“Worship Him who lives forever and ever.”

Revelations 4:10b
How to Use the “40 Days of Preparation” Devotional Guide

The “40 Days of Preparation” campaign is firmly rooted on a foundation of personal reflection, prayer, fasting and waiting upon God. To help maintain focus on the Lord and to prepare our hearts for Regent’s Global Week of Worship, November 7-11, 2011, we have prepared a series of daily devotionals — one for each of the 40 days of the campaign.

Here are a few practical tips for making the most of the “40 Days of Preparation Guide”:

1. **Make these devotions a part of your daily walk** for the next 40 days. You may want to follow online or download a printable copy.
2. **Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal Himself** to you as you read and reflect.
3. **Read the Scripture and the reflection**; pause to reflect on how the lesson can be applied to your life.
4. **Consider the application questions**. You may even want to journal what God shows you or how you plan to apply the devotional topic and scripture to your life.
5. **Share the daily devotional with a group** on campus, as you are able. This might be a life group, a Bible study group, a staff meeting, or a faculty gathering. Share the devotion with a small group using the group application question and concluding with prayer.

**Visit us here each day during the next 40 days** for a helpful devotional guide. Many authors from our Regent family have written devotionals to help us all prepare our hearts for a fresh move of God. Each day you will find a short scripture passage, a reflection, along with a few questions to prompt your heart and mind as you seek the heart of Jesus.

Remember to involve others in your 40-day journey - your colleagues, classmates, departments, work groups, small groups. There is a daily application question for group discussion and prayer. We want to encourage you to seek Him in community as well as personally.

**Day of Repentance – November 7, 2011**

We’d love you to join us as students, faculty, staff and alumni during the next 40 days to seek God and allow the Spirit to search our hearts to prepare us for a dedicated time of repentance. A special solemn assembly will take place on November 7, and will be designated as a **Day of Repentance** allowing us to personally and corporately seek God’s forgiveness and freedom. It is our desire to encourage you to take additional time, in the midst of your full schedules, to pause, reflect, pray and worship – to seek the heart of Jesus in a more focused way.
Sept. 28, 2011: Unveiled Faces

"As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man!"

Psalm 27:19

From the moment of our birth onward, we are assailed by forces and voices from without and within that tell us who we are, who and what we are not, who we ought to be and what we should be doing. Racism, sexism, economic injustice, jealousies, resentments, self-doubt, fear and many other enemies of our authentic self demand to be heard and take up space in our hearts and souls.

Sooner or later, we listen and begin to erect walls between our inner and outer lives. We are desperately trying to protect what is within us or trying to portray ourselves to others in a way that benefits us. Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or that our inner darkness will be exposed, we hide our true identities from each other – and eventually from ourselves. Ultimately, we end up living divided and inauthentic lives at great cost to us and those around us, as …

… we make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it.
… we remain in settings or relationships that kill off our spirit.
… we harbor secrets, deceive and manipulate to achieve personal gain at the expense of others.
… we hide our beliefs and values to avoid conflict, challenge and change.
… we conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned or attacked.

Only when the pain of our dividedness becomes more than we can bear do most of us embark on a journey toward becoming authentic again. Authenticity is not about perfection, but is about the courage to live an undivided life and to finally respond to our original created purpose and call. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic vocation and service in and to the world.

For Personal Application:

- Is there a line from the text above that especially resonates with me? What might it be saying?
- Is there a part of self I most need to recover for my life to become more authentic?

For Group Application:

- How have we allowed the world around us to determine our path, to compromise our values and beliefs?

Prayer: Lord, give me courage. Show me who I am in my innermost being, and give me boldness to celebrate the good and resilience to allow you to touch the broken and dark places within. Help me to break free so that I may behold you with unveiled face, as I become what you have meant me to be. Amen.

"Now I become myself.
It’s taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces …”
Mary Sarton
Sept. 29, 2011: Only You, Lord: A Fresh Look at Humility

“Then He said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered, ‘My Lord and my God!’”

John 20:27-28

When most of us think about the virtue of humility, we think of someone walking down the sidewalk with his head tilted toward the ground, eyes gazing upon the tops of his shoes. The humble Christian is the one who speaks gently and seldom raises his or her voice. Perhaps we picture the pacifist who allows someone to strike him in the face accepting the violent action stoically. At some level this is humility, but God calls us to practice a deeper humility which we often don’t address.

In the passage above, Thomas has just been shocked back into the reality that our God is a God of deep mystery. We may think we know things about God and have expectations about how He will perform His divine actions, but this too frequently becomes a type of pride and arrogance forcing us to lose sight of the divine mystery. Yes, God reveals much about who He is and who we are through divine and natural revelation. We are not left in the dark about the God we love; however there still remains a great mystery about Him that keeps us humble. Thomas thought he knew who Jesus was and that the death of Jesus was the death of all he experienced. Then, through Thomas’ arrogant protestations, the Lord appeared and asked him to experience a deeper and mysterious Christ. Thomas responded in awe at the mystery of the resurrected Lord and in humility called out, “My Lord and my God.”

Another Thomas in the 13th century had a similar experience to that of his name sake. Thomas Aquinas was said to have been praying when he saw the crucified Christ before him. Christ spoke to Thomas asking him what he wanted for all the work he had done. Thomas answered "Non nisi te, Domine" which is Latin for “Only You, Lord.” After that experience of God, Aquinas could not return to his intellectual work. He believed his work to be nothing more than “straw.” The encounter he had with the mystery of God humbled him in a sincere manner drawing him further into the mystery of Christ.

For Personal Application:

- How have I allowed my comfort with God to become a type of pride?
- Do I take for granted the mystery that God is in my life?
- What steps can I take to be firmly grounded in what God has revealed to me, but still live in the mystery of His presence? How does love flourish because God remains known and mysterious?

For Group Application:

- How have those of us who are academics and students of knowledge limit the mysterious experience of God because of our pursuit of things known and understandable?

Prayer: Lord, so often we are like Thomas the apostle, stuck with arrogance in thinking that we can know You completely and thoroughly as we would any other person in our lives. Teach us the humility that is fostered by entering into Your mystery and allow that to keep us in love with who You are. We ask this through Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

““The sufficiency of my merit is to know that my merit is not sufficient.””
Augustine of Hippo

“It is good for me, Lord, that Thou hast humbled me, that I may learn Thy righteous judgments, and may cast away all haughtiness of heart and all presumption.”” Thomas a Kempis
“Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’”

Matthew 6: 9-10

Many Christians can recite the Lord’s Prayer without opening their Bibles. If you were raised in a liturgical church, then I’m sure you’ve memorized this passage. The Lord’s Prayer, sometimes called the “Our Father” or the Pater Noster, is the result of Jesus teaching His followers how to pray. While there’s some debate about whether it was meant as a structural model for prayer or a specific prayer to be used individually and corporately, it’s certainly part of the spiritual discipline of many believers.

Many of us tend to focus our prayers on the bottom part of the Lord’s Prayer. We’re quick to approach God and ask Him for our daily bread (or even more extensive provisions), for forgiveness of sins, and guidance and deliverance as we walk in a fallen world. Thankfully, God not only hears and answers such requests, but He invites them from us. How wonderful it is to worship a God who numbers the very hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30) and is intimately involved in the minutest details of our daily life.

I was reminded recently of the importance of the top part of the Lord’s Prayer. After inviting us to call Him Father, we’re petitioning that His name would be hallowed. We’re not stating that God is holy (although that’s certainly true), but we’re asking that God would be acknowledged as holy. And where do we want this? In our lives, yes; in the church, certainly; but also in the whole world. We’re asking that God would bring His kingdom and fulfill His will on earth as it is in heaven. We’re not just asking God to bless and keep us until we’re with Him in eternity, but we’re asking Him to break forth into His creation now and bring redemption, renewal and shalom.

Let’s not limit our prayers to the daily difficulties of life. By all means let’s bring those to our Father who delights in giving good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11) but let’s not stop there. Let’s also pray faithfully that God’s name would be declared holy, that His kingdom would come, and His will would be done. Here, now, on earth, as it is in heaven.

For Personal Application:

- Do I limit my prayers to either the top or bottom part of the Lord’s Prayer? What steps can I take to ensure that I regularly pray in a manner consistent with both the top and bottom petitions?
- How can I use the Lord’s Prayer to strengthen my prayer life? Can I pray it more regularly or use it as a model for extemporaneous prayers?

For Group Application:

- How can we pray corporately in such a way as to be faithful to both the top and bottom petitions of the Lord’s Prayer?

Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

“An infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others.” A.W. Tozer
Oct. 1, 2011: Breathe

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

1 John 1:9

Confession is a necessary part of a vibrant walk with an almighty, pure and perfect God. It is an absolute necessity in the life of followers of Christ, but too often we rely on ourselves to “make things right.” How foolish and arrogant to even think for a moment that we can fix our sin. The only thing that can remove my sin is Christ’s death on the cross; my deeds are just dirty rags in His presence. I am helpless in the face of my own sin.

Although the release from my sin has already been provided for me by Christ on the cross, to experience His wonderful cleansing forgiveness, I must confess my sins. I must agree with the pure and perfect God that I have sinned against Him in doing things my own way.

Confession is a necessary element of a moment-by-moment walk with God. It is like breathing. When I breathe, I must exhale bad air to make room for the good air that I need to live and breathe and move. I exhale the bad air, getting the carbon dioxide out of my bloodstream so that I can be healthy and live. Likewise, confessing my sin is equally necessary, to get the bad out so that I can be spiritually healthy. Without confession I am maintaining bad air and bad blood in my life. Only if I confess can this stain be purified. And like breathing, I need to see confession as something I can do moment by moment, as many times as I need to, or whenever I have that selfish thought or attitude. If I confess my sin, God gets rid of the garbage in my heart and cleanses me.

The best way for me to continue to experience God’s love and forgiveness is to keep short accounts with Him, to confess as much as I need to, so that I will eventually sin less and less. He will break up my fallow ground. He is faithful. He is just. He will forgive my sin and cleanse me from all unrighteousness. When I confess, He makes me clean.

For Personal Application:

- Do I tend to think that God knows my sin and that I don’t need to come out and confess it to Him, or do I tend to think I do not sin?
- Am I too proud to admit my wrong, speak with God about it, understand I need cleansing, and agree with Him to experience His forgiveness?

For Group Application:

- How have we allowed our sins against each other to build, and how can our personal confession time benefit those around us?

Prayer: Dear Lord, prepare my heart for repentance. I confess that I, too, often prefer to do things my own way. Change that in me, Lord. As I spread my many iniquities before you, I am so grateful that I can confess my sin to You, without fear. Cut me to the quick when I sin, and remind me to confess as involuntarily as I breathe. Thank You that when I confess my sin to You I can experience release, cleansing, joy and peace. And most of all, thank You that only You can cleanse me from all my unrighteousness; break up my fallow ground. Amen.

“You will never have the Spirit of God dwelling in you till you have unraveled this whole mystery of iniquity, and spread out your sins before God. Let there be this deep work of repentance and full confession, this breaking down before God. ...” Charles G. Finney

"... your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'"

Isaiah 30:21

Perhaps no greater promise was made to the disciples in their calling to advance Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) mandates then that He would send another Comforter. As He celebrated the Passover, Jesus introduced them to the voice of the Holy Spirit (John 13-17). Later, He breathed on them this comforter, counselor, teacher and guide. With the Spirit came the authority to extend God's grace to a lost world (John 20:19-23). And a few days later, Pentecost, like Passover, was forever changed when the Comforter came in power to guide them into all Truth. Isaiah prophesied that true believers would be able to hear God’s voice (Isaiah 30:21). Jesus delivered on that promise with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Hearing the voice of the Spirit is the most important resource for doing God’s work. But how do we know when the Spirit is speaking?

First, the voice of the Spirit is in harmony with the Scriptures. He will never call us to do or believe things that are contrary to God’s Word. Be disciplined to hide His Word in your heart (Psalm 119:11) so it will be that light to your path (Psalm 119:105) to discern the true voice of the Spirit.

Second, seek the counsel of others who first seek God’s kingdom (Matthew 6:33). Ask them to evaluate what you have heard. Remember, we know in part – we see through a dirty mirror (I Corinthians 13:9) – but a multitude of righteous counselors can help us discern God’s voice (Proverbs 15:22).

Finally, the voice of the Spirit acts in keeping with the character of Jesus as defined by the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). This fruit is demonstrated when it is Jesus’ Spirit we are following. When truly led by the Spirit, we bring glory, honor and attention to Christ more than to ourselves.

God’s calling on our lives is only achieved to the degree we tune our ears to the voice of the Spirit. We get in tune when we harmonize with the Scriptures, seek and heed righteous counsel, and demonstrate the character of Jesus who sent us His Holy Spirit!

For Personal Application:

- Have I received the fullness of the Holy Spirit by making a full surrender of my aspirations, dreams and goals to Christ? Only when I have surrendered all can I be assured that I can hear His voice
- Recall a time of feeling that God was speaking to me. Did I act on what I heard? How did it turn out? What lessons did I learn?

For Group Application:

- How can we as a group be better equipped to provide righteous counsel to one another as we each seek to hear and obey God’s voice?

Prayer: Spirit of God, descend upon my heart – and my mind and ears as well! Cause me to hunger for Your Word so I might discern that which is truly of You. Lead me to righteous counselors who seek first Your kingdom. Help me to discern my motives so that I can hear only that which ultimately advances Your Great Commission and empowers in me Your Great Commandment – all for the glory of Christ alone! Amen.

“Only our communion with God provides the appropriate context for communications between us and Him.” Dallas Willard
Oct. 3, 2011: Choices

"Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.'"

Matthew 26:42

We’ve all read devotionals and seen preachers talking about God’s will – how we can discern God’s will, how we should try and stay in God’s will, how we must stay in His will if we want to lead a happy life. However, as you reflect on this verse I encourage you to consider something else about it.

It’s about choice.

Jesus made a choice with just four little words that changed humanity forever. God gave us this gift of free will, not so that we can struggle and go crazy trying to figure it out. He gave us the choice so that we can grow in Him. And these choices determine who we are and who we become.

Sometimes they are little choices, like choosing to get off the Internet to spend time with your spouse. Sometimes they are big choices, like trying to decide if your life needs major change. Whatever the gravity of choices that we face, the good news is that God is there to guide us through them all.

When Jesus made this statement, He was alone. His friends had forsaken Him, and even though a small part of Him asked God if He didn’t have to die, He made THE choice, to let God’s will be done. He didn’t turn His back on us or the life He was destined for.

Meet your choices head-on. See what happens the more you choose to tell God, “Your will be done” in any situation. You will be amazed at the beauty and blessings that follow.

For Personal Application:

- What choices might I face today that could make a difference in my life?
- Am I willing to step out on that limb and let my choices reflect God’s will and not my own?

For Group Application:

- With your group, think of one situation where you were faced with a choice and you didn’t know which way to go. Did you make a decision based on God’s will? If so, or not, what was the outcome? Share your reflections with the group.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank You for today, for allowing me to get out of bed and face my day with the many choices it holds. Guide me, God, and give me the strength to make choices wisely. Most of all, Lord, I pray YOUR will, not mine, be done in my life today. Amen.

“A man either lives life as it happens to him, meets it head-on and licks it, or he turns his back on it and starts to wither away.”

Gene Roddenberry
Oct. 4, 2011: Being or Doing: What’s Our Focus?

"My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God."

1 John 3:18-21

It is an unfortunate reality that a large portion of Christians miss out on the joy and hope of salvation by “doing Christianity” instead of being children of the Most High God.

I had been going through life knowing that I was a child of God but living with absolutely no understanding of what that meant because I failed to truly understand the character of God. I could tell you He was loving, but did not really even know what that meant. I could preach to you about grace, but I had no idea what it felt like. I could recite Scripture on any subject and knew the Word of God was true but still let doubt live in my heart and rationality cloud my spiritual mind. Until I made the decision that if I was going to believe the Bible then I was going to believe the Bible 100 percent and start treating it like it was real.

My mind was instantly blown as I realized that if I was going to truly choose to believe the Bible, then I must understand that God is who He says He is and, therefore, I am who He says I am. I am a child of the Most High God; I am redeemed by the blood of Christ, and God has made a place for me.

This hit me like a ton of bricks as I realized that the Almighty God is in control, and there is no need for me to strive any longer. All I really need to do is believe, and He will take care of the rest. In this moment, I stopped doing Christianity and became a child of God.

The commandment to love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself became a thing of ease. Take a moment to pause and reflect on being in relationship with an awesome God … and stop striving.

For Personal Application:

- Do I believe what the Bible says without doubt? What inhibits me from fully believing God’s Word?
- Do I believe God is who He says He is? Do I understand that I am who God says I am?

For Group Application:

- What would the Body of Christ look like if we all believed that God was who He said He was?

Prayer: Lord, please forgive me for allowing doubt to hinder my relationship with You and the plan You have for my life. Please give me the faith to believe Your Word and a true understanding of Your ways. Father, show me who You are and help me understand who I am. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”
E.E. Cummings
Oct. 5, 2011: Abiding in the Vine

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me.”

John 15:4

In John 15:1-17, Jesus speaks about how to live in intimate connection with Him. Within these verses, Jesus uses the word “abide” 10 times, emphasizing that the single-most important dimension of life is staying attached to Him.

The power to abide in Christ comes from Christ Himself (“as I abide in you”) and is a direct result of grace extended. However, the decision to abide in Christ is ours (“abide in Me”). We must give ourselves to this abiding process.

How easy it is to detach from Christ, as when we think we can do things in our own strength, fail to wait on the Lord, and are pulled away by busyness, distraction and temptation.

The blessings of abiding are numerous. First and foremost, we experience God’s loving presence. Second, we can enjoy the blessing of prayer. Third, we will bear much fruit. And fourth, we are able to love others. Jesus tells us how we are to abide: by keeping God’s commands.

After surviving a treacherous storm, the apostle Paul warned the ship’s crew of the consequence of not remaining in the ship: “Unless these men stay in the ship, they cannot be saved” (Acts 27:31). Their lives were spared because they abided in the ship. Life for us continues, as we abide in Christ.

According to Jesus, the pathway to true success is to abide in Him. Despite uncertainty, struggle, fear, confusion and doubt, we can be assured that by abiding in Christ, He will keep and protect us.

For Personal Application:

- At this time, what is the single greatest threat to my abiding in Christ?
- Which spiritual practice will I commit to over the next 30 days in order to fortify my abiding in Christ?

For Group Application:

- How can we support the efforts of others as we seek to abide in Christ more consistently?

Prayer: Lord, I confess that so often I do things in my own strength without asking for Your enabling grace. Would You forgive my pride – not pride that says, “I am better than others,” but rather pride that says, “I can do things without You?” Forgive me for my independence and desire to impress others. Help me to realize that genuine fruitfulness, including authentic joy, can only blossom if I take time to nurture my relationship with You. Lord, help me to practice Your presence on a daily basis. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

“Neglecting a vital friendship with Jesus is one of the gravest dangers to spiritual well-being, and it can happen so subtly, because we are easily distracted from Him by the challenges and opportunities of our culture. … And His blessing may still seem to accompany us even as we get by on our own strength, unaware of the creeping death that has been unleashed. Then one day we wake up feeling empty or stressed by the demands of our lives … and there will be no joy.” Wayne Jacobsen
Oct. 6, 2011: The Primacy of Prayer

“… one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’”

Luke 11:1

Most realize that prayer should be an important discipline in the life of followers of Christ, but too often we rely on prayer as a last resort or only in times of crisis. Prayer is essential for a healthy spiritual walk. It should be as normal as breathing.

Prayer is simply heartfelt communication with God. Communing with God may include praise, thanks, requests, intercession for others, or pausing quietly to meditate and reflect in His presence.

The time to pray, of course, is anytime. A pastor once explained to me, “It doesn’t matter where we pray or when we pray – what matters is that we pray.” Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17), which suggests that our daily lives should be characterized by an unceasing attitude of prayer and communication with the Father. That’s not easy in today’s world of rapid-fire tweets and moment-by-moment distractions. Just keeping our spiritual equilibrium can be challenging. I recall many times I have struggled to maintain consistency in my prayer life, but God gently draws me back and graciously receives my sometimes weak efforts at learning to pray more regularly and more effectively.

Prayer should be viewed by God’s people as not only a good habit and our spiritual duty, but as a privilege and a benefit to us as growing followers of Jesus. The benefits of prayer are too numerous to mention, but here are a few: (1) Our hearts are purifed and changed, (2) We grow in intimacy with God, (3) We release supernatural power, (4) We affect change in our nation and the world, (5) We help to build up God’s people, (6) We sharpen our minds with His perspective.

Don’t miss out on the privilege and the power of daily prayer. Prayer not only changes things, but it changes us.

For Personal Application:

- Is God pleased with my current life of prayer? What are the most important changes in my prayer life that I need to consider?
- What ways can I take positive steps to upgrade my prayer life? What are two or three steps I can take that will have the most positive impact in my prayer life?

For Group Application:

- How have we allowed other competing priorities to crowd out time and energy for prayer in our group, and how can we adjust our priorities to make room for this priority?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to pray! I want to learn your heart and be used as an instrument to change the world through a disciplined and effective prayer life. Forgive me for my prayerlessness, and help me to be faithful and fruitful in this area. Amen.

“I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach.”
Charles Spurgeon

“Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God’s infinite grace and power. All that God is, and all that God has, is at the disposal of prayer.”
R.A. Torrey
Oct. 7, 2011: Thanksgiving

“Give thanks in all circumstances for this the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18

The holy texts of Judeo-Christian faith often place emphasis on the discipline of thankfulness, not to be understood as merely an emotion or only as occasions of giving thanks and expressing gratitude, but as a way of life in which the heart is constantly turned to God in a spirit of loving thankfulness for the priceless and countless gifts of God. That most precious gift for which we are called to thankfulness is the giving of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ, expressed in the finished work of the cross.

The ritual and liturgical expressions of authentic worship in both historic and contemporary Judaism and Christianity are centered in thanksgiving and expressed inwardly and outwardly by living in the spirit of thanksgiving in all times and in all seasons. Thanksgiving is a lived theology embracing the One whose perfect love, whose depth of mercy and daily care for God’s people is limitless.

The heart of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is thanksgiving. The term Eucharist, from the Greek εὐχαριστία (eucharistia) literally means “thanksgiving.” This holy meal, “the Lord’s Supper,” was birthed in the spirit of gratitude. Believers are called to come to the family table of this holy meal only in the spirit of thanksgiving for there is no greater gift than the Body of Christ and the blood of Christ, given and shed for us, through the Son’s finished work of salvation.

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., from the University of California, Davis; and Howard G. Koenig, M.D., MHSc, from Duke University Medical Center, are two scholars well known for their research in the areas of religion, spirituality and health. Their research confirms that daily practicing the attitude and actions of thankfulness profoundly and positively affects cardiovascular health, longevity and other vitally important health issues.

For Personal Application:

- What persons and events, whether related to difficulties or to joys, is the Holy Spirit prompting me to give thanks for?
- Begin a Thankfulness Journal, recording those persons, events, circumstances, blessings, hopes and dreams for which I am thankful. Include challenges and difficulties for which I thank God for the Holy Spirit’s constant presence and guidance, even when I may not feel God’s presence.

For Group Application:

- Thank the Lord those you interact with daily, stating the qualities and gifts you admire about each one and thanking God for the opportunity to know them. Consider writing a brief personal card or email to each one, expressing a word of thanks to them.

Prayer: Father, this is a new day, in which to begin a renewed journey of living in thankfulness. I ask your forgiveness for the ways I have neglected the discipline of thanksgiving and begin today to cultivate the holy habit of giving thanks, as St. Paul taught “in all circumstances.” Conform my heart to the character of Christ, my Savior, who, even on the night of His betrayal, gave thanks to You in breaking bread. Thank You, Father, for Jesus: sent and given for me, that I might live in the joy of holy thankfulness. Amen.

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” G. K. Chesterton
Oct. 8, 2011: Satisfying the Longing Soul

“For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”

Psalm 107:9

David, Paul – much like my bright-eyed first grade class, every hero of the faith recorded in history lived expectantly with a story of victory doused in a humble awareness of their need for a good and great God “… for He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”

For Personal Application:

- Weariness, distraction, self-focus, laziness and over-familiarity are all enemies of spiritual zeal. Ask God to intensify my hunger and thirst for Him. Then, enter His presence, and ask Him to fill me with good things.
- Ask God continually to let His rivers of life flush away “dehydrators” so that I can fulfill my story of victory. And thank Him for the story He has given me to share.

For Group Application:

- Talk about the importance of thanking and praising God consistently – independent of how we feel – and then, through discussion and prayer, take a few minutes to think on His loving deeds.

Prayer: Forgive us, Lord, for our forgetfulness of our great need for You and Your unfailing love and power. Thank You that You bless and satisfy us fully – turning our deserts into pools of water and the parched ground around us into flowing springs – as we simply come to You hungry, thirsty and longing … like little children. Empower us, by Your Spirit, to sow fields and plant vineyards that yield a fruitful harvest for You who is the River of Life. Amen.

“You don’t have to live with a dehydrated heart. Receive Christ’s work on the cross; the energy of his Spirit; his lordship over your life; his unending, unfailing love. Drink deeply and often. And out of you will flow rivers of living water.” Max Lucado

“Teacher, can we pray again for my dad to hear?” “Teacher, Jesus helped my (autistic) brother be so settled with his new teacher this week.” “Teacher, how ‘bout we sing the ‘Jesus Loves Me’ song and see who can sing the loudest!” Every week some 15 bright-eyed, spirited, fully engaged first-grade girls kept me on my toes with questions, ideas and stories of God’s simple, consistent goodness in their lives. They were hungry to know Him and enthusiastically aware of His power and interest in their lives. Our lessons focused on God’s invitation for His children to “come boldly into the throne room of grace.” And, oh were they coming – hungry, thirsty, longing, believing!

By contrast, I recently sat in a tiny church amidst a dying congregation droning songs and prayers empty of conviction. Hollow. Hopeless. Barren. “You can cross Mary Ellen’s name off the prayer list, pastor,” a congregant blurted during the “intercession” portion of the service. “She’s never going to get any better. Don’t waste your prayers.” Like lackluster machines, her fellow congregants simply deleted Mary Ellen, not just from their list but also from any inkling of belief that God is great and He is good … breaking chains … illuminating darkness … able to do the impossible.

The whisper in my soul felt more like a gut punch: “They forgot.” They forgot that as Christians we live with an open invitation to come boldly to the Lord who satisfies, who is faithful and whose love endures forever. I choked back tears. Indeed, they had forgotten, and so all of us are capable of doing when we get tired, distracted, self-focused, lazy or overly familiar with our gift of salvation.

What can keep us hungry and hydrated? Comb through Scripture and you will find boundless stories of those who ingested – gulped – rivers of life to flush away fear, anxiety, hopelessness and impotence: Moses,

For Group Application:

- Talk about the importance of thanking and praising God consistently – independent of how we feel – and then, through discussion and prayer, take a few minutes to think on His loving deeds.
Oct. 9, 2011: Praying for America

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

1 Timothy 2:1-4

Working in political campaigns is extremely rewarding, but the two outcomes are inevitable – someone will win, and someone will lose. I can recall one election where, after conceding defeat, the only words that brought comfort to the depressed crowd gathered was someone solemnly quoting the Apostle Paul in Romans 13: “There is no authority except that which God has established.” America is a nation with deep Christian roots; we acknowledge that as one nation under God, God’s hand has guided this nation from its very foundation. 1 Timothy reminds us that we should pray for our leaders so “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

It does not matter whether you voted for your elected leaders. As Christians, we are commanded by God to lift up all of our leaders and elected officials in sincere prayer. That means praying for their success, their favor among the nations and praying for their protection. When our leaders fall or fail, it is not a license to pray against them; rather, it should provide us with all the more reason to lift them up in prayer. In praying for our leaders, let us not forget to pray for our nation. Pray that our nation would experience a genuine revival and that we would see Christian men and women rise up into the halls of government. We should also pray for those who will become our leaders, many of whom may very well start their journey to leadership right here at Regent University. No leader is perfect, and no political party has a monopoly on Jesus or Christianity, but as Christians, we must remember that prayer is powerful, so let us pray for our nation and for our leaders today.

For Personal Application:

- Do I know who my elected officials are, and do I pray for them? In what ways can I regularly make elected officials a part of my prayer life?
- Do I spend more time complaining about my elected officials than I do praying for them?

For Group Application:

- Do we remember to include our leaders both in government and our leadership here at Regent University in our prayers as a department?

Prayer: Lord, help me to pray for those whom You have appointed to lead our nation and our community. I pray that with Your help and guidance, our leaders will lead with integrity and lead our nation toward continued prosperity. Grant them the wisdom needed, the strength to persevere, and the integrity to do what is right even if it is not popular. Forgive me when I am too quick to judge or criticize my leaders, and help me to continually lift them up to You as You lift us up to the Father. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“Be thou present, O God of Wisdom and direct the counsels of this honourable Assembly. Enable them to settle things upon the best and surest foundation, that the scene of blood may be speedily closed; that harmony and peace may effectually be restored, and truth and justice, religion and piety prevail and flourish amongst thy people. Preserve the health of their bodies and the vigor of their minds; shower down upon them and the millions they represent such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this world, and crown them with everlasting glory in the world to come. All this we ask in the name and through the merits of Jesus Christ thy son, Our Saviour, Amen.” Rev. Jacob Douché, First Prayer offered in Congress, 1774
Oct. 10, 2011: Revival Time

“Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.”
Proverbs 11:25

Andrew Gih says, “God's time for revival is the very darkest hour, when everything seems hopeless. It is always the Lord's way to go to the very worst cases to manifest His glory.”

Today, many people reject religion because they do not see what they consider to be its advantage in the face of injustice, lack of peace, lack of love, poverty and pain. What an awesome time for revival!

But what is revival? Revival is when the Spirit of God moves upon the face of material reality, quickens death to life and gives a brand new start.

In Genesis 1, God breathed upon chaos and spoke order into a discombobulated existence. In the New Testament, Jesus proclaimed “good news” in the face of negative history. In Acts 2, the Spirit birthed the Church to continue the work of Christ to renew the earth. In 1906, the Holy Spirit moved expansively bringing renewal among churches and beyond. I am convinced that the same Holy Spirit challenges the churches to move beyond their walls; the Spirit charges the churches to lead in community transformation.

Don’t miss out on the next revival because it does not look like the moves of God from the past.

For Personal Application:
- How do I imagine revival to look?
- Is God moving me to pray for revival and to participate in it through giving my time, talents and treasures? How am I willing to alter my life for the sake of revival?

For Group Application:
- Is it possible that we are limiting revival? Are we praying for the Holy Spirit to bring revival as God sees fit? Or, are we looking for revival on our own terms and in our own way?

Prayer: Lord, revive them; revive us; revive me! I want to learn Your heart and be used as an instrument to change the world through a move of the Spirit that uses me to bless them. Forgive me for making it all about me and how I feel and experience YOU. Help me to think about the move of the Spirit in the world for Your glory, and through this I will be revived. Amen.

“Revival is not just evangelism, excitement or emotionalism. It is the extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit.” Del Fehsenfeld Jr.
Oct. 11, 2011: Cheap Grace

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up the cross daily, and follow Me!”

Luke 9:23

Oh, how quickly we proclaim our faithfulness and our followership … and how quickly we attempt to set the terms of our discipleship. When we do so, we cheapen God’s grace. I am reminded of the book The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and of how he described cheap grace: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

John Walker, in the foreword of his book Costly Grace, writes: “Sadly, millions of Christians are confused about what it means to surrender to Jesus, and so they go on living their lives without ever changing the way they live. The "cheap grace" that Bonhoeffer describes in The Cost of Discipleship has so deeply saturated our congregations that, despite our evangelical theology, the idea of surrender is as unpopular and misunderstood as the idea of submission.”

To follow Christ means to become His disciple. We do so by denying ourselves and taking up the cross daily. Luke 14:33 speaks of a type of personal surrender that demands everything we have and all that we are: “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple.”

What is the promised reward for this sort of surrender? It is grace; a type of grace that can only be found at the foot of the cross and as we become willing to pick up the cross. It is also grace that enables us to surrender all. In these pivotal moments of surrender we enter into the promise of new life in Him. May we joyfully join the choir of so many faithful servants and disciples of Christ before us:

All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give.

For Personal Application:

- Where have I bought into the notion of cheap grace? What are the areas in my life that I have not fully surrendered to Christ?
- How can I take up my cross daily? How can I grow in my discipleship of Christ?

For Group Application:

- Do we truly operate within a framework of total and personal surrender to Christ as we go about our daily work?

Prayer: Lord, help me to surrender! Help me to faithfully embrace my cross daily. Show me when I am tempted to give in to cheap grace. Forgive me for not following You fully and wholeheartedly. Make me a disciple of Christ! Today, God, I surrender all that I have to You. Everything I have, all that I am, is Yours. Today I desire to die to myself. Not my will, but thy will! Amen.

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Surrendered people obey God's word, even if it doesn't make sense. Surrendered hearts show up best in relationships. You don't edge others out, you don't demand your rights, and you aren't self-serving when you're surrendered. Being surrendered to Jesus costs us just as it cost Jesus when He surrendered Himself to the cross for us.”

John Walker
Oct. 12, 2011: A Loving Father’s Embrace

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Luke 15:20b

The familiar parable of the lost son reminds us of the power of a father’s love.

This younger son decides to leave the family home after receiving his share of the inheritance. However, he wastes his wealth in wild living. To make matters worse, a famine consumes the land.

In desperation, he hires himself out to feed pigs. Ironically, the pigs are eating better than he is! Suddenly, he envisions the hired hands who work for his father who, by contrast, have food to spare. He longs for home, not because of any kind of longing for his father or inner repentance for rejecting him, but rather because he seeks the security of provision ... as a hired hand. His plan alleviates the need for full repentance and the responsibilities of sonship. Tragically, his personal identity has morphed from a son’s privilege to an employee’s mentality.

There awaiting him from afar was his father who runs to meet him. Wrapping his arms around his son in joyous embrace and with a sincere welcoming kiss, the father communicates not only forgiveness, but also the reassurance of true sonship. In his book, Exclusion and Embrace, Miroslav Volf comments, “No confession was necessary for the embrace to take place for the simple reason that the relationship did not rest on moral performance and therefore could not be destroyed by immortal acts. The son’s return from “the distant country” and the father’s refusal to let the son out of his heart sufficed.”

The prodigal’s father represents our heavenly Father, who being full of forgiveness and love, longs to embrace and restore us, especially when we fail.

Many of us have not received the love and care of earthly fathers or father figures who have affirmed us. Our heavenly Father unconditionally loves us!

For Personal Application:

- How has your view of your earthly father or father-figure/s influenced the way you view God the Father?
- Knowing that heavenly Father longs to give good gifts to His children (Mt 7:11), ask God to reveal His love for you in a specific way this week.

For Group Application:

- How does this passage shape our view of God? How could this passage shape our view of extending God’s grace to others?

Prayer: Lord, I confess that sometimes I forget that You are more concerned with my soul than my failure. Remind me that in the midst of my shortcomings You desire to wrap Your arms around me in order to lead me home to the safety and security of Your love. Open my spiritual eyes and heart to see and experience Your lavish love, knowing that repentance and humility provide the pathways to Your embrace. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“I am beginning now to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find Him, but, instead, as the One who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding.” Henri Nouwen

“Pride brings a person low, but the lowly in spirit gain honor.”

Proverbs 29:23

When our 10-month-old Rottweiler–Husky puppy discovered that he could leap at the leash in my hands and instantly be engaged in a game of tug o’ war, our walks went from pleasant to painful. My shoulders ached and occasionally, he would even miss the leash and grab my fingers. My yelps would stop him, but only for a minute, and then we move to “game on.” One night after a particularly challenging trip outdoors, I mentioned the “game” to my husband who calmly replied, “Yeah, he used to do that to me too.”

“What do you mean, ‘used to?’” I asked.

My ever-so-wise husband explained that as soon as the pup would snag the leash, he would let go. Game over. The thrill of grabbing and tugging diminished instantly as the line went limp and hit the ground. Hearing this solution, I thought of the countless times we had said to one another, “I’m laying down my end of the rope. No more tug o’ war over some issue or another.” And then I thought of how everything changes the moment one person puts down his end of the rope.

Pride makes us want to tug away until we win. Humility allows us to lay down our end and allow the other person to assess his new position. Sometimes the rope must be picked up again, but more often, when the resistance is gone, a reasonable and acceptable solution is revealed. Tug o’ war with only one person is just no fun. At its core, the “war” is about maintaining our position and forcing the other person off his position. When we stop focusing on the defense of our position, we open the door to the possibility that the other person’s point of view has merit, that there may be a side to the issue that neither of us has considered. In short, wisdom can be discovered.

For Personal Application:
- Are there places in my life where I’m keeping strife alive because I just won’t let go of my end of the rope?
- What am I afraid might happen if I let go of my end? Can I see where letting go might improve a particular situation I face?

For Group Application:
- How do we as Christians hold onto our end of the rope on issues like abortion or addictions or lifestyle choices, and inadvertently, allow those on the other end to avoid dealing with the matter at hand and invest all their energies in resisting us?

Prayer: Lord, show me where I’m in a tug o’ war with someone and instead of facing the issue, I’ve gotten caught up in the resistance. Give me a glimpse of the wisdom You offer to me so that I can release my hold on my opinion, my position and my own pride. Help me be gracious, humble and forgiving when You show me where I’ve been willful and unwilling to release my end. Amen.

“I will not play tug o’ war. I’d rather play hug o’ war.
Where everyone hugs instead of tugs,
Where everyone giggles and rolls on the rug,
Where everyone kisses, and everyone grins,
and everyone cuddles, and everyone wins.” Shel Silverstein

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8

Acts 1:8 is not only the programmatic verse for the entire book of Acts, but it has also been at the heart of the spirituality and vision for world evangelism for Spirit-filled Christians for the last 100 years. To be sure, accompanying this focus is usually a deep sense of commitment to the Great Commission mandate and an equally profound feeling of incompetence with regard to fulfilling the task of world evangelization. Hence, it is not surprising that this verse has been the lynchpin and even raison d’etre of Spirit-filled Christianity: how else might the body of Christ take the gospel to the ends of the earth apart from the power of the Holy Spirit?

Yet sometimes we confuse God’s call and designs with our own. The disciples remained focused on the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:5) because they could not see beyond their own Israel-centered horizons and interests. Jesus’ response was a gentle rebuke, but an urging that He would be sending His Spirit precisely in order to accompany them in their walk of faith and to expand their vision so that it could align more with what God was intending to accomplish.

Oftentimes we think we are engaging in kingdom-related activities and therefore must be at the center of God’s will. But here we see that the power of the Spirit is needed to reorient our imagination, which is otherwise usually limited to our own very parochial concerns. Even our best intentions often inhibit what God wants to bring about. Might the fire of the Holy Spirit burn away our small-mindedness and help us to see more clearly how God wants to empower us to participate in His transforming and changing the world?

For Personal Application:

- Are my prayers for more of the Spirit often motivated by more selfish, mundane and personal concerns? What might I need to repent of to receive more of the Spirit’s power for God’s kingdom purposes rather than my own?
- Do I feel like the infilling of the Spirit empowers merely personal evangelism? Might it be possible that the witness of a Spirit-filled life also takes other missional forms and activities, and if so, what might that look like?

For Group Application:

- Our common vision at Regent University has a global purview and our common mission is, finally, to change the world. Are we ready to call upon God for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit? What might happen to us as a result and are we ready to be transformed ourselves by a deluge of the Spirit?

Prayer: Lord, fill me afresh with Your Holy Spirit! Remove any hindrances in my life that would inhibit reception of the fullness of Your Spirit. Pour out Your Spirit upon me again – fill my heart with Your love and empower me to bear witness to Your name and to tell of Your wondrous works. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“Like everything else, the dream of the kingdom had been transformed through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Just as Jesus had told them they would have to lose their lives to save them, so now He had to explain that they had to lose their kingdom-dreams – of an earthly kingdom with ordinary administrative and governmental power, in charge of subject states – in order to gain them.” N. T. Wright
Oct. 15, 2011: The Cross is Key!

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

1 Corinthians 2:2

It is the single-most significant event in the history of the world. On the day that Christ was crucified, the world changed; nothing would ever be the same. Jesus willingly offered up His life for us that day upon the cross. Through the cross, we have redemption and a restored fellowship with God despite our sins. Without the cross, our faith would be empty and our hope found wanting. We can talk about God’s love and grace, His mercy and forgiveness; but it all goes back to the cross.

Only God could take a symbol of shame and death and make it a symbol of hope and life. Picture Jesus, bruised, bloody, mocked and tortured. Beaten and whipped to the point of death, but this still was not enough to settle the debt for our sins. Jesus willingly paid the ultimate price and accepted His place there, lifted high on the cross that day. The tiny baby in the manger had grown to fulfill His purpose and become the only one who could forgive our sins.

Do you see Jesus? Do you see Jesus, there, hanging on the cross suspended between heaven and earth as if rejected by both? Can you imagine Jesus looking into the crowd and seeing you there? Spotting you and though filled with pain, His eyes shine with love for you. Looking at you, it is as if Jesus says, “I love you this much.” It is in that very moment that the power and the centrality of the cross become so real. When we look to the cross, we find ourselves rescued, redeemed and restored. We find the love of Jesus in the cross. May we never forget that at the core of our faith will always be the cross.

For Personal Application:

- When was the last time I recalled the work of the cross and thanked Jesus for giving His life for me? In what ways can I reflect and be more Christ-focused?
- How often do I share the message of the cross with people? What can I do to be proactive in this area?

For Group Application:

- Do we acknowledge His working and leading in our group/department?

Prayer: Lord, Thank You for the cross. Thank You for doing for me what I never could, for saving me and giving me a hope and a future. Lord, may I daily be reminded of the powerful message of the cross and live my life in service and praise to You. I join with my fellow believers to honor and praise Your name; for by the cross, we all have been saved. May my faith be centered not in my own works, but in the cross alone. Amen.

“To be in Christ – that is redemption; but for Christ to be in you – that is sanctification! To be in Christ – that makes you fit for heaven; but for Christ to be in you – that makes you fit for earth! To be in Christ – that changed your destination; but for Christ to be in you – that changes your destiny! The one makes heaven your home – the other makes this world His workshop.” W. Ian Thomas
Oct. 16, 2011: Superficial Christianity

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

1 Peter 1: 6-7

I used to see bad things in my life as mere attacks or punishment for wrong doing. I lived a superficial Christian life. During a Bible study, someone asked me what question I would ask God if I could ask Him anything. This simple proposition plagued me for weeks! I finally came to this: “Why do some people experience a deep intimacy with Christ while others who search for it do not?” The more I thought about it, the more this question burned within me. Finally satisfied with my question, I asked it to God. I had no idea He would answer!

Over the next several weeks, some colossal failures in my life were revealed. These sinful mistakes led to everything I held dear in my life to be stripped away. My life was turned upside down, and I began to experience what I now know to be brokenness. I had never experienced pain like this before. Thankfully, I wasn’t alone in my pain. The Lord met me in a whole new way. I quickly sensed that He wasn’t outside my pain looking in – He was standing neck-deep at my side, enduring it with me. Fortunately for me, there was no quick end to what I was going through. I didn’t realize it, but this refining time would provide me with a new depth and intimacy in my relationship with Christ that would mark me forever.

While it is never enjoyable to endure pain and hardships, I have come to see them as a chance to experience God in a new way. What about you? What question would you ask God if you could stand in front of the Creator of the universe? Think about it. Be careful though … He will answer you. And trust me; you will never be the same.

For Personal Application:

- Ask God to reveal to you every area of my life that isn’t fully submitted to Him.
- How can I use the difficult circumstances I am currently going through to experience God in a whole new way?

For Group Application:

- If you could ask the God of the universe one question, what would it be?

Prayer: God, thank You for allowing pain in our lives and for walking through it with us. Thank You for Your desire to have an intimate relationship with each of us. Please reveal whatever hinders us from knowing You deeply. Restore us to You in a way we could have never imagined. Amen.

“Brokenness is the doorway through which every person must pass who wants to experience the life of Christ being expressed in and through him.” Steve McVey
Oct. 17, 2011: An Invisible War

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

Ephesians 6:12-13

Father Christmas in the Chronicles of Narnia, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe says, “Battles are ugly affairs.” Then he proceeds to give the children tools of war with which they are to defend themselves. Battles are ugly affairs, and war is even uglier.

In Ephesians 6, God has made it absolutely clear that He has prepared us for spiritual warfare. He uses the Apostle Paul to remind us of the spiritual armor given to us by God, and that we have spiritual authority in the unseen heavenly realms. God has provided us with all we need to face the spiritual warfare ahead. The armor of God illustrates the protection Jesus gives us against this dark work, against demonic attack and against spiritual forces of evil.

Spiritual warfare for believers is often fought in the mind, the emotions and the will. We must put on that spiritual armor daily in our personal devotional times of Scripture reading, prayer and meditation. As I put on the armor, I am demonstrating my obedience to God and my trust in His perfect protection for me as I enter the battle, no matter how ugly it gets. His spiritual armor will protect me from spiritual attack. And when that obedience results in overcoming spiritual temptation, I truly experience victory in the physical realm as well.

The armor of God allows me to stand my ground in spiritual battles, and to win in spiritual warfare. When the day of evil comes – today, tomorrow, whenever – I will be able to stand because I have obediently prepared for the battle to come. Battles and spiritual warfare are ugly affairs, but God equips me with His armor for victory daily.

For Personal Application:

- Do I realize that my Christian walk is done in the midst of warfare? Meditate on that fact.
- How can I daily clad myself in the armor of God to approach the battle that is brought to me every day by the world, the flesh and the evil one?

For Group Application:

- How can we support each other in being mindful of the forces of darkness that we face, and assist each other in putting on spiritual armor to prepare for battle?

Prayer: Dear Lord, I confess that I have not fully understood that I am in a spiritual war with powers of darkness that I can neither see nor fully comprehend. Remind me to keep my armor on, and use Your armor to protect me so that I can take my stand against the schemes of the evil one, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Amen.

“Modern theology does not prepare us for combat. It produces churches which are more like country clubs than boot camps. ... Good battle strategy calls for wearing the right uniform ... Be alert! The battle will get fierce.” Bill Bright
Oct. 18, 2011: Because of Grace

“But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ.”

Romans 5:15

God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and His grace is always present. No matter what our work or personal life situation, we can always find our Father’s acceptance and kindness. Possibly, some of us are in need of returning to a gracious God, regardless of our personal faults or failures. When we return like prodigals, He begins the process of healing and restoring the wounded and broken places of our spirit. In a recent, very painful episode, I felt as if I was being “painted into a corner,” but in reality the cross and the way out was directly behind me! I was focusing my attention on the problems ahead and I saw no means of escape, but the Lord said, “Turn around,” and I viewed the cross of grace, the doorway to deliverance. God will always encourage us on the road to grace with gentle words and personal nuggets of love through circumstances and events, like greeting cards from God saying, “I love you!”

The Lord gave me a vision to hold on to when Satan is attacking me with condemnation and shame for my recurring weaknesses and sins. It is that of the Lord’s ongoing vigilance as He scans the horizon searching for my return. I see His excited pace as He runs toward me from afar, I feel His warm embrace as He throws his arms of love around me, provides a kiss of eternal assurance, places sandals on my feet to restore my steps and direction, places His finest robe over me to cover my shame, joyfully restores my inheritance, kills the fatted calf and throws a party to demonstrate His joy in telling the world the wonderful news, “My son has returned!” May God’s grace fill your spirit with joy and peace as you take that step towards Jesus and confess and repent of those ongoing issues and sins that weigh you down.

For Personal Application:

- Do my thoughts and actions demonstrate that I have a clear understanding of the nature of God’s unconditional grace portrayed in Luke 15? Why or why not?
- Identify an area of ongoing weakness or sin and reflect on how God’s grace can help me gain victory over the struggle. Do I walk in shame and condemnation, or do I ask for forgiveness and for the strength to change with God’s power?

For Group Application:

- How can we model and communicate God’s grace more effectively to others?

Prayer: Lord, please help me to truly believe in my heart Your amazing grace. Help me to reject shame, guilt and condemnation for my recurring weaknesses, sins and strongholds, and turn toward the Father for forgiveness, healing and the strength to resist temptation. Amen.

“We hold that man is never so near grace as when he begins to feel he can do nothing at all.” C.H. Spurgeon

“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 18:4

Most of us come to God with our plans and ask Him to bless what we have conjured because it makes sense and seems to fit our agendas quite comfortably. We tend to easily give God our strengths, secretly preferring to stay right where we are because it is prosperous and sufficiently satisfies our need for significance, safety and security.

The challenge with this way of thinking is that the way up in the kingdom of God is the way down in the world’s systems. This broken road lends itself to experiences that require relinquishing our weaknesses for use to God. Hard life circumstances, uncomfortable positions, assignments and relationships require a complete dependence on God. We no longer receive satisfaction in our own strengths, comfortable surroundings and comfortable jobs, but by His presence alone. This broken place is not one of dejection but sweet surrender to the God-whisper in our heart that says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Consider the woman who washed Jesus’ feet; she gave her living to purchase perfume to wash the Lord’s feet with her hair (Luke 7: 36-38). We can presume she might have experienced a place of brokenness on her way down to wash Christ’s feet. Why would she choose a posture of humble servant over a seat at the table? Perhaps this woman had a revelation of the power of God’s presence and thought it was worth risking everything to be close to Him, even if she appeared weak to the world. What if the way down is actually the way up in the Kingdom of God? This woman knew this posture ushered her into the loving arms of her King. The fragrance that comes from a broken and contrite spirit is the way up.

For Personal Application:
- What does the way down to humility and brokenness look like in my own life?
- In what area of my life have I become too comfortable and find myself relying on my own strengths and abilities as a means of satisfaction?

For Group Application:
- What area of your work or school life do you need to sweetly surrender on your way to the feet of Jesus for the betterment of your team, department or organization? Take a moment of silence to ask God what area of fresh surrender He wants in your life, particularly in the area of work or school. Pray for one another today.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for my obsession with controlling my life and pushing my agendas. Forgive me for often confusing the way down as the road to failure in the world. I humbly ask you to show me the areas in my heart and life that need to be broken again. I surrender what I perceive as my weaknesses and give you complete control to use them however you see fit, even if it is not comfortable or conducive to my plans and immediate desires. Above all else, Your kingdom come and Your will be done. Give me a broken and contrite spirit. Amen.

“I'm in love with a king who became a slave.
I'm in love with a God who is humble.
You have to go down if you want to go up.
And you have to go lower if you want to go higher and higher.”

Lyrics by Misty Edwards
Oct. 20, 2011: No Longer Orphans

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 3:16-17

Do you ever feel like you can never do enough to make God truly proud? Perhaps you feel as though God’s compassion for you has run dry. Sometimes we feel like orphans, children of an estranged father. We think: God wouldn’t want me to have that job; I don’t deserve it. God wouldn’t want to trust me with a ministry. What could I offer Him? No matter what we hear and sing about on Sunday morning, God’s father-like love can seem limited to our own degree of success.

However, looking at the passage above, we don’t see a reclusive father who grudgingly blesses His child. Instead, we see a tender father whose heart bursts with uncontained favor and love for His son. This is the love of our heavenly Father. Could it be that God loves you and me in the same way?

God’s everlasting love is hard to comprehend. For someone who grew up without a dad, there are times when it’s hard for me to understand that God would not condemn, silence or abandon me like many fathers in this world do. Here in Matthew, God paints a beautiful picture of what He means when He calls us His children. Read verse 17 again and look at the way God speaks to His child, to you. It’s as if God is picking you – the way He did Jesus – out of the crowd, like the way a proud father points out his son or daughter at that dance recital or on the soccer field. He shouts, “This one’s mine! The one I love. The one who makes me so proud.” Maybe, to you, your best isn’t good enough. But God still favors you. After all, you are His child. To Him, that’s enough to secure His favor, love and care through every turn of this life’s journey.

For Personal Application:

- Do I ever feel like an orphan? God, show me how much You love me. (Check out Isaiah 42:1, Psalm 2:7 and Matthew 12:18 for more Scriptures about His favor.)
- When I don’t ace that interview, get an “A” in that class, or accomplish everything in my five-year-plan, it might be tempting to think God’s love for me is affected. How can I remind myself that God does not love or favor me any less than if I had succeeded?

For Group Application:

- Do people in your group know anyone who needs to know more about God’s unconditional love? Is there a way your group can actively encourage each other to reflect God’s love and acceptance to those individuals?

Prayer: Thank You for Your unconditional love for Your children and me. Thank You for being my faithful Father. Teach me to put my trust and hope in Your everlasting love even when I am discouraged. Help me to see myself in Your eyes – the eyes of a loving and proud Father. And help me to show that same love to those around me so that more of Your children can understand their place in Your family. Amen.

“Resolved, to examine carefully, and constantly, what that one thing in me is, which causes me in the least to doubt of the love of God; and to direct all my forces against it.” Jonathan Edwards
Oct. 21, 2011: Great is Your Faithfulness

“Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease.”

Lamentations 3:21-22

In the seconds immediately following my father’s last breath, the audacity of this question pierced my heart: Through what lens would I view my heavenly Father and the life set before me? Would I become maimed and embittered that death had snatched away full restoration with my father – after 10 years of disaffection? Would I blame God for unjustly stealing my father’s life and the fulfillment of his potential? After all, he was only 51.

Or would I recognize a kind and faithful God who empowered my heavily sedated father, struck by a massive heart attack, to call for me from his ambulance? He called for me. Would I acknowledge the miracle that Dad, placed in a medically induced coma, had awakened for an instant to answer my nervous phone call before his surgery, to say to me, “Come. I need you here. I love you”?

In the course of a two-week eternity, my yet unsaved father underwent quintuple bypass heart surgery, fought for his life, and squarely confronted death and hell itself. In his most vulnerable condition, he was audaciously asked by God: “Through what lens will you view Me?” How would you answer?

Like a scene from a fairytale, my dad inexplicably moved to a normal cardiac recovery room with the promise of a full recovery. My husband and I loaded our daughters in the car for a three-hour trek to meet their Grandpa Isaac. Love and forgiveness filled Room 221 that idyllic evening. Beaming with the brilliance of a giddy boy, my father affirmed: “I finally get it … It’s all about the love – God’s love for me and mine for Him … for you. Everything’s going to be okay now.”

With those words, my father smiled, closed his eyes and breathed his final breath. It was time I made my choice: I would audaciously hope. I would see and trust the love and faithfulness of a precious Savior. Beauty for ashes. Gladness for mourning. Praise for despair. His name is Yahweh – Great I Am, El Elyon – God Most High, Jehovah Jireh – My Provider, Jehovah Rapha – God my Healer. No matter what your circumstance, He is faithful; and His very nature reveals His enormous love for you. Let that be the lens through which you view your life.

For Personal Application:

- What is God asking me to remember of His character so that I may hope in His faithfulness, kindness and mercy?
- Am I struggling with prayers yet unanswered? I will wait in God’s presence and allow His goodness and unfailing love to surround me.

For Group Application:

- Think about some of God’s names and remember together how God has answered prayers and shown His goodness to your group.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that through bleeding and blessing, devastation and delight, You remain loving, powerful and gracious. I choose beauty, gladness and praise. Help me not to be swayed by circumstances and situations but to put my hope in You, my ever-faithful Savior. Amen.

“...Again and again I have been conscious of the Good Shepherd’s guidance through dark days and deep valleys.” Phillip Keller
Oct. 22, 2011: The Hope of the Brokenhearted

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

Psalm 147:3

Next year, I will celebrate 20 years of ministry. My journey has been rewarding in many ways. Yet, I cannot seem to adjust to the plenteous up-close opportunities to counsel and pray for people.

When we meet people, we smile and say, “Hello, how are you?” Most people say, “Fine, how are you?” (Or some variation of the same response). We say, “Good” and move on. Culture teaches us that such salutation is polite. However, in pastoral ministry I have learned that cordiality does not mean authenticity.

More people are not doing fine and not feeling good than those who lead others on to think so. More and more people are hurting deeply. People’s hearts are often broken for a whole myriad of reasons from physical, psychological and emotional situations. Additionally, people smile and seem part of the community when in truth they are not happy and feel isolated from community. I often think to myself “Hmm, I wonder what is the truth behind that glamorous visage.”

The writer of Psalms gives us supernatural insight and delivers the only hope for broken humanity. God cares about deep-seated brokenness, even when others do not know or understand. God tends to our wounds, even the secret ones. It is safe to be honest with God about how we feel. Let God heal us today.

For Personal Application:

- Are there areas in my life where I lead people to believe I am fine when in fact I am hurting?
- Am I pretending to be a part of the “in crowd” when in fact I feel isolated from community?
- How can we be God’s hands to extend healing to the brokenhearted in the communities around us?

For Group Application:

- Are we sensitive to others around us who might be broken? How can we be more in touch with the needs of others? As a group, pray for one another now.

Prayer: Lord, there are so many brokenhearted people in the world, many of whom are in close proximity to us. Especially in these devastating times of sudden deaths, illnesses, danger and loss, we need You to protect, comfort and heal our hearts. There is no other remedy for the pain, agony and frustration that accompany the fractured hearts. God of mercy, please hear our prayers. Amen.

“There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.” African American Spiritual
Oct. 23, 2011: Don’t Run Into the Storm

“So don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Matthew 6:34

I finally convinced my daughter to see a doctor. Her problem seemed small and cosmetic, but when over-the-counter solutions were ineffective, a check-up seemed necessary. The doctor suggested that a hormone imbalance might be the problem, and if so, the fix was an easy one. A blood test was ordered. When the doctor called the next day and asked us to come in, I knew there was more going on.

The doctor was calm and direct. He ordered an MRI of my daughter’s brain and cranial area. The words were never spoken but the implication that this could be very serious hung over us like a cloud.

Now my mind was reeling. I purposed to keep my fears to myself. And besides, I was a woman of faith. I would just speak to these fears and they would cease. But to say the next days were a challenge is an understatement.

Then for some reason, I began remembering a book I had read as a child. The storyline about a girl and a horse seemed to have nothing to do with my situation, but the thoughts persisted. Finally I stopped and really thought about what I’d read years ago. In this little novel, the heroine had been spared being soaked in a rainstorm while her friends were drenched. Instead of racing to the stable when a fierce storm arose, her horse would only plod along refusing to run home. But when she arrived home long minutes after the others, they were sopping wet and she was only damp. Her friends had run directly into the storm while she had been held back out of the worst of it.

Then I heard the Lord. “Don’t run into the storm.” And I knew. We had no results, no reason to think the worst. I was running headlong into the fray while the Lord was saying, “One day at a time. Don’t borrow trouble from tomorrow.”

The results of the MRI did show a small problem. My daughter takes a medication to control it. Through this experience, I’ve learned to ask, “Is the storm here, or am I running into it?”

For Personal Application:

- Lord, where have I borrowed trouble in the past and lost the peace You give by anticipating something that was only a cloud on a distant horizon?
- What are some ways I can focus on today and allow the Lord to bear the burdens of tomorrow?

For Group Application:

- How do we often waste valuable time and energy and even cause ourselves to fall into sin by becoming “tomorrow” focused instead of concentrating on what today has in store?

Prayer: Lord, help me stay focused on the needs of today. Help me hold onto the truth that You have tomorrow and all its challenges, and You will be there when I get there to help me through. Help me have peaceful sleep each night and a quiet spirit each day so that I can hear You and follow You in the present moment. Amen.

“When we borrow trouble, and look forward into the future and see what storms are coming, and distress ourselves before they come, as to how we shall avert them if they ever do come, we lose our proper trustfulness in God.” Henry Ward Beecher
“The Lord your God will soon bring you into the land He swore to give you when He made a vow to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob … be careful not to forget the Lord, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt.”

Deuteronomy 6:10, 12

According to A.W. Tozer, one of the greatest enemies facing the church is “the dictatorship of the routine.” He says, "When we come to a place where everything can be predicted and nobody expects anything unusual from God, we are in a rut.” It's easy to learn “how” and forget “why.”

Our relationship with God can be reduced to empty ritual. We simply go through the motions of serving God. That's the potential danger of rituals. But rituals can serve as powerful reminders. They can give structure and significance to our spiritual lives.

In today’s Scripture reading, God reminds His people of the importance of remembering. The problem is that sometimes our memory fails us. We tie a string around our finger to help us remember. The ability to remember is a wonderful gift that God has given to us. In a flash you can be a child again, skipping rocks across a pond, or walking in a meadow.

Memories are also very practical. If you couldn’t remember that a red light means “stop” you’d be in trouble. If you couldn’t remember that water quenches thirst when you’re thirsty, or you weren’t able to remember what day it is, or your anniversary or wife’s birthday – you’d be in big trouble.

My own challenge is learning to forget what I should forget and remember what I should remember. Throughout Biblical history God has used rituals to remind us of what He doesn't want us to forget. He established festival days, named people and places and placed a rainbow in the sky – all designed to help us remember Him and His promises. Today, join me in remembering God’s goodness, faithful deeds, answered prayers or a Scripture that sparks a special memory.

For Personal Application:

- Has the busyness of life caused you to develop any spiritual amnesia? Are there specific moments in your past that recalling causes you to offer praise to God?
- Consider what rituals or practices can be a helpful crutch for remembering the right things.

For Group Application:

- Are there ways we can practically help one another to remember God’s promises when we face life’s adversities?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for becoming forgetful of Your faithfulness. I am blessed and fortunate, and I choose to remember that it is all because of You! Help me become more mindful of revisiting and remembering Your promises. Amen.

“There is nothing wrong with memorials … provided they don’t so link us to the past that we fail to serve God in the present ... the next generation need reminders of what God has done in history, but they must strengthen their faith and draw them closer to God.”

Warren Weirsbe
Oct. 25, 2011: Love Dispels Darkness

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

John 15:12

Tick…tick…tick…6:30 a.m., Mom and Dad pulled into my driveway. I peeked out my window. “No, they’re here to get me.”

For two years, I had been manipulated into believing that my parents were enemies. As I isolated myself, I turned into a walking skeleton struggling with anger, anxiety, hatred and loneliness. I knew my situation was serious, but I didn’t know where to turn and certainly not to my parents.

As my roommate opened the door, I raced behind my door to hide. “Don’t touch me. Get your hands off me. I don’t want to go. It won’t work. It’s all your fault.” I glared at Mom and Dad intensely threatening to harm myself if they dare come any closer. I truly believed that I had just signed my own death sentence, and Mom was to blame.

Over the next few months, Mom and Dad gently responded to my accusations with love and gentleness. As I returned their friendly smiles with scowls and hatred, they continued showering me with unconditional love. I didn’t feel like I deserved their love. I thought that my life had been completely crushed with no future. And yet, through my parent’s love for me, the Lord dispelled all darkness and completely set me free from all the accusations and lies that had controlled my life. It is easy to love those that love you in return. It is more challenging to love someone that doesn’t return your love.

Perhaps you’ve been in a situation in which you were ready to give up on someone because your love wasn’t received. However, you never know what impact you are having on that individual when you smile, say hello or just send a note of encouragement even when they respond with anger and hatred. If it wasn’t for my parents’ persistence and unconditional love, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Similarly, you never know how your ability to extend a hand of love will have a life-changing impact on the next person you meet. God calls you a world-changer! He wants to use the power of love to break chains of darkness and set people free. As I John 4:18 says, “Perfect love drives out fear.”

For Personal Application:

- God calls us to love our enemies. Have I ever struggled with loving someone who didn’t love me in return? How do I/have I overcome this struggle?
- At times, it can be very easy to judge individuals by their outward appearance. What has God personally shown me about loving the unlovable?

For Group Application:

- What does it mean to lay your life down for someone?
- As a group, discuss ways in which you can help a friend come into the revelation of God’s unconditional love.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank You so much for Your unconditional love. I thank You that You never give up on me and that You see me as the apple of Your eye. Even during those moments, when I feel like there is nowhere else to go, You are there for me. I pray that You will make this revelation even more real to me. I also pray that You will help me to be able to love those that don’t love me. Soften my heart and give me eyes to see people the way that You see people. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“IIntense love does not measure, it just gives.” Mother Teresa
Oct. 26, 2011: Forgiveness

"... bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

Colossians 3:13

Forgiveness enriches and enlarges one’s ability to love and to dwell in the shalom and freedom of the Holy Spirit.

For Personal Application:

- Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in remembering the people and events in your life for which you have not yet granted full forgiveness.
- Prayerfully submit each of these to the Lord. State very specifically your forgiveness of the wrong and of the person responsible for the wrong. Ask God for forgiveness for each person and for yourself for harboring unforgiveness. Ask the Lord to heal your own heart as well as the hearts and lives of those who have hurt you.

For Group Application:

- We each have our imperfections and limitations – ways in which we may, even unconsciously, offend others within a collective setting. Determine ways your group can be more mindful of one another. On your own, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any person(s) you may have offended or been offended by. Freely ask them for forgiveness/forgive, and ask God to bless them and to restore the relationship.

Prayer: Father, forgive my sins and trespasses. Grant me the wisdom to clearly see and acknowledge my own faults and weaknesses; the ways I “miss the mark” rather than thinking and acting in Christ-like ways. I pray for the strength, courage and maturity of character to always acknowledge my sins and trespasses and the motivation to quickly ask forgiveness for those who sin against me. I ask also for the grace to forgive myself, understanding that Your mercy and forgiveness are always freely and lovingly given to me. Amen.

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” Lewis B. Smedes
Oct. 27, 2011: From Chaos to Order

“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Genesis 1:2-3

In the first few moments of your morning, when you clumsily hit the alarm clock and rub your eyes, what is your first thought? Is your mind filled with thoughts about yesterday’s failures, today’s expectations and tomorrow’s worries? I find myself often asking the question: How did I let my relationship with God become so disorganized and haphazard? I crave His closeness to begin my day, but instead I find myself thinking of everything else but Him. That’s probably due to the piles of clothes on the chair, the bills unpaid lying on my dresser, and my bedspread strewn across the room like a hurricane blew through. Many times we find ourselves in a mess spiritually, and it is evident in all areas of our lives. And the reality is that no one really wants to be in that “formless and void” place, and yet we find ourselves stubbing our toes on toys, shoes and the other paraphernalia of the mess of our lives.

It is at this point that I recall these beautiful verses. What I need to realize is that the presence of the Spirit is in my situation. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over those primeval waters. He is hovering over my primeval bedroom waiting to reveal to me His movement in my life. This verse goes on to say that God speaks into the chaotic situation, and He speaks something that is contrary to all the seeming evidence. He reveals Himself in the midst of chaos to be a divine Organizer. He is the God who turns the light on. You can clean your spirituality with a little help. Turn the light on to begin your day, and let the light shine in the dark and dusty corners of our spirituality. Look for God hovering over your morning, your day, your night and pay attention to what He is shining on.

For Personal Application:

- What are some of my thoughts that create the chaos of my morning – my job, relationships, fears?
- In thinking through the Creation passage – have I ever thought that God started the world with a process, and maybe He wants me to approach my spirituality as a process and not an instant fix? What are the benefits of realizing my spirituality is a process?

For Group Application:

- How can grace be shown to others that we encounter on a daily basis who might be going through a difficult process of God ordering their chaos? What attitudes should we inherit from this passage?

Prayer: Dear Creator of the heavens and earth, I recognize that my life is formless and void without You, and I can do nothing apart from You. Speak a word that brings light to my day, so that I might watch You order every part of me. Let me recognize how You are prioritizing my life, so that by the end of the day, I might find myself in a place full of Your goodness and rest. Amen.

“"The Creator could have made His work perfect at first, but by this gradual proceeding He would shew what is ordinarily the method of His providence, and grace.” John Wesley
Oct. 28, 2011: Making Yourself Useful to God

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted: He rescues those who are crushed in spirit.”

Psalm 34:18

What’s on the top of your to-do list these days? Not the daily chore stuff, but the long-term really important things. Let’s see: lose weight, get a better job, have the best lawn in the neighborhood, oh, and be broken before God! … Huh?

Most of us don’t think of brokenness as something to be desired. “Broken” means something needs to be fixed. When I was little, my dad had a tray on his dresser. Whenever something was broken, we could confidently put it in the tray, knowing that if it could be fixed, he would fix it. Dolls, puppets, trains and skates all made their way from the playroom, to the dresser, to the workshop, and back again, better than ever. I learned early that “fixed” was a good thing. Similarly, when we come to salvation, we discover the joy of our heavenly Father’s power to heal our hearts and our lives, to fix us.

But what if the glue holding our daily lives together is pride or fear or the need to control things around us? Psalm 51 tells us, “The sacrifice You desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart.” Are we willing to be broken, really broken? He asks us to be willing, to trust Him, to make us better than ever, to walk so close to Him that nothing remains of self in the light of His love.

This is the challenge of brokenness; do we really want Him, on His terms, in the fullness of who He really is? If so, the real question is not “How can I have more of Jesus?” but rather, “How can Jesus have more of me?”

For Personal Application:

- What of self remains between me and the lordship of Jesus Christ? As I open my heart to the light of His love, what does it reveal that must not remain? Can I give it to Him?
- What positive steps can I take to begin the walk of brokenness? How can I begin to trust Him to break those things of the shadows, which may be intimately tied to my concept of self?

For Group Application:

- How can we support each other, corporately, in the life of brokenness? What are the challenges to making that commitment?

Prayer: God of heaven and Lord of my heart, teach me Your ways of brokenness. Let nothing of my own self remain in opposition to the work that You wish to do through me. I trust You Lord! By Your loving hand break me, break my heart, that no prideful or selfish matter remain to the detriment of Your gospel through me to others. Amen.

“God can never make us wine if we object to the fingers He uses to crush us with … you cannot drink grapes. Grapes become wine only when they have been squeezed.” Oswald Chambers

“But God is the God of the waves and the billows, and they are still His when they come over us …” Amy Carmichael
Oct. 29, 2011: Holy Living

“Strive … for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Hebrews 12:14

Lately, I have been re-reading St. Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions*. In his opening prayer, he says, “[Human beings bear about them their] mortality, the evidence of [their] sinfulness, and the evidence that [You] resist the proud: Yet this tiny part of all that [You] have created desires to praise [You]. [You] excite [human beings] that to praise [You] is [their] joy. For [You have] made us for [Your]self and our hearts are restless until they rest in [You].” Through the eyes of the bishop, what I have is not enough; what I have accomplished is not enough; where I am going is not enough; accepting my calling to ministry is not enough; helping others is not enough. Rest in God is the wholeness and the holiness to which every human soul yearns.

Oswald Chambers says, “Holiness, not happiness, is the chief end of man.” There is personal fulfillment in holiness that supersedes happiness that human processes ascertain. When Christians submit to God’s holiness, we experience satisfaction that physical beauty, degrees, jobs, money, prestige, possessions and positions cannot give – only God’s holiness offers this fulfillment. Biblical teachings on the subject of holiness align the Christian with God’s beauty.

Pursuing God through prayer, the way we interact with others, and how we live privately is the essence of holiness. Without holiness, we cannot see nor fully experience God; without it we will always frantically search for something else to make us happy. Let us pray for the holy life today.

For Personal Application:

- Do I seek to live a holy life or does holiness seem too difficult to pursue?
- What are two or three steps I can take that will help me in my search for God’s holiness?
- How have we allowed greed and other competing priorities to interfere with our pursuit of a holy life?

For Group Application:

- In what ways do we allow for inappropriate or unholy living as a team/group? Is it possible to provide greater support and encouragement for each other as we seek to live holy lives?

Prayer: Lord, we want to be holy! Of all our worldly pursuits, none could grant us full reflection of You. Our hearts are restless until they fully embrace the joy that comes from true holiness. We want to be holy. Please, help us to be holy as You are holy. Amen.

“Holiness, Holiness is what I long for
Holiness is what I need
Holiness, Holiness is what you want for me
Take my heart and form it,
Take my mind transform it,
Take my will conform it,
To yours, to yours, Oh Lord.

Take my heart and mold it,
Take my mind transform it,
Take my will conform it,
To yours, to yours, oh Lord.”

Lyrics by Micah Stampley
Oct. 30, 2011: Fearing God

“The Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love.”

Psalm 147:11

Perhaps no one has captured the character of God better than C.S. Lewis in his Chronicles of Narnia, in which he portrays the Lord Jesus Christ as a lion, as John does in Revelation, chapter 5. The lion is a figure fierce and powerful, yet tender. His splendor is dazzling. His wrath is terrible, yet His love and tenderness are infinite. To be in His presence was nothing less than awesome. Quoting Lewis, "As the Lion passed by they were terribly afraid He would turn and look at them, yet in some queer way they wished He would." Naturally anyone would be nervous confronting a lion! One who knew this Lion well was asked, "Is He safe?" I find the answer both startling and profound: "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course He isn’t safe. But He’s good. He’s the King, I tell you."

Possibly one of the most important, yet infrequently taught truths we need to hear today is that we need to fear the Lord. How irreverently we treat God! How casually we allow ourselves to walk through life without honoring Him with a healthy fear. Of course, this is a holy and healthy fear – a profound sense of awe toward God. Some mistakenly confuse this principle with being afraid of God. Those who do not know the Lord personally exemplify the lack of a godly fear.

As Christians, we must refocus our hearts on God’s character and attributes to maintain balance, perspective, worship and holy living. The Lord delights in those who put their trust in His unfailing love (Psalm 147:11).

For Personal Application:

- Am I growing in the fear of the Lord? Are there ways that my life and conduct fail to reflect a respectful reverence for God?
- What practices help to instill a healthy fear of God? Am I willing to repent and apply wisdom to this area of my life?

For Group Application:

- Do our attitudes or actions as a group/department betray a healthy fear of God?

Prayer: Lord, help me to discover the blessing of fearing You – not in a wrong sense of being afraid, but fully recognizing Your character and holiness. I desire to drink from this life-giving fountain (Proverbs 14:27). Today, I choose to fear You and acknowledge Your holiness. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“We cannot too often think, that there is a never sleeping eye that reads the heart, and registers our thoughts.” Sir Francis Bacon
Oct. 31, 2011: Repenting for Corporate Sins

“Both my father’s house and I have sinned.”

Nehemiah 1:6

Nehemiah, who had risen to a position of influence to a leader of a pagan culture, was called to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and restore his nation – not just politically and structurally – but most importantly spiritually. Israel had abandoned the commandments of God. Once again an empire that despised their faith and mocked their God humbled them.

Nehemiah, whose name means “Comfort of Yaweh,” takes the proactive steps required to return Israel to a nation that could appropriate the promise that “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Psalm 33:12). Brokenhearted over their corporate sin (Nehemiah 1:4), he fasts and prays crying out in confession and repentance. He does not minimize the offences nor question God’s righteous judgment.

Perhaps the key to his intercession is his willingness to take personal responsibility for his own as well as the sins of others – both my father’s house and I have sinned (vs. 6). The powerful confession that “we have acted corruptly against You” (vs. 7) positions him to become the nation’s deliverer. By taking on the sins of his people, Nehemiah foreshadows the redeeming work of Christ who knew no sin but willingly became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

For Personal Application:

- Is my heart broken over the sins our nation has committed against the clear commands and ordinances of God? (Take personal responsibility for at least one of those sins on behalf of our nation asking God for His forgiveness and mercy.)
- What proactive steps can I take to address this particular sin? How can I serve in a way that becomes the “Comfort of Yaweh” to those this sin has victimized? What personal steps of restoration and reconciliation will I take?

For Group Application:

- How can our group be actively involved in bringing the sins of our nation before those who are in leadership? What positive steps can we take corporately to correct these sins as well as minister to the victims?

Prayer: Lord, first search my heart and reveal any hidden sin in me so that I might repent and cry out on behalf of my nation! Break my heart over what in our nation breaks Your heart. Show me how to be Your comfort to those whom our sins have victimized. Send Your Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin and empower us to live righteously before You no matter the cost or consequence. All in and for the sake of our Redeemer Jesus! Amen.

There is much good about our nation. However, we must also own the reality that we are exporters of evils that victimize the least, the left and the lost. Too often, however, we who have been forgiven stand off in judgment rather than fall on our knees in intercessory anguish and true repentance. To be a vital part of returning our nation to righteousness, we must first be so broken by our corporate, national sins that we are compelled to own them as our own. And once broken, be willing to pay the price to speak and act righteously demonstrating that our repentance is more than just pious words. Corporate repentance is ignited by the true confessions and proactive responses of those willing to pray, both my father’s house and I have sinned!

― Erwin Lutzer

“Despite its foundational Christian heritage, America is rapidly degenerating into a godless society. The church in America, although highly visible and active, appears powerless to redirect the rushing secular currents. Mired in a moral and spiritual crisis, America’s only hope is a national revival, like God has graciously bestowed in the past.”

― Erwin Lutzer
Nov. 1, 2011: Cry Out to God

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Psalm 19:14

As fall begins to unfold, I find myself often overwhelmed by life. Family illness, financial strain, and uncertainty about the future loom in the background of my days. With so many demands, some days I have no words to offer God when I sit down to read Scripture or pray.

I wonder if you've experienced this too: that feeling that you've prayed that prayer before, sung that song before, claimed that Scripture before … the feeling that words just aren't enough.

In Psalm 19, David offers not only his words, but the meditations of his heart – the attitudes, the focus, the very core of who he is. In a time when I don't know what to say, I take great comfort in this: it's more than just sounds forming my cry to God.

In this light, my time of worship before God becomes a refuge, rather than an exercise in one-sided conversation. No doubt brought on by the passing of Hurricane Irene, I imagine a storm shelter furnished simply with the basics – a lamp, a bed, a dry blanket. The purpose of this refuge is not to calm the storm, or even prevent it; the purpose is to provide a safe place to abide while the rain pours and the winds charge through.

Now, I can simultaneously be silent and cry out before God. With Him as a refuge, there's no pressure to say the right words or pray the right prayers. While life's struggles continue to clamor for attention, I have a place I can go and a God who simply listens to my heart.

For Personal Application:
- When was the last time I was silent before God in worship?
- How can the meditations of my heart honor God today?

For Group Application:
- Do our actions and motives reflect the words we share about our Lord and Savior?

Prayer: Father God, I confess that many times I become so consumed with the words of my worship that I ignore the content of my heart. I come before You today, quiet and ready to cry out to You. O Lord, may the meditations of my heart be just as pleasing to You as the words I utter in Your presence. Amen.

"God doesn’t miss a single sigh that escapes our lips. But historically, God’s people most often cried out in spoken words that sprang from the depths of their being! God heard their petitions ... and shook their worlds. Like fasting or kneeling, crying out is the Scripture-sanctioned way to pray with intensity and commitment.” Bill Gothard
Nov. 2, 2011: Be Anxious for Nothing

"My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

Psalm 62:1-2

The Lord commands us over and over in His Word not to worry, don’t be anxious, don’t fear. Why is it then that this command seems so difficult to obey? I take comfort that even the Psalmist David, who God called a man after His own heart, was prone to worry and fear. He began many of the psalms by expressing his fear, but he didn’t stop there. He ended by praising the Lord.

I have found that many of my worries are connected to my thoughts of “what if.” What if I fail my test, what if I get cancer, what if I don’t get chosen for the job I want, what if I never get married? The problem with “what if” questions are that the things we fear may not even happen, but we already wasted a lot of time thinking about what we would do if they did! Time is too valuable to spend it dwelling on negative thoughts. The Bible tells us in Philippians 4:8 to think of things that are true, noble, right, pure, etc. Dwelling on fearful things that may or may not come true is the opposite of what this verse is telling us.

What if every time we are tempted to worry, we pray instead? I don’t know about you, but I sure would be praying a lot! What if that meant I became an expert in praying instead of an expert in worrying? Now there’s a “what if” to dwell on!

For Personal Application:

- What changes do I need to make in my life in order to have a calm soul that is free from worry and fear?
- If I am worried and anxious, am I trusting in God or in myself? Why do I feel that I can’t trust that God will see me through?

For Group Application:

- How do we set unrealistic deadlines that cause unnecessary fret and worry?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for letting worry consume my time. Teach me to think of things that are true. Show me that I can trust You in situations when I am tempted to fear. You care when a sparrow falls to the ground and you say in Your Word that you care much more for me. Thank You for giving me manna for today, and I know You have it ready for tomorrow too. Amen.

“Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy.”
Leo Buscaglia

“Worry is interest paid on trouble before it comes due.”
William Ralph Inge
"And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone."

Matthew 14:23

In the midst of our often obsessive and frenetic activities, God calls us to practice the discipline of silence in order to know Him better: “Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). The Biblical calls to silence go hand-in-hand together with the call to be alone with God, the ancient discipline of solitude. But for most Christians the practice of these disciplines with any regularity remains difficult, because the demands of these calls are, in essence, a call to do nothing.

In the Biblical disciplines of silence and solitude we allow God to be the only God for us. He is free to speak, act and be God in our lives. All competing voices are silenced; all our efforts to control and manipulate our world are stopped. As the prophet Habakkuk witnessed: “But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” We keep silence because we have placed all our trust in Him and know that He is able to fight every battle for us (Exodus 14:14). To keep silent in solitude is an act of complete trust and faith in Him.

How do we practice these Biblical disciplines? Jesus instructed us to find solitary and private places for our daily practice of prayer (Matthew 6:6). It is when we “come away,” to use the Old Testament call to intimacy, that we will see His face and hear His voice (Song of Solomon 2:8-17). It is here in the “hiding place” of prayer (Psalm 32:7) that we learn to wait upon Him, keep our eye on Him as His servants (Psalm 123) and find our energy, strength and focus renewed (Isaiah 40:31).

Today, find a quiet place where you can let go of all activity, concerns and rest by faith in Him. You will find that He indeed is the only God and that He will be exalted in your life and in our world.

For Personal Application:

- Why do I fear silence? What practical steps can I take to silence the noise around me?
- Is there a healthy balance of solitude and communal activity in my life? Do I need to make more space for “alone time” with God?

For Group Application:

- Do we provide enough opportunities for faculty, staff and students to “come away” and seek the Lord’s guidance in silence and solitude? How do we temper organizational noise and frequent activities?

Prayer: Father, open my ears to hear the call of Your Spirit to seek You in the secret place of prayer. Give me the courage to silence all competing voices and to be still and know that You are indeed the only God. Empower me to follow in the footsteps of Your beloved Son, Jesus our eternal Savior. Amen.

“Silence gives us a new outlook on everything. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say but what God says to us and through us. Jesus is always waiting for us in silence. In that silence, He will listen to us; there He will speak to our soul, and there we will hear His voice.” Mother Teresa

“There is no mode of life in the world more pleasing and more full of delight than continual conversation with God.” Brother Lawrence
Nov. 4, 2011: Finding God in Dark Times

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

Romans 8:28

I realize it shouldn’t take a lifetime for us Christians to embrace the truth expressed in this good word from the Apostle Paul to the Romans. But I needed this truth to help me through the loss of my son, Austin, 22, who was killed by a drunk driver in 1996. For three long years I walked through the valley of the shadow of death David wrote about in Psalm 23. I lost the joy of my relationship with God. I stopped engaging in praise and worship at my church. I wouldn’t communicate meaningfully with my wife and three children. I sought refuge through long hours at work, avoiding the pain of returning home where I had last seen him.

Austin was to me as David was to Jesse and Joseph to Jacob. He would sit at my right hand at the dinner table. When his eyes gazed into mine, I would see admiration and unconditional love for me, his father. His passion for God was as intense as his physical prowess and beauty. He was a national athlete; he worked as a fashion model to pay for college and was engaged to another model as passionate for God as he.

Near the end of the third year following his death, a former graduate student of mine, David, told me he had come to know the Lord at Austin’s funeral when he experienced a praise service rather than a morbid death ceremony. Immediately, as he shared with me over lunch one day, I heard in my spirit the voice of God telling me this as David continued to speak: “My child, since the world revolves around you and your needs, I’m willing to send Austin back to you. But you must realize that Austin won’t come to know Me, the Muslim student Austin was witnessing to won’t repent and commit to Me, and many others who have been transformed by his death will never know the abundant life. And, by the way, he’s kicking and screaming because he doesn’t want to return.” I shared this word from God with David right then and there:

“David, even though I hear this message from God right now in my spirit, I will have to tell him that Austin can stay in heaven. The world doesn’t revolve around me. I know God’s plan is the best plan even though the pain of this loss is almost more than I can bear and will linger with me forever.” As I gazed into my student’s eyes, I realized anew that all things do work together for good even when it seems so bad.

For Personal Application:

- Do I linger in the dark valley of disappointment when I should be holding my gaze on God and His plan for my life? Do I blame God for not protecting a loved one whom I’ve lost?
- What are possible outcomes of my disappointment that reflect the good that has come? How might I walk closer with the Lord in whom is my strength and the joy of my salvation? Are this world and its criteria of success more important than my walk with my Creator?

For Group Application:

- What good might not have occurred had you been delivered from a dark valley like that described in Psalm 23?

Prayer: Father, help me to know and understand that my relationship with You is more important than everything else in my life. My walk with You makes everything else in my life work. I call on the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit as I seek to understand the promise of Romans 8:28. Amen.

“Losses and disappointments are the trials of our faith, our patience and our obedience. When we are in the midst of prosperity, it is difficult to know whether we have a love for the Benefactor or only for His benefits. It is in the midst of adversity that our piety is put to the trial.”

John Fawcett
Nov. 5, 2011: Self-Examination

“Let us search out and examine our ways and turn back to the Lord.”

Lamentations 3:40

Historically and contemporarily, the discipline of spiritual self-examination has remained an important daily practice for Christians in view of the many Old and New Testament verses and passages that relate to reflective self-examination. The Spanish priest, St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), who founded the religious order known as the Society of Jesuits, wrote a classic book on Christian formative spirituality, *The Spiritual Exercises*, a series of disciplined actions based on the ancient practices in Judeo-Christian faith including self-examination. He brought reemphasis to the practice of *examen*, which includes a contemplative approach in discerning God’s presence and movements in one's daily life and reflection on the manner in which one has responded to God in motives, thoughts and actions.

The discipline of self-examination recognizes the essential spiritual need to seek and to respond to the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit. St. Ignatius recognized what he defined as two distinct movements in one’s spiritual life: a movement to “consolation,” or a movement to “desolation.” The former indicates those thoughts, actions and experiences in which one draws closer to God and God’s will, and the latter to those times when one moves away from the presence and will of the Lord. The goal in self-examination is to discern the Holy Spirit’s presence and guidance; and to recognize and acknowledge the ways one has “pulled away” from the Lord, then to move forward in repentance and thanksgiving for new, daily opportunities to live more fully and faithfully in God’s presence and will.

The discipline begins with setting aside time each day in a place of solitude. Here is one pattern of the process of *examen*:

Find a place of solitude and bring your favorite Bible translation and a journal. Acknowledge God’s presence, thanking the Lord for the gift of another day and the opportunities it brings to love and serve the Lord. Invite the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind all of the events experienced during the day, waiting silently on the Lord to bring specific thoughts about the day to your consciousness. As you remember each event, use the questions below as a guide for prayer.

For Personal Application:

- Lord, what are the ways in which I followed Your will in responding to this person or event—the ways I glorified You during this day?
- What are the ways in which I “missed the mark” in my thoughts and responses to this person or event?

For Group Application:

- What are the ways in which we are moving in Your will toward the achievement of our mission or goal? What are the ways we have not moved toward Your will in achieving it? In what ways may we change and improve in moving more toward Your will for us?

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, thank You that throughout my day You are present. Your Word, both written and whispered in my heart, is always there to guide me if I desire to hear Your “still, small voice.” Examine my ways, Lord, as I reflect on the day; remind me of the perfect obedience of my Lord Jesus Christ: how He lived to please His Father. Conform me, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, to those thoughts, words and actions that glorify my Father and move me always closer to Your perfect will. Amen.*

“The unexamined life is not worth living” Socrates

“Nothing will make us so charitable and tender to the faults of others, as, by self-examination, thoroughly to know our own.” François Fénelon
Nov. 6, 2011: Doing the Word

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

James 1:22

I own every exercise DVD ever created – at least, that’s what my husband says. It’s true; I do have a pretty big collection. It is because each one addresses a different area. I have strength-training workouts especially for arms or legs, routines that target the tummy and cardio workouts that burn fat. Some feature weights, bands or resistance training while others use dance, step aerobics or kickboxing.

With so many workouts to choose from, I can target any area of my body that needs it. The problem is I rarely use any of them. My collection of DVDs gathers dust on the shelf because I either don’t take time to exercise, or I choose to go for a quick walk instead. After all, walks don’t require me to learn new moves or work hard enough to sweat. But this easy approach to exercise isn’t going to get me fit. By not challenging myself or exercising all of my muscles, I will never get stronger.

Too often I approach Scripture the same way. I own many Bibles and read them frequently. I can even quote portions of Scripture. However, unless I make it a point to put God’s Word into practice in my life, I will not grow in my faith. My spiritual muscles cannot develop unless I use them.

As Christians, it is easy to talk about the fruits of the Spirit found in Scripture, or to speak of loving and forgiving our enemies, but are we living out these attributes? God’s Word offers guidance for every area of our lives, but if we merely read it and do not put it into action, we miss out on its power to change us. We can only become more like Christ if we do what His word says.

For Personal Application:

- Are there portions of Scripture that I struggle to obey? What are they? What steps can I take to begin doing what God asks of me in these areas?
- Have certain parts of Scripture become so familiar to me that I miss the powerful message contained in them? What steps can I take to see these passages in a fresh way?

For Group Application:

- What are the most recent passages of Scripture we’ve read or heard about in sermons? Have we done anything to put those into practice? What actions can we take this week to live out these Scriptures?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for Your life-giving Word that brings peace, comfort, correction and guidance for my life. Help me to not only read Scripture, but to do what it says. As I put Your Word into practice in my life, help me to become more like You in all I think, say or do. Amen.

“I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts.” John Locke

“Well done is better than well said.” Benjamin Franklin
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