



**grow. pray. study.**

December 29, 2019

**“Old things have gone...new things have arrived!”**

**MONDAY 12.30.19 2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

The Apostle Paul, a great traveling gospel preacher and writer of roughly half of the New Testament, was a vivid example of a “new creation.” As a young Pharisee (under his Hebrew name Saul—cf. [Acts 13:9](#)), he fiercely opposed early Christians. He wrote today’s passage to Christians he himself won to faith in the city of Corinth. He said Jesus didn’t have to convince an unwilling God to love us—“God was in Christ, reconciling.” And once reconciled, all of us, like Paul, help share God’s call—“we are ambassadors who represent Christ.”

- You can read about the encounter with Jesus that changed Saul’s life in [Acts 9:1-20](#). He went from “spewing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” to being the man who wrote, “The love of Christ controls us...All of these new things are from God...If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation.” In what ways is Christ shaping you into part of the “new creation”?
- Most Roman, Greek and Canaanite religions offered gifts and sacrifices to try to reconcile their angry, demanding god or gods to them. But Paul said that was backward. We were the alienated ones. God came in Jesus actively seeking to draw us back into the circle of heaven’s love. Are you reconciled with God? Are you open for God to work through you to reconcile others—sharing the good news of freedom in Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, God was reconciling the world (the world that includes me) to himself through you. Shape me into a transparent, winning beacon of the message that God loves us all. Amen.

**“The superior value of knowing Christ”**

**TUESDAY 12.31.19 Philippians 3:3-9**

Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith.

**Did You Know?**

John Wesley’s spiritual heirs (Methodists) often use Wesley’s Covenant Prayer as a meaningful way to end one year and begin a new one. [Click here](#) for a printable version of Wesley’s prayer. Pray it individually, and with others, as you move into 2020 tonight and/or tomorrow.

As a New Year approaches, it’s natural to take stock of our life, reviewing where we’ve been and looking ahead to where we hope to go. The apostle Paul took stock of his life in his letter to Christians in the city of Philippi. If we could save ourselves by religious performance, he wrote, he’d gladly put

his record, his human “credentials,” up against anyone. But those religious “assets” no longer counted. He “wrote them off,” and trusted in Jesus' grace.

- The young Pharisee Saul had all the human credentials. Review Paul’s list of “assets” in verses 5 and 6. What might be some modern equivalents you’d be likely to claim, in church, in business and finance, in education, or any other area of activity? If preserving those “assets” ever conflicted with heeding God’s call on your life, what would you choose? To what extent are you able to find your spiritual confidence in the same divine reality that Paul did?
- “In Christ,” Paul wrote, “I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith.” What basis for self-worth did Paul claim, rather than relying on his own accomplishments? Is whatever righteousness you believe you have “your own,” or does your confidence rest fully on God’s gracious gift of divine righteousness through Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, my prayer this New Year’s Eve is, in the words of the classic hymn, “Live out thy life within me, O Jesus, king of kings.” Dwell in my heart as the New Year begins. Amen.

### “Reach out for the things ahead”

#### **WEDNESDAY 1.1.20 Philippians 3:10-14**

In these words, so fitting for New Year’s Day, the apostle Paul testified that his overarching goal was to grow into all God called him to be. As *The Message* rendered these verses, he said, “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me...I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.” \*

- In verse 13, Paul shared an essential truth about pursuing God’s goals: “I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me.” The process of growing spiritually focuses on what is to come, not what lies behind. Is anything from your past haunting you, or defining you in the present? If so, ask God to help you let it go. Focus your energy on living the year ahead with God, not the things (bad or good) in the past.
- Scholar William Barclay said Paul’s word for reaching out “is used of a racer going hard for the tape. It describes him with eyes for nothing but the goal. It describes the man who is going flat out for the finish.” \*\* In 2020, how can you live your life in such a way that you, too, are going flat out for the goal of living the life God calls you to? What choices can you make in this New Year that will empower you to run God’s race with eyes for nothing but the prize?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, make it more true of me this year that “the goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call” in you. Keep my eyes on the prize of the ultimate goal of life in your kingdom. Amen.

\* Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message* Numbered Edition Hardback. Navpress. Kindle Edition.

\*\* William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, p. 67.

### “Don’t be afraid, little flock”

#### **THURSDAY 1.2.20 Luke 12:22-32**

“Don’t be afraid” was one of the Bible’s most common commands for a reason. We tend to worry about the future. Every day we face cars that wear out, bills we need to pay, even routine questions like “What’s for lunch?” Our minds may know that research says worry shortens our lives (research that Jesus anticipated in verse 25). But our hearts still tend to worry. Jesus pointed our eyes beyond this world, saying, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

- Our culture tells us to “stand on your own two feet.” The title “little flock” bore a different message: “The flock can also be an image of vulnerability. Thus we find the disciples called a ‘little flock’ that needs to be commanded to ‘fear not’ (Lk 12:32)...As a...metaphor, the flock is an apt picture of the combined people of God under his care.” \* How easy or hard do you find it to trust God’s care for you more than your own efforts? Are you okay with being part of God’s “flock,” not just a free-standing individual?
- Suppose you applied Jesus' wisdom (“life is more than food, and the body more than clothes”) to everyday life. What would rise on your priority list? What might drop lower? Scholar N. T. Wright said “This wasn’t just good advice on how to live a happy, carefree life. This was a challenge to the very center of [our] world.” \*\* Jesus was asking, “Can you really trust that God, your great Father, will love and care for you not just now, but through all eternity?” How would it alter your mindset to deeply trust that he will than to just “kind of hope that maybe it’s true”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you called yourself the good Shepherd, willing even to give your life for your flock. I thank you for your tender care for me, both now and in eternity. Amen.

\* Article “Flock” in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, general editors, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, p. 293.

\*\* N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 153.

### “We love because God first loved us”

#### FRIDAY 1.3.20 1 John 4:14-19

Some of us look forward confidently to good things in the new year. Some of us just hope things don’t get any worse. Sadly, some of us fear that illness, poverty, loneliness or even death will define 2020 for us. No matter what our circumstances, John urged us to remember (not just at New Year’s, but every day) that our ultimate destiny rests in the hands of our God, who “is love.” And John said that perfect love—i.e. God’s love—casts out fear.

- John’s words are so familiar that we can easily miss the depth of his thought. “God IS love” (which John said in verse 16) was a different reality from “God loves” (among many other qualities). In her book *Many Waters*, Madeleine l’Engle wrote that “all the raging of creation...was enfolded in a patient, waiting love.” \* How does it shift your view of life’s meaning and purpose to believe in a patient, waiting love, rather than just a cold, uncaring universe?
- John particularly related the idea that God IS love to a human fear of punishment. To what extent did your upbringing, or your adult experiences with church, teach you to see God as angry, eager to punish you for even a nit-picking failure? What is helping you to change that inner picture, so that you can live 2020 in the light of God’s love, rather than in fear of punishment?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you that your love is a fixed point I can depend on in an ever-changing world. Keep me steady, stable and loving every day of 2020. Amen.

\* L’Engle, Madeleine. *Many Waters* (A Wrinkle in Time, Book 4). Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR). Kindle Edition, p. 318.

### “God is for us”

#### SATURDAY 1.4.20 Romans 8:14-18, 31-32

The apostle Paul tirelessly preached Jesus. He preached even in settings where both the Roman Empire and much of the Hebrew religious leadership strongly opposed him, at times imprisoned him, and ultimately executed him. Like those who opposed Jesus, Paul’s foes often seemed devastatingly strong. But the great apostle, though he was not devoid of human emotions, refused to let fear govern his life or determine what he would do. That was more than just human stubbornness or resolve. In

his letter to Christians in Rome, he stated his guiding conviction clearly: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

- Paul, trained as a rabbi, drew heavily on the Old Testament. He said the Holy Spirit teaches us to address God as *abba*, the Aramaic word little children used to address their fathers (likely drawn from [Psalm 68:5-6](#)). Did you have a warm, trusting bond with your father, or was your experience of a human father more hurtful and fear-filled? How does the invitation to relate to God as *abba* speak to your heart? Paul also contrasted a fear-filled spirit of slavery with the good news that God adopts us as God’s own children. What role, if any, has fear played in your spiritual life? Have you ever had times where you sought desperately to please God by “trying harder”? Let Paul’s life-changing words soak deeply into your spirit: “If God is for us, who is against us?”

**Prayer:** Dear God, teach me how to trust your steadfast love more completely. In my relationships with others and with you, guide me to live free from fear because I know that you are “for” me. Amen.