but I'm going to do it anyway." That displays a willingness to do wrong, to rebel. Paul says that if your knowledge puffs you up to do that to me then you have sinned against me (and therefore against Christ) when you should have loved me. A little compassion, gentleness and self-control from you would have kept us both from sin!

Lord, it's clearly good to grow in knowledge so that we might be pure and blameless in your sight. Forgive me for when my knowledge is greater than my love. Help me to live and act with sensitivity towards others, promoting purity, holiness and fidelity to you; building up, rather than knocking down.

1 Corinthians 9 – Free to be a Slave

It seems that the Corinthians had been raising questions about how Paul was funded, what he ate and drank, and even about his apostolic credentials. Paul asserts his rights as an apostle but then remarkably waives them. That leaves him completely free from all actual or perceived allegiance to a benefactor which might undermine his witness to various groups. For Paul, his compulsion to witness overrides any sense of rights. He becomes a slave to everyone in the hope of witnessing to everyone and he does so with a very deliberate plan.

Lord God, you know our witnessing is very often to people very like ourselves. Thank you for Paul's example of putting himself out to cross cultural divides to be an effective witness for you. Give me that evangelistic sensitivity and zeal that I might widen the range of people I witness to.

1 Corinthians 10 – Participating in Christ

We're reminded of a number of events early on in Israel's existence when they came under God's judgment for idolatry. We're also reminded of the privilege they had of enjoying fellowship with God in the offerings brought to the altar. In a similar way, food sacrificed to an idol is fellowship with the demon that promoted its existence. More positively, those who share in the Lord's table participate with him. We need to avoid flirting with religious practices that are actually idolatry and be very deliberate about worshipping Christ in Spirit and in truth.

Living God, we make idols out of all sorts of good things. We're often oblivious to the demonic lies that draw us in. Help me to maintain true worship in Christ in living fellowship with him always.

1 Corinthians 11 – The Lord’s Table

Paul commends the Corinthians for keeping with traditions regarding head coverings, but he has a stern rebuke regarding Lord’s Table instruction. The key to the problem is in v29 where they’re not “recognising the body” – that is, each person only thinks of himself when he ought to use the occasion to celebrate the whole body of Christ, the local church (see 1 Cor 10:17, 12:27). In Exodus 24, the elders of Israel ate a meal together on Sinai in the presence of God having sprinkled the people with the blood of the covenant. This New Covenant meal is no less a communal meal with God. It is the *Lord’s Table*.

Lord God, it is a remarkable privilege to come to your table with your people and enjoy communion with you. Forgive my own individualistic tendencies and how quick I am to think and behave independently from your body, the church. Help me to grasp the full 24/7 reality of being part of your church.

1 Corinthians 12 – Spiritual Gifts

Why doesn’t the Holy Spirit distribute spiritual gifts evenly? Why must we all be different? It is because we are a body, a unit, meant to function as a whole and yet with every part dependent on all the others. The Spirit distributes gifts of his own good free will. We all need and belong to our local church, celebrating diversity and unity in one body. There are no spare parts and no redundant members of this body. No-one is so important they don’t need the others. No-one is so unimportant that they’re not needed. Our culture of individualism must be overcome if our churches are to be truly in step with the Spirit.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your local church and the body of which I am a member. The Holy Spirit is to be praised for the gifts he has given me and others for our edification, for the proclamation of your gospel, and for the magnification of your glory and honour. Help me, then, to use these gifts in your name, in your church, for your kingdom.

1 Corinthians 13 – Love is...

In the previous chapter we reflected on the diversity of gifts across the church. Some people obviously have more gifts than others. We might use those gifts in all sorts of ways, but it would be a mistake to measure how 'spiritual' you are by how religiously active you are. The goal and purpose of these gifts is love. And love is always other-person-oriented. The object of our love need not be lovely or deserving, and our love seeks no reward other than the benefit of others. 1 Corinthians 13 wasn't written to be poetry – it's a stinging rebuke to unloving, self-serving, individualistic Christians.

Lord God you have blessed me with spiritual gifts but I confess I don't make use of them as I ought. In particular, I don't love others as I ought. You love me with a powerful, sacrificial love I don't deserve. Help me to love others in actions for their benefit and your glory.

1 Corinthians 14 – Building Up

It's clear from what Paul writes that 'speaking in tongues' is speaking in languages that can be translated and understood. It was an important sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts and no doubt very dramatic to witness. But God speaks to be heard, and Paul says that even that gift is of little value without interpretation or translation. Better by far is a word of prophecy for all to hear. Now, with Scripture complete, we have all God's needful prophetic words written down for our building up. And whatever gifts we seek to have or to nurture, the goal of building others up must always be the focus. Gifts not directed by love are nothing.

Lord God, often we desire the gifts you've given to others, but all too often our motives aren't love but pride. May the Spirit of Christ in me promote love for others. And help me to grow in wisdom that I might apply these gifts well for your kingdom, in your will.

1 Corinthians 15 – Man of Heaven

Christians are to shun evil, put up with hardships, and suffer rejection in the name of Jesus. What a joyless existence that would be if we ceased at death. But, just as Christ is raised so too all his people will be raised to be like him – bodies without failing sight or hearing, with limbs that don't break or ache, and skin without lesion or blemish. Incorruptible, eternal, physical, spiritual bodies – like Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. What a comfort this is as we age and fall ill. What a prospect as we grieve the world and mourn our lost. Truly, we are raised with Christ.

Lord Jesus, we are conscious of death and decay every day all around us. It's hard to imagine not changing, ageing or decaying. You must be so glorious to see! And you are breathtakingly gracious to grant such hope to a sinner such as me.

1 Corinthians 16 – Everything in Love

This letter has contained correction and rebuke throughout but perhaps its most important point is this: Paul wrote everything in love. He wants the very best for the Corinthian believers and the very best is holy Christlikeness lived out in love for one another. He even makes a point of mentioning how he'd urged Apollos to go to them, showing that he disregards notions of factions built around leaders and dismissing any sense of competition. No church belongs to any of us on earth, though we all belong to the church simply because we are Christ's bride. And so, do everything in love.

Lord God, once again Paul is seen to live out his theology in heartfelt love for you and your people. Thank you that by your word I can grow in knowledge, but help me also to love with a steadfast, experiential love. Lord, forgive my selfish cold heart, and may the Spirit be pleased to make me his own.

2 Corinthians 1 – Comfort

We're given the beautiful phrase "God of all comfort." When we suffer pain, grief, or persecution, God himself is healing balm. Not necessarily escape *from* affliction but always comfort *in* it. When we're faced with someone in pain, we often try to bring comfort along the lines of, "I know how you feel." But we bring the comfort of God not by sharing our pain but by sharing the comfort we have received from God (v6-7). Paul had despaired of life itself (v8) but then praised the God of all comfort for the deliverance received and the greater deliverance yet to come. God is our comfort.

God of all comfort, you know that I'm too quick to seek comfort elsewhere and to fail to point others to you in their times of dire need. Help me to be neared to you and to point others to you and to bring the comfort you bring in Christ – our only hope for peace and deliverance.

2 Corinthians 2 – Forgive and Comfort

Christ's commission to his church is to go and make disciples, not just converts. Paul is Christ's apostle to the Gentiles and he is as concerned about discipling existing churches as he is about church growth. Even in Troas (v12-13) where he enjoyed gospel growth he was distressed about the state of things in Corinth, awaiting news via Titus. Paul was concerned about many things, one of which was a man rightly excluded from the church. On the man's repentance, the church must "forgive and comfort" the man – restoring him fully into the heart of the church. That would mean wounds healed, unity restored, Satan's schemes thwarted.

Lord Jesus, your church is precious to you. We measure success in numbers far too much, when we ought to take care of love, forgiveness, comfort, and discipleship. Help me to love your church with deliberate action, to see our joint edification and sanctification as disciples in the same way you do.

2 Corinthians 3 – From Glory to Glory

The Corinthians seemed to want speakers to come with endorsements – letters of recommendation. Paul says the church *is* his letter, all the proof anyone needs of his genuineness in Christ. This is because we are only saved by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, not by external recommendation or legal observance. Moses saw the glory of the Lord directly, spiritually, and seeing the church in Corinth is an indirect way to see the Lord's glory (as in a mirror). We ought not to rely on human endorsements and recommendations, but to gaze at the Lord's glory all we can in as many ways as we can – and that will transform us into glory too.

Glorious God, thank you that the Spirit has lifted the veil from my heart so that I can see Jesus. Thank you for glimpses of glory as I contemplate him. Help me to reflect his glory for all to see, even as seeing his glory transforms me to his likeness.

2 Corinthians 4 – We Do Not Give Up

The truth that hearts can only be unveiled by God is liberating for our evangelism. There's no need for gimmicks – we are to tell people about Jesus. Whether someone hears that news well or badly is not down to our giftedness or eloquence. That *is* liberating for those of us who aren't super-evangelists or speakers! In fact, us being as fragile as jars of clay actually glorifies God – if anyone is saved by something we say or do it can't be because *we're* brilliant, but rather because the gospel is powerful. If we spend all our energies and resources, lose all our friends, and waste away outwardly, our eyes are on greater glories ahead.

Gracious God, forgive me that I so often try and fail to do things in my own steam. Worse, I often hold back, sensing my own shortcomings and inability as if they mattered. Help me to trust the gospel that saved me to save others. Help me to speak truth simply, honestly, and earnestly for your glory.

2 Corinthians 5 – Compelled by Christ’s Love

As we get older and feel our bodies age and decay, thoughts of a perfect resurrection body bring great hope. More than that, we will receive those bodies when we see Jesus and it is the hope of life with *him* that thrills us most. As we know and experience more of him now by faith and long to worship him by sight, it is his love for us that compels us to want to please him and make him known to others. He has reconciled us to God (such joy!) and given us a ministry of reconciliation to take out as his ambassadors. This is an honour, privilege, and joy only achieved in him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing reconciliation through your death and resurrection. Thank you that in union with you, you make me a new creation. Help me to fulfil the privilege of being an ambassador for you, bringing truth boldly, pointing others to you and the hope of eternal life that only you can bring.

2 Corinthians 6 – Open Your Hearts

Paul has given so much of himself for the benefit of the church in Corinth. He has been poured out for them over and over. This wasn't some dry obligation though, as if caring for Corinth were some kind of work task or objective. Compelled by Christ's love for Paul and the church, Paul loved the church deeply and longed for richer, holy partnership with them – actually for the good of the church itself. How great his grief, then, to see them partnering with the world rather than with Paul. How many church leaders grieve to see their church members looking outside the church for help that really ought to be sought within the fellowship?

Lord Jesus, you know how little we truly open our hearts to your people in our local churches. Forgive me, Lord, for not opening my heart to your people to share their burdens and have my burdens shared with you through your people. Help us to truly love one another.

2 Corinthians 7 – Happiness and Joy

This might well be Paul's most happy chapter in all his letters! In his inner being, Paul's joy in Christ never wavered but that doesn't mean he was always happy. He suffered a great deal in life. His happiness comes through fellow believers: First, there's the simple pleasure of reunion with Titus. Second, the news that Corinth had received Titus so well. But mostly, Paul's happiness came through the news that the church had received Paul's "severe letter" (now lost to us, but between 1 & 2 Corinthians) very well. Rebuke led to repentance, repentance to salvation and rejoicing. Is that what makes us happy, too?

Thank you, Lord, that we are so often greatly encouraged by Christian friendships. It is a thrill to hear of spiritual progress being made. I pray for warmer friendships and fellowship across our church, that we might experience and display your love to all.

2 Corinthians 8 – Give Yourself

Paul is raising money for a problem among the churches in Judea. The Corinthians had promised to contribute and are now being urged to fulfil their commitment. The Macedonian churches gave abundantly out of poverty. What drove them to such generosity? "They gave themselves first to the Lord" (v5). We find giving hard when we believe we own our possessions but when we give ourselves to the Lord then all we have is his already. Giving is easy when you know that what you give is the Lord's already. You no longer skim off surplus, but rather lay it all at Christ's feet. The more we "have" the harder this becomes.

Lord Jesus, you who left riches and honour beyond imagination and came to such humble poverty, you who lavishes heaven's grace on us, forgive me that I don't always see my possessions as wholly yours. Help me more and more to give myself to you, to be used for your kingdom and glory.

2 Corinthians 9 – Give Cheerfully

V7 has the well-known phrase, “God loves a cheerful giver.” But where does this cheerfulness come from? If you think that your money is your own then you will always see giving as losing. But Chapter 8 reminded us to give ourselves to the Lord first, in which case ‘giving’ becomes ‘sowing’. If giving is sowing, what’s the harvest? It’s not more money, but rather righteousness (v10). It’s a sign of righteousness in Christ and an overflow of his grace extended to us. Recipients of our giving will, in turn, give thanks to God and have deep affection for you because of God’s work in you.

Lord God, you know my giving to Christian work is often limited by my own unspiritual thinking and worldliness. Help me to truly see giving as sowing, so that your kingdom righteousness may be spread abroad to the blessing of many and the honour of your name.

2 Corinthians 10 – Boast in the Lord

There’s a significant change in tone as we come to Chapter 10. Maybe some new information or report has prompted Paul to have to defend his apostolic ministry. It seems that some other, more impressive speakers have arrived and while Paul’s letters are strongly worded the man himself appeared less impressive. But comparison is so often unhelpful. Paul refuses to measure his ministry against others. He will only measure himself against the tasks the Lord has assigned (v13). Whether our church is small or large, our gifts many or few, all that actually matters is obedience to Christ where we are.

Lord Jesus, obedience to you is liberating in so many ways. Forgive me for comparing my output with others. Help me to serve you with grace and diligence where you have placed me.

2 Corinthians 11 – Foolish Comparison

It seems that some men, calling themselves “super-apostles”, have come to Corinth. They are more talented at public speaking than Paul and receive payment from the church (Paul served at no cost to the church which was frowned upon, since any “decent” leader would demand a fee). Paul responded by highlighting the foolishness of comparison. But instead of boasting about gospel triumphs and successes, he lists how much he’s suffered for the gospel. Satan exalts himself and so do his followers. Christ serves and lifts up the poor and lowly, willing to suffer for others. Don’t compare yourself even to Paul, but serve Christ where you are.

Once again, Lord, I must ask for forgiveness for comparing myself to others. There is so much jealousy and idolatry in that path. Give me wisdom and diligence, compassion and love, that I might serve you well for your glory, doing the work you have prepared for me with the gifts you have given me.

2 Corinthians 12 – Sufficient Grace

Paul writes of “a man” who had been caught up in a vision of heaven itself. It’s clear he’s writing about himself, but to prevent pride and self-exaltation the Lord permits him to have a “thorn in the flesh” – probably a painful physical condition. The Lord refuses to remove it even though it weakens Paul. In Scripture, Christ’s grace means both his undeserved kindness to us and his active divine assistance in the Spirit. In Paul’s weakness, Christ is glorified in the divine assistance so visibly present in Paul’s ministry. Thus must impact on how we view our own illnesses, disabilities and problems in life.

Lord God, you are the author of all that is good and you only ever do good to us. Sometimes your providences are painful and confusing, yet even as they drive us to you in prayer they do us good. Help me to know and to experience your divine assistance, your grace, and to bring glory to you in my weakness.

2 Corinthians 13 – Grace, Love, and Fellowship

The church in Corinth had chosen to listen to more gifted public speakers than Paul with the result that they'd drifted into godlessness and immorality. 1 & 2 Corinthians weren't Paul's only letters to them. He poured both love and strong words into them. Here in this last chapter we're reminded of his hopes for them: Holiness of life in union with Christ, Christian maturity, unity and love. It was never about Paul or winning arguments. His final words to them are a true blessing that the church would reflect the triune God who saved them. May we be gracious (as Christ), loving (as the Father), and in fellowship and partnership together (as the Spirit).

Holy God, you know all the imperfections in all your churches. Forgive me for my part in the shortcomings of our church. Help me to see your people as you do, to live out my union with Christ as an active reality, to be gracious to all, loving to all, fellowshiping with all your people.

Galatians 1 – A Different Gospel?

There is one God and one mediator for all humanity by whom we may be saved, Christ himself. We're saved by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone. This salvation is revealed to us and in us by God himself. So, here in Galatians 1, Paul is angry and distressed that churches in the region of Galatia have begun to accept a "different gospel" – which is no gospel at all. He makes it clear from verse 1 that what he teaches is from God himself in Christ, not some kind of manmade religious pick 'n' mix. Salvation is the revelation of Jesus to us and in us (v16) and nothing could possibly compare.

Lord Jesus, the salvation and redemption you accomplished for us is gloriously complete. I know that if there were some sin I could commit to jeopardise my salvation I'd do it. Thank you, then, for perfection. Thank you for your supernatural revelation, and may that extend to you revealing your grace to others through me.

Galatians 2 – By Faith in Jesus Christ

The Galatian churches were being swayed by teachers who said that even Gentile (non-Jew) believers needed to be circumcised (under Jewish law) if they were to be counted as God's people. Even Cephas, the apostle Peter, was persuaded. The gospel revealed by God to Paul is that we are saved by faith in Christ alone and emphatically not by any work of law. Does it matter how we live then? Very much so because of our union with Christ. We are united to him in his death – crucified with him even – and our union with him means he now he lives in us and we live for God.

Living God, what a change you have brought about in me! Forgive me my sin, Lord, and even the great sin of not living conscious of your indwelling in me when my thoughts drift off and linger in darkness. Help me to know and experience you, being alive in you and living life for you and to you always.

Galatians 3 – Children of Abraham

To claim Abraham as your "Father" was to claim to be one of the children of God. The Gentile Galatians were beginning to impose the law of Moses on themselves in order to be truly counted as children of Abraham. Paul points out how foolish that is for two reasons: First, the law didn't even appear until 430 years after Abraham. Second, Abraham believed God and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. The law serves to highlight sin and transgression and curse. It causes us to turn in faith to Jesus, the fulfilment of the law, and our faith is credited to us as righteousness exactly as it was for Abraham.

Gracious God, you know our weaknesses and our failings. Your word highlights them so that we might more fully grasp our condition before you. Your grace in this is beautiful, not least as you point us to Jesus. Lord, forgive me my sin and count Christ as sin for me. And may I praise your grace for all eternity.

Galatians 4 – Children of God

In the previous chapter, Paul argued that those who have faith in Christ are the true children of Abraham. He ends this chapter with an allegory explaining how we are children of freedom, redeemed from slavery to law by the work of God. But our greatest, truest parentage is described in 3:25-4:7. We are children of God. Adoption is transferred parenthood. It's permanent. We call God "Abba, Father" just as Jesus did in Gethsemane. His Father is our Father. The "Spirit of Adoption" (Romans 8:15), the "Spirit of the Son" (v6) is in us, sent by God. Our redemption from sin takes us into the family of God.

Heavenly Father, holy God, your grace to me is astonishing and boundless. It is stunning that you should forgive my sin at all, and yet you have gone so much further in calling me to adoption, sending the Spirit into my heart that I might know you as Father. Thank you, thank you.

Galatians 5 – Walk by the Spirit

The Galatians were being urged by someone to go back to Jewish regulations to be counted as God's people. But Paul has argued that we're free from the law. So how are we to live? Lawlessly? No, now we are free to love one another, not to live to sinful desire. In Christ, by faith, we are made new. The Holy Spirit of Adoption, the Spirit of the Son, is in us. Though we're not perfect, we are to walk (to live) by the Spirit in us with our lives bearing the fruit of his indwelling in us. The list of nine fruit is not exhaustive (v22-23) and is biased towards our dealings with others. We honour the Spirit as we serve one another in love (v13).

Holy Spirit of God, Spirit of adoption, please continue your work in me to produce fruit of sanctification and righteousness in action and words of love to others. May Christ himself be experienced and known by others as you work in me to the glory and honour of the Father.

Galatians 6 – Reap What You Sow

To walk by the Spirit is to walk in love, and love is always towards others. We are to bear one another's burdens, actively trying to help one another. Love doesn't boast, though, so we don't love for audience applause. Rather, we carry our individual load of accountability to the one who saved us. So we sow in acts of love looking to reap a harvest of righteousness and eternal life in the Spirit by grace. With that in mind, don't give up loving others. Encourage and build up everyone – including even those who teach and lead. Consciously nurture the growing harvest of the fruit of the Spirit in you.

Lord God, you know how individualistic I am, like so many in our culture. Thank you that your word makes it clear that your people are one in union with Christ. Thank you for the Spirit's life in me. Work in me to bring you honour as I sow works of love and righteousness today. When I tire, help me not to give up.

Ephesians 1 – Praise to the Father

This is a spectacular chapter where every verse is worthy of meditation on its own. God our Father is praised for his eternal love for us, determining our glorious future with him since ages past, knowing we would need to be saved by him in Christ. It is astonishing to learn that one's own salvation is a specific element in God's eternal plans. Paul is thrilled that the Ephesians are counted in and his prayer for them is that somehow they can grasp the wonder of salvation, praise the triune God, experience his power, and live in anticipation of glorious inheritance.

Gracious Father, who chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world, and who then called me to salvation in him by your own good pleasure and will, granting me the Holy Spirit as security of inheritance, you are greatly to be thanked, praised, worshipped and adored. Forever isn't enough time to praise your greatness.

Ephesians 2 – One in Christ

We were given a glimpse of God's eternal plan to save us in Chapter 1, and here we see how it came to us. We were dead in sin and were children of wrath until God, by grace, made us alive in Christ. Corpses don't raise themselves to life. We are saved by God's grace and power. Here's the key point: We are *all* saved the same way. In Ephesus, Gentile Christians might have felt second-class compared to Christians from a Jewish background. But no, we are all members of the one household of God, saved by Christ, with access in one Spirit to the Father. There are no second-class Christians.

Loving Father, you know our fickle hearts. In the company of some we do feel second-class, while in the company of others we look down. Help me to see all your people as you do, all made alive in Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, adopted by you. Thank you for who I am in Christ.

Ephesians 3 – The Riches of His Glory

God's wisdom is like a spectacular, multi-faceted diamond turning this way and that, radiating God's glory in the heavens. How is it made visible? Through the church. The administration of God's grace is not a divine side show in God's plans for his creation. It is centre stage for all to see. No wonder Paul isn't put off by challenges (v13) if it means Christians have access to the Father. So, as in Chapter 1, Paul prays that we might grasp the riches of God's glory and love lavished on us in Christ. And we do that as Christ takes full residency in our hearts and we experience his strength and power in the Spirit.

Eternal, gracious and wise God, how you are glorified in redeeming a people for yourself. You are worthy of all praise. Triune God, whose sacrifice, power, grace and life utterly transformed me into a new creature, thank you for the access you grant me now and the promise of inheritance to come.

Ephesians 4 – Walk Worthy

So far in Ephesians we've seen how all believers were chosen by God before the foundation of the earth to be one church bringing glory to God in the heavens. It is essential, then, that we all walk worthy of such a calling in order that God be glorified in us. How? First, work at unity with other Christians in humility and love. Second, submit to godly teaching from biblical church leaders and use what you learn to build other Christians up. Third, cast off sin from your words, thoughts and actions and live in a holiness of life consistent with the Holy Spirit who dwells in you.

Holy God, it is frankly unsettling and humbling that your glory and honour are in any way at stake in the conduct of your people in your church. Forgive me my lack of love for your people, seen how infrequently I determine to build up and encourage others. Lord, in word, thought and action, help me to walk worthy today.

Ephesians 5 – Children of Light

The Christian life isn't characterised by do's and don'ts. We are in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, children of the Father. We must imitate our Father, then, growing in Christlikeness, filled with the Spirit. How are we filled with the Spirit? Paul lists four ways: (i) Singing to one another. (ii) Singing to the Lord. (iii) Giving thanks always. (iv) Submitting to one another. So you need to be with other Christians if you are to be filled with the Spirit. No doubt the Lord is gracious to those who are unable to gather with others, but for those of us who can, walk as children of light with others.

Lord God, thank you for your church. Thank you for the love and fellowship of other believers. Help me to make the most of this means of grace, being filled with the Spirit as we sing and give thanks. Show me what it is to imitate you, to be a true child of light.

Ephesians 6 – Be Strengthened

The instruction to put on the armour of God is quite well known, but why is it just here in Ephesians? We've seen how the church is God's wisdom on display in the heavens and how necessary it is to live a life in consistent holiness, united to Christ and indwelt by the Spirit. The enemies of Christ also inhabit unseen realms and are working to trash the church through temptation, division, and persecution. Not all our enemies can be seen. We are all tempted and all do battle with sin and opposition every day. But we don't fight unaided or alone. So we pray to be strengthened by the Spirit (3:16), clothed in God's armour every day.

Gracious God, you know the hand-to-hand combat your people are engaged in against sin, temptation, unforgiveness, and opposition. I pray for the Spirit's strengthening, that Christ might reign truly and wholly in my heart, helping me to walk worthy of so great a salvation – a salvation authored in eternity past and to be rejoiced in forever.

