

Dear Church,

Have you have been keeping up with the devotional reading throughout July and August? I hope that your prayer has been deepened and your mind has been shaped around God's Word as you daily participate in our communal readings.

The theme of September's devotional is Spiritual Preparation. In his book *A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality*, Glen Scourgie describes three dynamics of Christian spirituality. "The first, the *relational*, deals with being in healthy relationship to God and others. The second, the *transformational*, examines the sanctifying and healing changes God's Spirit works in our souls. And the third, the *vocational*, considers the new life and mission to which we are called." You may find it helpful to examine which of the three dynamics you most resonate with at this time in your life. Is God inviting you to go deeper in that area? Or is he nudging you to focus on the other areas that you may be neglecting?

Here is my prayer for you, for us as a church, Ephesians 3:14-21:
When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth, I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

Amy Martin, Open Campaign Prayer Chair

How can I stay focused and get the most out of my devotional time?

There are a number of types of prayer that have been developed within the Church that Christians have found helpful for many centuries. Here I describe a few of them, and I encourage you this month to practice all of them at least once to see which ones you find helpful during this stage of your life and faith journey. If you would like more personal help in learning to pray and listen to God, find me on the plaza, or contact me at amy.may.martin@gmail.com. I would love to meet with you.

Silence. If you are having trouble focusing in prayer and Scripture reading, it may be that you haven't prepared sufficiently by quieting down your heart, mind, body and environment. "As long as our hearts and minds are filled with words of our own making, there is no space for the Word to enter deeply into our hearts and bear fruit. In and through silence the Word of God descends from the mind into the heart, where we can ruminate on it, masticate it, digest it, and let it become flesh and blood in us. This is the meaning of *meditation*. Without silence the Word cannot become our inmost guide; without meditation it cannot build its home in our hearts and speak from there." --Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*

Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading). This is a form of devotional reading using Scripture or other written works (such as poetry or worship songs) that God might use to speak to you. Whereas traditional Bible study focuses on the universal meaning of the text, *lectio divina* assumes that the reader is already rooted in God's word and good theology and instead places the focus on God's special message to the reader at the particular time of the reading. Instead of asking, 'What does this passage mean?' we ask, 'God, what do you want to say to me today?'

Quiet down. The first step is *Lectio* (reading/listening). Read the passage slowly (preferably out loud), listening for the still, small voice of God

speaking to you personally and intimately. Second is *Meditatio* (meditation). Read the passage again. Ruminates on the word; ponder it in your heart. Memorize it as you say it over and over again. Let God's word for you sink deep inside where it can take root and become a transforming part of you. Third, *Oratio* (speaking/prayer). Read again or recite the part of the passage that stands out most to you. Is God's Word speaking to something specific in you--a wound, a hope, a fear, a sin? Respond by offering that part of yourself to the Lord. Talk to him about it, and allow him to continue to speak to you. Last, *Contemplatio* (contemplation). Sit in wordless silence in the presence of the Lord. What has the Lord invited you to release to him? Breathe it out. What is the Lord offering to you? Breathe it in. End your time with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Visio Divina (Sacred Looking). At times, words are inappropriate to prayer. God is not confined to human language. In fact, often the deepest and richest communication he has to offer us bypasses the auditory processors of our brains and goes straight to the intuitive receptors of our hearts. Our spirits *just know* what he is saying to us. Our hearts feel the peace and love of his presence. During those times when we want to just *be* with God, having a visual image can be helpful. It might be a painting or lighted candle, an ocean view or a bee busy at work. As we contemplate this thing of beauty, we clear away distractions and allow a path for God to communicate his love and truth directly to our hearts. As with *lectio divina*, what we receive from God from this method will come from the knowledge and understanding about God we have already stored up in our hearts; the Holy Spirit is merely bringing the truth to our minds in a fresh and intimate way.

Daily Examen. There are many methods for prayerfully looking back over one's day, and this one by Dennis Hamm is helpful and pleasant. He calls it *Rummaging for God: Praying Backward Through Your Day*.

1. *Pray for light.* Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding.

2. *Review the day in thanksgiving.* Walk through the past 24 hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.

3. *Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day.* Our feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing, are clear signals of where the action was during the day. Simply pay attention to any and all of those feelings as they surface, the whole range: delight, boredom, fear, anticipation, resentment, anger, peace, contentment, impatience, desire, hope, regret, shame, uncertainty, compassion, disgust, gratitude, pride, rage, doubt, confidence, admiration, shyness -- whatever was there. Some of us may be hesitant to focus on feelings in this over-psychologized age, but I believe that these feelings are the liveliest index to what is happening in our lives. This leads us to the fourth moment:

4. *Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it.* That is, choose the remembered feeling that most caught your attention. The feeling is a sign that something important was going on. Now simply express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling -- praise, petition, contrition, cry for help or healing, whatever.

5. *Look toward tomorrow.* Using your appointment calendar if that helps, face your immediate future. What feelings surface as you look at the tasks, meetings and appointments that face you? Fear? Delighted anticipation? Self-doubt? Temptation to procrastination? Zestful planning? Regret? Weakness? Whatever it is, turn it into prayer -- for help, for healing, whatever comes spontaneously.

**A mnemonic for recalling the five points: LT3F (light, thanks, feelings, focus, future).*

Reflection pages (provided).

Focus. As you read and reflect on the Bible passages and devotional thoughts each day, you may find that there are issues that come up that you want to explore further. Perhaps there is a prayer that you can't fully agree with even though you want to. Maybe you feel disappointment with God. Perhaps you feel hurt by the church. Whatever it is, the reflection pages offer you a format to spend some additional time in a model of prayer that can potentially bring truth and healing to your situation.

Thoughts. Rummage through your recent experiences, conversations, mental pictures and internal dialogue related to the focus issue, and jot down the things that seem important.

Feelings. As you reflect on your thoughts, pay careful attention to your visceral and emotional responses. Try to relate specific emotional reactions to specific thoughts. You will be able to see what about your current situation is causing you joy, anxiety, etc.

Emotional Exchange. You can symbolically pull out unhealthy emotions and give them to Jesus; ask him to fill you with something new. Again, receive it symbolically and feel it filling your body where you once held anger, hurt, fear, etc.

Forgiveness. You may find you need to forgive someone (including yourself or God) who has wounded you either by something they have done or failed to do. There are four steps in healthy forgiveness:

Tell the Lord all of the ways the person has hurt you. Be specific, and voice or write out everything that comes to mind, even if it seems small. (*Lord, I choose to forgive this person for...*)

Express to God every emotion that comes up when you think about the way the person treated you. (*When they did this, I felt...*) Ask God to exchange those feelings.

Ask God's forgiveness for ways you reacted sinfully to what that person did.

Pray a blessing over that person.

Beliefs and Motivations. Underlying your thoughts, feelings and actions are the things you believe and value. Your actual beliefs may be different from what you confess to believe, and that is why honest introspection is important. As you uncover your convictions, try to also determine how you might have developed them (e.g. from parents; as reactions to certain experiences; from the Bible).

Truths and Lies. Ask God: 'Is there anything that I am believing about this situation that is a lie?' Then, 'What is the truth you want me to understand?'

Pray. Pray in response to this exercise. Confess attitudes that are not in line with God's Word and ask for God's help in changing your beliefs and values. Renounce any lies you have been believing, and affirm the truth. Thank God when you see the fruits of the Spirit displayed through your emotional responses, and praise him for changes that he is working in you and in your situation. Record important insights from your prayer time so that you can refer back to them in the future.

The first reflection page has been filled in with an imagined (though realistic) example. Walk through it as you reread the instructions so that you can get the most out of using the forms.

Focus: I can't pray because I am stuck thinking about my sins.

1. **What do I think about this?** What specific thoughts come to mind?

God won't accept me the way that I am. If I try to get close to God, I just feel judged. I know what I am doing is really wrong—even my friends disapprove! When I think about changing I feel hopeless, even though most of me really wants to change. I don't know what my life would be like without this sin, so part of me would rather just stick with what I know.

2. **How do I feel about this?** What emotions come up when I think about this, and where do I feel them in my body? If you were to pick up the emotion and examine it, how would you describe it? What would it want to say if it was given a voice to speak?

Joy	Shame	Fear	Cheerfulness	Sadness
Confident	Dread	Dismay	Anticipation	Anger
Serenity	Tolerance	Panic	Humility	Alarm
Trust	Foolish	Guilt	Hopeless	Anxiety
Acceptance	Conflicted	Envy	Disappointment	Annoyance
Surprise	Uncertainty	Pride	Embarrassed	Fatalism
Safe	Unsafe	Cynicism	Submission	Pessimism

I feel guilt in my heart, like black tar. I feel conflicted and uncertain in my head. "What kind of future is ahead of me?" Hopelessness hangs over me like a gray fog. I feel anxiety in my chest, like nails scratching.

3. Emotional Exchange.

God, I give you my feeling of _____. What do you have for me in exchange?

Anxiety → Acceptance

Hopelessness → Lighted Path—a way out

Guilt → Forgiveness & A clean heart

Confliction → Single, solid mind

4. God, is there anyone I need to forgive?

Myself (and I need to ask forgiveness from God); my friend who introduced me to this lifestyle

5. **What do I believe about this?** What specific beliefs and motivations underlie the emotions and thoughts? How did I develop these attitudes and views?

God only loves and accepts people who are really good and cleaned up. Where did I learn this? It's just the impression I got at the church I grew up in. I feel hopeless because I've tried to change before and I know I'm not able to do it. I feel anxious because I feel like maybe there really is a choice that I have to make, but I know from experience that I don't have the strength of will to follow through.

6. **Lies and Truths.** God, what lie am I believing? What is the truth?

Lie: I have to do this on my own.

Truth: God says: "I'll show you the way and I'll be with you every step.

Lie: God will only accept me when I'm clean and perfect.

Truth: God will accept me just like I am and he wants to help me become a better person.

My prayer of response:

Lord, thank you for showing me that you will accept me just like I am without cleaning myself up first. Thank you for telling me that you will light a path for me, a way out of my sin, and that you will lead me and be with me every step of the way. Thank you for your forgiveness and your promise that you will give me a clean heart and single, solid mind. Thank you for showing me that I really can pray and you hear me and I can hear you. Show me what it will look like to live without this sin, and give me courage to walk down that path with you and have a new life. Amen.

3. Emotional Exchange.

God, I give you my feeling of _____. What do you have for me in exchange?

_____ → _____

_____ → _____

_____ → _____

4. God, is there anyone I need to forgive?

5. What do I believe about this? What specific beliefs and motivations underlie the emotions and thoughts? How did I develop these attitudes and views?

6. Lies and Truths. God, what lie am I believing? What is the truth?

Lie: _____

Truth: _____

Lie: _____

Truth: _____

Focus: _____

1. **What do I think about this?** What specific thoughts come to mind?

2. **How do I feel about this?** What emotions come up when I think about this, and where do I feel them in my body? If you were to pick up the emotion and examine it, how would you describe it? What would it want to say if it was given a voice to speak?

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6. Lies and Truths. God, what lie am I believing? What is the truth?

Lie: _____

Truth: _____

Lie: _____

Truth: _____

September 4



Psalm 32:8. The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you."

Sit silently and meditate on this promise of the Lord to you. What is God speaking to your heart through his word?

View the accompanying image. As you reflect on your Father's promise to guide you along the best pathway for your life and his promise to advise you and watch

over you, what does this picture of father and son convey to your heart about God's relationship to you?

Memorize this verse today. Hide God's promises in your heart so that the Holy Spirit can cause them to bear fruit in your life.

Father, thank you for your promise to guide me, advise me, and watch over me. I choose to receive and believe this promise and anything else you spoke specially to my heart as I meditated on your word today.

--Amy Martin

September 5

John 15:4-5. Abide in me and I in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself: it must abide in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit: apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus declares to all of us that He is the vine and we are the branches. Therefore we must stay connected to Him.

We are commanded to not go off on our own way in this life because we will not survive spiritually. God's word declares that not only will the branch not survive, but it will not bear fruit. A broken branch eventually dies. It has no life support, and death is inevitable. The same with us as Christians: apart from God we die a spiritual death that separates us from Him now and in eternity.

Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." Jesus is saying, 'Stay connected to Me, live in Me'--for apart from Him we all will die spiritually. To abide in Jesus means to keep his commandments. And to keep his commandments means to love him with all our hearts, souls, and minds. Some ways that we can display our love for him is through our trust, prayer, and devotion to him.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for always pursuing us. You are with us wherever we go. You are the vine that we the branches are connected to. Please continue to keep me growing and producing righteous fruit as I trust you completely and always stay connected to you. In Jesus' precious name we pray, Amen.

--Rebecca Hester

September 6

Psalm 147:3. He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.

One of my elementary school teachers gave me the nickname “walking wounded” - I was constantly injured in some way and I never seemed to fully heal before managing to injure myself again. It was so bad that I’m pretty sure I had my own personal chair in the nurse’s office.

As I’ve gotten older, the injuries have now (mostly) been replaced with the heartaches of life in a fallen world. I have experienced the loss of family members, interpersonal strife, disappointments, challenges -- the list goes on and cuts deep to the heart. My version of “walking wounded” has changed from the physical to the emotional; it is hidden inside where most don’t see. But the beautiful thing is that God sees my brokenness, and because I come to him, God has compassion and heals my deep wounds.

I’m pretty sure that most people we see on a daily basis could be considered “walking wounded.” Job loss. Family strife. Chronic illnesses. Like me, their list is long and painful. The difference between us and “them” is that we have our Lord who heals and bandages our wounds.

Because we know what healing feels like, shouldn’t we want to help the wounded find healing? May we see people as God sees them, with all the hurt and brokenness, and have compassion to bring them to a place where God can heal their hearts.

Lord, help us to see the walking wounded in our lives. Help us to have compassion for those who are hurting in our community. Help us point them towards the one who can truly heal them.

-- Courtney Tibbils

September 7

Psalm 139:23-24. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

I'm sure I can speak for many of us that it's probably not too easy to pray that God sees all of our thoughts and actions that are sinful. For a lot of us our first reaction is to hide these things, to ignore them, or to justify them in our own minds. Nevertheless, the justifications for our thoughts and actions are not truly life-giving, unless they originate from God first. Therefore, I encourage you to make this your prayer as well, for while it may be difficult to pray that God search you, test you, and point out anything that offends Him, it will ultimately bring you closer to Him.

God, I humbly confess that I am a sinful person. While it might seem scary at times that you know each and every machination of my heart, I know that you love me and that your ways are the ones that are life-giving. Therefore, search me Lord and know me. It is my prayer that anything that offends you may be shown to me so that I may correct them and pursue you more fully. Amen.

--Garrett Koch

September 8

Luke 6:43-45. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thorn bushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.

When we moved into our house, I hung a swing on the beautiful apricot tree in the backyard. For years, we played beneath its shade, and the kids enjoyed the swing. But, most of all, we all loved the wonderful fruit that filled the summer months with sweetness! Many summers came and went till one summer there were very few apricots, and they were just not the same. The tree looked fine, but the fruit in the years that followed was so bad, even the birds wouldn't eat it! We didn't need a doctor to tell us something was wrong. The fruit told the story: Our tree was actually dead in the center. The heart of the tree was rotten, so nothing good could come from it. We needed to cut it down and plant a healthy young apricot tree if we wanted to find sweet fruit again. And that's what we did!

Is your heart healthy, producing sweet fruit when you speak and share life with others? Or are you struggling with outbursts of anger, constantly complaining, or blaming others? Jesus is telling us to search our hearts by assessing our speech and actions. He is the Great Physician and will heal your heart, but only with your permission.

Jesus, touch my heart and renew my spirit. I want my words to bless others with the sweet fruit of your Holy Spirit.

--Rick D'Amico

September 11

Romans 12:1-2. So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I am always amazed at how good actors can play a character that totally contrasts their real character. When you're in a film or play, it's a good skill to have; but it's not good in the Christian life. Too often, I'm afraid, we become like actors assuming an outward expression that does not come from within--that doesn't represent our inner heart life--leaving the impression that we share the world's values.

We need to let God bring out the best in us and develop well-formed maturity in us. This is living a transformational Christian life that is real and genuine; it allows Jesus' light within us to shine through us to the world around.

Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory." Is there any part of you that is ashamed of Jesus and his message? Confess it, and ask him to renew your mind and conform you to his will.

O Lord, there is pressure everywhere to conform to the patterns of this world. Give me courage to stand with a living faith at all times. Transform my mind; my whole being. Take over, Lord, take over.

--Ron Graff

September 12

1 Peter 2:9. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

In his first letter, the Apostle Peter writes in chapter one about what God has done for us and in chapter two he writes about how God see us.

Studies in the last forty years indicate that the way we see ourselves determines to a large degree the way we act and react in life. How do you see yourself? What is your identity? God, through the words of Peter, gives us a positive affirmation in his words *you are*.

God sees us as acceptable. He calls us *a chosen people*. We tend to be people driven by the desire to be accepted. We want to be accepted by our parents, spouse, and friends. But despite our disabilities, character flaws, shortcomings, insecurities, and immaturity, God accepts us as we are. He invites us home. No conditions. No restrictions.

God also sees us as valuable. We are *God's special possession*. How much do you think you are worth? Not net worth, but self-worth. We should never confuse valuables with value as a person.

As those who put their trust in Jesus, we have been rescued from the penalty of sin by his sacrifice on the cross. Why did Jesus go to the cross for us? Because we are of such incredible value and worth to him. God sees you as capable. We are *a royal priesthood*. Being a priest may sound a little scary to us! The Latin word for priest simply means bridge. God sees you as a capable bridge that helps people get access to himself. When I think of this metaphor, I am encouraged with feelings of humble confidence as I realize that God has entrusted his work to us.

God, thank you for seeing me as acceptable, valuable and capable to do the work you have called me to.

--Dean Mayeda

September 13

Colossians 3:1-5. Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory. So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.

One of the biggest reasons why professing Christians don't grow spiritually is that we either think very little about heaven, or we misunderstand what it is. As a result, we don't long for heaven as our true home and view ourselves as foreigners amidst a sinful culture. Paul tells us to think about the things of heaven. What makes heaven so great? There is no violent or immoral entertainment, no gossipy magazines to read, no opportunities for illicit pleasure, no sins in other people to criticize, no money to hoard, no power to abuse, and nothing to boast about. If our focus is on sinful, earthly pleasures, heaven will not hold much appeal. But if our desire is to worship God and love others, unhindered by sin, then heaven is exactly the kind of place we will think about and desire. And as we think about heaven, our present lifestyle will increasingly resemble our future lifestyle.

Jesus, help me to view myself as a citizen of heaven and to long for the day when I can worship you and love others in a place completely free of sin and temptation. Help me to place my greatest hope in the joy of eternal life with you, not in the earthly pleasures of sin.

-- Dave Martin

September 14

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ.

How do you know you're called by God? Earlier in this passage Paul says it is because you believed what you were told about Jesus. It's that simple. You were told, you believed, and now you're part of the people of God, chosen to tell others so that they can also believe. So you go to work, or school, or keep busy around the community, while all along you embody the Hope of the World. It's like you're Clark Kent, but you don't need to rush to a phone booth to change outfits before performing heroic feats. It's within your everyday roles and responsibilities that God empowers you to contribute to saving souls and changing lives. What is your faith prompting you to do in your place of business? At school? At home? In your community? Do you make it your goal to honor the name of Jesus before every person you interact with? Do you allow your faith to inform your decisions and priorities?

Jesus, give me power today to be a blessing to others and honor your name at all times. Remind me that I have Hope that others need and that nothing is as important as sharing that hope with the people around me.

--Amy Martin

September 15

Psalm 39:4. Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.

When I read these words at age 15, I thought, "No, thanks. I'm not going to think about dying *now*. Too depressing!" That summer, my friend died suddenly. I was shocked and saddened and very angry at God. It seemed so wrong! Only old people should die - not my friend! This was the first time someone close to me had died. It frightened me, I think, because I was faced with the specter of my own death. My friends and I never talked about it. I actually pushed away the thought that I would grow old and die. Now, 50 years later, I begin the day with this prayer and often add the words of Psalm 90: "So, teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom."

What caused me to embrace the prayers I once rejected? Just this: I have lived long enough to know seasons of great blessing and pure joy interwoven with crushing losses, pain, and despair. Quietly, God has used those joys and sorrows to change me, teaching me to cherish each moment with family and friends. These verses urge us to view all of life, even the end of life, with clarity and perspective by looking through the lens of God's Word. Honestly face your own mortality, and you will treasure each day as a gift from God. You can relax with God and unwrap that day expecting Him to lead you, to use you, and be at your side through whatever may come.

Let's redeem the time God's gifted us by living each day on purpose.

Lord, I thank you for this life, this day. Open my eyes to Your plans, I pray.

--Rick D'Amico

September 18

1 Kings 18:41-45. And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the winds rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

James 5:17-18. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain...

James says that Elijah was a regular human being just like us. He didn’t have superpowers. He relied on God through prayer. Imagine how he felt as he prayed for rain on the top of the mountain. It hadn’t rained for three and a half years, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. He had told King Ahab it would rain based on God’s promise, but he must have been tempted to doubt after praying for a while with no answer. Imagine if he had given up after his servant checked the sky for the fourth, or fifth or sixth time. God would have been dishonored and the people would have starved from famine. Thankfully, Elijah continued to pray until God kept his word. What has God put on your heart to pray for? Keep praying and checking for his answer until it comes. Even if God’s answer appears to be insufficient at first, continue to trust Him.

Lord, help me to remember that Elijah was a normal human like me, and to pray with the kind of faith that he modeled, trusting that you will keep your promises.

-- Dave Martin

September 19

Psalm 73:21-26. Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant—I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.

Are you reconciled to this unflattering description of yourself? The first step in spiritual growth is to come to a point where you can acknowledge and articulate who you are apart from God's intervention.

Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.

The Good News is that God would never leave you in that hopeless state. You might be like a brute beast--but you are His beast! See yourself being transformed by the Lord from an untamed, unreasoning animal to a spiritual person with a "glorious destiny". What will that journey look like? Are you ready to take the next step with God?

Lord, thank you that I belong to you. Thank you for holding my hand as you guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but you remain the strength of my heart; you are mine forever. Amen.

--Amy Martin

September 20

2 Corinthians 4:6-7. For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

Like the people of Corinth, we too need encouragement and that is why we have this scripture today as a reminder of the following:

- * As good as life can be or as tragic as life can be for each of us, we are always reminded we live in a fallen world because of the pain and evil we see and live through.
- * That is why God, who loves each and every one of us so much, sent his only son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins.
- * However, God's promise was not to make us sinless, for we are still sinners living in a sinful world. But now, we have a savior who gives us the hope and strength to be a light (a reflection of Jesus) in a dark (sin filled) world.

Let us all remember that God knows we are perishable containers, and be encouraged to know He doesn't expect us to be perfect Christians. What's more important is we use the power God gave us, through Jesus, to have the strength and courage to strive daily to be a light in this dark world.

Lord, my prayer today is that I will shine brightly in the South Bay and maybe you will use me to bless a lost soul in the name of Jesus Christ.

--Raul Chipeco

September 21

1 Corinthians 10:31-33. So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved.

I myself have been a people pleaser the majority of my adult life. Recently I have asked myself if I am doing so with the intent of loving others, or am I doing it for my own satisfaction? One day I was listening to a sermon, and I heard a phrase that changed my life and my approach towards others.

God's glory is at stake. What does that mean to you? God's glory is at stake with how I act when my marriage isn't going smoothly. God's glory is at stake with my interactions with the homeless and the thoughts that go through my mind. God's glory is at stake with my actions while I am at work and surrounded by nonbelievers. God's glory is at stake when I am playing sports or going out with friends. You can easily fill in the blank after that phrase, and ask yourself if you are truly glorifying God in what you are doing at any given moment. When you are in any situation, do you feel the gravity of God's glory being at stake?

We are tasked with working with God to save souls and make disciples of Jesus and doing so by leading with love for others before ourselves. As we interact with others, remember as you think and speak and act: *God's glory is at stake.*

I still consider myself a people pleaser by the common definition, but I am now leading with love for others and glorifying God through my actions rather than finding fulfillment in my own satisfaction.

Father, I pray that my intent in all my actions is to honor and glorify you, and remember in all that I do, all my interactions, and in the situations I find myself in, I seek to uphold your Glory.

--Butch Paredes

September 22

2 Corinthians 12:7-10. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

If we have everything going our way, we can coast along, forgetting to seek God's presence and guidance each day. We seek and receive the admiration of others in all areas of life, even at church. We find it extremely addictive, but strangely unsatisfying. Something is wrong, but we're not sure what it is. We push it aside and move forward, confident that we will be fine. But then when trouble comes, we often react angrily: to sickness, financial peril, emotional suffering. Instead of loudly protesting the unfairness of it all, we need to be still and listen.

Jesus says, 'I am here. I have always been here. Thank Me for the conditions that require you to be still. Your weakness is an opportunity for you to latch onto Me in unashamed dependence. Awareness of your need for Me is a rich blessing, training you to rely wholeheartedly on Me. Quietness and trust enhance your awareness of My Presence with you. I will lead you through these very circumstances to find My way in this present moment. I know the plans I have for you, My Child. Rejoice in your insufficiency, for My Power is made perfect in weakness!'

Lord, Jesus, use my trials to draw me close to you. May Your Life be my strength and bring you glory.

-- Rick D'Amico

September 25

2 Timothy 2:20-21. In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

Our Lord is always working to refine us. To grow us. *To make us more like Christ.* Maybe, in this scripture, the large house is the churches within the South Bay community. The articles are the people within these churches--some covered in gold and silver and others covered in wood and clay.

What if it's God's plan to use the Open Campaign to cleanse us, to refine us, to make us pure so we can shine like gold and silver, to know we are priceless in Christ and reflect God's love? Then our Master will use Nova Community Church like never before for His most special purpose: saving His lost children in the South Bay and beyond. May we be a church that truly is prepared to do good work--God's work!

Lord, my prayer is that you will purify me and lead me to trust you during the Open Campaign, so I may become one of your gold or silver shiny instruments used to do your good work, God's work! Amen.

--Raul Chipeco

September 26

Hebrews 12:1-2. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Here’s how to win the gold medal in living a life of faith in God:

Divest yourself of any hindrances. A winning runner doesn’t run in hiking boots. He strips off everything that would hinder him. What is hindering your faith and tripping you up?

Run with endurance. Running a heroic faith life is not for sprinters who flame out after 100 or 200 or 400 meters. It is a long-distance race, a marathon for faithful plodders. Do you find yourself getting tired of living the Christian life?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. When we take our eyes off of Jesus, we lose faith and sink like Peter. “Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever.” (The Message) Where is your focus?

Lord Jesus, I so want to hear you say to me on judgment day, “well done, good and faithful servant”. I confess my struggle(s) with _____. I also find myself focusing on _____ instead of you. I now come and lay it all before You. Cleanse me, help me to be like you and run the race well that you have set before me.

--Ron Graff

September 27

1 Corinthians 4:3-5. As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.

We often care so deeply about what others think about us. Those concerns drive us to dress a certain way, show up at different events, behave in a certain way, and say all the right things. Our outward appearance is how the world judges us. But God judges our hearts. He knows why we do what we do. We should always be seeking his guidance and asking him to change our hearts for the better.

Lord, help me to align myself with your will. I don't want to just do the right things, but I want to have a heart like yours.

--Thomas Whiteside

September 28

Ephesians 4:1-6. Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

To take seriously one's Christian calling is to be serious about maturing spiritually--to lead a life worthy of that calling. Check your spiritual progress by reflecting honestly on these questions:

*Am I humble? Or do I put myself ahead of others and push my own agenda?

*Am I gentle? Do I care for other's feelings and say things without anger or harshness or disdain?

*What am I doing to cultivate patience? How has my impatience offended others recently?

*Do I make allowances for other's faults? Do I remember that I myself need to grow in some areas? Do I leave a generous amount of room for improvement for others, cheering them on and supporting them as they make mistakes and grow? Do I understand the meaning of "love covers over a multitude of sins"?

*Am I making every effort to keep unity and bind myself to others in peace? Do I need to forgive anything or ask forgiveness? Am I holding any grudges or judgment against another?

Holy Spirit, be my mirror. Search my heart and convict me when I am blind or dishonest about my weaknesses and sins. Give me a heart that is fiercely committed to unity with my brothers and sisters at Nova.

--Amy Martin

September 29

Ephesians 3:20-21. Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

Kids know what they want – an extra cookie, a new video game – and they certainly think they know what they need! Any deviation from not getting one’s way could be met with brief resentment and family turmoil! A loving parent often gives a child what the child desires, and yet they are always considering and planning for what the child truly needs and ultimately will desire when the child is older and (hopefully) wiser.

In Ephesians 3, Paul writes that God’s power working in us and his purpose for us (“the church”) are greater than we can comprehend. Like children, we are limited in our perspective, and oftentimes our requests to our Father are not based on his character and nature. God desires to bring glory to himself and to his Church in unimaginable ways, and he has privileged us to be those who bring him glory through prayer and action as the Spirit works in us.

Father, strengthen my trust in you today. Forgive me for doubting your love and power. Change my desires to be your desires. Open my eyes to the work you are doing around me and help me to pray boldly and expectantly for your kingdom’s causes.

--Andrew Pitman