



*You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. (v.15)*

We all love to hear testimonies of how God has worked in our lives and saved us. “No Compromise” recounts the radical conversion of Christian singer and songwriter, Keith Green. As a young man trying to make his way in show business, Keith experimented with drugs and the free love lifestyle before coming to faith in Christ. After he was saved, his passionate zeal for Christ and personal holiness ignited spiritual fire in those who knew him and listened to his music.

The apostle Paul was also dramatically converted to Christ, and in our reading for today, he was addressing a crowd of Jews who had begun rioting in Jerusalem because he had appeared at the temple flanked by Gentiles. He had been accused of having defiled the temple and taken into custody. Now he stands on the steps and shares his testimony with the crowd. And Paul’s is a fairly dramatic testimony. We learn first of his conduct before he knew Christ as Lord. He speaks of being a religious zealot who persecuted followers of the way (those that followed Jesus). He was a real Jew and had issue with these Christians. He wanted rid of them and did his best to work at that. But something happened to Paul and we learn of his conversion. The Lord broke into his life in a dramatic way. He was blinded by a light on the Damascus road and his life was changed from that moment. He came to recognise that Jesus had died to save him from his sins and crowned him Lord of his life. Notice too that as a sign of his new found salvation he was baptised immediately afterwards. And then Paul speaks a little of his commission and his life after he was born again. He shares the Lord’s call on his life to go and be a witness for him.

Paul’s testimony gives us a great template for our own testimony. We are to speak of our life before we were saved; we are to tell of how we were saved; and then we are to share how life has been since we became Christians. Why not write out your testimony now and be reminded of God’s grace in your life.

**Pray:** thanking God for saving you.

**Reflect:** on your testimony and choose to share it with someone today.

*Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. (v.11)*

Can you remember the police station scenes or courts scenes after a murderer or paedophile is arrested? I think back to various crimes of recent times and see the crowd run up to the security van carrying the criminal and throw eggs and breaks at it, shaking it and thumping on the sides, and shouting angrily at the accused. The crowd are angry and annoyed because of what the person has done.

Judging by the angry reaction of the crowd in our reading today, you would have thought the apostle Paul was an accused murderer. But he was innocent of any crime. Luke makes it clear that Paul was on trial because of the gospel. In his hearing before the Sanhedrin, Paul was never able to communicate the heart of the gospel message. When the commander of the Roman garrison realised that the charges against Paul were Jewish in nature (22:30), he ordered Paul to appear before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. As Paul began he reminded them that he had a clear conscience before God – he had served him faithfully and well.

It quickly became apparent to Paul that the council was in no mood to sit still for a reasoned defence of the gospel. So he shrewdly appealed to the doctrine of the resurrection, knowing that it would divide the Sanhedrin.

He was right. The proceedings became so violent that Paul had to be forcibly rescued. It was here that the Lord appeared to Paul with a message of comfort (v.11). Paul was human, after all. Perhaps at this point he was beginning to wonder if he would ever live to see Rome. The plot formed against him shows that humanly speaking Paul was as good as dead. God assures him though in this verse that he has plans for the future for Paul still to fulfil. He will keep him safe.

The Lord often comes to comfort us too in difficult times. He comes to remind us that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Trust in him.

**Pray:** thanking God for his promise never to leave us.

**Reflect:** are you serving God faithfully and well?

*That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you. (v.25)*

A legend tells of the devil summoning his evil forces to consider how best to keep the world on his side. One demon said, "Send me. I will tell them that there is no God." Satan replied, "They will never believe you. Most of them know that there is a God." Another said, "Send me. I'll tell them that there is no heaven or hell." Satan shook his head, "That will never do. They know that there is life after death." Then a third spoke, "Send me. I'll tell them there is a God, a heaven, and a hell, but there's no hurry to decide." "Ah," said Satan with satisfaction, "that is the best plan!" He was sent out into the world to spread this lie.

That demon was surely at work in the case of Felix. Here was a man with the opportunity of a lifetime – he had Paul on trial before him and then had time to listen to none other than the apostle Paul preach the gospel to him and his wife personally. But Paul's preaching got a bit too close for comfort. Felix should have responded as the trembling Philippian jailer did, by asking, "What must I do to be saved?" Instead, Felix became frightened and told Paul, '*That's enough for now. You may leave. When I find it convenient I will send for you.*' (v.25). He did summon Paul often after that, but he never trembled again. He missed the opportunity to be saved because of the excuse that he didn't have time for God.

Sadly this happens often in life. People we share the gospel with will procrastinate like Felix thinking they have plenty of time. But we know the truth that there is no time like the present to make that confession and commitment. Keep sharing the gospel and share it with some urgency urging people to respond in faith. I wonder if at times we too are like Felix and put things off. Are you putting off crowning Jesus as Lord? Are you putting off being obedient and publicly witnessing to your faith by being baptised? Are you putting off serving God because you are scared? Then stop procrastinating before it is too late.

**Pray:** asking God for the courage to stop procrastinating.

**Reflect:** what am I putting off that God is calling me to do?

*I was at a loss. (v.20)*

On December 17, 1903, when Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in keeping their homemade airplane in the air for 59 seconds and 852 feet at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, they rushed a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio, telling of this great accomplishment. It read: "First sustained flight today 59 seconds. Hope to be home by Christmas." The sister was so excited that she rushed to the newspaper office and gave the telegram to the editor. The next morning the headline stated, "Popular local bicycle merchants to be home for the holidays." The editor botched the scoop of the century because he missed the point.

Sometimes we miss the point because we lack the perspective of history. From our vantage point in history, it seems inconceivable that anybody could overlook the first airplane flight and focus on a trip home for the holidays. The Wright brothers' flight was one of the most significant events in the history of the world, an event that would change the world. But at the time the editor didn't realise the significance of that event.

Incredibly, in spite of the vantage point of two thousand years of history, there are many people who view the resurrection of Jesus Christ just like that editor viewed the Wright brothers' first flight. They don't give much thought to it. Even though it is the most significant event in the history of the world, they shrug it off as inconsequential and go on about life, focusing instead on trips home for the holidays and other trivia. They just don't get it.

In our text today we find Festus, the governor who replaced Felix missing the point. In fact in his own words in verse 20 '*I was at a loss.*' He had heard the charges the religious leaders brought and he had heard Paul's claims about Jesus. He was at a loss about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He missed the point. He didn't get it. And there are many like that today. Are you at a loss? Then get reading God's Word and discover the truth. Are your friends at a loss? Then get sharing the gospel clearly with them.

**Pray:** for an opportunity to share the gospel clearly with a friend.

**Reflect:** what is that causes people to miss the point about Jesus?

*Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? (v.28)*

I once read about a man by the name of William Hyatt. He was a 62-year old miner, and his dead body was found out in the Mojave Desert. When his body was found, his face and his hands were buried in the sand. He died while trying to dig for moisture. It turns out that his car had broken down; he had walked some 22 miles through the Mojave Desert until he succumbed from dehydration and died. He had crawled on his hands and feet the last two miles. Sadly, just over the hill less than a half-mile away was a spring, an oasis of water that could have saved him. He was almost there, but almost was not good enough for William Hyatt!

It would appear that Agrippa was almost there with the gospel. But almost is not enough. Paul has been on trial before Felix and then latterly Festus. Paul appealed to Caesar and is awaiting being sent to Rome. In the meantime King Agrippa is brought in so he can hear Paul and help Festus with some written charges for sending him before Caesar. Paul shows due respect by waiting until the king motions him to speak. And then when he does Paul begins by counting it a privilege to be before the king and able to share his story. Paul shares his testimony with Agrippa and it follows the same pattern we saw previously and are encouraged to use ourselves. He spoke of his life before Christ, his conversion, and his life since trusting Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Paul very clearly uses the prophets to illustrate the truth of Jesus suffering, dying and being raised to life again. He seeks also to ensure that the king knows that there is an appropriate response to the gospel message – repentance (v.20). Paul pleads that the king would respond (v.26-27) but Agrippa is not quite convinced and responds as such in v.28.

Sadly many we share the gospel with respond in the same way. We ought not to give up. We must keep praying for them and keep sharing the gospel with them.

**Pray:** for someone you have shared the gospel with who is yet to respond.

**Reflect:** am I put off sharing my testimony because people don't respond?

*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me. (v.25)*

A passenger on an ocean liner was enduring a rough Atlantic crossing. As he leaned over the rail, his face a shade of green, a steward came along and tried to encourage him: “Don’t be discouraged, sir! No one’s ever died of seasickness yet!” The nauseous passenger looked up at the steward with horror and said, “Don’t say that! It’s only the hope of dying that’s kept me alive this long!”

I wonder if that is how Paul and his fellow-passengers felt after two weeks of enduring the storm at sea. Not only were they sick; after not being able to see the sun or stars for many days, they had lost all hope of being saved (v.20). In the same way, when people go through severe storms in life, often they lose all hope.

Into this bleak picture, the encouraging words of the apostle Paul brought a ray of light. In verse 22, he urges everyone to keep up their courage, promising that there would be no loss of life among them. Again in verse 25 he says, ‘*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me.*’ Yet again in verse 33 we read that ‘*Paul urged them all to eat.*’ The result was (v.36), ‘*They were all encouraged.*’

We all need encouragement from time to time. Life can be tough and difficult and we may feel like giving up hope at times. The encouragement from God and from His Word today is to keep going, to take courage and to hope in God. Paul was able to encourage others because his hope was in God. He knew God and trusted God. His life had been changed and transformed on the Damascus road – he was now a follower of Jesus. He experienced much hardship as he witnessed for Jesus yet always knew the Lord’s presence (Acts 23:11). He also knew that God kept his promises. Look back at the times God has worked in your life and has walked with you through the good and the bad times. Be encouraged that he will keep walking with you through all the experiences of life.

**Pray:** thanking God for his presence in your life.

**Reflect:** do you trust in the promises of God?

*Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. (v.31)*

Giacomo Puccini was a great composer whose operas number among the world's favourites. Even after he was stricken with cancer in 1922, he was determined to write a final opera, "Turandot," which some consider his best. As his illness grew worse, his students implored him to rest and save his strength, but he persisted. At one point he remarked, "If I do not finish my music, my students will finish it."

In 1924, Puccini went to Brussels to be operated on, where he died two days after his surgery. His students did finish "Turandot," and in 1926 the premiere was held in Milan under the baton of Puccini's favourite student, Arturo Toscanini. All went brilliantly until they came to the point in the score where the teacher had been forced to put down his pen. Toscanini, his face wet with tears, stopped the production, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "Thus far the master wrote, but he died!"

After a few moments, his face now wreathed in smiles, Toscanini picked up his baton and cried out to the audience, "But his disciples finished his work!" They finished the opera.

There is a sense to which as we draw to the end of Acts that we see the disciples of Jesus finishing his work. Paul in particular is carrying on the work. He has made it to Rome just as God promised and despite being under house arrest he still welcomed people and shared the gospel. His one desire was to preach about the kingdom of God and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many faithful followers have passed before us, yet the gospel message still resounds among the people – its work has not finished. The baton is now ours to pick up. We are called to go and be his witnesses. We are called to go and make disciples. We are called to boldly proclaim Jesus.

**Pray:** asking God for boldness to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

**Reflect:** am I carrying on the work of being a witness for Jesus?



*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator – who is forever praised. (v.25)*

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) was present at the Vienna Music Hall, where his oratorio *The Creation* was being performed. Weakened by age, the great composer was confined to a wheelchair. As the majestic work moved along, the audience was caught up with tremendous emotion. When the passage “And there was light!” was reached, the chorus and orchestra burst forth in such power that the crowd could no longer restrain its enthusiasm.

The vast assembly rose in spontaneous applause. Haydn struggled to stand and motioned for silence. With his hand pointed toward heaven, he said, “No, no, not from me, but from thence comes all!” Having given the glory and praise to the Creator, he fell back into his chair exhausted.

Paul is keen to do exactly the same here in Romans 1. He longs for everyone to hear and respond to the gospel. He declares in verse 16 that the gospel is *‘the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.’* Yet he is only too well aware that people do not know God despite the evidence of God all around them. Paul’s response was to declare the truth. He speaks of creation pointing to a creator and their consciences knowing there is a God who made it all. He also shares that they have rejected God and made idols for themselves instead. And yet he proclaims that the creator will forever be praised (v.25).

In our day we know and experience the same. People in our society are all too quick to declare that they do not know God and hence do not believe there is a god. And yet they take great delight in the wonderful creation all around them and also in the many creations they use around the house and workplace. They do not know God. And yet all around there are signs of God. Our role is like Paul’s – to declare the truth and point people to the creator. Our purpose in life is to glorify him.

**Pray:** praising God for being our creator and sustainer.

**Reflect:** am I pointing others to Jesus?

*You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? (v.21)*

A professor of ethics at a leading university was attending a convention. He and another teacher of philosophy had lunch at a restaurant and were discussing deep issues of truth and morality. Before they left the table, the professor slipped the silverware into his pocket. Noticing his colleague's puzzled look, he explained, "I just 'teach' ethics. I need the spoons."

By vocation that man was paid to instruct his students in the principles of right and wrong. But outside the classroom he failed to put those principles into practice. Profession without practice is hypocrisy, and hypocrisy is a sin.

Jesus reminded the hypocrites of His day that God had declared through Isaiah, *'These people...honour Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'* (Isaiah 29:13). He could just as well have cited God's rebuke to Israel through Ezekiel, *'They hear your words, but do not put them into practice'* (33:32).

In Romans 2 the apostle Paul exposed the hypocrisy of self-righteous religionists. He said, *'You who preach against stealing, do you steal?'* (v.21). Paul warned that people who are quick to judge the sins of others are guilty of the very things they condemn. I think all of us can identify with this tendency. We see a sin in another person's life and we rise up in pride to correct that person. But if we are honest with ourselves, we can see similar faults in our own life.

The Christian life is like a coin. One side is belief; the other is behaviour. If our behaviour isn't consistent with our belief, we are hypocrites. By God's enabling grace, we need to bring practice and profession into alignment. We must walk our talk, then we can talk our walk.

**Pray:** asking God to forgive us for sin in our lives.

**Reflect:** do I put all of God's word into practice in my life?

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. (v.23)*

A beggar stopped a lawyer on the street in a large southern city and asked him for a quarter. Taking a long, hard look into the man's unshaven face, the attorney asked, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" "You should," came the reply. "I'm your former classmate. Remember, second floor, old Main Hall?" "Why Sam, of course I know you!" Without further question the lawyer wrote a cheque for \$100. "Here, take this and get a new start. I don't care what's happened in the past, it's the future that counts." And with that he hurried on.

Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he walked to a bank nearby. Stopping at the door, he saw through the glass well-dressed tellers and the spotlessly clean interior. Then he looked at his filthy rags. "They won't take this from me. They'll swear that I forged it," he muttered as he turned away.

The next day the two men met again. "Why Sam, what did you do with my cheque? Gamble it away? Drink it up?" "No," said the beggar as he pulled it out of his dirty shirt pocket and told why he hadn't cashed it. "Listen, friend," said the lawyer. "What makes that cheque good is not your clothes or appearance, but my signature. Go on, cash it!"

I think there are many in life who feel they are not worthy of God's grace. You recognise that you are a sinner and that you have fallen short of God's standards and that leaves you feeling hopeless. You look at your life and think no one can help, I'm not good enough. You don't need to be. Jesus died in our place. He took our sin on his back. He was the perfect sacrifice on the altar.

You may not feel worthy of the price that Jesus paid for you, but He's paid it. Go ahead and receive it!

**Pray:** thanking God for our redemption.

**Reflect:** have I received God's grace and mercy? What's holding me back?

*However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. (v.5)*

Concerned Christians asked evangelist George Needham to visit a rich and socially prominent man, but when he arrived at the man's house he found him to be very busy. Needham apologised for the intrusion but asked the man if he had time for one quick question. Receiving permission to ask, Needham said, "Are you saved?" "No," replied the rich man, "but I am trying to be a Christian." "How long have you been trying?" Needham asked. "For twelve years," he answered. To that, the evangelist responded, "Permit me to say that you have been very foolish." Taken back by the statement, the man asked Needham what he meant. Needham calmly explained, "You have been trying for so many years, yet you haven't succeeded. If I were you, I would give up trying and start trusting."

That evening, to Needham's surprise, the man came to the church where he was preaching. His face reflected a look of peace and joy that the evangelist hadn't seen earlier in the day. After the meeting, the visitor said to Needham, "I have been foolish indeed, wasting twelve precious years of life vainly trying, when salvation could have been mine by simply trusting."

The Bible does not tell us to work or do or try to be saved. And yet for many people that is exactly what they do. They try to live good lives. They do good deeds. They work helping the poor. I'm guessing that for some of us we have tried the same at times. We are trying to balance the scales. Our sin is on one side and we are trying to level it out with all our good works. But it is never going to be enough. The apostle Paul said, '*However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*' (v.5). The only way to receive eternal life is to stop trying and start trusting Jesus. Jesus paid the price once and for all. He did what we could not do. Trust him.

**Pray:** asking God to forgive us for trying to earn our salvation and asking him for courage to simply trust Jesus.

**Reflect:** what am I still doing to try and earn my salvation?

*And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (v.2)*

The glories that await the Christian defy our comprehension. What little we understand about them, however, fills us with anticipation. We look longingly to that day when we shall enjoy heaven in all its fullness.

“In Dare to Believe”, Dan Baumann told a story that illustrates the unique experience of knowing something is ours yet longing to enjoy it more fully. Every year at Christmastime, he would do a lot of snooping, trying to find the gift-wrapped presents and figure out what was in them. One year he discovered a package with his name on it that was easy to identify. His mother couldn’t disguise the golf clubs inside. Baumann wrote: “When Mom wasn’t around, I would go and feel the package, shake it, and pretend that I was on the golf course. The point is, I was already enjoying the pleasures of a future event; namely, the unveiling. It had my name on it. I knew what it was. But only Christmas would reveal it in its fullness.”

That’s the way it is for believers as we await what God has for us in heaven. Wrote Baumann, “We shall be glorified, but we are beginning to taste glorification now. This quality of life begins the moment an individual places faith in Christ and thereby shares His life. We have eternal life - here and now - but it is only a foretaste of its fullness. God has whetted our appetites for the main course, which has to come later!”

Paul speaks of this in Romans 5 as he reminds us again of our justification through faith and the peace that this brings. We deserved nothing but wrath from God but instead he shows us his love. ‘*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*’ (v.8). We have received salvation now as our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God but we will also receive it completely when we go to be with him forever and ever in glory. We ‘*rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*’ We rejoice knowing what lies ahead for us.

**Pray:** thanking God for the hope of glory that is now in us.

**Reflect:** am I gladly looking forward to heaven?

*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. (v.12)*

One fine day, a bus driver went to the bus garage, started his bus, and drove off along the route. No problems for the first few stops - a few people got on, a few got off, and things went generally well. At the next stop, however, a big hulk of a guy got on. Six feet eight, built like a wrestler, arms hanging down to the ground. He glared at the driver and said, "Big John doesn't pay!" and sat down at the back. Did I mention that the driver was five feet three, thin, and basically meek? Well, he was. Naturally, he didn't argue with Big John, but he wasn't happy about it. The next day the same thing happened - Big John got on again, made a show of refusing to pay, and sat down; and the next day, and the one after that, and so forth. This grated on the bus driver, who started losing sleep over the way Big John was taking advantage of him. Finally he could stand it no longer. He signed up for body building courses, karate, judo, and all that good stuff. By the end of the summer, he had become quite strong; what's more, he felt really good about himself. So on the next Monday, when Big John once again got on the bus and said, "Big John doesn't pay!," the driver stood up, glared back at the passenger, and screamed, "And why not?" With a surprised look on his face, Big John replied, "Big John has bus pass."

We have been forgiven our sins – Jesus paid the price to break the chains that bound us. Sin no longer has mastery over us. And yet at times we let it still reign in our lives. We make those excuses that we are weak and frail and that temptation is too great, yet the truth is we are simply giving in and not using the pass we have been given. Jesus has the victory. He has beaten sin. And he has paid the price for our sin. We do not need to go round still paying for our sin – trying to win victory over it. We have the victory in Jesus. We do not need to let our lusts or cravings, our sinful desires bully us. So stop giving in to sin. Trust in Jesus and accept the victory he gives us over sin.

**Pray:** asking God to help us stop giving in to the desire to sin.

**Reflect:** do I let sin have control over me? How can I stop that?

*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (v.24)*

The smooth, shiny lizard known as a skink doesn't ordinarily draw crowds at the zoo. But the little critter discovered by a homeowner in Jacksonville, Florida, a few years ago created quite a stir because it had two heads, one at each end of its body. What an unusual spectacle! And what an illustration of absolute frustration! When it tried to run, its legs actually moved in opposite directions.

As I studied its picture in a newspaper, I thought, how incredible! Yet how typical of many believers in Christ! We all have an innate tendency to sin; but when we are born again by faith in the Lord Jesus, we receive a wonderful new nature. This often creates an intense struggle. We experience a continual conflict between the mind of Christ and our old ways of thinking.

The apostle Paul shares that struggle in Romans 7. He says in verse 15 *'For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.'* He goes on to say what a wretched man he is and who can save him. He knows that Jesus already has and sanctification is an ongoing work in his life. He recognises that whilst we are new creations in Christ, the old sinful nature is still around. We are works in progress. We are (hopefully) becoming more like Jesus day by day, but whilst that work is progressing, our sinful nature still tries to control us at times.

If we do not submit ourselves completely to the Saviour but try to serve self as well, we resemble the two-headed skink who attempts to go in opposite directions at the same time. Jesus said, *'No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other'* (Matthew 6:24). Let's yield completely to Christ. It's the only way to avoid the frustration of the double-minded skink.

**Pray:** asking God to help us serve him only.

**Reflect:** am I like the two headed skink?

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (v.28)*

I read a story about a shipwreck. When the sole survivor reached a small, uninhabited island, he prayed for God to rescue him, but help didn't come. Eventually he built a hut out of driftwood for protection from the elements. One day he returned from scavenging for food and found his hut in flames, the smoke rising into the sky. Angrily he cried, "God, how could You do this to me?" The next morning he was awakened by rescuers. "How did you know I was here?" he asked. "We saw your smoke signal," they replied.

The troubles that come our way are a disaster from our perspective. We do not always see the bigger picture. The survivor's hut being on fire was a big disaster for him and yet God used it to rescue him. There are many things that happen in our lives that cause us stress yet we should learn to hand them over to God and trust him to work it all together for good.

Paul says in Romans 8:28 '*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*' Notice he says '*we know*'. How do we know? We know because of past experience - experience in our own lives, and also experiences of those who have gone before us. Whenever I read this verse I am always taken back to the story of Joseph in Genesis. He had this wonderful dream but upset his brothers by sharing it with them. They threw him into a pit then sold him into slavery. He worked in the captain's house but then ended up falsely accused and imprisoned. Finally he ended up before Pharaoh, right where God wanted him at just the time God needed him there. Joseph was able to say at the end of his life '*You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*' (Genesis 30:20).

We **know** that in all things God works for good – we've seen it and experienced it. Let's trust him always.

**Pray:** thanking God for always being there for us.

**Reflect:** do I always trust God in the hard times as well as the good?



*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! (v.14)*

As we thought yesterday we might not always understand what God is doing but we can trust him that he is working all things together for good. We may not always understand what God is doing, but His ways are best.

Corrie Ten Boom in “The Hiding Place” relates an incident which taught her this principle. She and her sister, Betsy, had just been transferred to the worst German prison camp they had seen yet, Ravensbruck. Upon entering the barracks, they found them extremely overcrowded and flea-infested. Their Scripture reading that morning in 1 Thessalonians had reminded them to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Betsy told Corrie to stop and thank the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters. Corrie at first flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted. She finally succumbed. During the months spent at that camp, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible study and prayer meetings without guard interference. It was several months later when they learned that the guards would not enter the barracks because of the fleas.

Many in life struggle with the things that happen and the way God works. Paul speaks of God’s sovereign work in Romans 9 and the way he chooses to save some and not others, to use some and not others. He asks in verse 14 ‘*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!*’ God is the one who made the universe and everything in it. He can do as he wants. He can save who he wants. He can help in whatever way he wants (including using fleas).

The truth is, as we have already thought in Romans, we are all sinners who have rebelled against God and rejected him. None of us deserves to be saved and God is not obligated to save us. And yet in his mercy he chooses to save some. What amazing grace and mercy at work. Let’s not question how God works but rather be grateful that he does work in our lives.

**Pray:** thanking God for his grace and mercy in saving us.

**Reflect:** do I believe God’s ways are always best?

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (v.14)*

A woman named Rose Crawford had been blind for 50 years. “I just can’t believe it!” she gasped as the doctor lifted the bandages from her eyes after her recovery from delicate surgery in an Ontario hospital. She wept for joy when for the first time in her life a dazzling and beautiful world of form and colour greeted eyes that now were able to see. The amazing thing about the story, however, is that 20 years of her blindness had been unnecessary. She didn’t know that surgical techniques had been developed, and that an operation could have restored her vision at the age of 30. The doctor said, “She just figured there was nothing that could be done about her condition. Much of her life could have been different.”

There are many in our world wracked with guilt and not knowing what to do with it. There are people who are stuck in loneliness and see no way out. There are people with no purpose in life who see no hope for the future. There are those who fear death because they do not have the hope of heaven in front of them. There are people all around us that need to hear about Jesus. But how will they hear?

Paul declares in Romans 10 that all men need do is confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead and they will be saved. So why do more people not do that? Well for some they just do not know who Jesus is. Paul asks the question in Romans 10:14 how can they call on the one to save them if they have not heard about him? Not everyone knows who Jesus is and what he can do for them. How will they ever be able to know?

The challenge is for us to go with the good news we have received. The command is for us to go into all the world and preach the good news (Mark 16:15). What are we waiting for?

**Pray:** for an opportunity to share the good news this week.

**Reflect:** who shared the gospel with you? Give thanks for that person.

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! (v.33)*

A fable: when Albert Einstein was making the rounds of the speaker's circuit, he usually found himself eagerly longing to get back to his laboratory work. One night as they were driving to yet another dinner, Einstein mentioned to his chauffeur (a man who somewhat resembled Einstein in looks and manner) that he was tired of speechmaking. "I have an idea, boss," his chauffeur said. "I've heard you give this speech so many times. I'll bet I could give it for you." Einstein laughed loudly and said, "Why not? Let's do it!" When they arrived at the dinner, Einstein donned the chauffeur's cap and jacket and sat in the back of the room. The chauffeur gave a beautiful rendition of Einstein's speech and even answered a few questions expertly. Then a supremely pompous professor asked an extremely esoteric question about anti-matter formation, digressing here and there to let everyone in the audience know that he was nobody's fool. Without missing a beat, the chauffeur fixed the professor with a steely stare and said, "Sir, the answer to that question is so simple that I will let my chauffeur, who is sitting in the back, answer it for me."

Sometimes we think that we are starting to figure it all out and feel we can fill in for God from time to time. But then we hit a really difficult situation. We don't have to know everything. If we were able to understand everything about God perfectly, I would have to conclude that our God is pretty small. If He really is the One who created the universe, don't you think His mind is just a little bigger than ours?

Paul finishes Romans 11 with a wonderful doxology. Paul knew lots about the Law – he had studied the Old Testament Scriptures for years before coming to faith. He has met the risen Lord and learned so much more since. And yet he proclaims the wonderful truth that there is a depth to the wisdom and knowledge of God that we will not attain. God is the only one is all-wise, all-knowing, and all-sufficient. Let's simply trust in him and seek to know him more each day.

**Pray:** praising God for being all-wise, all-knowing, and all-sufficient.

**Reflect:** on these three great characteristics of God and what they mean for you.

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (v.2)*

Many years ago now, two university students in Moorhead, Minnesota, painted a mural on the wall outside their dormitory room. According to USA Today, it showed a school of fish all swimming in the same direction except for a single fish heading the opposite way. The one fish was intended to be the age-old symbol for Christ. Printed on the picture were the words, "Go against the flow." University officials, arguing that the mural might offend non-Christians, ordered the students to paint over it.

In obedience to our Master, we must be willing to go against the flow of society. As we follow Jesus, our motives, values, and habits are bound to be different from those who are not Christians. That's the way it was in the first century when the pagans were puzzled and convicted by the lifestyle of Christians. Peter wrote, *'They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you'* (1 Peter 4:4).

Paul speaks of this need to be different in Romans 12. He begins by reminding us that God deserves our best. He gave His only Son for us and the least we should do is offer our selves as living sacrifices back to God. Then he challenges us to stop conforming to the world around us. We are to swim against the tide. We are different for we are God's children. We should take our instructions from him. We should be living life the way he intended. How do we do that? By reading His Word and seeing how we should be living, and then by praying and asking God to help us walk in His ways.

When we are marching to the beat of a different drummer, of course we will be out of step with people around us. This takes conviction, courage, and courtesy. But by God's enabling grace we can be disturbingly different - and effectively different too.

**Pray:** asking God for the strength to swim against the tide.

**Reflect:** what needs to change in your life in order to live God's way and not the world's?

*Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. (v.14)*

There's a story about a photographer for a national magazine who was assigned to take pictures of a great forest fire. He was advised that a small plane would be waiting to fly him over the fire. The photographer arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough, a small Cessna airplane was waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, "Let's go!" The tense man sitting in the pilot's seat swung the plane into the wind and soon they were in the air, though flying erratically. "Fly over the north side of the fire," said the photographer, "and make several low-level passes." "Why?" asked the nervous pilot. "Because I'm going to take pictures!" yelled the photographer. "I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures." After a long pause, the "pilot" replied: "You mean you're not my instructor?"

Who is it sits in the pilot's chair of our lives? Who makes the decisions? Do you have a "beginner" behind the stick? Do you let Jesus fly the plane? So often in life rather than looking to Jesus we are persuaded by those around us in the world. So often we feel pressurised by society to act in certain ways, to say certain things, and to think in a certain manner. Our lives are not to be controlled by others. We thought yesterday about not conforming to the ways of the world and today Paul backs that up by encouraging us to clothe ourselves with Jesus. We are to put on Jesus as it says in some translations.

When we choose to look to Jesus and to do things Jesus' way, then we will stand out from the crowd. Paul challenges the people to stop getting caught up in the ways of the world: orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension and jealousy. When we hang with the wrong crowd we end up doing what they do and speaking like they do. Sometimes we have to make the hard choice to turn our backs on them and look only to Jesus.

**Pray:** asking God to help us clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Reflect:** who or what cause me to take my eyes off of Jesus and follow the ways of the world around? Determine to stop being controlled by them.

*Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. (v.13)*

We sometimes criticise others unfairly. We don't know all their circumstances, nor their motives. Only God, who is aware of all the facts, is able to judge people righteously.

John Wesley told of a man he had little respect for because he considered him to be miserly and covetous. One day when this person contributed only a small gift to a worthy charity, Wesley openly criticised him.

After the incident, the man went to Wesley privately and told him he had been living on parsnips and water for several weeks. He explained that before his conversion, he had run up many bills. Now, by skimping on everything and buying nothing for himself he was paying off his creditors one by one. "Christ has made me an honest man," he said, "and so with all these debts to pay, I can give only a few offerings above my tithe. I must settle up with my worldly neighbours and show them what the grace of God can do in the heart of a man who was once dishonest." Wesley then apologised to the man and asked his forgiveness.

As you read that I wonder if you brought to mind times you have thought or said something similar; times perhaps when you have passed judgement on someone else without knowing all the facts. We are all guilty of that at times. On top of that we often like to put obstacles in people's way. We want them to dress a certain way, behave in a certain manner, and speak with a certain tone.

Well Paul challenges us today to stop that. He reminds us that God is judge and we are all sinners who have been saved through his amazing grace. It is time for us to look at our own lives and get those in order, and then to encourage others in their walk with the Lord.

**Pray:** asking God to forgive us for the times we have judged others.

**Reflect:** how can I encourage someone today rather than criticise them?

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (v.7)*

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realises there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behaviour at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realises that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-grey hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?" It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, "The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do." And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

**Pray:** that we would learn to accept one another as Christ accepted us.

**Reflect:** do I accept everyone as they are?

*I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people including me. (v.2)*

Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, successfully completed their historic climb of Mount Everest in 1953, a feat of remarkable courage and skill. Once during their descent Hillary lost his footing. Instinctively, Tenzing held the line taut and kept them both from falling by digging his axe firmly into the ice. Hillary recovered his balance, regained a foothold, and they continued their descent. When reporters later called Tenzing a hero, he refused to take any credit. Rather, he said, “Mountain climbers always help one another.” He considered it a routine part of his job.

That’s the way it should be with Christians. We are all pilgrims headed toward the same goal. When another’s burden becomes heavy or someone stumbles along the way, we should give whatever assistance we can. Outsiders should say of us, “Christians always help one another.”

That is certainly what we see set as an example for as we reach the end of Romans. Paul writes a list of people who have helped him in one way or another: those who have stood by him and served with him, those who have worked with him and supported him, those who have loved him and cared for him. This is the example of Christians helping one another.

I wonder if we were to write a list of those who had helped us, who would some of the names be? What is it we would write about them? And would our names appear on the lists of others? What they say about us and our help?

Jesus urged us to love one another. Paul’s encouragement is for us to stand together. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to spur one another toward love and good deeds.

**Reflect:** write a list of those who have helped and supported you in life?

**Pray:** giving thanks to God for each of the names you wrote down.



*Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. (v.31)*

The story is told of a turtle who wanted to spend the winter in Florida, but he knew he could never walk that far. He convinced a couple of geese to help him. Each one took one end of a piece of rope while the turtle clamped his vicelike jaws in the centre. The flight went well until someone on the ground looked up in admiration and asked ‘Who in the world thought of that?’ Unable to resist the chance to take credit and boast, the turtle opened his mouth to shout, ‘I did...’

We like to boast in our selves and in our own wisdom and good ideas. We like to bum ourselves up to be better than we are. We always want to impress others by the good things we do.

When it comes to our Christian faith and to Church we are no different. We soon forget that it’s all about Jesus and start to think of how we fit into the picture and what a great job we have done and are doing. It appears that is the problem for the Corinthians. They came out with a “new and improved” version of the gospel. Their new gospel focused more on wisdom and less on suffering. It talked more about philosophy and said less about the cross. It was more spiritual and less earthly. It was more acceptable to the Greek mindset and less offensive to their culture. It was still the gospel, but it was a gospel with the edges rounded off and the offences smoothed out. The Corinthians probably thought of it as the gospel for the modern mind! And boy did they like to boast in that as well forgetting all about the essentials of the gospel.

Paul writes to them warning them of the dangers of what they are doing and seeks to point them back to Jesus. He reminds them that the Saviour on a cross is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, and yet that is exactly the means God used for our salvation. Paul calls for us to look to the cross and remember our redemption. And he suggests that if we want to boast then the only thing we can boast of is the Lord – for He it is who reached down when we were lost and rescued us; He poured his grace upon us. Let us boast in Christ alone.

**Pray:** thanking the Lord for saving us through Jesus’ death on the cross.

**Reflect:** do I boast in my own achievements or boast in Christ alone?

*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. (v.4)*

A newly-hired salesman stunned his superiors with his first report, for it revealed that he was nearly illiterate. He wrote: "I seen this outfit who aint never got a dimes worth of nuthin from us an sole them sum goods." But before he could be fired, a second letter arrived. It read: "I came to Chicawgo an sole them haff a millyon." The sales manager dumped the problem into the president's lap. The next day the staff were amazed to see the salesman's letters on the bulletin board, with this memo: "We ben spendin two much time tryin to spel insted of tryin to sell. I want everybody should read these letters from Gooch, who is doin a grate job, and you should go out and do like he done!"

Sometimes we get so preoccupied with appearances that we lose sight of our primary purpose. We care more about presenting the gospel flawlessly than we do about its real aim. How much better is a stumbling, stammering presentation of the gospel that points sinners to Christ than a cold, formal, precise address that leaves them unmoved!

And that is what Paul reminds the Corinthians here in chapter 2. He starts by saying that he '*did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom*', rather he came with simple ordinary words to testify about Jesus. We noticed his testimony several times over in Acts and each time he simply shared what he was like before he met the risen Lord, how he was converted, and how his life had been since that day he was saved. Paul goes on again in verse 4 to say that he did preach with '*wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power.*' He says again that he is nothing special but the message is. As well as that the Holy Spirit takes his efforts and uses them for God's purposes.

Let's not get caught up in trying to be flawless but to be faithful in sharing Jesus whenever we can.

**Pray:** asking God for courage to share your faith today.

**Reflect:** do I make excuses for not sharing the good news?

*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. (v.6)*

A deacon rebuked an elderly preacher one Sunday morning before the service. “Pastor,” said the man, “something must be wrong with your preaching and your work. There’s been only one person added to the church in a whole year, and he’s just a boy.” The minister listened, his eyes moistening and his thin hand trembling. “I feel it all,” he replied, “but God knows I’ve tried to do my duty.”

On that day the minister’s heart was heavy as he stood before his flock. As he finished the message, he felt a strong inclination to resign. After everyone else had left, that one new boy came to him and asked, “Do you think if I worked hard for an education, I could become a preacher - perhaps a missionary?” Again tears welled up in the minister’s eyes. “Ah, this heals the ache I feel,” he said. “Robert, I see the Divine hand now. May God bless you, my boy. Yes, I think you will become a preacher.”

Many years later an aged missionary returned to London from Africa. People spoke his name with reverence. Nobles invited him to their homes. He had added many souls to the church of Jesus Christ, reaching even some of Africa’s most savage chiefs. His name was Robert Moffat, the same Robert who years before had spoken to the pastor on that Sunday morning in the old Scottish church.

It is not our job to fill the church, it is God’s. It is not our job to make a name for ourselves as if people should follow us. We are called to faithfully preach God’s word and make disciples. It is God’s job to bring the increase. And he has promised that he will. Paul lays that challenge before the Corinthians as it appears there has been some argument as to who they should follow. Paul makes it very clear that we are all servants of God and he is the one who matters and he is the one who brings the growth. Let’s forget about being famous and successful and concentrate on being faithful.

**Pray:** asking God to build his church locally and internationally.

**Reflect:** am I faithful to God’s call on my life to make disciples?

*Therefore I urge you to imitate me. (v.16)*

Life certainly was a lot simpler years ago. If a man was a carpenter, his son was likely to be the same. That's because the shop was at home and the boy worked with his father. The son watched carefully as Dad cut the wood, planed and smoothed it, then fastened it together to build a table or a bench. It was apprenticeship by example.

Most young people don't learn their trades like that anymore. Vocations are far too complex and the training way too demanding.

One aspect of life, however, is the same as it was years ago. Children not only learned how to do things from Dad and Mum, they also learned about life. They saw their parents' values and ethics in action every day in their homes.

Christian parents still have "little apprentices" watching how they put their beliefs into practice. It goes on at mealtime, in the car, in the shops, in conversation with or about neighbours - all the time. What a wonderful opportunity to teach our children how to live for Christ! And young people not only need it, they want it. There is a great responsibility on us parents then to set the right example.

Paul told his children in the faith to imitate him - to follow his example (v.16). Paul's example of a life lived well for Christ was now evident to them. His life had been changed and transformed by Jesus on the Damascus road and now he sought to share the gospel with others. He speaks in the preceding verses of working hard to spread the gospel. The call on us is to imitate those faithful followers who went before us and to be setting the example for those who would come after us.

Are we living for Christ in such a way that we want our children and others to imitate us?

**Pray:** that you would set a good example for others to follow.

**Reflect:** whose example have I followed in my Christian life? Give thanks to God for that person.

*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? (v.13)*

An Air Force pilot who was court-martialled on bigamy charges paid a high price for his actions. According to the Los Angeles Times, a jury of five officers sentenced him to 3 months in a military jail and ordered that he be discharged from the service. The Air Force captain was 9 months shy of having 20 years in the service and would lose his monthly pension. The prosecutor called his action “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.”

Just as a military court saw the need to take strong action against behaviour unbecoming to an officer, so too the church needs to discipline any member whose behaviour is a reproach to the name of Christ.

Some people will call this harsh and unmerciful, but it is for the person’s good as well as the good of the church. Genuine love doesn’t let a Christian go on sinning and hurt the reputation of Christ. Just as a branch of the military is respected for its ability and readiness to serve with honour, so also must the church of Jesus Christ hold its members accountable so they will be above reproach. Yet, too often we are reluctant to correct and restore an erring member.

Here in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is urging the believers to deal with sin among their number. He calls them not to turn a blind eye to it but to handle it carefully and according to Scripture. They are to challenge immoral behaviour and if need be to cast the unrepentant sinner out from among them. The hope being of course, that as the sinful person is challenged they will repent and turn back to God.

We do not like to challenge sin in each other’s lives because we are afraid to cause upset or fear how the other person will react. But God’s word calls us to hold one another accountable. Let’s get on with lovingly caring for one another.

**Pray:** asking God for wisdom in holding others accountable.

**Reflect:** do I allow others to hold me to account?

*You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body (v.20)*

We are a good bit into the football season now and assessments are being placed on the summer buys. Managers spent weeks over the summer assessing players, working out who they wanted in their team, considering and negotiating how much they would pay for them and then pay them. Now all eyes are on the newly acquired talent to see if he was worth the cost. The ultimate measure of the player's success is whether his contribution to the team is a good return on the investment.

In 1 Corinthians 6:20, Paul reminds us that we too have been '*bought at a price.*' The context paints a compelling picture of Christ's great sacrifice. He liberated us from the cruel slave master of sin by buying us with the high price of His own life.

Getting a grip on God's great and loving investment in us should motivate us to gladly consider making His sacrifice rich in dividends. How is that return on His investment measured? By living to bring glory to Him! Our eyes, hands, feet, thoughts, dreams, and desires have been purchased to reflect the wondrous glory of God's will and wisdom. In other words, we are no longer our own. Paul concludes the chapter by saying that in light of Christ's sacrifice we ought to honour God with our bodies. We are, as he said in Romans 12:1, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices.

Unfortunately we far too often get caught up in sin still. And Paul has been warning of the dangers of allowing sin to still have mastery over us in the preceding verses. In particular he points to sexual sin. He calls for us to flee from it. Now that might mean we need to turn over the channel on our televisions or turn them off altogether for the sex scenes become ever more frequent. It may mean we have to put filters on our computers so we do not see the porn that flashes up so easily before us.

Remember that we were bought at a price. Let's give up sin, sexual sin and all other sin, and live lives that honour God.

**Pray:** thanking God for Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

**Reflect:** in what ways do I bring honour to God?

*Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. (v.5)*

A little girl at a playgroup heard the story of Snow White for the first time. She was so enthusiastic about the story she retold it at the tea table. After telling how the prince had arrived on his white horse and kissed Snow White back to life she said, half asking, ‘And do you know what happened then?’ ‘Of course,’ said her big brother, ‘they lived happily ever after.’ ‘No they didn’t,’ responded the girl, keen to tell the rest of the story herself, ‘they got married!’

We laugh and smile as if marriage is not a happy thing. Marriage is a great thing, and as a happily married man of 20 years I can say that with great authority and mean it. Paul comes to speak of matters of marriage, singleness and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. It is important to realise that he is dealing with specific issues that have come up and he has been asked about. This chapter is not the biblical marriage manual – there is much more elsewhere throughout Scripture. But Paul does have some important things to say and let me just comment on the issue of marriage itself.

There are two key things for a good marriage – passion for your spouse and passion for God. We should be excited by our spouse and be committed to them. We should love them deeply and want to do all we can to please them. We ought to remember that we belong to each other (v.4). We should not let anything come between us.

Paul even mentions the matter of sexual union and the importance of it in a healthy marriage. He also speaks of abstaining from sex for a time to concentrate on prayer – here is the passion for God. Husbands and wives ought to pray together. They should each have a deep love for God as well as a deep love for each other.

**Pray:** for marriages within the church family: that God would protect them and bless them.

**Reflect:** do I have a passion for God and for my spouse?