

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

September



NORTH FORT WORTH
CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

September 1
Ezekiel 32:17-33:20; Jeremiah 52:28-30;
1 Chronicles 4:24-5:17; Psalm 137:1-9

Now, son of man, I am making you a watchman for the people of Israel. Therefore, listen to what I say and warn them for Me. (Ezekiel 33:7)

God calls His servant, Ezekiel, to be a spiritual watchman on behalf of His people. The role of the watchman cannot be underestimated. He serves as the eyes and ears for the people looking for potential enemies or threats. Physically speaking, the watchman's role is essential if a people or a city are to remain safe and protected. Someone must watch out for the well-being of others. Spiritually speaking, it is all the more crucial. Spiritual adversaries seek to influence God's people in self-destructive ways. They may not rattle a sword, but through deception and clever compromise, they promote self-inflicted injury and harm. God calls Ezekiel to understand the danger and to stand watch.

God also explains a two-fold responsibility for the watchman and the people. 1) The watchman is to sound the alert whenever an enemy is detected. 2) The people are expected to respond with the appropriate diligence whenever they hear the alarm. Each is dependent upon the other. If either falter, defeat is assured. If both react appropriately, God's people can prevail.

Interestingly, God will not hold His watchman responsible if the people refuse to respond to the warning. Ezekiel is only accountable for sounding the alarm. He cannot control what people choose to do or not to do. That's a lesson we should remember as we spiritually seek to influence others. We can only prayerfully share the truth. We cannot guarantee a particular response. The watchman, however, will be held accountable if he fails to sound the appropriate alarm. The LORD explains, *"If I announce that some wicked people are sure to die and you fail to tell them to change their ways, then they will die in their sins, and I will hold you responsible for their deaths."* (Ezekiel 33:8) Silence or indifference is not an option for God's watchmen. He expects vigilance on Ezekiel's part and courage to share the necessary message.

Do you think God is looking for spiritual watchmen in our day? Is He looking for spiritually alert individuals willing to sound the alarm when a threat appears? I'm not asking if God is seeking a "moral police squad" that is only interested in controlling or condemning others. Jesus exposed the Pharisees of His day as that kind of group. They primarily wanted to cast down the guilty instead of lifting up the repentant. The LORD, instead, is looking for the tenderhearted who will call others into a right relationship with the God who loves them. They warn the misguided of the self-destruction that sin and disobedience will cause. Yet, they also reassure the sinful that God's forgiveness is real if they repent and turn to Him in faith. God's watchmen deliver messages of warning and hope.

Do you think the LORD is looking for someone like that today? Though our circles of influence may be smaller, are we willing to share God's messages of warning and hope with those around us? We are not responsible for how they respond. We are accountable, however, for sharing what we know. May God grant us the faith and boldness to do so!

September 2

1 Chronicles 5:18-26; 1 Chronicles 6:3-15, 49; 1 Chronicles 7:1-8:28

There were 44,760 capable warriors in the armies of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. They were all skilled in combat and armed with shields, swords, and bows ... The people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh lived in their land until they were taken into exile. (1 Chronicles 5:18, 22)

Genealogical lists may be some of the least favorite passages for people to read. Though they connect the children of Israel with their tribal past, today's readers may struggle to understand their relevance. Yet, the genealogical roll call is significant as 1 Chronicles begins. 1st and 2nd Chronicles were written following the Babylonian exile. God's people had suffered a humiliating defeat. The LORD Himself exposed their sins and held them accountable. God's judgment against Judah and Israel should underscore within our hearts the seriousness of our sins and God's expectations for His people.

However, the purpose of 1st and 2nd Chronicles is to reconnect the returning exiles with their past so they might better understand their future. Their story is retold, so they might focus on the promise of a future KING. Yes, the "chronicler" reintroduces the readers to David and Solomon. He recounts the destructive spiritual decline resulting in the Babylonian exile. Yet, this fresh retelling of the story aims to position a new generation toward the promise of tomorrow—thus explaining the importance of the genealogical list. It's the writer's way of emphasizing, "Our story is not yet done."

The background surrounding 1st and 2nd Chronicles helps us better understand what is written and the reasoning behind the writer's genealogical opening. Yet, knowing how Judah's story ends also awakens a sadness within. The people had so much potential. They were collectively strong in number, skilled, and gifted in many ways; nevertheless, they failed. Their failure is a sobering illustration of the people's inadequacy apart from God's blessing and activity. As noted above, the armies of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh were skilled in combat and armed with shields, swords, and bows. Warriors from these three tribes alone numbered 44,760 strong. And the end of their story? They were taken into exile. The people failed to understand the spiritual principle, *"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."* (Zechariah 4:6, ESV)

The "chronicler's" hope is that their future generations might learn from the tragic failures of the past. I pray that we might do the same. May we increasingly appreciate that our present and future success is not dependent on our numbers or giftedness. It is directly related to our walking with the LORD and experiencing the difference He makes.

Reading a genealogical list may not be our favorite thing, but their lessons should be learned. May we take them to heart.

September 3

1 Chronicles 8:29–9:1; Daniel 4:1-37; Ezekiel 40:1-37

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was living in my palace in comfort and prosperity. But one night I had a dream that frightened me; I saw visions that terrified me as I lay in my bed. So I issued an order calling in all the wise men of Babylon, so they could tell me what my dream meant. (Daniel 4:4–6)

Today's reading includes an episode in Nebuchadnezzar's life—the King of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar played a prominent role in the recent events involving Judah. His military forces facilitated the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Indeed, God uses a foreign ruler to pour out a devastating judgment against His covenant people. The LORD did so, not because Nebuchadnezzar deserved it, but because God had pledged to hold his people accountable for their sins. The Babylonian ruler's success had more to do with the LORD's activity than his own. Nebuchadnezzar's terrifying dream would make this clear.

Today's passage in Daniel describes a nightmare that sends Nebuchadnezzar searching for answers. The dream involved cutting down a prominent tree that reached into the heavens. The tree's demise and the consequences afterward left Nebuchadnezzar unsettled and afraid. The troubled monarch calls for his kingdom's experts to interpret the dream. The king will not ignore what he perceives as a message from on high. However, Daniel alone will make sense of Nebuchadnezzar's vision. And what does it mean? The LORD's servant explains, *"This is what the dream means, Your Majesty, and what the Most High has declared will happen to my Lord the king. You will be driven from human society, and you will live in the fields with the wild animals. You will eat grass like a cow, and you will be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven periods of time will pass while you live this way, until you learn that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone He chooses."* (Daniel 4:24–25) Having interpreted the dream, Daniel also appeals, *"King Nebuchadnezzar, please accept my advice. Stop sinning and do what is right. Break from your wicked past and be merciful to the poor. Perhaps then you will continue to prosper."* (Daniel 4:27)

Nebuchadnezzar's fear concerning the dream appears well-founded. The ruler had allowed his many victories to go to his head, and the dream indicates that God can quickly bring him down to size. Like a towering tree, he can be cut down. Does Nebuchadnezzar learn the lesson and promptly humble himself before the LORD? The answer is "No!" He continues to live as if he is self-sufficient and in control. Later, Nebuchadnezzar even exclaims, *"Look at this great city of Babylon! By my own mighty power, I have built this beautiful city as my royal residence to display my majestic splendor."* (Daniel 4:30) The king fails to learn the appropriate lesson from the dream and immediately develops a condition that drives him into the forest to live. Instead of humbling himself before the LORD, the great king of Babylon is publicly humiliated for seven years. The man who once commanded armies is reduced to behaving like a beast of the field.

And the lesson for us? It's relatively simple. We should walk humbly before the LORD. Don't make Nebuchadnezzar's mistake. Let's view our successes and victories for what they are—a gift of God. Let's acknowledge God's grace as we navigate forward. May we select the path of humility instead of humiliation. God gave Nebuchadnezzar another chance to get it right. I suggest we choose humility from the start, not the end. What do you think?

September 4

Ezekiel 40:38-43:27

After this, the man brought me back around to the east gateway. Suddenly, the glory of the God of Israel appeared from the east. The sound of His coming was like the roar of rushing waters, and the whole landscape shone with His glory. This vision was just like the others I had seen, first by the Kebar River and then when He came to destroy Jerusalem. I fell face down on the ground. And the glory of the LORD came into the Temple through the east gateway. (Ezekiel 43:1–4)

God enables His prophet, Ezekiel, to take another visionary visit to His Temple. Nineteen years earlier, Ezekiel witnessed God's departure from the Temple. The sinfulness of God's people drove the Lord's presence away. They had defiled the meeting place of God in every way imaginable and would suffer the consequences. The departure of the LORD's manifested glory would be the precursor to His judgment. The Babylonians would subsequently destroy Jerusalem and the holy sanctuary.

God now transports Ezekiel to a new Temple that exceeds the size and scope of the former sanctuary that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed. An angelic being (bronze-like man) leads the prophet through an elaborate complex. He sees the Temple's walls, structures, and courtyards—the dimensions of which are carefully defined by his guide. As a Judean priest, Ezekiel must have been amazed by all he witnessed. Yet, as awe-struck as he may have been, what happens at the eastern gate causes Ezekiel's heart to soar. God's glory reappears.

This appearance represents the third time Ezekiel is privileged to observe God's glorious presence. First, the LORD grants Ezekiel a vision of His presence before his prophetic call (Ezekiel 1). Second, the prophet witnesses the LORD's sorrowful departure from the Temple (Ezekiel 8-11). And now, God's servant is permitted to see the glory of the LORD return. The roar of rushing waters accompanies his entrance, and the Temple is flooded with radiant light. Ezekiel responds as only one could. He quickly bows face down before the presence of Almighty God.

And what is the significance of the LORD's return? The Spirit of God lifts Ezekiel and places him in the inner courtyard, where he hears an explanation from the LORD. *"Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place where I will rest My feet. I will live here forever among the people of Israel."* (Ezekiel 43:7) It is noteworthy that the chariot throne included in the earlier visions is not mentioned. The mobility of the throne is no longer required, for God will establish a permanent throne. Indeed, He will dwell forever among His people.

When will this take place? Some interpret this symbolically, pointing to a future day when God eternally manifests His presence among His covenant people. Others (of whom I am one) believe the detailed vision will ultimately find fulfillment during Jesus' thousand-year reign described in Revelation 20. Either way, don't miss the main emphasis. God intends to dwell with His people again. May our hearts soar with this realization. May we likewise recognize that Jesus, God's Son, is the key. He is the One who sanctifies the Temple and God's people so that a future defilement and departure would no longer be possible. Marvel with me over the thought and be encouraged by the sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice and provision. God will dwell among His people forever, and our lives will never be the same. Blessed be His name!

September 5

Ezekiel 44:1-46:24

Then the man brought me back to the east gateway in the outer wall of the Temple area, but it was closed. And the LORD said to me, "This gate must remain closed; it will never again be opened. No one will ever open it and pass through, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered here. Therefore, it must always remain shut." (Ezekiel 44:1-2)

In yesterday's reading, God grants Ezekiel a vision of His future Temple. It must have been breathtaking for an exiled priest to walk through such an elaborate complex. Every room and every detail must have captivated the prophet's mind. Yet, the defining moment occurs when the glory of the LORD appears at the east gateway. God would again fill His Temple, but it would be permanent this time. Indeed, God declares to His servant, *"Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place where I will rest My feet. I will live here forever among the people of Israel."* (Ezekiel 43:7) God's intention is clear. He desires to dwell among His people for all eternity.

Today's reading provides further instructions concerning that future day. The LORD defines His expectations for those serving within His future Temple. The priests would relate to God as holy in specific ways, reflecting the privilege that is theirs. God also provides details about the distribution of certain land and guidance concerning worship and festal observances. God is preparing His people for a new day, a better day. As I noted yesterday, interpretations vary concerning the meaning of Ezekiel's vision. I admit there are aspects of what is described that I find difficult to understand. Even so, my heart is still encouraged by the larger message of hope. God portrays a future time and setting when His covenant people will draw near and experience the glory of the LORD.

And what lesson can we draw from today's passage? After Ezekiel is led back to the east gateway, the prophet notices that the gate is closed. Of course, this is where the LORD's presence and glory had previously entered. Why is it now closed? The LORD explains that it is permanently shut because of the significance of His entry into the Temple, and no one will be permitted to open the gateway for future use. The gate's permanent closure elevates God's greatness, testifying to the uniqueness of His power and authority. Yet, there is another consideration. The fact that the gate will never again be opened serves as further testimony that the glory of the LORD will never again depart. Think about the implications of that and be encouraged.

There's much about Ezekiel's vision that is mysterious and difficult to understand. There's one observation, however, upon which we can all agree. Ezekiel's response to the LORD's presence is the appropriate response. The prophet describes, *"Then the man brought me through the north gateway to the front of the Temple. I looked and saw that the glory of the LORD filled the Temple of the LORD, and I fell face down on the ground."* (Ezekiel 44:4) Shouldn't that be our disposition of heart, considering all we have read? Perhaps we should do the same even now. Take a concluding moment and (by faith) kneel before the LORD's presence with your face to the ground. Gratefully humble yourself before Him and acknowledge the privilege that is ours to be numbered among His people because of His Son, Jesus Christ. May we never lose sight of the wonder of it all! Bow before the LORD and let Him know!

September 6
Ezekiel 47:1-48:35; Ezekiel 29:17-30:19; 2 Kings 25:27-30
Jeremiah 52:31-34

In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. (Ezekiel 47:1)

As Ezekiel's vision continued, the prophet observed a stream of water flowing from the entrance of the Temple. It flows from the Holy of Holies past the altar and beyond the eastern gateway. What appears to be a small stream deepens and widens beyond the outside wall. Indeed, Ezekiel is led by his angelic guide through the northern gate (the eastern gate is permanently closed) to observe the water's increasing flow beyond the Temple. The rapid increase in depth is noteworthy. It goes from ankle-deep to knee-deep, knee-deep to waist-deep, and waist-deep to a depth requiring a person to swim. All of this is taking place within a relatively short distance. There's nothing natural about the water's flow. It transforms unexpectedly from a small stream to an expansive river.

The greater surprise, however, is the impact of the river's flow. It becomes a source of life to whatever it touches. As the angel explains, *"The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows ... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing."* (Ezekiel 47:8-9, 12)

Again, the water's flow is life itself. It generates life where once there was death. And we must not lose sight of its source. Life ultimately flows from the throne of God. More specifically, it emanates from the LORD Himself. Life is in Him. Of course, similar language is used in Revelation 22, as John describes the new Jerusalem. He writes, *"Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations."* (Revelation 22:1-2) Life flows from the LORD.

Of course, we should experience this life-giving flow even now. On the last day of one of Israel's great feasts, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, *"Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me! Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.' When He said 'living water,' He was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in Him."* (John 7:37-39) Have we turned to Jesus in faith? Are we experiencing the life that streams from Him? Do understand: If Jesus is not seated upon the throne of our hearts, then the life He supplies is drastically reduced. Life flows freely within as we relate to the LORD for who He is. He is intended to be our God and King. So, figuratively speaking, how deep is the water's flow within you? Ankle-deep? Knee or waist deep? Or are you carried along by His presence and life (so much so) that your feet cannot reach the bottom? What do you want it to be? Oh, may God's river of life flow mightily through us today!

September 7

Daniel 7:1-8:27; Daniel 5:1-31

Earlier, during the first year of King Belshazzar's reign in Babylon, Daniel had a dream and saw visions as he lay in his bed. He wrote down the dream, and this is what he saw. (Daniel 7:1)

Our reading today takes us back to Daniel's writings, which include two dreams on Daniel's part—visions that leave God's servant troubled and looking for answers. That's right. The man who interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams now seeks answers for himself. It is worth noting that both of Daniel's dreams appear to parallel and expand upon Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel 2 involving the statue that dramatically collapses. The statue's head, chest, torso, and legs are composed of four metals, all crushed by a rock cut from a mountain (but not by human hands). Daniel's dreams appear to add detail to what was previously revealed.

Space does not allow us to explore all that Daniel's visions suggest. What is clear, however, is God's foreknowledge and authority over the larger affairs of this world. As much as humanity pretends to be in charge, we are not. God sees what we do not. He knows what we are incapable of comprehending. And the LORD's purposes and plans will ultimately be fulfilled.

Daniel's dreams communicate this foundational truth as He portrays the rise and fall of humanity's greatest kingdoms and empires. Does this negate human freedom or responsibility? As I have previously discussed, it does not. It does, however, highlight where ultimate power and authority rests. It is with the LORD, the Maker of the heavens and the earth. God emphasizes this initially with Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:44-45), and He now impresses it anew upon Daniel's heart.

Do we understand the same? To encourage us further, consider the testimony concerning God's promised Messiah. *"As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into His presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey Him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed."* (Daniel 7:13-14) Though this points to Jesus' glorious return, Jesus claims this testimony for Himself as He appears before Caiaphas. When asked, *"Are you the Messiah, the Son of Blessed One?"* Jesus responds, *"I Am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand, and coming on the clouds of heaven."* (Mark 14:61-62)

I marvel at Jesus' response because (at a pivotal point) it directs us back to Daniel's dream and God's revelation of what will be. It also reminds us that God is in the process of fulfilling His larger purpose. Though the kingdoms of this world will come and go, we can be assured that God's kingdom will not.

Through his visions, Daniel learned this in a way he would never forget. May God help us to understand the same.

September 8

Daniel 6:1-28; Daniel 9:1-27; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23;
Ezra 1:1-11; 1 Chronicles 3:17-19

Then the other administrators and high officers began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling government affairs, but they couldn't find anything to criticize or condemn. He was faithful, always responsible, and completely trustworthy. So they concluded, "Our only chance of finding grounds for accusing Daniel will be in connection with the rules of his religion." (Daniel 6:4-5)

Daniel is the kind of person I want to be. His faith in God affects his heart, influences his life, and is there for all to see. Yes, as some might say, "He's the real deal." Of course, the story of "Daniel and the Lion's Den" illustrates the character of this man's faith and life beautifully.

As an exile in Babylon, Daniel did not allow life's challenges to defeat him. He walks with the LORD. He applies himself to his assignments and distinguishes himself from those around him in ways that facilitate his advancement. Indeed, Darius (Babylon's new ruler) intends to promote Daniel to a position that provokes envy from others.

It's at that point that we learn Daniel's true character. His adversaries look to undermine the Jewish exile's rise but can't uncover anything negative against him. Think about that. Could your opponents reach the same conclusion about you? The envious administrators then devise a plan to use Daniel's faith and devotion to God as a trap. They cleverly passed a law forbidding prayer to anyone except King Darius for 30 days. And the penalty? If the law is violated, the guilty will suffer a horrible death. The person will be cast into a lion's den.

How does Daniel respond? *"But when Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room, with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God." (Daniel 6:10)* I am challenged every time I read this. Under the threat of death, Daniel refuses to alter a single thing. He continues to kneel before the One he trusts. Daniel will not violate (what is to him) the higher law or principle—his devotion to God.

Can we confess the same? How easily do we yield to the pressures of the culture around us? How often do we accommodate society at the expense of our faith? Daniel is willing to suffer the consequences—which he does. God's servant is arrested, and despite Darius' attempt to avert his execution, Daniel is cruelly thrown into a lion's den to die. And the ending? Who doesn't know the rest of the story? God miraculously protects his servant from harm, further elevating the testimony of the LORD across the land.

And our lesson? Daniel's example should challenge us to look honestly within our hearts. Would we stop praying if threatened by death? Or does a busy schedule already divert us? Daniel's daily dependence upon the LORD should serve as an example, for he understood who held his future—in life and death. Daniel relates to God for who He is—the living God. Yes, Daniel is "the real deal." Can the same be said of us? Do you want it to be?

September 9

Ezra 2:1-4:5, 1 Chronicles 3:19-24

Here is the list of the Jewish exiles of the provinces who returned from their captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar had deported them to Babylon, but now they returned to Jerusalem and the other towns in Judah where they originally lived. Their leaders were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. (Ezra 2:1-2)

God keeps His promises. We have learned this lesson often over the length of our chronological readings, but our reading today highlights it even further. For decades, Jeremiah announced that judgment would come against Judah, God's people (Jeremiah 20:4-6; 21:7-10). Even more specifically, the LORD's prophet warned that the king of Babylon would be the instrument of God's judgment against their sin and that many would be exiled. Did the people listen? They did not. The people refused to heed God's warning and suffered the consequences. Their experience illustrates a foundational lesson—God keeps His promises. His word is true.

Decades later, a remnant of God's people began the 900-mile journey back to the land of Israel. Indeed, a total of 42,360 descendants of Abraham make their way home. And with each step of their four-month trek, the people should have been reminded that God keeps His promises. Just as God announced their exile, the LORD's messenger also promised their return (Jeremiah 25:1-14; 29:10). God's covenant people would survive their exile. They would be restored in the land of promise. And what occurs? At the appointed time, Cyrus (the ruler of Persia and Babylon) decreed,

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are His people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2-4)

The people of Israel should have learned again that God keeps His promises. The LORD facilitates the exiles' return and finances their journey and the reconstruction of the Temple through a foreign leader. Think about that for a moment. What lesson should we conclude?

Of course, the journey home would have its share of challenges. Reclaiming the land and rebuilding the Temple would include more than a few obstacles. Yet, the people should have learned the foundational lesson—God keeps His promises. Knowing this is true, God's people should have displayed confidence about the future. Did they? We'll continue to follow their story and observe their reaction. But what about us? Have we learned the same? Do we accept God's promises as true? Do we allow God's Word to influence our actions because we are assured of the outcome? Do we actively believe that God keeps His promises? If so, how will we approach the day differently? Let's give that prayerful consideration as we move into the day ahead.

September 10

Daniel 10:1–12:13; Ezra 4:24–5:1; Haggai 1:1-15

In the third year of the reign of king Cyrus of Persia, Daniel (also known as Belteshazzar) had another vision. He understood that the vision concerned events certain to happen in the future—times of war and great hardship. (Daniel 10:1)

Daniel, God's servant, experiences another dramatic vision from the LORD. The vision follows an extended period of prayer and fasting. The prophet is likely concerned for the exiles who had recently returned to the land. He would have been informed about their arrival and initial efforts as the king's official. He may have received reports describing opposition to their progress and their struggles. If so, his response is not a surprise. A man who consistently humbles himself before the LORD in prayer will do so even more intently during particular times of concern. However, his season of intercession may also have been motivated by a greater desire to understand his earlier visions. The images of the four beasts, the ram, and the goat (Daniel 7-8), may have lingered in Daniel's mind. Though the LORD supplied some insight, perhaps God's prophet seeks a greater understanding concerning the future of Israel. Daniel provides a helpful example for others seeking to understand God's revelation. We, too, should be willing to tarry in God's presence. We should humble ourselves before the LORD, submitting to His will and waiting for His guidance. Some insights may not come quickly.

Whatever motivated Daniel to pray, God answered His servant dramatically. A man appears that is unlike any individual Daniel has previously encountered. He writes, *"I looked up and saw a man dressed in linen clothing, with a belt of pure gold around his waist. His body looked like a precious gem. His face flashed like lightning, and his eyes flamed like torches. His arms and feet shone like polished bronze, and his voice roared like a vast multitude of people."* (Daniel 10:5–6)

Who is this mysterious figure? Is he an angelic messenger sent by the LORD, the angel Gabriel with whom Daniel had earlier interacted, or is this a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus? Different Bible scholars support each possibility. My focus, however, is not on the identity of the glorious individual but on what his appearance represents. The man whose presence radiates God's power and glory is a response to Daniel's intercession for Israel. God heard his petitions.

Much of what the man reveals is as mysterious as the messenger's identity. He speaks of being opposed by the prince of Persia but overcoming with the help of the archangel, Michael. What is the nature of this opposition? Is it a portrayal of a spiritual realm unseen by natural eyes? Does it indicate a spiritual complexity to our lives of which we are generally unaware? The man also delivers a message that likewise stretches our imagination. He speaks with authority about humanity's future. The man describes a progression of kings and kingdoms that will historically rise and fall. Though aspects of the message may perplex us, the future is not uncertain to God. God's larger purposes and plan will be fulfilled.

And the applications for us? I suggest we learn again from Daniel's example in prayer. When concerned or unsure, Daniel humbles himself consistently before the LORD. Shouldn't we do the same? Let's also appreciate the spiritual complexity of our daily lives. We live generally unaware of any conflict in the spiritual realm around us. Perhaps we should be more patient with some of life's delays or struggles. Finally, let's remind ourselves that humanity's future is ultimately in God's hands. Current headlines and troubling events may disturb our hearts. It may then serve us well to pray, *"Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* The future is not a mystery to God. Let's renew our trust in Him. Yes, today's reading has stretched our imagination, but may it also strengthen our faith.

September 11

Haggai 2:1-23; Zechariah 1:1-5-11; Ezra 5:2

Then on October 17 of that same year, the LORD sent another message through the prophet Haggai. Say this to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of God's people there in the land: "Does anyone remember this house—this Temple—in its former splendor? How, in comparison, does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!" (Haggai 2:1-3)

Four people stand out prominently in today's reading—two prophets (Haggai and Zechariah), the high priest who is involved in the Temple's reconstruction (Jeshua, also known as Joshua), and the regional governor (Zerubbabel, grandson of king Jehoiachin). Haggai and Zechariah are contemporaries. The LORD uses both prophets to encourage the completion of the Jerusalem Temple. Work had slowed due to neglect and opposition. Haggai and Zechariah urge the people forward. They address Zerubbabel and Jeshua directly, seeking to reassure and motivate their actions. Haggai appeals, *"Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people still left in the land. And now get to work, for I am with you, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies."* (Haggai 2:4)

The prophets also call for the people to return to the LORD fully. The nation had suffered enough as a result of past sin. Through His servants, God calls for His people to respond to Him appropriately. Their future depended upon it. Indeed, Zechariah announces, *"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: 'Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.'"* (Zechariah 1:3) God sought more than the people's physical return to the land. He desired for them to rediscover a right relationship with Him. The LORD adds, *"Don't be like your ancestors who would not listen or pay attention when the earlier prophets said to them, This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: 'Turn from your evil ways, and stop all your evil practices.'"* (Zechariah 1:4) Half-hearted religious devotion would not be accepted.

Yet, as the people return to God, He promises blessing and physical prosperity. The LORD declares, *"I am giving you a promise now while the seed is still in the barn. You have not yet harvested your grain, and your grapevines, fig trees, pomegranates, and olive trees have not yet produced their crops. But from this day onward I will bless you."* (Haggai 2:19) God's message is straightforward. He invites them to walk with Him again so that they might experience the benefits.

The appeals of Haggai and Zechariah prove successful. As Ezra attests, *"At that time the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem. They prophesied in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jehozadak responded by starting again to rebuild the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them and helped them."* (Ezra 5:1-2)

How does this relate to us? God desires the same whole-hearted devotion on our part. Having been delivered by Jesus, we make a mistake when we settle for less than a vibrant relationship with the LORD. The people in today's reading became distracted or discouraged, preventing them from pressing toward all God makes possible. The LORD calls them to focus again on what truly matters. Let's not settle for less than what can be. Let's direct the appropriate attention and effort in ways that fulfill the LORD's purpose and plan. Be encouraged. As we return to Him, He will return to us.

September 12

Zechariah 6:1-8:23; Ezra 5:3-6:14

But Tattenai, governor of the province west of the Euphrates River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues soon arrived in Jerusalem and asked, “Who gave you permission to rebuild this Temple and restore this structure?” They also asked for the names of all the men working on the Temple. But because their God was watching over them, the leaders of the Jews were not prevented from building until a report was sent to Darius and he returned his decision.” (Ezra 5:3-5)

Construction on the Jerusalem Temple continues. Progress is being made, but not everyone is pleased. Tattenai and Shelthar-bozenai (regional leaders west of the Euphrates) raise questions concerning the project, disputing its appropriateness. They sought to intimidate the Jewish leaders by demanding the names of those undertaking the construction. Yet, as Ezra indicates, God is watching over those laboring toward the Temple’s completion.

Even so, Tattenai and Shelthar-bozenai wrote a letter to king Darius, the Persian ruler, reporting on the construction. They include in their letter the Jewish leaders’ explanation for the work. They claim Cyrus, the previous Persian leader, authorized it. The Jewish leaders assert that Cyrus commissioned the work and returned the gold and silver cups Nebuchadnezzar had previously carried away. Tattenai and Shelthar-bozenai question the legitimacy of these claims and ask Darius to investigate the matter and reach a decision.

It is at this point that the story takes an interesting turn. Tattenai and Shelthar-bozenai presume they have the upper hand and expect Darius to end the Temple’s construction. However, Darius researches the Jewish claim and uncovers a scroll that reports: *“In the first year of King Cyrus’s reign, a decree was sent out concerning the Temple of God at Jerusalem. Let the Temple be rebuilt on the site where Jews used to offer their sacrifices, using the original foundations. Its height will be ninety feet, and its width will be ninety feet. Every three layers of specially prepared stones will be topped by a layer of timber. All expenses will be paid by the royal treasury. Furthermore, the gold and silver cups, which were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar from the Temple of God in Jerusalem, must be returned to Jerusalem and put back where they belong. Let them be taken back to the Temple of God.” (Ezra 6:3-5)*

Confirming the Temple’s construction had indeed been authorized, Darius announced his support. The king also adds something in his response to Tattenai and Shelthar-bozenai that causes me to smile. He commands their assistance in the effort. He writes, *“I hereby decree that you are to help these elders of the Jews as they rebuild this Temple of God. You must pay the full construction costs, without delay, from my taxes collected in the province west of the Euphrates River so that the work will not be interrupted.” (Ezra 6:8)* God is working to fulfill His promise.

The lesson from this episode is reassuring. God will accomplish what He intends despite those questioning or challenging His plans. He may even use those who oppose His cause to contribute to their success. Think about that. The LORD is greater than the schemes and maneuvering of men. His purposes will be fulfilled. May God strengthen our resolve to follow His will as we anticipate His provision despite the difficulty. Remember Ezra’s description. God watches over those doing His work. Let’s keep that in mind and be encouraged as we move into the day.

September 13

Zechariah 9:1-14:21

Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet He is humble, riding on a donkey— riding on a donkey's colt. (Zechariah 9:9)

Let's focus today on another prophetic message pointing us to Jesus, the promised Messiah. Zechariah's joyful pronouncement concerning the coming King is one such passage. He describes the Promised One as righteous and victorious yet humble of heart. His humility is highlighted by His appearance upon a donkey's colt compared to a mighty steed. The action also communicates a message of peace on the arriving ruler's part. The gospel writer, Matthew, notes the symbolic significance concerning Jesus as he describes the Son of God's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He writes,

As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. "Go into the village over there," He said. "As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will immediately let you take them." This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, "Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey— riding on a donkey's colt.'" The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. They brought the donkey and the colt to Him and threw their garments over the colt, and He sat on it. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of Him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around Him were shouting, "Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the One who comes in the name of the LORD! Praise God in highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:1-9)

Zechariah announced Jesus' coming over five hundred years before He sat upon the colt. Of course, Jesus fulfills over three hundred prophecies throughout His life and ministry. He is the Promised One of God for all to see. And as Zechariah notes, He is both righteous and victorious. "Victorious" can also be translated from the Hebrew text as "having salvation." You see, Jesus' victory is not for Himself. It is for us—those Jesus would redeem from sin's judgment. Jesus is righteous and victorious. And humble? The beauty of the Promised One's humility would be demonstrated far beyond riding a donkey colt. It would be ultimately displayed as Jesus humbled Himself *"in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:8) on our behalf.

For today, let's focus anew on Jesus and respond to Him for who He is. Let's join the shouts of those who celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. *"Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the One who comes in the name of the LORD! Praise God in highest heaven!"*

Amen and Amen!

September 14

Ezra 6:14-22; Ezra 4:6; Esther 1:1-4:17

So the Jewish elders continued their work, and they were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. The Temple was finally finished, as had been commanded by the God of Israel and decreed by Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia. The Temple was completed on March 12, during the sixth year of King Darius's reign. (Ezra 6:14-15)

The reconstruction of the Temple is finally complete. Sometimes referred to as Zerubbabel's Temple (due to his leadership), the project required 20 years for God's people to finish. Why so long?

The work began in 536 BC following the exile's return to the ruins of Jerusalem. They initially erected an altar on the Temple's original site so they might worship the LORD (Ezra 3:2-3). That would subsequently be followed by a foundation being prepared for the future structure (Ezra 3:8-10). Everything is proceeding well, but then it stalls. The people become distracted by other interests and also encounter a growing level of opposition. The combination of the two produces a delay that extends over a decade.

God, however, remains committed to this work. The LORD calls His people to action through the prophetic appeals of Haggai and Zechariah. The LORD also uses the Persian ruler, Darius, to clear the way for construction to resume. God is doing whatever is necessary to fulfill His command through His people. There's a lesson in that. Whatever God commands, He enables. We should keep that in mind as we live out our faith. Ezra celebrates as much as he declares, *"The Temple was finally finished, as had been commanded by the God of Israel."* (Ezra 6:15)

And the people's response? With joy, they dedicate their new Temple to the LORD. They worshipped Him with generous offerings and resumed a priestly ministry before Him, which had been impossible for 70 years. God has kept His promise. He reestablished His people, who now freely worship the LORD their God.

What lesson should we consider? I already mentioned it above. Whatever God commands, He enables. We need to take this lesson to heart. God doesn't command the impossible. He commands what He intends to make possible. Today's example: The LORD commands that the Temple be rebuilt. He then works to bring it about through the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia. Think about that. God supplies what is needed in unexpected ways—sometimes through unlikely people. The Lord also prompts and encourages His people to do their active part. Yes, they had to set aside their distractions and fears. By faith, they were finally willing to do so. They obeyed and fulfilled God's command, and it was a glorious day.

Will we do the same? What is God commanding us to do? What task is being left undone? Let's be encouraged by today's example and step forward in faith. For we know whatever God commands, He enables.

September 15

Esther 5:1-10:3

On the third day of the fast, Esther put on her royal robes and entered the inner court of the palace, just across from the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing there in the inner court, he welcomed her and held out the gold scepter to her. So Esther approached and touched the end of the scepter. Then the king asked her, "What do you want, Queen Esther? What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!" (Esther 5:1-3)

The story of Esther is an unusual account in the Old Testament. It takes place during the reign of the Persian King, Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), around 479 BC. Many of the Jewish exiles had returned to Judah almost sixty years earlier to reestablish their presence in the land of promise. However, some of the Jewish population remained in Babylon and across Persia, many serving within the Persian empire. The story of Esther takes place within that historical period.

The Jewish woman Esther (also named Hadassah) was orphaned as a child but raised by her uncle Mordecai. It should be noted that the Book of Esther is not a handbook on how to enjoy a happy marriage, nor is it a textbook on faith and life. Indeed, there's much within the book that may leave the reader uncomfortable—particularly the actions of King Xerxes. He deposes his queen (Vashti) for refusing to make a banquet appearance. To compound matters, the king proceeds to replace the former queen by organizing a beauty contest (of sorts) to identify his future queen. Again, there are elements to the story that likely leave us shaking our heads. The book's purpose, however, is not to prescribe God's design for courtship and marriage. The purpose is to illustrate God's ability to preserve His people amid challenging and difficult circumstances.

The villain in the story is a man named Haman, who despises Esther's uncle. His hatred also extends to the Jewish people at large, so much so that Haman (Xerxes' closest adviser) manipulates the king into signing a law that would result in the collective annihilation of the Jewish population across the empire. As the Book of Esther describes, *"Dispatches were sent by swift messengers into all the provinces of the empire, giving the order that all Jews—young and old, including women and children—must be killed, slaughtered, and annihilated on a single day. This was scheduled to happen on March 7 of the next year. The property of the Jews would be given to those who killed them."* (Esther 3:13)

How will God preserve His people from such powerful forces? The LORD positions His people at the right place and time—starting with Esther. She is selected to be Xerxes' new queen among all the women available across the kingdom. Esther's role as queen will prove vital in rescuing God's people. Also, Mordecai (her uncle) overhears a potential assassination plot against the Persian King and communicates this to Esther. She discloses it to Xerxes, protecting him from harm. Mordecai is credited for saving the ruler's life, which will play a significant role in unfolding events. Are all these events coincidental? Absolutely not! The story illustrates how God is placing the right people at the right place and time. Mordecai acknowledges this when he asks Esther, *"Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:14)

Don't misunderstand. It still requires God's servants to act with courage. Esther displays extraordinary courage as she implements a plan to reverse Haman's murderous scheme. Her decisions are vital for the protection of God's people. She is not a mindless pawn. She is heroic and should be celebrated. Yet, the story behind the story remains. God is working to protect and preserve His covenant people. Let's keep that in mind as we step toward our future challenges. God seeks to position the right person at the right place and time. Who knows? That right person might be you. May the book of Esther enlarge our perspective and encourage us to act as the situation requires.

September 16

Ezra 4:7-23; Ezra 7:1-8:1-36

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in August of that year. He had arranged to leave Babylon on April 8, the first day of the new year, and he arrived at Jerusalem on August 4, for the gracious hand of His God was on him. This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel. (Ezra 7:8–10)

Sixty years have passed since the work on the Temple was completed. Challenges in Jerusalem persist, but the LORD's servant Ezra now leads a group of exiles back to God's holy city, including Temple servants, Levites, and priests. Ezra himself is a priest and a notable scribe. He was also commissioned by the Persian King Artaxerxes to improve the Jerusalem Temple and to take command of the Judean community upon his arrival. Indeed, Artaxerxes sends an accompanying royal declaration,

"I decree that any of the people of Israel in my kingdom, including the priests and Levites, may volunteer to return to Jerusalem with you. I and my council of seven hereby instruct you to conduct an inquiry into the situation in Judah and Jerusalem, based on your God's law, which is in your hand. We also commission you to take with you silver and gold, which we are freely presenting as an offering to the God of Israel who lives in Jerusalem." (Ezra 7:13–15)

Ezra's arrival is a notable moment for God's people. The Lord is sending someone to reintroduce His people to His Law and wisdom. Ezra is not just anyone. He is a direct descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. He is also an expert on God's Law and a capable teacher. More than that, Ezra seeks to live out God's teachings. He is a man of sincere faith, and God's hand is recognizably upon Him.

Again, this is a significant step forward for God's people. When God's people are ignorant or negligent of His Word, it leaves them spiritually vulnerable. The LORD is sending His servant to bring God's Word and its application into focus.

That is the lesson I would underscore with us today. Our chronological readings have allowed us to consider God's testimony anew. Yet, as we reflect upon Ezra's role, let's rededicate our commitment to studying and applying God's Word in our daily lives—especially with the New Testament approaching.

God's hand of grace was upon Ezra because of His obedience and devotion. May the LORD's hand likewise be upon our lives as we read His Word and faithfully seek to live it out.

September 17

Ezra 9:1-10:44; Nehemiah 1:1-2:20

At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the LORD my God. I prayed, "O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to You. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens." (Ezra 9:5-6)

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in August of 458 BC. There's no way that he could have anticipated what he would find. As a priest and scribe (an expert in God's Law), Ezra hopes to observe God's people honoring the LORD. What he discovers instead drives the man of God to his knees. The people have defiled themselves again. Inexplicably, God's people have taken up the detestable practices of the surrounding nations. Did they learn nothing from the Babylonian exile? Are they blind to God's holiness, exposing themselves further to His hand of discipline and judgment? To compound matters, many returning exiles (including their leaders) have joined themselves to foreign wives—a further indication of their widespread moral and spiritual compromise.

Ezra is stunned. He did not anticipate such a low spiritual ebb. He tears his cloak and shirt as a public act of contrition. He is appalled by what the people have tolerated and accepted. At the time of the evening sacrifice, God's servant falls to his knees in prayer. Ezra lifts his hands to the LORD and confesses, *"O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to You. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens."* (Ezra 9:6) Ezra's words are honest. His emotions overflow. He acknowledges the people's actions and the seriousness of their sins. He attests, *"Once again we have abandoned Your commands!"* (Ezra 9:10)

A large crowd gathers as Ezra prays and weeps. They share his sorrow and join Ezra in humbling themselves before the LORD. No excuses are made. No justification for their sin is offered. In response, Ezra directs the people to act accordingly. Sorrowing for sin is not enough. They must submit to God's Word and conform to His standard. Yet, not just those gathered, but all of God's people within the land. A call is sent out for the people to assemble. Three days later (on December 19), all the people of Judah and Benjamin convene in Jerusalem. They gather with one purpose—to address their sins before the LORD. It is a solemn assembly. It will become a defining point as they rededicate themselves to the LORD and His wisdom for their lives.

And the lessons for us? God is looking for "Ezras" in our day who will mourn over the spiritual condition of the people. Could that be you? Would the LORD have you humble yourself in deep remorse for the Church's or nation's spiritual needs? Or, are you like those who observe Ezra's sorrow, and it leads you to personal repentance? Is today's reading calling you to examine your life and respond to the LORD anew? No excuses are made. No justification for sin is offered. May we submit the whole of our lives to His standard and honor Him with our devotion.

What is the LORD asking of you?

September 18

Nehemiah 3:1-7:3

So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God. (Nehemiah 6:15–16)

Yesterday's reading introduced us to another significant post-exilic leader among God's people. Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah, served as the cupbearer to Artaxerxes (the Persian ruler). Like God's placement of Esther and Mordecai in the inner circle of Xerxes, Nehemiah is strategically placed by God into the royal entourage of Artaxerxes. He, too, would prove to be an instrument of the LORD on behalf of God's people.

The king's cupbearer receives a distressing report concerning the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. The city wall and gates remain in ruins, and the inhabitants reflect the same disorder. Nehemiah is visibly affected, which draws the attention of the king. Artaxerxes is informed of the situation. He then agrees to send his trusted cupbearer to Jerusalem to address the many problems. He does so with the Persian king's blessing and support. Nehemiah is likewise appointed governor of the province of Judea to facilitate the necessary work.

Today's reading highlights Nehemiah's effectiveness in the role. The situation is every bit as challenging as the earlier report had indicated. Nehemiah, however, acts promptly to organize and mobilize God's people. What had been disregarded and neglected for decades would finally be addressed. Indeed, in a matter of 52 days, the task is complete. The walls and gates are rebuilt, and the city's security is restored. It is an act of God through the availability of His people. It is a beautiful testimony of what God can do when His people take up the challenge together.

It should be noted—the task was far beyond a one-person job. Though Nehemiah's role should be celebrated, the leaders and workers who rally around the cause should be equally applauded (Nehemiah 3). They face threats and hardships but persevere to the end. They are committed to finishing the job with a sword in one hand and a building tool in the other. Their story should inspire us.

And the application? Let's again marvel at God's ability to place the right person in the right place to accomplish His task. Nehemiah is the person for the hour. However, we should anticipate God's continued placement of strategic people as we face today's challenges and problems.

Yet, let's also appreciate that the larger works of God require more than an individual. They demand the coordination and sacrifice of countless individuals to achieve something greater than themselves. Even Nehemiah's opponents recognize that the hand of the LORD is at work.

I pray that will be the testimony for our day. Will you join me in the prayer?

September 19

Nehemiah 7:4–8:12

All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey. (Nehemiah 8:1)

Much has been taking place among the people of God. Ezra has been instrumental in leading the nation toward widespread spiritual renewal. At the same time, Nehemiah organized and mobilized the population to repair Jerusalem's walls and gates. Both men play critical roles as God seeks to restore His covenant people. Today's passage describes how the people gather to hear the public reading of God's Word. To read the Holy Scriptures for oneself was rare. Few copies existed, and a limited number of people had access. That is why today's event is so significant. As the people continue to move toward the LORD, they recognize that they require the light of God's Word. Do we understand the same?

A great crowd gathers inside the recently repaired walls. Ezra ascends a platform with God's Word in hand. However, something noteworthy happens even before God's servant begins to read. Nehemiah describes, *"When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet. Then Ezra praised the LORD, the great God, and all the people chanted, 'Amen! Amen!' as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground."* (Nehemiah 8:5–6) Ezra and the people display joyful expectation as God's Word is opened. Indeed, they praise the LORD but also humble themselves before Him.

Do we reflect the same expectations and humility? Or has the reading of our Bibles become commonplace? Ezra and the people's examples should instruct us. Perhaps we should do more than open our Bibles and read. Maybe we should pause and praise the LORD for the opportunity we share. We are granted the privilege of reading God's revelation. Let's rejoice and humble our hearts before Him before the first words are read. Whether you physically bow down is up to you, but let's do something tangible that expresses to God an understanding on our part.

Ezra and others begin to read the Book of the Law aloud (likely the first five books of the Bible). They do so throughout the morning—maybe even five or six hours. Yet, they do more than read. Ezra and the Levites with him also seek to explain and apply the text (Nehemiah 8:8). The added instruction is helpful and necessary. Daily Bible readings are not about checking a box or fulfilling a religious obligation. We should read to understand and apply. Admittedly, there may be elements of what we read that we struggle to grasp. That's normal. Our prayer, however, should be for understanding so we might walk in the light of God's Word.

God's people spend the day listening to His Word and are inwardly affected. Their past ignorance had contributed to spiritual and moral compromise, and they now respond in heartfelt repentance. Interestingly, Ezra encourages the people to rejoice over what is happening. God's Word is again being elevated to its proper place. The people are discovering what has been neglected for too long.

And what about us? May today's example remind us of what we should seek through our daily readings. Our goal is more than completing a Bible plan. Our prayer is a daily encounter with the LORD, so He might guide our steps, affect our hearts, and ultimately change our lives. Let's praise Him as we read, humble our hearts before Him, and then read to understand and apply. May the LORD Himself help us to do so.

September 20

Nehemiah 8:13-10:39

On October 9 the family leaders of all the people, together with the priests and Levites, met with Ezra the scribe to go over the Law in greater detail. (Nehemiah 8:13)

On October 8, God's people (in a personal way) elevate the authority of God's Word over their lives. They praise Him and humble themselves before Him. They recognize that they have been living in the dark for too long. The revelation of God was again permitted to enlighten their way. This renewed emphasis, however, would not be a one-day occurrence. The following day (October 9), the family leaders return with the priests and Levites to examine God's Law further, even more closely. Do note the role of family leaders. A leader's weightiest responsibility is influencing the family toward the LORD. It is to ensure that the light of God's Word shines brightly within the home. Our families will only know the truth if God's Word is communicated and expressed.

As the leaders study God's Law more carefully, they recognize that they have neglected one of the LORD's appointed festivals—the feast of tabernacles or shelters. It is a week-long emphasis when God's covenant people erect and live within temporary shelters. The purpose is not to promote outdoor camping but to remind the children of Israel of God's redemptive work of grace. The seven-day emphasis points back to the testimony that God sustained His people as He led them across the wilderness. Once established in the land of promise, the week of spiritual renewal expanded into a harvest festival—further acknowledging their need and dependence upon the LORD. Almost five centuries later, Jesus (God's Promised One) would stand up on the final day of this great feast and call out, *“Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me! Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’” (John 7:37–38)* Have you responded to Jesus' invitation?

Returning to today's account, the family leaders see what they have neglected and immediately move to obey God's command. They understood that we are to become doers of God's Word, not hearers only (James 1:22-24). They promptly organize the festival, constructing temporary shelters on rooftops and open spaces. They seek to humble themselves before the LORD anew. The people express their dependence upon Him in a tangible way. God's people also opened their hearts daily to reading God's Word. As Nehemiah describes, *“Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God on each of the seven days of the festival. Then on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, as was required by law.” (Nehemiah 8:18)*

Do we see the progression? The people read God's Word, leading them to respond in faith. But as they act in faith, they continue to read God's Word. Their spiritual revival is directly related to rediscovering the authority of God's truth and revelation over their lives. We should recognize that the same can be true in our day. We, however, must keep our Bibles open if we seek a fresh movement of the LORD. Yet, we must do more than read or listen. We must allow God's testimony to guide our steps forward. Will we do so? I pray God will grant us a longing for Him and His Word. Will you pray the same?

September 21

Nehemiah 11:1-12:26; 1 Chronicles 9:1-34

*The people of Judah were exiled to Babylon
because they were unfaithful to the LORD. (1 Chronicles 9:1)*

One more time, let's remember an obvious lesson. God's people suffered severe consequences due to their prolonged rebellion and sin. They were exiled to Babylon because (as 1 Chronicles describes) they were unfaithful to the LORD. God is patient, and for that, we are grateful. But God's people can push the LORD beyond the limits of His mercy. They can cross a spiritual line that requires His discipline or judgment. The children of Israel tragically chose to do so, and the people endured decades of hardship. We are wise to keep this in mind. When (not if) we stumble, may we refuse to justify or persist in our sin. Instead, let's humble ourselves before the LORD and commit ourselves anew to follow His leadership. How different might the story of Israel have been if they had responded in repentance instead of defiance?

Of course, God brought a remnant of His people back into the land of promise. This month's readings highlight their path home and early challenges. Today's passage focuses primarily on the return of the Levites/priests. The significance of their return is underscored by the completion of the Temple and the worship that eventually ensued. Both Nehemiah and 1 Chronicles trace the genealogical records of those who would serve again in God's presence. Most of the names are not familiar to the typical reader. However, the many roles assigned to the individuals are worth noting. Though they all possess a priestly heritage, they do not perform the same tasks or assignments. Some guard or maintain the gates, while others manage the Temple articles and sacrificial food. Each is assigned specific duties that they effectively carry out. Everyone will not serve in the spotlight. Most will honor the LORD by working in the background. The ministry of Temple would not function otherwise.

That's the lesson I would emphasize for the day. Not everyone will minister or serve the LORD in the same way. Because of Jesus, we are all priests. Indeed, the apostle Peter says of believers, "*You are a chosen people. You are ROYAL PRIESTS, a holy nation, God's very own possession.*" (1 Peter 2:9) Again, because of Jesus, we all serve as priests spiritually. But similar to the Levites, we do not all fulfill the same roles. The apostle Paul illustrates this principle by adopting a body analogy for the Church. He writes,

"But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where He wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary." (1 Corinthians 12:18-22)

Let's take this lesson to heart. Don't fall into the trap of envying or diminishing the roles of others. Let's rejoice over our privilege to serve the LORD in ways He calls and enables. Every member of Christ's body matters. Every act of service is significant to the LORD. Celebrate that today and yield yourself anew to the opportunities before you—especially if it's behind the scenes. It's not hidden from God!

September 22

Nehemiah 12:2–13:31; Nehemiah 5:14-19; Malachi 1:1-2:9

This is the message that the LORD gave to Israel through the prophet Malachi. “I have always loved you,” says the LORD. (Malachi 1:1–2)

Malachi is our final book in the Old Testament. In our chronological readings, however, we still have the book of Joel ahead. The name Malachi means “*my messenger*.” Because of this, there’s some discussion surrounding whether Malachi is the writer’s name or a description of the author’s role. Either way, Malachi is sent by God to deliver a timely message to His people. No additional information about God’s messenger is provided inside or outside his prophetic writing. No reference to the writer’s background, call, or personal life is supplied. Even so, the book of Malachi is frequently cited in the New Testament (Matthew 11:10; 17:12; Mark 1:2; 9:11, 12; Luke 1:17; Romans 9:13) and offers a relevant message for today.

God’s pronouncements through Malachi begin with a declaration, “*I have always loved you.*” Think about that. The opening statement reassures the people of God’s love. That should mean a great deal to people who vividly remember the difficulties of the recent exile. The children of Israel had suffered God’s discipline and punishment. God now desires His people to live in the realities of His blessing and love. The problem is that the people do not appear to be reciprocating His affection. Yes, they participate in religious activities, but their responses are half-hearted. Their daily actions expose less than genuine devotion.

Malachi confronts the spiritual deficiencies through several exchanges between God and His people. The concerns the prophet highlights parallel the same struggles Nehemiah attempts to address as governor. Indeed, Malachi may have delivered these messages during Nehemiah’s absence from Jerusalem. There is one further distinction. Malachi’s messages reflect questions and answers between the LORD and His people. God and His people go back and forth as He exposes their sin and spiritual apathy.

An example in today’s reading involves the people offering inferior sacrifices to the LORD in public worship. Instead of offering God the best of what they have (as He rightfully deserves), they present animals that are crippled or diseased. They offer leftovers or castaways. What does that suggest concerning their hearts toward the LORD? Are they reciprocating God’s love? They publicly confess devotion. Their actions prove otherwise. God’s assessment is blunt and to the point. “*A son honors his father, and a servant respects his master. If I am your Father and Master, where are the honor and respect I deserve? You have shown contempt for My name!*” (Malachi 1:6)

And what of us? What do our actions reveal concerning our response to God? Do we offer just enough to satisfy our perceived obligations? Or do we present to the LORD the whole of who we are, the best of who we are? Let’s think about that as we move into the day. Consider that the next time you gather for public worship. God would declare to you, “*I have always loved you.*” What will your actions (not your words) say in response? May the depth and sincerity of our love be on display for all to see!

September 23

Malachi 2:10-4:6; Joel 1:1-3:21

The LORD gave this message to Joel son of Pethuel. (Joel 1:1)

Today is our final reading in the Old Testament as we complete Malachi and Joel. Like God's servant, Malachi, we know very little about the prophet Joel. Scholars even disagree about when Joel delivered his messages. Some suggest it may have been during the reign of king Joash (835–796 B.C.) before the Assyrian invasion of Israel. Others place his ministry during the post-exilic days of Nehemiah, which is why Joel's writings are placed at the close of our Old Testament chronological readings.

Instead of debating the date of Joel's ministry, let's focus on the prophetic nature of his message. Specifically, let's concentrate on God's promise concerning the future outpouring of His Spirit. Indeed, as we begin our readings in the New Testament tomorrow, let's envision what the work and mission of Jesus will usher forth. The prophet announces God's pledge, *"I will pour out My Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out My Spirit even on servants—men and women alike."* (Joel 2:28–29)

Jesus, God's promised One, will live, die, rise again, and ascend on high so He (and He alone) can fulfill this transforming promise. On God's appointed day, Luke shares the rest of the story. *"On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability."* (Acts 2:1–4) The apostle Peter publicly attests to the day's significance when he declares, *"Joel's promise is being fulfilled."* (Acts 2:16)

Think about that. God announced what He intended to do centuries before it would occur. The LORD will pour out His presence upon His people and not in a limited way. Men, women, young, and old—God would introduce a new work of His Spirit that will move humanity's story closer to Jesus' final appearance. And on that day, we can be assured, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."* (Joel 2:32) Let's rejoice! There is hope in Jesus Christ.

We have come a long way since Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3). We have followed the ups and downs of the human experience. We have observed some of the best of humanity and the worst. Yet, through it all, God has been steadily moving us toward a better day, a promised day. Starting with our readings tomorrow, we will recognize that Jesus is the key. He is the axis that connects the past and future. He is the Promised One of God. May God encourage our hearts as our New Testament readings begin. But let's not lose sight of where we have been. To truly appreciate the wonder of Jesus, we should keep humanity's larger story in view.

In the coming weeks, may God open our spiritual eyes to see Jesus for who He is!

September 24

Mark 1:1a; Luke 1:1-38; 3:23-38; Matthew 1:1-17; John 1:1-18

“This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1)

Today, we begin our chronological readings through the New Testament. It’s fitting that we should start by focusing on Jesus, the Son of God. Each of the four gospels shines light on Jesus’ identity in helpful ways. The Gospel of Mark is straight to the point. Mark boldly announces Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and then demonstrates the truth of his claim through the remainder of his gospel.

In contrast, Luke researches and then highlights the unique testimonies surrounding God’s promised Messiah. Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is heralded by an angelic messenger even before He is miraculously conceived. Gabriel explains to Mary, *“Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. And He will reign over Israel forever; His Kingdom will never end!”* (Luke 1:30–33) God’s message concerning Jesus could not be more clear.

Matthew also highlights an announcement by God’s messenger. This time, the message is directed to Joseph, Mary’s betrothed. Gabriel dispels Joseph’s confusion and disappointment about Mary’s pregnancy by declaring, *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”* Matthew adds, *“All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through His prophet: ‘Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means God is with us.’”* (Matthew 1:20–23)

Yet, before the angel’s announcement, Matthew provides a genealogical record concerning God’s promised Son. The genealogy points us back to the Old Testament witness. God promised that the Messiah, His “Anointed One” (the meaning of Messiah), would descend from Abraham’s line. He would also be from the tribe of Judah and would be a descendant of king David. Indeed, the Messiah would ascend David’s throne, and His reign would last forever. Matthew helps us see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises and prophecies of old. He truly is God’s anointed—the Christ.

Of course, one other gospel will testify to the truth of Jesus. John’s gospel introduces us to Jesus by directing our attention beyond the Old Testament record. John points to Jesus’ existence before the foundations of the world—to Jesus’ eternal nature as the Son of God. John refers to Jesus as the “Word” and writes, *“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone.”* (John 1:1–4) John’s testimony leaves no doubt concerning Jesus’ identity. He is far more than a man or a religious teacher. Jesus is the Eternal God who became flesh. John explains, *“So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father’s One and only Son.”* (John 1:14)

Four gospels herald the same glorious truth: *“Jesus is the Son of God!”* Each will open our eyes to the wonder of Jesus’ identity. Together, they will take us by the hand and introduce us to the One who can change our lives. I pray that God will deepen our understanding through our daily readings so we can see Jesus more clearly and experience His life and power more fully. Join me in this prayer as we turn our eyes upon Jesus.

September 25

Luke 1:39-80; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-40

Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means “God is with us.”

Jesus is the Son of God. Is that how you perceive Him? Each gospel writer seeks to open our spiritual eyes to this truth. Jesus is far more than a man. Even His conception testifies to the uniqueness of His identity. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus did not gradually become the Son of God because of His collective efforts. The promised Messiah is miraculously conceived by God’s Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18) so that even within His mother’s womb, the distinctiveness of Jesus would be evident.

Consider the response of John (Jesus’ forerunner) within his mother’s womb as Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s home. Luke records, *“At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, ‘God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.’”* (Luke 1:42–42) Again, Jesus did not achieve sonship later in life. Jesus’ unborn messenger senses the presence of God’s promised One and reacts.

Zechariah, John’s father, would also attest to Jesus’ identity following the birth of his son. Of course, Zechariah had been mute since doubting Gabriel’s message announcing the **unlikely birth of his son**. Yet, even the birth of Jesus’ forerunner would illustrate the significance of what is unfolding. During John’s circumcision ceremony, Zechariah regains his voice and announces God’s coming Messiah. He joyfully declares, *“Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”* (Luke 1:78–79) The testimony is not a reference to Zechariah’s son, John. It points instead to the life and mission of Jesus, God’s Son. As the English Standard Version translates verse 78, *“the Sunrise shall visit us from on high.”* Jesus is our spiritual sunrise.

It seems only appropriate then that the Son of God would be born at night. Jesus introduced God’s light into humanity’s darkness, bringing hope where hope was lost. As Luke describes, *“She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped Him snugly in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.”* (Luke 2:6–7) Of course, heaven would not remain silent. Luke adds, *“That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. ‘Don’t be afraid!’ he said. ‘I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.’”* (Luke 2:8–12)

God’s sunrise had dawned! Our future hope was born. Let me stress one more time. Jesus did not gradually become the Son of God. From Jesus’ conception to His birth, from Jesus’ public ministry to His death, from Jesus’ resurrection to His ascension, the testimony is the same—**Jesus is the Son of God!** Is that how you perceive Him? If not, I pray that you respond to Jesus in faith. If you already have, I pray that you trust in Jesus more fully today than the day before. May our response to Him reflect a deepening faith and devotion. Jesus deserves all we are because of the truth of who He is—Jesus is the Son of God!

September 26

Matthew 2:1-3:17; Luke 2:41-3:18; Mark 1:1b-11

They entered the house and saw the child with His mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

Today's reading highlights three notable scenes further verifying Jesus' identity as the Son of God. First, the appearance of the mysterious wise men from the east. Who were these individuals? What was their background? Many speculate, but what requires no speculation is the purpose of their journey. They ask, *"Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw His star as it rose, and we have come to worship Him."* (Matthew 2:2) And finding Him, worship they do. They place before Jesus treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The uniqueness of Jesus is recognized, even as an infant.

The second scene describes Jesus as a twelve-year-old child at the Temple. Luke describes how Jesus is engaged in discussions with the religious teachers of His day. And it is said, *"All who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers."* (Luke 2:47). Yes, there's something about Jesus that distinguishes Him from the other twelve-year-olds. And Jesus knew it. When Mary asks why He had become separated from the others, Jesus responds. *"Didn't you know that I must be in My Father's house?"* (Luke 2:49) Again, even as a child, there's something about Jesus that sets Him apart.

And finally, the scene of Jesus' baptism must not be ignored. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all attest to the notable event of Jesus' baptism. Of course, John (the baptizer) had been heralding the arrival of God's promised One. *"Prepare the way for the LORD's coming," John proclaimed. "Clear the road for Him! The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God."* (Luke 3:4-6)

God is setting the stage for the appearance of His promised Messiah, and then Jesus presents Himself to John—and the rest is history. *"Jesus Himself was baptized. As He was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on Him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, 'You are My dearly loved Son, and you bring Me great joy.'"* (Luke 3:21-22)

We have three scenes that all point to the same reality. Jesus is no ordinary infant, child, or man. He is the fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus is the promised Son of God who has come to make the necessary difference in our lives. And our response? I hope it is to trust in Him.

Yet, even more, we should respond as the wise men of old. If they bowed down and worshipped Jesus as an infant, how much more should we (knowing all we do) place our lives and treasures before Him?

And our response? Let's worship Jesus today!

September 27

Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-15; John 1:19-2:25

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where He was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry. (Luke 4:1-2)

Following Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit leads God's beloved Son into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Yes, the blessing of Jesus' baptism is quickly followed by a prolonged period of temptation and testing. That's not uncommon. Our spiritual adversary will often attempt to trip us up following times of personal success or blessing—so don't be surprised.

However, Jesus' experience is beneficial to us. Do note. We would not be aware of Jesus' victory over the devil's schemes apart from His revealing it to His disciples. No eyewitnesses were present for the spiritual skirmish. Perhaps one of the disciples questioned Jesus about temptation, and He shared His experience. Regardless, the testimony of Jesus' wilderness encounter is a tremendous help to all who face temptation.

What can we learn from Jesus' example? Focus on the three emphases Luke highlights: The presence and activity of God's Spirit (Luke 4:1), the illumination of God's Word (Luke 4:4, 8, 12), and the necessity of active faith. Each emphasis is key to our spiritual victory or success. First, note the role of God's Spirit. Filled by God's Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness and (be assured) is strengthened by God's Spirit as the Son of God faces off against the devil. We are short-sighted if we do not recognize our need and dependence upon God's Spirit. Without the Spirit's presence and activity, we will prove inadequate for the battle. Be encouraged. As believers in Jesus, we possess the same Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). We should then seek the Spirit's filling, leading, and power—especially during times of temptation.

Second, center on the illuminating role of God's Word. The devil attempts to lead Jesus astray from the Father's plan three times. Each time, Jesus promptly brings the temptation into the light of God's Word. We often stumble in temptation because we fail to see things clearly. The devil deceives us or seeks to manipulate our emotions. God's Word has been given as a lamp to our feet (Psalm 119:105). Use it when tempted to expose the devil's deception or lie. Jesus models the vital role God's Word is to play.

Finally, pay attention to the necessity of active faith. Jesus prevails at each point because He renews His trust in the Father's plan. At the heart of every temptation is a question, "Who will we trust?" Will we trust our feelings, the misguided appeals of a darkened world, or God and His Word? Jesus models our path to victory, which requires active faith on our part. It involves a trust in God that leads us to say "no" to temptation and "yes" to the One we follow.

Let's learn from Jesus' example. If the Son of God relies upon the Spirit's presence and work, the illuminating light of God's Word, and displays faith in the Father's wisdom and plan, how much more should we? Let's ask God to teach us to respond to temptation, even as Jesus did!

September 28

John 3:1-4:45; Luke 3:19-20

I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

Today's reading includes one of the most significant conversations in the New Testament. Nicodemus, a religious leader and teacher, comes to Jesus for answers. Jesus had made an impression on this notable leader through His teaching and ability to do the miraculous. Indeed, Nicodemus pursues a private conversation with God's "Anointed One" away from the crowd.

Nicodemus eases into the conversation by complimenting Jesus. God's Son abruptly redirects the discussion to address the question of the ages: "What must a person do to enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus is straightforward in His answer. A person, Jesus explains, must be "*born again*" (John 3:3). Born again? How is that possible for an older man like Nicodemus? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time?

Jesus is not speaking physically. Jesus emphasizes the necessity of one's spiritual birth. "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh,*" Jesus clarifies, "*and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" (John 3:6, *ESV*) You need to be born spiritually, Jesus would say. That's important for a religious person to hear. Entrance into God's kingdom is not achieved due to one's good works. Salvation is received like an undeserved gift as a person turns to Jesus, God's Son. As the apostle Paul later declares, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 6:23). Jesus is the key.

Of course, Jesus seeks to open Nicodemus' spiritual eyes by sharing what is now a widely familiar verse, "*For this is how God loved the world: He gave His One and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) Jesus is clear. A person does not enter God's kingdom based on one's merit. We discover life eternal by turning to Jesus, God's Son. Jesus would die on the cross for our sins so we might experience His forgiveness and life. Jesus adds, "*God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God's One and only Son.*" (John 3:17-18)

We should impress Jesus' words upon our hearts. God delivers those who turn to Him from the judgment they deserve. Hope, life, and the promise of God's kingdom are made possible through Jesus. Did Nicodemus believe? The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus doesn't indicate. However, John later tells us that Nicodemus is one of two individuals who took the lifeless body of Jesus down from the cross (John 19:38-40). What must he have been thinking as he remembered Jesus' words? I anticipate seeing Nicodemus in God's future kingdom. But will I see you?

Your response to Jesus will determine the answer to the question. Have you believed in Him? Have you turned to Him as the One who can save you from the guilt of your sin and give you His gift of life? If the answer is "yes," pause even now and give thanks. If the answer is "no," what are you waiting for? Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish. Cry out to Him today!

September 29

Mark 1:14-39; Matthew 4:12-25; 8:14-17; Luke 3:23; 4:16-44; John 4:46-54

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow Me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed Him. (Matthew 4:18–20)

Jesus’ call of Simon and Andrew (and later James and John) is a significant moment in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus had been preaching to the crowds across Galilee, heralding the good news. As Mark describes, *“The time promised by God has come at last!”* Jesus announced. *“The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”* (Mark 1:14–15). It’s important to keep Jesus’ primary message before us as we consider the call of Simon and Andrew. The recurring theme of Jesus’ preaching is repentance for God’s kingdom is at hand. More personally, God’s promised King is at hand. They must respond appropriately to Him.

Regrettably, Jesus’ call to repentance is frequently misunderstood. Jesus is not appealing for people to say they’re sorry for their sins. The New Testament term for repentance is the Greek word *“metanoeō,”* which emphasizes a change in thinking that results in a change in direction. Repentance represents a change in life because one’s perspective changes.

Jesus calls people to change their thinking and actions because God’s kingdom is upon them. Or, as already mentioned, the promised King is among them. He challenges the crowd to change their thinking as their eyes open to the truth of who He is and the difference He makes. *“Repent of your sins,”* Jesus appeals, *“and believe the Good News.”* Of course, Jesus is the Good News. Jesus explained that to Nicodemus in yesterday’s reading. So, the call to repentance is a call to Himself. *“Believe in Me,”* Jesus would say. Or, as He expressed it to Simon and Andrew, *“Follow Me.”*

In a real sense, Jesus’ invitation to *“Follow Me”* portrays what it means to *“repent and believe.”* To believe in Jesus is to follow Him. To follow Jesus is to believe in Him. One statement should be descriptive of the other. Simon and Andrew leave their nets behind because they recognize that there is something about Jesus worthy of their trust and devotion.

Is that descriptive of you? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you follow Him? It should be noted that repentance in the New Testament is not a singular act. It’s a pattern of a believing heart. Repentance is evident as we change our thinking daily and choose to follow Jesus. It’s more than a single faith response. It’s a daily realignment of our thinking around the truth of who Jesus is and the path He leads us to follow. As Jesus later appeals,

“If any of you wants to be My follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23)

Simon and Andrew said “yes” to Jesus’ invitation, and God’s transforming work of grace began. Indeed, Jesus would make them fishers of men and so much more. Can the same be said of us? Jesus’ call to repentance remains. *“Follow Me,”* He appeals. What are you thinking?

September 30

Luke 5:1-39; Mark 1:40-2:22; Matthew 8:1-4; 9:1-17

As Jesus was walking along, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow Me and be My disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed Him. (Matthew 9:9)

Yesterday, we observed Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be His disciples. Jesus appealed to each of them, *"Follow Me."* And they did. They believed something about Jesus justified leaving their old lives behind to follow Him. Some might call them crazy, but they saw Jesus as more than a man, which changed their thinking about life.

Today's reading highlights the same response by a man named Matthew. What's noteworthy about Matthew is his reputation. Matthew is considered the worst of the worst in Jewish society because he is a tax collector. He is perceived by most as a traitor to the nation and a sinner before God. No one in respectable society would have anything to do with a tax collector—except Jesus.

Jesus walks up to Matthew's tax booth and asks him to do what Simon and Andrew had previously been willing to do. *"Follow Me."* Matthew must have been startled by the invitation. Yet, the response of public enemy #1 is just as surprising. Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. He had heard and seen enough about God's "Anointed One" (no doubt at a distance) that when invited to follow Jesus, Matthew didn't hesitate.

Think about what Matthew's invitation represents. No one is beyond Jesus' transforming touch. If Jesus extends His invitation to the Matthews of this world, then everyone can take heart. Jesus can take the worst of the worst and change their lives forever. That means all are invited to experience the life Jesus makes possible.

Of course, Jesus can be generous with His invitation because (as the story of the paralyzed man illustrates) Jesus possesses the authority to forgive sin. Let that sink in. Jesus can forgive a person's sin. To prove the point, Jesus does what no ordinary person can do. He dramatically heals the paralyzed man. Yes. Jesus restores the man's limbs to prove that He can restore health to the man's heart. Jesus truly is the Son of God.

It is not lost on me that Matthew's call occurred after Jesus demonstrated His authority to forgive. The order in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the same. Jesus forgives and heals the paralytic and then calls the worst of the worst to be His disciple. Jesus is making a point. Again, no one is beyond Jesus' transforming touch—except those who choose to be.

That's the sad element of today's reading. Instead of celebrating the good news of Jesus' authority to forgive, some criticized and attacked God's anointed. Instead of rejoicing over the change in the direction of Matthew's life, some would condemn Jesus for associating with such.

Today's reading is both remarkable and baffling. I marvel over the difference Jesus can make, but I am baffled by those who reject Jesus and position themselves outside His touch. And which is descriptive of you?

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
All references unless noted: New Living Translation