

### ***Read Gen 3***

**What** – This scripture starts off with “Now the serpent”. It’s all downhill from there. This scripture was written by Moses and describes how Satan brought sin and shame into God’s creation through the volition of man. Satan, the great tempter, causes man to believe that He should see things like God does. Adam and Eve do see things like God, but to their surprise, knowing shame, evil and sin is not such a good thing. God punishes Adam, Eve and Satan for these transgressions and has no choice but to put “man” out from the Garden of Eden.

**Why** – People often accuse God of being “unfair”? “Why me, God?” is a common plea in times of trouble. David said the same thing when he was in trouble (see Psalm 22:1). What we fail to realize, however, is that our struggles today (and throughout human history) are often a result of our own bad choices. God “made us in His image” (Gen 1:26-28), so we have freewill. The key in this scripture is that we chose not once, but twice. Eve had a chance to say no, and then Adam could have corrected the situation but did not. Adam and Eve chose wrong. We continue to follow in their footsteps. Suffering and problems are a result of sin in the world. They are not caused by God.

**WOW** – Satan is the father of lies and deceit. Paul reminds us that it is Satan who is our primary adversary in this life still (Eph 6:12). We must never lose sight of the fact that our actions and our LONGINGS have long term consequences. What is it that you “want” (the Bible uses the word “covet”, see the Ten Commandment in Deut 5 or Exodus 20) and how is Satan convincing you that you should have it? You would do well to step back and look at that, because nothing good comes from being outside of God’s will, and that is exactly where our desires will put us. More important, however, than the character of Satan shown here is the character of God. In the face of original sin, seeing His good creation ruined by the enemy, God IMMEDIATELY showed His grace. Read Vs 21 again. God made them clothes to protect them from the environment He was sending them into and to cover up their sin. God has made a way, despite our failings. Remember Romans 8:35-39, “NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF JESUS”. Not even our own sin. Yes, there are consequences in our lives and in our world for sin, but NEVER forget that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33) and God is always restoring what we destroy.

### ***Read Exodus 3:1-14***

**What** – In this important scripture Moses recalls his “call” from God. He meets God while he is out tending the sheep (a theme we will here again in the scriptures). From the midst of a bush that is on fire but is not consumed, God calls out to Moses. Moses, his interest now peaked, goes over to God for a talk. God reminds Moses who he is conversing with (take off your shoes) and then proceeds to tell Moses that the Jews are in trouble and God intends to use Moses to save them. Moses hesitates, citing some potential problems. Here we get a picture into the past, and we are reminded that Moses knows all too well what Egypt and Pharaoh are like, since just a chapter before, Moses was an adopted son of Pharaoh and fled from Egypt after a tussle with the law.

**Why** – This scripture is important for many reasons. First, and most importantly, is the introduction to one of the major themes in the bible. This scripture shows us that grace and love compose God’s character. God’s reason for seeking out Moses was that He had heard the cry of his people. The Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt is a framing event of the Old Testament. It reminds us that God’s purpose is “salvation” and it foreshadows what God eventually planned to do for all of mankind through the Jews. The importance of this theme from a standpoint of understanding the entire bible cannot be understated. God also reminds us of another important point regarding His character. He says to Moses, “take your shoes off, you are on Holy Ground.” What makes the ground holy? God’s presence makes it holy. God’s holiness is often overlooked by modern Christians who focus so much on the humanity of Jesus. While it is true that God wants to be our friend, we should never assume that He then accepts our sin as OK or our humanity as acceptable. He loves us, but holiness (being like Him) is still the standard and the goal. God sets this principle down clearly for us here. Where we meet with God is “Holy Ground”.

**WOW** – There are so many WOW’s in this scripture that they can hardly be discussed. First is Moses response when God calls him. “Here I am” is a simple response that many servants have said in response to God’s call (see Isaiah 6:1-7). God calls us based on our humility and willingness to serve Him. This begs the question, “Are you ready and willing to be called?” Moses showed that he was ready. When God announced His presence, Moses hid his face. Do we share that awe and fear of the Holy Lord Almighty? Do we have God on the throne or is he simply our pal that we consult and consort with on our terms? We would do well to remember the foundation that was present in Moses life before God chose him for service. Moses had the fear of the Lord to compliment and complete his friendship with the Lord. Finally, God says something to Moses that has changed and defined history. When Moses asks who he should say sent him, God says to tell the Israelites, “I AM WHO I AM. Tell them the I AM has sent you.” WOW, WOW and double WOW. God reminds Moses to remind the people that God is the beginning, the end, and all things in between. God wants to know us, love us, help us, and guide us, but we must remember that HE IS IN CHARGE. Salvation, knowledge of Him, service, and every other part of our relationship with Him are done ON HIS TERMS. When our desire to know Him is so we can “prove” to ourselves He is worthy of our time, then we have overstepped a line of faith. He wants us to seek Him. He invites questions that will

bolster us and grow our faith, but He will not be mocked or pulled down to our level. He is, after all, God. We would do well NEVER to forget that.

### ***Read Exodus 20:1-21***

**What** – This scripture needs no introduction. Most recognize it by the reference, and if not, immediately know the Ten Commandments when they are referenced. They have been a powerful symbol of God's ideals since God gave them to Moses and have been a source of controversy recently in our nation. They are the basis for our modern legal system, no matter how much some may want to deny that, and they identify for us a part of God's character. Moses recorded these at the request of God to show the people that God was a God who loved His people enough to tell them what would help them prosper and what would not. Later in the Old Testament, we see just how smart God was when we recognize that the Jews broke nearly every one of the ten regularly. Rather than a list of rules, God intended this list to be a warning about what temptations and sins we need to be aware of. With God, we always see grace shining through, even in the midst of His LAW.

**Why** – God wrote these to give the Israelites guidance. Their desperate need for guidance is discovered if we read just a bit past this section. It took God a little while to put the words of the Law on the tablets. In addition to the 10 Commandments, God wrote all the Law on the tablets, almost everything we read from Exodus 20-31 (see Exodus 21-31). The people became so impatient that they built a Golden Calf to worship in God's place because Moses was taking too long (see Exodus 32). God finished in a hurry and sent Moses back when He saw what the people were doing. Sometimes we mistake the Ten Commandments for a "to do" list for good behavior. God never meant them to be that. As with the impatient and wayward Israelites, He gave them to us so that we might remember Him, His character, and His desire to see us live His gift of life to us to the fullest.

**WOW** – The Ten Commandments are important for several reasons. First is the glimpse into God's character. Look at verse 12. God says that He is telling us this, "that it may go well with us." These are not rules to please Him, but an instruction manual to help us get the most out of what He has given us. What an amazing concept! God gave us boundaries TO HELP US. It says a lot about His love, doesn't it? Second is the simplicity of the section. If you break the Commandments up, they only deal with two areas of life. The first four deal with our relationship with God and the rest deal with our relationships with the people around us. Think about all the scriptures that say things like, "I will be their God and they will be my people," (Jer 7:23) or, "draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). Our primary task in the Christian life is to seek God and try to know Him more. Besides that, we are to treat others like Christ treats us. Think of scriptures that say things like, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). The Ten Commandments have always echoed something that Jesus made perfectly clear. The life of following God is not easy, but it is simple. Love God and love others. If you are doing those things, you will find yourself doing God's will.

### ***Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9***

**What** – Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy as a reminder to the Israelites of all that God had told them before they entered the Promised Land. Many people do not realize that the Israelites had a chance to enter the Land of Canaan BEFORE they wandered around the desert for 40 years. The Israelites were disobedient, not trusting in God's specific command to enter the land. As punishment, He SENT them into the dessert for all those years (Read Number chapters 13-14 for this story). In that time, they were to learn obedience and practice their faith. Then, as they were about to enter the land God was giving them again, Moses preached the three sermons that compose the book of Deuteronomy to remind the people of all God has promised, as well as all the mistakes their ancestors had made. Deuteronomy means "Second Law". Moses did not want them to make the same mistakes again. In chapter 6, we find a prayer that the Jews call the "Shama". This is taken from the Hebrew word "hear", which is the first word in the prayer. It is still chanted by Jews today, and was obviously important in the time of Jesus as He calls it the "Greatest Commandment".

**Why** – This scripture is important today for many reasons. As Moses began to explain the Law to the people, he reminds them of several foundational concepts that still must undergird our understanding of God's Word today. First, we are to FEAR THE LORD. This is difficult for many in our society today because we have a very dysfunctional understanding of the word "fear", and because we RARELY put anything in life ahead of our own well being. Fearing God means understanding that He is in control of everything we see, do and are. He is the King, the Boss, the main man, the one in charge. However you want to phrase it, God's way and God's will comes first. That is non-negotiable as we look at His Law and our lives. Moses quickly reminds us, however, of the beauty of this. He says that we must fear God "so that we will enjoy long life". Yes, God is in charge, but He ALWAYS has our best interest in mind. These two ideas MUST be at the core of our relationship with God, or we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the Israelites. Do you think we understand this? A clue is that Moses tells the people twice in two sentences to listen. "SHAMA", or "HEAR THIS" Israel, Moses says. We REALLY need to hear this message. Moses goes on to remind them how important it is. They are to love God with every aspect of their life, Heart, Mind and Body. They are to constantly talk about, read and practice the word of God. The same message is still needed today.

**WOW** – As we dig into this verse, the amazing insights of this sermon by Moses are astounding. What do we put ahead of our relationship with God? The kids, work and entertaining ourselves all seem to take priority over our Spiritual life. It seems as if not much has changed in 4000 years. Moses touches on all of these in one fell swoop. No matter what you are doing or where you are going, your devotion to God has got to be included. Jesus shared this passion. Many of Jesus' most astonishing statements had to do with this very issue. When Jesus called people to follow Him, He left no room for any response but an immediate "YES". Many obeyed (Peter, Matthew, Paul, see Matt 4:19; 9:9, Acts 9), but many could not let go of the baggage of this world to do so (the rich young ruler comes to mind, see Mk 10:17-22). Not only does Moses remind us that all we have must be poured into loving God, but he gives us practical examples of home, family and travel to remind us that NOTHING we do is exempt from our love for God. Our love

for God should consume and include OUR ENTIRE LIVES. Anything short of total commitment will end in less than God has planned. Often, we think that a total commitment to God will be the end result of our walk with Him. Moses begins his message to the Israelites with these proclamations. Today, like then, we have the cart before the horse. A total commitment is required before we can start our journey. Are you in?

### ***Read 1 Sam 3***

**WHAT** – Samuel was a very important figure in the life of Israel. This story tells about Samuels “call to ministry”. He could not be a priest because to be a priest meant you came from the tribe of Levi, but he was given to the temple by his mother because she was so grateful to God for giving her a son. In this scripture he meets God, literally, and the beginning of a powerful ministry is initiated. Samuel grew up to be one of Israel’s most important and powerful prophets, and he was responsible for anointing the first two kings of the nation of Israel.

**WHY** – Samuel was the first true “prophet” in the line of biblical prophets found in the books of 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings. Before this period God had “judges” over Israel. In that sense Samuel was the last judge and the first prophet, a “link” as it was, between both methods of God dealing with His chosen people. He returned Israel back to God after a long period of separation. He also was big part of the life, ministry, and kingship of one of the most important figures in the Old Testament, King David.

**WOW** - There are a lot of small but wonderful details here. Verse 1 reminds us that “the word of the Lord was rare”. This shows how sin will separate you from God. Verse 3 says that Samuel was sleeping in the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of God was kept. That was unheard of. If you study the Old Testament, you see that NO ONE was allowed in the Holy of Holies with the Ark except the High Priest, and him only once a year to make a universal sacrifice on the “Day of Atonement” (Yom Kippur). Samuel SLEPT under the ARK! What an amazing statement about God’s grace, His true purpose for worship (relationship rather than rules) and the plan He had for Samuel’s life. Finally, in verse 10, the bible says that “God came and stood there” to talk to Samuel. WOW. God’s very presence shining upon Samuel. It is no wonder He was special.

### ***Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13***

**What** – In this scripture we are introduced to one of the most important human figures in the Old Testament, King David. The prophet Samuel records his direction from God to anoint a new king since Saul, the first king, is failing so miserably. God tells Samuel that Jesse of Bethlehem has a son who will be the next king. Samuel is fearful of the mission because Saul has become a jealous, power hungry leader. Samuel goes to Bethlehem with a covert mission and, amid a group of nervous and pondering leaders, lines up a meeting with Jesse and his boys. Samuel first has Jesse, David's father, parade all of David's brothers in front of him. With each one Samuel thinks that he has found the candidate of God's choosing, but God says "NO". Finally, Samuel must ask Jesse if there are any more sons, and he says, "Oh yes, I forgot the last one who tends the sheep." God gives Samuel His consent on this final choice and David is anointed as the next king. It is interesting to note that David did not become king immediately. In fact, it was many years until he did finally take the throne.

**Why** – This scripture is extremely important for many reasons. We are introduced here to David. As a king, David is revered by the Jews because of his military exploits, his Spiritual leadership, and his powerful love for God. Even in the midst of David's own sin and imperfection (See 2 Sam 11), David cries out to God and seeks God as his help and salvation. David shows us how to follow God in faith, with patience and with an ear to God's leading. These are examples that are as special to us today as they were to the Jews then. David is described in scripture as, "a man after God's own heart" (See 1 Sam 13:14). Because of this he becomes for us a prototypical man, showing us how to relate to God through our struggles and grow amid a world of turmoil. In addition to David's character, when we look at the lineage of Jesus, we see David there as a prominent figure. Jesus' role for us is as that of king, prophet, and priest. David sets the standard for king. Although Christ perfects it, David shows us why we need a king and what God expects from us as we live out a life of faith in Jesus. In writing most of the Psalms, David left us a heritage of God-seeking that still inspires believers today.

**WOW** – This short, pivotal scripture is full of practical lessons for us today. David is the LAST son, the one in charge of the sheep. This is the lowest position in the family. He was the least important of the children according to custom. It should make an enormous difference to us that God does not care about custom or tradition, He cares about the heart. David was the son who was willing to work hard (tending sheep was hard work), David was the son who had a heart for doing what needed done. David was the son who was open to learning and leading from God. These things matter more to God than family standing, and God chose the man who would do the best job for the kingdom. In addition to this, it is interesting to note that David was the opposite of Saul. Saul was a leader in appearance and presence, David was a leader in action and motivation. David served others; Saul commanded others. David gives us a picture of Jesus; Saul gives us a picture of sinful man. And this leads to the most impressive WOW in this scripture. God's statement in verse 7 is breathtaking and life changing. God tells Samuel when he is sizing up candidates, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." What we look like on the outside



does not matter. If our hearts are right, if they are inclined toward serving our God, He can and will do amazing things through you. What does God see when He looks at your heart?

### ***Read 2 Samuel 9:1-13***

**What** – There is a lot of background needed to really understand this scripture. David is King of Israel, and He was patient in obtaining his throne. He waited on God for years and followed Saul as King, until God decided to fulfill His promise and make David king. In David's day, when a king became king, he usually PUT TO DEATH all of the possible heirs from the past king, thereby undoing any power struggle or claims to his throne from the past. David, however, in the spirit of the one true king, uses the person of Mephibosheth to illustrate to Israel what a king should be like. King's should show kindness and follow God. They should be willing to sacrifice for the people what God would sacrifice for His people. And most of all, he should be a man of his word and keep his promise, no matter the circumstances.

**Why** – The promise is a big part of what makes this scripture special. David and Jonathan (King Saul's son, Mephibosheth's father) had a covenant. Jonathan saw the evil in his own father and the anointing on David. Jonathan promised to do the will of God and protect David and in return David promised to remember Jonathan's family in the future when he was king (See 1 Sam 20:15 ff, 42). David, even at the risk of putting his kingdom in danger, follows through on this promise. In fact, David does more than follow through. He restores Mephibosheth to a respected place in the kingdom. He gives him enormous amounts of land and allows him to "sit at the king's table." This was a place of immense honor in the ancient world. Essentially, David took his enemy and made him a prince. This is incredible, and it foreshadows the relationship that a loving God wants to have with His sinful people.

**WOW** – But this scripture even goes beyond the promise. It speaks to how all of us should treat the people around us. The Hebrew word used here for "kindness" is *hesed*. It is used 3 times to describe David's feeling and actions towards Mephibosheth. This word is interesting. It is often translated from the Hebrew as "kindness", but it also means "duty". Being kind to others is not a choice, but a duty if we are followers of God. There is also a running metaphor of the "table" in this scripture as well. Look at Judges 1:7, the table is not always a symbol of love and affection as we know it through Jesus. In the Old Testament it was a sign of power. Kings had the "power" to feed many at their table or withhold goods from their enemies. Eating is a necessity and the kings controlled it. In addition to that, it was an honor to be in the king's presence at a personal time like a meal. We understand some of this from the Last Supper, but what we need to see is that the Last Supper draws its power from this example. Jesus CHOOSES as the King to invite us to his table. David's emphatic statement in verse 13 that Mephibosheth "always ate at the King's table" reminds us that the love of God invites us into the presence of the King, even though we are "handicapped" like Mephibosheth by our sin. God chooses to show us love and kindness at His table and He reminds us each time we share with Him that He is a God who shows His power by loving us.

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### ***READ 1 Kings 18:16-39***

**What** – There is no way of knowing who wrote the books of 1 and 2 Kings. Scholars have debated for years the authorship. Some ascribe it to one of the many prophets, others to scribes whose job was recording history. It really does not matter. What does matter is the record of what was going on in Israel and the conflict that was growing between the men of God (the Prophets) and the Kings of Israel. While some kings (all in the Southern Kingdom of Judah) had good relationships with the prophets, most did not. The “Men of God”, as they were called, simply seemed to get in the way of what really needed to be done. Much like today, who has time to worry about God’s opinion? It is easier to make morality relative to fit your current needs. Not much has changed. In this scripture we get a clear picture of the role of the prophet. His job was to challenge the world (represented by the kings) and to assert God’s rule over it. Elijah was called to challenge Ahab, described as Israel’s most evil king, and remind him and his wife Jezebel who was in charge. In a battle pitted against 450 of Baal’s prophet, Elijah reminds Israel of the Lord’s power and presence. The people were stunned and returned to God, if only for a short time.

**Why** – This scripture is important because the role of the prophet must be understood in the church today. Jesus is often understood by His filling the three primary roles representing God in the Old Testament. He is our Priest, Our King, and our Prophet. We seem to understand Priest. He is our link to God. His Godliness and Humanity combined connect God with fallen humanity. King also is easy for us to grasp. Jesus is the boss. He owns it all. We only have as He gives to us. But prophet is not as easy for us to understand. Many like to think of the prophets as fortune tellers whose main job is to see into the future. While this was a small part of their job, it really does not describe who they were. The prophet did not just tell the future. He relayed the Word of God to the people. In that way, the prophets were more like preachers today. They simply tell the people what God has said and what the consequences will be for not following. Relaying the message of God is the real role of a prophet. More importantly, the prophet had the job of reminding God’s people that there was a better way. The message of the prophets was usually very simple. They reminded people that there was an alternative to doing things the way they were doing them, they pointed people who were caught in sin back towards God. Isn’t this the quintessential message of the gospel Jesus taught? Peter said, “Repent and turn to God, and times of refreshing will come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19). In that way, all of us have a duty as believers to confront the sin we see in the world in a prophetic way with a message of the alternative, a life devoted to God.

**WOW** – The WOW’s in this scripture are many. The power of God was as striking here as in any scripture in the bible. He brought down fire that not only consumed the offering but melted the stones and the altar and licked up all the water in the trench around the altar. When God decides to make a statement, He makes a statement. But what really stuck out here is the leash that God gave Elijah in dealing with the prophets of Baal. As the prophets are dancing and wailing, Elijah taunted them. He told them to yell louder. He egged them on and made fun of them. In verse 27 he told them to yell louder. Perhaps, Elijah says, Baal was “resting” and needed awakened. The Hebrew word here

means “getting relief” and one translation actually says that Baal is using the bathroom! While this statement is incredibly funny, it does not seem to be like God to be sarcastic. But he allows Elijah to continue to taunt Baal’s prophets. Why? We can only speculate, but I believe it points to two things. The first is that God hates sin. Idolatry is the worst sin (at least it is first on the list of Ten Commandments!) because it is the most degrading to God. He really wanted this message to get through to the people. Secondly though, and more subtly, is the fact that God chooses us for His tasks according to His gifting. Elijah hated sin too. His sarcasm shows that He really disliked Baal’s prophets. He had no respect for those who hated God and he wasn’t afraid to stick his neck out. We can’t expect him to show the composure and grandeur of God, because he was a man. But God enjoyed the wit and the righteousness He had combined in the character of Elijah, and He was letting him use it for God’s glory. This leads to my final point. Are you sticking your neck out for God? Are you willing to be who God made you even when it might not be popular? Elijah’s confrontation shows us that God will honor it when we do. You didn’t know you were a prophet, did you?

## ***READ Nehemiah 4***

**What** – Nehemiah is the last book in the Old Testament chronologically. To realize the importance of what is going on, one must understand a bit of OT history. In 721 BC, the nation of Israel (The NORTHERN NATION, remember the kingdom split in two after Solomon) was captured and taken captive by the Assyrians. 140 years later, a wicked and unrepentant Judah (the SOUTHERN kingdom after the split) suffered the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians. Many of the books in the Old Testament refer to, look forward to or talk about this event that we refer to as “the exile”. Not long after the exile took place, PERSIA overtook Babylon and began to let captives from all over the world return home. As Jews began to return to Israel, they found their homes and towns destroyed. God told them to rebuild. Nehemiah’s book is written about the rebuilding of the walls and city gates around Jerusalem.

**Why** – This book is important for several reasons. First is the history. As the last book of the Old Testament chronologically it is one of the few historical events recorded between the exile (the end of Israel as a nation) and the birth of Jesus. From this and several related books (Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) we get the only picture of the spiritual and physical state of the Jews before Jesus came. Perhaps more important practically, we get a wonderful example of Godly leadership and fortitude. The people who had taken Israel over when the Jews were carried away were in no hurry to give back their land and homes. Over a hundred years had passed, and the new inhabitants did not care about the spiritual heritage of the Jews. Much like the world today, there was a constant battle with the world, one that only God can win. This is where we pick up the story in chapter 4. Nehemiah was encouraging the people to stand up to the world, reminding them of the power and promise of God.

**WOW** – The walls were not just a physical safeguard. The city walls and the gates served as social meeting places, places where decisions were made, and justice was dispensed (see Deut 22). What was at stake here was the very spiritual heritage and future faith of the nation. Make no mistake, the world today seeks to strip the faith from your life and wipe the Godly heritage of this nation from the history books. They have no respect for the work, Word or will of God, and our fight is just as difficult. Our answers are also the same. Look at chapter 4 closely. Nehemiah bathes EVERYTHING in prayer. A constant theme in this book was Nehemiah on his knees. God wants to be involved in EVERY thought and decision we make. Nehemiah also acted decisively. Look at verse 13. He took appropriate action to counter what the world is doing. APATHY CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO RULE. If the church is guilty of anything in our current time, it is a lack of action. We have sat by and watched the devil take away our nation and our children’s future while we have hidden inside our churches making ourselves feel better. Nehemiah knew action was needed and he acted. We must do the same. Finally, Nehemiah made a statement that changed my life personally when I read it, and I know finalized his victory over his enemy. Vs 18 says that “the builders wore their SWORDS at their side when they worked”. Ephesians chapter 6 reminds us that the WORD OF GOD is the “SWORD” of the Spirit. The first time I read this, God spoke to me so clearly. The Word of God HAS TO CENTRAL in our lives if we are to fight the good fight. As Christians,

we must not only be in the Word, but we have to LIVE IT. It should go with us, define us, leads us and be on our hearts, minds, and lips. Our enemy will flee if we fight with the sword God gave us.

Nehemiah was an amazing leader. Simplicity and faith were his underlying principles, and they guided him to success and blessing that God had ordained. God has ordained the same for His church today. My prayer is that we His people are listening. We need to be praying for guidance, acting to change the world around us and letting God's Word be the center of our lives. When that happens, we will again see God's church become the fortress of hope, love and salvation for the world He has designed it to be.

### ***READ Proverbs 1:1-7***

**What** – The Proverbs are the “wisest” of what the Bible calls, “The Wisdom Literature”. While much of the Bible is in narrative form, the books of wisdom (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs) are a collection of songs, prayers and wise saying that the Jewish community had collected over thousands of years. In the title line of the Proverbs we see that Solomon, Son of David had collected the verses that he recorded as the Proverbs. When Solomon was King of Israel, the nation grew to its greatest size and wealth. What made the nation special was its geographical location. Israel was on the trade route between the two superpowers of the day, Babylon and Egypt. Because of this Israel was VERY powerful and for a short time became a world crossroads for culture, finance, and technology. It was during this time that Solomon was asking God for wisdom and collecting all that God sent his way from around the world.

**Why** – The important thing about this scripture is that it reveals God’s plan for us and for His Word, especially the Wisdom Literature. God desires that we attain wisdom and discipline. These things come from Him, which is why He is collecting these proverbs. His desire is that we understand what goes on around us from His perspective and that we learn, grow, and have a positive affect on the world and the people in our circle of influence. God does not just record these sayings for His glory; His goal is to aid His creation.

**WOW** – The WOW here is our response. God says, “I want to help you,” but He also reminds us verse 7 what is required of us if we want to have the full life God has planned for us. “Fear of the Lord” and a desire for “discipline” will lead us to know the secrets of God. This scripture is repeated often in many ways in the New Testament. Paul’s well-known exhortation in Romans 12:1 to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices” is a prime example. The beginning of Proverbs is a call to sacrifice. Don’t put yourself first, put God’s will first (Fear of the Lord) and be willing to work at it (discipline) if that is what it takes. If we are willing to do that, God’s blessings of understanding, wisdom, guidance, and success will follow as we experience His plan for us. That is different from the wisdom of the world, but it is the essence of Gods wisdom for us His people.



### ***READ Isaiah 9:1-7***

**What** – The prophet Isaiah wrote the book that shares his name around the turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (700 BC). The nation of Judah was in turmoil because of her troubled kings and because her sister, the Northern Kingdom of Israel (remember the two split after King Solomon died) had already been carried away into slavery by the Assyrians in 721 BC. Isaiah is reminding Judah to look at what happened to Israel because the same fate was going to befall her. Chapter nine is a well-known scripture that tells of the coming Messiah that will redeem God's people. The prophets had two jobs, telling the people when their actions were sinful, and reminding them that God was the only alternative to their sinful ways. Here Isaiah, beginning this section with, "Nevertheless", reminds Israel that after they are judged, God will still show them favor and give them another chance in the form of Jesus. He describes the Messiah, the blessings He will bestow and Names He will be known by, pointing to the coming Kingship of Christ.

**Why** – Most prophecy in the Bible deals with one of three topics. Many prophecies deal with the exile of the Jewish people and the immediate judgment for their sins. These can be confusing if we fail to realize that the prophets are talking in the future tense about things that we see in the past. The exile happened to the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 721 BC and to the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 586 BC. Context is crucial here. There is also ample prophecy in the Bible that talks about the second coming of Jesus. These are things that have not happened yet. As these occur, we realize that the time for Jesus' second coming is approaching, and we should always be ready. The prophecy we are looking at today, however, is in a third group of prophecies that are very important. There are Messianic prophecies that deal with the birth, life, and mission of Jesus. These prophecies are important to us because, even though they have already occurred, they are a powerful proof to the truth and reliability of scripture since we know they were spoken hundreds of years before Jesus and historically we know they came true. Besides helping to strengthen our faith, many of these prophecies also show us the character of God. If we look at the scriptures surrounding chapter nine, we see that God is angry at Israel for their sinfulness. He is about to judge them. Yet in the middle of His wrath and judgment, He reminds them that Jesus is coming. He will help them, guide them, save them, and heal them. This prophecy is so important because it gives us a wonderful picture of the love and mercy that defines God's character.

**WOW** – There are several things about this scripture that should grab your attention. The first is the blessings that will accompany the Messiah. Isaiah reminded Israel (and us) that the presence of Jesus will cause us great joy and lighten the burdens that we carry. The things that cause us stress (like war – see verse five) will be destroyed by his presence in our life. It is also astounding to me that the government will be on His shoulders. In America we pride ourselves on the "Separation of Church and State", but Jesus' purpose is to rule every area of our lives, and in the end, when God creates a new heaven and a new earth (see Revelation 21), Jesus will reign as King of the Earth and of all of us who know Him. Finally, the most amazing WOW in this scripture is the final verse. In the midst of judgment, God said that His "zeal" will accomplish all that is prophesied here. "Zeal" is a passionate desire to see a cause or idea succeed. God is judging Israel, He has

too because He is holy, but His real concern, His innermost desire, the thought that drives Him and keeps Him going, is the well being of His people. He wants them to know the good news. This is the good news for today. You are His person. The New Testament puts it like this, “NOTHING can separate us from the love of God that is shown us in Jesus”. (Romans 8:38-39). Do you know that God is “zealous” for your well being? Do you realize that you are so important to Him that He would send Jesus to earth just for you? He did, and Jesus is your Wonderful Counselor, your Prince of Peace; a gift from God sent so that the world (John 3:16) might, like Israel, have a second chance from God’s judgment.

### ***READ Jeremiah 2:1-19***

**What** – Jeremiah wrote more than any other biblical author, and he had much to write about. The nation of Judah in Jeremiah's time was in a serious state of sin and disrepair. The great nation of David and Solomon was long forgotten, as was, except for a few brief periods, God's Word. The nation of Israel (the NORTHERN nation after the split) had 100 years before been carried off into captivity by the brutal Assyrians, and the SOUTHERN nation of Judah was facing the same fate at the hands of Babylon. Jeremiah struggled with the consequences of his people's sin and hard hearts. Why would they not follow God? Why would God allow them to be destroyed? What would become of those few who were still earnestly seeking God? It is easy to see why Jeremiah, faced with the sin of the people and their impending destruction because of it, earned the nickname "the weeping prophet". Chapter two of his book sets the stage for much of his ministry, as Jeremiah is told to remind the people of their disobedience and how much God has loved them despite it. For a thousand years God had been loving them and showing them grace in the face of their disobedience. God says, however, that two things have led to His decision to withdraw His favor from His people. Verse 13 tells us that the people stopped depending on God and started depending on their own strength. Self-worship is the ultimate idolatry, and God will not stand for anything taking His place.

**Why** – This scripture is important for so many reasons. For the Jews it sealed their fate. They had taken God for granted for far too long. God is THE God of love and grace, but sin must be judged because it is not in God's nature, and eventually an addiction to sin will keep you from hearing God. The choice belonged to the Jews. They decided to chase idols, and they were reaping what they had sown. For us, this scripture drives home two primary points. Because we have a new perspective through Jesus, we see that God used the end of Israel to bring about a new way, a living hope, Jesus the Christ. The Law was not enough, the Jews proved it and God sent His Son. Now the sin could be paid for in full and we could be shown grace beyond even what the Jews experienced. God took the condition of the Jews and used it to show us, and them, that He was even bigger than the Law. His character is love. BUT! We are also reminded by this scripture that while Jesus is a permanent cure for sin, He is only so for each of us if we choose Him. The unfortunate part of the lesson of this scripture is that just as with the story of Israel, sin will be judged in the bigger story of mankind. There will be an end of sin, just as there was an end to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. God cannot allow sin to continue to ruin His creation. The opportunity for this world to accept Jesus and escape the results of the sin we choose will not last forever. There is an urgency to our mission today just as there was for the weeping prophet 2600 years ago.

**WOW** – The amazing WOW in this scripture is that Jeremiah describes sin in a way that applies now as well as it did 2600 years ago. As God reminds us through the Jews that we have a limited time to accept the Word, He also pinpoints what is holding us back. Look at verse two. God "remembers the devotion of our youth". How many of us were excited about Jesus when we first knew Him, but have settled into a rut and lost that first love (See Rev 2:1-7)? I can guarantee God has not changed and is not boring! We sin when we stop pursuing Him. Look at verse five. Israel followed worthless idols and became

worthless themselves. How many of us have stopped asking God, “What can I do for you?” and started asking God to serve us? Haven’t we then made ourselves the God? Our desires and our knowledge will never be bigger than God. The church has become weak and powerless ever since it began to depend upon the wisdom of man rather than God. His Word is truth and must be the base for what we believe and how we live. Finally look at verse eight. God says that those who “deal with the law” did not know Him. The result of our self-idolatry is that our teachers and leaders are straying from the Word. How many preachers and churches are teaching health and wealth above sacrifice and obedience? God is a God of love, grace, and blessing, but in His time, by His Word, and for the benefit of HIS kingdom. We fail miserably, just like the Jews, when our teachers and leaders allow the vision of the church to be defined by man rather than God. This may not seem applicable to many of us, but do not forget that we are all leaders to someone, our spouses, our children, and anyone God’s puts in our paths to witness to. These principles apply to our lives, homes, and family. When we look at things from that perspective, each of us is a leader who can redirect God’s kingdom in a small way. Are you ready to lead in your area? God is waiting, but He will not wait forever.

## ***READ Jonah chapter 2***

**What** – The context of this scripture is legendary. We teach the story of Jonah and the big fish to our children yet fail to realize what a powerful lesson it is for us adults. Jonah, in chapter one of this book, purposely disobeys God and decides to run from God instead of doing what God has asked of him. How many of us know that we are not living according to God's plan? In the process, Jonah is thrown overboard in the middle of the ocean. Likewise, we feel helpless and hopeless when the results of our disobedience come home to roost. God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah and save his life. Chapter two records the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish, thanking God for His love and salvation and pledging to be faithful from here on out. With that God commanded the fish to "vomit" Jonah onto the shore.

**Why** – This scripture is important for several reasons. First, we can all relate to Jonah's emotions and reaction. Many of us sit in church or read God's Word and think to ourselves, "I can't do that!" We run from God by putting out of our minds the things we know we should be doing. I firmly believe that our cultures addiction to "busyness" is an attempt to run from God. We simply don't have time for Him, and consequently we don't have time to notice His light shining on our sin. The Christian rock band "Hawk Nelson" puts it this way in a song, "If I listen, I'd have to change something about me." The scary truth is, however, that we are just like Jonah. The more we run, the harder we will fall. More importantly, however, is the fact that Jesus used this scripture to describe himself and the three days He spent in the tomb. Was Jesus there because of His disobedience? Was He guilty of a sin against the Fathers will? Of course not! Jesus spent YOUR time in the belly of the fish. He died and suffered for your disobedience. Because of that, all of us can share in this prayer with Jonah.

**WOW** – So what did Jonah pray that we can repeat to God? Verses three - seven reminded us that we have only one chance during the swirling world of chaos that we live in, and that is the grace of God. Verse eight reminded us that it is probably the idols that we surround ourselves with that lead to our downfall. Jonah's greatest idol was pride. Pride is the root of all sin and is a major idol today. Finally, verse nine reminded us that God wants our hearts. How do we commit our hearts to God? Knowledge about God is not enough. Jonah knew God as he ran from Him. James 2:19 reminds us that even the demons know God. WE HAVE TO ACT ON WHAT WE KNOW TO BE TRUE. Obedience is the key to real faith. Jonah told God that he would sacrifice with thanksgiving and make good on his vows. Follow through and action based on the knowledge of God is the true definition of faith. Hopefully, we are not too busy to realize this. God's plan for us is simple. Stop running, stop hiding and start following. You will be blessed for your obedience.

## ***READ Haggai chapter 1***

**What** – Haggai was one of three minor prophets (remember minor prophets are called “minor” because they wrote short books) to write after the Jews returned to Jerusalem after their exile to Babylon. In 586 BC the last of the Israelites (the southern kingdom of Judah) was overtaken by the Babylonian army. Israel was not a nation again for almost 2500 years until the end of World War II saw a new Israel formed. Haggai wrote to the Jews and relayed a message from God that even though He had shown them grace by allowing them to return from captivity; they were not flourishing because their priorities were not in order. Immediately upon return, the Jews set to work restoring the temple of God. Quickly, however, that work halted so that they could work on their own homes. God says, “You expected much, but it turned out to be little because my house remains in ruins.”

**Why** – This book is an overlooked gem in the Old Testament. Few people have studied it, but few books so directly depict today’s culture like the timeless message of mixed up priorities. God pinpointed a problem in the hearts of the Israelites that caused them to stray from Him in the first place. That same attitude caused them to fail upon their return and that same attitude causes us to miss God’s plans and work in our life today. As a people, God’s church still does not have Godly priorities.

**WOW** – God tells us here how to solve the problem. Twice in this short chapter God said, “Give careful thought to your ways.” If we read on, in chapter two, He repeated that phrase twice again, but this time He was talking about taking note of all the blessings that He has showered on us in the past, that He is giving us now, and that He has planned for our future. When we think about our ways, we must also think about His ways, and how His ways are perfect. Our thoughts should be from a heavenly perspective. Then our priorities would be right. The end of this chapter, however, was most amazing. After telling the people of their sin, God said to them, “I am with you.” Then God Himself “stirred up” the Spirit of the leaders to move the people to action. God wants to help you. He knows, even before you start on the task assigned, that you will fall short. He is seeking hearts that eagerly do His will. God is not looking for perfection since only He can fulfill that requirement in us, He is seeking passion. Are your priorities Godly? Are you seeking after the things of God as your first priority? Don’t be fooled by the world. God will not judge you on the result of your efforts, He will judge you by the condition of your heart. My prayer is that all of us begin to look at the world through His lens and make our goals, dreams, and priorities the ones He has laid out for each and every one of us.

### ***READ Malachi 3:6-12***

**What** – Malachi wrote his prophecy for several reasons. After the exile, when the new Persian rulers allowed the Jews to return from captivity in Babylon, the Jews found themselves facing many of the same problems that had initially caused their exile. They were highly motivated at first, but quickly fell into their old habits of disobeying God and neglecting their spiritual life. God reminded them in several books that take place after the exile (Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah) that they must return to Him or the same fate would befall them again. We know from history that they do not receive God's message, and there are 400 years of silence that end with the announcement of Jesus' impending birth. That does not mean, however, that we can not learn from their mistakes. One of the areas that the Jews struggled with was offering. God reminded the Jews that their giving was tied to their faith. They wanted to return to God in speech, but their actions were not following suit. God says that if He was blessing them, but they refused to see it, they were robbing Him. He challenges the Jew's, and us in the process, to test Him in this area and see if we can out give Him. Obviously, we cannot out give God, and He reminds us of just how well we could have it if we align our wallets with our faith.

**Why** – This scripture is as important to us as it was to the Jews, and for the same reason. Very few things in our modern culture stand between us and God like our money and possessions. One of our greatest heresies today is the health and wealth gospel. These preachers claim that God's purpose is your literal financial prosperity. I do believe that God will bless those who give, but your prosperity is not His purpose. Furthering His kingdom is His purpose. So long as your wealth is going to that end, He will bless it. The problem, as laid out in Malachi, is our perspective. Is our perspective and priority with our wealth to give God glory? That is what God meant when He said, "You are robbing me." Our purpose, in all we do, should be to give God glory. We often trust Him with one part of our life and not with another. This terrible mistake was made by the Jews and is being repeated by us on a mindboggling scale. How can we not trust God with our money? After all, He created the universe, saved us on the cross and continues to act in our lives. Our money should be easy for Him to manage. Worse yet is the result of our financial self service. Our lack of faith in this area acts like a cancer and usually, if left unchecked, will drag our whole faith into the tank. It did for the Jews.

**WOW** – God started out this section with the statement, "I the Lord do not change, so you have not been destroyed". This amazing statement is meant to clue us in on several important factors. God is a God of grace. Why does this matter? It matters because it is not too late to change. God is always waiting for us to return to Him. His greatest joy comes from blessing us, but He cannot bless what does not coincide with His way. Obedience and blessing always go together, not because God is random or mean, but because He is Holy, because He made us, and because He knows what is best. Again, faith is at the core of our giving and God's blessing. It must be that way. It matters so much to God, that he says an amazing thing in verse 10. He tells us to "test Him". This is the only place in scripture where God says this. It is so important to Him that we understand that He is willing to put up with our lack of faith to prove Himself to us. We are not worthy of His patience, but He knows how difficult the lure of wealth is (It was,

after all, Lucifer's wealth of beauty that caused him to fall – see Ezekiel 28). Because of this His promises are specific, not generic. He told the Jews that He would bless their vines and their crops. Not just increase their wealth in general, but specifically protect the very things they needed most for survival. It's amazing that these are the same items they had put their faith in rather than God. Finally, He reminds us that providing for ourselves should not be our final purpose. Verse 12 said that all the nations would take note of the blessings God will provide. Your obedience will lead to others realizing the goodness of God. Is God using you in that way? Remember what Malachi reminded the Jews. He wants to!



### ***READ Mathew 1:18-25***

**What** – Merry Christmas! Matthew had no idea when he wrote this gospel that the church would celebrate Jesus' birth as a holiday of remembrance (the church did not officially recognize Christmas until around 336 AD. Check out a great article for details at [www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2000/dec08](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2000/dec08) ). He was simply recalling the birth of the one who his entire gospel would be about, his main character, his teacher, his rabbi and his savior, Jesus. Matthew was a Jew, and Jews were very concerned about lineage, family traditions and genealogy. For that reason, Matthew gave far more detail about Joseph than does Luke in his gospel. He reminded us that Joseph was a righteous man and that God worked in the lives of Joseph and Mary to fulfill the prophecy and bring His son to this earth. He reminded us of the purpose that God assigned to the life of His son, to save His people from their sins. He also informed us of a startling and still difficult reality. Jesus was God in the flesh. Then after all those bombshells, Matthew simply stated that, "she gave birth to a son, and they named Him Jesus." As books go, even if you were not reading this as the Word of God, you would know this one was going to be good!

**Why** – Matthew said two things in this scripture that define the rest of the New Testament and the history of the world. First, Jesus would save His people from their sins. At Christmas God introduces the Savior of the World, the Way, the Truth and the Life and the only name under heaven and earth by which men must be saved. God starts His final battle against sin and Satan here (see Rev 12:1-7) and the world, as any history professor in any high school or college on earth can tell you, has never been the same. The second, and no less important reason this scripture defines history is the statement that Jesus will be called "God with us". Not enough Christians realize the immense importance of this statement. This is what separates Christianity from every other faith in the world. In most religions, and unfortunately in the practices of many Christians who do not realize the purpose and plan of God, God is distant. He resides in heaven far away, and man resides on earth. God deals with His people through rules, communication of various sorts and indirect action, but He (God) does not come to the earth. This idea of a far away God has been the standard for all modern thought since the Greek philosopher Plato (hence the word "Platonic" meaning "not intimate"). Jesus SHATTERED that understanding of faith. God becoming like His creation for the sake of that creation is a totally new and unthinkable plan that only Christianity can claim. There never was and never will be another like Jesus. He was God in the flesh. He redefined love and salvation and set His people on a new course that changed the world and continues to change lives today.

**WOW** – As if God taking up residence on earth was not enough of a WOW, God delivered another awesome revelation in this scripture. He showed us that the prophets had predicted what was happening. That was Gods way of saying that He had planned this from the start. He is in charge. The virgin and the Holy Spirit remind us that Jesus was fully God and fully man. His Godliness was necessary because a perfect sacrifice was needed to reconcile us with God. His humanity was needed to set an example for us and to shatter forever the yoke of Platonic separation from God. His plan was perfect. But the biggest WOW from this scripture is that His plan is STILL perfect. Here is what I

mean. When I read this scripture two things stuck out to me, namely MARY and JOSEPH. These were two ordinary people, and young people at that. Why did God choose them? What made them stand out to Him? We get a clue from the text. Verse 19 told us that Joseph was a righteous man who put Mary's needs and feeling ahead of his own. Luke reminded us (see Luke 1:38) that Mary was a humble, obedient follower of God. We can do those things! We can be obedient. We can be righteous. God's example to us, even in the implementation of His plan, is that He wants to use us for His kingdom purposes. What an amazing Christmas message. God will use you if you let Him. I know there will never be another Jesus, but I also know that God is still working. What is His plan for you in the future? The bible says "ask, and it will be given unto you." I believe this what God is talking about. If we seek Him, if we truly desire to follow and serve Jesus, then God will use us to work miracles in the lives of those around us just like He used Mary and Joseph. There is no better gift that God could give you.

## ***READ Mark 1:14-20***

**What** – Mark’s gospel is the shortest of the gospels, and he immediately began by describing the ministry of Jesus. Before Jesus got very far into his ministry, He recruited for himself several young men to “follow” Him. Jesus had a specific purpose. He was proclaiming that the “Kingdom of God was near”. He told the soon to be disciples that their mission would be helping Him introduce that news to the world. He was going to teach them to “fish for men”. The historical context for this scripture adds so much to our understanding. Most of us see that following a teacher would be preferable to fishing for a living, but few of us realize just what Jesus was offering these young men. In Jesus time, all Jewish boys were asked to memorize the Old Testament, it was part of what every young Jewish boy did. The boys who showed a skill in this area moved on to deeper study, and the other boys were sent to learn other trades, like fishing. Jesus statement, “Come, follow me” was much more than an invitation to a different life, it was an invitation to become what every Jewish boy dreamed of. They were going to apprentice with a Rabbi.

**Why** – This scripture is important in helping us remember that the mission of the church today is still to “fish for men”. Jesus confirmed that when He commissioned His disciples to take over the church after His resurrection (see Matt 28:19-20). Also striking is the revelation that Jesus’ invitation to follow in the footsteps of the master extend to us. When we look closer at the lives of the disciples, we see that Jesus chose them with the purpose of including us in His mission. These were ordinary men. They were NOT priests or teachers, but fishermen. In addition to that, they were from the “wrong side of the tracks”. In John chapter seven the Jewish leaders argue with Jesus’ followers saying that a prophet cannot come from Galilee. They were speaking of Jesus, but the disciples were also from that area. The message for us is simple. No matter where you are from, no matter what the “powers that be” say about your past or your heritage, God can use you in a powerful way. Jesus’ first recruits were ordinary people, and He is still using men and woman from every walk of life to accomplish His goals on earth.

**WOW** – As we witness the start of Jesus’ ministry, and we realize that He wants to use everyone as His witness, I am most overwhelmed by the response of the disciples. It says that they followed Him, “at once” and “without delay”. WOW. How I wish we were so bold in following our teacher and our savior. While it was a lifelong dream to apprentice with a rabbi, I am sure the disciples had a comfortable routine in life. They were ordinary, not destitute men. Their families had boats, so they had some means of income in a time when not all people could say this. It was a risk to drop that and follow Jesus. They gave up the known, the routine, the easy (at least in terms of risk) way to follow the kingdom of God. The faith of these young men cannot be denied. Finally, I believe that their faith was placed so solidly because of one last important piece of this scripture that so often goes unnoticed. The simplicity of Jesus message is absolutely astounding. Incredibly, Jesus did not discourse here on the Trinity, His own deity, or the proper time for baptism or communion. He did not speak about denominational polity or spiritual growth. He didn’t talk about financial success or failure. He simply says, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” He gave them, and us, a vision, and a goal.

They were going to change the lives of people with Him and through Him. Your life and the lives of the people around you will be affected if you follow Him. Incredibly simple, incredibly direct, and incredibly forgotten in our complex church world today.

Is your faith as simple as Jesus proclaimed to the disciples originally? The goal of the church has not changed, so the message is the same for us as it was for them. Jesus is calling you. Are you responding to His invitation to focus on Him and fish for men? When you do, He will work out the rest.

***READ Luke 15:1-7***

**What** – Jesus often taught in parables to make stronger points and so that the people would have word pictures to help them understand His teaching. Many of His parables involved farming, fishing, or other very practical examples from everyday life so that the people could connect Jesus’ teaching to everyday life. In this parable, Jesus used the example of a shepherd and his sheep to illustrate how valuable people are to God. God is searching after us because we have wandered away from His protective and providing hand. And there will be great joy, just as with a real shepherd, when a lost sheep is found.

**Why** – The real importance of this scripture lies in Jesus revealing the character of God. The Jews thought they were “the chosen” people. Jesus clearly stated here that God is looking for all His lost sheep. His goal is not just for the Jews, but for all those who have wandered away. Many of Jesus’ parables reveal an important character trait of our heavenly father. This one spoke to His singular purpose of restoring man to a relationship with Him. That is why He sent His Son (see John 3:16-17). The religious leaders of the day did not understand the character of God, so how could they lead the people into a knowledge or even a proper worship of the Almighty? Jesus’ choice of shepherds and sheep would have especially hit home with the poor who saw the immense value in one sheep. You are more valuable even than that to God!

**WOW** – Jesus choice of the shepherd/sheep motif was even more powerful, however, to the religious leaders. Shepherds were not well thought of. They were smelly, lonely outcasts who did not fit in well with society. Jesus represented God as the shepherd in this story. His message to the Pharisees was that God had more in common with a shepherd than with them. OUCH. Jesus was only following in His Fathers footsteps in the use of this metaphor. David was a shepherd, remember? His dad and Samuel nearly overlooked him when God wanted to anoint him king (see 1 Sam 16). God gave the initial message of Jesus birth to shepherds (see Luke 2:8-20). How insulting to the Pharisees! The truth is, God has more in common with the lowly and the humble than with the proud; even the religious proud! But I believe the biggest WOW in this scripture is the “JOY” in heaven. God said, “Rejoice with me” and Jesus said there will be much rejoicing in heaven over sinners who repent. Why all this joy? Because you are God’s purpose. He is so great, but also so personal. He loves YOU that much. What a thought to think; our repentance, our turning toward God causes Him JOY. It never ceases to amaze me how much He loves us. His sole purpose in this world is to show the world His love and fix what we destroyed (see Gen 2-3), our right relationship with Him.

### ***READ John 3:1-21***

**What** – The Apostle John wrote his gospel with a different goal than the other gospel writers. While all of them wanted to share the “good news”, John had a very special perspective from the others. John called himself, “the apostle Jesus loved” (see John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7&20, and many more). While some might see this as conceited or arrogant, it shows the special relationship that John and Jesus had. In all four gospels we see that John had a special place in Jesus’ inner circle, and he, along with Peter and James, were privy to events and perspectives even the other disciples did not see. Because of this one of John’s goals, besides sharing the “good news”, was illustrating to his readers that Jesus was, in fact, God in the flesh. We see this realization shining through in John’s chapter 3 discourse and description on salvation. John depicted salvation in contrast to Nicodemus, a Pharisee. By doing this John showed us that salvation does not come through knowledge or the law, but by becoming a new person, by being “born again”. Who else can “re-create” a human but its original creator? This point of view was missed by the Pharisee, the one whose relationship is with the law rather than with the Lord. John says that “believing” in Jesus, the Greek word here meaning a continuing, life changing understanding, changes who you are from old person to new. He described for us what that looks like. When you are in the very presence of God, you understand the right and wrong, light and dark. John was sharing with us his unique perspective of walking with God in the flesh.

**Why** – This scripture is one of the most important for the Christian faith because it deals with a topic that is central to our beliefs, salvation. There are many who teach that salvation is from “works”, or what you do. John clearly disposes of this notion by contrasting Jesus teaching with a Pharisee. They had all the right actions, but wrong motives and impure hearts. There are many who say that salvation is “imparted” at a particular time, like baptism or confession. But John here clearly teaches that salvation is the result of a changed heart. Belief is a state of understanding that changes how you act. Those acts, confession and baptism, might be the immediate or “first” fruit of this new faith. They show that you are actually following the Jesus of the bible by being obedient, rather than following a self-serving god of your own creation. But salvation itself is a result of your changed heart, your new “belief”. Perhaps equally important in this scripture, but usually overlooked, is the “verdict” that John attaches to this statement. A person who has experienced “salvation”, according to John, will see the world in a different light. It is impossible to keep your old points of view, your old beliefs, your old understandings about what is going on around you when you have placed your faith in and experienced the presence of the almighty. The true test of “belief”, along with your immediate actions, is “living by the truth” (Verse 21). John stresses that your life will change. Life change is the total sacrifice God requires from you.

**WOW** – There is so much in this pivotal scripture that you can almost say WOW to all of it. If you have never memorized a scripture before, this is one to start with. But even amid this life changing, dare I say WORLD changing message, Jesus has for us tidbits for daily living. Verse three says “flesh gives birth to flesh”. Jesus was reminding us that actions will follow beliefs. If you surround yourself with worldly things and worldly people, then

your life will produce worldly results. Jesus was reminding the Pharisee that he cannot expect to understand if he does not change his surroundings. The same goes for us. In addition to speaking about our nature, Jesus gives us here a clear and wonderful picture of the nature of God. Verse 17 says that, “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him”. Yes, God hates sin. Yes, He must judge that sin. Yes, He allows us to suffer the consequences of our rebellion. But at His core, God is a God of love whose GREATEST desire is that we come to know His grace and salvation. This picture of God motivates us to love the world around us and share the “good news” that God has for this world. This is a picture of the very foundation of God’s character, and it is fundamental to our understanding of Him. Finally, John reminded us of the struggle we are in. Men will not be drug away from their sin easily. We like the darkness because we do not like our deeds exposed. It will be a battle that only the Son of God can win, but He asks that you trust Him and join in the fight. Are you armed for battle?

### ***READ MATTHEW 26:26-29***

**What** – This event is recorded in some form by all the gospel writers (John's is a bit different, but the dinner is mentioned) and by Paul in Corinthians. Matthew's gospel is the quintessential description of Jesus' famous table blessing. Jesus took the opportunity of blessing the meal to remind the disciples that there was a purpose to His coming, that they had a huge role to play in that purpose and that the time had nearly come for Jesus to take the biggest step in fulfilling that purpose.

**Why** – This importance of this scripture cannot be understated. It describes very purpose, plan, and mission of God in the lives of His people. It describes God's love for us, His willingness to sacrifice everything to see us redeemed and reminds us of the fact that our sin cost Him greatly. It also reminds us that our sin will cost us greatly as we try to follow Jesus. In the Old Testament sin was "atoned" for by the shedding of blood. A sacrifice was given to God to "pay" for a transgression of His law. The problem with this system, as much of the bible reminds us, is that it was incomplete. We continued to sin and had to offer sacrifices continually. Jesus tells us here that His sacrifice, on our behalf, will be for all sin for all time. In one fell swoop, God is giving us a chance to be redeemed. A more important event HAS NEVER TAKEN PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD.

**WOW** – There is so much here that we can hardly do it justice in a devotion. First, Jesus said that this was HIS BODY. Can you imagine the surprise (and possible disgust) of the disciples? Jesus was willing to die for us. He wants to be our sacrifice. Then He reminded the disciples that what was being invoked was a NEW COVENANT. Essentially, He told the Jews that the old covenant with God (Covenant and Testament mean the same thing) was being replaced by a new one. This one depended on His blood. We know what that means, and three days later the disciples would too. Covenants are different from contracts because they are not dependant upon the paper they are written on but depend upon the character of the one making them. Jesus showed here that GOD is made a promise to pay our debt of sin to Him through Jesus. Nothing more important was ever done. Finally, Jesus reminded the disciples that He would return. He was fixing the problem, but the new covenant did not clean up the mess. That will happen "when we drink it anew in God's kingdom". Revelation 16 prophecies Jesus' return to clean up the mess. The scriptures are connected by the reminder that Jesus will be back. Until then we are empowered by the covenant to do the will and work of the Father, will and work we can now understand because Jesus has made us right with God.

The full descriptions of the Last Supper are found in Matt 26:17-35, Mark 14:12-26, Lk 22:7-23, John 13:1-17 and 1 Cor 11:23-25



### ***READ Matthew 27:32-44***

**What** – The point of the gospels is two-fold. Jesus' life was given both as a sacrifice and an example. Matthew 27:32-44 describes the death of Jesus. While Matthew described the scene with factual detail, we know from hindsight that what was playing out in this moment had worldwide, historical significance like no event before it or since. Along the way Matthew mentioned many people and events, many having symbolic meaning as well as historical accuracy. Simon of Cyrene carried the cross when Jesus was weakened from His beating. The event took place at Golgotha, a place the Romans used regularly to kill by crucifixion. The worldly possessions of Jesus were worth more to the crowd than His life, and they mocked Him with a label and with insults. Finally, as they had done during the entirety of His ministry, the unbelievers around Jesus continued to ask for proof and mock Him when He failed to meet their standards. Even the robbers looked down at Him. Meanwhile His disciples were scattered, confused and heartbroken, failing to see the big picture and forgetting the words and promises Jesus had made them just hours before.

**Why** – This scripture is important because it is one of the central doctrines of Christianity. At the center of our faith stands the cross, reminding us that we are unable to come to God without a sacrifice to atone for our sin. Jesus is that sacrifice. We are reminded just how awful our sin is when we realize just how awful His death was, and we are reminded that we share in putting Him to death understanding that we are sinners just like those around Him. We also get a picture of the spiritual struggle we are engaged in. The world doesn't understand the message naturally. We cannot comprehend a God who would love us this much. Even at the cross, the soldiers were self centered, worried about the worldly things like clothes rather than realizing what they were witnesses to. The Jews and passersby mocked him, either because they did not understand or because they understood all too well that IF Jesus was who He said He was, they would lose their control over their lives and the leaders would lose their positions of authority over others. Likewise, today, the message falls on deaf ears because we want our salvation our own way. God demands too much of us, asking that we accept His atonement through repentance. "Why can't we keep our favorite sin and still get to heaven?" we ask. Many simply cannot give up control and because of this will never see the kingdom of God. Finally, the people asked for more proof of Jesus identity, failing wholeheartedly to see that the cross itself, and an innocent mans willingness to go there, was the final proof of both the identity of Jesus and the character and love of God. This truth is still a stumbling block for mankind today. We simply don't understand how complete and perfect the cross of Christ was.

**WOW** – This scripture is so perfect because it is simple and yet powerful. Matthew painted a picture that we can see and understand. We can feel the anger of the Jewish leaders and the apathetic indignation of the Roman guards. Isn't this a perfect picture of the world today? Paul described the world perfectly in Romans 1:28 – 31 when he said the world is faithless and ruthless. That is exactly the picture Matthew painted of the cross. It is an amazing testimony about God that the ruthless and apathetic who crucified Christ are the very people Jesus came to save. Think about His teaching in Matthew 5

that is so difficult for us to understand. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn and give them the other, Jesus teaches (see Matt 5:38-42). REALLY? If Jesus meant that literally, it means that He hung on that cross dying, He was thinking, "I know you all hate me, but I am doing this for you. I love you all and I would gladly do it again. Incredible, isn't it? Unfathomable when we think about it, but that is EXACTLY what He was thinking. Luke and John record Jesus saying just that. He says in Luke 23:34 and John 20:23, "Forgive them Father, they don't know what they are doing." It is my opinion that we cannot even understand that level of love. Jesus didn't just die for those who love Him, He died for EVERYONE. His invitation is open to all, and thank goodness, because as Paul said, the person we see in the mirror is the chief of sinners. Each of us adds to the sin Jesus took to that cross, and each of us is forgiven when we accept that forgiveness and attach ourselves to the grace and promises of God that are in Christ Jesus our Lord. Reflecting on this scene is enough to make me want to take up a cross and follow in His footsteps. Care to join me?

### ***Read Luke 24:1-8***

**What** – The Death and Resurrection of Jesus combine as the most important events in the history of the world. Jesus was the sacrifice that atones for all the sins of the world, for all of history. Without His death, we could have no access to God. But without His resurrection, we would have no power to live. His resurrection proves that He was who He said He was. No other god of any other faith has conquered death and done so in a historically proven way. We see in this scripture that the disciples were mourning the loss of Jesus, (still failing to realize all He had taught) which is why they brought spices to anoint the body. When they arrived at the tomb, the stone was rolled away (quite a miracle in itself) and the body was gone. Immediately their thoughts turned to panic. “What happened? Where did He go?” These thoughts would have consumed the minds of the followers of Jesus had the Father not intervened almost immediately with angels to prompt them. The ladies at the tomb seemed to realize immediately that something special was going on, as they bowed down before the angels. Much like us, however, they still underestimated the importance and power of the news they heard. The angels almost sarcastically asked them why they were looking for Jesus in a tomb. Jesus had already told them He would not be there, but they failed to remember when the time came. This is like so many of our tough decisions. God has already told us the answer, but that answer does not always fit in with our understanding or desire (we forget that God is in the miracle business) and we miss what God wants of us. Finally, again much like us, the women remembered the words of Jesus and headed off to remind the others.

**Why** – The importance of the Resurrection is seen in multiple applications. Jesus conquered death, which Satan believes is his most powerful weapon. This realization should completely nullify the devil’s power over us. More importantly is the confirmation that Jesus will follow through on what He says. Jesus told His disciples that He was going to tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days (Mk 14:58). In other places He is far less metaphorical about His resurrection, simply telling His disciples that He will die and come back to life (Luke 9:22). Here we see perhaps the strongest evidence in the scriptures that Jesus will NEVER let us down. He made a claim that only God can make and followed through on that promise. The resurrection reminds us that every promise of God is powerful and can be counted on to come true. In addition to that, while the death of Jesus atoned for our sins, the resurrection reminds us of the power we have to live a life for Jesus. In John 12, Jesus reminded us that He must die so that we understand that the power to live is in Him and only fully realized when we are willing to sacrifice ourselves to His cause (Romans 12:1-2). Many gods have died, but only one faith has a God who has risen. We should never forget that.

**Wow** – With the realization that ONLY Jesus has conquered the grave comes the real impact of this scripture. It seemed to me that the entire section, indeed almost the entire Bible, leads up to the last statement in this section. “Then they remembered His words.” “THEN” in this sentence showed us that Jesus was not quitting on us. Whether we run away purposefully or wander off in ignorance, He will keep pursuing us. He was willing to give it all so that we might understand Him. But what do we remember? HIS WORDS

are what we remember. There is power in what Jesus has said, and there is power in what He is speaking into your life right now. The Word of God has the power to heal, teach, rebuke and train (2 Tim 3:16-17). It holds the truth of the past and the future within it and The Word is synonymous with the Person of Jesus (John 1:1-2;14). God “spoke” to create the world, and He spoke to raise Lazarus from the dead (John 11). He calls us to “confess with our mouths” (Romans 10) and His breath will sound the final trumpet when He judges sin once and for all. God’s Word is eternal, trustworthy, and true, and when Jesus walked out of the grave, it was His Words that He points us too as proof of the past and hope for the future. With that knowledge, we should be pouring ourselves into God’s Word. Many in our time are seeking after proofs and miraculous signs, but I believe the most powerful sign has been given. When the reality of Jesus’ resurrection settled on His disciples, “they remembered His WORDS.” Do you know His Word well enough to remember it when He calls you too?

### ***Read Acts 2:1-14***

**What** – Luke wrote the book of Acts as a follow up to his gospel. He wanted his audience to understand the life of Jesus and the details surrounding the beginnings of the church (see Luke 1:1-11). In Acts 2, Luke described the arrival of the Counselor which Jesus promised He would send, the Holy Spirit. In this scripture the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in a miraculous way. More astounding (and a living object lesson on the purpose of the church) is that when this happened, the disciples began to speak in the languages of all the people who were witnessing the event. When they shared the gospel in languages they did not know, God was glorified, and the church was born. This important day is known in the church as the day of Pentecost. Pentecost was an important Jewish holiday, also called the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Harvest. Pentecost was for the Jews, and still is in some liturgical Christian denominations, a holiday (see Leviticus 23:15-22) when Israel celebrated God's gracious bounty (of crops in Bible times) and thanked him for meeting their needs. Jerusalem would have been full of Jews from many nations for this feast. Pentecost gets its name because it takes place 50 days ("*Penta*" means 50) after the Passover Sabbath. Luke closed this section with a reminder that at that moment, as now, not everyone appreciated the message of the church.

**Why** – This scripture is important for several reasons. First, it really was the beginning of the church. God's people are special because God dwells in them. We, the church, are the temple because God dwells in our hearts. No other faith can make this claim, and Pentecost is the day God began to indwell His church in the form of His Holy Spirit. Also, God showed us here that the purpose of the church is to share the good news of Jesus with the world. The scripture reminds us that there were God fearing men from many nations that "heard them declaring the wonders of God in their own language". God's plan is that the message of what He has done, is doing and wants to do in the world be spread to all that will hear. In Revelation Jesus said continually "He who has ears, let him hear". God wants everyone to hear the truth of who He is. Finally, this scripture is important because it reminded us that not everyone will take to the message. Selfishness, pride, and idolatry are not new sins, and they caused people then, in the presence of such a great miracle, to ignore the obvious truth. We should not be surprised when people find excuses not to follow God today.

**WOW** – God's presence is always miraculous, but Pentecost is truly incredible. Wind and breath always represent the Spirit of God (see Genesis 2:7), and here God's Spirit was heard (wind) and seen (fire) by everyone around. Luke reminded us, however, that the people who received the message were "God-fearing" Jews. God- fearers usually refers to Jewish converts or non-Jews who worshipped their God. Whether this is meant here, or the Jews are simply being described for their particularly strong faith, Luke is clearly telling us that the ones who were LOOKING for the message were the ones God spoke to. Sometimes I talk to people and they act as if God will have to move heaven and earth for them to believe that He is real. When we think about it, that is really putting you ahead of God. Rather, God is seeking hearts that are soft and open to His movement. He could prove Himself to us any time He wanted to, but why would He? If the goal is really

to spread the gospel, wouldn't you rather worship a God who gives us a choice and uses those who want to be His people? Even in His miracles, God does not force us to do anything. He made us in His image, free will and all, and He always honors that. Finally, the way God worked here was astounding. He didn't simply give away the answers and tell people what to do. While He could have, that is not what works best for the real goal of growing the kingdom. The witnesses ask, "What does this mean?" Even in His introduction to the Holy Spirit, God is setting up the church for future work. Essentially, He shows up, acts, and then allows Peter (In the rest of Acts 2) to answer the witnesses questions. The result of the inquiry by the witnesses, after Peter gives a sermon and explains what is going on, is 3000 salvations. God set it up but allowed Peter to deliver the main message. God enables His church to do the work that He calls it to do Think about that next time He calls on you for a task.

### ***Read Acts 9:1-9***

**What** – Luke wrote the Book of Acts and recorded in chapter nine a VERY important event in the life of the church and in the life of the Apostle Paul. Paul, whose name at this point in the bible was Saul, was on his way to Damascus to arrest any Christians he might find there. Jesus confronted him on the road, changing Saul's opinion about who Jesus was and beginning the ministry of the greatest evangelist, author, and church planter in the history of Christianity.

**Why** – The importance of this scripture comes to light when we look at the results of this incident. Paul went on to write much of the New Testament. In his 25-year career as a missionary, Paul planted many churches and was responsible for the spread of the gospel from the Middle East to Europe. In addition to this, Paul changed the way ministry was done. This meeting with Jesus did not only change his beliefs, but it shaped the way Paul witnessed. Paul understood clearly after this meeting that the purpose of the “church” as he knew it was not to promote itself, but to introduce the world to its Savior, Jesus. This meeting shaped EVERYTHING Paul did from this point on and should shape the way we do ministry today.

**WOW** – God has a way of getting our attention. This event in Paul's life was startling. Sometimes God shakes us up to get us pointed in the right direction. This is not uncommon in the Bible. Think of Moses and the burning bush. Remember Jonah and the big fish. God's intervention should motivate us. But the most amazing part of this scripture is often overlooked. Paul was responsible for KILLING Christians. That was his job (see Acts 8:1). God not only forgave him, but He redeemed Saul. Paul was given a fresh start. God took this “Christian-killer” and used him to be the greatest “Christian-maker” in the history of man. Do you have any sins as great as Paul's? The truth is that all sin is bad. The message here, though, is that NO MATTER WHAT YOUR SIN, GOD CAN USE YOU FOR GREAT THINGS IF YOU WILL LET HIM. The bible says that NOTHING can separate us from the love of Jesus (See Romans 8:37-39). Paul showed us that your past does not determine how much God will use you. God has great plans for you. If you are willing and obedient, God will use you to accomplish great things in His kingdom.

God's Top 40 devotionals are simple ...

**WHAT** – What was written, by who and what does it say?

**WHY** – Why is it important?

**WOW** – What things should I take notice of? What other scriptures are related?

## **27. Romans 3:21-31**

### ***READ Romans 3:21-31***

**What** – This is one of the most eloquent sections of scripture ever written, and in it Paul reminded the Christians at Rome that their hard work and observance of the Law was not what allowed them to enter into the presence of God. Rather, Paul said, all of us fall short of God, no matter who we are or what we do, so that only faith in Christ, allowing His atoning work to take the place of our efforts, can bring us into the presence of God. Paul concluded this section with a powerful yet often overlooked statement that by faith we do not NULLIFY the Law, but we UPHOLD it. Our works do not save us, but they do show that our faith, the real substance of our salvation, is whole and true and placed in the proper place, upon the Cross of Christ.

**Why** – This scripture is important because the church has struggled for 2000 years with the simplicity of Jesus' message. Notice I said simple, not easy. The basic tenant of Christianity is the substitution of Jesus for us on that cross. We deserved to die, but God instead died himself in our place. As humans, especially in Western, modern civilization, we struggle with this concept. We believe that we must "earn" whatever we get. We think that we are so good and smart and powerful that we can craft our own salvation. Salvation by our works fits well in our worldview. We get to "achieve" or "earn" our spot next to God in heaven. The problem is that it does not work that way. God is HOLY. No one can hold a candle to Him. For us to go to heaven, we must be perfect! As Paul said here, no one is perfect. All of us sin. That is why Jesus had to be God in the flesh. What human sacrifice could settle the accounts of all humanity? One man could atone for his own sins on a cross, maybe, but only God could atone for the sins of the world. Because of that, the order of operations is crucial here. That is what Paul is really talking about. Good works matter, but as an outflow of faith and not as a substitute for faith. Faith must come first, or the good works, no matter how powerful, fall short because they are not enough to match the cross or connect us to a holy and perfect God.

**WOW** – There are so many other scriptures that support and coincide with this section of Romans. This is important because the number one rule of Bible interpretation is that we must allow the Bible to interpret itself. If two scriptures appear to contradict each other, one of them is being interpreted improperly, because the Word NEVER contradicts itself. In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus says that anger is equal to murder and lust is equal to adultery. The point Jesus makes is the same as Paul in this section of Romans (vs 23). NO ONE can live up to God's standards. James also agrees with what Paul wrote here. James said in chapter 2 of his letter that the kind of faith that saves is the kind that we see show up in good works. Paul reminded us here that the entire Bible gives testimony to the fact that faith that saves is faith that comes before, but also leads to, good works. He said that the



Law and the Prophets testify to this very fact. The Old Testament, Paul said, should lead us to the same conclusions as the life of Christ. Man is justified by faith. God is the only supplier of that righteousness. Man cannot achieve God's favor on his own, but only through the work of Jesus. The atonement of Jesus allows us to know God and serve Him. That service gives glory to God and testifies to the fact that our works are useless without Christ. God is calling ALL of creation back to Him, and when we know Him, our actions will show our faith. Paul was concise and eloquent here. In the same way, Jesus' work on the cross was powerful yet simple. God's plan is perfect yet simple. Our role is simple too, it just isn't easy. Are you ready to let your faith guide your steps? God is waiting.

God's Top 40 devotionals are simple ...

**WHAT** – What was written, by who and what does it say?

**WHY** – Why is it important?

**WOW** – What things should I take notice of? What other scriptures are related?

## **28. Rom 12:1-2**

### ***READ Romans 12:1-2***

**What** – Paul wrote this well known verse to the church at Rome. The letter of Romans is one of his longest, and in my opinion, most complete theological treatises. In many letters that Paul wrote in the New Testament, he was addressing specific troubles in a church. To Rome, he wrote a timeless letter to promote proper doctrine and action. This part of his letter begins what is called the *paranesis*. Simply put, in many letters, Paul points out ideas and follows them with application. Chapter 12, starting with an emphatic “Therefore”, is the start of Paul describing to the Romans how to live their life for Christ, referencing all of the theology and Christology he laid out in chapters 1-11.

**Why** – This scripture is important for several reasons. Besides being placed at the intersection of the Roman epistle, it defined for us several very important aspects of the Christian life. Paul urged us, “in view of God’s mercy” to follow Jesus. Rather than acting on our own, everything we do should be motivated by what God is doing for us. In view of God’s mercy reminds us that we are not the originators, but God is. He is the source, the motivation, and the purpose behind our very lives. But there is more. What are we being motivated to? We are called to offer our bodies as “living sacrifices” to God. WOW. This is not simply going through the motions. This is far from the habitual, Sunday only Christianity that we are far too familiar with. **THIS IS YOUR VERY LIFE.** Following Jesus is not a command, and it is not a part of your life, it is the very essence of who you are. Paul reminds us of what will get in the way. The world and the thoughts that world puts into our heads. We need to guard our hearts and minds very carefully. God wants us to change, more precisely, be changing, so that we reflect His glory. I say be changing because Paul uses the “perfect tense” verb “renewing” here. The change you make is a process, not an event. This life in Jesus will change you.

**WOW** – The most stunning part of this verse, however, occurred at the end. How many of us have asked God, “What are you doing?” or “What do you want from me?” This verse answers that question. Paul said point blank, “then”, referring to the directives laid out just prior, “then you will know God’s will.” **DID YOU HERE THAT?** If we buy into the program, if we give it all up for Him, if we fight against the world and push on towards the prize, sacrificing all for the sake of the one who loves us, **WE WILL BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED.** This is beyond amazing. Obedience leads to a peek into heaven. Let that idea settle in today.

### ***Read 1 Corinthians 13***

**What** – One of the most moving and often quoted chapters in the bible, Paul used chapter 13 of his first reply to the church at Corinth to remind them about love. Corinth was a city full of deceit and debauchery and the Christians there were really struggling with living out their faith in such an environment. Paul reminded them of love's virtues. He told them the importance of love, and he gave them hope with his emphatic declaration, "The greatest of these (faith, hope and love) is love."

**Why** – This scripture is as important today as it was then and for a very similar reason. Love is important. The scriptures remind us that "God is Love" (1 John :16). But what we fail to see is that what God means by love is not what we have come to understand that word to mean. Because of that, we badly misinterpret this scripture and cause ourselves much pain. We are called to love, like the Corinthians. Love, however, is not the "mushy feeling" that we ascribe to it today. The Corinthian church would have heard a very different message in the Greek. **Agape** is a word most of us in the church know, and this is the word Paul uses here to make his point about love. It would have had a stark and defined meaning for the Corinthians as opposed to the "erotic" love they saw around them. The same contrast stands for us. God was not saying here that we are to "feel mushy about those around us". That would be "**eros**" in the Greek. No, agape love demands a commitment from us. Agape is about sacrifice. You would do anything for the one you love with agape love. This is very different from the "come and go" love we share today. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO "FALL OUT OF" AGAPE LOVE.

**WOW** – The real beauty to this scripture is that when we look at it from the standpoint of **agape** love, the scripture takes on new meaning. Verses 1-3 showed that God's gifts are useless unless used for the right reason. Think about this in terms of how you interpret love. Are God's gifts useless unless they make you "feel good"? That is what many in the church teach today because of a bad understanding of "love". Rather God was saying that His gifts to you take on power when you are committed to Him. WOW. Sounds like Philippians 4:13, doesn't it? Verses 4-8 told us how to treat those we love. I have heard preachers tell people they should treat people like this verse says because they are "in love" with them. Again, if our motivation is to treat each other patiently and kindly because it "feels good" we are in big trouble. We will all fail. Sometimes "loving" someone is difficult. It is no wonder so many people "fall out of love". The minute it hurts, our modern interpretation of this verse makes no sense. Instead we treat people kindly and with patience because we are COMMITTED, to them and more importantly to Jesus. Agape is the only way to love others like Jesus loved us (See John 13:34). Finally, in verses 8-12 Paul showed us that if we are to be mature in Christ (hopefully that is our goal!!!) we must learn to love. Agape love is the result of practice. As we know Jesus more, we are more able to love like He did. Paul reminded us that love is the only thing that lasts. It is the result of a life lived FOR and WITH God.

Let's give Him glory with our lives. I am confident that if we do the right things for the right reasons (agape) God will fill us with the good feeling (eros) we so eagerly desire.

### ***Read Galatians 5:16-26***

**What** – Paul wrote the letter of Galatians to “all the churches in Galatia”, or the province of Asia minor. There were many churches there that Paul had helped start in the decade before he wrote this letter. After Paul had started these churches, men had come to many of them and began to plant false ideas about Christianity into the minds of the new converts. Paul called these men “Judaizers” because the heresy they were planting had to do with Christianity’s relationship to Judaism and the covenant of circumcision. Essentially, they were telling the new Christians that they were not truly saved until they were circumcised like Jews. You can see how this would be a stumbling block to many adult male converts. Paul was very irritated by this heresy and at the end of this letter, in the verses we are looking at today, he reminded the Galatians what a walk with God looks like. He told them their lives should be guided by God and that the proof of their love for the Lord would show up not in any particular one time action, but by the results, or “fruit” of God acting in their lives and the lives of those around them. He concluded this section with the statement that, “against such things there is no law,” contrasting the works of the law (things not to do) with the works of the Spirit (things to do).

**Why** – This section is important because it highlights several areas that we still struggle with today. First is the reminder that the world and the scriptures are not compatible. It is our duty before God to either accept what is written or not. There is no middle ground or halfway point, and we do not get to choose what is right and wrong. God has defined that in His Word, and we are simply called to accept it. The church often argues points of doctrine and this leads people to believe that much of what is in the Bible “depends on interpretation”. This is rarely true. Most everything is cut and dry. God tells us what is right and what is wrong very clearly, and the debates within the church commonly are hair splitting theological issues which bear little weight in the face of deciding how we act and live as Christians. Second, and equally important, was Paul’s discussion here of how we live out our faith. He defined for us that a life lived for God is one where we are always being guided by God. This seems impossible, but Paul is describing a life of discipline. The “disciplines” are those things that we do that connect us to God. Some interpret this scripture rather mystically and are waiting for God to verbally speak to them. While this might happen on occasion, most often this is simply an excuse for not doing what we know God is calling us to do. God’s plan is that we stay connected to Him through the means He has provided. Daily times of prayer and study, meditation on Him and His Word and surrounding ourselves with other Christians are all simple methods that God has prescribed and provided to keep us in touch with Him. How many people do you know that can study the Bible and then knowingly sin almost immediately after? Few would do this, because when you read the Word, you feel connected and sense His presence. This is the life Paul was prescribing in this scripture.

**WOW** – Paul’s words are so powerful here because of the immediacy and practicality, but also because of the astounding statements he made as he revealed some of God’s most profound proclamations on how we live our lives. Overlooked and rarely taught is the importance of verse 18. “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law” is a reminder of why the law has lost its power since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

We often look at the Law (Ten Commandments, etc) as rules, a list of “no-no’s” that God has handcuffed us with. Paul’s statement in verse 18 was a powerful reminder that God is a PROACTIVE God. If you are following, indeed chasing with a passion, after Jesus, do you really think you are danger of breaking one of God’s laws? God’s plan is that you are so enamored with Jesus, so in tune with who He is and what He desires, that the Law is meaningless to you. God’s Law for us shows us His character, identifies sin and points to Jesus, but should not be needed as a list of do’s and don’ts. Our relationship with Jesus gives us that. In addition to this deep understanding of our walk with Christ, Paul commented on our relationship to the world in verse 24. We, according to this verse, should have crucified the sinful nature. Paul was directly commenting here on the fact that our relationship with Jesus should make the things of the world distasteful to us. We should know, by the Spirit within us, what is wrong, and we should be opposed to it. The church (the people being the church) has a duty to stand up against what is not of God in our culture. Not just privately, but publically as is suggested by the word “crucified”, we should be proclaiming the goodness of God and the evil that is destroying men, woman and children around us. When we do this, we will be “in step” with God. He is moving and we should be doing what He is doing. That is an amazing thought, and one that is encouraging to me as we seek to share and live out our faith in this decaying world.

### ***Read Ephesians 6:10-18***

**What** – The Apostle Paul wrote this letter as a circulatory letter to all the churches in Asia minor. Many of Paul's letters were written to address specific heresies. This letter was written to encourage and teach as it was passed on from church to church. Ephesus sat on a major trade route, making it a crucial city to aid in the spread of the gospel and the advice Paul was giving. Because it is so practical and general in its nature, this letter has been a favorite in the church for centuries. It is worth mentioning that there are early copies of this letter addressed to the church at Laodicea. Since Laodicea sat on the same trade route and was less than 100 miles from Ephesus, this really does not change the power or meaning of the letter. In chapter 6, Paul specifically encouraged Christians to live fully in the power that their faith in Jesus supplies them. As the church began to be persecuted this was an especially important message. While the method of persecution may have changed, we are no less in need today of a reminder of the power afforded us by the gospel. Our faith is still under attack, we are still in a battle, and we still need the armor of God if we are going to be successful in serving God with all that we have.

**Why** – This scripture is important because as we investigate the life of the recipients of this letter, we see a parallel to our own spiritual journey. Whether this letter was written to the Laodicean church or the Ephesian church, we know some things about these people. Paul commended them in this letter (see Ephesians 1:15) for their faith. While they were obviously new Christians, they were also headed in the right direction. In contrast to this, approximately thirty years later, when John wrote the Book of Revelation, Jesus chastises the church at Ephesus for “forsaking its first love” (see Rev 2:4) and the church at Laodicea for being “lukewarm” (see Rev 3:16). Clearly these churches had lost the fervor that they had when Paul had written to them, and in only one or two generations. Likewise, many believers follow this same path in their spiritual lives. They start out strong. They grow and seek God in everything. As they walk this path, however, they lose their spiritual passion. Many fall into routine, becoming “lukewarm”, while others find goals to pursue other than those laid out by Christ for His church. They lose their first love. We must guard our spirituality like the precious gift it is. I believe Paul foresaw this struggle when he closed his letter with these specific instructions for how to fight the goods fight.

**WOW** – The battle plan laid out here is beautiful and practical. Paul compared our faith to a Roman soldier, giving the people of his day a practical picture to help them understand their faith. First, he identifies the enemy, Satan. Sin is not a product of God, and our battle is not against man, but the devil. Truth is our belt. A soldier's belt held his entire uniform together, and truth, better described as integrity, weaves our spiritual life together as a cohesive unit. Righteousness, or “doing the right thing”, protects our heart. What a powerful statement to a culture that has lost all sense of right and wrong unless defined by the moment. We are to be ready, at peace with what ever God might call us to do, and our faith, a belief that God is all and sustains all, protects us from the projectiles of the devil. No truer statement could be made. When we START with our faith as a basic assumption, the arrows of our modern culture, such as evolution and self-reliance, just fall meaninglessly to the ground. Finally, we protect our brain with our salvation, the

actions that stem from our faith, and we attack Satan with our only offensive weapon, the Word of God, our sword of the Spirit. It is amazing to compare this verse with the fourth chapter of Nehemiah. When Nehemiah's men were under attack, they did their work with one hand and carried their sword in the other. We are to take the Word with us everywhere we go. Moses told the Israelites to put it on their hearts and talk about it always (See Deut 6:6-9). In the end, Paul reminds us to pray. The armor that he described is the ARMOR OF GOD. It is not the armor of man. Without prayer, the armor is worthless. God empowers it, like He empowers us when we follow Him in faith into battle.

### ***Read Philippians 2:1-11***

**What** - Paul wrote this letter while in prison in Rome. He was thanking the Christians in Philippi for helping him, and in doing so touched on some VERY important things and taught deeply about the nature of Jesus. He said that we should imitate Jesus as our way of life. He also said that when we do this, it brings him, and therefore we can assume God, JOY. It is also interesting to note that many historians think that verses 6-11 are a song inserted by Paul to illustrate and teach on this point.

**Why** - These verses contain some of the most specific language pertaining to the nature of Jesus. Paul reminded us that God is a God of power, but not always in the way we as humans see power. God's power is made perfect in weakness. This is a common theme in the bible, and it says to us that we should think more of others than of ourselves. Perhaps more notably Paul reminded us here that if we are to have claim to the name of Jesus, we must follow Him (vs 5) and sacrifice ourselves as He did. In addition to this Paul here emphasized the fact that eventually EVERYONE will be introduced to the person of Jesus and be forced to accept His glory, either from heaven or hell. This description of obedience leading to blessing and a reminder that Jesus will eventually judge evil once and for all are beautifully woven into this short scripture. This is one worth memorizing!

**WOW** - Jesus was God (vs 5) and He was man (vs 7) at the same time. The apparent dichotomy is settled by the fact that he willingly gave His life for us. A perfect sacrifice who was also the perfect example for us to follow. He humbled Himself willingly. This is so important. God never forces us to do anything. He asks us to follow, tells us what is best for us and reminds us of His love and His desires for our life, but GOD NEVER FORCES US TO DO ANYTHING. He asks that we follow of our own will. Last but not least, we are reminded of the ultimate goal and benefit to following Christ. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full." Verses 10 and 11 reminds us of worship in heaven (see Rev 4 & 5). This picture was put here to show us what is in store for us as children of the King. Phil. 2:1-11 reminds us that a FULL LIFE is a life filled with JOY as we WILLINGLY follow Jesus.



### ***Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18***

**What** – Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians for several reasons. Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica quickly as we see in Acts chapter 17. With new converts from paganism left behind in this new church, Paul undoubtedly wanted to inform them of much that he would have taught could he have stayed longer. In the section we are studying today, however, Paul spoke about the second coming of Christ. This appeared to be for two reasons. First, the new Christians were being persecuted and the return of the Messiah was a comfort. Also, however, Paul was answering for the Thessalonians a quintessential question that we still ask today. What happens when we die? Paul reminded the new converts that we worship a risen Lord who has promised us to rise. The second coming Paul described, so debated and pondered even today, was really simply a reminder that we are secure in Christ.

**Why** – This letter is important because all of us wonder what will happen when Jesus returns. The church begins with a messenger from God reminding the church of the imminent return of Jesus.

#### **Acts 1:11 (NIV)**

<sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Ever since the church has wondered what this will be like. Revelation gives us a bit more of a clue, but God is careful not to give us all the details. He does this purposely so that we will not become complacent in our faith. Faith is made to be exercised, not stagnant. In the same way, Paul gave us a glimpse into the future without revealing all of the pieces to the puzzle. He said that at the end a trumpet will sound (see also Matt 24, 1 Cor 15, Rev 11) and those who have died before us will rise with Christ first, then we will follow. While this does not give us a total picture of the last day, it gives hope, both for us and those who have gone before us.

**WOW** – It never ceases to amaze me how scripture interprets itself. Trumpets abound in several books, and Jesus returns in a glorious march that God includes us in. The WOW here is that we get to be part of the procession. The Greek word *parousia* (used here in Vs 15) means a procession. It is like a parade for a returning, victorious king. We are part of the celebration. God has not only saved us, but His goal is for us to help Him celebrate and conquer sin on His Earth. What an amazing privilege. Perhaps the biggest WOW in this scripture, however, is found in the two smallest words in the section. In verse 14, there are two tiny words connecting the parts of that sentence and the concepts of this entire section of scripture. The words are "and so". Jesus died, Paul said, AND SO we have hope. All of what will happen, all of what has happened, all of our hope, all of the glory of God, all of the power of our future victory over death and God's victory over the devil is tied to what comes before those two small words. Jesus died and rose again. EVERYTHING hinges on that fact. Nothing else matters. Jesus died, AND SO, we have all that we have. Now that's a reason to celebrate, even before Jesus returns.

### ***Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7***

**What** – Paul wrote this letter to Timothy for purpose of instruction. Timothy was one of Paul’s many “ministry leaders in training”. In fact, Timothy was probably Paul’s most successful project. Ministers today are often called “Timothies” by the churches that grow them and send them out. As Timothy was often left behind or sent ahead to manage new churches, Paul gives Timothy some basic instruction in the important area of leadership. This information would have been crucial to the new churches. As church plants full of new Christians, leadership would have been difficult to find and at a premium.

**Why** – This scripture is important because leadership is important, especially in the church. It could be argued that leadership is still lacking badly in the church today. Strong evidence of this fact resides in the failure of the American church to have much effect on a declining society in the last 50 years. As we review the requirements Paul sets up for church leaders, we see that very few people in the church meet the requirements that Paul laid out. Topping the list is “above reproach”. This means that a leader lives his life in a way that no one can find fault with. This is a difficult task in our society for several reasons, but primarily because our lackadaisical view of sin, even within the church, has made several generations of people who simply do not understand what God’s idea of holiness really is. Most people in our culture used to know something about the bible, but now even believers cannot tell you where the Ten Commandments are to be found. This has led to fewer and fewer people who desire or are able to lead others into the scriptures in a meaningful way. We are simply running out of leaders.

**WOW** – The real WOW here is not about leaders at all. This scripture, while pointing out leadership qualities, really points to our goal as believers. Paul said to the Corinthians, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Leaders should be modeling for the rest of us what our walk with Jesus should look like. The list here applies to each and every believer as a set of goals. The Word says God will hold our leaders to a higher standard, (James 3:1) but we should be making every effort to live, grow and know Jesus on the same level as our qualified leaders. Are you making the grade?

## ***Read Hebrews 11***

**What** – This chapter is sometimes called the “hall of faith”, a play on our modern “halls of fame”. God here used a long list of great bible characters to show what our faith should be like. All those listed showed their faith by their actions and followed God despite struggles and heartache.

**Why** – God not only illustrated in these verses what faith is, giving us a great object lesson to describe our faith, but He reminded us of things about our faith that we often forget. He reminded us that the actions we take by faith last long after we are gone (Vs 4). He reminded us that faith allows us to see things only God normally sees (Vs 5-6). He reminded us that the world might not share our faith, but we must follow Him anyway (Vs 7-12). He reminded us that the ultimate goal of faith is to keep our eyes fixed on heaven, something we can not see but certainly can be sure of (Vs 13-19). He reminded us that our faith secures our future (Vs 20-22). God, through Moses, reminded us that faith allows God room to work in our lives (Vs 23-28). He protects us even when we see it as a risk, all through our faith (Vs 29-31). Faith is what glues us to God and holds us together even when we do not see the plan and outcome that God has in store (Vs 32-40). Faith is the only way we can live a life with God.

**WOW** – This list is amazing, but the last several verses are what strike me the most. None of the examples, Paul said, “received what they had been promised”. The problem with faith is that we are not in control. God fulfills His promises on His time and according to His will. Does God’s timing mean God’s promises are any less real? Of course not, but we look at things from a human perspective and assume that if our desires are not met YET, then God is not faithful. God is always faithful, and faith is LIVING WITH THE ASSUMPTION that God is good and keeps His promises. Nothing less will do. I believe whole heartedly that our impatience, stubbornness, and lack of faith is often the cause of delay in seeing God’s promises fulfilled. The last verse is most amazing to me. The “hall of faith” requires “walking with God” for admittance. That seems obvious, but most of us don’t get it. The last verse specifically says that, “together with us” God will make things right. Faith REQUIRES action (see James 2), but not any action, ACTION WITH GOD. We often assume that if God says “jump” and we do, we are OK. But God literally says, I will jump with you, let’s do it together. Faith is walking, or jumping, along with God. We must work where He is working, walk where He is walking, serve who He is serving, and follow Him wherever He leads us. That is faith, and that is what God wants to bless.

## ***Read James 2:14-26***

**What** – James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this book to Jewish Christians “scattered” among the nations. James’ themes of struggling against the rich and living out faith in the face of trials remind us of the struggles of Christians by the time this letter was written sometime just before 70 AD. In nearly all Roman provinces by this time, Christians were being persecuted for their faith and blamed for the increasing social ills that plagued the heathen and morally bankrupt Roman society of the late first century. Life was not easy for the Christians, and James, a powerful leader in the early church, wanted the church to understand that their suffering would lead to blessing if they stayed the course. Looking into the teaching laid out here showed several common themes. James made an urgent plea for the church to follow Jesus. His instructions did not wax on eloquently. He got immediately to the point. Also, James had a passion for practical spirituality. He showed that a faith that is spoken but not lived is worth nothing. This is the point he made in chapter 2, and it has become a cornerstone for church teaching for almost 2000 years.

**Why** – Chapter 2 has become even more important in recent years (the last 300 to be specific) as the church has moved into the “modern” age. Undoubtedly in James’ day, people spoke about their faith but did not act on it as a way of avoiding persecution. Today we fail to act for a very different reason. Since the “Age of Reason” began in the Renaissance, man has begun a steady trend towards the worship of “knowledge”. Those who get ahead, especially in the West, are those who “know the most”. This high priority on education (which I am very fond of but try not to worship) and an attitude of “worship” towards universities and centers of learning have shifted the historical understanding of what being a Christian means. Biblically, Jesus had “followers”. Now we often speak of “believers”. This dichotomy has infected the church with a bug. This virus causes Christians not to act on their faith. We assume that simply knowing who Jesus is should be enough for salvation. James reminded readers that the only way to see if proclaimed faith is genuine is action stemming from it. What is faith worth if it is not strong enough to affect your actions? James said that even demons have that kind of faith.

**WOW** – Jesus said that you judge a tree by its fruit (Luke 6). James said essentially the same thing. This is a WOW because this text has often been used to prove that our works are the essence of our salvation. James said that we are not justified by faith alone, but by what we do. Does this mean we are saved by our works? Certainly not, we know from other scriptures that we are saved by the cross (Romans 1:16). It does remind us, however, that while our faith is primary, it must have action to be valid. While we should not place our hope in our works, Jesus never separates faith from obedience. They go together like the chicken and the egg. You cannot have one without the other. James drove this point home when he said that Abraham’s faith was “made complete” by his actions. Faith without works is no faith at all. James also made an amazing statement when he said that faith without works is dead. It is not only useless, of no value, pointless and meaningless, it is dead. If we reflect on this it is rather scary. Dead means past the point of no return. Dead means not even recognizable, no longer able to be revived. This is a difficult thing for us to wrap our head around as we ponder a God of grace, but at a certain point, when we do not exercise our faith, it might die. We might fall to a point

where we are no longer able to recognize or reach God. God will never separate Himself from us, but we might forget who He is (see Romans 1). How far out of shape is your faith muscle? It might be worth checking.

### ***Read Revelation 3:14-22***

**What** – The second and third chapter of Revelation describe the church in its current condition. God went through the seven churches in Asia and described to each their particular sin and area of weakness. Some have said these verses describe the churches since Jesus, or the “church ages”, and some say they describe various areas of heresy and struggle for all churches since Christ. I believe both might be true. Without a doubt, the message our Lord gives John here to describe to us is convicting in terms of our current dilemma and crisis of faith in the church today. God told the church at Laodicea that they were “lukewarm” and that they had become so because they were resting on their wealth and accomplishments (self). What a perfect description of the church in America today. Our success has made us lazy, apathetic, irrelevant, and ineffective.

**Why** – This scripture is beyond important as a lesson for us to learn today. Throughout history there have been “revivals” in the church, times when people realized they were not focused on Jesus and made earnest efforts to return to Christ-centered Christianity. **AT NO TIME IN OUR NATIONS HISTORY HAS THE CHURCH BEEN SO LAME!** Our apathy is perfectly described in Rev 3 as “lukewarm”. Are we “on fire” for Jesus? Not hardly. The reason this matters so is that our apathy is eroding the very fabric of what we believe and what our society is built upon. God laid something heavily on my heart recently. Churches are strong because they contain strong Christians. How can the church be strong if her people are weak in their faith?

**WOW** – The real beauty of this section is not the pinpoint accuracy with which God nailed our current culture, but the solution He lays out before us. He says, “I counsel you to buy [from Me] gold [refined by Me], white clothes, and salve.” God said that there are three things we need, and He is the only supplier of those things. First, He said to get gold from Him that He had refined. Are all your possessions run through God before you get them? Do you pray over what brand of milk to buy or what your menu for the week will be? God wants to be a part of ALL the decisions we make and ALL the actions we take. You can see that by these standards we are all “lukewarm”. Next God said, “wear “white clothes” that we purchase from Him”. The white clothes represent holiness and purity, things we need to have a relationship with God. The sacrifice of Jesus is **THE ONLY THING THAT MAKES US WORTHY TO BE IN HIS PRESENCE**. We often put other things in the place of grace and forget that only Jesus makes us holy in God’s sight. Our actions can and will never justify us. God wants us to remember His grace! Finally, God reminded us that the world will not soothe the hurt that it causes. Only God can give us peace. The fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22ff) tells us that peace and joy are a direct result of God’s spirit living in us. He wants to help us if we would only turn to Him.

So, ask yourself this question, “Am I lukewarm”? If you are not on fire for Jesus, you may be part of the problem with the church rather than part of the solution. But do not fear! Jesus died for this very reason. Focus on the cross, remember God’s grace, and give everything you have to Him as a sacrifice. God will change your perspective. He will light your fire. He promises to be our God if we will be His people.

## ***Read Revelation 4&5***

**What** – The revelation of John is one of the most studied books of the bible, but for what I believe are some of the worst reasons. People always seem to be looking for a clue as to what will happen in the future. Jesus was clear in Matthew that the end will come on us unexpectedly, so I believe that people are often looking for things in Revelation that they will never find. We would be a sorry lot if we knew the date of Christ's second coming. It is clear from scripture that we are simply to be ready, assuming it could happen today and acting with urgency but with the assurance that God will deliver on His promises. With that said, some of the true treasures that lie within the Book of Revelation go overlooked. Chapters 4 and 5 give us a beautiful picture of what worship will be like in heaven. John started with an open door (all are invited), and saw God on His throne, the true center of what our worship is supposed to be. An overwhelming sense of power and beauty surrounded both the worshippers and the worshipped. God was declared "Holy" and at those words all present fell prostrate to worship the king. As we moved to chapter 5, God's Word was declared by the only one worthy to declare it, the Lamb of God. A heavenly choir responded to the presence of Jesus and all of heaven celebrated in song and praise the glory of the Risen King of Kings. John was overwhelmed, and we should be too.

**Why** – This scripture is so important because Christian Worship today is one of the most divisive issues in the church. More churches split over worship style than over any other issue, and more often than not, those disagreements are not theological in nature, but rather people simply desiring "their" church to continue doing what they like. The picture into heavenly worship that is given us in Revelation, if examined and applied, could help us understand which changes and methods in worship are acceptable and which are not. It might also convince some that if worship stays within the biblical model, some changes are OK and may even be beneficial to all involved. First and foremost, this scripture reminded us that when we worship, it is about God and not about us. We do not come to "get" something, we come to "give" our hearts and songs and thanksgiving to God the Father and to His Son who died for us (hence the term "Lamb" used here). If we are not celebrating what Jesus did for us, we are not worshipping. Everything should focus on Him. In addition to that, we see what things are to be included in worship. Styles may vary, but song, prayer, sadness, and joy are all things that God apparently has planned for use in giving Him glory. With that, demonstrations of power and light (which I would see as drama), symbols (lampstands, chap 4 Verse 5) and the presence of God all can and should help us understand who God is. Most importantly, as most of chapter 5 demonstrated, God's Word and His love for the lost should take center stage in worship. When we are doing these things, modeling ourselves after John's peek into heaven, how can we help but structure worship that is fulfilling and honoring to God?

**WOW** – If you can read this scripture and not be in awe of what God's plan for current and future worship is, then you might reconsider whether you really know Jesus or not. This scripture is amazing because it demonstrated the power of a life lived in God's will. I know many of you are asking, "Where did He get that?" Let me show you. I hope you do not doubt that this scripture is talking about worship. Romans 12:1 reminds us,

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--**this is your spiritual act of worship.**” Worship occurs when we are living lives dedicated and directed by God. When you combine this scripture with those like Gal 5:25 (Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit) and 2 Tim 1:7 (God did not give us a Spirit of [fear],but of power, love and self control), we get a picture that shows us that a life lived in an attitude of worship is a life so powerful that the world will not stand a chance against it. This verse not only comments on the worship of the church as a body, but on the worship as a way of life for God’s people. Is your life a part of the celebration going on in heaven?



### ***Read Revelation 19:11-21***

**What** – It seems that one of most debated and discussed topics in the church today is the second coming of Jesus. Many believe that before He comes that the world will experience terrible tribulations, the likes of which we have never seen. Others believe that the struggles that the bible tells us about will occur after God's people have been taken away (or "raptured") to be with Jesus. Still others hold that halfway through this terrible time we will be taken up to heaven. The bible is, I feel, VERY INTENTIONALLY vague on this point. One thing is for sure, however. Regardless of whether you hold to a pre, post or mid tribulation on the rapture, Jesus will return to judge sin and defeat satan once and for all. The short scripture we are studying today shows us what the final battle will look like. Jesus invited John to watch and record all he saw, and here John showed us what the end of time will be like. Jesus will come in all His glory, followed by His army. Satan stands ready with his forces. In about one sentence it is all over. Satan and his followers are disbursed of and creation begins to swallow up what was not of God's doing. This scripture, considering it is the end of the world as we know it and the battle to end all battles, is surprisingly short.

**Why** – This scripture is important because we must NEVER lose track of the fact that GOD MUST JUDGE SIN. In our effort to understand God and share the Word, we have painted God as a God of "love". The bible says, "God is love", but we make the mistake of understanding that God is "love" like we know it. While that is part of it, God is "love" as HE UNDERSTANDS LOVE. That includes the grace and mercy we focus on, but it also includes holiness, perfection and a hatred of evil that is a part of God's character. When we understand God as grace but fail to see God's hatred of sin, we only get half the picture. God loves us more than we know, and because of that, He must do away with sin eventually, because sin is the very essence of our separation from Him. By necessity, because God is love, He must end all the sin and evil that is wreaking havoc on his creation. This will cause those who have willingly chosen not to follow Him to suffer. It is unavoidable except for the grace God has offered us in the person and sacrifice of Jesus.

**WOW** – The WOW's for this scripture are endless. Imagine what this scene will be like when you see it live in the future. The power and majesty of Jesus with a backdrop of "heaven standing open". I don't really think we can imagine that, can we? His eyes are like blazing fire, His robe a reminder of how much He loves you. His titles, King of Kings, Lord of Lords are emblazoned on His body, and God's creation is literally panting in anticipation of what is about to happen. And what is about to happen? Everything that has ever tripped you up, every struggle, every pain, every difficult moment or sinful thought, is about to be taken captive by God himself and sent to hell never to be seen or heard from again. The actual battle lasts only a split second, really only one word ... "BUT". "***But*** the beast was captured and with the antichrist thrown into the lake of fire." The followers of the beast will be killed. What we know inherently because we follow Jesus, satan and his minions have not seemed to figure out. God is all powerful and NOTHING will stop Him. The devil has failed to realize that for centuries what he thought was power was only God being graceful to His creation, waiting for men to hear

the message and except the truth (see 2 Peter 3:9). Even satan's power was a result of God's power and His love and patience on our behalf. Finally, the message that all of us need to remember each day as we struggle, in the end satan has NO POWER. Can you say that today? Most of us cannot, but Jesus will bring you to this point if you let Him. This scripture is an assurance of that very truth.

### ***Read Revelation 21:1-8***

**What** — John recorded all that Jesus showed him so that we might know what is coming. Even more importantly is that we might know and understand God's ultimate plan. Here, nearing the end of the Revelation, John described what happens immediately after the final judgment. A new heaven and a new earth will come down out of heaven. This is amazing for so many reasons, and John seemed overwhelmed by its glory and its beauty. God declared that the plan is complete, "the dwelling of God is with men" and we can live in peace with God because sin has been disposed of. All the results of sin, pain, suffering and death, are put to rest by God and He declares that everything is new. He reminded us again that He is the source of life. Those who are committed to Him will live forever and those who are not will perish. Once and for all sin and those who worship their sin are done away with. This is the second death.

**Why** — This scripture is amazing because people often fail to realize the overarching ramifications of GOD'S plan for salvation. When I read this scripture, I realize and remember that when man fell, all of God's creation, the creation He gave us dominion over, fell along with us. In MAN'S plan for salvation, man gets to go to heaven. But God's plan involves EVERYTHING being made new- God is literally "re-creating" creation. Man will dwell with God, which was the plan from the beginning. We have learned from our sin and now understand that God is the center of our existence. Heaven is not a bunch of people sitting around in white robes talking to people who look like George Burns (although that might be one option), rather heaven is a recreated earth where we enjoy the presence of God in our everyday life and live on an earth unspoiled by the sin and pain man has created. While God has always been in charge, in the new heaven we are glad that He is and we are seeking ways to follow and worship Him rather than fighting against His will. Imagine what it will be like when WE are in the place of Adam and Eve before the fall. Walking with God in the cool of the day, enjoying all that He has made; this is His plan for us and was from the beginning- And it is ours not because of anything we do. The bible says that we "inherit" this. God gives it to us as an act of grace. We live forever in the shadow and security of His love.

**WOW** — If the scene does not put a lump in your throat and a tear in your eye by itself, consider some of the specifics God has placed in this scripture for our practical application right now. How many of us endure suffering and struggle in today's world? Most of us do. God said specifically that there will be, "no death or mourning or crying or pain." How many of us think that heaven is too far away to imagine? God made it practical when He reminded us that our desires to know Him will be like a thirst that is quenched forever. Imagine the sensation of need that becomes thirst being met on a spiritual level, PERMANENTLY! Finally, and perhaps most importantly, God reminded us that there will be justice in the world. Many of us wonder why the wicked sometimes seem to prosper in our world. It causes us to question God. Jeremiah put this very question to God in Jeremiah 12:1. "Why do the wicked prosper?" he asks God. God answered once and for all here, reminding us that in the end only those whose faith is in God will survive. The final blessings are reserved for those who were willing to give it all up for God when they had

the chance. All that is wrong with the world will be made right, and justice will be done in the end. Perhaps you are struggling right now. Perhaps the world is getting to you. No matter the circumstances, God ends our story in glory! It is worth looking forward too. Don't forget that. The King of Kings will be just that for everyone in the future. That must be enough for us to make Him King of Kings in our life right now.

## ***Read Gen 1***

**What** – Moses penned the opening chapter of the bible as a record of how our world came into being.

**Why** - Perhaps the most important aspect here is that God made it all, started it all and is in control of it all. For us, that means we should take His perspective when looking at things and understand His sovereignty as a basic assumption in life. This stands in direct contrast to what the world teaches (evolution) which puts man at the center of life as "the most important" or "best" thing that exists.

**WOW** - God "spoke" to create. That means literally that God's "word" is at the center of life. God breathed into us life, the only variance from His normal creative routine, placing us on a different level than the rest of creation. We are the stewards of the rest of creation. Vs 27 says, "Let 'Us' make man in 'Our' image." Who is "us" and "our"? This verse is one of the important proofs that God in three persons (the trinity) has always existed. In the New Testament (John 1:1-14), Jesus is said to have made everything. This verse reminds us of that. From the beginning Jesus was looking out for us. Perhaps the most important thing that Gen 1 reminds us is that God initiates all communication with us. This is so very important as we respond to God. Often, we think that God "responds" to us. If I act correctly, avoid sin, or do the things God has commanded, then He will act in my life. In creation God reminded us that He ALWAYS HAS THE FIRST WORD. Our worship, prayer, good behavior, and thanks are always in response to His love and grace, not vice versa. God has already acted by creating, then saving us. My prayer is that our response will be as whole-hearted as His creation of us was in the beginning.