

July 1 Philippians 3:12-21

Not that I have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own,
because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
Beloved, forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.
Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind.
And you who think differently, God will make this clear to you.
Let us hold fast to what we have attained.

* Picture how we both “hold fast” and “press on” in our life in Christ.

Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ;
I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.
Their end is destruction; their god is the belly;
their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things

But our citizenship is in heaven;
from there we expect a Savior, the Lord Jesus.
He will transform the body of our humiliation
that it may be conformed to the body of his glory
by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself.

* What does it mean to live as an enemy of the cross of Christ? How do you see this in the world? When and how do we also live as an enemy of the cross?

* What does it mean to you that your citizenship is in heaven? How might this either keep you isolated from or motivated toward being a citizen here?

* Rather than seeing our physical bodies as “humiliating,” how is Paul challenging us to see the risen Christ as a promise to heal the humiliation of our sins – the ways we sin, and the ways we are sinned against?

God of grace and mercy, in Jesus Christ we have already received the gift, the prize, of life with you forever. We, too, shed tears over those, including ourselves, who turn from the cross. Conform us to Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 2 Philippians 4:1-7

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for,
my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.
Yes, and I ask you also, my beloved companion, help these women,
for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel,
together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers,
whose names are in the book of life.

* When people, yet today, resist the role of women serving in the church, how might Euodia and Syntyche be helpful reminders of how women have been co-workers in the work of the Gospel since the empty tomb?

* How does having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2) shape us all to be companions in the work of Christ?

Rejoice in the Lord always;
Again I will say, Rejoice.
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near.
Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known to God.

*May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts
and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

July 3 Philippians 4:8-14

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence,
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived
your concern for me, which you had no opportunity to show.

Not that I am referring to being in need;

for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.

In any and in all circumstances I have learned the secret
of being well-fed and of going hungry,
of having plenty and of being in need.

* How have the words, “be content with whatever you have” been thrown *at* people? How can we live true, honorably and content when we have plenty and when we have little?

* How does living in the care and concern of the church empower us to live caringly and concerned about brothers and sisters in Christ around the world?

I can do all things through God who strengthens me.
In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

Jesus Christ, in whose name we live and serve, may we keep on doing the things that we have learned and received and heard and seen, and may the peace of God be with us all. Amen

July 4 Philippians 4:15-23

In the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia,
you were the only church who shared with me in giving and receiving.
Even when I was in Thessalonica,
you sent me help for my needs more than once.

Not that I seek the gift, but the profit that accumulates to your account.
I have been paid in full and have more than enough;
I am fully satisfied,

now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent,
a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

My God will fully satisfy every need of yours

according to God’s riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen

* What is the relationship between offerings and need? How does our being united in Christ, who knew poverty, and who through his death and resurrection gives us all we need, free us to give liberally? And also to receive?

* How is Christian freedom to be distinguished from national freedom? How are we called in Christ to share and to care for the needs of the whole world?

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.

The friends who are with me greet you.

All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household.

God of grace and mercy, we pray for friends, for all households, for all nations: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

July 5 **Colossians 1:1-8**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and Timothy our brother.
To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God,
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus
and of the love you have for all the saints,
because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

You have heard of this hope before in the word of truth, the gospel.
Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world,
so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves
from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.

You learned this from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.
He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf
and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

* From whom did you first learn the word of truth, the gospel? Among whom
are you learning it now? What new fruit is it bearing in your life?

* Faithful servant, whom are you teaching now? What additional possibilities
are there for your faith community to grow and truly comprehend the grace of
God in order to bear fruit in the world?

*Christ Jesus, we give you thanks that you call us to be teachers and learners in
the faith community and beyond. Increase our love and increase our
knowledge, so that we might be inquisitive learners and wise teachers,
ministering on your behalf. Amen.*

July 6 **Colossians 1:9-13**

We have not ceased praying for you
and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will
in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God,
as you bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with the strength
that comes from Christ's glorious power,
and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience,
while joyfully giving thanks to God,
who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

God has rescued us from the power of darkness
and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son,
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

* What is the connection between having spiritual wisdom and understanding,
and being filled with the knowledge of God's will? And how does living a life
of faith lead one to hunger for ongoing growth in the knowledge of God?

* Ponder the images of God's work in Christ for us: "rescue from the power of
darkness," "sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light," "redemption, the
forgiveness of sins." What do these mean to you in the particularities of your
daily life?

*May we grow strong to be prepared to endure everything, whether suffering or
success, darkness or light, barren or fruit-bearing seasons with patience,
joyfully giving thanks to you, O God, in whom, through Jesus Christ, we have
redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Amen.*

July 7 Colossians 1:15-23

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers,
all things have been created through him and for him.

Christ is before all things and in him all things hold together.
Christ is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the first born from the dead.
In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him God reconciled all things to God's own self
whether on earth, or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of Christ's cross.

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,
Christ has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death
in order to present you holy and blameless before him,
provided you continue securely established and steadfast in faith,
without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel you heard,
which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

* What are the core components of the Christian faith here concerning incarnation, cross and resurrection, reconciliation, the church? How would you talk about them?

* What are the ways we experience and participate in estrangement in our lives, our church, our world? What difference does faith in Christ's reconciliation make? And how does the fact that Christ's reconciliation includes all people shape our service?

O God, we give you thanks for Christ becoming incarnate among us, reconciling us through his death and resurrection, and becoming the head of the church. Keep us steadfast in the faith and in our ministries of reconciliation in the world. In Christ we pray. Amen.

July 8 Colossians 1:24-29

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,
and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking
in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.
I became its servant according to God's commission,
given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,
the mystery hidden for ages that has now been revealed to the saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles
are the riches of the glory of this mystery,
which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
We proclaim Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom,
so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil and struggle with all the energy
that Christ powerfully inspires in me.

* We, too, are commissioned to make the word of God fully known. We cannot add anything to Christ's cross; but how does our ministry in the church "complete" his work?

* In your sharing the faith, whether through preaching or teaching or witness, how are you making known the "mystery" of the gospel? How are you helping people mature in their faith?

* "How great among the Gentiles..." indicates that the gospel is already at work beyond one's own faith community. What might that phrase mean to people in your church?

O mysterious God, in the midst of our toil, give us the inspiration and the energy to powerfully reach out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a mystery too great for us to comprehend, and yet revealed to us, to all the saints, to all the world. Amen.

July 9 Colossians 2:1-6

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you,
and for all those in Laodicea,
for all who have not seen me face to face.

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love,
so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding
and the knowledge of God's mystery, Christ himself,
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

* In a world in which riches define people and shape their pursuits, what would you consider to be the "riches of assured understanding" of Christ himself?

* How does being united in love with those who struggle with and encourage us in the faith help unlock the mystery of the hidden treasure of wisdom and knowledge of God?

I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.
Although I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit,
and I rejoice to see your morale,
and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

* What plausible arguments against faith in Jesus Christ are presented to us?

*Pray this blessing on someone; have someone also bless you:
As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your life in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Amen.*

July 10 Colossians 2:8-15

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit,
according to human tradition and to elemental spirits of the universe,
and not according to Christ.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,
and you have come to fullness in him,
who is the head of every ruler and authority.

You were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision of Christ:
when you were buried with Christ in baptism,
you were also raised with him through faith
in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in trespasses and uncircumcision of your flesh,
God made you alive together with him,
when God forgave us all our trespasses,
erasing the record that stood against us with legal demands.

He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.
He disarmed the rulers and authorities
and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross.

* What does each of these concepts of Christ's work mean for you?
Captive in empty deceit; having fullness of God in Christ
Buried with Christ in baptism; raised with him through faith
Dead in trespasses; alive together in Christ
Unforgiven trespasses; legal demands erased
Dominating rulers and authorities; triumphed over by the cross

Christ Jesus, may we daily remember our baptism, your cross and our new life. Amen.

July 11 Colossians 2:16-23

Do not let anyone condemn you
in matters of food, drink or festival observations.
They are only a shadow of what is to come,
but the substance belongs to Christ.
Do not let anyone disqualify you,
insisting on self-abasement or angel worship, dwelling on visions,
puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.
Hold fast to the head, from whom the whole body,
nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews,
grows with a growth that is from God.

* If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? Although first century religious observations and regulations were quite different from ours today, how does our imposing certain practices or disqualifying someone on the basis of “Christian” regulations hinder growth in Christ and give a false witness to the world?

All these regulations refer to things that perish with use;
they are simply human commands and teachings.
They have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety,
humility, and severe treatment of the body,
but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Merciful, loving God, you have joined us to Christ, the only head of the body, who holds us together as the church. Loose our insistence on those things which deter us from the substance of faith, which alone keeps us from self-indulgence. Grow us together in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 12 Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.
Set your minds on things that are above,
not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ who is your life is revealed,
then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death whatever in you is earthly:
fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed (which is idolatry).
On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.
These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.
Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth.
Do not lie to one another;
see that you have stripped off the old self with its practices
and have clothed yourself with the new self,
which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

* Lest (from yesterday’s text) we think it doesn’t matter how we live as Christians, read carefully this list. God’s wrath is real. How, through such actions, do we severely hurt others and damage the Creator’s image of human life together?

* Imagine taking off, shedding, throwing out the clothing of anger and greed. What else should go? Imagine putting on the new clothing, a new self, which is Christ. How does it fit? When we are all clothed with Christ, how do we look to one another? How are we renewed to live?

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew,
circumcised and uncircumcised,
barbarian, Scythian, slave and free:
but Christ is all and in all!

Creator, Liberator and New Life-Giving God, may we each day be buried and raised to new life with Christ in our baptisms. Reveal him anew to us; set our minds on him. Clothe us with Christ, that he may live in, through and among us. In him we pray. Amen.

July 13 Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience.
Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another,
forgive each other;
just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
Above all, clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in the one body.
And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;
with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

* Just as we were told what not to wear (yesterday's text: anger, greed, etc.), now we are given new clothes. Envision someone you know who wears (on the inside as well as the outside) compassion, kindness, patience, meekness. What do they look like?

* Imagine a community, clothed in love, which "binds everything together in perfect harmony." We need to beware of wish dreams; however, at least once in a while, where have you seen and felt such love?

* Through teaching, admonition, gratitude and the peace of Christ, how are we strengthened to forgive?

In whatever we do, in word or deed, may we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.

July 14 Colossians 3:18-4:1

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

Children, obey your parents in everything,
for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything,
not only while being watched in order to please them,
but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it,
as done for the Lord and not for your masters,
since you know that from the Lord
you will receive the inheritance as your reward;
you serve the Lord Christ.

The wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done
and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly,
for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

* What do all of the above admonitions have in common? For everyone?

* Through the centuries, and yet today, how have some of these verses been taken out of context in order to justify unjust systems and abusive behavior? What do you say to that? What does the church need to say?

* While these admonitions speak to people *within* their given first century societal roles, how do they speak to us both within our roles today, and also as we change roles and relationships throughout life?

May we willingly serve you, Christ Jesus, in whatever roles we have and tasks we do. May you live between and among us in all of our relationships. May we work dutifully and fairly, and also justly, courageously, always in the love with which you clothe us. Amen.

July 15

Colossians 4:2-6

Devote yourselves to prayer,
keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.
At the same time pray for us
that God will open a door for the word
that we may declare the mystery of Christ,
for which I am in prison
so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders,
making the most of the time.
Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

* Paul's perspective is from prison; he prays that God will open a door—for the Word. From where do you pray—what situation, what condition? For what do you pray so that you may reveal the word clearly and declare the mystery of Christ?

* "Keep alert." Each of us has our own particular struggle with keeping alert, whether in worship, in private devotions, in _____. What is yours?

* How do we conduct ourselves toward outsiders? How can we be more gracious, authentic, interested in people we don't know? How can we listen more astutely so that we might wisely be able to converse with people as we share the grace of God?

Spirit of the Living God, we pray that you might be fully present in us so that we might be fully present with you and that our prayers might be filled with thanksgiving. Give us passion for the Word and for those who do not yet know it, that we might speak with clarity and grace in the name of Christ. Amen.

July 16

Colossians 4:7-18

Tychicus, beloved brother, faithful minister, fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me and encourage your hearts.
He comes with Onesimus, faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark, Barnabas' cousin. You have received instructions from him—if he comes, welcome him.
Jesus, called Justus, greets you. They have been a comfort to me.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He always wrestles in prayer on your behalf so that you may stand mature, fully assured in everything God wills.
He has worked hard for you and those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Luke the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.
Greet the brothers and sisters in Laodicea
and Nympha and the church in her house.

When you have read this letter, have it read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.
Tell Archippus, "Complete the task you have received in the Lord."

* Think about such people in your own life. Pray for them. Send them words of greeting, instruction and appreciation. With whom might you connect for their growth in faith?

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains.
Grace be with you.

Gracious God, live in and among us, strengthening us for your service in Christ. Amen.

July 17

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you,
and mention you in our prayers,
constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith
and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know, brothers and sisters beloved by God,
that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel
came to you not in word only,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction;
just as you know what kind of persons
we proved to be among you for your sake.

- * Remember, specifically, one work of faith you have seen in a faith community: an example of a labor of love, an instance of steadfastness of hope. Give thanks.
- * We use words. We teach and proclaim the Word, the message of the gospel. How do you see, hear, feel, the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit moving among the people? What full conviction and power have you seen arising from the people?
- * Just what kind of person do you need to be among the people of God among whom you serve...for *their* sake?

God of grace and peace, we give thanks for the faith communities of which we have been a part and for all communities who center their lives in Jesus around the world. Move among us by the power of the Holy Spirit to increase works of faith, labors of love and steadfastness of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

July 18

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

You became imitators of us and of the Lord,
for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy
inspired by the Holy Spirit,
so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you
not only in Macedonian and in Achaia,
but in every place your faith in God has become known,
so that we have no need to speak about it.

- * We are not saved by being good examples; however, through the cross and resurrection, how does God shape us to be imitators of Christ and thereby imitators of and examples for other people?
- * When have you seen and heard the word of the Lord sounding forth from people as they become engaged in mission? What does it sound like? When have you seen people witness for Christ beyond what you might have thought they could do? How do we then continue to learn from each other how to witness and be engaged in mission?

The people of those regions report about us
what kind of welcome we had among you,
and how you turned to God from idols,
to serve a living and true God,
and to wait for God's Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—
Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

- * From what idols are people called to turn in our age? How do we proclaim a living and true God in the midst of idolatry?
- * What is the wrath to come? How do we wait? How does Christ's resurrection change everything in how we live, how we wait, and how we serve now?

God who calls us to mission, shape us in the image of Christ, so that we might welcome, serve, and witness. Turn us from idols to you, the living God. In Christ, Amen.

July 19

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, we had courage in our God to declare to you the Gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but, rather, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, we speak not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts.

As you know, and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

* These verses are like a love story. Like all love stories, what self-defense do you see? What appeals? What greater purpose? What endearments? How do you see God at work?

God of love, who gently, tenderly, cares for us all, give us courage to declare your gospel, motives which please you, and genuine love for people so that, by the power of your Spirit, we might share the gospel of Jesus Christ and our very selves. In Christ we pray, Amen.

July 20

1 Thessalonians 2:9-16

You remember our labor; we worked night and day, so we might not burden you while we proclaimed the gospel of God. You and God are witnesses to our pure, upright, and blameless conduct toward you believers.

We dealt with you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into God's kingdom and glory. We constantly give thanks to God that when you received the word of God, you accepted it not as a human word, but as what it really is, God's word.

You became imitators of the church of God in Christ Jesus in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of the sins they have been committing. And now God's anger has at last come down on them.

* What do you hear in these words about passionate mission work? Upright conduct? Working late? Urging and encouraging? Thanksgiving for people receiving the Word?

* How has this passage been misused over the centuries to scapegoat Jewish people?

* What is the core message of this passage for people who are suffering because of their beliefs?

* How does being imitators of Christ and of one another in Christ lead to one church being strengthened by another in our imitation of—resemblance to—each other?

O God, you have called us to your word, to our work, to suffering, and to thanksgiving. In Christ, whose image shapes our own. Amen.

July 21

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

As for us, brothers and sisters,
when, for a short time, we were made orphans
by being separated from you—
in person, not in heart—
we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

* What connotation does “being orphaned” have for you? Reflect on a relationship of the heart—perhaps a dear friend in Christ, or a Christian community—that is so strong that even when you are apart you feel no separation. What further metaphors might you use to speak of separation from those you love and of your eagerness to see one another?

We wanted to come to you –
certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—
but Satan blocked our way.

* Paul briefly differentiates himself from Silvanus and Timothy (“we” “us”). Why might he want to speak precisely for himself? When might it be helpful to differentiate oneself from a group when speaking or writing? What might he have meant by “Satan blocked our way”? What forces might block our way, keeping us separated from other parts of the church?

What is our hope or joy or crown or boasting
before our Lord Jesus at his coming?
Is it not you?
Yes, you are our glory and joy!

* In Christ Jesus, who is your joy? Your hope? About whom might you boast?

God, what can separate us from your love, in Christ Jesus? We are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power or height, or depth, nor anything else in all Creation. Amen.

July 22

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Therefore when we could bear it no longer,
we decided to be left alone in Athens;
we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God
in proclaiming the gospel of Christ,
to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith,
so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.

Indeed, you know that this is what we are destined for.
In fact, when we were with you,
we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution;
so it turned out, as you know.

When I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith;
I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you
and that our labor had been in vain.

* When and about whom have you been worried in regards to their young or fragile faith? What were (are) the temptations that they faced? Have there been times when you could bear it no longer, but needed to find out how they were? What did you do?

* We cannot fully comprehend the persecution that Paul and his companions faced. Perhaps we have not known persecution for the sake of the gospel at all. But, as you are able, from your own experience, how do persecution, temptations, and suffering, shake people and their faith?

Christ Jesus, you have faced and known the Tempter. Keep close to you those who are young in faith or struggling to believe or to believe again. And may we know that our labor in you is not in vain but that you will bring us and those among whom we have shared the Gospel to full communion with you forever. Amen.

July 23

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

Timothy has just now come to us from you,
and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.
He told us that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—
just as we long to see you.
For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution
we have been encouraged about you through your faith.
We now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.

* For whom might you pray: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face
and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

* How do you begin and end your gatherings in the faith community? Council meetings? Committees? Choir? Work projects? Mission work? Adapt the following verses (11-13) for use next time you meet. Or, using these words as a pattern, compose your own, based on your communal experiences, the feeling you have toward one another, and your joint calling in Christ. And right now, thinking about people you might quietly bless, use these words as your devotional prayer today:

Now may our God and Father and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.
May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another
and for all, just as we abound in love for you.
May God so strengthen your hearts in holiness
that you may be blameless before God
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen

July 24

I Thessalonians 4: 1-8

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus
that as you learned from us how you ought to live and please God
(as in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.
For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

This is the will of God, your sanctification:
that you abstain from fornication;
that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor,
not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;
that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter
because the Lord is an avenger in all these things,
just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.
God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.
Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God,
who also gives the Holy Spirit to you.

* God calls, not to be, “holier than thou” but *in* God’s holiness. How does living in *God’s* holiness make a difference in growing in sanctification, by the power of the Holy Spirit?

* Four times we are read it: “you learned from us,” the “instructions we gave you,” “each of you know,” “just as we have already told you.” Rather than heavy-handed absolutes, how does reminding people to be what they already are in Christ encourage people to live in holy and honorable ways? How do we need that, too?

* What does it mean to you to abstain from fornication? To view your own body with holiness and honor? To exercise self-control?

* Who are our brothers and sisters? What are the broad manifestations of sexual exploitation? Is not one’s spouse also a brother or sister in Christ? Is not global sex trafficking also our concern? How does the claim of being “consenting adults” not only impact private lives but have consequences for the whole congregation?

God of love, fill us with your Holy Spirit that we might be what we already are in Christ. Amen.

July 25

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters,
you do not need to have anyone write to you,
for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;
and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters
throughout Macedonia.

But we urge you, beloved,
to do so more and more,
to aspire to live quietly,
to mind your own affairs,
and to work with your hands, as we directed you,
so that you may behave properly toward outsiders
and be dependent on no one.

* So, which is it? Are we to encourage reliance on each other or self-sufficiency? How do we encourage people to claim their abilities and use them fully as well as to use their gifts to care for others? How is interdependence different from dependency?

* When nurturing a Christian community still in formation, teaching them how to love one another in Christ and how to live in relation to “outsiders” is important work. How do we nurture faith communities, whether new missions, or old, well-established congregations in education and hospitality?

* What does it mean to aspire to live quietly and mind your own affairs? When would that be a helpful word? When would that impede outreach?

Loving God, who has taught us to love others, may we do so more and more. Thank you for such love. Increase our awareness of our own growth areas and of the needs of others. Continue to grow us up into Christ in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.

July 26

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,
about those who have died,
so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,
through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.
We declare to you by the word of the Lord that we who are alive,
who are left until the coming of the Lord,
will by no means precede those who have died.

The Lord, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call
and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven,
and the dead in Christ will rise first.
Then we who are alive, who are left,
will be caught up in the clouds together with them
to meet the Lord in the air;
and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Therefore encourage one another with these words.

* How do we encourage one another that we will be with Christ forever, together with all those for whom Christ died?

* How have these words, as well as those from “The Revelation of John” been used by some leaders to misguide people through human predictions about the last times? How do we live trusting in the knowledge and wisdom of God alone?

God who was, and is, and is to come, hold us close in Christ, that in this living hope, we may lead lives of care and commitment, mission and ministry. In Christ, Amen.

July 27

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters,
you do not need to have anything written to you.
You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord
will come like a thief in the night.
When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction
will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman,
and there will be no escape.

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief;
for you are all children of the light and children of the day.
Let us not fall asleep as others do, but keep awake and be sober;
and put on the breastplate of faith and love,
and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation
through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us,
so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.
Therefore encourage one another and build up each other,
as indeed you are doing.

* Two thousand years later, we know the end times did not come as soon as these New Testament Christians thought they would. So, how do we hear these words? What images do you have? A thief in the night? Labor pains? When there is peace and security?

* We live in the “already” and “not yet” of the reign of God. How do we live as children of the day, keeping sober and awake to the present realities and the coming of the Lord?

God of mercy, you have not destined us for wrath, but for salvation in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead for us all. May we indeed encourage one another, and build one another up in the Lord. We, and all the faithful who went before, await your coming in Christ, Amen.

July 28

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

* What do you see in these verses—each phrase—about wise leadership in community?

We appeal to you, brothers and sisters,
to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you
in the Lord and admonish you;
esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves.
We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers,
encourage the faint hearted,
help the weak, be patient with all of them.

See that none of you repays evil for evil,
but always seek to do good to one another and to all.
Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise the words of prophets,
but test everything; hold fast to what is good;
abstain from every form of evil.

Read this blessing to the Thessalonians, make it your own, and read it to others:

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful; God will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen

July 29

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
to the church of the Thessalonians
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters,
as is right,
because your faith is growing abundantly
and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.

Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God
for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions
and the afflictions that you are enduring.

* This epistle, as so many others, begins with greeting, blessing and thanksgiving. Are these just words? What do you see here? What about the way we greet one another (using our various modes of communication)?

* The writers *must* give thanks! *Always!* When have you seen someone or some faith community's faith growing abundantly? How do you thank God—and encourage them?

* How does God grow a community so that they increasingly love one another in steadfast ways? In times of affliction and otherwise? What are you doing specifically to help your faith community intentionally carry out acts of love among themselves and beyond their community? What would increase their faith? Their love?

God of love, grow us into becoming more and more the brothers and sisters in Christ you have created, redeemed and empowered us to be. No matter what comes, may we trust you and love each other. In Christ, Amen.

July 30

2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,
and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God,
for which you are also suffering.
It is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you
and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us,
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
with his mighty angels in flaming fire,
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

* We have a just God. God does and will reveal Godself. What would it be like to have a God who was not holy or just? What do you believe about God's judgment?

These will suffer punishment of eternal destruction,
separated from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious might,
when Christ comes on that day to receive glory from all his people
and honor from all who believe.

You, too, will be among them because you have believed
the message that we told you.

* Believing matters. Faith is substantive. In writing about eternal destruction, how is being separated from the presence of Christ key? Can you imagine being separated from God forever? What have you been told? What do you believe?

To this end we pray the prayer for the church of Thessalonica:

God, make us worthy of your call and fulfill by your power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified through us and we in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

July 31

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ
and our being gathered together to him,
we beg you brothers and sisters,
not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed,
either by spirit or by word or by letter,
as though we said that the day of the Lord is already here.

* Can you imagine what it was for first century Christians, for whom Christ's death, resurrection, and the start of their new churches had all happened in a relatively short period of time? What would shape their expectation of Christ's coming again?

* What does the appeal to not be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed mean to you?

* How might *our* words be heard differently than we intend, arousing anxiety?

Let no one deceive you in any way;
that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first
and the lawless one is revealed,
the one destined for destruction.

He opposes every so-called god or object of worship and exalts himself
so that he takes his seat in the temple of God,
declaring himself to be God.

* What contrasts do you see between "The lawless one," and the righteous God who through the cross and resurrection destroyed the powers of evil?

Holy and Righteous God, may we not be deceived, either in following those who would claim to know when Christ will come again, or by anyone or any thing that would presume to take the seat of God. In Christ alone we trust, hope, and pray. Amen.