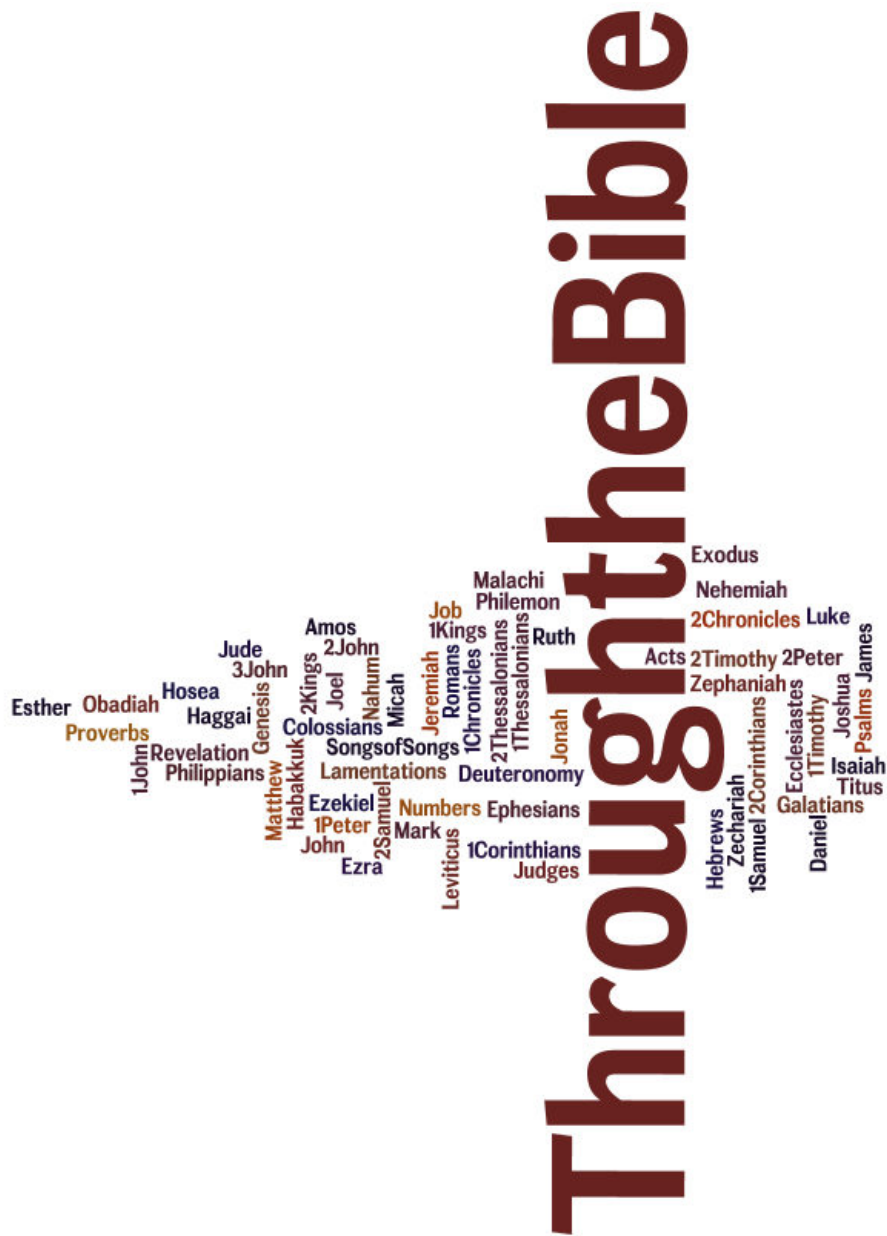




# Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action

in the community of Cornton



December 2013

*Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. (v.9)*

Dr H A Ironside tells the story of the time he was at a picnic of Christians, and there was present a man who had been converted from Mohammedanism. A girl brought a basket of sandwiches up to this man and asked if he would like some. He said, "What kind do you have?" "Oh," she said, "I'm afraid all we have left are ham or pork." He said, "Don't you have any beef?" She replied, "No, they are all gone." "Well," he said, "then I won't have any." She, knowing that he was a Christian, said to him, "Well, sir, I am really surprised. Don't you know that, as a Christian, you are freed from all these food restrictions, and that you can eat pork or ham or whatever, if you like?" He said, "Yes, I know that. I know I am free to eat pork, but I am also free not to eat it. I'm still involved with my family back in the Near East, and I know that when I go home once a year, and I come up to my father's door, the first question he will ask me is, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' If I have to say to him, 'Yes, father,' I will be banished from that home and have no further witness in it. But if I can say, as I have always been able to say, 'No, father, no pork has ever passed my lips,' then I have admittance to the family circle and I am free to tell them of the joy I have found in Jesus Christ. Therefore I am free to eat, or I am free not to eat, as the case may be."

This is at the heart of what Paul is writing to the Corinthians. Some saw no harm in eating meat that had been sacrificed for idols for they were strong believers and knew that idols were only wooden images and that there was only one true God, the one they worshipped. Others had issue with this still and thought it a problem. So Paul's advice was for them to exercise their freedom carefully. And there are times in church life we need to do the same. We do not have to have our rights. We are free to give them up anytime the situation warrants it. Though we have the rights, we also have the right not to exercise them for the sake of love.

**Pray:** for wisdom in living with each other within the church.

**Reflect:** do I hold on to my rights regardless of how it affects others?

*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (v.25)*

In 1924 Eric Liddell electrified the world by capturing an Olympic gold medal in the 400 metres – a race he was not expected to win. Liddell was the favourite at 100 metres, but he had withdrawn from that race after learning the qualifying heats would be on Sunday, a day he observed as one of worship and rest. Instead of lamenting his lost chance in the 100, he spent the next 6 months training for the 400 - and set a new Olympic record. Liddell was dedicated and committed to running the race and winning the prize.

Paul used a sports metaphor to emphasise the Christian's need for spiritual discipline and dedication. *'Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.'* (v.25). Paul was encouraging his readers that they cannot simply meander through life hoping to reach the end. We are in a race and there is a prize in store for all who finish the race. It's not a sprint as if we should expend all our energy in a quick burst, but rather a marathon where the steady pace and continual progression marks the one who will finish. Paul himself wanted to stay in the race and complete it well. Paul longed to remain faithful to Christ because he wanted to bring the message of salvation to others (v.19, 27).

Throughout Liddell's life, he disciplined himself spiritually each day by spending time in God's Word and in prayer. He remained faithful until he died of a brain tumour in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. Strengthened by the grace and power of God, Eric Liddell ran well and finished strong in the race of life. And so can we. In order to do that we have to be in strict training: that involves being found in God's Word daily and in prayer continually. As we read and learn, we can apply that to our lives and live well. And as we live life well people will ask us *'to give the reason for the hope that you have.'* (1 Peter 3:15)

**Pray:** for the discipline to keep reading and learning from God's Word.

**Reflect:** am I running the race well? How can I run it better?

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (v.31)*

On the 80th birthday of the famous musician and conductor Arturo Toscanini, someone asked his son what he considered to be his father's greatest achievement. He replied, "For him there can be no such thing. Whatever he happens to be doing at any moment is the biggest undertaking in his life, whether it be conducting a symphony or peeling an orange."

We ought to have a similar attitude as we serve Christ. By yielding to the Holy Spirit, we can have such a strong assurance of doing the Father's will that we'll be able to engage in every endeavour with zest and enthusiasm.

Toscanini gave himself so completely to every task that he could become totally involved in peeling an orange or in conducting a symphony. How much more as God's children should we take continual delight in the deeds of love we do for the Lord and for others!

Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians is that whatever task they are involved with they should be doing it for the glory of God. That is what Paul sought to do and he encourages others to do likewise. Now that is easy for us to do when we are doing something nice or something upfront or something that brings great reward. It is harder to do if we are honest when it is something menial that no one sees or for which we do not get much praise. We need those who clean, and move chairs, and set up tables.

And of course this goes further for we often feel we bring glory to God when we are doing the Lord's work – serving in church, playing in the band, helping at kids club, serving teas at the coffee morning – and yet Paul says we should bring glory to God in all we do. So at work and university live for Jesus and bring glory to God in your work and your study. Work diligently. Work with zeal and enthusiasm. Smile. And as you do that you bring honour and glory to God.

**Pray:** asking God to help you bring glory to him in all you do.

**Reflect:** do I bring honour and glory to God in my workplace?

*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (v.26)*

During the kids talk one Sunday the minister was talking about Communion and what it is all about. 'The bible talks of Holy Communion being a "joyful feast". What does that mean? Well "joyful" means happy, right? And a feast is a meal. So a "joyful feast" is a happy meal.' He paused and then asked 'What are the three things we need for a happy meal?' A little boy put up his hand and said, 'Hamburger, fries and a regular soft drink?' Our kids are too used to McDonald's!

There are three things we need for the Lord's Supper and Paul speaks of them here in these verses. We need to have examination, commemoration and proclamation. We celebrate communion regularly in church and this is right for us to do. Jesus commanded his disciples to carry on this meal regularly together in order to remember him – to remember his life, his death and his resurrection. They were to remember what he achieved as he died on the cross of Calvary. He died to pay the price for sin once and for all. He died that our sins could be forgiven. He died that our relationship with God could be reconciled.

As we come to the Lord's Table we come to exam our hearts and our lives. Paul encourages the Corinthians in verse 28 to check their hearts as they approach the table. This is a good moment for us to ask God to reveal any sin in our lives and for us to confess it before him. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin (1 John 1:9). Next comes commemoration. To commemorate means to honour the memory of someone. As we take bread and wine we remember Jesus. This is a memorial meal for him. We remember his body broken on the cross and his blood shed for each one of us. As we do this we are drawn to thank and praise him for the greatest gift ever – our salvation. And lastly it is a time of proclamation – as we take the bread and wine we proclaim Jesus' death until he comes again (v.26). We share the gospel with each other in this simple act of remembrance.

**Pray:** thanking God for the gift of salvation.

**Reflect:** are these three elements present when I take communion?

*Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it. (v.27)*

Teamwork is essential in business and industry. To underscore this point, Co-op Magazine included this item: “You’ve heard of the corny Tate family. They pervade every organisation. There is Dick Tate, who wants to run everything. Ro Tate tries to change everything. Agi Tate stirs up trouble whenever possible, and Irri Tate always lends him a hand. Whenever new ideas are suggested, Hesi Tate and Vegi Tate pour cold water on them. Imi Tate tries to mimic everyone, Devas Tate loves to be disruptive, and Poten Tate wants to be a big shot. But its Facili Tate, Cogi Tate, and Medi Tate who always save the day and get everyone pulling together.”

We laugh and smile because we know it is true. We are all different but we all need each other. A one-man show doesn’t get very far. But nowhere is this truth brought to a higher and more powerful fulfilment than in the body of Christ. The Scriptures teach that by God’s design all who are in Christ have been made dependent on one another. We may think we can go it on our own, but we can’t. We can’t fulfil our high calling as members of the body of Christ until we begin to realise that we all have a vital part to play. We are family. We need one another. That’s why church is important and church membership at that. It’s God’s design.

Paul speaks of that here in 1 Corinthians 12. He speaks of the church being a body made up of many parts. And each part needs the other. A hand is no good without a foot, an eye no good without an ear, and a nose no good without a mouth. And that is true in church with the gifts we have. The pastor cannot do everything. We need administrators, helpers, teachers, musicians, cooks, cleaners, and so on.

We all have different gifts. What is your gift? And are you using it as part of the body? If not, then the local church is not all that it was intended to be. Get working together.

**Pray:** asking God to keep the local body united together in love.

**Reflect:** What is my gift? Am I using it as part of the body?

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (v.13)*

There was a man who didn't have much of an education. But this man wanted to be a soul-winner. God had laid a brilliant lawyer on his heart. Obeying the Lord, he went to talk to the lawyer about Jesus Christ. But no sooner had he begun when the lawyer used his legal training and brilliant mind to turn the man inside out. The man finally apologised for coming and for taking the lawyer's time. He left with tears in his eyes as he said to the lawyer, "I just want you to know that I came because I love you."

Dejected, he went home to his wife and said, "I don't want to be bothered. I don't want to talk to anyone the rest of the day. I just want to go to my room and be left alone; I feel such a failure." About an hour later, the lawyer came and knocked on the man's door. He told the man's wife he would like to see her husband. She said, "I'm sorry, but he is not seeing anyone today." "Oh," he said, "I think he will see me. Just tell him who I am."

So the husband allowed the lawyer to come into his room. He said, "Why have you come? Have you come to make fun of me? Have you come to argue with me again? You know I cannot argue with you." The lawyer said, "No, I haven't come to argue with you. I have come to ask you to tell me how to be saved." The man replied, "I don't understand. What changed your mind? Every time I tried to tell you about Jesus you came up with an argument that I couldn't answer." The lawyer said, "Yes, I did. But you came up with an argument that I couldn't answer." This soul-winner looked at him and said, "What was that?" The lawyer replied, "When you looked at me and told me you loved me, I couldn't argue with that."

Nothing will win the victory over others and over circumstances like love! It is love that makes the difference. Paul knew that which is why he said '*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*' God showed his love towards us in sending His only Son to die in our place.

**Pray:** asking God to help us love one another.

**Reflect:** do I show love to other people all the time?

*But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. (v.3)*

President Lyndon Johnston had the reputation of being incredibly critical. It is said that he once saw his press secretary's desk in a terrible mess and said 'Kilduff, I hope your mind isn't as cluttered as your desk.' Naturally Kilduff made sure the next time the president saw his desk, it was completely clear, with everything put away in the proper place. This time Lyndon Johnston said 'Kilduff, I hope your brain isn't as vacant as your desk.'

Paul is speaking to the Corinthian church to encourage them to love one another and follow the right path. They have been disagreeing on a number of important doctrines and get themselves all caught up in secondary issues at times as well. They are critical of each other. One of those issues was the use of tongues and Paul speaks here in chapter 14 to encourage them to concentrate on what is important. Tongues, for Paul, is a personal thing for personal edification, whereas prophesy is for all people. Now immediately we begin to think that prophesy is telling the future. That may be a part of it, as in the Old Testament we see God give prophesy of things to come to the prophets. But in the New Testament, it is more often the forth-telling of the Word of God. It is about simply speaking the truth of God to people.

So Paul starts this chapter by linking it back to the previous chapter and says '*follow the way of love*'. He longs for them to love above all else. Paul then says concentrate on prophesy. Concentrate on speaking forth the truth of God to others. He gives three important purposes for speaking that word in verse 3: to strengthen, encourage and comfort others.

When we speak the Word of God we strengthen others in their faith, we edify and teach them; we encourage them about God's love and encourage them to love, to do good deeds and to gain holiness; and we comfort them as we bring them reassurance from God. Let's be speaking God's Word.

**Pray:** asking God to help us build one another up with His Word.

**Reflect:** do I speak of God's Word to others?



*But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (v.57)*

Little Philip, born with Down's syndrome, attended a Sunday School class with several eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences. But because of a creative teacher, they began to care about Philip and accept him as part of the group, though not fully.

The Sunday after Easter the teacher brought egg containers, the kind that look like large eggs. Each receiving one, the children were told to go outside on that lovely spring day, find some symbol for new life, and put it in the egg-like container. Back in the classroom, they would share their new-life symbols, opening the containers one by one in surprise fashion. After running about the church property in wild confusion, the students returned to the classroom and placed the containers on the table.

Surrounded by the children, the teacher began to open them one by one. After each one, whether a flower, butterfly, or leaf, the class would ooh and ahh. Then one was opened, revealing nothing inside. The children exclaimed, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do their assignment." Philip spoke up, "That's mine." "Philip, you don't ever do things right!" the student retorted. "There's nothing there!" "I did so do it," Philip insisted. "I did do it. It's empty. The tomb was empty!" Silence followed. From then on Philip became a full member of the class. He died not long afterward from an infection most normal children would have shrugged off. At the funeral this class of eight-year-olds marched up to the altar not with flowers, but with their Sunday school teacher, each to lay on it an empty egg container.

Philip saw the importance of the empty tomb as a sign of new life – he caught the resurrection hope Paul speaks of in this chapter. Because *'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day'* we have the ultimate victory.

**Pray:** thanking God for the victory we have in Jesus our risen Saviour.

**Reflect:** what does the resurrection mean for me?

*On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. (v.2)*

There is a story about a little girl who experienced a major breakthrough in her life when she learned to tie her own shoes. But instead of excitement, she was overcome by tears. Her father asked, “Why are you crying?” “I have to tie my shoes,” she said. “You just learned how. It isn’t that hard, is it?” said the father. “I know,” she wailed, “but I’m going to have to do it for the rest of my life.”

I believe many of us feel that way when we learn about Christian financial giving. We know it is a responsibility. We put something in the offering plate to appease our conscience. But we really do not want to discuss the words “giving” and “sacrifice” in the same sentence especially if it is something we must do the rest of our lives. Paul speaks to us here in the last chapter of 1 Corinthians about giving to the Lord. He does this on the back of having spoken of God’s great gift to us – salvation.

And he lays down five principles I think for our giving to God: regular, universal, systematic, proportionate and voluntary. He starts by saying it should be regular. He speaks of us doing that on the first day of the week – Sunday. Giving ought to be part of our weekly worship service. He says it is universal – ‘*each one of you*’. We are all to be involved, whether we earn a little or a lot. He encourages us to make it systematic – we are to think through our giving and plan how we give. With that planning he encourages us to make sure our giving is proportionate. Work out how much you earn and give at least a proportion to the Lord (often we use the example of the tithe – the first 10% of our income). And lastly he says do it voluntarily. Give because you want to give, not because you feel forced into it – the Lord loves a cheerful giver. Although we will do this for the rest of our lives, it becomes a wonderful part of our worship, thanksgiving and praise to God.

**Pray:** thanking God for all the good things he gives us.

**Reflect:** how is my giving to the Lord?

*...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (v.4)*

One day Commissioner Booth-Tucker was preaching in Chicago when a man stepped out of the crowd and said to him before the entire audience, “Booth-Tucker, you can talk about how Christ is dear to you; but if your wife were dead, as my wife is, and you had babies crying for their mother, you couldn’t say what you are saying.”

A few days later, Booth-Tucker lost his lovely wife in a tragic train accident. Her body was returned to Chicago for the funeral. As the service concluded, the husband took his place by the casket and said, “The other day when I was preaching in this city, a man said that if my wife were dead and my children were crying for their mother, I couldn’t say Christ was sufficient. If that man is here, I tell him that Christ is sufficient! My heart is crushed, bleeding, and broken. But there is a song in my heart, and Christ put it there. The Saviour speaks comfort to me today.” The man was present, and on hearing that, he came down the aisle to surrender his life to the Lord.

God is the giver of all comfort. He draws alongside us in our times of trouble – that is literally what the word comfort means: to call to one’s side. Go through the Psalms and you find the Psalmist speak of God being his comfort and help in times of trouble. Paul knew that too – later in this letter he will speak of all his traumas: shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments; yet he knew the Lord with him through it all.

Paul writes to remind the Corinthians of who God is and the comfort he brings to them. He also encourages them to take that experience of comfort and use it to help others. God allows His children to experience sorrow and suffering that they may be better able to comfort others who are going through deep waters. We don’t need to have gone through exactly what they have in order to ‘*comfort those in any trouble*’.

**Pray:** thanking God for being our comfort in times of trouble.

**Reflect:** who needs my comfort this week?

*...in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (v.11)*

General George Patton of World War II fame was seldom at a loss for words. What he said during a battle in North Africa may be legend, but it typifies the man. Patton's troops and tanks were engaged in a successful counterattack of German forces under General Erwin Rommel. Patton is reported to have shouted in the thick of the battle, "I read your book, Rommel! I read your book!" And that he did. In Rommel's book 'Infantry Attacks', the famed "Desert Fox" carefully detailed his military strategy. And Patton, having read it and knowing what to expect, planned his moves accordingly.

Satan has authored no book. God, however, has exposed our enemy's tactics in His Holy Word. We know how Satan works if we read God's Word. If we learn these we can be on our guard and resist Satan's temptations when they come. Paul reminds the Corinthians here in 1 Corinthians 2:11 that '*we are not unaware of his schemes.*' And if we remember those Satan will not outwit us.

Here are but a few of his subtle strategies: he quotes Scripture to lead us astray (Matthew 4:6), he afflicts the body (2 Corinthians 12:7), he plucks away the seed of the Word (Mark 4:15), he tempts by impure thoughts (1 Corinthians 7:5), he tempts by pride (1 Timothy 3:6), he hinders through circumstances (1 Thessalonians 2:18), he seduces by pleasure (1 Timothy 5:11,15), he severely buffets in a crisis (Luke 22:31), and he tempts to hypocrisy and lying (Acts 5:3).

The best way to resist the devil is to be in a close relationship with the Lord. Read and learn God's Word and use it against Satan when he comes tempting (just as Jesus did). Pray continually. Be alert to his tactics. And remember the victory is ours in Christ Jesus.

**Pray:** asking God for strength to resist the devil.

**Reflect:** do I memorise God's Word? Is this something that could help me resist the devil in future?

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (v.18)*

A woman went to a diet centre for help in losing weight. The director took her to a full-length mirror, and on it he outlined a figure. "This is what I want you to be like at the end of the program," he told her. Days of intense dieting and exercise followed, and every week the woman would stand in front of the mirror, discouraged because her bulging outline didn't fit the director's ideal. But she kept at it, and finally one day she conformed to the longed-for image.

Our ideal is Christ. Putting ourselves next to His perfect character reveals how "out of shape" we are. Being transformed into Christ's image does not mean sinless perfection. It means becoming complete and mature. God often works through suffering to bring this about (James 1:2-4). Sometimes He uses the painful results of our sins or the sins of others. Although no specific sin may be the cause of our day-to-day difficulties, we undergo the pain of learning obedience, suffering for doing the Father's will.

And becoming like Jesus takes time...in fact a whole lifetime. He is the potter who is shaping the clay (Isaiah 64:8; Jeremiah 18:1-6). He moulds us and makes us into the finished piece he longs for us to be. He chips away at times and it is hard but in the end it is worth it all. We have to leave ourselves in his hands.

Of course there is a part we can play in all this too: we can keep reading His Word and applying it to our lives, and we can continually pray that God would have his way in our lives, changing us into the people he wants us to be.

**Pray:** asking God to continue the work of transformation in your life.

**Reflect:** what is God changing in my life at the moment? Am I resisting that change or allowing him to have his way?

*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (v.18)*

The famous preacher D.L. Moody told about a Christian woman who was always bright, cheerful, and optimistic, even though she was confined to her room because of illness. She lived in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of an old, rundown building. A friend decided to visit her one day and brought along another woman - a person of great wealth. Since there was no elevator, the two ladies began the long climb upward.

When they reached the second floor, the well-to-do woman commented, "What a dark and filthy place!" Her friend replied, "It's better higher up." When they arrived at the third landing, the remark was made, "Things look even worse here." Again the reply, "It's better higher up."

The two women finally reached the attic level, where they found the bedridden saint of God. A smile on her face radiated the joy that filled her heart. Although the room was clean and flowers were on the window sill, the wealthy visitor could not get over the stark surroundings in which this woman lived.

She blurted out, "It must be very difficult for you to be here like this!" Without a moment's hesitation the shut-in responded, "It's better higher up."

She was not looking at temporal things. With the eye of faith fixed on the eternal, she had found the secret of true satisfaction and contentment. So often in life we let our lives be dictated by the circumstances around us. We see trouble and heartache and pain, and that leads us to despair and depression. Yet the Lord calls for us to look up and ahead. This is not our home, our home is in heaven. One day we will be with our Saviour for all eternity in a place where there is no more pain, sorrow or suffering. As Paul encourages the Corinthians today let us fix our eyes on what is unseen. "It's better higher up."

**Pray:** thanking God for the hope of heaven.

**Reflect:** where are my eyes fixed – on the Lord or on my problems?

*Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (v.5)*

In the UK, it's customary for a man to give an engagement ring when he asks a woman to marry him. This tradition probably dates back to the Greeks or perhaps even the Egyptians. The first diamond engagement ring was apparently given in Austria in 1477. Thus the engagement ring is an enduring token of a couple's commitment to marry each other and spend their lives together. The Bible also talks about a "token" and a marriage. The Bridegroom is the Lord Jesus Christ, and we, His church, are the bride. As His bride, we have received something more glorious than a ring, because we've been given God's pledge, His Holy Spirit, as a token of His promise to be with us forever.

In both 2 Corinthians and later Ephesians 1, Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a deposit, who guarantees our eternal inheritance. Although the imagery is different, the same truth is expressed whether we think of the Holy Spirit as type of engagement ring or down payment. In both cases, God's indwelling Spirit assures us that we'll be in His presence for all eternity.

The opening part of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church underscores God's glorious work on our behalf through the work of Christ. These verses span God's work of election before the world's foundation to our present redemption and adoption as God's own children to the eternal inheritance that awaits us. This sweep from past to future assures us of God's complete control over the entire scope of our lives.

Our greatest assurance of our future glory, however, is our marking, or sealing, with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). In Paul's day as well as our own, cattle were often marked, or branded, with their owner's seal to protect against theft. In a similar way, Paul says that believers have been "sealed" as God's special possession with His own seal, His Holy Spirit. The Spirit guarantees what is to come – our place in glory with God.

**Pray:** thanking God for the gift of the Spirit and our assurance of heaven.

**Reflect:** do I rest in God's promise to be with me always?

*Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way. (v.4)*

When William McKinley was President of the United States, he had to make a decision about the appointment of an ambassador to a foreign country. Two candidates were equally qualified, so McKinley went back to when he was still a Congressman and he had observed an inconsiderate action by one of the men. He recalled boarding a streetcar at the rush hour and getting the last vacant seat. Soon an elderly woman got on, carrying a heavy clothesbasket. No one got up to offer her a seat, so she walked the length of the car and stood in the aisle, hardly able to keep her balance as the vehicle swayed from side to side. One of the men McKinley was later to consider for ambassador was sitting next to where the woman was standing. Instead of getting up and helping her, he deliberately shifted his newspaper so it would look like he hadn't seen her. When McKinley noticed this, he walked down the aisle, graciously took her basket, and offered her his seat. The man was unaware that anyone was watching, but that one little act of selfishness would later deprive him of perhaps the crowning honour of his lifetime.

Who we really are shines through in how we live, how we act and how we speak. We can point people towards Jesus by our actions or we can turn them from him. The Apostle Paul knew that which is why he reminds the Corinthians that he has tried not to be a stumbling block (v.3). He does not want his ministry to be discredited. He does not want to bring shame on the name of Christ. And as if to prove this he then says in verse 4 that he and his companions have tried to '*commend ourselves in every way*'.

Paul then details how he has suffered and endured through the trials of life. He has kept his focus on the Lord and has accepted all of these hardships as part of life. He has shown patience and kindness in all his dealings. His life and witness is an example to us of how to live for Christ in the good times and in the bad.

**Pray:** asking God to help us follow him consistently.

**Reflect:** do I commend myself in all my actions and speech?



*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. (v.10)*

In his own words, John Newton “sinned with a high hand” before he met the Lord. After deserting from the British Navy, he was caught and severely disciplined. In lieu of further punishment, Newton persuaded his superiors to assign him to a slave ship. He eventually captained several slave ships, even after his conversion, although he tried to prevent the worst abuses of slavery. Finally, however, Newton became completely disgusted and quit the trade. To his dying day, he shuddered over his former involvement in slavery and fought the cruel trade in every way that he could, including assisting William Wilberforce.

When God convicts someone of sin, there will always be some positive outcome. In John Newton’s case, godly sorrow spurred him on to fight injustice. In the case of the Corinthians, godly sorrow led them to repentance and godly growth.

This first part of today’s passage indicates that some had accused Paul of wrongdoing, perhaps suggesting that he had ulterior motives for the collection to help Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This explains the great care that Paul took in writing this letter and his overwhelming expression of love for the Corinthians. It also explains the tremendous joy that he felt finally to receive a good report back from Titus.

Although difficult, Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church is a powerful example of love in the body of Christ. Paul would have laid down his life for the Corinthians. At the same time, he didn’t hesitate to speak painful truth when necessary. He knew that godly sorrow, although painful, ultimately benefited them. If he hadn’t confronted them, they would have grown more hardened and persisted in sin. But painful yet faithful words led to repentance and restoration.

**Pray:** giving thanks to God for those who spoke truth into your life even when it was hard to receive.

**Reflect:** do I confront sin in others with a loving heart?

*Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (v.2)*

In the province of Mizoram in India lives a group of Christians who have discovered a unique way to give to the work of the Lord. As the woman of the house prepares meals for her family, meals that consist primarily of rice, she measures out just enough rice to feed her family. Then, before she cooks that rice, she reaches into the dish, grabs a handful, and takes it out. This she sets aside until Sunday, when she takes it to church and combines it with the rice brought by other women. The church then sells it and uses the proceeds to support missionary projects. One of the items purchased was a computer that is being used to help the Mizo people complete a translation of the Bible in their language.

It would be easy for people without much money to look at the little they have and decide it's not worth giving. Likewise, it would have been easy for the widow in Luke 21 to feel inadequate with her two small coins when she saw the large amounts the rich people put in the temple treasury. Yet she gave and Jesus spoke of her sacrificial giving.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to '*excel in this grace of giving*' (v.7). He has shared with them the example set by the believers in Macedonia. They had suffered much and endured much and didn't have very much, yet they gave to the work of the Lord. No one asked them to give but rather they begged Paul to allow them to give. They gave first to the Lord, then to the Lord's work and workers. When was the last time you begged to give money to the Lord's work in your church?

And notice the example they set us for giving: we are to give regularly, give gratefully, give joyfully, give generously, give proportionately, give sacrificially, give voluntarily, give willingly, give yourself and give continually. They gave because of God's grace to them in Jesus (v.9)

**Pray:** giving thanks to God for his grace shown in Jesus Christ.

**Reflect:** how does my giving measure up to that of the Macedonian believers?

*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (v.7)*

George lived in a rented room at the YMCA in Chicago. He had one set of clothes, shoes wrapped with rubber bands to keep the soles from flopping, and a threadbare black overcoat. He spent his mornings napping in an old metal chair by the heater in the back of the 18<sup>th</sup> District police office. Two officers, Kitowski and Mitch, took an interest in the old man, occasionally slipping him a few bucks. They found out that Billy the Greek over at the G&W grill gave him a hot breakfast every morning – no charge.

The two policemen and their families decided to have George as their guest for Christmas dinner. They gave him presents, which he unwrapped carefully.

As they drove him back to the YMCA, George asked, ‘Are these presents really mine to keep?’ They assured him they were. ‘Then we must stop at the G&W before I go home,’ he said. With that George began rewrapping his presents.

When they walked into the restaurant, Billy the Greek was there as always. ‘You been good to me Billy,’ said George. ‘Now I can be good to you. Merry Christmas.’ George gave all his presents away on the spot.

George gave because he had been loved much and given so much and he wanted to give out in return. When we are given much the natural reaction to most of us is to give back in return. And Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the ‘*indefinable gift*’ God has given to them – their salvation through Jesus. And he encourages them to give in return to the Lord’s work. When it comes to giving to God we should give generously, give willingly, give cheerfully and give thankfully. We give because God first gave to us.

**Pray:** giving thanks to God for his indefinable gift.

**Reflect:** am I a cheerful giver or do I like to hang on to my money and possessions?

*When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves they are not wise. (v.12)*

The growth chart had slipped from the playroom wall because the tape on its corners had become dry and brittle. Five-year-old Jordan hung it up again, meticulously working to get it straight. Then he stood his sister against the wall to measure her height.

“Mummy! Mummy! Anne is forty inches tall!” he shouted as he burst into the kitchen. “I measured her.” His mum replied, “That’s impossible, Sweetheart. She’s only 3 years old. Let’s go see.”

They walked back into the playroom, where the mother’s suspicions were confirmed. Despite his efforts to hang the chart straight, Jordan had failed to set it at the proper height. It was several inches low.

We easily make Jordan’s mistake in gauging our spiritual growth or importance. Compared to a shortened scale, we may appear better than we are. How many times do we look around at others and think we are better than them. Compared to many others we think we are doing OK. But what faulty measurement. By looking at our peers and comparing our own behaviour with others who have done worse than we have, we conclude that we are not so bad after all. But such pride is demolished when people compare themselves with a perfect standard of righteousness. Only when we stand against the Cross, that “great leveller of men” as A. T. Robertson called it, can we not think of ourselves “more highly than we ought to think.” Christ, himself, must be our standard. If we fail to measure ourselves against God’s standard we will fail to see our need for salvation. In and of ourselves we are sinners and the only way to be saved is to trust in Jesus.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he does not measure himself against others but his only boast is in the Lord.

**Pray:** asking God’s forgiveness for the times we fall short of his standard.

**Reflect:** am I measuring myself against the right standard?

*And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. (v.14)*

During the Franco-German War of 1870-71, two unexploded shells were found near a house. The homeowner cleaned them up and put them on display near his fireplace. A few weeks later he showed these interesting objects to a visitor. His friend, an expert in munitions, suddenly had a horrible thought. "What if they're still loaded?" After quickly examining the shells, he exclaimed, "Get them away from the fire immediately! They're as deadly as the day they were made!" Without realising it, the homeowner had been living in grave peril.

Likewise, many people unknowingly live in constant jeopardy of something far worse - a Christ-less eternity in hell. Failing to recognise the consequences of unbelief, they are in danger of sealing their doom at any moment. The risk of rejecting Christ and living in unbelief cannot be exaggerated, for what we do with Him and His offer of salvation determines where we will spend eternity.

In the final chapters of 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is dealing with probably the most powerful tool, the most dangerous threat to a church the devil has - infiltration - the destruction of a church from within by teachers who are veering off from the truth. Paul warns the Corinthians of the danger of the false apostles amongst them. He says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and leads them astray.

We are quick to see the devil's schemes when they are blatant and obvious before us, but when he comes up dressed in nice clothes and befriends you and quietly and persuasively tells you things that sound wonderfully wise we believe him and fall into his trap. Paul wants the Corinthians to be on their guard and so should we. How can we know false apostles amongst us? By taking their words and comparing them against God's Word. How can we guard against being trapped by Satan? Stay close to the Shepherd; walk closely with Jesus each and every day in life.

**Pray:** asking God to help you stay close to the Good Shepherd.

**Reflect:** am I walking closely with Jesus each day?

*That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (v.10)*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, known as “the prince of preachers,” felt he delivered his sermon so poorly one Sunday that he was ashamed of himself. As he walked away from his church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, he wondered how any good could come from that message. When he arrived home, he dropped to his knees and prayed, “Lord God, You can do something with nothing. Bless that poor sermon.”

In the months that followed, 41 people said that they had decided to trust Christ as Saviour because of that “weak” message. The following Sunday, to make up for his previous “failure,” Spurgeon had prepared a “great” sermon - but no one responded.

Spurgeon's experience underscores two important lessons for all who serve the Lord. First, we need the blessing of God on our efforts. Solomon said in Psalm 127:1, ‘*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.*’ And second, our weakness is an occasion for the working of God's power. The apostle Paul said, ‘*I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong*’ (v.10). In and of ourselves we can do very little, but with God's help we can do all things. He works in and through us, and at times in spite of us, to bring about his purposes.

When we count our blessings, we should include the weaknesses, the hardships, the burdens, and the trials we face. If we do, we might find that God has used our difficulties more than the “good” things to help us grow spiritually. Why is that? Because it is in those difficult places that we discover the sufficiency of His grace. In our trials, we turn to God. As we depend on Him, we find that His strength is made perfect in our weakness (v.9).

**Pray:** thanking God for his work in our lives.

**Reflect:** do I praise God for the thorns as well as for the blessings?

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.  
(v.5)*

Paul has been examined by the Corinthians and now he wants them to examine themselves. He has a real love and concern for them. And he wants them to know that they are truly saved. He doesn't want them to be deceived by the false teachers. He doesn't want them to go through the motions. He longs for them to know and love and serve and worship Jesus.

In these days when everyone is so good at role-playing, it's sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the impostor and the real thing. Even within the church, some behave as if they can satisfy God by skilfully acting out the part of a Christian.

They are like the goat who wanted more than anything else in the world to be a lion. He told himself that if he could learn to walk like a lion, talk like a lion, and go where lions go, he would be a lion. So he practiced stalking through the jungle and tried to swish his stubby little tail majestically. Then he tried to turn his pitiful little bleat into the deep, awesome roar of the king of beasts. He worked and worked on it. Finally convinced that he looked and sounded like a lion, he said, "Now, all I have to do to be a lion is to go where lions go." So he marched into lion territory one day about lunchtime.

Sometimes people who have learned to walk, talk, and act like Christians, think they really are. By outward appearances, they are. But if they have never personally placed their trust in Jesus Christ, they are phonies. They lack that "genuine faith," which alone brings true salvation.

When we rely on church attendance, pious language, or good behaviour to get us into heaven, we deceive ourselves. Only by trusting the Lord Jesus as Saviour can we avoid the rude awakening on the Day of Judgment that faced the misguided goat when he walked into lion territory.

**Pray:** thanking God for his work of salvation in your life.

**Reflect:** do I play at being a Christian or am I truly saved?

*Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I still trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of God. (v.10)*

An old fable that has been passed down for generations tells about an elderly man who was travelling with a boy and a donkey. As they walked through a village, the man was leading the donkey and the boy was walking behind. The townspeople said the old man was a fool for not riding, so to please them he climbed up on the animal's back. When they came to the next village, the people said the old man was cruel to let the child walk while he enjoyed the ride. So, to please them, he got off and set the boy on the animal's back and continued on his way. In the third village, people accused the child of being lazy for making the old man walk, and the suggestion was made that they both ride. So the man climbed on and they set off again. In the fourth village, the townspeople were indignant at the cruelty to the donkey because he was made to carry two people. The frustrated man was last seen carrying the donkey down the road.

We smile, but this story makes a good point: We can't please everybody, and if we try we end up carrying a heavy burden. Well meaning Christians may offer us advice, and much of it is valuable. But when we try to do everything other believers want us to do, we can easily become frustrated and confused. That's why we need to remember that the One we must please above all others is Christ. And we do that by obeying God's Word. In many ways it is so simple.

As Paul writes to the Galatians he reminds them that he is not trying to please men. His call has come from God and his aim is to preach the gospel to the whole world. He is not willing to compromise on this. He does not want to merely tickle the ears of his listeners; he wants to confront them with the truth of the gospel – we are sinners who need a Saviour. Our job is not to please people but to present Jesus to them.

**Pray:** asking God for the courage to stand by the truth and to please him rather than people.

**Reflect:** do I try to please people or God?



*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. (v.20)*

A young man approached an older Christian with this question: “What does it mean as far as this life is concerned to be ‘crucified with Christ’?”

The believer replied, “It means three things: (1) a man on a cross is facing in only one direction; (2) he is not going back; and (3) he has no further plans of his own.”

Commenting on this, T. S. Rendall wrote, “Too many Christians are trying to face in two directions at the same time. They are divided in heart. They want Heaven, but they also love the world. They are like Lot’s wife: running one way, but facing another. Remember, a crucified man is not coming back. The cross spells finish for him; he is not going to return to his old life. Also, a crucified man has no plans of his own. He is through with the vain glory of this life. Its chains are broken and its charms are gone.”

Paul knew this and lived this. In the latter part of this chapter he is reminding the Galatians what it means to follow Jesus. For Paul this meant that he had turned from trying to simply keep the law. Before he was saved Paul kept the law to its fullest and demanded that others do the same. He says in Philippians 2:6 that he was faultless in keeping the law, in legalistic righteousness. Paul loved the way of life he had. Yet he goes on to say in Philippians 2 that it was all dung compared to knowing Jesus.

Paul has one purpose in life now – to follow Jesus fully and completely. There is no turning back for him regardless of the trials he suffered. He no longer lives and tries to do things in his own strength, rather Christ lives in him, leading and guiding him through life.

**Pray:** asking God to rule and reign completely in your life.

**Reflect:** does God rule supreme in my life or am I still trying to go it alone?

*So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. (v.24)*

The law has never saved anyone, and it never will. God did not give it to redeem us from sin but to show us our need of salvation. That's why the apostle Paul refers to the law being '*put in charge*'. That word is also translated as "guardian" or "schoolmaster" or "tutor".

In an unforgettable sermon, evangelist Fred Brown used three images to describe the purpose of the law. First, he likened it to the small mirror dentists use. With the mirror they can detect cavities. But they can't drill with it or use it to pull teeth. The mirror reveals the decayed area or other abnormality, but it can't fix the problem.

Brown then drew another analogy. He said that the law is also like a flashlight. If the lights go out at night, you use it to guide you down the darkened basement stairs to the electrical box. When you point it toward the fuses, it helps you see the one that is burned out. But after you've removed the bad fuse, you don't insert the flashlight in its place. You put in a new fuse to restore the electricity.

In his third image, Brown likened the law to a plumbline. Builders check their work by using a weighted string. If this plumbline reveals that the work is not true to the vertical, the plumbline cannot correct it. The builder must get out a hammer and saw.

Like the mirror, flashlight, and plumbline, the law points out the problem sin, but it doesn't provide a solution. The only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law. Only He can save. And that is why Paul once more points us to Jesus in Galatians 3 as he speaks of the law and the promise. Today is Christmas Day and we celebrate the keeping of God's promise – he sent his own son into the world in order to save the world from sin.

**Pray:** thanking God for his wonderful gift of love to the world.

**Reflect:** do I trust in the law or in the Saviour of the world?

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that they might receive the full rights of sons. (v.4)*

It is told that once in the days before the ending of slavery, Lincoln bought a slave girl with the sole purpose of giving her her freedom. She did not realise why he was buying her; she thought it was simply another transaction in which she was involved as a thing. So he paid the price for her; and then handed her her papers of freedom. She did not even understand. 'You are free,' he said to her gently. 'Free?' she said. 'Can I go wherever I want to go now?' 'Indeed you can,' he said. 'Then,' she said, 'if I am free to go anywhere I will stay with you and serve you until I die.'

Christ came to bring our freedom. At just the right time, writes Paul, God sent his Son into the world. He was born of a woman he says and we have been thinking on that amazing story in recent days as we celebrated Christmas. We pondered afresh the angel visiting Mary with the news she was with child and then sat in wonder again at the humble birth and the visit of the shepherds. That child would grow to be the Saviour of the world. Jesus died in our place on the cross, freeing us from the burden and penalty of sin. He redeemed us as we had been unable to keep the law and were heading for eternal separation from God. What great news.

And yet Paul is writing these words to the Galatians for they have somehow forgotten it or not fully understood it. He says here that they are no longer slaves to sin but are now sons and daughters of God and heirs of Christ too. Heaven is their future. And in the present they are to live as Christians with the power of the Spirit at work in them. It seems that like us, the Galatians had a hard time understanding that the chains that bound them were now broken – they had been set free. Because of Jesus' sacrifice we are free from sin too and are children of God. Why is it then that we so often forget that and keep on sinning?

**Pray:** thanking God for setting us free from the chains of sin.

**Reflect:** what does it mean to live as a child of God?

*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. (v.24)*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's memorable children's poem wryly illustrates the extremes of human nature. It reads, "There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. And when she was good, she was very, very good. But when she was bad, she was horrid."

That little girl is not alone. As Paul expresses to the Galatians, when we live by the Spirit our lives are categorised by a variety of very good qualities. But when we yield to our fleshly desires, the results are awful. Paul's challenge to the Galatians is to live by the Spirit. When we come to trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour we are born again. And at that moment of being born again God gives us the gift of His Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives within us to lead and guide us through life. Yet we still have free will. And free will in sinful human beings is a problem - our flesh still desires to sin. We know what we want to do but somehow we still end up doing that which we do not want to do. Paul knew that struggle himself (Romans 7:15).

Paul challenges us here to live by the Spirit and to stay away from the sinful desires of our hearts. He lists some of the obvious acts of sin so that we take notice. When temptation comes our way we should turn from those and turn to Jesus. The early sin in the list is sexual sin. How many times do we see something sexual come on the television and just leave it on – turn it off or switch channels! Take decisive action. Follow the Spirit's leading. And then Paul lists ways the Spirit produces new qualities in our lives. These are the ones we ought to desire and reach for.

This change in our lives takes time. We have to remember though that as we came to Christ we crucified the sinful nature – we are new creations. Let us no longer be dominated by our old sinful nature but let us seek to live by the Spirit and in so doing bring glory and honour to God.

**Pray:** asking God for daily help to live by the Spirit.

**Reflect:** am I more easily led by the Spirit or by my sinful nature?

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. (v.2)*

In spring 1994, Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class at Lake Elementary School in Oceanside, California, included fourteen boys who had no hair. Only one, however, had no choice in the matter. Ian O'Gorman, undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma, faced the prospect of having his hair fall out in clumps. So he had his head shaved. But then 13 of his classmates shaved their heads, so Ian wouldn't feel out of place.

"If everybody has his head shaved, sometimes people don't know who's who," said 11-year-old Scott Sebelius in an Associated Press story (March 1994). "They don't know who has cancer, and who just shaved their head."

Ten-year-old Kyle Hanslik started it all. He talked to some other boys, and before long they all trekked to the barber shop. "The last thing he would want is to not fit in," said Kyle. "We just wanted to make him feel better."

These boys lived out what Paul spoke of to the Galatians here in chapter 6. We are called to carry one another's burdens. Now those burdens come in various shapes and sizes. Paul has spoken of the burden of sin in verse 1 and his encouragement was to confront sin in a brother or sister rather than ignore it. We are to hold one another accountable as Christians. We are to spur one another on toward love and good deeds but to do that at times means challenging sinful behaviour in another. Don't be afraid. Stand with them.

Of course carrying burdens goes beyond sin. It means standing with others when they are struggling and helping where we can. We are to provide that listening ear and those words of encouragement. We are to care for them and love them – and then to show that in our actions.

**Pray:** asking God to help you stand with a brother or sister who is struggling just now.

**Reflect:** how can I show my love and care for another today?

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (v.3)*

Nathan, age 8, was working hard (with a little help from his grandfather) to build a birdhouse for his mother for Christmas. He referred to it as his “secret project.” He gave it careful thought and poured all his energy into it. Most important, he was motivated by love.

Before Nathan started, he calculated the number of hours he thought it would take to make it (7½), and he decided what colours it should be painted (yellow with a blue roof). On Christmas morning he insisted that it be the first gift opened, and he beamed when Mum said she really liked it.

Nathan’s gift was given in the true spirit of the gift whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. God the Father, moved by His great love, ‘*gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*’ (John 3:16-17).

As Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians he reminds them of the great love of God toward them. He speaks of the spiritual blessings they have received in Christ. He shares with them that God has chosen them from before time to be his children. Paul reminds them of the heart of the gospel message as he shares that Jesus died to redeem them. Jesus’ blood was shed that their sins could be forgiven. He assures them of the Spirit’s work in their lives and of the hope of heaven they have before them now that they have trusted in Jesus. The Spirit is the deposit guaranteeing their inheritance.

Sometimes it is good for us to sit and read these words and ponder them. It is good to be reminded of God’s love for us. And especially to do this during the Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of Immanuel ‘God with us’. And then it is good to respond to them in praise and worship.

**Pray:** thanking God for his great love toward us.

**Reflect:** what does Christ’s sacrifice mean to me?

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. (v.8, 9)*

Harry Houdini, the famed escape artist from a few years back, issued a challenge wherever he went. He could be locked in any jail cell in the country, he claimed, and set himself free in short order. Always he kept his promise, but one time something went wrong. Houdini entered the jail in his street clothes; the heavy, metal doors clanged shut behind him. He took from his belt a concealed piece of metal, strong and flexible. He set to work immediately, but something seemed to be unusual about this lock. For thirty minutes he worked and got nowhere. An hour passed, and still he had not opened the door. By now he was bathed in sweat and panting in exasperation, but he still could not pick the lock. Finally, after labouring for two hours, Harry Houdini collapsed in frustration and failure against the door he could not unlock. But when he fell against the door, it swung open! It had never been locked at all! But in his mind it was locked, and that was all it took to keep him from opening the door and walking out of the jail cell.

In life we are so like Houdini – we work and toil and labour trying to set the scales right with God. We recognise our sin and shame and set out to be good people who live good lives. We try to earn our salvation. The trouble is we cannot earn it – we are simply not good enough and never will be. Eventually we collapse in exhaustion with the realisation that we are trapped. But we are not trapped. God has made a way out of jail. Jesus has already unlocked the door. He's paid the price for our judgment when He died on the cross. And all we need to do is walk through the door by trusting in Jesus.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that they are sinners who deserve God's wrath and judgement, yet because of his love God has saved them. They are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone so that God alone gets the glory.

**Pray:** thanking God for his grace and mercy.

**Reflect:** am I still trying to earn my salvation? Trust in Christ alone.

*For this reason I kneel before the Father. (v.14)*

Three preachers sat discussing the best positions for prayer. A telephone repairman who was working nearby happened to overhear the conversation. “Kneeling is definitely best,” claimed the first minister. “No,” the second pastor contended. “I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched toward Heaven.” “You’re both wrong,” the third preacher insisted. “The most effective prayer position is lying prostrate, face down on the floor.” The repairman could contain himself no longer. “Hey, fellas,” he interrupted, “the best prayin’ I ever did was hangin’ upside down from a telephone pole after my safety strap broke.”

Now I don’t know what the best posture for prayer is but I know there is a right attitude to have. As Paul bows the knee, he is expressing an attitude of humility and submission to God. He recognises who God is. He sees him as the mighty creator and sustainer of the world. He knows him as the God who has shown him amazing grace and mercy and love. And so he humbly comes before him to pray for his brothers and sisters in Christ in Ephesus. We ought to have the right attitude when we come before the Lord in prayer.

Paul then prays specifically for these believers. He prays that they would be strengthened in power and that they would grasp the full measure of the love God has for them. He prays that they would be rooted and grounded in love. When was the last time you prayed for your brothers and sisters in Christ in this way? We are quick to pray for their immediate needs – problems with health, worries about jobs and family etc, but do we pray that they would grow to know God more. That’s the challenge Paul lays down. And as he prays Paul reminds the Ephesians that God *‘is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.’* What an awesome God we worship.

As a New Year begins tomorrow, commit to praying in this manner for others in the church family.

**Pray:** for all in the church family.

**Reflect:** do I pray that others would grow in their love for God?