

Dear Pathway Family,

October is here—you can feel the crispness in the air as the season changes. Much like the seasons, our world has changed over the last several years. As Christians, we need to be aware of these changes and understand that more than ever, we need to take a stand and proclaim from every corner of the earth that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and that His Word that He has given us as instruction for our lives is absolute and unchanging. ***All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*** (II Tim. 3:16).

2023 has been a year for changes at Bible Pathway Ministries as well. This year we are celebrating our 50th year publishing the Read Thru the Bible Devotional as well as 50 years of sending Bibles and Bible Pathways around the world to those seeking His Word. We have faced many challenges this year. From the burst pipes in January, we've had mold issues, insurance denials, and construction delays. In early August, our phone system was destroyed when our building was struck by lightning. By the grace of God, the phones are up and running again, and we have found someone willing to hang the drywall for us at a reasonable price. Very soon, we should have ceilings and walls again. After the walls go up and as the funds are available, we (me, Tiffany, Judy, Ryan, Kevin, and Gilbert) will be learning to tape, mud, and sand drywall. It will be good for all of us to do some physical labor for the Lord!

Over the past decade, we've kept the prices of our devotionals the same, even as printing and postage costs have risen. However, we've recently faced some unavoidable changes. Postage rates continue to increase, and our printer raised our monthly printing costs by \$1300.00 three months ago. As a result, our annual printing costs for the monthly devotionals now total \$77,613.72. We've had to make the difficult decision to increase our yearly subscription price for 2024 to \$29.85. We're grateful for your continued prayers and financial support. We have felt every prayer and are immeasurably blessed to have you as part of our family!

In His Love, *Jennifer*

But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:20-21).

Christianity began with a miracle and a sacrifice. ***Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*** The four Gospels were recorded so that we would understand the full magnitude of this miracle and the fundamental truth contained within. Over 700 years earlier, Isaiah had written: ***Therefore the LORD himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Is. 7:14).*** The Jews had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah; the birth of Christ meant that the wait was over. ***And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS.*** God's plan for the salvation of His most prized creation, man, was coming to fruition, ***for He shall save His people from their sins.***

The birth of Jesus was met with celebration and rejoicing. Everyone from the angels in heaven (Luke 2:13-14) to the shepherds in the fields (2:16-17) and the gentile wise men from the east (Matt. 2:1-12) marveled at the birth of the Savior. It is not hard for us to imagine the parental love and pride that must have flooded the hearts of Mary and Joseph (for God had placed Jesus in his care) as they looked down upon God's tiny miracle. They knew their son was destined to save His people from their sins, but they did not as yet understand how that was destined to happen or what that would mean for their child. They did not know, but God did. The miracle that brought forth our Savior incarnate was preceded by a sacrifice that no human heart can ever wholly appreciate.

Jesus' first sacrifice for man did not occur on Calvary's cross; instead, it happened at the moment of divine conception in the little village of Nazareth (Luke 1:26). At that instant, Jesus

Christ, one-third of the eternal trinity of God, allowed himself to become a human being. He did not simply become "God among the humans"; He became human. He carried the genes of his biological mother, Mary, and all the human frailties and needs that those genes entailed. As a man, Jesus got hungry and thirsty; He got tired, discouraged, and scared. He felt physical pain and had the same emotional needs as every other person on the planet. In short, He was mortal. It is impossible for us to grasp what a sacrifice this was for our God—there is nothing we can compare it to. We are insignificant compared to our Creator, yet He willingly became one of us to save us from ourselves. As we continue to study the earthly ministry of Jesus, let us resolve to take nothing for granted. Every second of His life was lived so that we might find our way home.

He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied: by His knowledge shall My righteous servant justify many; for He shall bear their iniquities (Is. 53:11).

Thought for the Day: *Only by studying the time that Jesus lived as one of us can we even begin to emulate how He would have us live our lives.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 1:23:** See Is. 7:14. **Matt. 2:6:** See Mic. 5:2. **Matt. 2:15:** See Hos. 11:1. **Matt. 2:18:** See Jer. 31:15. **Matt. 3:3:** See Is. 40:3.

Word Studies: 1:18 **espoused** = engaged; **came together** = had physical relations, she was a virgin; 2:16 **mocked of** = deceived by; **coasts** = surrounding regions; 3:8 **fruits meet for repentance** = a life that confirms your change of heart; 3:15 **Suffer** = Allow; **fulfil all righteousness** = do all that God requires.

Pray for Staff: Jennifer Palafox, Bible Pathway Ministries President • **Government Officials:** Rep. Jimmy Panetta (CA), Rep. Grace Meng (NY) • **Country:** Congo, Democratic Republic of the (77,433,744) in West-central Africa • Major Language: French, Lingala • Religious Freedom • 50% Roman Catholic; 20% Protestant; 10% Kimbanguist; 10% Muslim, 10% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask for courage to praise the Lord before unbelievers (Ps. 96:3-5).

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain: and when He was set, His disciples came unto Him: And He opened his mouth, and taught them, saying (Matt. 5:1-2). The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' first widely attended public sermon. In it, He made many statements that would have been considered radical for the times. He challenged the people to go outside their comfort zones, ignore the pomp and circumstance that organized religion had become, and follow God's laws as God Himself had always intended. Jesus reminded them that adhering to the letter of the written law was not enough; true righteousness came from loving and fearing the Lord God. He challenged His listeners to embrace life, not as law-bound Jews, but as members of the family of God and citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. Jesus stood before the crowd in fulfillment of God's promise and His law. He taught as the embodiment of the Word (John 1:1,14). As such, He taught with an authority that had never been witnessed before (Matt. 7:29). The people before Him had become caught up in a system of sacrificial payment and false righteousness. They were being led by **scribes and Pharisees** who proudly proclaimed to know everything about religious sacraments but knew nothing about God. With His words, Jesus sought to educate the hearts of the people, opening them to God's will and

grace. His goal? Nothing less than perfect redemption. ***Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*** (5:48).

Christ's words are just as applicable today as they were to His original audience. Our churches are packed to the brim with people just going through the motions without any clear understanding of the God they claim to serve. These individuals cling to their baptismal certificates and church memberships as if they were the keys to heaven, all while a copy of God's Word sits on their bookshelves, dusty from lack of use. They wear their 'Christianity' proudly, so busy maintaining the proper public persona that they have no time to privately commune with God. Their righteousness is a sham, no more significant than that of the ***scribes and Pharisees***. They are dangerously lost, all the more so because they believe themselves to be found.

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God (Mic. 6:7-8)?

Thought for the Day: Even centuries later, Christ's words remain revolutionary; for those who cling to the fallen world, they are incomprehensible.

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 4:4:** See Deut. 8:3. **Matt. 4:6:** See Ps. 91:11-12. **Matt. 4:7:** See Deut. 6:16. **Matt. 4:10:** See Deut. 6:13-14. **Matt. 4:15-16:** See Is. 9:1-2. **Matt. 5:21:** See Ex. 20:13. **Matt. 5:27:** See Ex. 20:14. **Matt. 5:31:** See Deut. 24:1. **Matt. 5:33:** See Num. 30:2. **Matt. 5:38:** See Ex. 21:24. **Matt. 5:43:** See Lev. 19:18.

Word Studies: 5:13 **his savour** = its usefulness; 5:18 **one jot or one tittle** = as the dot on the letter "i" or the cross of a "t"; 5:22 **say . . . Raca** = worthless one, pour contempt; 5:29 **offend thee** = causes you to sin; 5:33 **forswear** = swear falsely, break an oath; 5:46 **publicans** = Jewish tax collectors, worldly-minded; 6:19 **corrupt** = make money worthless; 6:22 **single** = free from deceit; 6:23 **evil** = selfish, sinful; 6:24 **mammon** = material things.

Pray for Staff: Tifany Parisi • **Government Official:** Rep. Hank Johnson (GA) • **Country:** Congo, Republic of the (4,662,446) West-central Africa • Major Languages: French, Lingala • Religious Freedom • 33.1% Roman Catholic; 22.3% Awakening Churches/Christian Revival; 19.9% Protestant; 2.2% Salustite; 1.6% Muslim; 1.5% Kimbanguist; 8.1% Other; 11.3% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Exalt the Lord, for He is holy (Ps. 99:9).

And His disciples came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. And He saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him (Matt. 8:25-27)!

What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him! This question, while it might have been expected had it come from a bystander witnessing one of Jesus' miracles for the first time, is somewhat disappointing when we hear it coming from His disciples. In saying, ***What manner of man is this***, the disciples revealed that they followed, loved, and trusted Him, but they had yet to fully grasp who He was or what He was offering. While they believed that God had sent Him, they did not understand that He was their Messiah, Savior, and Lord.

At the time this question was posed, these men had already borne witness to many miracles, ranging from turning water into wine to bringing life back to the dead (Matt. 8:1-15; Mark 1:21-27; Luke 7:11-17; John 2:1-11; 4:43-54). They had heard their Master teach, both privately and publicly, about the all-encompassing will of God, and they had listened to His promises of grace and mercy. ***Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened (Matt. 7:7-8).*** Yet, despite all of this, they still did not understand the full truth. Why?

The Disciples had come as far as human understanding could bring them. They had willingly opened their hearts and their minds. They had sought out God's teachings and immersed themselves in His Word. They had readied themselves to receive one of God's most precious gifts, the gift of faith. ***For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8).*** They stood at the edge of a spiritual precipice, needing only that one final nudge from God to push them over into complete understanding.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). He is the Son of God, and, at the same time, He is God. He is the fulfill-

ment of every promise the Lord has ever made. He has dominion over every speck of life on this planet (John 3:25; Eph. 1:21-22), right down to the tiniest bug, and He is our touchpoint to God. By the terrible day of His crucifixion, His disciples had begun to see Him clearly (Matt 16:16), and after His glorious resurrection, all of them finally understood. ***And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God*** (John 20:28).

Our Lord could have fully revealed Himself at any time, yet He chose to lead His disciples through a journey of discovery for the benefit of future generations. Thanks to the experiences of these men, the Gospels lay out for us, from start to finish, any answer we will ever need to the question, ***What manner of man is this?*** As we open our hearts and minds to the study of the Word of God, we open ourselves to the gift of faith it contains.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6).

Thought for the Day: God leads us by the hand down the path of salvation, but we must choose to hold on.

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 7:23:** See Ps. 6:8. **Matt. 8:4:** See Lev. 14:1-32. **Matt. 8:17:** See Is. 53:4. **Matt. 9:13:** See Hos. 6:6.

Word Studies: 7:2 **ye mete** = you measure out, give; 7:3 **mote** = tiny, insignificant speck; **beam** = such as judgmental unloving self-righteousness, pretending to have a character one does not possess; 7:6 **rend** = to tear apart; 8:31 **suffer** = permit; 9:9 **receipt of custom** = tax collector's office; 9:10 **sat at meat** = sat down to a meal; 9:36 **fainted** = were distressed by the burden of the rituals and rules of the scribes and Pharisees; **scattered abroad** = thrown down, confused, deceived, neglected by the self-righteous leaders who were more concerned about keeping their own position than helping others.

Pray for Country: Cook Islands (10,134) South Pacific Ocean • Major Languages: English, Rarotongan • Religious Freedom • 62.8% Protestant; 17% Roman Catholic; 4.4% Mormon; 8% Other; 5.6% None; 2.2% No Response • **Prayer Suggestion:** Recognize the Lord's mercy and loving-kindness, and praise Him (Ps. 100:4-5).

But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come. The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household (Matt. 10:23-25)?

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6). Being a Bible-believing Christian in today's world can be difficult. Our beliefs are regularly mocked as 'narrow-minded' or 'old-fashioned.' Whenever we attempt to take a public stand for the principles of God's Word, we find ourselves accused of being 'bigoted,' 'prejudiced,' or 'elitist.' When we openly worship God by living every facet of our lives according to His will, we open ourselves up to scorn and ridicule. We struggle to find our place in a world that appears to be actively fighting against the teachings of Christ. ***This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God (II Tim. 3:1-4).***

As we read about the lives of Christ and His disciples, it is impossible not to notice that the problems we are experiencing are nothing new. Jesus Himself endured much the same type of harassment and persecution for the entirety of his ministry here on earth (Matt. 9:3,24,34). As He prepared to send His disciples out into the world, He warned them not to get discouraged but rather to anticipate and respond appropriately to mistreatment. ***But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.***

We live in a big, wide world, and there are many here that are desperately in need of the healing touch of Christ's love.

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (10:16). In order to reach those in need, Jesus wants us to openly stand firm in our faith, but He is not calling us to continuously waste our time beating our head against a brick wall. ***Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you*** (7:6). We will never draw others to Christ by shouting or exchanging insult for insult. Instead of pausing to fight with those who scorn us, we can better serve Him by continuing on our way and reaching out to the next person we encounter. As we live our faith in Christian love, sure and steady, day-by-day, we demonstrate to friend and foe alike that we cannot be swayed from God's path.

Concerning the works of men, by the word of Thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer. Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not (Ps. 17:5).

Thought for the Day: While we might believe that the world is getting worse all the time, sin is sin. God perceives the same fallen world He has always sought to save us from.

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 10:11:** 35-36: See Mic. 7:6. **Matt. 11:5:** See Is. 35:5; 61:1. **Matt. 11:10:** See Mal. 3:1. **Matt. 11:23:** See Ezek. 26:20; 31:14; 32:18,24. **Matt. 11:29:** See Jer. 6:16.

Word Studies: 10:25 **Beelzebub** = prince of evil; 10:29 **a farthing** = a small coin of little value; 10:35 **variance** = division, disagreement; 11:20 **upbraid** = rebuke.

Pray for Staff: Ryan McCrary • **Government Officials:** Rep. Mark Alford (MO), Rep. Ilhan Omar (MN), Rep. Lauren Underwood (IL) • **Country:** Costa Rica (4,755,234) Central America • **Major Languages:** Spanish, English • **Religious Freedom** • 76.3% Roman Catholic; 13.7% Evangelical; 1.3% Jehovah's Witness; 0.7% Other Protestant; 4.8% Other; 3.2% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Seek the Lord when you are oppressed (Ps. 102:8-13).

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from Thee. But He answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:38-40).

The Pharisees had already made it quite clear that they would not accept Jesus' claim of authority (Matt 12:2, 10-14, 24). They were comfortable in the orderly world they had created—a world in which they, not God, had the last word. They had taken the law given to Moses, expanded upon it, and rigorously enforced their rules and regulations with lavish ceremony and pageantry. ***This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (15:8-9).*** It is unlikely they would have been thrilled with the appearance of the Messiah in any form, but they were noticeably less than impressed with the carpenter's son from Nazareth (13:55) that openly challenged their interpretations of the law. They were careful, however. Jesus had gained a rather large following, and it wouldn't do for them to appear as enemies of the people. They didn't attack His teachings directly; instead, they tried to subtly discredit Him. ***Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from Thee.*** They approached Him in false humility, pretending that they wanted to believe Him and asking only that He provided them with a miraculous, Godly sign so that they might be certain of His word.

Jesus did not allow Himself to be drawn into the Pharisees' drama. He knew it would not matter what He did; the Pharisees would only see what their hardened hearts allowed them to see. ***Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart (Eph. 4:18).*** Instead

of immediate proof (which He had been providing all along by way of His many miracles), Jesus offered up a means by which future generations could confidently identify Him. ***For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.***

"You can't expect me to just believe; show me proof!" This has become the battle cry of 'enlightened' people everywhere. They scoffingly ask for proof because they 'know' that such evidence does not exist. But the problem is not a lack of proof; it is their lack of openness of heart and mind to perceive it. Just as it was in the time of the Pharisees, the confirmation of God's existence is all around us. We have the wonder of the world in which we live (Rom. 1:19-20), the teachings of God's Word where we find, over and over, the evidence of prophecy fulfilled, and the Spirit-driven testimonies of an uncountable number of people whose lives God has touched. The proof of God's existence is woven into every aspect of our lives, but the only way it can be seen is through the eyes of faith.

For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God (Job 19:25-26).

Thought for the Day: Worldly power allows the prideful to indulge in sin without fear of correction or rebuke; they should be pitied, not envied.

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 12:7:** See Hos. 6:6. **Matt. 12:18-21:** See Is. 42:1-4. **Matt. 12:40:** See Jon. 1:17.

Word Studies: 12:1 **corn** = grain fields; 12:5 **profane** = violate or break the law; 12:29 **spoil his goods** = take away his possessions; 12:44 **garnished** = ready for use.

Pray for Staff: Judy McCrary • **Government Official:** Sen. Benjamin Cardin (MD) • **Country:** Cote d'Ivoire (22,848,945) Western Africa • Major Language: French • Religious Freedom • 38.6% Muslim; 32.8% Christian; 11.9% Indigenous; 16.7% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Bless the Lord for your redemption (Ps. 103:4).

But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison (Matt. 14:6-10).

As we read through the four Gospels, it is only natural that we focus primarily on the direct words and teachings of Jesus. We must be careful, however, not to read with such single-mindedness that we skip over the other lessons that God has included in these Books.

One such lesson occurs here, with the retelling of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas. Herod had no love for John, but he refrained from killing him because of his reputation as a prophet of God. ***And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him*** (Matt. 14:2). ***And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet*** (14:5). A spontaneous, ill-worded promise combined with the manipulations of his devious wife put him in a position where he either had to execute John or lose the respect of his court. Herod had taken great pleasure in his stepdaughter's dancing, and he likely had thought nothing of offering to reward her when ***he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask***. Yet the moment that oath passed his lips, he completely lost control over the situation.

Over and over again in His Word, God has provided us with examples of what happens to those who speak before they think or who offer up foolish vows or promises. We have read of King Ahasuerus, who in a drunken rage stripped his queen of her rights and title and banished her from his court (Esth. 1:1-22; 2:1). We watched helplessly as Jephthah sacrificed (set aside and sent away into the Lord's service) his only child in

fulfillment of a foolish and unnecessary vow (Judg. 11:30-40). Time after time, we have seen lives changed forever by words spoken without thought.

God wants us to understand how easily our open-ended statements can twist around and trap us. For instance, how many of us have said, "I'll do anything you want me to if you will only...." Far too often, these words lead us down a road that dead-ends in sin. We either must do something we know we shouldn't do, or we break our word. Neither is an acceptable option in the eyes of God. ***If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth*** (Num. 30:2). The only successful way out of this situation is to not get oneself into it in the first place (Matt. 5:34-37; James 5:12). Before you commit yourself to action, stop, think, and pray. If you align your words with God's will, you will find that life goes much smoother.

Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him (Prov. 29:20).

Thought for the Day: *We should strive to commit ourselves only to God and His will in all things; anything else is potentially spiritually damaging and ultimately meaningless.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 13:14-15:** See Is. 6:9-10. **Matt. 13:32:** See Ps. 104:12; Ezek. 17:23; 31:6; Dan. 4:12. **Matt. 13:35:** See Ps. 78:2. **Matt. 13:41:** See Zeph. 1:3. **Matt. 13:43:** See Dan. 12:3.

Word Studies: 13:5 **forthwith** = quickly; 13:15 **is waxed gross** = has grown hardened; 13:20 **anon . . . receiveth it** = immediately accepts it; 13:21 **dureth for a while** = continues only a short time; 13:25 **tares** = weeds – symbolic of satanic activities; 13:33 **leaven** = seemingly insignificant yeast that affects the whole; **meal** = ground grain; 14:8 **charger** = large platter.

Pray for Government Officials: Rep. Steve Scalise (LA), Rep. Brian Higgins (NY), Rep. Lloyd Doggett (TX), Rep. Victoria Spartz (IN) • **Country:** Croatia (4,470,534) Southeastern Europe • Major Language: Croatian • Religious Freedom • 86.3% Roman Catholic; 4.4% Orthodox; 1.5% Muslim; 1.5% Other; 2.5% Unspecified; 3.8% Not Religious/Atheist • **Prayer Suggestion:** Praise the Lord for His goodness and mercy (Ps. 106:1).

Then Peter took Him, and began to rebuke Him, saying, Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee. But He turned, and said unto Peter, Get Thee behind Me, Satan: Thou art an offence unto Me: for Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men (Matt. 16:22-23).

Peter loved Jesus with a deep and abiding love. He knew and accepted Him as his Master, his Savior, and His friend. **And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt.16:16).** He took his role as Jesus' trusted servant very seriously. Peter lived his faith daily and always sought to be what Jesus desired him to be. **And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (16:17-18).** Yet it was not love, but rather fear, that led Peter to react with horror and disbelief when Jesus began openly speaking of the ordeal that was to come. **From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day (16:21).**

As Jesus explained to His disciples what would happen in Jerusalem, Peter reacted with dismay that the Son of the living God would be subjected to such torturous treatment. Peter did comprehend that Jesus was speaking of His Father's perfect plan, and he immediately spoke out against what he felt was an unnecessary humiliation for his Lord. Peter felt his words were motivated by love, but Jesus saw the devil's hand guiding Peter's reaction, tempting Him to turn from God's plan.

As we move forward in our service to God, we must guard against falling prey to the same worldly influences as did Peter. When we view our lives and the lives of those around us through the lens of fleshly comfort, we succumb to the devil's trap of

believing that it is our welfare and security in the here and now that matters, and we exert pressure on those we care about to focus on their own welfare instead of on the will of God.

Conversely, the greatest temptation we will ever face as a child of God will come not from our enemies but our friends and family. Because they love us, they do not want us to suffer. At times, that will mean that they will encourage us towards a course of action that goes against the will of God just so that we can avoid physical or emotional pain. They mean well, but they don't realize that they have given in to the devil's temptation by offering that encouragement. God does not want us to suffer, but it is sometimes an unavoidable consequence of following the Lord in our imperfect world. We must learn to follow the example of Jesus; we must walk in the will of our heavenly Father, regardless of earthly consequences.

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps (Jer. 10:23).

Thought for the Day: *God must come first in all matters, or we risk straying from the path He has set.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 15:4:** See Ex. 20:12; 21:17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 5:16. **Matt. 15:8-9:** See Is. 29:13. **Matt. 16:27:** See Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12.

Word Studies: 16:6 **leaven** = false teaching; 16:18 **gates of hell** = the powers of Satan; 17:25 **prevented him** = anticipated what Peter would say and spoke before Peter could.

Pray for Staff: Kevin Jennings • **Government Official:** Rep. Bill Foster (IL), Rick McCormick (GA) • **Country:** Cuba (11,047,251) Caribbean • Major Language: English • Restricted Religious Freedom • 85% Roman Catholic; 15% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Pray and praise God with a spirit of thankfulness for His goodness (Ps. 107:1,21).

But Jesus called them unto Him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25-28).

For three years, Jesus had been in the company of these twelve men, spreading the message of the Kingdom of God. Now, as they approached the climactic end of His earthly ministry, Jesus once again sought to prepare them: ***Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn Him to death, And shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify Him: and the third day He shall rise again*** (Matt. 20:18-19). Although He had spoken of it before (16:21-28; 17:22-23), the responses He had received made it clear that the disciples did not fully comprehend what He was telling them. This time proved to be no different. No sooner had He made the grim pronouncement than He was approached by the mother of two of His disciples with a rather ambitious request: ***And He said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto Him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom*** (20:21). Even with Jesus' proclamation ringing in their ears, these men and their mother still clung to the notion that the Kingdom of God would mirror the earthly kingdoms of which they were familiar. Based upon that notion, they sought to reserve their positions in the royal hierarchy. They proclaimed their willingness to suffer with Christ (20:22) but were equally concerned that they received appropriate recognition once He was installed as King.

Many of us today serve Christ with the same attitude as the sons of Zebedee. We genuinely love the Lord and have accepted Him as our Savior. We are willing to stand up for our beliefs in the face of public ridicule and persecution, but we

do so with our 'eye on the prize.' We want a place of honor in heaven and to ensure we receive the recognition that is our 'due.' Our primary motivation is not love for our fellow man. Instead, we are seeking a promotion in the Kingdom of God.

The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. Jesus' only motivation for coming to earth was a love so great and so pure that it could not be contained (John 3:16; 15:9-17). He had nothing personal to gain; He allowed Himself to be broken so that we could be made whole (Is. 53:5). It is with this attitude that we are being called into service. If we are to follow the example set by Christ, there is no room in our hearts for anything but love. Our top priority must be the furthering of His kingdom. We need not worry about our future because we have already placed it in God's hands.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

Thought for the Day: *When we place our lives in God's hands, our future belongs to Him. We need not waste our time worrying about it.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 18:16:** See Deut. 19:15. **Matt. 19:4:** See Gen. 1:27; 5:2. **Matt. 19:5:** See Gen. 2:24. **Matt. 19:7:** See Deut. 24:1-4. **Matt. 19:18:** See Ex. 20:13-16; Deut. 5:16-20. **Matt. 19:19:** See Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:18; Deut. 5:16.

Word Studies: 18:6 **offend** = do wrong, cause to sin; 19:14 **Suffer** = Permit; 20:3 **third hour** = about 9 a.m.; 20:11 **murmured against the goodman of the house** = were indignant, critical of their employer; 20:15 **Is thine eye evil?** = Are you begrudging, jealous, or envious?; 20:26 **minister** = servant.

Pray for Government Official: Rep. David Kustoff (TN), Mark Molinaro (NY), Rep. Kelly Armstrong (ND) • **Country:** Belize (340,844) Central America • Major Languages: Spanish, Creole • Religious Freedom • 39.3% Roman Catholic; 30.9% Protestant; 1.6% Jehovah Witness; 9.9% Other (Hindu, Muslim, Baha'i, Buddhism, Mormon); 3.1% Unknown; 15.2% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Pray for your adversaries (Ps. 109:4).

And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto Me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass (Matt. 21:1-5).

And He hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS (Rev. 19:16). It is an indisputable fact that Jesus is King over all of creation. Still, Scripture makes it clear that His Kingship is unlike anything the world has conditioned us to recognize. On the night of His birth, the shepherds did not find the newborn babe in a palace or royal attire but rather wrapped in rough cloth and lying in a humble stable manger. Similarly, His triumphant entry into Jerusalem did not occur with the flourish of a stately display of horse-drawn chariots and flowing royal robes. Nothing could be plainer or less pretentious than this memorable event that Zechariah foretold. ***Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass*** (Zech. 9:9).

The lowly animal chosen for His entry was as unassuming as the garments the disciples draped upon it. Nothing about the physical appearance of his procession gave any indication of royalty. How could the garments of the disciples and the branches of the multitude be compared to the purple hangings and gorgeous array with which other sovereigns paraded their power and displayed their pride? Yet for all that, something about the man Himself made everyone stop and take notice. It was not for a royal procession, but solely for the man sitting on the donkey that ***the multitudes that went before, and that fol-***

lowed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest (Matt. 21:9).

Christ the King has come to rule our hearts and to shepherd us back into the presence of God. God has given Him dominion over all that is in this world **And hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all things to the Church** (Eph. 1:22), but worldly boundaries and standards do not define His kingdom. God has displayed His glory from within in a way wholly unrelated to fanfare and showmanship, and only those who are willing to avail themselves of the tools God has provided us that allow us to view Him with clear eyes and open hearts will be able to perceive Him as He truly is.

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power (Eph. 1:17-19).

Thought for the Day: *God's authority is absolute, but if we wish for it to shape our lives, we must first accept it without reservation.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 21:5:** See Is. 62:11; Zech. 9:9. **Matt. 21:9:** See Ps. 118:26. **Matt. 21:13:** See Is. 56:7; Jer. 7:11. **Matt. 21:16:** See Ps. 8:2. **Matt. 21:33:** See Ps. 80:8-9; Is. 5:1-2. **Matt. 21:42:** See Ps. 118:22-23. **Matt. 22:24:** See Deut. 25:5. **Matt. 22:32:** See Ex. 3:6. **Matt. 22:37:** See Deut. 6:5. **Matt. 22:39:** See Lev. 19:18. **Matt. 22:44:** See Ps. 110:1.

Word Studies: 121:2 **over against you** = ahead of you; facing you; 21:8 **strawed . . . in the way** = spread in His path; 21:33 **husbandmen** = tenant farmers; 21:42 **The Stone . . . is become the Head of the corner** = Christ (Ps. 118:22-23) who is the Chief Corner Stone (Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6).

Pray for Staff: Gilbert Palafox • **Country:** Curacao (146,836) Caribbean • Major Language: Papiamentu • Religious Freedom • 72.8% Roman Catholic; 6.6% Pentecostal; 3.2% Protestant; 3% Adventist; 2% Jehovah Witness; 1.9% Evangelical 3.8% Other 6% None; 0.6% Unspecified • **Prayer Suggestion:** Do not be fearful or live in dread of what might happen; trust the Lord to take care of you (Ps. 112:7).

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to His disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers (Matt. 23:1-4).

Chapter 23 of the Book of Matthew details Jesus's last public message during His earthly ministry. His words here carry with them both the certainty of truth and the bitterness of damnation as He seeks to impart one last timely warning. ***The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.***

Jesus was God Incarnate, yet those who publicly claimed to be closest to the Lord still refused to see. Although they had pledged to live in strict observance of Mosaic Law and the tradition of the elders (man's interpretation of the law)(15:2-3), the Pharisees had never availed themselves of God's love. They were filled with hypocrisy and iniquity. They enforced the letter of the law in order to bring about personal (not spiritual) gain. They had no genuine desire to forward the kingdom of God, and point by point, Jesus stripped them of all pretense.

Jesus' words were not uttered to sway the proud Pharisees. His warning was not for the wicked, greedy, and ambitious leaders of the day. Instead, Jesus sought to warn those who would assume future leadership positions. He reached out to all who would answer His call, who would undertake the mission He was setting before them: ***And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*** (Mark 16:15). He was warning them of the dangers that came with leadership. He wanted them to understand the horrible and eternal consequences of yielding to the sins of hypocrisy and pride and, in so doing, leading others astray.

The Pharisees lived in the public eye and were very concerned with their outer appearances. They were willing to do whatever

it took to LOOK the part, but they were privately motivated by greed and carnal desires. The 'pure' face they showed to the world covered a soul **full of extortion and excess** (Matt. 23:25). Jesus warned His disciples and all His future followers to guard against allowing their motivations to become likewise twisted.

It is imperative that we serve God from the inside out. Only by aligning a pure love for Christ with our words and deeds as we offer ourselves as His humble servants will we be able to direct others to the kingdom of heaven. **But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in** (Matt. 23:13).

Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part Thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me (Ps. 51:6-10).

Thought for the Day: *Wholly dependent on God, we fall to pieces when we can no longer perceive His presence. Fortunately, such loss is easily remedied. All we have to do is reach out, and we will find Him again.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 23:39:** See Ps. 118:26. **Matt. 24:15:** See Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. **Matt. 24:29:** See Is. 13:10; 24:23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10,31; 3:15; Zeph. 1:15. **Matt. 24:30:** See Dan. 7:13. **Matt. 24:31:** See Deut. 30:4; Is. 27:13; Zech. 2:6. **Matt. 24:38:** See Gen. 6:3-5; 7:7.

Word Studies: 23:5 **phylacteries** = Scripture texts in small boxes worn by some Jews to impress others of their religious zeal; 23:15 **compass** = to "go about," or "go around," sea and land; 23:29 **garnish** = decorate, adorn.

Pray for Government Officials: Gov. Gavin Newsom (CA), Rep. Tony Gonzales (TX) • **Country:** Cyprus (1,172,458) Mediterranean Sea • Major Language: Greek • Some religious discrimination • 78% Greek Orthodox; 18% Muslim; 4% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Remember that one of the purposes of prayer is to glorify God (Ps. 115:1).

Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, *Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly* (Matt. 26:69-75).

It had been a long and confusing night, and Christ's disciples were physically and emotionally exhausted. Even though Jesus had taken great care to prepare them for what was about to happen, it appears by their reactions that they were still blindsided by the events of the night (Matt. 26:56). Just a handful of hours earlier, Peter had stood before His Lord, ***and Peter said unto Him, Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee. Likewise also said all the disciples*** (26:35). Peter had spoken these words with confidence, filled with the belief that there could never be any circumstance that would lead him to deny His beloved Master. Following Jesus' arrest, though, it all fell apart.

Alone, fearful, and desperate for news, Peter followed his Master at a distance and attempted to blend in with the high priest's servants (Luke 22:54). When he was recognized as a companion of Jesus, his fear overwhelmed him, and his inner strength failed. ***And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man.*** Three times he was asked, and three times he denied Him, growing ever angrier with each 'accusation' until finally, ***then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And im-***

mediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.

Peter ***wept bitterly***, not out of fear or despair but in godly sorrow. ***For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death*** (II Cor. 7:10). His personal strength and emotional attachment to Jesus had not been enough to win out against his innate human cowardice. As his tears fell, he realized his trust (in himself) had been misplaced. The only strength he could depend on was that which the Lord provided.

How many of us, like Peter, have viewed the world around us through the lenses of our personal strength and devotion? How often have we thought, “I love God enough to...” In reality, our love is imperfect and fallible. Only by accepting God’s love for us and allowing it to work through us will we be able to stand with grace under pressure.

But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you (I Pet. 5:10).

Thought for the Day: *To allow fear to push our faith from our minds is akin to tossing away the flashlight before running headlong into darkness.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 26:31**: See Zech. 13:7. **Matt. 26:64**: See Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13.

Word Studies: 25:27 **exchangers** = moneylenders; **usury** = interest on money loaned; 26:15 **covenanted** = established an agreement; 26:47 **staves** = clubs; 26:63 **I adjure Thee** = I charge You under oath before God.

Pray for Staff: Jennifer Palafox • **Government Officials:** Sen. Patty Murray (WA), Rep. Chuck Fleischmann (TN) • **Country:** Czech Republic (10,627,448) Central Europe • Major Language: Czech • Religious Freedom • 10.4% Roman Catholic; 1.1% Protestant; 54% Other/Unspecified; 34.5% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Call upon the Lord in adversity, for He will hear (Ps. 116:1-4,8).

Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent (Matt. 27:50-51).

Jesus Christ left the throne room of heaven for a singular purpose: **for God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life** (John 3:16). With love He entered into this world, and for that love, He died. **Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends** (John 15:13). Scripture tells us that He was born into humble circumstances, the (supposed) son of a lowly carpenter and his wife (Luke 3:23). He grew up learning the trade of His earthly father, but His thoughts were never far from His Heavenly Father's plan (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus began His public ministry at approximately 30 years of age, and in three short years, He turned the world upside down. He gathered His disciples and amassed many followers. He performed miracles and challenged established religious beliefs. Through the power of His love, he changed the hearts of many, offering them a new life that was previously unimaginable. In the end (which was, in reality, a glorious new beginning!), He fulfilled His purpose as the true **Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world** (John 1:29).

All of this played out on the world stage. It was seen by the people of the day and recorded in Scripture so that all who were yet to be born could also bear witness to it. **And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures** (I Cor. 15:4). **So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God** (Mark 16:19). Jesus died, He arose, and He ascended. These three basic, unquestionable facts are the basis for our faith. Of these three, the ascension is the one that we discuss the least. We praise Him for dying for our sins in our place and for rising from the grave and permanently defeating the power of death (I Cor. 15:55-57), but many of us seem unaware that upon His return to heaven,

Jesus gave to us yet another profound gift—the gift of direct, personal communication with God.

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. Since the time of Moses in the wilderness, the high priest would walk behind ***the veil of the temple*** into the presence of God in the most holy place and make intercession for mankind with God once each year, on the Day of Atonement. Jesus' work on the cross and His subsequent ascension into heaven changed that forever. ***For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*** (I Tim. 2:5). With Jesus as our Savior, we are now free to approach the throne of God at any time, for any reason. We no longer depend on an earthly intercessor; we need only reach out to Him in faith, and we will be heard and answered (I John 5:14-15). Through the power of Jesus, we are once more connected to God's heart.

I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting (I Tim. 2:8).

Thought for the Day: *Through Jesus, God has removed all of the barriers between Him and us, save for the one in our hearts. That one we must remove ourselves if we are to perceive His presence.*

Cross Reference: For **Matt. 27:5-10:** See Zech. 11:12-13. **Matt. 27:34:** See Ps. 69:21. **Matt. 27:35:** See Ps. 22:18. **Matt. 27:39:** See Job 16:4; Ps. 109:25; Lam. 2:15. **Matt. 27:43:** See Ps. 22:8. **Matt. 27:46:** See Ps. 22:1.

Word Studies: 27:15 **wont** = accustomed; 27:16 **notable** = notorious; 27:24 **tumult** = uproar, riot; 27:48 **straightway** = immediately, without delay.

Pray for Staff: Tiffany Parisi • **Country:** Denmark (5,569,077) Northern Europe • Major Languages: Danish, Faroese • Religious Freedom • 495% Evangelical Lutheran; 3% Other Christian; 2% Muslim • **Prayer Suggestion:** Know that God answers prayer (Ps. 118:5).

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Mark 1:9-11).

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1). At 16 chapters, the Gospel of Mark is far and away the shortest of the four books that together form the Gospel of Christ. Unlike Matthew or Luke, it offers us no glimpses of Christ's life on earth before the onset of His three-year ministry. It does not contain any record of the genealogy of Christ, nor does it delve into the miraculous nature of His birth. Mark does not dwell on the evil machinations of a Rome-appointed king or the faithful actions of a poor carpenter and his betrothed bride, and he makes no mention of wise men or shepherds. We are told nothing of Jesus' childhood or how He came to stand before John the Baptist on the banks of the River Jordan. To Mark, the whens, wheres, and hows of Jesus' appearance on earth were secondary in importance to the establishment of one incontrovertible fact. Namely, that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God (Mark 1:1; 3:11; 5:7; 14:61; 15:39), had come to earth as a faithful servant of His heavenly Father, and that His every word and deed was undertaken with Godly authority and approval. ***And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.***

And all the city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him (1:33-34). As we read through the Gospel of Mark, our attention is drawn time and time again to the tireless manner in which Christ served those whom He had been sent to save. From words of love and compassion to exorcisms and miraculous healings, Christ was unwilling to turn anyone in need away. The constant action wasn't Mark's sole focus, however. He also made certain to record the 'secret'

of Christ's tremendous power and strength – His unbreakable connection to His Father. ***And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed*** (1:35).

Every action Christ took was undertaken by the authority of the One who had sent Him, and the time He spent in prayer allowed Him to rest and refocus His energies on the task that lay before Him. As we take up the charge of Christ today, let us endeavor to live by His example. It is not enough that we put ourselves out into the world to work for Him to the best of our ability; we **MUST** remain in constant contact with Him to ensure that we work in full accordance with His will.

For I have not spoken of Myself; but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that His commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto Me, so I speak (John 12:49-50).

Thought for to Day: *When we place our hand in His, we will find His hold secure.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 1:2:** See Mal. 3:1. **Mark 1:3:** See Is. 40:3. **Mark 1:11:** See Ps. 2:7.

Word Studies: 1:7 **latchet** = leather strap similar to a shoelace; 1:26 **torn him** = thrown him into convulsions; 1:43 **straitly charged** = sternly warned; 1:45 **blaze abroad** = make known everywhere; **every quarter** = everywhere; 2:1 **it was noised** = the news spread.

Pray for Staff: Ryan McCrary • **Government Officials:** Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (NY), Sen. Maria Cantwell (WA) • **Country:** Djibouti (810,179 Eastern Africa • Major Languages: French, Arabic • Restricted Religious Freedom • 94% Muslim; 6% Christian • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask for understanding of the Word of God so you can share it with others (Ps. 119:27).

If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And He said unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath (Mark 4:23-25).

And the disciples came, and said unto Him, Why speakest Thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand (Matt. 13:10-13). Jesus often taught with parables, but He never intended to hide His lessons from those who genuinely sought to learn from Him. His message may have been encoded, but the key to unlocking it was ever-present in the Word of God and His day-to-day ministry.

Jesus was a patient teacher; He willingly answered questions from His followers when they had difficulty understanding the lesson. ***And with many such parables spake He the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake He not unto them: and when they were alone, He expounded all things to His disciples*** (Mark 4:33-34). He knew that His teachings could not be fully absorbed in a day, week, or even a year. Jesus encouraged His disciples to trust Him to lead them down the right path and to embrace a lifetime of learning. He knew that complete understanding would not be possible until they were removed from this sinful world and stood before Him, cleansed and whole, in the kingdom of God. ***For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*** (I Cor. 13:12).

Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. When a person enters a higher math class

for the first time and sees this equation, $\sin \alpha \pm \sin \beta = 2 \sin \frac{1}{2}(\alpha \pm \beta) \cos \frac{1}{2}(\alpha \mp \beta)$, they might be tempted to turn around and run right back out. On first examination, it makes no sense, and if they sit there staring at it, repeating to themselves that it is confusing and makes no sense, then it never will. But if they listen to the lesson with an open mind and a willingness to learn, things start falling into place. It is the same in our relationship with God. We will never understand if we read His Word with a closed mind. ***This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart*** (Eph. 4:17-18). But if we approach with a desire to be taught, He will continuously increase our ability to learn.

But My people would not hearken to My voice; and Israel would none of Me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels. Oh that My people had hearkened unto Me, and Israel had walked in My ways (Ps. 81:11-13)!

Thought for the Day: *It is not a sign of failure if we first do not understand the meaning of His Word; it is only failure if we then cease to study it.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 4:12:** See Is. 6:9-10; Jer. 5:21; Ezek. 12:2.

Word Studies: 4:24 **mete** = measure out, give to others; 5:19 **suffered him not** = did not permit him.

Pray for Government Official: Rep. Suzanne Bonanici (OR) • **Country:** Dominica (73,449) Caribbean • Major Language: English • Religious Freedom • 61.4% Catholic; 20.6% Protestant; 1.2% Jehovah Witness; 7.7% Other Christian; 1.3% Rastafarian; 1.6% Other/Unspecified; 6.1% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask for understanding of the Word of God as you read each day (Ps. 119:34).

Howbeit in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And He said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye (Mark 7:7-13).

Webster defines tradition as “an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom).” Traditions take generations to form, but once rooted, they are among the most powerful influencers of behavior known to man. When traditions are given the added weight of religious imperative, they become subconsciously binding to many.

Over the millennia since the earthly ministry of Christ, the Christian church has repeatedly divided and sub-divided until there are now over 45,000 different denominations worldwide. Each of these denominations has established its own doctrine based on a combination of the teachings of God’s Word and what they consider essential religious tradition. The teachings of God and man have become so intertwined that many modern Christians have difficulty understanding which is which, and they wind up giving everything equal weight. This, in turn, dilutes their witness to the world, as the Jesus they portray is based more on an amalgamation of human perceptions than on the Gospel that He charged us to share— ***Making the word of God of none effect.***

In today’s reading, Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes reveals that this is not merely a modern-day problem. For as long as there has been organized religion, individuals

have tried to control the narrative. People have attempted to pad God's Word to fit more comfortably into the world around it. Others have strived to find a way to make it more profitable or have sought to twist it to amass worldly power. These changes are passed down and embellished with each successive generation, and the problem continues to grow.

The solution is simple. Go back to the source. Immerse yourself in God's Word. Take everything you have been taught and compare it with what you find there. Examine the traditions of your congregation and determine if they are based on the teachings of God or man. For any tradition that is determined to be manmade, look deeper. Does it in any way contradict God's Word? Does it draw the focus away from Him and His message? Is it being propagated by you or your congregation as holy and necessary for salvation? If any of these can be answered yes, then it must be discarded. It is our job as Christ's witnesses to illuminate the path, not to set up barriers that will prevent others from finding the way.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so (John 4:23-24).

Thought for the Day: *Many claim to look to God for answers when in truth, they only seek justification.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 7:6-7:** See Is. 29:13. **Mark 7:10:** See Ex. 20:12; 21:17; Lev. 20:9; Deut. 5:16.

Word Studies: 6:25 **charger** = a large dish; 7:19 **purging all meats** = declaring all food ceremonially clean.

Pray for Staff: Judy McCrary • **Government Officials:** Gov. Wes Moore (MD), Gov. Kay Ivey (AL) • **Country:** Dominican Republic (10,349,741) Caribbean • Major Language: Spanish • Religious Freedom • 95% Roman Catholic: 5% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask for boldness in telling others about the Lord (Ps. 119:46).

And He asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if Thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief (Mark 9:21-24).

What is faith? While on the surface, this seems to be a simple, straightforward question, it is one that many of us still struggle to answer with any degree of coherency. Faith is not, as some suppose, simply a belief in God. ***Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble*** (James 2:19). Faith is bestowed by God in recognition of our belief and trust in Him (Acts 3:16; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; II Pet. 1:1). It is not something that we can just ‘decide’ to have, but it is something that God has promised to make available to all who sincerely seek it. ***So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*** (Rom. 10:17). For those who do, it is a gift freely given, and it forms the cornerstone of our relationship with Christ. ***For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast*** (Eph. 2:8-9).

The desperation of the afflicted child’s father as he approached Jesus was evident for all to see. His son had been suffering for many years, and until now, he had been powerless to do anything about it. After hearing of the miracles performed by Jesus and His disciples, he brought his son to them, seeking relief. Yet when he arrived, Jesus was not there, and the disciples were unable to help him. They had tried in vain to cast out the evil spirit, and ultimately, they had determined they were not strong enough to do so. By the time Jesus returned, the father had become despondent. He recognized the fact that Jesus was his last hope, but he lacked the conviction of faith. He fervently wanted Jesus to be able to save his son, but he didn’t 100 % know that He could do so.

As imperfect children of God, we have likely found ourselves in this situation more times than we feel comfortable admitting. ***Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*** (Heb. 11:1). Not only can we not obtain faith on our own, but it is also impossible for us to maintain it without regular infusions of God's grace. When confusion and doubt creep in, we must turn to God. Even though He is the very one we are doubting, He is the only one capable of helping us sort things out. To strengthen our faith, we must turn our fears and concerns over to Him. When we doubt, we must pray as this desperate father prayed: ***Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.*** He is the only one who can.

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness (Is. 41:10).

Thought for the Day: *The stronger our faith, the fewer questions we have for God. Not because we know all the answers but because we trust Him enough that we don't need them.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 8:18:** See Ezek. 12:2. **Mark 9:44,46,48:** See Is. 66:24.

Word Studies: 9:3 **fuller** . . . can white them = launderer can bleach them; 9:12 **set at nought** = rejected; 9:13 **whatsoever they listed** = whatever they wanted; 9:45 **halt** = crippled.

Pray for Government Officials: Rep. Andre Carson (IN) • **Country:** Ecuador (15,654,411) South America • Major Language: Spanish • Religious Freedom • 95% Roman Catholic; 5% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** In times of trouble, pray and seek comfort in the Word of God (Ps. 119:50).

And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, He (Jesus) was hungry: And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, He came, if haply He might find any thing thereon: and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And His disciples heard it (Mark 11:12-14). And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto Him, Master, behold, the fig tree which Thou cursedst is withered away. And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in His heart, but shall believe that those things which He saith shall come to pass; He shall have whatsoever He saith (Mark 11:21-23).

Of all the recordings of Jesus' miracles, the narrative of the 'cursed' fig tree stands out in the minds of many as one of the most confusing. Taken strictly at face value, it paints an odd picture. If ***the time of figs was not yet***, why did Jesus seek the fruit on the tree in the first place, and why did He become angered when He didn't find any? Lastly, what was the point of cursing the tree? We know that Jesus was holy and righteous, and all of His actions aligned with God's will, but was it really God's will to seek to destroy a tree just because it wasn't fig season?

To understand this living parable, we must first remember that Jesus never acted without reason. He sought fruit on the fig tree because the tree had an abundance of leaves. Fig trees bear fruit and leaves simultaneously. Therefore, a leafy fig tree would, at the very least, contain immature fruit. When Jesus found the tree barren, He knew it was 'corrupt.' Under the authority of God, Jesus cursed the tree, making it so no one in the future would be misled by the covering of leaves to believe they had found fruit.

In parable form, the leafy fig tree represented the self-indulgent worship of the Pharisees and the Sadducees that had taken over the Temple of God. The 'leaves' of pomp and circumstance lead people to believe that God was there, but

looking under the surface cover revealed a total absence of spiritual 'fruit.' With His curse, Jesus exposed the corruption of the fig tree; with His life, death, and resurrection, He would strip bare, for all the world to see, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of Israel and all who followed in their stead.

There is one last lesson that Christ had for His disciples as they stood there on that dusty road next to the withered tree. This lesson didn't utilize riddles or parables, yet it is undoubtedly still one of the hardest lessons they (and we) have ever tried to grasp. Faith in God is ALL that we need, ever, in any situation. True faith makes the impossible, possible. True faith means that we live fully inside God's will and that His wants, wishes, and desires are reflected in our every thought and action – without doubt, without fear, and with unwavering belief. This is the faith that Jesus has come to ignite in our hearts. This is the faith that can lead us home.

Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent (John 6:29).

Thought for the Day: *When prayer becomes an extravagant production, chances are good that it is reaching everyone's ears but God's.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 10:6:** See Gen. 1:27; 5:2. **Mark 10:7-8:** See Gen. 2:24. **Mark 10:19:** See Ex. 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20. **Mark 11:9:** See Ps. 118:26. **Mark 11:17:** See Is. 56:7; Jer. 7:11.

Word Studies: 10:1 **by the farther side of** = beyond; **people resort** = multitudes gather; 11:8 **strawed** = spread, scattered.

Pray for Staff: Gilbert Palafox • **Government Officials:** Rep. Michael Quigley (IL), Sen. Martin Heinrich (NM) • **Country:** Egypt (86,895,099) North Africa • Major Languages: Arabic, English, French • Christians are not permitted to evangelize Muslims • 90% Muslim; 9% Coptic; 1% Other Christian • **Prayer Suggestion:** Lift up your prayers to God with your whole heart (Ps. 119:58,145).

For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch (Mark 13:34-37).

When Christ first came to earth, His arrival caused little stir. Yes, there were prophecies and signs which led some to ponder and suspect, but on the whole, the birth of the Nazarene carpenter's son went unnoticed by the world at large. As He grew to adulthood and began His earthly ministry, the concentric circles of His influence grew steadily wider, but He was still a relative unknown outside of Judah and Samaria. Even among those familiar with Jesus, the man, few had any fundamental understanding of His complete identity.

Jesus accomplished all He set out to do during His first coming. ***I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do*** (John 17:4). He fulfilled the law of sacrifice (Matt. 5:17) and opened the path to salvation (John 11:25-26). He conquered death (II Tim. 1:10) and broke the bonds of sin; He destroyed the barrier and bridged the gap between God and man (I Tim. 2:5). All this was done without fanfare or overpromotion. Jesus spoke God's truth; He sowed the seeds of the Gospel in the hearts of mankind. He then left it up to us to choose what to do with what we have been given.

When Jesus returns, every soul on earth will know it immediately (Matt. 24:27). ***And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*** (Matt. 29:30-31). There will be no need for signs or portents, no double-checking of prophecies or Scripture. Everyone will know, and our hearts

will be suffused with either wonderous joy or terrible despair. Christ has no need of a watchman to proclaim His coming, nor would posting one give us any advance warning of His approach. ***For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night*** (I Thess. 5:2).

And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch. Jesus commands us to **watch**, not the skies or roads for signs of His return, but the workings of our own hearts and minds. He does not want us to listen for His footsteps outside the door so that we might scurry around at the last minute and make our ‘house’ presentable; He asks that we stand guard on ourselves, staying ever vigilant lest we be deceived by the lies of the world. **Watch**—stand ready and prepared at all times. **Watch**—focus on the Promises of God and the Word He has provided to guide and support us as we navigate the world. **Watch**—with open eyes and a steadfast heart; do not be led astray by the worldly notions of compromise and universal acceptance. **Watch** yourself, and you will not be taken unawares by His return.

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee (I Tim. 4:16).

Thought for the Day: *All will know when the Lord returns. We spread His word so all will have the opportunity to understand what it means.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 12:1**: See Is. 5:2. **Mark 12:10-11**: See Ps. 118:22- 23. **Mark 12:19**: See Deut. 25:5. **Mark 12:26**: See Ex. 3:3-6. **Mark 12:29**: See Deut. 6:4. **Mark 12:30**: See Deut. 6:5. **Mark 12:31**: See Lev. 19:18. **Mark 12:32**: See Deut. 4:35. **Mark 12:33**: See Deut. 6:5; Hos. 6:6. **Mark 12:36**: See Ps. 110:1. **Mark 13:14**: See Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. **Mark 13:24**: See Is. 13:10. **Mark 13:26**: See Dan. 7:13. **Mark 13:27**: See Deut. 30:4; Zech. 2:6.

Word Studies: 12:1 **let it out** = rented it; 12:17 **Render to Caesar** = Give to Caesar; 12:34 **durst** = dared; 12:42 **two mites** = a farthing (a penny).

Pray for Staff: Kevin Jennings • **Government Official:** Rep. Young Kim (CA) • **Country:** El Salvador (6,125,512) Central America • Major Language: Spanish • Religious Freedom • 57.1% Catholic; 21.2% Protestant; 1.9% Jehovah Witness; 0.7% Mormon; 2.3% Other; 16.8% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask for understanding as you read the Word of God (Ps. 119:73).

And Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went unto the chief Priests, to betray Him unto them (Mark 14:10). And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth with Me shall betray Me (Mark 14:18). And he that betrayed Him had given them a token, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is He; take Him, and lead Him away safely. And as soon as he was come, he goeth straightway to Him, and saith, Master, master; and kissed Him (Mark 14:44-45).

In all of the Bible, no man is more universally hated than ***Judas Iscariot***. Called by Jesus as ***one of the twelve***, he had been privileged to be among those that Jesus called “friend” (Matt. 26:50). Yet Judas betrayed that friendship in the most horrific of ways, as Jesus had known from the very beginning that he would. ***Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray Him, being one of the twelve*** (John 6:70-71).

For most of us, Judas is not someone that we spend much time contemplating. We prefer to think of him as evil incarnate—basically the devil in human form. We don’t like to think about the fact that he was a man, a creation of God who knowingly betrayed the Son of God of his own free will. We are uncomfortable with the realization that it was a choice because then we are left to wonder, “Why?” Was it done out of hatred? Greed? Jealousy? Was it done in an attempt to manipulate or change God’s plan? Did he believe that by doing so he would force Jesus to defend Himself and thus bring about the return of God’s independent, earthly Kingdom of Israel? Could he honestly have believed that he was working for the ‘greater good’?

As we consider these questions, we are forced to admit a painful truth. We are not that different from Judas, after all. Each of us has willfully betrayed Christ—not just once, but over and over, sometimes on a daily basis. Any time we resort to lies (even so-called ‘little white lies’) or other forms of manipulation to get our way, we betray God’s trust. Every time we intentionally break one of His laws, even for a ‘good’ reason, we are saying that we

think we are smarter than He is. The Bible warns us, repeatedly, that God's plans are too complicated for us ever to be able to understand them (Job 36:26; Is. 40:13; 55:8; Rom. 11:34; I Cor. 2:16; Phil. 4:7), but we still regularly attempt to 'force His hand' by jumping into the middle of situations He has not yet prepared us for. Regardless of our motivations, each action adds to the sins that Jesus carried with Him to the cross. As surely as did Judas, we, too, have turned Him over to be crucified.

What then can we do? How do we make amends? Judas tried desperately to undo what he had done, only to discover that it was impossible (Matt. 27:3-4). We, too, must realize that we cannot change what we have done in the past. Yet instead of reacting to that realization with despair, we must turn at once into the arms of our Savior. ***If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*** (I John 1:9).

Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved (Ps. 55:22).

Thought for the Day: *Unrepentant sin leads to death; the nature of it does not matter.*

Cross Reference: For **Mark 14:27:** See Zech. 13:7. **Mark 14:62:** See Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13. **Mark 15:24:** See Ps. 22:18. **Mark 15:28:** See Is. 53:12. **Mark 15:29:** See Ps. 22:7-8. **Mark 15:34:** See Ps. 22:1. **Mark 16:19:** See Ps. 110:1.

Word Studies: 14:31 **spake the more vehemently** = protested emphatically; 14:65 **buffet Him** = hit Him with their fists; 15:15 **scourged** = whipped; 15:38 **twain** = two; 16:16 **damned** = condemned to eternal hell.

Pray for Country: Equatorial Guinea (722,254) Western Africa • Major Language: Spanish • Religious Freedom • Nominally Christian and predominantly Roman Catholic, pagan practices • **Prayer Suggestion:** Rise early in the morning to lift up your prayers to God and hope in His Word (Ps. 119:147).

And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless (Luke 1:18-22).

Perfect faith never doubts. It trusts God in all things, never wavering or questioning even for an instant. With perfect faith, there is never a single moment of uncertainty or disbelief. Perfect faith submits instantly to God and precludes any possibility of disobedience or sin. Perfect faith stands in equal measure with perfect love. It ***beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*** (I Cor. 13:7).

Perfect faith is the ideal; it is the goal of every Christ-centered heart. We strive to take the precious gift of faith that God has laid in our hearts (Eph. 2:8) and nurture it with His Word until it shines through, directing our every word and deed. This is what we strive for, but it is not something we will ever fully attain during our lifetime on Earth. As illustrated in today's reading, even the most devout individual sometimes stumbles. Yet when we do, God is there, offering correction and support, guiding and directing. ***Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand*** (Ps. 37:24).

Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, loved God. ***And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless*** (Luke 1:6). They believed in Him, trusted Him, and ordered their

lives around His **commandments and ordinances**. But when Zacharias received a visit from an angel bearing an answer to a decades-old prayer, the humble priest had difficulty accepting the words at face value. His wife was well past childbearing age, so what the angel told him seemed impossible. Zacharias faltered in his faith by assuming the power of God was contained by the limits of His creation.

God's response to Zacharias' stumble gives us the perfect example of correction with grace. Removing Zacharias' ability to speak worked three-fold. One—it gave him the sign he sought. God demonstrated His power over the physical state of man. Two—it silenced his faithless words. Zacharias verbally doubted God, and therefore God removed his ability to verbalize. A powerful reminder to consider one's words before voicing them. Three—it graced Zacharias with the gift of silent observation. For nine months, he was privileged to watch God's miracle unfold without having to explain or discuss it. God proved Zacharias' doubt unfounded and gave him extended time to be still and silent in His presence. When his voice returned, Zacharias' faith was stronger than ever before. **And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God** (1:64).

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth (Ps. 46:10).

Thought for the Day: *God expects us to continuously strive for perfect faith.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 1:17:** See Mal. 4:5-6. **Luke 1:50:** See Ps. 103:17. **Luke 1:53:** See Ps. 107:9. **Luke 1:71:** See Ps. 106:10. **Luke 1:76:** See Mal. 3:1. **Luke 1:79:** See Is. 9:1-2; 59:8.

Word Studies: 1:40 **saluted** = greeted, embraced; 1:46 **magnify** = exalt, praise; 1:54 **holpen** = helped.

Pray for Government Officials: Rep. Mike Levin (CA), Sen. Brian Schatz (HI), Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (RI), Vice President, Kamala Harris • **Country:** Eritrea (6,380,803) Eastern Africa • Major Languages: English, Arabic, Tigrinya • Gov't limited religious freedom • Muslim; Coptic Christian; Roman Catholic; Protestant • **Prayer Suggestion:** Praise God for His mercy (Ps. 136:2).

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:4-7).

Today's reading opens with what are arguably the most well-known verses recorded in the New Testament, Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus Christ. Just as he did with the first chapter, Luke once again seeks to draw us in and have us experience the wonder and joy surrounding the birth of our Savior. ***And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:9-11).*** For centuries, these words have warmed the hearts of people worldwide as they gaze in their mind's eye at the swaddled babe sleeping peacefully in the manger under the watchful eyes of Mary, His mother, and Joseph, her husband.

Luke then goes on to give us a single, precious glimpse into Jesus' childhood. At the age of 12, He accompanied His family on their annual Passover trip to Jerusalem. While there, He became separated from His parents and was missing for three days. When they eventually found Him, He was conversing with the elders in the Temple, and He was astonished that they had considered Him missing. ***And He said unto them, How is it that ye sought Me? wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business (2:49)?*** This is the last we are shown of young Jesus, but Luke closes the narrative of His childhood with this assurance: ***And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man (2:52).***

It is difficult for many to read these first few joyous chapters

of Luke and reconcile them with the horrific events that occurred a mere 33 years later, but to truly appreciate the depth of God's love for us, we must. This innocent baby came into the world with full knowledge of the manner in which He would leave it, and He did so willingly, His heart brimming with compassionate love for all the desperate sinners that He had come to save. Yes, the angels in heaven rejoiced at His birth, but how much greater must have been the joy the day He ascended into heaven after His triumphant victory over sin and death? ***O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*** (I Cor. 15:55-57).

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father (John 16:28). ***And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was*** (John 17:5).

Thought for the Day: *Jesus' life was lived in preparation for the greatest of miracles, His death and subsequent resurrection. The same is true for all who are faithful to God.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 2:23:** See Ex. 13:2,12. **Luke 2:24:** See Lev. 12:8. **Luke 2:32:** See Is. 9:2; 42:6; 49:6. **Luke 3:4-6:** See Is. 40:3-5.

Word Studies: 2:7 **swaddling clothes** = linen cloth wrapped around an infant; 2:46 **doctors** = the rabbis who were the instructors in the Law; 3:1 **tetrarch** = ruler of a fourth part or one of four rulers of a country or province.

Pray for Staff: Jennifer Palafox • **Government Official:** Sen. Ted Budd (NC) • **Country:** Estonia (1,257,921) Northeastern Europe • Major Languages: Estonian, Russian • Religious Freedom • 9.9% Lutheran; 16.2% Orthodox; 2.2% Other Christian; 0.9% Other; 54.1% None; 16.7% Unspecified • **Prayer Suggestion:** Give thanks to the God of heaven; His mercy and loving-kindness endure forever (Ps. 136:26).

Now when He had left speaking, He said unto Simon, *Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto Him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at Thy word I will let down the net* (Luke 5:4-5).

Simon (Peter) and his partners, James and John, had been fishing all night. By the time morning broke, they still had caught nothing and were tired and discouraged. Despite this, Simon readily agreed when Jesus approached and asked to use one of the boats to teach from. After all, this man had healed his mother-in-law with only a word (4:38-39). Simon would have been excited by the opportunity to hear more from the teacher of whom his brother Andrew had spoken so highly. ***He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ*** (John 1:41). When Jesus finished with His lesson, He instructed Simon to head out to deep water and cast his net. For the first time that day, Simon had conflicting feelings. As an experienced fisherman, Simon knew that the sun's heat would have driven all the fish beyond his reach, and he would gain nothing if he ***let down the net***. Even so, he agreed to do as Jesus had directed.

Many hold these verses up as a shining example of Simon's faith in his Lord, but a closer look reveals that not to be the case. Simon did not act out of a faithful belief that Jesus would provide. Indeed, he believed the action to be pointless, but nevertheless, he willingly followed the directive out of respect for Jesus. Only after the netting of two boatloads of fish (where logically there should have been none) did Simon begin to perceive the godly authority of Jesus over all things. ***When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken*** (Luke 5:8-9). That perception enabled respect to turn into trust—trust, which in turn, the Lord transformed into faith.

Over the course of our studies this month, we have dis-

cussed in length the truth that faith is a gift from God (Acts 3:16; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; II Pet. 1:1) and how it is impossible for a person to bring him or herself to faith. Yet, as we see in today's reading, it is not merely possible but also highly desirable for us to put ourselves in a position to receive it. The more we choose to follow God, respecting His authority even when we privately believe it won't make any difference, the more we will prepare our hearts to embrace the truth when it is revealed to us.

God is eager to impart this gift to us, just as He did to Simon Peter. Simon's faith was revealed to him in the presence of the living Word, Jesus Christ. ***And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*** (John 1:14). God has promised that ours is available from the same source, the living Gospel contained in His written Word. Only by fully opening ourselves to hearing the Word will we be able to absorb its life-changing message. As we willingly approach God with respect and trust, we will soon discover His blessing of faith.

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17).

Thought for to Day: *God can and does bless the faithful, but to build our faith on the expectation of those blessings reveals a flimsy foundation.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 4:4:** See Deut. 8:3. **Luke 4:8:** See Deut. 6:13-14. **Luke 4:10-11:** See Ps. 91:11-12. **Luke 4:12:** See Deut. 6:16. **Luke 4:18-19:** See Is. 61:1-2. **Luke 5:14:** See Lev. 14:1-32.

Word Studies: 4:29 **brow of the hill** = edge of a cliff; 5:9 **draught** = catch; 5:27 **a publican** = a tax collector for Rome; 5:36 **rent** = tear.

Pray for Government Official: Rep. Patrick McHenry (NC) • **Country:** Ethiopia (96,633,458) Eastern Africa • Major Languages: Amharic, Tigrinya • Some religious discrimination • 43.5% Ethiopian Orthodox; 33.9% Muslim; 18.6% Protestant; 2.6% Traditional; 0.7% Roman Catholic; 0.7% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Praise the Lord for His loving-kindness and faithfulness (Ps. 138:2).

And it came to pass the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and much people. Now when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not (Luke 7:11-13).

Miracles were a natural extension of Christ's earthly ministry. From the examples gifted to us through Scripture, we have learned that He was moved to perform them for a wide variety of reasons. We have seen miracles granted in response to the deep faith on the part of the person asking (7:1-10), out of a desire to strengthen the faith of people that were struggling (Matt. 8:25-27), in an effort to establish His identity (Mark 2:3-12) and in response to widespread need (Matt. 14:13-21). The miracle we witness here in today's reading stands apart from all of these in that it seems to have sprung only from a deep sense of compassion on the part of our Lord.

The Creator of life stood face to face with the pallbearers of death, yet no one recognized Him. The procession was headed out of the gates and away from the city walls when Jesus drew near. No one in the procession of death pleaded with the Savior. No request was presented to Him. Jesus simply looked upon the deep sorrow and desperate emptiness which filled the mother's heart and was moved by compassion. This miracle, perhaps more than any other that occurred throughout the ministry of Christ, should provide hope and comfort to those of us living today. The plight of this grieving, widowed mother demonstrates to us that our need, helplessness, and sorrow deeply touch the heart of Christ even when we are so despondent that we cannot pray.

And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. Nothing seems emptier to the newly bereaved than platitudinal attempts at comfort when the cause of weeping remains, and Jesus offered none. Indeed, the mother didn't even have time to wonder at the stranger's words

before He was in motion. ***And He came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And He said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise*** (Luke 7:14). Even though he had been taken by death, the young man heard and obeyed Christ's voice. By reviving this young man, Jesus demonstrated his total power over the last enemy, death (I Cor. 15:22,26; Rev. 1:18).

This miracle provides us with hard evidence that, in Christ, death need not be the end. It encourages us to move beyond the trials and tribulations of our day-to-day lives and cling to the promise of salvation in Christ as we anxiously await His return. ***For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord*** (1 Thess. 16-17). That chance meeting in Nain stands forever as an enduring symbol of Jesus' purpose on earth.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live (John 5:25).

Thought for the Day: *Through God, death is a transition; only through the world is death the end of life.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 7:22:** See Is. 61:1. **Luke 7:27:** See Mal. 3:1.

Word Studies: 6:11 **communed** = discussed; 7:14 **bier** = a stand on which a corpse or casket is laid.

Pray for Staff: Tiffany Parisi • **Country:** Falkland Islands (2,840) South America • Major Language: English • Religious Freedom • 66% Christian; 32% None; 2% Other • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask the Lord to reveal what is not pleasing to Him (Ps. 139:23-24).

And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in Thy name; and we forbad him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us (Luke 9:49-50).

As Jesus' reputation grew, word of His ministry spread to the point that others outside His inner circle were coming to understand the holy power of His name. While doing their business for Him, the disciples saw a stranger ***casting out devils in Thy*** (Jesus') ***name***. Realizing that the person was not a known disciple, they stepped in and took charge of the situation, ***and we forbad him, because he followeth not with us***. Later, as they sat learning at Jesus' feet, John reported the incident to Jesus. As he spoke, it became apparent that John wasn't complaining that someone was taking Jesus' name in vain, nor was he saying that they were breaking moral or legal laws and attributing it to the teachings of Christ. John's complaint was simply that the other person ***followeth not with us***; in John's eyes, that meant they were not 'good enough' to do the same work the disciples were doing.

Jesus' reply to John is something that we all should take to heart. ***And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us***. Jesus recognized a fact in John's statement that apparently the disciples, in their haste to classify, had overlooked. The man in question was SUCCESSFULLY performing the work of the Lord in the name of Jesus. This was a task that still proved difficult and, at times, impossible for those closest to Christ. Jesus did not view the stranger's actions as a threat but as an affirmation. His message was spreading! Even as He began to prepare His disciples for the ordeal that lay ahead (9:44), Jesus saw His ministry take fruit. ***If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples*** (John 15:7-8).

In the United States alone, there are over 200 separate Christian denominations. Worldwide that number reaches upward of 40,000. Sadly, it is not uncommon for the various members to spend much of their time squabbling about denominational differences. Some even go so far as to proclaim that their way is the only way. The truth of the matter is that no one on earth holds a patent on salvation. No one will ever make it to heaven just because they faithfully followed each and every one of their church's bylaws, no matter how well-written or godly they may be. God's Word states that ***if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved*** (Rom. 10:9), and we need to remember that, in the long run, this is the only message that matters. Remember the words of Christ: ***he that is not against us is for us***. If we would do less fighting among ourselves and instead spend that time reaching out to others, just think of how many more lives we could touch!

For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another (Rom. 12:4-5).

Thought for the Day: *Rivalry between the like-minded is a worldly method of advancement that yields no benefit when found between the members of the family of God.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 8:10**: See Is. 6:9. For **Luke 9:35**: See Ps. 2:7.

Word Studies: 8:44 **stanch** = stopped flowing; 9:3 **staves** = staffs, walking sticks; **scrip** = small bag for money or food; 9:29 **glistening** = shining with brilliance.

Pray for Bible Pathway Printer: Pollock Printing, Nashville, TN • **Government Officials:** Rep. Seth Moulton (MA), Rep. Bradley Sherman (CA), Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham (MN), Rep. Kweisi Mfume (MD), Sen. Jeff Merkley (OR), Sen. Mike Rounds (SD) • **Country:** Faroe Islands (49,947) Northern Europe • Major Language: Faroese • Religious Freedom • 83.8% Evangelical Lutheran; 16.2% Other/Unspecified • **Prayer Suggestion:** Trust the Lord and ask Him to direct your steps (Ps. 143:8).

Now it came to pass, as they went, that He entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard His word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to Him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

One of the wonderful offerings of the Gospel of Luke is the insight it gives us into the personal life of Jesus. Within its pages, we discover that, in addition to His dedicated disciples and ever-present crowds of followers, Jesus also had dear friends with whom He could fellowship. In Bethany, at the house of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, Jesus was provided with hospitality and shelter (Matt. 26:6-13; Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-45). The sisters, Martha and Mary, loved the Lord with their entire hearts (Luke 10:27) and believed He was the Messiah (John 11:27), but they expressed their dedication differently.

On this occasion, when Jesus entered the house and sat sharing His Word with the other guests before the meal, Martha became ***cumbered about much serving***. So intent was she on providing the Lord with a perfect dining experience that she was ***careful and troubled about many things***. Her sister Mary, on the other hand, was overcome with a desire to learn from the Master, so she left off of her meal preparations and ***sat at Jesus' feet, and heard His word***. This led to hurt feelings on the part of Martha, who believed that Mary's actions disrespected both Jesus and herself. Jesus met Martha's complaint with a gentle rebuke. He appreciated her service, but the fact that she allowed herself to be cumbered and troubled by it proved that she needed the same teachings her sister Mary was availing herself of.

What are the key elements of living a Christian life? Much is said on the worthy subject of service (Matt. 25:35-40; Mark

9:35), but is that all that we are called to focus upon? In the verses above, Jesus addresses this very question. The number one requirement to living a Christian life is maintaining a solid relationship with Jesus, and the only way we can do that is to stay in regular contact with Him through the reading and studying of His Word. ***Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*** (II Tim. 2:15). We are instructed to ***draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded*** (James. 4:8). Only by regularly making time to sit at His feet will we receive the guidance necessary to put His Word into action.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever (I John 2:16-17).

Thought for the Day: *We must be careful not to mistake what we do for our own satisfaction as something we are doing for the Lord's.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 10:27:** See Lev. 19:18. **Luke 10:28:** See Lev. 18:5.

Word Studies: 810:40 **cumbered about much serving** = frustrated over all she had to do; 10:41 **careful** = overly concerned; 11:8 **importunity** = persistence; 11:39 **ravening** = greed, covetousness; 11:46 **lade** = load; 11:53 **vehemently** = fiercely.

Pray for Staff: Ryan McCrary • **Country:** Fiji (903,207) Southwestern Pacific • Major Languages: English, Fijian • Religious Freedom • 55.4% Protestant; 27.9% Hindu; 9.1% Roman Catholic; 6.3% Muslim; 0.3% Sikh; 0.3% Other/Unspecified; 0.7% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving (Ps. 147:7).

And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided (Luke 12:16-20)?

The ***rich man*** in the above parable was a prudent, worldly farmer of great affluence. Jesus recounts that he was a hard worker who always planned ahead, two traits generally considered positive. As Jesus' narrative continues, however, it becomes evident that the man has taken both qualities to a spiritually unhealthy extreme. Instead of merely exercising personal responsibility, he had turned miserly. God had richly blessed him, but he never even considered sharing it with those in need. His whole focus was on storing it and saving it for himself to use at some future time. And although he had lived under the bounty of God's generosity for many years, he had yet to ever experience ***ease*** or joy. He was so focused on 'getting ahead' that there was never time for anything else.

And He said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth (Luke 12:15). Money cannot buy happiness. This phrase is thrown around all of the time in today's society, but precious few of us believe it. Most of us are confident that a well-timed windfall could go a long way towards improving our happiness quotient, at least during our time here on earth. Jesus warns us strongly against getting caught up in the pursuit of wealth. There is something grim and terrifying in the finality of His words as He discusses the possible effect of earthly wealth on our willingness to serve the Lord (Matt. 19:21-24) or help those in need (James 2:16). The world has conditioned us to measure men by their bank

accounts, new cars, and fine homes, yet to God, these things mean nothing. Chasing after our fortune will leave us tired and stressed, but **godliness with contentment is great gain** (1 Tim. 6:6). This contentment is not dependent on worldly possessions. Often the less we have, the easier it is to embrace the gift of God's love. If we have little, we learn to be content with that little, whereas if we have much, we live in fear of losing what we have.

Jesus' words are not meant to imply that having wealth automatically precludes a person from His service; His warning is regarding our attitudes, not our possessions. Whether we have much or little, the Lord has chosen us to be His representatives. Therefore, as long as we fix our hearts on Him instead of on our bottom line, we will find **ease** and joy.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

Thought for the Day: *One that does everything correctly by the world's standards has likely drifted far from the Lord's.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 13:27**: See Ps. 6:8. **Luke 13:35**: See Ps. 118:26.

Word Studies: 12:50 **straitened** = pressed with intense sorrow; 12:58 **hale** = take by force; 12:59 **mite** = fraction of a cent; 13:8 **dung it** = fertilize it; 13:24 **strait** = narrow, strict, illustrating no deviation from what God has said in His Word.

Pray for Staff: Judy McCrary • **Government Official:** Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (MO), Rep. Troy Carter (LA), Rep. Byron Donalds (FL) • **Country:** Finland (5,268,799) Northern Europe • Major Languages: Finnish, Swedish • Religious Freedom • 78.4% Lutheran; 1.1% Orthodox; 1.1% Other Christian; 0.2% Other; 19.2% None • **Prayer Suggestion:** Praise the Lord for His wonderful blessings (Ps. 150:2).

Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead (Luke 16:27-31).

Everyone born will come to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. For those who come to know Him in their lifetime, the knowledge will bring joy, peace, and life everlasting. For those who refuse to see Him in life, death will forcibly open their eyes. They will understand their error too late to do anything to correct it. For this group of people, recognition will bring horror, pain, and eternal regret. As they suffer under the weight of their sins, they will know in full what they threw away. **But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence (Luke 16:25-26).**

After being told that his situation cannot be altered, the rich man changes his plea. He goes from seeking personal relief to begging that Lazarus be returned from the dead and sent as a messenger to visit his brothers to confirm the reality of hell so that they might repent and be saved. Although this request appears on the surface to be motivated by a concern for his brothers' well-being, it also serves as a subtle indictment of the Lord for what the rich man perceived as a lack of transparency. The rich man believed that if only God would send a clear message detailing the realities of hell, everyone would know to avoid it. With certainty, the rich man proclaimed, **If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.**

The truth in Abraham's reply was lost on the man condemned

to hell, much as it is lost on many living in the world today. **And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.** If a person has set his or her mind against God, there is no miracle great enough to bridge that divide. **Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation** (John 11:47-48). The Pharisees witnessed many of Christ's miracles but discounted them all as the work of a self-serving charlatan. They had allowed the traditions of men to overwrite the Word of God in their hearts; thus, they were utterly cut off from God's truth even when it unfolded right in front of them. The same is true of all who refuse the Word of God today. Those who will not hear will never perceive the truth.

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17).

Thought for the Day: *Ultimately, God does not require our acknowledgment or acceptance; it is we who desperately need to know Him.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 16:15:** See Prov. 21:2.

Word Studies: 14:26 **hate not** . . . = all natural affections are to be as compared with the Christian's devotedness and love for Christ. Jesus clarified this when He said: Who is My mother? and who are My brethren? . . . For whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother (Matt. 12:48-50); 14:32 **ambassage** = delegation; 15:16 **would fain** = craved to; 16:11 **unrighteous mammon** = the use of your money in this world.

Pray for Country: France (66,259,012) Western Europe • Major Language: French • Religious Freedom • 83-88% Roman Catholic; 2% Protestant; 1% Jewish; 5-10% Muslim; 4% Unaffiliated • **Prayer Suggestion:** Let your prayers be praise to the Lord (Ps. 150:6).

Then said He unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him (Luke 17:1-4).

Temptations are an integral part of the fallen world we live in. They come in many forms. Unintentional temptation can be found in the passive existence of an object or substance that we covet or the inadvertent action or offer of someone ignorant of our internal struggle. Active, impersonal temptation can be found in advertisements, entertainment, social media, and any other source that seeks to direct and influence society as a whole. Deliberate, directed personal temptation comes from individuals aware of our weaknesses and internal struggles. They either don't care if they cause us to stray or actively seek to pull us from the path. These individuals know what they are doing; they simply believe they have the right to do it.

It is not enough to abstain from active sin; we must guard against speaking and behaving in such a way that leads someone else into sin. ***But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend*** (1 Cor. 8:12-13). If we do so in ignorance, God expects us to apologize, make what amends are possible, and adjust our actions going forward. If we do so deliberately, then Jesus' warning is clear. ***Woe unto him, through whom they (offenses) come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.***

But while we are to be vigilant and self-disciplined regarding our actions involving others, Jesus teaches limitless

patience and compassion regarding others' transgressions toward us. ***If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.*** This is not, as some might perceive, a double standard; instead, it is a beautiful example of managing what we can control with Christian love and trusting God to handle the rest. When we ***rebuke*** (speak up and let the other person know what they did against us), we give them the tools they need to make a different choice. When they ***repent***, and we ***forgive***, we are celebrating that choice—their step toward God. Just as God is patient with us, lovingly correcting and quick to respond with grace and mercy each time we humble ourselves before him, so too does He expect us to be patient with others.

It is not easy to maintain self-control and an awareness of the needs of those around us at all times and in all things. It is even harder to let go of expectations for those around us to maintain the same standards we set for ourselves. Neither is something that we are capable of doing on our own, a fact the disciples immediately grasped. ***And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith*** (17:5). We can strive to do both, but only with God's help will we have any chance of success.

But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26).

Thought for the Day: *Do not let your pride lead others into temptation; to humble yourself before God is to acknowledge your faults.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 18:20**: See Ex. 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20.

Word Studies: 17:8 **sup** = eat, dine; 17:9 **trow not** = think not; 18:1 **faint** = give up; 18:3 **Avenge me of** = Provide justice and protection against.

Pray for Staff: Gilbert Palafox • **Country:** French Polynesia (280,026) South Pacific Ocean • Major Languages: French, Polynesian • Religious Freedom • 54% Protestant; 30% Roman Catholic; 10% Other; 6% No Religion • **Prayer Suggestion:** The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips (Prov. 16:23).

Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Cæsar, or no? But He perceived their craftiness, and said unto them, Why tempt ye Me? Shew Me a penny. Whose image and superscription hath it? They answered and said, Cæsar's. And He said unto them, Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which be Cæsar's, and unto God the things which be God's (Luke 20:22-25).

When Jesus first sent forth His disciples to begin their independent ministry, He gave them a warning: ***behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*** (Matt. 10:16). Jesus knew what they were going to face from His own experience. He knew of the ***craftiness*** of man. Over the course of His ministry, He had wisely avoided trap after trap that had been set for Him by Pharisees and other 'religious' leaders. On this occasion, He was approached by a mixed group of Pharisees and Herodians, a sect of irreligious Jews who sought to advance themselves by urging submission to the Roman government (Matt. 22:16). At this point, the Jewish leaders were desperate to have him out of the way, so they asked him a carefully designed question: ***Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Cæsar, or no?***

Had Jesus answered that it was not lawful (allowed or required under the laws of God), then He would have been guilty of conspiring against the Roman government, and Pontius Pilate could have legitimately arrested Him for treason. Yet if He asserted that it was fitting that they be taxed, the crowds of oppressed Jews would have turned against Him. Either way, the Pharisees would be well on their way to solving the 'problem' of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus knew exactly what they were doing. He also saw beyond their relatively simplistic political question to the root of the issue behind it. Had God given Caesar authority over His people or not? By having them positively identify the money in question as Caesar's, Jesus had thrown their own question back at them. ***Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which be Cæsar's.*** Whether they liked it or not, God had allowed Rome to become ruler of the territory, and it did not honor God to

break Roman law by refusing to pay Roman taxes. Yet Jesus' answer also came with a clear warning to render **unto God the things which be God's**. Living under the statutes of Rome in no way exempted a person from living under the Laws of God.

Today, Christians live, first and foremost, as citizens of the kingdom of God. We owe Him everything—our tithes, our offerings, our obedience, our service, our very lives—for everything is already His (Ps. 24:1). Yet in order to be truly living in obedience to God, then we must also live under the God-given authority of man. **Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God** (Rom.13:1). This means, among other things, that as Christians, we are expected to pay our civil taxes whether or not we agree with the decisions of the government collecting them. We do so not as men of the world but as citizens of heaven who seek to please God.

Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour (Rom. 13:7).

Thought for the Day: *Mankind is not allowed to usurp the authority of God; it is only by His will that we are permitted dominion.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 19:38:** See Ps. 118:26. **Luke 19:46:** See Is. 56:7; Jer. 7:11. **Luke 20:17:** See Ps. 118:22. **Luke 20:28:** See Deut. 25:5. **Luke 20:37:** See Ex. 3:6. **Luke 20:42-43:** See Ps. 110:1.

Word Studies: 19:13 **Occupy** = Use your talent to buy and sell; 19:16 **pound** = a unit of money to illustrate opportunities to increase; 19:21 **aus-tere** = stern, exacting; 20:20 **feign themselves just men** = pretend to be sincere followers.

Pray for Staff: Tifany Parisi • **Country:** Gabon (1,672,597) West-central Africa • Major Language: French • Religious Freedom • Christian; animism; Muslim • **Prayer Suggestion:** Study and heed the instruction of the Word of God that your prayers may be heard (Prov. 1:28-30).

But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony. Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist. And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake. **But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls** (Luke 21:12-19).

Today's reading contains some of the most joyful and heart-warming verses in the Gospel of Christ. It also contains some of the most disheartening. First, the good news: **But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls.** As members of the body of Christ, we are promised eternal life. **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life** (John 3:16). He has saved us, and there is nothing that Satan or the world can do to change that. **And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand** (10:28). But unfortunately, the fact that they will never succeed will not stop them from trying.

Which brings us to the bad news. While we must tirelessly work to reach as many individuals as possible, the world as a whole is lost and cannot be saved. No matter what we do or say, what witness we provide, how fervently we promote the Gospel, or how diligent we are in pursuing Godly rule, the evil that has infiltrated the civilizations of mankind has taken root and is here to stay until forcibly removed by Christ when He returns. **And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming** (II Thess. 2:8). That evil will take many forms. Some will be easily recogniz-

able adversaries. Others will be our **parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends**. Whatever the form, the goal is the same. They seek to turn us from God. Failing that, they will work to silence us, discredit our witness, and pervert God's truth. For as long as we live on this earth, we will be forced to fight to keep the beacon of God's Word lit and tended.

Back to the good news. God will never leave us to fight the battle alone. He will never leave our side, no matter how long or involved the skirmish. If we keep our focus on Him, then **He will give you (us) a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist**. God will never let our struggle be in vain or our testimony be irrelevant. **So shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it** (Is. 55:11). Trust Him. Cling to Him. Live for Him. God will take care of the rest.

For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8).

Thought for the Day: *We do not battle against the world, for that is a battle God has already won; Our fight is against the weakness of our own hearts.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 21:27**: See Dan. 7:13. **Luke 22:37**: See Is. 53:12. **Luke 22:69**: See Ps. 110:1.

Word Studies: 21:4 **penury** = poverty; 21:13 **shall turn to you for a testimony** = will turn out to be an opportunity to tell the Good News; 21:15 **to gainsay** = to refute, to refuse; 21:34 **surfeiting** = over-indulgence; 22:39 **wont** = in the habit of.

Pray for Government Officials: Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr. (NJ) • **Country:** Gambia (1,925,527) West Africa • Major Languages: English, Mandinka • Restricted Religious Freedom • 90% Muslim; 8% Christian; 2% Indigenous Beliefs • **Prayer Suggestion:** Ask the Lord for wisdom and discernment (Prov. 2:1-6).

Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, **Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words, And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest** (Luke 24:1-9).

Jesus was dead and buried. This wasn't hearsay or a rumor that could not be verified. They knew it for a fact; they had seen His dead body with their own eyes. The Man that was their everything, the Savior in whom they had placed all their hopes, was gone. And despite everything He had done to prepare them for this moment, they could not see beyond their despair.

Christ's lifeless body had been removed from the cross on the eve of the Sabbath (Luke 23:52-56). With no time to spare, Joseph of Arimathaea had collected the body, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in the tomb. The women made preparations to properly anoint the body, but their ministrations were delayed by the Sabbath day of rest. When they arrived at the tomb the morning after the Sabbath, they were met, not by the Roman guards and sealed tomb they expected, but rather by an open, empty tomb and a pair of heavenly messengers, saying, **Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how He spake unto you?** Upon hearing this reminder, the women rejoiced. A sudden understanding of Christ's words flooded their hearts and unlocked their faith. Jesus had risen; He had conquered death.

The women immediately rushed to share the news with

those who had loved Christ best. Scripture doesn't tell us all that was said, but it is reasonable to assume that in addition to telling them of the empty tomb, they also recalled for the disciples the things Jesus had told them to expect. But where the reminder had restored the women's faith, the eleven were unmoved. ***And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not*** (24:11). Yes, they had seen Jesus work miracles, but Jesus was gone. In their minds, the miracles had died along with Him. It would take varying levels of proof before they would believe any differently.

Perfection is not in the nature of man; it is not possible to achieve. This includes perfect faith. Even those who have genuinely come to know the Lord will sometimes have their senses clouded and be overcome with doubt and fear. God understands this and will not leave us to our despair. He will reveal Himself to us as often as we need Him to do so. As long as we still seek Him, we will never be left in the dark.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief (Mark 9:24).

Thought for the Day: *God is there to catch us when we stumble in our faith, but if we allow our pride to get in the way of taking His outstretched hand, we risk falling prey to temptation and sin.*

Cross Reference: For **Luke 23:30:** See Hos. 10:8. **Luke 23:34:** See Ps. 22:18.

Word Studies: 23:5 **Jewry** = the Judean region; 23:19 for . . . sedition = for having started a riot; 23:23 **instant** = insistent or persistent; 23:29 **paps** = breasts; 23:32 **malefactors** = criminals, ones who do evil; 24:29 **far spent** = almost over.

Pray for Staff: Jennifer Palafox • **Country:** Gaza Strip (1,816,379) Mid East • Major Languages: Arabic, Hebrew, English • Islam is Official Religion • 99.3% Muslim; 0.7% Christian • **Prayer Suggestion:** Let your faith in the Word of God overrule all fears (Prov. 3:6).

