

November

November 1

John 1-3

John speaks of Jesus' beginnings in a different way from Matthew and Luke. Jesus has been one with God from the beginning of time; He did not just become alive 30 years before His ministry started (when He took a human form). God has come to earth to dwell among us.

John the Baptist was a cousin of Jesus, just a few months older. When did he first know that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God? John says in 1:31, "I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel," and in 1:33, "I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'" Surely John's mother had told him the stories of Jesus' and his own miraculous births (as recorded in Luke 1). Maybe it was just a mysterious tale to him until God spoke to his heart.

John testifies to the great faith of Jesus' mother, Mary. At the wedding in Cana, she fully expects Jesus will do something to rescue the bridegroom from disgrace, since the wine has run out. She puts her trust in Jesus, and leaves the situation to Him.

John places the incident of Jesus 'cleansing the temple' and overturning the tables of the moneychangers at the beginning of His ministry, rather than near the end. (It certainly could have happened more than once.) The religious folks must have thought He was crazy! When they asked why He had done it, he replied that He could build the temple back in three days.

John records a visit to Jesus by Nicodemus in chapter 3. In spite of what he says, there is no evidence that Nicodemus represented anyone but himself when he came to Jesus. Though a teacher of the Jews, he was *one person* who was still willing to listen for God to teach him more. That's a smart teacher!

November 2

John 4-5

John tells us that Jesus delegated the baptizing to His disciples. Makes sense! So many people needed to repent, and Jesus couldn't personally have gotten to them

all. It wasn't necessary that Jesus create a 'bottleneck'. If he had done *some*, these might claim later that their baptism was a higher class.

The Samaritan woman sees her encounter with Jesus more as a contest than a conversation. She tries to keep the offensive. The more we *listen* to Jesus, the better off we are! Jesus tells her plainly that He *is* the Messiah. Why didn't the word get around? Because who would believe a Samaritan?

The man healed by the pool of Bethesda seemed to know that it was against the Law to carry his mat on the Sabbath, but did so because Jesus healed him, and told him to pick up his mat and walk. He considered Jesus, the one who healed him, to be a higher authority.

November 3

John 6-8

You've got to admire that boy with the five barley loaves and two dried fish. He overheard Jesus asking Philip where they could buy food for all those people, and the kid immediately volunteered to share his lunch. I'm not always that quick to respond, but I'm trying!

After feeding the 5000, Jesus could tell that the people would have tried to make Him king. He slipped away for a bit, but when He returned, Jesus 'turned up the heat', speaking tough words of discipleship. When He told them they'd have to 'eat my flesh and drink my blood,' many turned away, and the 'crown him king' movement fizzled.

Chapter 7 is full of confusion! The priests wanted Jesus arrested, and actually sent guards to do it, but opinions were so divided and confounded that the guards just gave up.

Verse 8:6 reveals that the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by asking Him what to do with a woman caught in adultery. What trap? Everyone knows the penalty; if Jesus had simply agreed with the stoning, there would be no trap. Somehow they knew He would have mercy on her---what a reputation! He did have mercy, by *forcing them* to be merciful They sure were a bloodthirsty lot!

November 4

John 9-10

There is no way around it. Jesus saves! Some people will never let themselves come into direct confrontation with that, and it becomes a stumbling block to them. It is meant to be a standard for the whole world to align itself.

In chapter 9, the religious authorities who have become Jesus' enemies are confronted with the fact that Jesus healed a man born blind. This was obviously a miracle wrought by God---a person would have to be spiritually blind not to see that! The leaders refused to let themselves admit that Jesus was from God. They would rather look righteous to themselves, and look like fools to God and all the people. Wrong choice! Jesus saves, but some would rather be lost, and be the king of their 'lostness'.

The religious authorities had set up a system of life that did not leave room for Jesus. It called for a harsh life, always conscious of rules and regulations. They were the keepers of the system, ruling the common people with an iron hand. Worship of God was never meant to be a prison! Jesus came to set the prisoners free. The religious authorities would not let the people be set free; it was a threat to their very identity. Jesus offered *them* freedom, too, but they could only see His offer as loss of a system that they had put all their hopes in.

November 5

John 11-12

Lazarus died, and Jesus let him. I can imagine the emotions of Mary and Martha. Jesus was a close friend of the family---why did He let His work keep Him from helping them in their time of great need? Love ought to mean dropping what you're in the middle of to come to the rescue. Martha is very forgiving, and says she still believes in Him, but Mary is obviously hurt deeply, and doesn't come to see Jesus until Martha comes to talk to her.

The episode at the tomb is pretty scary stuff! Jesus is more emotional than people had ever seen Him before, and calls for the tomb to be opened. Is He crazy with grief, and going to touch the dead man with hugs and kisses or something? I'm sure many of the bystanders were paralyzed with shock. They opened the tomb, with only Martha able to speak an objection. (By the way---did the body stink after four days?) Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb; how many people screamed and ran away when the dead man walked? Who was brave enough to remove the grave clothes? God is able to bring the dead to life, so which of your problems have you decided not to bring to God?

"The Jews" have gone beyond the point of being able to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They have set their minds against it. They have molded and shaped religious life into a thing that won't allow God in. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah is not possible in their present situation---they'd have to 'break the mold', and they've got too much invested. They cannot trust God to replace what they'd lose if they let Jesus be Lord. They have made themselves the gatekeepers of their own souls, and will not let God have the key.

November 6

John 13-16

I was surprised to learn that Bible scholars don't all agree that the disciples' feet were dirty. Some think that they had already been washed, and that Jesus was giving a visual aid. Maybe so! This "parable in action" certainly would stick in their minds better than just words.

Verse 13:15 continues to be a challenge to the church. Can people tell we are Christians by how we treat our fellow church members, and fellow Christians?

A disciple of a rabbi in Jesus' day would do his best to follow the master wherever he went, trying to learn every little detail of how to be like the master. When Jesus says in 13:36 that Peter cannot follow Him now, Peter can hardly stand it! What is it that I am not allowed to learn? How can I be just like Jesus if I don't follow Him closely? Jesus assures Peter that he will be able to follow later. (Tradition has it that Peter also dies by crucifixion.)

Verses 14:7-14 discuss what God looks like---he looks like Jesus! In the same way, as we do the things Jesus did (and more), people should see Jesus in us. Now, don't expect it to be obvious; Jesus had been with His disciples for three years, yet they didn't recognize they were seeing the Father in Him.

I love the metaphor in 15:1-4 about being pruned, as branches of Christ. The fewer shoots a branch has, the bigger the fruit. There are habits and unprofitable activities that must be 'pruned' out of our lives so that we may produce more 'fruit' for God. Some of these shoots might have gone on to produce fruit for God, too, given the chance. Still, too many ventures for God at once will produce fruit of smaller size and quality.

We are reminded in 15:9-11 that God's commands are given so that we might have a better life, and even greater joy. What some may see as handcuffs are really beautifully ornamented bracelets!

Talk about last words! Jesus says at the end of chapter 14, "Come now, let us leave." They finally get out the door in 18:1.

November 7

John 17-18

Jesus prays for Himself and then for His disciples. He doesn't talk about the great pain He will soon undergo, but about the great joy it will bring. In the same way, Jesus does not ask that His disciples be allowed to avoid pain. "Sanctify them by the truth" doesn't suggest that they will find 'sanctuary' from tough times, but that they will be made holy by their adherence to eternal truth.

Jesus was very predictable in His personal devotional practices. Judas knew that Jesus could be found praying in the Garden of Gethsemane after the meal. There was no doubt about it. Should we be predictable, too, in our practices of seeking God?

Peter was brave in following Jesus after He was arrested. There was *another disciple* at Jesus' trial, too, who moved about freely and seemed to be a friend or acquaintance of Annas. This other disciple had the servant girl serving at the gate invite Peter in, so it was not surprising that she would assume Peter also was a disciple. When questioned, though, he denied it; surely he wasn't afraid they'd arrest him as they did Jesus, for they weren't arresting that other disciple.

Clearly Pilate sees no criminal as Jesus stands before him---he's just a looney! A "king", whose kingdom is "not of this world", whose followers must believe in "truth" that ordinary folk can't see. Good grief, why don't we just release this crazy man?

November 8

John 19-21

I suppose we misuse the word "crucifixion", as if it meant "death". Crucifixion was the act of nailing the man to a cross, not the actual death. Still, that's not too large an error, for death was inevitable after crucifixion.

At one point in Jesus' interview with Pilate, Jesus refuses to speak, causing Pilate to say, "Don't you know I have power to either free you or crucify you?" Actually, we soon see that Pilate is powerless to stop the process. The mob is calling out, "Crucify him!" and would settle for no less. When people become part of a mob like that, sin has complete control.

When Nicodemus helps bury Jesus, there is no more hiding his beliefs. This is an act of faith and devotion that is the final result of his short interview with Jesus in John 3.

In chapter 20, Mary Magdalene is the first to happen upon the 'crime scene' ("They've taken his body,..."), and then Peter and John. Peter doesn't know what to think about what they find, Mary is sure it's been a grave robbing, but John's faith tells him that Jesus is alive, though he has little to go on. None of the rest believe until they have actually seen the risen Jesus. In our time, Jesus does not appear in the flesh, but is always present on our earth as the Holy Spirit. People come to believe in Jesus by seeing His actions in you and me.

Peter was the only one who had spoken publicly a denial of Christ, and Jesus knew he needed special treatment to get him back on track. In chapter 21, He takes Peter aside and has a talk with him. Peter has a chance to 'cancel out' his previous

denial with words of devotion and love for Jesus. To signify that Peter is now forgiven and restored, Jesus says simply, "Follow me," just as He had at the very beginning of His ministry when He was calling various men to be His disciples. It's a new start for Peter.

November 9

Acts 1-3

Luke picks up where he left off in his first book, with a little overlap for continuity (Luke 24:45-53).

Very few of Jesus' words that He spoke during His 40 resurrected days on earth are recorded. I suspect Jesus spent time reminding His disciples of what He had said over the previous three years. Everything would have a new light cast on it after the resurrection. One thing Jesus did say was that they should stay together in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came, at which time they would be witnesses throughout the world. This was a little different sounding command, because Jesus said they *would* be His witnesses, not just could or might.

The Pentecost miracle was about hearing. Everyone plainly heard about the wonders of God now, now matter what their native tongue might be. There were 3000 added to the church that day; many of us would have been content with the 120 attendees they already had, but God had a bigger idea.

The apostles discover that they have indeed received power from "on high", just as Jesus had promised. They also have boldness to teach and preach. You can understand why this is called the birthday of the church, even though there were already 120 followers---now there is power.

After Peter and John brought healing to the man at the Beautiful Gate, they preached to a crowd outside the temple, in the colonnade. Somehow, I always pictured the healed man jumping around inside the temple; sometimes our Sunday School stories don't get all the details right.

November 10

Acts 4-6

Peter and John are brought before the religious leaders of Jerusalem to be reprimanded for healing on the Sabbath. Among the leaders present were Annas, Caiaphas, and many others who had sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion. Peter spoke boldly to them, even putting full responsibility on them for Jesus' death. The leaders didn't know how to handle this! They ended up letting them go with no

punishment, except to warn them to stop teaching and speaking in the name of Jesus. Peter plainly told them, “Forget it. We’ve got to do whatever God commands us. He outranks you.” (My paraphrase!)

This new movement is getting out of hand. How can Jesus be right and Moses still be right, too? It never occurred to the religious leaders that Jesus might be the Messiah that Moses and the Old Testament prophets had predicted would come. The part that caused the most trouble, and that should have tipped them off, was the miracles. Even after Jesus was crucified, the miracles *in his name* continued.

After Peter and John are released, the believers considered it a victory, and praised God excitedly, *and the house shook* as they felt the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 5 and its story of Ananias and Sapphira is a little troubling. They lied to God, and therefore they were struck dead. It’s just that this was a critical time in the birthing of the Christian church; lack of trust among the believers was unacceptable. This was not like the former church, in which people jockeyed for power and position.

In 5:18, the apostles are imprisoned for healing in Jesus’ name. Too many people are joining this new religious sect, and the old gang is jealous. An angel lets them out in the middle of the night, *through locked doors*, just like when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the day He was resurrected, entering through a locked door.

The apostles realize, at the end of chapter 6, that twelve men just can’t handle the administration of a church of over 5,000 and still maintain their heavy teaching and preaching schedule. They appointed seven helpers; God honored this by bringing more and more into the church.

November 11

Acts 7-8

At Stephen's trial, I really don't think the Sanhedrin wanted to convict him. They didn't have the murderous intent they had had at Jesus' trial; they simply asked him if the charges against him, that he had spoken blasphemy ('treason') against Moses and God, were true.

Stephen proceeds to give a good sermon, rehearsing in short form the main points of the history of the Jewish people. He was making it obvious that his theology was sound, and there was no treason or blasphemy in him.

At the end of Stephen's sermon, though, he boldly points out the sin of his listeners, the murder of Jesus, Instead of repenting, they flew into a rage and stone him to death. They have again rejected Jesus. In fact, they began persecuting Christians, and many evacuated Jerusalem for more pleasant surroundings. This did Christianity a great favor, for the Good News of Jesus Christ was being scattered like good seed.

Philip made many converts and did great miracles in Samaria, so much so that a magician everyone used to follow was now following him.

Philip has suddenly become a great prophet and evangelist. Like Elijah (I Kings 18:46), he finds himself running with a chariot; this one is going slow, and he hitches a ride. Philip quickly turns the conversation to Christ, makes a convert, and even baptizes him by the side of the road. The Ethiopian convert praises God; Philip disappears for other evangelistic exploits.

November 12

Acts 9-10

The story of Saul's conversion is key to the book of Acts. Just as happened many times in the Old Testament, God chose a very unlikely hero (Jacob, Saul, Gideon, Samson, etc.). Saul was given pretty convincing proof here that Jesus is the Son of God, but he could have resisted. don't we have friends and relatives that wouldn't have been persuaded?

Damascus is a long ways from Jerusalem. Christianity is spreading! Saul has three days, while totally blind, to make sense of all that has just happened to him (maybe like three days in the tomb?), and emerges a new man. He quickly makes sense of how Jesus fits into the Old Testament, and is eager to share the Good News.

Barnabas shows the value of trusted character, as he stands up for Saul in 9:27. Saul's word wasn't believed, but Barnabas swayed everyone. *Because Saul had become a Christian*, there was no significant persecution now, and Christianity resumed its tremendous growth in numbers.

When Peter raised Dorcas from the dead, he was doing as his Master had done in raising Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:49-56). Peter is one of the few who had seen this.

When Peter saw the vision of the unclean foods presented to him from heaven, he was told three times. Why? Was it because he was slow to learn? Because he had denied Christ three times/ More likely, it was for emphasis, because Jewish food restrictions were really crammed into their heads as they grew up. By the way, do suppose Cornelius had heard, or heard about, Philip the Evangelist (8:40), who had been preaching in Caesarea for a good little while now? God prepares the way.

November 13

Acts 11-13

When Peter was criticized in Jerusalem for preaching Christ to the Gentiles in Caesarea, he recounted to them exactly the vision he had seen from God, and how the Holy Spirit had come on the Gentiles as he preached. The truth was enough for Peter's fellow believers, and criticism turned to praise. It's ironic that, in Jesus' case the truth (and miracles) had not been enough for those who criticized Him. Instead, they crucified Him.

(Peter leaves out the part about inviting the Gentile messengers into the Jewish household where he was staying, to stay overnight and share meals. It would have just confused the issue.)

Peter's 'jail break' was incredible. He's been in prison twice before, and God again rescues him. Everything happens in three's for Peter! Remember that the penalty for the guards, for prisoners escaping, was death, whether or not they were negligent.

John Mark is mentioned many times in this section. He was a cousin to Barnabas, and a helper in his ministry. It is generally accepted that he wrote the book of Mark, which may have been the first of the four Gospels written (believed to be Peter's account of Christ's ministry).

In 13:11, God's judgment came on Elymas by the hand of Saul, and he made blind. See the irony? When Saul had been traveling to Damascus in chapter 9, Jesus had made him blind to bring him to belief and salvation.

Somewhere in chapter 13, Saul takes on the Roman name of Paul. He and Barnabas do a great job of spreading the message of Christ throughout the eastern Mediterranean region of the Roman empire.

November 14

Acts 14-16

Paul and Barnabas begin to run into steady opposition to their evangelistic efforts from Jews. It seems the Jews either accept the teaching about Jesus or are radically opposed to it. Paul was even stoned and left for dead at Lystra. He is alive, however, and gets up and returns to Lystra to preach. Later, after preaching in Derbe, Paul returns to Lystra and tells the believers, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God ." My goodness, we think it a hardship when people speak ugly to us!

It is an historic turning point, reported in chapter 15, when it is decided converts need not become Jews first when they become Christians. No longer is Christianity an extension of Judaism. By the way, do you suppose the messenger Barsabbas, in 15:22 , is the same mentioned in 1:23 as a candidate for apostleship?

Paul again returns to Lystra, where he once was stoned and left for dead, and makes more converts. Learn from his persistence!

Notice the difference between Paul's rescue from prison and the earlier incidents with Peter. The angel that released Peter three times never included other prisoners in the release. When Paul and Silas are rescued, all the prisoner's shackles are loosed. It seems God was going to great lengths to bring salvation to the jailer.

What ever happened to the other prisoners?

November 15

Acts 17-19

Maybe it was a little overwhelming for the Jews when Paul came into town and spoke in the synagogue. He was an educated Jew from Jerusalem , a student of the famous teacher Gamaliel. They couldn't out-argue him in discussions about Jesus' place in scripture, so they resorted to underhanded tactics to silence Paul.

In Athens , Paul reasons with the great thinkers of that area. It seems that they loved ideas, but lacked the faith to put them into action. We'll never completely understand God's love, but must always take a step (or a leap) of faith to become a Christian.

Paul spends a year and a half in Corinth . Most of his church there is composed of Gentiles, not brought up in the synagogue school or Jewish ways. He concentrates on teaching scripture, planting a firm foundation for life in Christ.

What a surprise in Ephesus – Paul speaks in the synagogue and the Jews are eager to have him stay! He moves on to Caesarea while they still like him, promising to return later. A teacher named Apollos shows up in Ephesus and helps the people immensely; Paul comes back later, after Apollos has moved on, to a strong church. He does spend a little time correcting theology taught by Apollos, though. Their ministries were very complimentary.

November 16

Acts 20-22

Paul was on the homeward leg of his third missionary journey. though he had already set his mind on another journey, to Rome, he did his best to make another visit to as many cities as he could, to strengthen the believers. He nearly ran out of time (20:16), and had to skip some of the last cities to make it to Jerusalem by Pentecost.

I'm impressed by Paul's statement in 20:26: "I am innocent of the blood of all men." He means that he has not held back from declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone possible. It's no longer Paul's fault if anyone fails to accept Christ, but their own. As God told Jeremiah, if a prophet fails to warn people of impending doom, it's the prophet's guilt. *That now means us!* If we who know the way of salvation fail to pass it on, it's our guilt.

Paul is more sure each day that hard times await him in Jerusalem. Since God never tells him not to go, he never hesitates in heading for that city. Not all Christian service is pleasant; that doesn't make a bit of difference to those who are determined to do God's will.

As Paul is arrested and put under guard, it becomes more apparent how unique a person God has chosen to be His spokesperson. Paul is a Jew, but also a Roman citizen. He is well educated, by the best Jewish teacher, but has become a bridge to the Gentiles. He is not a native of Jerusalem, but spent many years there.

November 17

Acts 23-25

A legal trial is a setting where truth is spoken, and judged on its merits. Paul begins to be taken from trial to trial and takes the opportunity to testify to the truth of Jesus Christ.

At his first major hearing, Paul gets the Pharisees arguing with the Sadducees, probably on purpose, and has the Pharisees standing up for him. "What if he has heard from an angel?" one says. Ironically, that night Paul does hear Christ speak to him.

Paul's life is threatened. (Again?) Forty men agree together that they won't eat or drink until they have killed Paul. When the Romans learn of the plot, they move Paul to another prison, under the guard of 470 soldiers! Why so many? *Because Paul was a Roman citizen.* (Don't you suppose God had a hand in this?)

Not much is said about Paul's two-year stay in Caesarea . He was allowed some freedom, and had many friends in Caesarea (21:8-16). We also know he frequently had talks with the Roman governor, Felix, about faith in Jesus Christ.

In the trial before the new governor, Festus, Paul appeals to Caesar. By this, he means he demands to stay in the Roman legal system and not be tried within the Jewish system. He was not necessarily demanding to be sent to Rome , but Festus decided to send him there. (Paul had insulted Festus when he said, “No one has the right to hand me over to the Jews.”) Now Paul is going to Rome , which he has longed to do for many years.

November 18

Acts 26-28

As Paul testifies before King Agrippa, he leaves part of his testimony out--- did you notice? Paul said nothing about being blinded on the Damascus Road and regaining his sight three days later. Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would give us the words we needed when we testify to others; that also means that the Holy Spirit will lead us in using only those parts of our testimony that are helpful in the present situation. Sometimes our favorite parts need to be left for a better time.

What is Aristarchus doing on the boat (27:2)? He was one of the workers that accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, joining him at Thessalonica. Looks like he was also going to Rome for a trial, for in Colossians 4:10, Paul calls him "my fellow prisoner". (In Philemon, he is one of Paul's workers in Rome, so he must have endured only a short imprisonment.) Of course, the author of Acts (Luke) seems to be traveling with them, too.

Paul is not a sailor, but he has a 'hot line' to the One who made the seas. The captain is reticent to take Paul's advice, but eventually comes to realize that Paul has special knowledge from above that will keep them alive. After days of dreadful storm, they run the ship aground and, though the ship is torn to pieces, no lives are lost.

Paul reaches Rome, his goal, and is allowed a bit of freedom. He speaks convincingly to crowds of Jews; some believe, while other steadfastly refuse. Verse 28:30 leaves us a little in the dark, for it says Paul stayed in Rome two years---some say he was then beheaded, while others say he was set free for a while but later returned to Rome as a prisoner and was then beheaded.

November 19

Romans 1-3

Paul has not yet been to Rome at the time he writes this letter. Note that he is writing to both Gentiles and Jews; if he were writing to Jews only, some things would not have to be explained. Romans is a great apology (explanation) of the Christian faith.

Why is Paul longing to make it to Rome? First, of course, God has put it on his heart; he knows God will make a way. Second, Rome is the capital of the empire. People come from all directions to Rome, and disperse in all directions. Therefore, if the Good News of Jesus Christ is preached in Rome, it will spread in all directions, to the whole empire.

One of the sins that has really caught Paul's attention is the sexual promiscuity in the Roman culture (passed on from Greek culture). They act as if there is no God, but rather worship the human body. Though this really upsets him, he calls on believers to clean up their own lives before passing judgment on others.

Paul equates the Gentile's innate knowledge of what the Law teaches, though they'd never had a class or an explanation, with the Jew's book knowledge. It's the living of God's commands that counts. This is what was foretold in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, a law that is within you and written on your heart.

November 20

Romans 4-7

The key point that brings assurance of salvation to the non-Jews is in 4:10: Abraham was considered in right standing with God (righteous) before the sacrament of circumcision started. That is, before there was a mark that separated Jews from non-Jews, there was a way to get right with God. That way was simply believing God. Abraham believed that God's promises would come to pass. We find salvation the same way, by believing God that Jesus has paid the price for our sins. Abraham is the father of us all, because he was the first to gain salvation by faith alone.

Our lives change when we accept Jesus' death on the cross as payment for our sin. We no longer are 'under the thumb' of sin, in knowing that we have something between us and God that will not allow us to experience eternal life. The debt has been paid! We are free to learn a new kind of life, what Jesus called "abundant life", and we are constantly being nudged toward that by the presence of Christ (the Holy Spirit) that has come to dwell in us ("Christ in you, the hope of glory", Colossians 1:27). The old life will still have a pull on us, but we can overcome it by relying on God to provide the overcoming strength we need.

November 21

Romans 8-10

There are two opposing forces working in our lives. The sinful nature brings decay, while the Spirit brings life. A person's life before they accept Jesus as their

savior is focused on what can be done before death, while a saved person's life is aimed far beyond, to eternity. The Spirit works to make us continually better, while the sinful nature is constantly fighting against the day of death.

God originally chose Israel to be a people set apart for Him. The Ten Commandments and other laws were put in place not as restrictions, but as guidelines for a life walked hand in hand with God. Most missed the point, though, and became obsessed with earthly things rather than life lived by faith in God. They worshipped the Law rather than the Law Giver. The real 'set apart' ones are those who trust in God's promises, both Jew and Gentile.

November 22

Romans 11-13

Paul makes sure we know that the Jews and Gentiles now have an equal chance for salvation. It is by God's grace we are saved, not by any works or ritual. It may seem that the Jews have some advantage because of their rich heritage, but when we Gentiles are saved by God's grace; their heritage of faith becomes ours, also.

All those who have accepted Christ's death as payment for their sins have become one big family. None has anything to boast about, as if they were of a "better part of the family." Whatever your background, we are all on equal footing with God, all linking arms to serve in God's army of love.

Paul's encouragement to obey the government leaves something important out, I think. We should always obey our leaders, for they provide structure necessary for life. Occasionally, though, they call on us to disobey God while obeying our rulers. That is where we draw the line in citizenship. God always comes first.

November 23

Romans 14-16

Paul has consistently promoted the idea of being lenient or flexible on the nonessentials of religious practices, but being steadfast when it comes to the basics of Christian doctrine. Let's not let little squabbles cause conflict in the church; we can "agree to disagree" as long as we agree on the Bible and Jesus Christ.

Is it easier for people with no religious background to understand the work of Christ than for those who had been brought up in a non-Christian religion? Paul thought so, and I suppose I agree. You can build without having to tear down walls first. People can understand that there is a God, just by looking at the complex nature of plants and animals. It's not a big step to understand that people make wrong choices and are disobedient to God.

Paul was set on going to Rome, though he didn't realize he'd be going as a prisoner. Judging by his words in chapter 15, he had planned to head to Spain after the Passover visit to Jerusalem, and make Rome an important stop along the way.

November 24

I Corinthians 1-4

I like Paul's beginning, especially 1:4-6. His testimony has been confirmed in them; he has seen changed lives.

It's not just the preachers and missionaries that are called. We are all called out from 'ordinary' lives to be followers of Christ. As we accept Him, we begin to see everything differently. The Bible becomes understandable, as the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and make sense of it all. In fact, life itself begins to make more sense!

It's not the preacher that builds us up, but the Holy Spirit working within. As Paul says, all servants of God work for the same Master and seek to build you spiritually as an offering to God. It's ridiculous to compare preachers we've heard or who've been our pastors. There should be no golden past that we try to get back to, sacrificing our present and our future. We need to let ourselves be built up spiritually, allowing the Holy Spirit to train us each day and year.

Verses 4:8-13 really strike a chord with me. I've felt that same way at times! People were sitting in judgment of Paul's ministry. They were comfortable, patting themselves on the back, while Paul and his fellow workers went through all kinds of hardship and sacrifice to bring them spiritual truth. Paul was feeling unappreciated: "Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world."

November 25

I Corinthians 5-9

Sexual sin is a destroyer of spiritual health. First, God's plan of sexuality *must* be taken on faith. It goes against, at times, what feels good and what seems healthy emotionally. Sex outside marriage and even homosexual love are justified by some on the basis that it feels so natural and right, that the participants were 'born for this'. We hold our own reasoning up against God's as if the created could correct the Creator, and even doubt God's Word. It's very hard for some to trust God in the area of human sexuality, that God's way is best. Second, to segment off an area of life in which we will not trust God's wisdom is to undermine faith in its entirety.

Paul says an interesting thing about marriage in 7:15 -16. 'If your unbelieving wife or husband leaves, let them go!' He has already said that it's not grounds for divorce if your spouse is not a believer. We need to hear more from Paul on this, because divorce, and remarriage, is quite an issue in our time.

What a man of God! Paul has given himself completely to God. His goal in life is to bring others to Christ, not so that he can boast, but to offer them as a gift to God.

November 26

I Corinthians 10-13

Verse 10:13 talks about *temptation*. We often misquote this verse, as if it said, "God will not give you more burdens than you can bear." The misquote has a lot of truth in it, too, that God will always bear your burdens with you. The point of *this* verse, though, is that you never have to give in to temptation.

The first part of chapter 11 is controversial. Obviously, it is "culture-specific". In that day and place it was considered immoral for a woman not to cover her head, or to consider herself equal to a man. Although these things have not been considered immoral in our own society for a long time, Paul's point still holds: If certain practices are considered immoral, don't do them! In our day, this might include short skirts or low-cut blouses. Thinking back to chapter 10, whether or not you consider a practice immoral, consider how others will perceive it. Do nothing that might make your sister or brother stumble.

Some of the gifts of the Spirit Paul mention in chapter 12 do not seem to be present in most of our churches, such as speaking in tongues and healing. He points out that they are not meant to be points of pride; we're all in ministry together! Please note that not all of the churches Paul founded exhibited these gifts, either. Maybe chapter 13 puts the best perspective on this: The greatest gifts are faith, hope, and love, with love being more important than any other.

November 27

I Corinthians 14-16

Evidently some in the Corinthian church were speaking in tongues without actually having the spiritual gift --- they were just babbling. The proof of the gift is whether or not God inspires someone to interpret the message, which then makes it prophecy or a word from God for those assembled.

Paul's writing about women keeping silent in the church is controversial in our time. Remember that this particular item is 'culture-specific'; in Paul's day, it was disgraceful for a woman to speak in public, though that seems

odd to us today. It was a very male-dominated society. In any age, it is wise to avoid practices that society considers immoral, representing Christ in the best way we can.

How important is the resurrection of Christ to us? It is very important! If Christ rose, that puts strength in His promise that *we* will have eternal life. The details are vague, but Paul is obviously right in saying the body we will have after our earthly stay will be different, because this one is not made to last eternally.

The Corinthians couldn't help but be encouraged by chapter 16. They're not in this alone! Paul mentions many other churches and leaders, many of whom send greetings. We, too, are part of a worldwide Christian movement, that has been, is, and will be!

November 28

II Corinthians 1-4

In 1:3-4, we see an answer for the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" After God has seen us through our distress, we are better able to comfort people who have come upon the same type of struggle.

Paul tells them of plans he had to visit Corinth, approved by God, but how he changed them so that he could come when he wouldn't have to be correcting them. He plainly tells us that, at times, our leaders will have to set us straight on spiritual matters, though it might be painful.

Forgiveness is tough, but necessary. If we must correct someone in spiritual matters, we must follow quickly with forgiveness and a fresh heaping of love. The corrected party could easily "take it personally" and be angry at what might otherwise be considered an attack on their character or personality.

It's kind of sobering to be reminded by Paul that we are a picture to others of what Christ is like. We have so many flaws! Still, verses 3:5-6 says God makes us competent.

November 29

II Corinthians 5-8

The Holy Spirit took up residence in you when you gave your life to Christ. The Spirit convicts us, not by bringing up our wrongs, but by giving us a taste of what true holiness is. We can't help but feel the contrast between our life and that taste of what life will be like in heaven, when all sin has been destroyed. It builds a great longing in us for the life to come, which is healthy, and which drives us toward

holy living. However, don't let your mind be so focused on heaven that you don't live your responsibility as an ambassador of Christ in the present age.

In 6:14, Paul speaks of being unequally yoked. How did this come to be about marriage, when the context is so plainly about discipleship? Some of the Corinthians have taken to adhering more to worldly principles than to the Christian teaching Paul brought to them and lived before them. In our day, we see some of the same in church management, with leaders putting more stock in business management principles than in Jesus' words and example about getting along with others.

Chapter 8 does not talk about giving in the ordinary ways. There is no mention of tithing or giving first to God. This is more about missions, giving to fellow Christians far away. The appeal is, first, to give freely as Christ so freely gave to you and, second, give to the needy because someday your roles may be reversed.

November 30

Romans 9-13

Paul is talking about giving, but uses it as an example to show how our Christian service can be a great encouragement to others. It inspires similar action and also thankfulness to God.

No disciple should have to boast of his or her accomplishments. Their "lifesong" should tell all the story necessary. At times, we introduce speakers by a list of their accomplishments, to give them some credibility in the hearing of those who have never met them. Even then, their actions and speech must continue to live up to their 'billing', or what they have said will later be discarded as worthless.

Christian teachers and preachers need to keep a good measure of humility. It is easy, when everyone is commending you, to think you've done something on your own, though all we have comes from God. Relying on our own ability causes us to rely less on God, which is a loss both for our listeners and ourselves.

Paul feels he has instructed the Corinthians enough through this correspondence that they ought to be able to straighten the church out before his next visit, in which case the visit ought to be pleasant. If not, they can expect a painful visit, for he will be as harsh as he needs to be to bring them back to solid Christian living.