



# 2021 Weekly Devotions

**Week of: March 15<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup>**

**Sermon: March 14<sup>th</sup>**



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
building community ◦ equipping believers ◦ serving Jesus

March 15

**John 14:1-3**

It is safe to say that we all struggle in our circumstances sometimes. Peace in the midst of events that are sensical and obviously clear is easy. When they are confusing, hurtful, and appear meaningless, peace, apart from faith, is almost unattainable. Our chosen text for today is spoken to Christ's disciples on the Thursday night when He is betrayed, denied, arrested, and tried. Jesus knows that He will soon be taken from them. He knows that confusion and heartache will overwhelm them but on the edge of this soon approaching reality, He speaks these words of comfort, of guidance, of strength, and hope.

Brothers and sisters, these words are for the hard times. This is kin to Paul saying, "Fight for your faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). The ability to hold onto faith, to maintain peace, and to not let your heart be overly troubled is given to believers by the Holy Spirit. Many are the situations in this life where we may utter the words, "I just can't do it." Likewise, many are the opportunities for us to lean into the Holy Spirit and actually live the "overcoming" life (John 16:33). Friends, we must understand we *cannot* handle all that we face all the time. It is not uncommon nor is it unbiblical for us to be in over our heads. The sooner we accept this reality the better. There is no need to waste too much energy and time trying to fix what you can't fix. This passage provides a better way. Frankly, it provides the only way.

When you cannot see what God is doing, when the world doesn't make sense anymore, and when it just isn't going the way you thought it would, even though you were trying to be obedient, this is when and where you lean into the promises of God. In this passage, Jesus tells us that He is going away to prepare a place for us and that He will come back and get us so that we can be with Him again. He gives us a promise and reminds us of a place that we will call home (heaven) and that our key to this place is faith in Him as our Savior. But this is spoken into a situation that is going to be extremely dark, painful, and confusing.

Beloved, I am sure that you have heard it said, "We must believe in the dark what we learned in the light." Folks, the training, the strengthening, the discipleship is certainly valuable in the easy days, but it is truly necessary when the battles begin. In the heat of the heartache, you must believe and trust that God is still working out His perfect and wonderful sovereign will. In our text for yesterday's sermon, Jesus knew what He was doing. He knew the Father's perfect plan was unfolding. I hope you remember as I preached yesterday the clear evidences that God was still controlling the situation right down to the moment Simon the Cyrene "happened" to walk up. God was orchestrating events for larger purposes. He is still doing that today.

Friend, as a child of God, there is never a time when our Father stops loving us or stops working life out for our good. No, it doesn't always make "earthly" sense. Yes, sometimes it looks like we are losing. The truth is that we are not because He cannot lose. Family, "Let not your heart be troubled in these days." I can almost imagine Jesus giving us a wink even as He was carrying the cross and saying, "Hold on. I've got this and you are about to see."

March 16

**Luke 23:26, John 15:2**

This passage from Sunday's sermon contains the phrase, "They seized a man, Simon the Cyrene...." Simon was grabbed and forced to help Jesus carry the cross to Calvary. He did not choose it nor was it voluntary. The same can be said for all of us. The Father chose us, wooed us, and effectually called us to follow His Son and to be cross bearers. The amazing paradoxical truth is that it is in our slavery to our Master that we become free, and it is under the weight of the cross that our burdens are lifted. The point that I want us to ponder today is that it should be considered a hidden benefit when God, through others (the Romans) or circumstances, against our own will causes the cross to be imposed on us which we do not like to bear, and which yet, is good for us.

In John's gospel, Chapter 15, verse 2 it says, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit." Have you ever watched a master gardener prune or cut back a plant? Man, there are times when it looks like the plant is being massacred. To the ignorant eye, this butcher of the bushes can appear to be killing the flowers; but to the knowing eye, he is a wise vinedresser. He knew that a bush's life actually *increases* with pruning.

Before Jesus went to the cross, He gave a final sermon to His disciples. Right in the middle, He uses this gardening metaphor to describe the importance of growing spiritually and drawing strength from Him—the true vine. Jesus was telling the disciples and all Christians that He was setting them apart for a lifestyle of bearing fruit. Their fruit would come as a result of God's intentional pruning and I would add to that today – cross bearing. A wise vinedresser doesn't let his fruit grow wildly on its own. In order to produce the best fruit, he must follow the established rules of pruning by cutting away dead or overgrown branches to encourage growth. Before the grapes can be made into wine, pruning must occur. Like the branches in Jesus's story, we're all unique, and our pruning won't look the same. He will prune us differently, but this is a process we entrust to Him, knowing that He is good and at work in our lives.

Pruning often happens during our trials because suffering is a prime time for the revelation of the idols in our hearts. We can't really grow spiritually and turn away from our idolatry if we can't identify our own idols. Biblical counselor David Powlison uses an illustration to show how our difficult circumstances serve as effective idol-revealers. He takes out a water bottle filled with water, removes the cap, and starts smashing the bottle, bending it, and spilling water out of it. Soon water is all over the place. He then asks, "Why is there water on the floor?" The initial answer is that there is water on the floor because he shook the bottle. But the ultimate answer is that there is water on the floor because there was water in the bottle. The situation doesn't create the water it just reveals what's inside. Again, the reality is that our biggest problems are within us not outside of us. God knows what it takes to truly transform us into the image of His Son and to bring us to the place of "fullness of joy." Sometimes it's a strange journey but it is right and necessary. Trust the Master Vinedresser.

March 17

**Proverbs 3:5-8**

How does one “lean not on their own understanding?” Do you realize just how difficult that is to do? Think about it. Everything I understand and know, everything I’ve experienced and have grown to “handle” in this world, I am here called to lay aside. This means there is a category of events in life that I cannot “figure out” or put into my neat little box. We would certainly not deny the Scriptural admonition that we are to be growing in wisdom and stature as children of God. The point to ponder today is that there must obviously be a limit to what we can know and understand. Where does that leave a child of God?

How often do we cheer others on with phrases like, “You’ve got this” or “You can do it?” Can you imagine yelling out to a friend or family member, “You don’t have what it takes this time” or “Hang it up buddy, you can’t figure this one out?” I know that sounds almost cruel, but it is important to come to grips with this reality. There are actually circumstances in this life that we cannot fix or fully grasp. Friends, as scary as that may sound it should not be. You see, that wisdom that we are supposed to obtain from God’s Word is adequate to teach us this truth too. AND it is where we will find genuine peace to be “okay” with this reality. As the Holy Spirit teaches us the very Word of God through our reading and study, we learn that there is a beauty in our brokenness and great value in our vulnerability. Much of what God is doing through our lives is breaking our self-reliance and causing us to voluntarily submit ourselves to His will. Does it make more sense to rely on our finite and limited, sinful self or on our infinitely wise, good, and perfectly holy God?

Beloved, when you stop and think about it, you cannot effectively come to Christ as Lord and Savior until you reach the point of accepting your sinfulness, weaknesses, and complete and utter inability to save yourself. The Gospel tells us that God is our Creator and as such has the right to rule us. It also tells us that mankind rebelled against His authority and rule over us and sinned which led to death for the entire human race. We learn in the Gospel that there is now none righteous and that all fall short of God’s holy and righteous standard. This leaves us totally helpless in regard to saving ourselves. Our human nature says that we should be able to work hard enough to earn a right standing with God. It tells us that if we just keep trying harder that we can save ourselves. But here is one of those places where we must not lean on our own understanding. We must trust God and accept His one and only way for our redemption. Remember, the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; yet we know that the Gospel is beautiful and freeing. We know that we can run to our great God in heaven in belief and repentance and be forgiven and saved.

When I read the sermon on the mount (Matt. 5-7), I am always left with this conviction, “I can’t do it.” When Jesus says, “Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father if perfect” (Matt. 5:48). I am just unable to meet that demand. I can’t get there. I can’t reach that. I can’t make that happen. I can’t do a lot of things in this life and that’s okay. When I can’t make sense of things dear ones, I just rest in His knowledge, wisdom, and ways as I acknowledge Him as God.

March 18

**Psalm 30:6**

I hope that I don't sound like a broken record this week in our points to ponder. It is just that I know from firsthand experience how important it is to be grounded in God's Word if we are going to be faithful and strong through the trials of our lives. It is one thing for us to consistently tell you that you should have faith and that you must persevere. It is another thing for you to actually have the strength to do that. I equate it to me telling you to pick up a 300lb object knowing that you have not been trained to do so. You may say, "Sure, no problem, I'll get right on it." You may even think you can until you realize you don't have the strength. Faith is like that for many of us. We think our faith is "all that" until it comes under intense pressure. Under pressure we begin to realize the weaknesses of our faith and how bankrupt we may be.

Brothers and sisters, when you and I have plenty; when we are bringing home our wealth; when the winds and waves are pleasant and comforting as they bring in blessing and carry out our problems; when our gardens are producing bountifully; when the weather is just as we want; when we stand as successful men and women; when we enjoy good health; when we are marching through this world and living happily; when we are on our highs and awesome song lyrics are on our lips—the inevitable consequence for such an easy life is presumption. We can go on thinking that we are the best Christians ever to walk the earth.

Family, we must beware of the smooth places on our way. If God should always rock us in a gentle cradle or if we were always enjoying good fortune with no clouds in the sky or bitter drops of wine in this life, I am afraid that we would be lulled into an intoxicated stupor of thinking we are better and more faithful than we are. We could easily be in a state of jeopardy and not even know it. King David said, "Now as for me, I said in my prosperity, I will never be moved." If you keep reading that Psalm, you will find that David goes on to say that at that moment God "hid His face", David was dismayed (v.7). What happened to "I will never be moved?" The purifying fire of God's love for us will not allow us to rest too long in those places of complacency and false security.

Oh, dear ones, it is so easy for us to think we have arrived and that we are so spiritually strong on calm seas. Thank God for the afflictions and the changes in your life that keep you humble and dependent. Thank God for the times of chastening and discipline so that we don't become too secure in ourselves. He has ordained the season of trials and sufferings as well as the intensity and place in our lives. He has ordained that the cross of troubles to clearly distinguish the King's children. Our comfort comes knowing that our Master has walked this path before us. We have his presence and His sympathy to cheer us on. We have His grace to support us and His example to teach us how to endure. When we finally get home (heaven), the glory of heaven and of our King will prove more than enough to satisfy us and to help us see that our tribulations were well worth the cost.

March 19

**Romans 10:17**

So how does one get the faith to trust God when the weight of the cross is too heavy. How do we learn to really trust Him when we honestly can't see His hand at work in our lives? Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." Today I hope that you will think on the fact that there must be substance to your faith. When the wind blows hard against you and the pressure is turned up, your faith must be grounded in deep conviction over facts. Saving faith is faith that believes facts. It is more than believing in facts, but not less.

This is plain from Romans 10:9 as well: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a historical fact. It really happened in history. Saving faith believes that. This is one reason faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior can be so weak in so many. Faith is rooted in facts, and for many the facts are not known. The gospels are there to give us the precious facts with all their personal and powerful significance. But the facts are basic and essential. Saving faith believes facts, and sees them as draw-dropping, amazing truths. Saving faith is more than belief in facts; it is also a personal confidence that these facts mean Christ has saved me and will fulfill for me all God's saving promises in this life and in heaven.

Saving faith rests in the facts. Rests! Saving faith is not anxious and worried all the time. It is anchored in facts. So, saving faith is a confident resting in these facts, that God saves me and takes care of me as His child. But it is plain here that it happens by the word. Verse 17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." So, if you are struggling, put yourself in the way of the word, the way of hearing the message of the cross. Hearing the gospel of Christ crucified and risen is the means God uses to give us confidence that we are saved by it. Friends, if you are going to win the fight for your faith, you need to know in what and whom you are trusting. The Bible is clear that the only way to do that is through the Word of God.

Look where Paul landed because of genuine knowledge of Christ. In Philippians 3:7 he says that he counts everything as rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus his Lord. This is a treasuring of Christ because you truly know Him. That is part of what saving faith is. To be sure, we grow in this, but you must understand the growth happens as you read and study His Word. Folks, if a study diet of God's Word is not on your daily menu, I don't know how you think your soul is going to be nourished. It is no wonder so many are spiritually malnourished. So called believers are starving themselves to death as we fail to feed on God's written Word. Is there any wonder that many who claim to be Christians don't act like it when under pressure? When it's all on the line and your well being is at stake, do you know Jesus well enough to trust Him with the most precious things in your life? Time will surely tell.

March 20

**Matthew 5:29-30**

This may seem like a major shift in my focus in light of the last few points to ponder and truthfully it is. One benefit to writing these devotions is that Pastor Aaron and I can address issues from the text that we simply cannot get to in a single Sunday morning sermon. Today's devotion is one of those issues. Jesus is most likely dealing with two prophecies when He tells the crowd that the day is coming when unregenerate people will wish they never had children to mourn and that they would rather mountains fall on them to crush them to death rather than keep living. That sounds rather extreme doesn't it? Jesus could easily be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70. But, certainly, He is providing a picture of the horror of end times events. Can you imagine suffering so intense that parents are crushed by the hopeless and unending wrath their lost children are enduring?

Beloved, Jesus is once again, even in the midst of His pain, extending mercy to us as He reminds us to take advantage of the opportunities we have now to be saved. Charles Spurgeon once advised fellow-preachers, "Shun all views of future punishment that would make it appear less terrible." Efforts to extinguish the flames of hell abound in our day, just as they did in his. As you listen to popular views about hell, you can test what you hear with a couple biblically discerning questions: Does this view of hell diminish the threat of God's judgment? Does this teaching soften the urgency of repentance? Modern views of hell won't survive the test of biblical fidelity. They'll allow the sinner to feel more comfortable and complacent by removing the judgment and wrath God, making Him appear only loving and gentle.

Whenever Jesus described hell, He was never flippant or dismissive. He used vivid, terrifying terms to describe the final destination of sinners, shocking and scaring His audiences with frighteningly graphic metaphors. Hell is a place so bad that you should be willing to cut off sensitive, irreplaceable parts of your body to avoid it (Matthew 5:29-30); even martyrdom would be worth avoiding the torment of hell (Matthew 10:28). He always presented hell as a *horrific* place of intolerable suffering. My evangelism professor at Southeastern Baptist Seminary used to say, "Hell is an actual place, an always place, and an awful place." Jesus' descriptions are consistent with other biblical writers. Daniel referred to hell as a place of shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). Paul called it a place of endless destruction and punishment (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). Jude called hell a place of eternal fire and darkness (Jude 7). The Apostle John described hell as a place where sinners suffer everlasting torment, with no rest day or night (Revelation 14:9-11).

Taken together, all those descriptions of hell communicate pain, fear, loss, anger, separation, and hopelessness. It is utter agony, eternal torment. John Calvin, commenting on those descriptions, wrote, "By such expressions, the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread." Calvin understood the Bible's appeal to our senses. When you read about hell in Scripture, you can almost hear the agonizing wails, smell the smoke and burning sulfur, see the flames from the lake of fire, and feel the seething anger of the wicked as they gnash their teeth at the Righteous Judge. Here His warning and come to Jesus today!

March 21

**Isaiah 46:8-11**

I don't really understand why many people fight so hard against and attempt to resist the wonderful teaching of God's sovereignty. Do you really want to live in a world where He is not completely in control? Would you feel safer if you thought men and women were left to their own devices and our future was dependent upon the choices of humanity? I know that I would not feel safe or secure in any way. Friends, I don't have much confidence at all in humanity, but I have tremendous confidence in God and all of His attributes. Why in the world would I want my future left to chance or the whims of lost humanity?

In our text for this past Sunday, we saw the strong hand of God saving individuals even as He bore the cross. We were reminded that nothing happened on that day by chance. The journey that Christ finished on the walk to the cross began in the throne room of heaven before the foundation of the world. Every step was preordained including the last ones as He walked towards Calvary. The entire journey had been orchestrated from heaven and unfolded just as it needed to for His glory and our good.

When nations came to do their absolute worst, namely the murder of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, they had not slipped out of God's control, but were doing His sweetest bidding at their worst moment: "Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28). The worst sin that ever happened was in God's plan, and by that sin, sin died.

There should never be any man-exalting illusions as though mere human beings will be the decisive cause in any victory or loss. We don't determine if Jesus is allowed in the White House or not. He is not that impotent. God alone will have that supreme role. "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; . . . the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Daniel 2:21,4:17). The roll of the dice, the fall of a bird, the crawl of a worm, the movement of stars, the falling of snow, the blowing of wind, the loss of sight, the suffering of saints, and the death of all — these are included in the word of God: "I will accomplish all my purpose" — from the smallest to the greatest.

Let us be thrilled and calm in these days of great upheaval because victory belongs to God, and no purposes that He wills to accomplish can be stopped. To make this great news even better is the fact that He is always good, and He will never stop loving His children. Our sovereign King rules with complete wisdom and knowledge, complete power and strength, and a desire to transform us into vessels of honor fit for the kingdom of heaven. Our Father will see us home just like He got Jesus safely home too.