

The Reader's Companion
for the
New Testament

INTRODUCTION TO MARK - This is an easy Gospel to read. There is little background information given or needed. Mark just begins with the main actors and action of his story. He tightly focuses on Jesus, telling us how Jesus feels and what Jesus does. “Immediately” is one of Mark’s favorite words. The book was probably written for a Roman audience that would appreciate and understand power and a Man of decisive action.

1 - John the Baptist seems to have intentionally chosen by his lifestyle and clothing to identify himself with the Old Testament prophets, rather than trying to be part of the “religious establishment” (**verse 6**). Jesus then bursts on the scene, changing men’s lives (**verses 17-27**), and teaching without any mention of rabbinical traditions or precedents but with His own authority (**verse 22**). He quieted demons (**verse 25, 34**) because such could only give Him an undesirable recommendation. No one wants to be commended by a demon! Some puzzle why Jesus asked people not to tell about His great work (**verses 44-45**) but when this leper violated Jesus’ request the Lord could hardly move around and Jesus’ wisdom is vindicated.

2-3 - These chapters introduce the two controversies that dogged Jesus through out His ministry: separation with sinners (**2:17**) and the Sabbath (**2:23ff, 3:1-6**). The key to the controversy in **2:24ff** is to remember that Jesus and His apostles were not violating Moses’ Law but rabbinical traditions about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees by asking why they don’t condemn David, who really did break God’s law (**verse 26**), and why with their traditions they destroy the Sabbath’s real intent (**verse 27**)? Chapter three continues these controversies, and we meet the Herodians (**verse 6**). This was a political party dedicated to keeping the Herodian family in power. Strange bedfellows for the straight-laced Pharisees indeed! Don’t get lost in Jesus’ discussion of an unforgivable sin (**verse 29**). This is simply the sin of the hard heart that refuses all evidence, and will not repent. A heartfelt concern about having committed this sin would of itself show that one has not done so!

4 - Verse 2 introduces Jesus’ favorite teaching method: parables. Jesus told parables to gain and hold people’s interest, as well as to sift the casual hearer from those truly interested in His message (note **verses 12 and 25**). So Jesus urges His listeners to use their ears to really hear, to really listen (**verse 9**). Mark concludes the powerful message of Jesus with a powerful miracle (**verse 39**), leaving us, the readers, asking “Who can this be?”

5 - This chapter introduces three hard cases which would impress Mark’s audience with Jesus’ jaw-dropping power. The demon-possessed man always brings out questions about Jesus sending demons into the pigs (**verse 12**), why He would do that and why they wanted to go there. The truth is we don’t know, and aren’t told because it is not important to the purpose of the story. We need to get our eyes off the pigs and look at the man who was healed. We also need to note that if you ask Jesus to leave (**verses 17-18**) He will! In **verse 19** we get a change of strategy, as Jesus usually forbids this (see 1:44). But this area was heavily Gentile, which may account for Jesus allowing this man to become His messenger. **Verse 41** contains Aramaic, the common language of the common man in Palestine. Mark translates it for his readers, showing us that his intended audience was not Jews in Palestine.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Jesus had no interest whatsoever in placating the religious establishment or perpetrating their stifling man-made traditions that they bound as if they were from God. Examine yourself and your own ideas about how to worship and live as a Christian. Ask yourself “Do I bind what God has not? Am I stifling God’s ways with my self-made traditions?”

Week 2 - Mark 6-10

6 - Some are confused by **verse 5’s** lack of miracles, but it is not Jesus suffering a “power outage,” but a lack of faith in the crowd (note **verses 3 and 6**). Their faithlessness limited Jesus’ work because they didn’t bring more to Him to be healed! The sad story of John the Baptist is inserted now by Mark. **Verse 17’s** Philip is not the Philip of Luke 3:1 but another relative named Philip. Herod Antipas was visiting him in Rome, met Herodias and talked into her running away with him. John the Baptist reproved them for living in adultery (**verse 18**), and it cost him dearly. The chapter concludes with two more illustrations of Jesus’ power. **Verse 37** speaks of denarii. It was a day’s wage, meaning that this is eight to ten month’s of pay! **Verse 48** says it was between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m.

7 - Again Jesus and the Pharisees tangle. Jesus sternly rebukes all their human traditions, derived from long debates by various rabbis, which end up neatly nullifying God’s law. **Verse 11** tells how they got around caring for parents by simply saying “I’ve dedicated those funds to God’s work.” It appears that one didn’t even have to give those monies to the Temple then, but could just say “they are dedicated to God,” freeing him to change his mind later (after his parents were gone). What sophistry! We are not used to a Jesus who appears unwilling to help (**verse 27**) but we cannot hear His tone of voice or see the twinkle in His

eyes. Is He testing this woman's resolve and faith? In **verse 33** Jesus takes special care to let this deaf-mute man know what He is doing.

8 - We have had 5000 fed, but the disciples don't fully understand Jesus' power so Mark gives us another illustration by telling of the feeding of the 4000. For those seeking more signs can help, but for those with closed hearts no sign will be given (**verse 12**). Why Jesus heals the man of **verse 22** in stages is unknown to us. It is clear that Jesus does not want His disciples telling the world He is the Messiah (**verse 30**) until they understand what being the Messiah means: He will be killed and rise again (**verse 31**).

9 - The chapter begins with the key promise of **verse 1**. It doesn't matter how folks want to define the "kingdom" it is clear Jesus thought it would come shortly. Any teaching that has the kingdom to be something yet future is therefore obviously flawed. **Verse 7** makes the point of the Transfiguration: Jesus is of primary importance. We may not ever grasp all that happened there but we can get that. Moses and Elijah probably represent the Old Testament (the Lawgiver and the Great Prophet) but Jesus is the One who matters now. That is why John the Baptist came as His forerunner (**verse 13**). We may wonder why the disciples could not handle the demon possessed boy of **verses 17-25** but Jesus tells us: they were intimidated and lost their faith. What was needed was prayer that restores faith and power (**verse 29**). So much is made of the unknown man in **verse 38**, particularly if one tries to rebuke false teaching. Yet this man is not a false teacher for Jesus approved him! If Jesus rebukes false teaching, wrong religion and hypocrisy (and He does!) then His disciples can and must follow His example. **Verse 50b** probably references purity.

10 - The teaching on divorce and remarriage is remarkably clear (**verses 1-12**). While much has been made about exceptions the tenor of Jesus' teaching is simple: if you are married, stay married! The rich man of **verses 17-22** ought to surprise us. In Jesus' day the belief was that the rich must be very righteous for they had been so blessed. Jesus shows how such blessings can get in the way of really serving God - a warning we do well to consider carefully. **Verse 37** shows a very carnal view of the kingdom. This was a consistent problem with Jesus' audiences. **Verse 38** uses "baptism" to speak of an immersion, but not in water, but in suffering. Jesus tries to counter their mistaken view of the Kingdom with the "serve first" teaching of **verses 42-45**.

Applications from This Week's Readings

An emphasis in these chapters is Jesus doing the most incredible and amazing things. Meditate on the power of Christ. How can you have more faith in Him? How does seeing His great power help you feel more safe and secure knowing He will help you and answer your prayers?

Week 3 - Mark 11-15

11 - Mark now begins the last week of Jesus' life. On Sunday Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, hailed as the Messiah (**verses 9-10**). On Monday He curses a fig tree that promised fruit but did not deliver (like the Jewish nation), and then stops the use of the temple as a marketplace (**verses 12-17**). We need to be careful with **verse 23's** statement about faith. First, the apostles indeed had done much that seemed impossible, like walk on water and cast out demons. Second, other passages inform us about prayer and what we should ask for, and that needs to be factored in to all we believe about prayer.

12 - This is one of Jesus' sharpest and clearest parables. Israel was often compared to a vineyard (see Isaiah 5:1ff), so the meaning here is easy to grasp (**verse 12**). Jesus deals with their "impossible" questions easily (**verses 13-27**), but they cannot handle His (**verse 35**)! Jesus quotes Psalm 110 where God says to David's master (or Lord) "Sit at the place of prominence." But how could that be? David was the greatest king. The Messiah would be his son. How could the son be greater than the father, especially when that father was David? Jesus is pushing them to recognize that David's son would be Divine and so be a greater king than even David. However, they don't see it. Do we?

13 - This chapter is the subject of so much speculation and controversy. Yet if we simply look at the questions the disciples asked (when will the Temple be destroyed, **verses 1-4**), and remember that they didn't understand that Jesus would leave so had no basis to be asking about a Second Coming, we will come out just fine. Watch how the chapter repeatedly addresses Jesus' listeners. Whatever this is about they would see it, it would happen in their lifetimes, they needed to be warned, and they needed to be ready (note **verse 30**). **Verse 14** uses the term "abomination of desolation" but Luke has "armies" letting us know exactly what this is about: the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70. Some get lost in the language of **verses 24-27** but it is simply judgment language from the Old Testament prophets (see Isaiah 13:10-13; 19:1ff).

14 - Mark shows Jesus in control of everything, including the timing of His death, despite what the chief priests wanted (**verses 1-2**). **Verses 8-9's** praise should give every disciple determination to imitate this example and to do whatever we can, no matter how small it may seem. Why the secrecy in planning the Passover (**verse 12**)? It would provide an ideal setting for an arrest — out of the way and private. But Jesus is determined this Last Supper will not be interrupted. The hymn of **verse 26** is probably Psalm 118.

Don't miss the end of **verse 31**. Peter's denials are famous but all the apostles pledged themselves to Jesus. Could **verse 51** be talking about Mark? **Verse 62** is an emphatic claim to be the Messiah, combining Psalm 110 and Daniel 7:13-14.

15 - Going to see Pilate was necessary because the Jews could not enact capital punishment (**verse 1**). The effect as Mark walks us through Jesus' sham trial with Pilate is for us to see Jesus' absolute innocence, the lust for blood on the part of the crowd, and Pilate's sad and cowardly weakness. **Verse 23** tells us Jesus refused the common painkiller offered to the condemned. Jesus' crucifixion takes place around 9:00 A.M. (**verse 25**). The land would be dark from noon till three o'clock (**verse 33**). It is easy to miss what Jesus' death means but **verse 38** makes sure we don't: Jesus opens the way up to God.

Applications from This Week's Readings

These chapters show how what people wanted Jesus to do and what they wanted His kingdom to be were far from reality. How do we try to remold the Kingdom to fit our own grand designs and delusions today? Will we listen to Jesus and let Him be the King He is?

Week 4 - Mark 16; Galatians 1-4

16 - Make certain you note how no one has any expectation of a resurrection (**verse 3**). This is powerful evidence for those who want to argue an apostolic conspiracy stole Jesus' body. **Verse 9** introduces a serious textual question: are these verses authentic? Various translations footnote or italicize these verses, giving them an air of uncertainty. However, the verses actually teach nothing new or different. The only question is did Mark write them? Further, while acknowledging some important manuscripts do not contain them, there is excellent evidence based on very old documents that they are authentic and should be treated as such. **Verse 17** may cause some to wonder why we don't have these signs today. Granted, if this were the only verse about signs we might conclude we should have them, but **verse 20** tells us they did have the signs, while other texts tell us more about signs and how long they would last. In effect we do have the signs as we read about them in our Bibles!

Introduction to Galatians - This is one of the first epistles written (perhaps in the early AD 50's). It brings the Jerusalem Conference's results (Acts 15) to the churches in the province of Galatia that Paul and Barnabas established in Acts 13-14. A new teaching had taken root there, the result of "Judaizers" who taught that a Gentile must become a Jew before he can become a Christian. What will Paul say about this new hybrid Gospel?

1 - Galatians begins abruptly. Usually Paul has some words of praise for his readers but here there are none. Paul repeatedly develops his apostolic authority and authenticity (**verse 1**). **Verses 8-9** leave no doubt where Paul stands on adding to the Gospel, do they? Paul then retells his conversion and its aftermath to assure his readers that he didn't borrow his teaching from men (**verses 11-23**).

2 - Trying to mesh the visits to Jerusalem mentioned here with the record in Acts quickly becomes very involved and complex. More than likely, **verse 1** references the Jerusalem Conference. Paul subtly (and not so subtly) keeps introducing his main ideas, as in **verse 5**. Lest anyone think Paul is subservient to Peter we are told of Peter's hypocrisy (**verses 11-14**). Paul then emphatically states his main point: no one can be made right with God by their own deeds (**verses 16-21**). While Jews knew about sacrifices for sin and the Day of Atonement they were sure that God's person, a person in the covenant, would be marked by keeping the Old Law. Thus, Gentiles had to keep the Law if they were going to be "in." Paul says law keeping isn't the way "in," faith is! He will also go on to say it has always been that way (3:6). Of course, Jews would not like that at all. We are being treated like every other sinner, they would protest (**verse 17**)! But a life-giving relationship with God comes through faith in Christ (**verse 20**).

3 - **Verse 1's** strong tone shows us how concerned Paul is about his brethren in Galatia. He appeals to the spiritual gifts they see in their midst (**verse 5**) as proof positive that what he preached was the true Gospel from God. Further, Abraham was "in" with God prior to Moses' Law because he was a person of faith (**verse 6**). Because of his faith God made promises to Abraham, promises that included blessing all nations (**verse 8, 14**). This promise, that was made hundreds of years before the Law of Moses, finds its fulfillment in Christ (**verses 16-17**), not in Jewish pride. Paul knows Jews will ask "Why then did God give the Law?" His answer is that the Law restrained sin (**verse 19**) and led us to Christ (**verse 24**). Notice that **verse 26** shifts from "we" and "us" to "you," being inclusive of all of Paul's readers. The blessings promised to Abraham that come through Christ are available to all who will put on Christ (**verse 27**). All can be "heirs!" (**verse 29**).

4 - Christ has come to make us heirs, so don't go back to the way of slavery! Be an heir, be a child (**verse 5**) who can call God "Father" (*Abba* is an Aramaic word for father). We can do that when we receive the testimony of the Spirit, now contained in the New Testament (**verse 6**). **Verse 10** probably speaks of the Jewish holy calendar and its many feast days and Sabbaths. After being so stern with the Galatians Paul is tender in **verses 13-15**, remembering how he was sick among them. Did that illness affect his vision (**verse**

15)? Paul makes one more appeal for them to remain free from those who would bind the Law upon them by presenting an allegory (**verses 21-31**). This is a surprising allegory, because we expect Judaism to be linked to Sara, Abraham's real wife. Instead Judaism is tied to Hagar, the slave woman who bore Ishmael. Christians are the real children of Isaac, the real children of promise, Paul says (**verse 28**). Ishmael persecuted Isaac (see Genesis 16:15; 21:9-10) just as the Gentile Christians were being persecuted then.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Our readings this week and last week work together to show us Peter failing twice. Why did Jesus select a man like Peter, given some of his problems? What does this say about God's willingness to work with less than perfect people? Think also about Peter and quitting. Did Peter give up? Will you quit if and when you fail Jesus spectacularly?

Week 5 - Galatians 5-6; Ephesians 1-3

5 - Verse 6b contains a beautiful statement of how faith and works must go together. Paul knows these brethren well but does not seem to know the troublemaker(s) by name (**verse 10**). By **verse 15** Paul is transitioning from the doctrinal portion of the letter refuting the Judaizers to say, in a practical way, the church must get along. The NIV has "sinful nature" instead of "flesh" in **verse 16**, a translation that leads to misconceptions of every kind. "Walk in the Spirit" just means to walk according to God's will, or to walk with God, or be led by God. The teaching of the Spirit, contained in the Bible, controls how we live (see **verse 25**).

6 - Again Paul urges building strong relationships among brethren (**verses 1-2**). **Verse 11** may again refer to an eye illness, but it also serves to authenticate the letter. Paul apparently took the pen and added these last notes personally so the Galatians would know it was from Paul. While has the pen Paul revisits his main theme once more: don't let anyone add Judaism to the Gospel (**verses 12-16**).

Introduction to Ephesians - Ephesus was an important port city in the New Testament world. At the end of the 2nd missionary journey Paul established the church (Acts 18:19-28), returning on the 3rd journey and staying approximately two years (Acts 19:8-10). This epistle is one of the prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon) that Paul wrote during Roman imprisonment (AD 60-62). Paul writes to help with issues of unity, using the terms "in Christ" about thirty times, more than any other book in the NT. Understanding who we are "in Christ" (chs. 1-3) helps us "walk worthily" (chs. 4-6).

1 - Verse 5 mentions "predestination" as does **verse 11**. We must realize the Bible teaches predestination! What it does not teach is Calvinism's idea that individuals are individually chosen by God, regardless of their actions, to be saved or lost. God has decided, chosen, or destined, the *group of people* who serve Him to be saved. We decide if we want to be in that group. **Verse 9** speaks of the "mystery," which we will read more about in 3:3. A "mystery" is something we cannot know without God revealing it. **Verse 13's** seal is difficult. An official wax seal on a document indicated it was genuine. The Holy Spirit has worked to certify their Christianity is genuine. Note that a seal is very public and can be seen by all so this cannot refer to some mystical work in a person's heart. Perhaps this references the gift of miracles, a very public demonstration of the transformation of Christianity peculiar to NT times.

2 - Verse 3's "by nature" means "by habit." Unfortunately we have had to fight against so much misuse of **verses 8-9** that we may miss their point. We are saved by grace and should be so thankful for it! **Verse 11** makes plain that Gentiles particularly should be thankful for God's grace. By grace the Law of Moses ("the middle wall," **verse 14**) between Jews and Gentiles was broken down. Paul may have in mind the hostility between the two groups as well, so that peace should reign among disciples (**verses 15-16**).

3 - Verses 3-4 make it plain we can understand the Bible. Paul had a revelation (the mystery of how Gentiles were to be included in the Kingdom, **verse 6**), and when we read what Paul wrote we can understand it too. Gentiles being "in" was certainly not understood before (**verses 8-9**), but is known now, Paul announces. Such grace given to all is a cause for praising God (**verses 14-22**). God is amazing!

Applications from This Week's Readings

Reading Ephesians makes us more mindful of God's grace and our responsibilities to "walk worthily" as a result. Focus your attention in chapters 4-5. Can you identify some specific areas of your life that need to be improved in light of the admonitions here?

Week 6 - Ephesians 4-6; Philippians 1-2

4 - There is a heavy emphasis on unity in this chapter as Paul brings his teaching about all being saved by God's amazing grace to its point: walk worthy (**verse 1**). Paul speaks of gifts that benefit our unity and work together (**verse 7**), but someone might ask "How can Jesus give gifts?" He ascended on high (**verse 8**), defeating every enemy to do so. Parenthetically Paul speaks of that ascension in **verses 9-10**, but then returns to the theme of gifts in **verse 11**. You may want to write in the word "gifts" beside **verse 11** to help

you see the flow of thought: “And He Himself gave *gifts* to be ...” In **verse 17** Paul turns his attention from how brethren treat each other to how Christians act in the world.

5 - Verses 1-5 continue chapter 4’s “how to walk outside” theme, emphasizing purity. Judgment is used as a motivator for correct conduct in **verses 13-14**. **Verse 21** opens up the idea of submission. Paul then details the various roles we find ourselves in and how we function in them. “Submit” means to yield to another. It does not mean one is inferior. Chauvinism finds no refuge in these beautiful verses that describe how a wife willingly follows her husband’s leadership because he sacrificially loves her as Christ loves the church (**verses 22-33**). Christ doesn’t mistreat His church or act as a tyrant or dictator over us. How then could anyone find such an idea for the Christian home here?

6 - Verses 1-4 contain famous admonitions about children. These simply continue Paul’s discussion of roles in life begun in 5:21. The Lord is powerful and mighty (**verse 10**) but this does not negate our part in fighting against and defeating Satan and his helpers (**verses 11-12**). Spiritual warfare is real. Paul does not say such is a figment of our imagination or that the devil is a myth. He sees Christians locked in a struggle with a crafty and truly evil opponent. The armor of God and prayer equips one in this battle. “Praying in the Spirit” (**verse 18**) refers to praying with the Spirit’s help or in harmony with His revealed will.

Introductions to Philippians - The good church at Philippi began beside a river and was helped by an earthquake (Acts 16:12-40). Paul loved these brethren dearly. He took the occasion of writing a “thank you” note for their support to urge them to be unified and have real joy. There is little rebuke in the epistle, outside of a few words about grumbling and quarreling (see 2:2-3, 14-15; 4:1). Instead Paul uses his own example of how he is coping with his circumstances (he is in prison, 1:13) and to urge them to imitate Jesus.

1 - In NT times it was common to begin a letter with the sender’s name (instead of putting it at the end as we do) and then to follow that salutation with a word of prayer (**verses 3-11**). Notice how love and thinking are beautifully combined by Paul in **verse 9**. What a different idea about persecution and suffering is found in **verse 29**. Do we feel privileged to be able to suffer for Christ as Paul says the Philippians were?

2 - Some of the most awesome words ever written are found in verses 5-11. Paul is able to succinctly summarize Jesus’ incarnation and death as a means to motivate the Philippians to be unified and care for each other. If Jesus humbled Himself, how can Christians ever be arrogant and prideful? Paul wants the Philippians to “work out their own salvation” (verse 12), meaning they are to take an active role in their growth and strengthening as disciples. When we do that, we are connected to God who is working in us (verse 13). These verses demonstrate God’s willingness to empower us and work through our efforts to apply His grace in our lives. Verse 25 mentions Epaphroditus. We know little about him, except he was an important disciple in the church at Philippi, had brought funds to Paul (4:18) and then became very ill (verses 26-30).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Consider memorizing Paul’s grand statements about Christ humbling Himself in Philippians 2:5-11. Even if you don’t commit it to memory read it over several times. Then think about where you can give yourself up to serve others. Live out Phil 2:5-11 today!

Week 7 - Philippians 3-4; Hebrews 1-3

3 - Verse 2’s “dogs” is a reference to the Jewish teachers who wanted to circumcise Gentile Christians. We may wonder how Paul managed to overcome his past as a persecutor to be such a force for Jesus, but **verses 12-14** tells us how he did it. We can learn much from his example. Notice how apostolic example is crucial for Christians (**verses 15-17; also 4:9**).

4 - “Gentleness” or “reasonableness” in **verse 5** references a spirit of kindness that is necessary because the Lord’s coming is close (**verse 5b**). What does Paul mean by this? Either he wants to remind the Philippians that the return of Christ could happen at any time, or that by our dying (a possibility at any time) we go to see the Lord. Perhaps Paul means all of these ideas to some extent. Christians must live like Jesus could come at any time *because He could*. **Verses 15-16** provide good information about how churches need to send directly to preachers in the field, instead of forming a missionary society or bureaucracy of networked churches under one large church.

Introduction to Hebrews - The book of Hebrews has an unjustly deserved reputation for being hard to understand. So, many avoid it and thus miss out on a book designed to help Christians in times of trial. It is true we don’t know the author’s name (perhaps Barnabas?) but his identity is not the key to Hebrews. The key to understanding Hebrews is to remember it is a “word of exhortation” (13:22). The book was written to exhort and encourage discouraged Christians to persevere in the faith. Hebrews encourages us by showing us the greatness of our High Priest, reminding us not to harden our hearts like those who displeased God, to see that God is fulfilling the great promises to Abraham in Jesus (and we are the recipient of those blessings), and even presents great examples of men and women who refused to give up and “by faith” served the Lord. This book will be wonderfully encouraging to us if we will just let it!

1 - Verses 3-13 end all discussion about Christ's deity and equality with the Father. Angels are important, powerful and even helpful to us (**verse 14**) but they have never been addressed or treated like Jesus Christ has been. He is divine!

2 - Verses 1-4 form a parenthesis, keying off of 1:14's "angels." The "word" (**verse 2**) is Moses' Law. Note the purpose of miracles in **verses 3-4**: confirm the message of God. **Verse 5** rejoins the thought of Christ's preeminence begun in chapter 1. But how can Christ be so great if He was human? The answer is Jesus was "made a little lower than angels" (**verse 9**) for the purpose of salvation. How is Jesus "made perfect" (**verse 10**)? This is priestly language, used in other places to refer to the installation of the high priest. The Hebrew writer is arguing that Jesus is set aside for His work as Savior, He is installed in the office of Messiah, by His suffering. That suffering also equips Him to help us, His brethren (**verses 14-18**).

3 - Verse 1 is the only place Jesus is called an apostle. The designation fits well, however, because apostle means "one sent on a mission with the authority to carry it out." The Hebrew writer then contrasts Jesus and Moses (**verses 2-6**), using the metaphor of house building. Each built a house (a people or family) but Jesus' house is greater. As Moses' people were on a journey to the Promised Land so are Christ's. However, some didn't reach the physical Promised Land due to an "evil unbelieving heart" (**verses 7-19**). What a warning for the people following Jesus to the real and eternal Promised Land!

Applications from This Week's Readings

Hebrews urges us to see Christ more clearly that we might be encouraged to persevere and continue serving Him. How does the material in Hebrews 1-3 help you better appreciate Jesus?

Week 8 - Hebrews 4-8

4 - The comparison between Israel of old and Christians today from chapter 3 continues in **verses 1-13**. The key term is "rest," used here of the Promised Land and heaven. Those without faith cannot enter into God's rest (3:19; 4:2). The rest has been ready since creation (**verse 3**), some must enter into it, and the since the Israelites did not enter into it (**verse 6**), the rest remains (**verse 9**). Will we be the people of faith who enter into heaven by faith and trust in Jesus Christ? **Verse 14** picks up the idea of "high priest" begun back in 3:1. Look how practical and encouraging **verses 14-16** are!

5 - The Hebrew writer now gets to his point about Jesus as high priest. High priests are appointed (**verse 1**), gentle (**verse 2**), and called (**verse 4**). So it is with Jesus (**verses 5-7**). The point is strengthened by showing Jesus praying in the Garden in agony (**verses 7-8**). In this "school of suffering" Jesus "learned" or experienced trials fully as a man, as we do. He is therefore fully qualified to be our high priest, a subject the author would like to say more about but cannot because of spiritual immaturity (**verses 11-14**).

6 - This chapter continues the rebuke of 5:11-14, speaking of a lack of spiritual maturity. **Verse 4** should not be taken as proving there is an unforgivable sin, but instead speaks of a mind set that will not repent and so cannot be forgiven. The readers need to get busy diligently applying themselves so as to grow in the faith (**verse 12**) so they will be able to endure (**verse 15**). God won't fail us or lie to us (**verses 17-18**), we have Jesus the High Priest and the certainty of our hope as an anchor (**verses 19-20**). Therefore, we must not forsake the Lord or His way!

7 - One of the keys to perseverance in Christ is seeing and appreciating His role as our High Priest. It is to this key point that Hebrews now returns, linking up with 5:10 (note also 2:17; 3:1; 4:14) after a small detour on maturity (5:11-6:20). The chapter plays off Abraham's meeting of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and the prophecy of Psalm 110:4. **Verse 3** doesn't mean Melchizedek was an angel or had no parents. It just means he is not a priest according to genealogy. His parents are unknown, not non-existent (note **verse 6**). The argument is made in **verse 7**: if Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek then Melchizedek is greater than Abraham. That means since Jesus is a priest from Melchizedek's line, not Abraham's, He is greater than Abraham too. But for Jesus to be a priest there must be a change in the Law, for Jesus could not serve as a Aaronic priest (**verses 12-14**). The Law of Moses was weak (**verses 18-19**) so a change should be welcomed as it betters our situation (**verses 22-28**).

8 - Jesus is not only a better High Priest than the Law of Moses could have ever had, He is serving in the perfect, heavenly Tabernacle (**verses 1-6**). This is the *real* Tabernacle. The one Moses constructed was only a shadow or model of the heavenly reality (**verse 5**). Jesus also serves under the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah long ago (**verses 7-13**). Note Jeremiah's emphasis on knowing God (**verses 10-11**). In the New Covenant knowing God (equated with having God's law in mind and heart) will be essential to being accepted by God. This covenant also provides direct and real forgiveness of sin (**verse 12**).

Applications from This Week's Readings

Hebrews has much to say about the human part of Jesus, the suffering Son. What Jesus did for us was very hard for Him. Do we understand that, or just assume His earthly ministry and death were easy because, after all, He was the Messiah? Give some more thought to the difficulty of leaving heaven, of the suffering in Gethsemane, of the embarrassment of being executed before your mother and friends as a criminal.

Then give thanks to our High Priest that He was so willing to come *that we might have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses and temptations!*

Week 9 - Hebrews 9-13

9 - Verse 5 ends with “cannot now speak in detail,” simply meaning that time does not permit a fuller conversation about the earthly Tabernacle. Instead, the author presses forward with the idea of covenant ratification in blood. **Verse 8** is speaking of heaven, and makes clear that Moses’ Tabernacle was not sufficient (**verses 9-10**). Christ enters the better Tabernacle, heaven (**verse 11**), and makes atonement with His own blood (**verses 12-14**). Covenants, or “testaments” (**verse 15**) must be ratified with blood. Moses’ covenant was so ratified (**verses 18-22**), and so Jesus’ is as well (**verses 24-28**).

10 - Verses 1-4 make plain that sin was not dealt with fully and finally under the terms of the Mosaic covenant. While animal sacrifices provided forgiveness (see Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35) it was only forgiveness in view of Jesus’ work to come on the cross. Animal blood alone cannot atone for sin ever. Those very sacrifices should have reminded the worshipers of their own sinfulness and that a better sacrifice was needed (**verses 3-4**). Jesus is that great once-for-all sacrifice (**verses 11-14**). The massive development of Jesus as High Priest of a better covenant with a better sacrifice is brought to a head with **verse 19’s** “therefore.” With Jesus we have confidence we could never have under Moses’ Law and so must not vacillate but be strong, helping and encouraging other disciples (**verses 22-25**). “The day” (**verse 25b**) is judgement day. We see it approaching by faith. Picking up the theme of judgement day the Hebrew writer describes the awfulness of turning away from the only sacrifice for sin (**verses 26-31**). The chapter concludes with a plea not to give up Christianity and lose the reward of heaven (**verses 32-35**).

11 - This chapter is not hard to read. The key is to see that it connects to 10:32-35 and the theme of endurance. It is terribly unfortunate that chapter 11 has become known as the Hall of Fame of Faith because that destroys the very point the author wants to make. These aren’t super-Christians who are superior to everyone. These are set before us as examples of ordinary men and women who persevered due to their faith despite every difficulty. The point is they did it and you can too! The Hebrew writer is imploring his readers to do as others already have: live by faith and not give up!

12 - From start to finish Hebrews is about encouragement to persevere and now the author uses even the example of Jesus to do that (**verses 1-4**). The “chastening of the Lord” (**verses 5-11**) is hard for us. We don’t always understand why hardship comes into our lives. Neither did the recipients of Hebrews. But the author wants them to think of it as a proof that they are God’s children rather than somehow showing that God has forgotten them (**verses 8-9**). Hard times can have a positive effect on our character if we will let it (**verse 11**). The Hebrew writer reminds them of Esau’s failure (**verses 16-17**). It is not that Esau couldn’t repent but that once he started his life in one direction he couldn’t find a place to make a u-turn. This is a sober warning about apostasy! **Verses 18-24** use the imagery of mountains to again make the point that perseverance matters. If Mount Sinai and the Law of Moses (**verse 18**) was important, how much more is the new covenant, symbolized by Mount Zion (**verse 22**)? We must not “refuse Him who speaks” (**verse 25**). Judaism will be shaken (**verse 27**), perhaps a reference to Jerusalem’s destruction in AD 70, but Christianity will never be removed. We must be true to it (**verse 28**).

13 - This chapter concludes Hebrews with some fairly straightforward, direct admonitions. **Verse 9** informs us that some were being troubled with rules and regulations about food, but foods don’t build up spirituality. That leads to the writer using food and eating sacrifices to make a point about Jesus, the Christian’s sacrifice. **Verse 13** sounds the familiar note of being ready to suffer and to persevere in Christ. It may seem strange that such a long book is described as “few words” (**verse 22**) but given the vastness of the topic Hebrews isn’t as long as it could be. Timothy is mentioned in **verse 23**. This may be the Timothy that traveled with Paul, but we have no way of being sure.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

The best application of these chapters is to look at chapter 11’s pattern “by faith he/she did _____” and then decide what you are doing by faith. How are you persevering as a disciple of Christ “by faith?” What visual evidence is there of your walk with Christ and faith in Him? Are you pressing forward or turning back?

Week 10 - Colossians 1-4; Luke 1

Introduction to Colossians - This is another prison epistle of Paul’s (see 4:3, 10), written shortly after Ephesians. There is no doubt that it was written to combat false doctrine that was spreading in Colossae, though all the dimensions of the troubles are not known. Paul is concerned about true knowledge (see 1:9), and that false religious practices like asceticism and the worship of angels cease at once (see 2:8, 16, 18, 21-23). A major feature of this heresy seems to have been that God is far off and inaccessible. The result is

a warm epistle that helps us focus on Christ Jesus as the center of all we are, and to realize that He has come here for us and to save us. What reassuring truths!

- **Verse 3** begins an introductory prayer, just like Ephesians. **Verse 6** reminds us of the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Ephaphras (**verse 7**) will be mentioned again in 4:12. **Verse 13** should lay to rest all question about the Kingdom's present existence. If we are not in it now, we are still in the domain of darkness. We need not resign ourselves to wait to enjoy His reign in a future earthly kingdom and reign. Christ is king over His kingdom (the church) even now!

1 - Some have misunderstood **verse 15's** "firstborn" as making Christ a created being. Such cannot be, according to the very next verse which sets Christ above all creation (**verse 16**). "Firstborn" can mean the first one born, but it can also mean "position of preeminence" and be conferred upon one (see Psalm 89:27; Jer 31:9; Exo 4:22). No one can give birth order, but one can be *treated* with the status accorded to a first born. That is its meaning here. If there is any doubt about Jesus' divinity and deity just read **verse 19**. All that makes God deity rests in Jesus Christ (note 2:9 as well). Note how Paul rejoices in suffering (**verse 24**) as his example strengthens the Colossians and only verifies his apostleship.

2 - Laodicea (**verse 1**) is about 11 miles from Colossae. **Verse 2** makes plain how important growing up and maturing really is. This is essential if we are to avoid being tricked by false doctrine (**verse 8**). **Verses 11-12** are powerful verses to use in the case for baptism. If someone says "baptism is a work" read these verses to show that such is right: baptism is a work of God! **Verse 13** introduces the Gentiles, and as Paul develops this thought it seems some of the trouble may have been some form or offshoot of Judaism. Paul demands the Colossians separate themselves from this carnal religion and its false taboos (**verses 20-23**).

3 - The Gospel is for all, even barbaric tribes like the Scythians (**verse 11**). All that we do must be done "in Christ's name" or by His authority (**verse 17**). Paul's emphasis on how we must work hard because we work for the Lord is well needed today (**verses 23-24**).

4 - Paul mentions Tychius (**verse 7**). He was a highly trusted traveling companion of Paul's, who carried this letter, the letter to Philemon and probably the Ephesian letter too (see Acts 20:4; Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 3:12). Mark's mention in **verse 10** puts a happier face on his failure in Acts 13:13 (cf. Acts 15:37; 2 Tim 4:11). The mention of men like Aristarchus, Luke and Demas helps us see how many co-workers Paul relied on in his work. **Verse 16** mentions a letter to Laodicea, which some now assume is a lost epistle (as if God would allow inspired letters to be lost!). This letter is probably the epistle to the Ephesians which was meant to benefit all the churches in that area, and shows every characteristic of being a "cyclical" letter.

Introduction to Luke - this Gospel is a magnificent and powerful portrait of Jesus. Written in the mid 60's to a government official (1:3) it stresses several key themes. These include the verifiable evidence that Jesus was real and that Christianity is not a fairy tale, the troubles money cause a disciple, the work of the Holy Spirit, how the Gospel is for all (even Gentiles), and what discipleship is about. Caution: the chapters are long so the daily readings might take longer than usual.

1 - **Verse 3** names Theophilus as the recipient, in all probability a real person. Luke has a concern in both of his books for showing how the Gospel is accepted by the powerful and intelligent. **Verse 9** - there were too many priests so lots were used to determine duties. This was an important job and one would only get to do it once in a lifetime. **Verse 27** - Luke ties Jesus to the promises of David regularly (see 32-33, 69). **Verse 67** - the Holy Spirit is a continual theme in Luke-Acts.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Re-read Colossians 4:5-6. Paul wants the Colossians (and us) to take our influence very seriously. Others are watching us and listening to us, and they make judgement about the Kingdom and Jesus from what we do. Pray about this and be especially aware of your influence this week.

Week 11 - Luke 2-6

2 - **Verse 7** shows not a cute and cuddly scene (as portrayed today) but one of appalling poverty, dirt and humiliation. Jesus was born into just about the worst set of circumstances we can imagine. **Verse 10** - catch "all people" - the Gospel is for Gentiles too! **Verse 25-26-27** - the Spirit is emphasized again. **Verse 44** - we wonder how they lost Jesus but Mary and Joseph probably expected he was in a big crowd of family and so assumed they would see him at the end of the day when the group stopped for the night.

3 - **Verse 16** - the Holy Spirit's baptism here is something that promises power, but "fire" speaks of judgment (see the next verse). The big question in chapter 3 is the genealogy of **verse 23**. Why is it here? Why isn't it exactly the same as Matthew's? The answer to the first question is because it shows Jesus' connection to all men, going back to Adam not just Abraham. It also makes the point that Jesus was a real man, something easy to forget. The differences in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke have many possible explanations. Some think this is Mary's lineage via Levirate marriage or adoption.

4 - Verses 1-13 - watch how Jesus defeats temptation by using the Scriptures. Verse 1 emphasizes the Spirit's work, but the practical outgrowth of being led by the Spirit is knowing your Bible so you can use it to overcome the devil! **Verses 14-30** show Jesus being rejected at Nazareth, His hometown. They cannot get over knowing about His humble origins. Jesus stings them by talking of Gentiles that God worked with instead of Israelites in **verses 26-27**.

5 - Verses 1-11 show the kind of obedience Jesus is looking for: immediate, and without question. **Verses 33-39** are often misunderstood. Jesus speaks here of what is inappropriate, and even foolish to do. It is just the wrong time to fast, He says. That will come later, but now is the time to pay attention to Me.

6 - Does Jesus break Moses' Law and endorse situation ethics in **verses 1-5**? No. What the disciples did was a violation of rabbinical traditions, not God's Law. Jesus cites what David did not to endorse law breaking (He even says David did what was "unlawful," v. 4) but to point out that the Pharisees were guilty of selective prosecution. They wouldn't attack David for what was wrong but they did attack Him for what was not! **Verses 24-26** contain "woes" that are not in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. This has been called the Sermon on the Plain and probably contains the common message of the Kingdom Jesus preached everywhere. **Verse 40** is a key verse on discipleship.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Think about what you have seen of Jesus. Would you have followed Him if He called you (5:10)? *He is!* Are you pursuing Jesus Christ? The easy answer is "Of course." But how are you pursuing Jesus? What kind of following are you doing?

Week 12 - Luke 7 - 11

7 - Once again we find a Gentile accent in Luke (see **verse 9**). Many have wondered if John the Baptist had real doubts in **verse 20** or if he was only making an opportunity for two disciples to meet Jesus. Yet there seems to be little reason to doubt that John was doubting! Jesus was not doing what many thought the Messiah would do. In Jesus' answer He reminds John of what Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would be about (see **verses 22-23**). Jesus didn't do just any miracles but the prophesied works of the Messiah. The scene of **verse 36** is a little bizarre for us but customs in that day had everyone reclining at table. Further, it was not uncommon for people to come and go when a famous person was being entertained for a meal. The guests ate but it was perfectly acceptable to come in and sit along the wall, watch and listen to the dinner conversation.

8 - Verse 21 tells us more about discipleship: it involves doing. We need to ask ourselves "What am I doing in Jesus' name?" The story of the demoniac man and the pigs in **verses 26-40** always leaves us scratching our heads a little about the demons' request to attack the nearby swine. The text doesn't tell us why they asked for this, or why Jesus allowed it. There is just much we don't know about the demoniac world. Luke wants us to look at the healed man (**verse 35**), not the pigs!

9 - In many ways Luke's Gospel answers the question of **verse 9**. Don't miss the great discipleship sayings of **verses 23-26**. "Taking up the cross" does not refer to the sufferings of life, having ornery in-laws or a sick child. Worldly people have all of this too! The cross here is the peculiar responsibilities of discipleship, especially those that lead to a death of self. **Verse 40** makes us ask why the disciples couldn't cast out the demon but Jesus tells us in **verse 41**. They lacked faith, apparently being intimidated by the demon. The final discipleship sayings of the chapter emphasize that we don't follow Jesus to get riches or a grand home (**verse 58**), that important family matters like funerals are not more important than the Kingdom (**verse 60**), and that Jesus is requiring single minded devotion to Him that does not look back in regret (**verse 62**).

10 - Jesus commissions the Seventy to go out and preach. The result is the rolling back of Satan's dominion (**verse 18**). We then get two stories about what it is to be a disciple. Unfortunately, often times the story of the Good Samaritan (**verse 29ff**) gets bogged down in discussion of whether it means I must stop to help change a stranger's flat tire. Please remember the story is not about a man who is inconvenienced because his donkey threw a shoe. The man is bleeding to death! This story involves doing for others and the next story speaks of listening to Jesus (Mary in **verse 39**). Discipleship consists of both action and thought. We hear Jesus and we do Jesus' bidding, particularly for others.

11 - Note the emphasis on persistence in prayer (**verses 5-13**). In our instant society this is much overlooked. **Verse 30** includes Gentiles again, this time the Ninevites.

Applications from This Week's Readings

There is much in these chapters that challenges a lame and weak version of discipleship that says "I go to church three times a week so God must really be impressed with me." Am I becoming like Jesus? Am I bearing my cross daily? Am I denying self? Do I serve others or just self?

12 - Verse 10 catches our eye, for a sin that will never be forgiven is unimaginably horrible. Many wonder “Have I done this and so am irrevocably lost?” In the context Jesus is speaking of those who reject Him despite all His works done by the power of the Spirit. They even attribute that power to the devil (**11:15**). Such a hard heart will never ask for forgiveness and so will not be forgiven. It is not that God won’t forgive, it is that these will not humble themselves and ask. By being concerned about having committed this sin one reveals that he or she is exactly the kind of person Jesus is *not* talking about here! Remember, God will forgive any sin that we will repent and ask Him to forgive (1 John 1:9). Chapter 11 goes on with parables about a rich fool and servants who are and who are not ready for their Master’s return. There is an urgency to the Gospel’s demands (**verses 49-59**) that many miss, especially if they have many possessions.

13 - The idea of repentance percolates to the front in **verses 1-9**. Some ask why the Pharisees warned Jesus in **verse 31**? They may have been lying or, they may have been sincerely trying to help. Not all Pharisees were bad.

14 - Jesus tells stories at the dinner table that illustrate key aspects of discipleship. Luke again sounds the theme of the “outsiders” (Gentiles) coming in while Jews will not (**verse 23**). Some of Jesus’ most powerful sayings on discipleship end the chapter. The Lord does not mean “hate” as we use the term (**verse 26**) but “love less.” By comparison to our devotion to Jesus our ties to family are as nothing. Don’t take this lightly, Jesus says. Count the cost of following Me first (**Verses 28-35**)!

15 - The three Lost and Found parables are among Jesus’ most famous. However, the key to them all is probably **verse 2** and the concluding story of the Elder Brother (**verses 25-32**). God’s grace and forgiveness are freely given out to those who are most undeserving. Will we rejoice at this or piously pout?

16 - The parable of the unjust steward (**verses 1-13**) certainly surprises us. Did Jesus commend a thief? Yes and no. Jesus commends him taking action to secure his future, not his stealing. The parable urges disciples to be as diligent securing their future (**verse 9**). Note the emphasis on money again in Luke. **Verse 16** is also difficult. Some see the idea of great effort, of taking vigorous action to get into the Kingdom. While many lessons can be learned from the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (**verses 19-31**) we do well to focus on its main points: what we do here affects our eternal destiny, and once there our destiny cannot be changed. In **verse 29** we read of “Moses and the Prophets,” a Jewish expression for the Old Testament, i.e., the Bible.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

What rich material for us to pray about as we contemplate our discipleship! Repeatedly we have seen the contrast between the self-righteous and self-satisfied and Jesus’ demands for something more. Where am I in these chapters? Am I a Pharisee or a disciple of the Christ?

17 - Verse 4 puts repentance before us again. Don’t make more of **verse 6** than Luke wants. Other passages teach us more about praying in God’s will. Jesus is just emphasizing the power of faith, not that we should be transplanting bushes. **Verse 16** shows us another Gentile does the right thing. A key statement about the kingdom is found in **Verse 21**. The kingdom is about God’s rule and reign in our hearts, and should not become some institution. It is “within us.” The section beginning **verses 22** is difficult. It may be about Christ’s second coming, or it may speak of Jesus’ judgment on Jerusalem. Either way the focus on preparedness is clear. The wording about “two ... and one being taken” means some will be ready and others won’t.

18 - Don’t make the mistake of deciding God is a crabby judge from the parable in **verses 1-5**. Jesus’ point is that if a mean judge will help someone in need how much more will our great God? Luke’s money theme re-enters with the Rich Young Ruler (**verses 18-27**). Notice that not everyone is commanded to sell everything - just this man. Why? Because that is what he needed to follow Jesus. We all are called to give up whatever is in the way of serving Christ first. Notice how the blind man can see that Jesus is the Messiah promised to David (**verse 39**). Jesus’ signs confirmed to those *who would see* that He was the Christ.

19 - Zacchaeus forms a huge contrast to the Rich Young Ruler of chapter 18 who would not give up his money to be right with God. Jesus concludes that story with the shocking saying that a Gentile can become a “child of Abraham” (**verse 9**). Gentiles can be in too! Amazing! Notice the wrong thinking about the kingdom that permeated the people (**verse 11b**). This is why Jesus was often reluctant to reveal Himself as the Messiah or make plain statement that He was (and is) the King of Kings. The people of His day did not understand the kind of kingdom He had come to establish. The parable of the money (**verse 12-27**) may seem harsh but **verse 26** is the key: you are responsible to do with what you have.

20 - In **verse 17** Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22, a psalm about a king being threatened with danger and delivered. We meet the Sadducees in **verse 27**. Jesus destroys their contention that there is no life af-

ter death in **verse 37**. God would say He *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob if they were dead. Since He says He *is* their God then they must be alive. The use of Psalm 110 in **verse 42** is familiar but sometimes misunderstood. The first line could be translated “God said to the King.” The Jews understood this to be the Messiah, a son of David. But how could David speak of a descendant as his king? How could a descendant be greater than the forefather, especially when the forefather is David? The Jews didn’t know but we do: the descendant of David who is greater than even David is the divine Jesus Christ!

21 - This chapter is considered to be one of the most difficult in the Gospels, but it doesn’t have to be. A couple of clues in the text help tremendously. First, notice the question of **verse 6**. Many want this to be an End of the World/Second Coming passage but that isn’t the disciples question. Second, get the time frame of **verse 32**. Whatever all of this means it happened in the first century. I believe the chapter speaks to the judgment on Jerusalem brought about by Roman armies in AD 70 (see **verses 20-21, 24**). This best fits the warnings and context of this chapter. The difficult language of **verses 25-28** simply echoes the language of the Old Testament prophets when they warned of impending doom and judgment (see Isaiah 19:1).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Did you notice in this week’s reading how meeting Jesus forces people to decide what they will do with Him? Jesus pushes people to repent when He is with them. Some resist. Some repent. You are meeting Jesus now by reading about Him. *What will come about in your life from this meeting?*

Week 15 - Luke 22 - Acts 2

22 - Verse 15 highlights how important the Last Supper was to Jesus. He took great pains to make certain He was not arrested prior to this Passover because what He instituted here was and is so vital. The Passover feast featured several cups of wine (**verse 17**), but the order of the Supper is to be bread, then cup (**verses 19-20**). **Verse 36** warns the disciples to prepare for opposition instead of widespread acceptance as before. Want to defeat temptation? **Verse 40** shows prayer to be a powerful tool in the war against darkness (**verse 53**). We may wonder how Jesus saw Peter as he spoke (**verse 61**) but as Jesus was shuttled from fake trial to fake trial He could easily have been going right through the courtyard at the crucial moment.

23 - The charge against Jesus changes here (**verse 2**) because a Roman court won’t care about Jesus’ crimes against Jewish tradition and law. **Verse 4** is the first of many statements of Jesus’ innocence. In **verse 8** the Lord meets John the Baptist’s murderer, Herod Antipas, and refuses to answer him. Why would Jesus waste words on Herod Antipas, who only wants to see a dog-and-pony show? The criminal (an insurrectionist, not a thief) of **verse 42** has caused much anguish because he is saved without baptism. But Jesus can save who He wishes as He wishes. Further, baptism is part of the Gospel age, which had not yet begun.

24 - Watch carefully and see if you can find anyone who believed Jesus would rise from the dead. That ends the foolish speculation that a disciple stole His body. None of the disciples expected a resurrection so why would they stage one? The Old Testament really is all about Jesus (**verse 27**), and the Gospel really is about repentance and forgiveness of sin (**verse 47**). **Verse 49** references the promise of the Holy Spirit, who will be a major actor in Acts.

Introduction to Acts - Acts is the sequel to Luke. Its main purpose is to show that the work of God begun in Jesus is continued in Jesus’ followers, the New Testament church. It lets us watch disciples and discipleship in action.

1 - Luke enjoys showing bad questions, as we see in **verse 6**. The disciples were still stuck thinking about a physical kingdom! On the Sabbath you could walk a little more than a half mile on the Sabbath without violating rabbinical tradition. This is the “Sabbath’s day journey” of **verse 12**.

2 - This is one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Note the key role the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures play in “birthing” the church. People get confused in **verse 1** and fail to realize that “they” refers to the apostles (1:26). The apostles are the only ones who receive this special baptism, not the entire 120 assembled. Confusion reigns again in **verse 4**, where some try to make this ecstatic utterances. It is clearly foreign languages, as the people assembled can understand what is said (**verse 11**). Peter begins his sermon at nine o’clock in the morning (**verse 15**) and it is full of Scriptural references. **Verse 34** again brings Psalm 110 to the fore to point out Jesus’ superiority to David. Jesus is King and Messiah (**verse 36b**).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

We have witnessed, via Luke’s inspired pen, the most important events in human history: Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection three days later. The first question is “*Do you believe what Luke wrote here?*” It is credible and authentic history. So, the second question is even more important: “*Will you follow Jesus?*”

3 - This wonderful story is very straightforward. The man is healed and Peter preaches the sermon of Acts 2 again. **Verse 19's** expression "times of refreshing" is difficult. It may simply be the refreshing blessings of being in Jesus Christ, or it may refer to the restoration of all things (**verse 21**), speaking of the New World established by the Messiah. **Verse 25** connects Peter's sermon (and Jesus) to the grand promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12. The Bible's theme of redemption echoes from cover to cover!

4 - Luke wants us to see Peter's courage (**verse 8**). What has happened to the man so timid he would not stand up to a servant girl the night Jesus was betrayed? He is now "filled with the Spirit!" Notice how authentic and beyond question New Testament miracles are (**verse 14**). The benevolent spirit of **verse 32** would be important as so many Jews, now Christians, were remaining in Jerusalem. Luke loves to introduce us to major characters with a quick preview before they come fully on stage. So we meet Barnabas in **verse 36**.

5 - The church has been attacked in chapters three and four by outside enemies, but now finds itself with internal problems. What if Christians fail to manifest basic integrity? God makes an example of Ananias and Sapphira. Evidently they acted as if they gave all the purchase price of the land when they actually kept some back (**verse 2**). **Verse 12** shows how Jewish the early church was. They are still meeting in the Temple. At first **verse 13** appears to contradict **verse 14**, but verse 13 probably means few would just stand and listen unless they were willing to join, or it may mean no one would meddle with the church. Gamaliel sums Acts for us in **verse 39**. God is at work here!

6 - Racism and mistrust of foreigners is not a new problem. There were many out of town Jews among the first church, and they weren't being treated right (**verse 1**). The apostles are concerned about missing prayer time first, then teaching time (**verse 4**). We could learn much from this. Again, we see Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit in **verse 5**. We aren't certain what Stephen was preaching but we can deduce from **verse 11** that he may have been among the first to see that Christianity was completely separate from Judaism. Did Stephen's face really glow (**verse 15**)? Perhaps, or it could be an expression for inner confidence that gave a gleam to his eyes.

7 - Stephen's sermon stresses two themes: the Jews have been continuously blessed and they have continuously rejected God. He develops this by tracing out Jewish history, something his audience would have loved to hear, but it is a history full of warts and blemishes. **Verse 9** begins the theme of rejection. It is furthered in **verses 25, 35, 39**, and brought to a head in **verses 51-52**. For Stephen it is not ignorance (as Peter said in 3:17) but willful rebellion that is at work here. Stephen is often portrayed as seeing Jesus as he died but **verse 56** is prior to being stoned, and the vision may not have continued during the stoning. This is the equivalent to a lynching, as the Sanhedrin did not have the power of capital punishment.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Did you notice how much praying was going on in these chapters? How is the praying here different from your praying? Reread the prayer of 4:24-30. Can you adapt that prayer to be yours, so that you will be asking God for more courage to speak of Him and His way?

Week 17 - Acts 8-12

8 - Luke characteristically gives us a brief introduction to a major character in **verse 1**. Stephen's death is something Paul never forgot. **Verse 5** has the church starting to branch out in a natural direction: Samaria. Samaritans were looked down on by Jews but knew something of God and His law. Some of the most important information about the miraculous gifts of the Spirit is recorded in **verses 14-19**. Note that at baptism one did not receive a miraculous gift. This eliminates Acts 2:38's "gift of the Spirit" from being miracles. Further, we learn here that only apostles could give the power of miracles to Christians. This safeguarded the gifts from the very kind of profiteering Simon envisioned, but it also means that since there are no apostles today there can be no miraculous gifts given. **Verse 23** is difficult in the NASB, having "gall of bitterness." This simply means "full of bitterness." We wonder if God miraculously grabbed Phillip in **verse 39** or if that just means Phillip left. It could be either.

9 - Don't miss the significance of this story to Luke. He tells it three times in this book (chs. 9, 22, and 26). It is a powerful record of how one truly seeking God can make a dramatic change when he realizes he is wrong. **Verse 13** finds Ananias (obviously not the Ananias struck dead in ch. 5) arguing with God! God's patience is amazing. Galatians 1:15-24 tells us that there is a three year time period in between **verses 25 and 26**. The ability of the church to make a mistake with brethren is also well illustrated in **verses 26**. Once again Barnabas appears, encouraging and helping (**verse 27**).

10 - Cornelius is a "God-fearer" (**verse 2**). These were Gentiles who were attached to the synagogue and believed in the one true God but were not circumcised. Sometimes people think if God would just show them a vision they would understand all they were to do but Peter's vision still requires him to think about it and

it takes some time for him to “get it” (**verse 17**). For the rest of Acts **verse 35** serves as a kind of summary statement: the Gospel is for all and now it will go to all. The baptism of the Holy Spirit in **verses 44-47** is just the kind of remarkable sign necessary to get Peter’s attention and assure him that Gentiles can be admitted to the kingdom of God. There are only two cases of Holy Spirit baptism in Acts (here and Acts 2) showing us that it was not common, nor should we expect it today.

11 - Luke is determined that Christianity will not be just another party in Judaism like the Pharisees or Sadducees. Peter’s defense of what he has done is crucial to establishing that Christianity is for all. Notice that the charge against Peter is not baptizing Gentiles but eating with them (**verse 3**)! **Verse 19** connects Luke’s story back to 8:4. What happened because of the persecution? The Gospel went north to Samaria (chapter 8), then there are three incredible conversion stories (the Ethiopian, Saul, and Cornelius). Now Luke picks up the story of the Gospel’s spread by showing its arrival in Antioch. **Verse 20** is very important. Cornelius’ conversion paves the way for all Greeks to come to Jesus. The famine of **verse 28** occurred in AD 45-47, meaning the church is now more than twelve years old.

12 - The events of this chapter can be reliably dated to AD 44. This is Herod Agrippa I, the brother of Herodias (see Mark 6:22). **Verse 5** shows how the church’s answer to troubles was prayer. **Verse 15** keeps us from thinking the early Christians were always perfect paragons of faith. They were praying but did not have much faith God would act on their prayer! Don’t miss the contrast in **verses 23-24**. Evil men who try to stop God’s work are removed (even Josephus records Herod’s death) and the Word of God goes on.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

In these chapters we see God using so many people: Stephen, Ananias, Barnabas, Dorcas, Peter and Paul. Most are just common people who gave themselves over to God’s work. What if Ananias never goes and sees Saul? What if Barnabas doesn’t introduce him to the brethren in Jerusalem? Think carefully: are you making yourself available to God’s work, big or small? Pray about God using you just like He used His people in Acts. Then look for any place to be used and get to it!

Week 18 - Acts 13-17

13 - Mark the action of the Spirit again (**verse 2**), a constant theme in Acts. Paul sharpens this theme by identifying the real struggle: the devil versus the Spirit (**verses 9-10**). The sermon that begins in **verse 16** is not well known but uses Scripture powerfully to make the case for Jesus as Messiah to a Jewish audience. **Verse 48** may seem to speak of sort of predestination but don’t be confused. God has predestined all who will obey His word to be saved. How do you get into that group? You do as these did: you believe and obey God’s word.

14 - Miraculous signs are so badly misunderstood today. **Verse 3** reveals their purpose: confirm the message and messenger. Paul and Barnabas preach again, a short sermon, beginning in **verse 15**. Watch how it does not appeal to Jewish Scripture but instead to nature and its proofs of God. They adapted their approach to their audience. Once again Luke leaves us uncertain if we are seeing a natural event or a miracle (**verse 20**). The text just doesn’t say if Paul was dead or only appeared dead. Of more importance is Paul’s great courage. He goes right back into the city! **Verse 27** closes the first missionary journey on a very triumphal note. I wonder if we would have felt as good about it given all the persecution. Instead of complaining, Paul and Barnabas are happy to accent God’s work through them.

15 - The Jerusalem Conference is a crucial event in the early church’s history. For some twenty years Christianity has been viewed by some as simply a party or sect of Judaism. The increasing acceptance of Gentiles has made this more and more complicated to pull off. Christianity appears to some to be a break-away movement of its own that needs to be reined in (**verse 5**). Peter, Paul, and Barnabas all cite examples to prove God doesn’t require Gentiles to become Jews first before becoming Christians (**verses 7-12**). James cinches it by citing Scripture, showing that God always desired all people to come to Him (**verse 17**). What of the regulations bound on Gentiles (see especially **verses 20 and 29**)? These are probably best understood as the means to make social interaction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians possible. Gentiles need not become Jews but they could not act like full-fledged pagans either.

16 - Take a moment and check the map in the back of your Bible to see where these missionary tours occur. Lystra and Derbe are in present day Turkey. **Verse 11** details a key moment in world history: the gospel goes to Europe. After Acts 16 the emphasis of Scripture is toward the west and Europe, as Asia largely turns away from the Gospel. Where the Gospel went education and progress followed. Much of our current world situation is explained by Acts 16:11, isn’t it? **Verse 13** helps us see that there could not have been many Jews in Philippi, because if there had been as many as ten they would have had a synagogue and not been down by the river. The end of verse 14 is just a wonderful way of crediting God for Lydia’s conversion so that no one will think it was a result of Paul’s oratorical skills. God opened her heart through the preaching of the Word, not through some “better felt than told” experience that some get and others are denied. We may chuckle a little in **verse 37** as Paul asserts his rights as a Roman. These magistrates could be in real trouble if Paul decides to report them. Being a Roman citizen had privileges!

17 - Luke continues several key themes here. One of those is that preaching should be based in Scripture when possible (**verse 3**). The other is that the Jews rejected the Gospel, and so are responsible for the persecution Christians were receiving (**verse 5**). **Verse 11** is often used to plea for verifying all that is done from the Bible. The verse does teach that but it really stresses character. Many of the Athenians lack that kind of heart (**verse 32**), and the chapter closes with a low moment for Paul. The Gospel doesn't gain much of a foothold in Athens, but watch Paul. He never quits.

Applications from This Week's Readings

These chapters highlight the inevitable advance of Christianity because some very brave people were willing to take great risks to preach Jesus. They risked ostracism, misunderstanding and persecution. What are you risking to speak of Jesus and advance the Kingdom?

Week 19 - Acts 18-22

18 - The decree of **verse 2** was made in 49 AD. Notice that both Jews and Christians alike are evicted from Rome. The government does not, at this time, see a difference in the groups. That will change. The Jews continue to be the Gospel's greatest obstacle (see **verses 6 and 12**). Paul is involved with vows twice in our readings this week. The vow of **verse 18** may be the Nazirite vow of special dedication and thanksgiving to God. One took a vow, then after completing it special offerings were made and the hair was cut (see Numbers 6). The Second Missionary Journey ends in **verse 22** and the Third Journey follows immediately (**verse 23**), as Paul heads back to territory he believes will be fruitful.

19 - These two episodes about John's baptism (Apollos in **18:24ff** and this one) go together. In the New Testament world there was confusion about Jesus and John and some didn't have the whole story. It is of interest that a lack of knowledge about the Holy Spirit in **verse 2** cues Paul to the reality that their entire Christianity is suspect. We get some honesty about what drives idol religion (money, **verse 25**) followed by another look at Paul's courage (**verse 30**).

20 - **Verse 4** lists these men's names because they were delegates from the various congregations who were sending money to Jewish Christian's relief (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Worshiping with brethren, particularly observing the Lord's Supper, was very important for Paul. He waited so he could be with the brethren at Troas (**verse 7**). What a contrast to too many who make little effort to worship when "on the road" or even at home! As Paul gathers the elders from Ephesus he stresses how he has faithfully proclaimed all of God's word (**verse 27**). **Verse 35's** saying of Jesus is famous, but what many don't realize is that it is not in any Gospel. It must have come from Paul's own conversations with Jesus or from other who knew Jesus and told of what He said and did (see 21:16).

21 - This text is fairly straightforward. Paul is going to Jerusalem with money to relieve Jewish Christians in need and show how Gentile Christians cared about their brethren (see Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25-28). This concern drives him to Jerusalem, even as he is warned of impending danger (**verses 4 and 11**). What catches our attention is this business with Paul and the four men with a vow (**verses 20-26**). What is Paul doing getting involved in the old Jewish religion, we wonder? Remember that Judaism was more than just a religion, it was also a way of life. It was a culture, a lifestyle. Paul never told people to give up that lifestyle, or to deliberately do things to offend Jewish sensibilities. He circumcised Timothy to avoid offense (see 16:3-4), and the Jerusalem Conference's decision encouraged Gentiles not to offend Jews (see 15:23ff). What Paul does here is affirm that he isn't trying to force Jews to become Gentiles. Keeping old customs, like eating only kosher foods, was fine. However, if you asked Paul if they could be saved by those things he would have said "Certainly not!" (see Galatians 2:16) and he had no tolerance for the false gospel that Gentiles had to be circumcised (i.e., become a Jew) *first* before they could become Christians (see Gal. 1:8-9; 5:4-6). There was a difference in Jewish culture and Jewish religion. Paul was a part of that culture – it was how he grew up and who he was – but long ago he gave up trying to be justified by Jewish law to find grace in Jesus Christ (see Romans 7).

22 - As you read this chapter watch how Paul stresses his continuity with Judaism and that rather being a Law-destroying rebel he is actually the best kind of Jew. He even argues with God to get the right to teach Jews (**verse 19**)! Some have tried to find a contradiction in **verse 9** and the account in Acts 9:7, but together the accounts tell us they heard something but didn't understand what they heard. **Verse 17** has Paul "cutting to the chase," as he doesn't mention his preaching in Damascus or time in Arabia (see Acts 9:20ff; Gal. 1:17). **Verse 22** shows that Paul's real problem wasn't that he had committed crimes or was evil. The trouble was Jewish exclusivism and unwillingness to admit Gentiles could be accepted by God just as Jews were.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Our readings show how Paul kept butting heads with the Jews, and after giving them a fair chance he would move on to better prospects. Do you ever get weighed down having the same religious arguments with

the same people again and again? Be like Paul and move on to someone who will really listen instead of argue and cause trouble!

Week 20 - Acts 23-27

23 - Much has been made of **verses 4-5**, and the apparent disrespect Paul shows the High Priest. Many explanations are possible. Perhaps Paul's poor eyesight kept him from seeing who was speaking (especially plausible if the High Priest were not in his priestly garments). Maybe it is sarcasm and irony, as Paul is saying "No real High Priest would act like you are acting." Maybe Paul lost his temper and just said something he shouldn't. In such a place as this Paul seems to sense that he cannot receive a fair trial so he disrupts the proceedings with a careful statement (**verse 6**). **Verse 12** makes us chuckle as we think of hungry would-be assassins but it ought to show us how serious these threats were, and how quickly they expected to act. Lysias took the threats seriously, as his immediate action and large accompanying force shows (**verses 23-24**). Felix (**verse 26**) was appointed by Claudius in AD 52.

24 - This chapter is fairly straightforward. Listen to Paul as he connects himself deeply to Judaism and God's Law. Christianity is not some outlandish new idea, Paul says, but exactly what God planned all along (see **verse 14**). **Verse 17** references the collection for the brethren Paul brought (see Romans 15:25ff).

25 - As politicians come and go Paul can't seem to make any headway toward freedom, so in frustration he claims the right of a Roman citizen to go to Caesar (**verse 11**). In **verse 13** we meet Agrippa II, the son of the Herod Agrippa who was struck by God in Acts 12. Agrippa II, Bernice and Drusilla (Acts 24:24) were brother and sisters. **Verse 27** makes clear the issue Luke is pushing: Paul's innocence. . In some ways Paul seems almost to have become a sideshow or novelty being used by high officials for entertainment

26 - Paul uses his position, even if it is as a novelty, to preach one of the most stirring sermons ever. The theme again is Paul the Good and Obedient Jew (note **verse 6**). **Verse 18** gives us an excellent summary of the Gospel message. Is Agrippa mocking Paul or genuine in his statement of **verse 28**? We cannot hear his tone of voice so we do not know. The chapter ends with Paul being vindicated by the Roman government again (**verse 32**). Luke is letting everyone know that Paul (and Christianity in general) has not broken Roman law.

27 - Make certain you are consulting a map as you read Luke's travelogue in these last two chapters. Most Bibles have a map of Paul's journeys. The main point of these two chapters concern the difficulties of sea travel, Paul's courage and his innocence. Repeatedly Luke mentions little touches like Paul's liberty in **verse 3** to show his audience that Paul certainly is not a bad man. **Verse 9** dates the voyage, telling us of "the Fast" or Day of Atonement, which would be in October. Some translations have "Euroquilo" or "Euroclydon" in **verse 14**. It is simply a north-easter or terrible storm. **Verse 17** tells how desperate the situation was. They try to bind the ship up, and they are afraid of the sand bars off North Africa's coast. If they go aground there the ship will be battered into splinters and they will all die. **Verse 28** mentions fathoms, a nautical measure equal to about six feet. **Verse 34** shows how Paul combined faith with practical reality. God would do His part. They must be ready to do theirs.

Applications from This Week's Readings

We have now read Paul's conversion story three times. Why is it presented so many times? What proof does it offer for the power of the Gospel to change a person? Paul was very ready to explain his own conversion, from what led up to it to how Jesus changed him. Are you as ready to tell your own story? We do not encounter the Lord in blinding light like Paul did but we had to have some encounter with Him through the Word. Why did you obey the Gospel? How are you different now for having done so? What is your conversion story?

Week 21 - Acts 28 - Romans 1-4

28 - Again, we are impressed with Paul's practicality as even a great apostle can gather wood (**verse 3**), and his courage and faith show when bitten by a snake (**verses 3-4**). **Verse 11** has the sound of an eyewitness, doesn't it? It must have been exciting (and occasionally terrifying!) to travel with Paul. If our admiration of Paul knows no bounds it is tempered by the realism of **verse 15**. Even Paul could use encouragement and enjoy being with brethren! The preaching Paul offers (**verse 23**) is again scriptural, and again it fulfills the pattern of all Acts: some believe and some don't (**verse 24**). When **verse 31** closes Acts we may wish we knew more of Paul's final situation but the book isn't about Paul. It is about the work of God which goes on and prospers even to this day.

Introduction to Romans - Romans is unlike any book in the New Testament. It is the only epistle Paul wrote to a church he had never visited. It is common to view Romans as Paul's great summary of his teachings on salvation. However, Paul never wrote long theological treatises. He wrote to churches in trouble to help them do right. The church in Rome had unity problems between Jews and Gentiles as revealed in

chapter 14. Therefore, much of what Paul writes in this letter highlights the term “all” and “everyone” so that he can appeal for unity. Watch in the opening chapters how Paul will say that all of them, Jew and Gentile, are sinners, are saved the same way, and are servants of the Lord.

1 - Verses 8-15 reveal Paul’s desire to come see them. Note the three times Paul says “God gave them up” in **verses 24, 26, 28**. Although chapter 1 is usually applied to Gentiles only many of these sins can be found in Old Testament Israel (note **verse 32** - an appeal to people who know something of God’s law).

2 - Paul knows some of his readers will excuse themselves from the indictment of chapter 1. “I haven’t done all of those things, I’m not like that!” they will protest. Paul replies that saying “I am not as bad as others so I must be alright” won’t work. All are sinners (**verses 1-10**). **Verse 12** doesn’t mean Gentiles had no law whatsoever, but not the written codified law like the Jew had. **Verse 14’s** idea is that Gentiles didn’t know enough to write a Bible but they knew enough to keep from doing evil. Everyone knows something of right and wrong (**verse 15**). In **verse 17** Paul begins an attack on the Jews. They are not as perfect as they claim. In the judgment God won’t ask “Did you have the law?” but “Did you do it?” The advantage of circumcision was that it put one in the middle of the law and the people who had the law. But if you don’t honor the law and obey it then the advantage is lost (**verse 25**).

3 - Verses 1-2 are surprising. We expect Paul to say “None” but there were advantages to being Jewish. Unfortunately many Jews did not take advantage of those advantages and so were condemned (**verses 3-4**)! Would someone then argue that if God condemning sin shows Him to be just we ought to sin more so God will be seen as more just (**verses 5-7**)? Such is outrageous and cannot be so (**verse 8**). Paul will deal with such wrong thinking further in 6:1. Our understanding of **verse 12b** may be helped by adding “habitual” here. No one does good constantly, consistently, and continually. **Verse 23** has Paul’s major point for this section. That bad news is followed by good news (**verse 24**). **Verse 25** speaks of “propitiation,” meaning to remove God’s wrath through an offering. Look at the emphasis on unity and oneness again (**verse 30**).

4 - Once again, Paul shows his understanding of his audience. Some will object to what he is teaching by pointing to Abraham. Now *there* was a fine fellow! Surely God accepted him based on all the good things he did! No, says Paul, that’s not the case. Abraham was “justified” or “counted righteous *by faith*.” Here Paul sets forth an entirely different kind of righteousness not based on never sinning, but obtained through faith as a gift of God. It is based on forgiveness not perfection. **Verses 6-7** beautifully illustrate what “counted righteous” and “reckon” or “impute righteousness” means. Those terms just mean “forgiven.” The man counted righteous by God is the man forgiven by God. **Verse 9** sounds out the unity theme again. A Jewish Christian might say “Oh, yes, justified by faith, but not just any believer can be justified, but the *circumcised* believer only.” No, Paul says, Abraham was right with God prior to circumcision (**verses 10-12**). Thus Abraham can be the father of all who believe, not just the Jews or circumcised. Anyone with faith can be a child of Abraham! Paul even argues that if the promise of blessing depends on law keeping then it will never be fulfilled because no one keeps the law perfectly (**verse 14**). The chapter ends by showing that Abraham’s faith is a model for us today (**verse 22**). Be like Abraham and trust in God!

Applications from This Week’s Readings

A right relationship with God can be obtained because (1) we are right (we have never sinned) or by (2) faith in God. Since none of us are sinless the way of faith becomes critically important. Read 4:20 again. Is your faith strong like Abraham? Do you trust in God to forgive your sins and count you righteous? Pray about your faith this week and consider reading Abraham’s story (beginning Genesis 12) to build up your faith.

Week 22 - Romans 5-9

5 - Faith changes everything, even how we suffer (**verses 1-3**). How does the Spirit pour out God’s love in our hearts (**verse 5**)? By telling us of the cross (**verses 6-8**). **Verse 12** begins a difficult section. Paul wants to illustrate how one person’s actions have affected all humanity. Who can Paul use to illustrate this? Adam and Jesus are the only possible choices. So Paul says that just as it was in Adam’s case where one man’s sin had such terrible effects even so now the act of the one man Jesus Christ has brought about a universal effect. Notice Paul doesn’t write here of conditions. There is no talk of how we are condemned or saved. Thus, if we try to read more into chapter 5 we will end up in trouble. Let’s be content with Paul’s simple idea: just as one man’s sin had terribly destructive results so one Man’s righteous act has incredibly constructive results. Note **verse 19** as it troubles some. Paul may mean here that all men are treated as sinners (i.e. all die physically).

6 - Verses 1-5 set forth how all are in Christ now via baptism. Note that if baptism is not necessary to salvation then Paul’s argument fails. In **verse 6** some are charging Paul with loose theology that results in sin. Is the net result of being saved an indifference to sin? Absolutely not, Paul says! Instead we need to see ourselves as slaves of righteousness, not sin (**verses 15-23**).

7 - Paul is still answering the question of 6:15. He has spoken of a new relationship in Christ (6:18ff) and now speaks to the legitimacy of that relationship for Jews. They can “marry again” (be in Christ) because they died to the Law (think of baptism, 6:1ff). Notice that we can’t blame law for our sins, it is our passions at work (verse 5). So verse 6 concludes: we cannot continue in sin, we now live in the Spirit. Verse 7 then begins a new question: since we had to be delivered from the Law is it evil? Paul says “Of course not!,” but the material it works with (the human heart) is rebellious and thus our inability to keep the law makes it impossible for us to save ourselves. Verse 11 reminds us of the Garden of Eden. Satan based his entire attack on the law of God. He used it to deceive Eve and kill her (spiritually). Paul concludes by talking about the “wretched man” who tries to do right, knows the Law is right, but still fails (verses 14-25). Such a person can never be right with God for he sins despite his efforts not to do so. There has to be a better way....

8- The better way is found in Jesus (**verse 1**). A liberation has taken place because Jesus is greater than the sin power personified in the last chapter (**verses 2-3**). In **verses 5-11** Paul talks of how these freed people live: they follow God’s will instead of selfish desires. Paul then goes on to talk about the relationship we have with God when we are “in” the Spirit (**verses 12-17**). This language throws some but Paul isn’t speaking of something mystical or based in feelings. The Bible speaks freely of knowing God and being in God or Christ (note John 15:1-7; 1 John 2:24). This just means to be in relationship with God, to submit to Him and be controlled by Him. So it is here. We are controlled by the Spirit (who uses the Word to teach us what we need to do so we can do right, **verse 16**). This will lead to a glory that all Creation is waiting for (**verses 18-24**). As we wait the Spirit helps us, even with our prayers (**verses 24-25**). These verses have been subject to much debate as to “how” the Spirit does this, but we don’t know. Let us just rejoice that He does! **Verse 28** does not say everything *is good* but that God can work good *through anything*, even tragedy. **Verse 29’s** reference to predestination does not mean individuals are predestined, but that those who will choose God will be chosen by Him. All of this works together to assure the person who follows the way of faith, who is Spirit-led and controlled, will have victory (**verses 31-39**) for God is working for him!

9- But what of those who are still trying the Law way to be justified, Paul? Chapters 9-11 deal with this question, particularly since it appears Gentiles were disdainful of Christian Jews as somehow inferior since they were a minority in the church. Remember, Romans is about unity. The key verse is **verse 6**. A true Jew is one who receives God’s word (see 2:28-29). Indeed, there were physical descendants of Abraham, like Esau (**verses 11-14**) that God did not use. God works as He will (**verses 19-24**). The rejection of the Jews was even prophesied (**verses 25-31**), so don’t criticize God and how His Gospel works!

Applications from This Week’s Readings

These are difficult chapters. Much remains here that we may not fully understand in one reading. However, several truths are clear. We cannot be right with God by our own righteousness or efforts (ch. 7). We need Jesus and we need to be controlled by the Spirit (ch. 8). If we will follow Jesus God will do more than we can imagine to see to it we are saved. If we won’t follow Jesus we may well end up like obstinate and stubborn Jews who missed the Kingdom due to their self-righteousness (chs. 9-11). So we need to ask: *am I truly seeking Jesus?* Am I Spirit-led, i.e. do I let Scripture command my life? Am I trusting Jesus or my own righteousness? Focus then on the end of chapter 8 and thank God for His mercy, care and decisive actions that will bring us home to Him!

Week 23 - Romans 10-14

10- The reason so many Jews reject Christ is because they want to do it themselves (**verse 3**). There are only two ways to be saved: obey perfectly (**verse 5**), or travel the road of faith (**verses 6-17**). Regrettably, many of the Jews have rejected the way of the faith as prophesied (**verses 18-21**). It isn’t that they haven’t heard (**verse 18**), or they are offended at Gentiles being “in” (**verse 19**), or that it is too hard to figure out (**verse 20**). They are disobedient and stubborn (**verse 21**)!

11 - So what is the final word on Jews? Is God done with them? Paul says “Certainly not!” (**verse 1**). There will always be a remnant who is faithful (**verse 5**), even if many do reject Jesus. In fact, Paul wonders if the flood of Gentiles into God’s kingdom might ultimately provoke Jews to jealousy and cause them to come too (**verses 11-15**). In poignant verses reminding Gentiles not to get too full of themselves Paul portrays the people of God as an olive tree (**verses 17-24**). That tree was full of Jewish “branches” to start with. Yes, some of those branches were cut off due to disobedience and wild branches (Gentiles) were then grafted in (**verses 17-19**). But being grafted in is not a cause for boasting or carelessness (**verses 20-23**). Perhaps those broken off branches (unbelieving Jews) will come to faith and be put back in (**verse 24**). Indeed, all true Israelites (real followers of God) will be saved (**verse 26**).

12 - As Paul often does, he moves from doctrine to admonition. The key teaching of this chapter is at its beginning: take your body and use it for God's service in every way possible. Notice how all of life here is depicted as "worship" or "service" (**verse 1b**). To do this requires a radical change in thinking (**verse 2**). Since every member of the Body of Christ does not have the same abilities and talents we need to think correctly of

self (**verse 3**) and then use what we have to serve others (**verses 4-8**). Mark carefully the many different “jobs” or abilities people can have in serving the Lord and other Christians.

13 - Some might wonder if a lack of revenge and retribution will result in lawlessness. No, because government is appointed to take care of these problems. Scripture uniformly urges obedience to civil authority (see 1 Tim 2:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17) because, as Paul teaches here, civil government provides services to its citizens and is a God-ordained means of maintaining order. Thus we should submit to it. Naturally Paul does not mean we should disobey Christ to obey civil government, nor does Paul mean every government pleases God (note **verse 3b**). **Verse 8** should not be seen as a prohibition against all borrowing (note Matt 5:42; Luke 6:35) but merely commands that we pay what we owe, and particularly in this context that we pay the taxes owed government (see **verse 7**). What does Paul mean in **verse 11** about salvation being near? It is a difficult verse. Paul may just be referring to the reality that in God’s scheme of things there is only one major event left, final judgement. Every day draws us closer to it.

14 - This chapter has been the subject of misuse and much debate. If we are good students, however, we can see from the outset some principles that rule out many problems. For example, Paul is content to leave both weak and strong in their respective states. That means Paul cannot be discussing matters of right and wrong for if someone is in sin Paul wouldn’t let them stay in such a state, would he? Instead Paul says God accepts both weak and strong *as they currently are* (**verse 3**). Paul’s tone is also notably milder than when he deals with false teaching and sin (compare this to Galatians). So, what is Paul concerned about? *The eating of certain kinds of foods and the celebrating of certain days*. Probably these are foods sacrificed to idols or foods that were not kosher according to Jewish dietary law, and the days mentioned are probably Jewish feast days. We have seen much in this epistle about unity and here Paul gets down to the troubles at hand. Jews wanted Gentiles to eat as they did, and abstain from what they abstained from. Gentiles were appalled at Jews who continued to participate in Jewish feast days, and who refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols (see **verses 10, 20-23** - Paul will not tolerate forcing one view on others). Both sides were judging the other side as inferior. Paul says these particular matters are of no concern to God, and thus all judging must stop (**verse 13**). Don’t lead or push others into sin who do differently than you (**verses 14-21**). Don’t violate your own conscience and don’t look down on others who do different than you in these matters of judgment (**verses 22-23**)! A modern day example might be of converting a Jew, who is uncomfortable working on Saturday even though he is now a Christian. Should we (the strong) make him work on Saturdays? No! Can he, however, force everyone else to stop working on Saturday due to his scruples? No, Paul says.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

The Roman church was urged to get along, to help each other, to be understanding on non-important differences so they could be united. Ask yourself, “Am I helping the unity of the local church where I am a member?”

Week 24 - Romans 15-16; 1 Thess 1-3

15 - The first thirteen verses finish the thoughts of chapter 14. Paul is urging the brethren to serve one another as Jesus has already done. That is the remedy to the disunity and troubles in Rome: humble attitudes that see how we are all alike, all need Christ, and all need to do what Christ has done. **Verse 14** to the chapter’s end fill us in on Paul’s travel plans. Note **verse 16** and the contribution. This money is much more than just a cash contribution. For Paul it symbolizes Jew-Gentile relations and the full entrance of Gentiles into God’s scheme (see also **verses 26-27**).

16- This material gets overlooked as just a bunch of names. It’s much more than that! We get a good look into a NT church, what it was like, and who made it up. For example, from these names we note several things; that women can and should serve in important ways in the church (Priscilla (**verses 3-4**), Mary (**verse 6**), Junia (**verse 7**), Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (**verse 12**) are all female names). Further, we see that the church is made up of a diverse group of people. Nereus, Hermes, Persis, Herodion, Tryphosa, Tryphena, Amplias are all slave names. So at Rome the church would be made of slaves, former slaves, and freemen. What a collection! **Verse 17** gives rise to people “marking” troublemakers. However, the idea isn’t putting a mark on people but rather “watch” or “keep your eye on him.”

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians: This congregation was founded in Acts 17:1-9 by Paul. Jewish persecution drove Paul away and so he wrote back to Thessalonica, a populous and important city, to try and help the brethren he had to leave too quickly. He wanted to encourage them, deal with some false charges and answer some of their questions. The date of this epistle’s writing is fairly well fixed as AD 51 or 52, making it early in the NT canon. One of the keys to watch for is the expression “as you know.” Paul appeals to their personal experience with him throughout the epistle.

1 - Verse 1 mentions Silvanus, another name for Paul’s companion, Silas. In **verse 5** we can hear the echoes of charges against Paul. The church is commended for its evangelistic interest in **verse 8**. Note how repentance has worked major changes in the Thessalonians in **verses 9-10**.

2 - Paul sets forth his philosophy of preaching in **verses 3-6**. He will not trick, fool, or flatter to gain converts. Instead he shows the gentle and careful concern a parent exhibits (**verses 7 and 11**). **Verse 9** probably references Paul making tents to support himself. Jewish persecution is singled out in **verses 14-18** as the work of Satan. Note how Satan does have an affect on God's workers and what they can do. Satan can hinder us!

3 - Verse 1 speaks of Paul in Athens in Acts 17, anxious about how the new church in Thessalonica is fairing. Timothy's report was thrilling to Paul (**verses 6-10**). **Verse 10** has a very strong term for praying. It is a word translated elsewhere as "begging" (see 2 Corinthians 8:4).

Applications from This Week's Readings

Thessalonians brings much of the truth of the Gospel to bear in our lives in a very practical way. The Thessalonian brethren were changed by the Gospel. Focus on 1:8-10. Am I changed by the resurrection of Jesus the Christ? Am I evangelistic? Have I truly repented? Am I eagerly waiting for the Lord's coming?

Week 25 - 1 Thess 4-5; 2 Thess 1-3

1 Thess 4 - Thessalonica was a pagan city with pagan morals, particularly regarding sexual activity. Paul urges purity and self-control (**verses 3-7**). **Verse 4's** vessel can refer to one's own body or one's spouse, but either way it means to be chaste and pure. **Verse 6** reminds us that sexual sins (like adultery) take something from another we have no right to possess. The chapter concludes with great comfort for the Thessalonians who were sure that brethren who had already died ("fallen asleep," **verse 13**) had missed everything. No, Paul, says. Jesus will bring those brethren with Him when He returns again.

5 - Paul builds off the end of chapter 4 to talk more of Jesus' Second Coming. Yes, it will catch many unaware and so be terribly unpleasant (**verses 1-3**) but it will also bring vindication and salvation for Christians (**verses 9-11**). Some quick admonitions close the epistle, including a word about quenching the Spirit in **verse 19** that may puzzle some. It simply means to suppress the influence of the Spirit as He was directing that church through spiritual gifts like prophecy. **Verse 22** is not well translated in the old King James, resulting in much misunderstanding and misapplication.

Introduction to 2 Thessalonians - Paul's interest in the Thessalonians doesn't end with sending a single letter. While still at Corinth (Acts 18) he receives further word about the Thessalonian church. So he wrote again to set matters straight as persecution was leaving the church at the point of despair, and to repair damage done by a counterfeit Pauline letter. He also wanted to encourage the brethren not to forsake their normal duties in life simply because Jesus could return at any time.

1 - Verses 6-10 ring with a vengeance and victory, sounding like the book of Revelation. Judgement brings terror to evil doers and vindication to the righteous. That day will come, Paul says, so don't quit!

2 - This chapter is one of the most difficult in the New Testament. There are numerous translation difficulties (sometimes "he" can be "it" or vice versa), and we don't know what Paul had already taught them that he is relying on to guide them (**verse 5**). Their main concern was they had missed the Second Coming (**verse 2**). Paul says that can't happen because first there must be an apostasy (**verse 3**), which we cannot identify with certainty, and then the "man of sin" has to be revealed (**verse 3b**). There are many opinions about the "man of sin's" identity. Some see the pope here, others a certain Roman emperor demanding worship, others see the Roman Empire in general. Perhaps Paul is saying that Roman persecution will get worse, but Jesus will deal with Rome so don't lose your faith in the meantime. Whatever we make of the difficulties in **verses 3-9** the point of **verse 15** is clear: stand fast. Loving the truth is the key to standing fast (**note verse 10**).

3 - The epistle ends with a note about church discipline directed toward those who don't receive apostolic instruction (**verse 6**). It seems some were quitting their jobs because Jesus might return any day. Paul understood the possibility of Christ's return but that doesn't mean we can sit down and do nothing until He does come (**see verse 12**).

Applications from This Week's Readings

Persecution and patience are main themes in Thessalonians. Have you ever been persecuted? Is it harder to endure overt threats, like the seizure of property and jail, than the more subtle persecutions of our day? What are you doing to "stand fast" against the work of Satan?

Week 26 - 1 Timothy 1-5

Introduction to 1 Timothy - The epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are unique because they are not written to churches, but to young preachers to strengthen and encourage them. Timothy was Paul's beloved "son in the faith" (see Acts 16:1; 1 Tim 1:2), who seems to have been a little doubtful about himself and his abilities. 1 Timothy was probably written from the imprisonment reported at the end of Acts in the mid-sixties.

1 - Verses 3-7 makes it plain Paul has reports of problems and wants very specific issues dealt with by Timothy. **Verse 18** tells us that God had called or spoken of Timothy's work in high terms, though we do not have those prophecies recorded. As Paul always looked back on the Damascus Road call so Timothy is reminded of the charge God gave him. **Verse 20's** "handed over" refers to church discipline (see 1 Cor 5:5).

2 - In the first four verses Paul reveals his "filter" for observing all of life: how can this help the Gospel's cause? Even his prayer for politicians (verse 1) is for them to create the climate in which the Gospel will flourish (verse 2). Paul wants what God wants (verse 4). Verse 6 ends by saying it is now the right time, the appropriate time, to tell of the great truths about Jesus. "Lifting holy hands" (verse 8) must not throw us. Many prayers in Scripture are accompanied by a lifting of the hands to beseech heaven's help (see 1 Kings 8:22; Neh 8:6; Psalm 63:4; 134:2). Unfortunately, this practice is now identified with Pentecostalism, but Paul certainly wasn't thinking of today's charismatic groups when he wrote 1 Timothy! Verse 9 contains important admonitions about modesty, but we should note that Paul here is concerned with over-dressing. These verses are probably in the context of the worship assembly and so warn about coming to church to show off one's fine clothes. However, since immodesty is dressing to draw the wrong kind of attention to one's body, the application to under-dressing fits just as well.

Verses 11-12 uphold God's pattern in creation both before and after the fall, now beautifully displayed also in the Church. Both men and women bear God's image equally yet distinctly in their uniqueness as men and women, with women instructed here to respect, serve, and complement their brothers who have been given authority to teach & lead the church by honoring & supporting their leadership. This submission is shown in quietness (vv 2, 11, 12), ensuring that the instruction women may also be gifted to provide which Paul affirms elsewhere (Titus 2:3, 2 Tim 3:14, Acts 18:26) is not done so in a manner that exercises authority over men.

Verse 15 - Though we are promised to be saved through childbearing, it does not need to follow that we will be saved by it (see 1 Cor 3:15 for similar construction). The curse's aim as it relates to women was on pain in childbirth (Gen 3:16) & all its accompanying life-long realities. Our salvation - the ultimate undoing of the curse - will be accomplished because Christ became a curse for us (Gal 3:13), securing our hope even as we endure through the remaining effects of the curse in this temporary, physical life. And this redemptive work produces real fruit to demonstrate His power, as Paul urges here & elsewhere: faith, love, holiness, self-control. May women who belong to Christ take hope as our redeemed lives bear fruit that points to the day when God's final word over all the curse will be realized with salvation from every aspect of the curse through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ!

3 - Elder and deacon qualifications are fairly straightforward. Their application to every circumstance and situation is where we run into trouble sometimes, but a full discussion of that is simply not possible in this limited format. Mostly they are not that difficult to understand. **Verse 8** certainly is not giving license for today's social drinking. We need to remember the vast differences in biblical wines and wine now. Further, one can say "stop lying constantly" without okaying some lying. **Verse 16** uses the term "mystery" because without God's revelation we would never know these great truths (see Eph 3:3-5).

4- This chapter straightforwardly tells us apostasy is coming. We always need to be careful of those who offer some "higher" spirituality by abstaining from what God has made and declared good (**verses 3-5**). **Verse 8** offers a needed admonition to our society that adores perfect physical bodies but has no place for character.

5- **Verse 9** is talking about widows who are cared for from the church's treasury. **Verse 12** says younger women may cast off their first "faith" or "pledge." That may mean their pledge not to marry a non-Christian, or that they marry a pagan and lose their faith. The crucial distinction that the church cannot do everything individuals can do is firmly established in **verse 16**. Note that **verse 18** teaches that the church can financially support its elders for their work. **Verse 23** has wine as a medicine, not as a beverage.

Applications from This Week's Readings

While chapter 4 is discouraging in its direct prophecy of troubled days ahead much in 1 Timothy prepares him (and us) for times of apostasy and false teaching. What in 1 Timothy have you read that prepares you to be more effective for Christ in the religiously-tough times we live in?

Week 27 - 1 Timothy 6; 2 Timothy 1-4

6- **Verses 1-2** help us see that slavery was tolerated in New Testament times because it was a fixture in

that world. The church's purpose wasn't to remodel society. Paul returns again to the theme of boldness, re- minding Timothy that Jesus didn't shirk from telling the truth before Pilate (**verse 13**). The "deposit" of **verse 20** is the teaching Paul committed to him (see 2 Tim 2:2).

Introduction to 2 Timothy - This is the last epistle Paul wrote. Imprisoned in Rome (see 2 Tim. 1:8, 16; 4:6-13) in approximately 67 AD he knew that his execution wasn't far off. This epistle picks up the theme of boldness and confidence that 1 Timothy touched on and furthers it substantially. Timothy seems discouraged and Paul wants to remedy that in this letter.

1 - We know little of Timothy's family (mentioned in Acts 16:1) but it is clear that Eunice and Lois had a huge impact on Timothy's life (**verse 5**). But Timothy seems to have lost his courage (**verse 7**). Paul strongly urges him to press the cause of Christ fearlessly (note 2:3-5; 4:5). What is "what I have committed to Him" (**verse 12**)? Some translations have "what I have been entrusted with" which makes it even more difficult. This may be Paul's own salvation (in keeping with his idea of death being a victory, an encouraging idea for Timothy) or it may be the Gospel message Christ gave Paul to preach. That is how Paul uses the idea two verses later in reference to Timothy (see also 1 Tim 6:20). **Verse 15** singles out of Phygelus and Hermogenes, which may mean they were leaders.

2 - Verses 11-13 contain Paul's beautiful "trustworthy sayings." **Verse 13's** last line should not be taken to mean God saves the unfaithful anyway. It just means that God will always be faithful to His promises and Word, even if we are not. Timothy must watch carefully not to be contaminated (**verses 20-21**) with bad attitudes and actions (**verses 22-26**) if he wants to be useful to God.

3 - The "last days" mentioned in **verse 1** are the time of the Christian era (Acts 2:17). Paul believes he and Timothy were living in them at that time, and that this last era would be a difficult time for God's people. Jannes and Jambres (**verse 8**) are not mentioned anywhere in Scripture but in New Testament times were believed to be magicians in Pharaoh's court. **Verse 11** cites the troubles of the first missionary tour (Acts 13-14). The value of Scripture and its origin is cemented forever in two of the most famous verses in the Bible (**verses 16-17**). In context they are attached to **verse 15**, a reminder to Timothy to keep reading his Bible. What a needed admonition!

4 - After the disappointment of Demas (**verse 10**) we read an encouraging note about Mark (**verse 11**). He had left Paul on the first missionary tour but with Barnabas' help (Acts 15:37-38) is now serving God effectively. Note that Paul bears no hard feelings toward him. In **verse 19** we meet Priscilla and Aquila again. They were faithful co-workers with Paul (Acts 18:2; Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19).

Applications from This Week's Readings

Re-read Paul's final statements in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Picture yourself at the end of your life. You know the end is coming and coming soon. Could you say what Paul says here? If not, why not? Pray about staying the course, or making the changes needed to be able to live like Paul and have his confidence.

Week 28 - Titus 1-3; Philemon; Jude

Introduction to Titus - This letter is like 1 and 2 Timothy because it addresses a young preacher. However, it lacks any admonition about courage or zeal. We know little of Titus (he is only mentioned 12 times in the NT) but he seems to have been a remarkably effective preacher, even when working in difficult places and with difficult brethren. This epistle gives Titus some advice and encourages him to persevere (see 3:8).

1 - Much discussion has been raised over elder qualifications (**verses 5-9**). Again, extensive discussion of each qualification and the implications of various positions about them is impossible here. Let us be satisfied to see that elders are commanded and greatly needed for things to be "in order" (**verse 5**). Perhaps if more brethren saw the value in God's organizational plan for the church and *wanted* elders there would be less fussing over every nuance of these qualifications. **Verse 5** tells us Titus was on the island of Crete. This is a large island 160 miles long by 35 miles wide in the Mediterranean. Its citizens did not have a good reputation by any means (**verse 12**). The troubles there seem to contain some elements of Judaism (**verse 14**). These false teachers may be binding Jewish dietary restrictions (with its regulations about impure foods) on people. Jesus dealt with this (see Matt 15:11-20) but Paul and Titus must deal with it again. Paul has little use for these who undermine the Kingdom of God (**verse 16**).

2 - Titus' work will mainly consist of teaching "sound doctrine" (**verse 1**). The emphasis on teaching is made clear when we see how many times it is mentioned: "teach" or "speak" in 2:1, "teachers of good things" in 2:3; "train" in 2:4, "urge" or "exhort" in 2:6, 15, "show yourself" in and "your teaching" in 2:7, "teaching us" or "training us" (2:12), and "rebuke" (2:15). The center of all of this teaching is God's grace (**verses 11-12**) which changes our roles in society and what we do even as we grow older.

3 - Verses 5-6 speak of the Holy Spirit's work. This verse reminds us of Jesus' saying about "born of water and the Spirit" in John 3:5. It is simply a reference to how, when we have heard the Word that the Spirit inspired, we obey it and are born again by being baptized. **Verse 6** says the Spirit is poured out on "us," a reference to the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2. Where is Nicapolis (**verse 12**)? There were seven cities named Nicapolis ("city of victory"). This is probably the Nicapolis on the western coast of Greece two hundred miles northwest of Athens.

Philemon - This is a very personal epistle. Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He ran away (perhaps even stealing Philemon's money), somehow met up with Paul and was converted. Paul now returns him with this letter that pleads for Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly. At first we might dismiss this epistle as having little value to modern times. However, it is a marvelous "postcard" that puts teachings on forgiveness, warmth, and care for others into action for us to see. Christianity is to change how we live and how we treat others! Apphia (**verse 2**) might be Philemon's wife. Note the importance of voluntarily doing the right thing, instead of being made to do so (**verses 14, 20**).

Jude - Jude is a short book full of questions! The author is probably the Lord's half-brother (Mark 6:3).

His theme is evident. He wanted to write something positive but the faith must be defended (verse 3) from false teaching and teachers (verse 4). Jude cites examples of the judgment of the ungodly, relying on the Old Testament for his illustrations. It is those examples that may puzzle us since we as modern readers are not as familiar with the extra-biblical texts that the original

readers would have known to which Jude alludes. However, we can get Jude's point: these false teachers talk about what they don't know (verse 10) when even a mighty angel didn't talk that way. What are love feasts (verse 12)? This is probably just a reference to hospitality practiced in homes by individual Christians. The key to Jude is to see his emphasis on holding fast to the truth, knowing God is, all the more, holding onto us, and that we would not allow false teachers and teaching to take hold and destroy souls.

Applications from This Week's Readings

What is your attitude toward the truth? In our "whatever" society it is easy to decide doctrinal correctness isn't all that important. Titus and Jude both help us rethink our attitude toward false teaching and false teachers. Philemon stresses the right relationships that come when we obey truth. Will you pursue truth this week or dismiss it as something for elders and preachers to worry with? Pray this week that you will put more emphasis on understanding and even defending truth.

Week 29 - Matthew 1-5

Introduction to Matthew - Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of the Gospels. Repeatedly Matthew ties Jesus to the Old Testament and demonstrates He is the prophesied Messiah. While Matthew, Mark and Luke share similarities Matthew preserves large blocks of Jesus' teaching (like the Sermon on the Mount), uses titles for Jesus like Son of David and Son of God, and tells of Jesus' birth. Matthew's portrait of Jesus is enormously important for understanding Jesus the Christ.

1 - The first verse of Matthew sets the tone for the entire Gospel. Matthew is showing that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised to the house of David and to Abraham. He is the fulfillment of every Old Testament promise and prophecy. To show that to Jews a genealogy is in order, and that follows (**verses 2-17**). This genealogy shows Jesus to be of the kingly line of David. There are some surprising people in it (Tamar, **verse 3**; Bathsheba, **verse 6**; Manasseh, **verse 10**). It also shortens the lineages up in places by skipping a generation so as to maintain the symmetry of 14 generations to each marker in Jewish history (**verse 17**). Why the number 14 is important to Matthew is uncertain. **Verse 21** gives us Jesus' name and mission. His mission is unique, but His name is only the Greek form of "Joshua" and would not have been uncommon. It means "God saves."

2 - This chapter is very straightforward. **Verse 1** mentions Herod the Great, the first of many Herods in the New Testament. He was cruel, paranoid, and perhaps even insane. Note how the wise men did not visit the stable (as is often seen in various depictions) but "the house" (**verse 11**). The emphasis in this chapter is on Jesus' fulfilling prophecy after prophecy, and God caring for the Child and His parents so that even as the devil tries to murder Jesus as an infant his every attempt is foiled. It is also possible that Matthew is answering the objection that Jesus came from Nazareth, when everyone knew the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. With this week's reading we turn again to watch Jesus. Matthew wants us to see *King* Jesus. Let's make sure in our reading that we are getting that, and most importantly, that we are submitting ourselves to the Lord of Lords and King of Kings!

3 - **Verse 2** shows how John's message and Jesus' message dovetail perfectly. Both begin by proclaiming the coming Kingdom of heaven. John's demeanor, preaching style and even clothing and diet all fit the image of someone outside the religious establishment who was very much in the tradition of Old Testament prophets like Elijah (**verse 4**). John's baptism (**verses 5-6**) must have been a bitter pill for some to swallow, as Gentiles who converted to Judaism were required to do such! Being Jewish by birth wasn't good enough, John said (**verse 9**). It was time for a radical change of mind and heart if you were really going to be part of God's people. Of course, Jesus has not sin to repent of but He still desires John's baptism (**verse 15**) that He might fulfill every command of God.

4 - Jesus has been declared to be God's Son (3:17) but now the devil tempts Him to misuse His position and status. Jesus answers every temptation from Deuteronomy 6-8, a section of Scripture that discusses the testing of Israel and what they should have learned in the desert. Israel didn't learn to trust and obey God, but Jesus certainly will and does. **Verse 8's** temptation is exceptionally devious, as it offers Jesus a shortcut to the kingship and kingdom He came to claim. **Verse 12** speaks of the danger for Jesus of being in Judea (where John was arrested) so He moved north. Again, Matthew ties Jesus to prophecy (**verse 14**). What is this "kingdom of heaven" Jesus preaches (**verse 17**)? Some want to substitute in "church" everywhere they see "kingdom" and end up with some sort of institution. The kingdom is, first and foremost, the rule and reign of God in people's hearts. People who submit to God's rule and reign, of course, make up the church but we need to guard against institutionalizing what is an intensely personal concept. It is a mistake to read **verses 18-22** as if Peter, Andrew, James and John had never met Jesus, He simply walked by and they dropped everything to follow a complete stranger. John 1:35ff shows us they knew and followed Jesus at some level prior to this call. This is, therefore, a request for them to permanently come and remain with Jesus from now on to be trained as apostles. They are willing to do so immediately (**verse 22**).

5-6 - The Sermon on the Mount is easily the greatest sermon ever preached. Trying to cover it in a few paragraphs here is simply a travesty, and we are surely only touching the “hem of the garment.” A key theme to watch for is “more than the scribes and Pharisees.” Traditional religion, with its desire to curry men’s favor, just didn’t work for Jesus. The citizens of His kingdom would have to do better. They would have to sincerely seek God with attitudes well captured in the Beatitudes (**verses 1-12**). **Verse 18’s** “jot and tittle” references the two smallest strokes of a Hebrew letter. Jesus cared deeply about Scripture, didn’t He? **Verse 29** is not to be taken literally but instead to show how important cutting off anything that would pull down our spirituality really is. Make the sacrifices necessary to be pure and serve God! **Verse 39** puzzles, but Jesus is simply saying that we must show in our actions that we love all, as mandated in **verse 43**.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

The personal applications from the Sermon on the Mount just pour forth. Jesus stresses character, heart and pure devotion in every line. The serious disciple would do well to find the section of the Sermon that wounds him or her the deepest and then pray over and study that section repeatedly. This is, in a very real way, the constitution of the Kingdom. If we want to be part of Jesus’ kingdom this is who we must be. Ask yourself again and again: am I what Jesus requires? Does my heart reflect the values of His Kingdom?

Week 30 - Matthew 6-10

Chapter 6 makes plain that righteousness to be seen of men is valueless before God (**verses 1-8**). Some ask about fasting today (**verse 16**) but Jesus isn’t binding fasting. He is only regulating a very common custom. It is not wrong to fast, but it must not be done to gain the accolades of others. **Verse 21** stands as a huge key to the whole Sermon: it is the heart that matters most. Again, we need to be careful with **verse 33**. This means I need to seek God’s reign in my life first, that I need to let God rule me first, over any other concern of life.

7:1 may be the most misused verse in all of Scripture. Everyone is more than ready to quote “Don’t judge me!” but isn’t even saying “Don’t judge me” a judgement that you have been judged by another? Jesus’ words prohibit hypocritical judging, not all judging of every kind (see John 7:24). Indeed, **verse 6** requires some judging! **Verses 21-22** tells of those who are polite, orthodox, fervent and spectacular in their religion, but they are *wrong*. We do well to think about that.

8 - Matthew begins a section here of nine miracle stories, arranged in groups of three. In between there are some short sayings of Jesus focusing on discipleship’s demands. These miracles are also in Mark but they are shorter here, really putting Jesus “front and center” so we see His power and authority. He has absolutely irresistible authority. **Verse 4’s** call for silence is explained when we realize that Jesus’ fame spread quickly enough without any help. Further, Jesus wanted people to listen to His message, not just seek His miracles. Note how Jesus is uncompromising in **verses 18-22**. Following Jesus must not take a backseat to anything. Mark and Luke mention only one demoniac while Matthew has two (**verse 28**). Matthew may make mention of them both because Jesus’ law required two witnesses and this is a Gospel to Jews. This well illustrates how the Gospels do not contradict but rather complement each other. Mark and Luke focus on one man because they want to give more detail about him (but speaking of one doesn’t mean there wasn’t another) while Matthew identifies two because that fits the purposes of his gospel.

9 - Jesus quotes Hosea in **verse 13**, urging the Pharisees to stop dead ritualism and really live as God’s people. The teachings of **verses 14-17** discuss what is appropriate to do. Some things just don’t “fit,” they “aren’t done” because it isn’t the right time for them. **Verses 18-26** have the marvelous “miracle within a miracle” story, and show Jesus’ power over even death. **Verse 34** and **verse 36** stand together to show the failure of the religious leadership of the day. **Verse 38** urges prayer but we will see that those who are praying become those who are sent in chapter 10.

10 - This is the Limited Commission. Jesus’ work cannot be done by Him alone so He commissions others to assist Him. Many of these verses are very famous and are often read in isolation. Read together they form a powerful set of teachings about how disciples will never be popular, but should instead expect persecution (**verses 15-28, 34-39**). In that persecution they should be certain God will care for them (**verses 29-30, 40-42**) and be determined to never give up or recant. **Verses 32-33** are the keynotes of this chapter. Notice how any act of service, even a very small one, matters to Jesus if our motivation is right in doing it (**verse 42**).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

One of the themes in this section of Matthew is rejecting Jesus. Look over the reason and list reasons why people refused and rejected Jesus. How do people refuse Jesus today? Why do they reject Him? Are you with those who receive Jesus and His teachings or do preconceived ideas, a love for tradition, or other problems hinder you from accepting Him?

11 - Why John has doubts has long been a cause of speculation (**verse 3**). Perhaps Jesus wasn't acting like John thought the Messiah would. Jesus' answer is clear: I am doing what the Messiah was prophesied to do (**verse 5**). **Verse 12** is difficult. It may mean the kingdom has always been attacked by violent men, but others translate it "pressing forward vigorously" meaning men like John the Baptist and their hard work push the kingdom forward. Do not mistake **verses 28-30** to mean Christianity is easier than Judaism. Jesus contrasts the ways of Pharisees and all they had added to the Law with knowing Him and being in relation with Him. Obeying Jesus is a delight when we truly trust Him. We serve gladly and His burden is light when we want to serve because we know Jesus! It's not about less demanding law but about a relationship with Christ.

12 - **Verses 1-8** have been mistakenly used to prop up situation ethics but such cannot work. First, the apostles are not starving to death, they are just hungry. Secondly, Jesus says David did wrong. All this section shows is that Jesus' opponents attack Him for violating *their traditions* when they are unwilling to speak against David who violated *God's law*. **Verse 15** shows Matthew tying miracles to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, quoting Isaiah in **verses 17-21**. This speaks of the gentle spirit of the Messiah. People are always concerned they may have done what **verse 32** says can never be forgiven, but in context it is easy to understand what is meant. Jesus casts out a demon, and His enemies acknowledge He did so (**verses 22-23**) but then ascribe it to the devil's power (**verse 24**). Such is ridiculous, Jesus says (**verses 25-30**). Then Jesus says the heart that refuses to see what such miracles mean is a hardened heart that will never turn to God to ask forgiveness, and so cannot be forgiven. This means that one who is concerned about having committed the sin of verse 32 is showing the very opposite quality of heart and therefore cannot have so sinned! Jesus statements about demons (**verses 43-45**) raise many questions, but this isn't Demonology 101. Jesus wants the Jews to see they must turn fully to God or things will only get worse. John prepared the way, Jesus taught, but many were not really receiving God's work. Refusing God only leads to more hardness of heart and a person who is worse off than before.

13 - This great chapter has eight parables in it as well as the explanation for why Jesus told parables. In **verses 11-12** it may seem Jesus doesn't want people to understand His teaching but that is, of course, not the case. The point is *some don't want to understand*. Their hearts are not right (**verse 15**) so they just don't get it. The parable of the sower becomes then the model for all how all parables work. As Jesus' words fall on different kinds of hearts different results must be expected from each kind of hearer. The parable of the tares (**verses 24-30, 36-43**) warns us about fake disciples. The parables of the mustard seed and leaven (**verses 31-35**) show how from small beginnings great things can happen. The hidden treasure and pearl of great price parables (**verses 44-46**) speak of the value of the kingdom. The chapter concludes with the parable of the dragnet (**verses 47-50**) which is similar to the parables of the tares. Finally Jesus tells how a scribe that knew the Old Law would find new things in it as he saw it now through the lens of the Messiah (**verses 51-52**). This is a strong contrast to **verses 14-15**. Finally, watch how Jesus, when explaining parables, didn't make every detail mean something. Parables illustrate one or two truths. Trying to make them an allegory in which everything stands for something twists them out of shape.

14 - **Verse 1** tells of Herod Antipas, the son of the Herod that tried to kill baby Jesus. These verses about John (**verses 3-12**) show how controversy over divorce and remarriage has been a constant in human history. John lost his life because he would not compromise the truth. The feeding of the 5000 comes about because of Jesus' compassion for people (**verse 14**). **Verse 25's** "fourth watch" would be between 3 AM and 6 AM. What a desperate situation the disciples were in! **Verse 33** reminds us how powerful Jesus' miraculous control of wave, water and wind really was.

15 - Jesus is now drawing attention from important leaders, who travel all the way from Jerusalem to "check Him out" (**verse 1**). They duel over Jesus' unwillingness to bind their man-made rules about hand washing (**verse 2**). The bigger issue, Jesus says, is how their rules form convenient loopholes so people can evade the law of God and still justify themselves (**verses 3-9**). The example here is of a man dedicating his property to the temple (when he died), but since the law forbade breaking one's vows he then certainly couldn't use that property to support his parents, so ... *tough luck, mom and dad, I can't help you!* Jesus then goes to Gentile territory and meets a Gentile woman with a great need (**verses 21-28**). We gasp at Jesus' seeming harshness and unwillingness to help, but text cannot show us Jesus' tone of voice or the twinkle in His eye as He tested her faith. She knew Jesus would help her if she persisted and so she did and He did!

Applications from This Week's Readings

As we read Matthew the seed is being sown and our reaction to it will reveal what kind of soil our hearts are. Do we accept Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God? If so, are we bearing fruit as we let that reality control everything about our walk of life? Am I good soil? Do I bear fruit for Jesus?

16 - The theme of rejection and bad hearts continues. Such will receive no sign except the sign of Jesus' resurrection, called here the sign of Jonah (**verse 4**). That would be quite a sign for the Pharisees who plotted His death, and for the Sadducees who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead! Jesus announces His plans to build "His church" in **verses 18-19**. He may mean here that He will build it using the leadership of Peter (something that certainly comes to pass in Acts) or that He will build the church on the confession Peter makes, i.e., the truth that He is the Son of God. Peter's insight didn't come from human wisdom ("flesh and blood") but from God revealing it to Him in the person of Jesus Christ (**verse 17**). Jesus did and said the things that ought to have convinced honest people who He was – and it did convince Peter. We are quick to note Peter was not the first pope and that is certainly true. We should be as quick to see the church here is people who accept Jesus as God's Son, not a giant institution. The kingdom is of people! Peter's flash of brilliance earlier is replaced by complete misunderstanding in **verse 22**. Peter doesn't realize it but there can be no crown for the Christ without the cross. Jesus immediately links His church with His suffering (**verse 21**), something the disciples really struggle with.

17 - Jesus has told of His death but now the disciples see His glory. The Transfiguration is a glimpse of things to come. Peter blunders again, and is told Jesus has the preeminence over even great men like Elijah and Moses (**verse 5**). Then the disciples come off the mountain top to find trouble (**verses 14-21**). The demon possessed boy evidently intimidated the apostles into weakness and fear. **Verse 20** shouldn't be taken literally, but clearly says that persistent faith that doesn't give up in the face of tough circumstances can accomplish much because it is linked to a great God who can do so much in His time and in His way.

18 - Jesus' call to be like a child (**verse 3**) has provoked every excursion into the good qualities of children, but His point is clear in **verse 4**. Jesus is talking about humility. Kids have little power, wealth, rank or authority. Does **verse 10** teach that everyone has his own personal protector, i.e. a guardian angel? No, it simply says that angels are involved in watching out for our welfare, and while society dismisses children as unimportant God cares deeply for them. Every soul matters to God, which Jesus emphasizes in the parable of **verses 10-14**. Those that do run over and harm brethren are subject to specific disciplinary procedures, which God Himself says He will honor and attend (**verses 18-20**). Of course, a brother who repents must be forgiven, as **verses 21-35** well shows.

19 - **Verse 1** marks the final turning point, as Jesus sets Himself to go to Jerusalem. Watch His tone become more urgent as He warns the apostles what will happen there. Read **verses 1-9** carefully and without preconceived notions and you may well be amazed that such a clear text has engendered so much controversy. The Lord avoids the squabbling of rabbis and goes back to God's original intention for the home (**verses 4-6**) to announce that God's plan was for one man and one woman to wed for a lifetime, with one and only one cause for divorce. Let us say (and live) what Jesus teaches here! In **verse 16** we meet a good man who has done lots of good deeds but who has no place at the center of his heart for God. He is utterly unacceptable to the Lord in such a state. This bears much thought in our affluent world today.

20 - **Verse 3's** "third hour" would be 9:00 A.M. as the day began at 6:00 A.M. The parable of unexpected reward well illustrates Jesus' guarantee of rewards for His followers (19:28ff). Here we realize again how God doesn't do as humans do, and that should be a cause of much rejoicing. The parable of grace is interrupted by sober warnings in **verses 17-19**. Jesus is very emphatic here. Coming right out of that James and John's mother show that the apostles don't have a clue what Jesus means (**verses 20-28**). They are still dreaming of earthly glory, palaces and thrones and wanted to be sure they got theirs. They will receive ample suffering, Jesus says, but the Kingdom won't be like they think. Matthew ends the chapter with two blind men. Mark and Luke only tell of one (Bartimaeus, Mark 10:46), but Jewish law requires two witnesses so Matthew tells of both men. Here are two who see Jesus as the Son of David and Messiah (**verse 31**).

Applications from This Week's Readings

18:10's reference to angels makes a good place for us to remember all God does for His children. We may not always understand what angels do or how they do their tasks, but they are for us and we should thank God for them. Read the following verses: Heb 1:14; Luke 15:10; Gal 3:19; 1 Peter 1:12. Angels, those incredible creatures of power and might, are interested in us and serve us! Let us not react to the wrong ideas about angels all around us by discounting them or deciding they have no place to play. God cares for us and He uses even the power of angels to execute His commands on our behalf! *Thank God – for angels!*

Week 33 - Matthew 21-25

21 - This is one of Jesus' most deliberate actions. He clearly wants people to see Him as the Messiah of Zechariah 9:9-10. The crowd recognizes the statement Jesus is making (**verse 9**), but they don't seem to realize that if Jesus were coming to start a war with Rome He would ride a war horse, not a donkey. Jesus is a king, but not the kind they expect or want. The religious leaders continue to show their disdain for the com-

mon people (**verse 16**), the very ones who “get it.” The withered fig tree (**verses 18-22**) doesn’t represent Jesus throwing a fit of anger, but instead the nation of Israel that promised fruit but didn’t deliver (note the connection at **verse 43**). We see more bad hearts in the dishonesty of **verse 27**, and in Jesus’ pointed parables that close the chapter.

22 - The parables of Jesus are increasingly dark and violent, aren’t they? The parable of the wedding feast (**verses 1-14**) is crystal clear in its meaning and application, but it speaks of a happy time that is marred by foolish and ungrateful citizens. The opposition to Jesus is becoming so pronounced that the Pharisees and Herodians join forces to attack Jesus in **verses 15-22**. Since the Pharisees were so concerned about law keeping and the Herodians were a political group these are strange allies! The Sadducees fail equally to trap Jesus (**verses 23-33**). Notice how Jesus makes His entire argument about the validity of the resurrection off the tense of one word in **verses 32**. God doesn’t say “I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” but “I *am*” meaning they are still alive. Being careful with Scripture and trusting that even the very tenses of verbs are inspired is to treat the Scripture like Jesus did. The chapter concludes with Jesus asking the questions. How can David’s son be greater than David (**verse 43**)? Such couldn’t be, unless of course, the Son of David, the Messiah, was Deity as Jesus was and is. Jesus is the explanation for Psalm 110, a passage that puzzled the rabbis but is now crystal clear.

23 - **Verse 5’s** phylacteries were small cases or boxes that held a small piece of paper with scripture written on it. They were fastened to the wrist and forehead. The Pharisees were making these large so all would see them. **Verses 9-10** do not condemn all titles but rather the seeking of titles, and undue emphasis on them. Jesus forbids tricky wording to get out of our promises in **verses 16-22**. **Verse 23** tells us the Pharisees’ problem: not law-keeping, but law keeping without putting first things first.

24 - The disciples are impressed with the Temple (**verse 1**). Herod’s remodeling of Ezra’s temple was impressive. Some stones were used that were as large as 20 to 40 feet in length and weighed more than 100 tons! The disciples wondered how such a structure, especially since it was *God’s Temple*, could ever be desolated as Jesus said in 23:38? The chapter has provoked much speculation but if we kept the time frame Jesus gave in **verse 34** before us, along with an understanding that Jesus is using Old Testament language the Olivet Discourse is not nearly so difficult. Remember as well that the disciples didn’t understand Jesus would leave so they are surely not asking about the Second Coming! We must be content to see this chapter speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. **Verse 15** has “abomination of desolation” (from Daniel 12:11), but the parallel account in Luke 21:20 has “armies of Rome,” making the term clear. **Verses 27-30** throw many off because they aren’t familiar with Old Testament judgement language. Read Isaiah 13:10, 13; 19:1; Ezekiel 32:7-8 and Amos 8:1-2 to see these metaphors of doom used of other cities and nations. Jesus concludes His warnings with strong words to be constantly ready (**verses 36-51**).

25 - Part of every Jewish wedding was the delay when the groom went to get the bride. It was considered rude to be unprepared when they finally came. We may wonder why they didn’t open the door in **verse 11** but night was the hour of thieves, and these had insulted the groom by not being ready. This parable is often connected to Jesus’ Second Coming but in context more directly relates to the destruction of Jerusalem. However its principles well apply to the coming that we should be ready for, Jesus’ return. **Verse 15** gives us a measure of money, not skills and abilities. The key in the parable is **verse 26**. The one talent man is rebuked for *laziness*. Jesus doesn’t want His followers doing nothing while they await the Roman armies, or His Second Coming. They should be active in kingdom business. The third parable here does seem to be about the Second Coming. Notice how *all* nations are gathered (**verse 32**), and Jesus speaks of *everlasting* fire (**verse 41**), *everlasting* punishment and *eternal* life (**verses 46**).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Much of our reading has been about the judgment of God - either on the city of Jerusalem in AD 70 or even the final Judgment Day. Look carefully at what Jesus says about judgement in chapter 25. On that great Day will you be with the sheep or goats?

Week 34 - Matthew 26-28

26 - Matthew stresses how Jesus is in control of everything and will not be taken by surprise by His enemies (**verse 1**). **Verses 6-12** record a simple act of kindness by Mary (see John 12:3) that cannot be measured in terms of dollars and cents. **Verse 18** shows Jesus making secret preparations for the Last Supper. Judas will not know in advance where the Passover will be eaten, so he cannot betray Jesus there. The verses instituting the Lord’s Supper (**verses 26-29**) set it squarely in the Passover. Jesus is doing nothing less than replacing the feast that memorialized when Israel became the covenant people of God with a “feast” that memorializes the act that gives everyone a chance to be an “Israelite.” For so long, the Passover and its sacrificial lamb had pointed to Jesus and now that fulfillment was at hand. Watch the close ties between blood, covenant and forgiveness of sins as well. **Verse 30’s** hymn would be from Psalms 115-118. Notice in **verses 53-56** that Jesus is not held by the arresting soldiers, but by His determination to complete

His mission. In **verses 69-75** Peter fails spectacularly. If the Bible were only a tale made up by humans would one of its heroes act like this?

27 - After already suffering through mock trials before the Sanhedrin, Jesus is now dragged over to Pilate because the Jews did not have the right to execute lawbreakers (**verse 1**). Isn't it interesting that the Sanhedrin is worried about unlawful money in the treasury when they aren't concerned about lying and murder (**verse 5**)? Jesus' quiet dignity and courage impresses Pilate (**verse 14**), even while it is clear that nothing Jesus can say will stop the proceedings. Barabbas was a rebel (John 18:40), so it may not be surprising that the crowd would prefer a "freedom fighter" over Jesus. **Verse 27's** Praetorium would be in the Fortress Antonio, built in the corner of the Temple. **Verse 45** tells us it was noon. The veil in the temple was some sixty feet tall, and was torn from the top down, not from the bottom up as humans would (**verse 51**). Access to God and forgiveness of sins has been obtained at Calvary! **Verse 52** seems strange, and we are unsure of all it means, but clearly Jesus' death was momentous.

28 - Matthew's gospel ends with a bang. Even though Jesus had consistently been saying He would rise again no one seems to have taken Him seriously. So Matthew highlights everyone's unexpected joy and elation (**verses 8-9**). He also answers a vicious lie that was circulating about the resurrection (**verse 15**) and then records the Great Commission (**verses 18-20**). The story of Jesus ends, but what Jesus began goes on.

Introduction to 1 Corinthians - Paul founded this church in Acts 18:1-7, on the third missionary journey. He stayed 18 months. After leaving Corinth he received word of troubles and of questions about his teaching. This epistle is a virtual Q & A session, with Paul trying to help this church get things righted. It was probably written in the late 50's AD.

1 - Isn't it interesting that with all the problems Corinth had Paul begins with unity (**verse 10**)? Some try to use **verse 17** to negate baptism's importance, but in the context it is clear Paul did baptize (**verses 14, 16**) and that his concern is party-ism and division. Paul then begins speaking to the issue of human thought and wisdom, pointing out that no man can know God's will by human reasoning (**verses 18-31**). God does differently than humans would expect!

2 - As Paul continues working with the idea of God's wisdom versus man's wisdom you can still hear accusations against his apostolic authority (**verse 1**). **Verse 7's** "mystery" means something that cannot be known without God revealing it. How does God reveal His will, the mystery? Through the words the Holy Spirit gave inspired men (**verse 13**). Notice that it is not just the concepts of the Bible that are inspired, but the very words. Unfortunately, the "natural man" (**verse 14**) will not hear God's revelation. This verse does not mean the Spirit must directly aid us to understand the Bible, but that we must be willing to listen to God's Word.

Applications from This Week's Readings

What simple acts do we fail to do because we are concerned about what others will say of us or the cost of the sacrifice? Mary didn't miss her chance (26:6-13). Pray and ask God for an opportunity to serve someone this week – and then seize upon it!

Week 35 - 1 Corinthians 3-7

3 - Verse 1 ties to chapter 2 with the key idea of "spiritual." The Corinthians were not listening to God's revelation but were instead carnally minded. **Verse 4** picks up the troubles mentioned in 1:12. Paul is still working with the problem of division, although he has expanded on that to include being spiritually immature (the root of Corinth's division). **Verses 14-15** reinforce **verses 6-7**. If those we teach go astray that is a loss, but the teacher doesn't lose his/her salvation for it!

4 - Again we hear the undertones of an attack on Paul's apostleship (**verse 1**). **Verse 4** stands as a crucial point for all disciples. There is such concern today about what everyone else thinks of us, but that doesn't really matter, does it? Instead we need to listen to the Lord's revelation, the Bible (**verse 6**). We can't hear Paul's voice in **verses 8-10** but it is clear that he is being sarcastic. The Corinthians boasted of so much yet needed help from the very ones they deemed themselves superior to: the apostles, especially Paul. Of course, Paul doesn't want them to just feel badly (**verse 14**) but to change. Notice the "not-but" construction in **verse 14**. The "not" phrase doesn't mean "absolutely none of this" or "not at all" but "this is not as important, don't emphasize this." The "but" phrase is where the writer's emphasis lies. Watch for this construction as it is common in the New Testament (note John 6:27 where Jesus is not saying "don't work" but emphasizing spiritual priorities).

5 - This chapter and chapter six deal with Corinth's refusal to get involved in its own troubles and sort them out. Here a man is in scandalous sexual sin, perhaps with his step-mother (**verse 1**) and the congregation is doing nothing about it. **Verse 5** is difficult. It may be like the idea in Romans 1 that "God gave them up." Paul makes a play on the Passover and unleavened bread as he urges Corinth to purge out the attitude of tolerance toward sin (**verses 6-8**).

6 - We naturally wonder how Christians will judge the world (**verse 2**). In some sense we reign with Christ and will, evidently, participate in judging with Him. We should just accept it and wait to see how it works out! **Verse 12** begins a little tangent on several linked matters: sexual immorality, idolatry and eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul will address all of these matters in the chapters to follow, so perhaps this is a kind of introduction and summary.

7 - This chapter contains some of the longest and most fully developed teachings on marriage in the New Testament. Understanding it in light of the “present distress” (**verse 26**) is essential. History tells us these were uncertain times in the world, with famine and shortages rampant. Further, persecution was breaking out against the church. This would not be a good time to pursue marriage, but Paul wants to be clear that marriage is not sinful or “less holy.” Some have decided that we can ignore Paul’s recommendations (**verse 12**) because they are not from Jesus, but Paul is an inspired apostle! He goes on to develop that Christianity does not change our outward relations in life (**verses 17-24**). **Verses 36-38** are difficult because we are not sure if this is speaking of an engaged person or the father who gives his daughter in marriage. Whoever Paul is speaking of, it is still clear that Paul’s main point is carried through: marriage may be difficult just now, but it is not sinful.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

This week’s readings highlight the value of God’s revelation, the Bible. We simply cannot know the mind of God without Him revealing it to us (2:11-12). Thus, we should be very thankful for the Word. Second, we should be very determined to read this revelation and find out about God! Make certain as you read that you count the Bible as inspired, and as *the* source for the information we need of our Creator. Make a list of what you have learned of God just from 1 Corinthians.

Week 36 - 1 Corinthians 8-12

8 - Chapters 8-10 discuss the idea of Christian liberty using the example of meat that was offered to idols. Much of the meat available in the New Testament world would have been from idol temples. Could a Christian eat such? What if he/she had formerly been an idol worshiper? Do Christians have the liberty to eat such meat? Paul says Christians do, but they need to be careful how they use that right so as to not cause others to sin (**verse 9**). “Cause to offend” doesn’t mean hurt feelings here. It means “tempted into sin.” Christians must not help the devil do his evil work!

9 - If anyone at Corinth wonders if Paul will practice what he preaches (8:13), he now details how he has done exactly what he urges on them: give up liberty for others. Paul has given up the right to be supported by Corinth so that money wouldn’t be an issue between them (**verse 15**). Paul will give up anything to “win the more” (**verse 22**). He disciplines himself as he is asking the Corinthians to do to win the prize of heaven (**verses 25-27**).

10 - Paul is sure that while eating idol-sacrificed meat isn’t wrong, some at Corinth need to be careful about this liberty lest they fall back into idolatry (**verses 14ff**). The Israelites had great blessings and were God’s people but idolatry was a huge stumbling block for even them (**verses 1-5**). So don’t be proud and arrogant, but watch out (**verses 6-13**). Paul closes the chapter with very direct answers to questions that would arise in day to day living in an idolatrous culture. **Verse 23** doesn’t mean there is no such thing as sin, but in the area of liberty where all is lawful, not everything is helpful. Meat from idol temples was lawful to eat, but that didn’t mean everyone should eat it.

11 - The first sixteen verses of this chapter are famous for their perplexity. Yet it is not that hard to understand what Paul is saying here. Some women in Corinth needed to be covered when they prayed and prophesied. Men should not be covered when praying. The difficulty is knowing exactly what the covering for women is, and how much of this chapter is applicable to today. Does Paul want women today to be covered? Is the covering an artificial veil, a woman’s hair, or even more specifically, long hair on women? While these questions (and many others) cannot all be worked out in this brief format the reader needs to carefully study these matters. **Verse 5** speaks of women praying and prophesying. Where is this going on? Paul will forbid women doing this in the common assembly in chapter 14, so where was this being done? **Verse 6** seems to say something about the customs of that day, but there is uncertainty even about what those were. **Verse 10** is extremely difficult. Paul then addresses another problem at Corinth: turning the Supper into a common meal that featured class distinctions based on income (**verses 17-34**)! Some are confused by **verse 27**. It does not refer to the worthiness of the participant, but instead references a taking which fails to give the respect to the Supper that it deserves. It is to take the Supper in an irreverent way. Those that do so just bring judgment upon themselves (**verse 29**), and become spiritually weak if not dead (**verse 30**).

12 - Discussing the Lord’s Supper (11:18-34) leads Paul to another aspect of worship and questions from the brethren at Corinth: spiritual gifts. This will occupy his attention for the next three chapters. Obviously things are out of control, as some are saying “Jesus is accursed” and then that the Spirit made them say such (**verse 3**)! Early on Paul introduces the idea that all the differing spiritual gifts are needed (**verse 7**),

an important point for a church infatuated with one gift, tongue speaking. The gift of faith in **verse 9** cannot be the saving faith required of all Christians but must be an additional measure of faith, perhaps giving one a very tough faith. **Verse 13** is difficult to translate (baptized *by* the Spirit or *in* the Spirit?) and equally hard to understand. “By the Spirit” is used in **verses 3 and 9** to mean “under the influence of” and that may be the sense here. “Drink the Spirit” is difficult, but Paul’s point is clear: the Corinthians have all had the same experience, are all Christians, are all one body and so must act in a unified way. **Verse 22’s** “weaker members” references our internal organs. They cannot survive outside the body, and are not as sturdy as fingers or hair, but are indispensable to the body.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Think again about matters of liberty and our example as discussed in chapters 8-10 of this week’s reading. Can you think of matters that are not necessarily wrong but are not wise to engage in? How concerned are you about your influence, and what other (possibly weaker) Christians see in you? Do we imagine we are impervious to temptation and so are reckless, just ready to fall into sin like Israel of old?

Week 37 - 1 Corinthians 13-16; 2 Corinthians 1

13 - Paul now presses the Corinthians to pursue something greater than spiritual gifts: the way of love. Without love all is vain (**verses 1-4**), and love is permanent while spiritual gifts are passing away (**verses 8-13**). **Verses 8-10** are key verses in understanding spiritual gift’s duration. Paul speaks of the revelation gifts - prophecy, knowledge (not just any kind of knowledge but supernaturally given knowledge, see 12:8) and tongues - and says this means of revelation will cease when “the perfect comes” (**verse 10**). Logically “the perfect” can only refer to a full measure of whatever “the partial” is. So Paul says “we have partial revelation with these gifts. Someday we will have full revelation and not need them.” That full revelation is the completed New Testament.

14 - **Verse 2** tells us that when no interpreter was present only God could understand a tongue-speaker, so he speaks “to God.” In **verse 5** Paul begins to develop the theme that gifts are for edifying others, not getting attention for self, and must be used for edification. **Verse 14** indicates that the mind and spirit must work together for prayer to be correct. Spoken words can have great power, as when one preaches (prophesying is speaking for God) and an unbeliever is convicted by the Word of God (**verse 24**). Paul’s injunction against women speaking in church (**verse 34**) has been often misunderstood. It cannot mean a woman can never say anything in church, lest she be unable to sing. “Silent” is the same word as in **verse 28**, where a tongue speaker without an interpreter is told to be silent. That did not mean he was to say nothing, but to keep silent regarding his tongue speaking. Similarly, **verse 34** doesn’t mean a woman can never say a word in the assembly but that she be silent regarding the questions some were interrupting the assembly with (note **verse 35**).

15 - Paul changes gear here, now dealing with problems about the resurrection. Some in Corinth were saying there was no resurrection of the dead (**verse 12**), so Paul logically applies that to Jesus (**verse 13**), showing how that would undercut all of Christianity (**verses 14-19**). Paul likes the “through one” analogy (and will use it in Romans). Here he compares Adam’s one act of sin that brought death to Christ’s one act (the cross) that brings salvation and life (**verses 21-22**). **Verse 29** is notoriously difficult. Paul’s point, in the context of talking about the resurrection, seems to be “Why are we baptized if we just die and are no more? Are we just baptized to be numbered among the dead who never rise?” His wording is difficult however. The practice of baptism for dead unbelievers who are lost has arisen from this verse, but other verses clearly teach that no one can obey the Gospel for someone else (see 2 Corinthians 5:10).

16 - **Verses 1-2** give authoritative information on how a church is to raise money. Some have tried to assert that the treasury can only be used for benevolence (its use here) but other passages supply more information about all the scriptural uses of the treasury (see Philippians 4:15). Paul closes with travel plans and the names of fellow workers. These verses put a very human face on the New Testament church, and on this grand apostle who had to concern himself not only with doctrine and revelations but also mundane matters like ship schedules and financial support (**verse 6’s** “send” means financial support).

Introduction to 2 Corinthians - After reading 1 Corinthians we marvel at a church with so many problems, and we wonder if the first letter helped. 2 Corinthians tells the “rest of the story,” letting us know that some things did improve, but in other areas the situation was worse. Key themes are the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship, the collection for the poor Jewish saints in Jerusalem, and his deep love for the Corinthians.

1 - **Verse 6** figures into Paul’s “we suffer for you because we love you” theme. Paul’s afflictions are the trials and persecutions he endures so he can bring the Gospel to people like the Corinthians. When he is comforted that is for them too – they benefit from learning of his example. **Verses 9-10** reference some terrible peril Acts doesn’t record. **Verse 12** gives the first hint that some are challenging Paul’s apostleship and conduct. **Verse 15** alerts us that some of the attack was based on Paul changing travel plans. **Verse 22** is

famous for spawning all kinds of wild ideas about the Holy Spirit. The emphasis, however, is on ownership and certainty. “Sealed” speaks to ownership, while “deposit” speaks of an escrow or guarantee of full payment in the future. The sealing may be miraculous gifts (a very public sign that one was a Christian, owned by God) or might even refer to baptism, the act by which God takes one as His own. The deposit of the Spirit probably refers to being in relationship with Deity, a relationship that will be fully developed in heaven. Being in Christ, in the Father, and in the Spirit now is only a taste (a deposit) of what is to come, but none of these relationships are mystical or spooky. We have relationship with God when we are obey His word and abide in it (note John 15:7; 1 John 3:24).

Applications from This Week’s Readings

This last section of Corinthians and the beginning of 2 Corinthians reminds us how far from what God desires the church can go. The Corinthians needed to return to the pattern, and obey the instruction of the Lord as given by this inspired apostle. Do we assume we “have it made” and fail to continually check our teaching and practice against the New Testament standard?

Week 38 - 2 Corinthians 2-6

2 - It is very difficult to work out all the “when” of Paul’s travels and writings. **Verse 1’s** “sorrowful visit” does not seem to be mentioned in Acts. But we learn here that since that visit didn’t go well he wrote 1 Corinthians (mentioned in **verse 4**) while at Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) and sent it with Titus (2 Cor 7:6-8). Anxious to hear how they received that letter he set off over land to find Titus (**verses 12-13**). Chapter 7 will tell how he found Titus and heard good news about their reception of 1 Corinthians. However, before Paul gets to that he has a long digression that lasts from 2:14-7:4. In this material Paul talks about his work as an apostle, beginning it with the image of a victory parade (**verse 14**). Paul sees the Corinthians as proof of his work, and proof that he is not a “peddler” of the Gospel (**verse 17**).

3 - We need to be careful with **verse 6**. Many try to make out that carefulness in obedience is legalism and “kills,” versus being “free and easy,” as in “I just follow the spirit of the law.” Paul has no such ideas under consideration here. The “letter” that “kills” is Moses’ Law (note **verse 7**) not careful obedience, which is never condemned in Scripture. The Law of Moses had glory (**verses 7-9**) but it could not give eternal life and is not as glorious as the Gospel which transforms us into the likeness of Christ (**verse 18**). “Freedom” in **verse 17** is not liberty to do as we please and ignore God’s Word, but freedom *from the bondage of sin* (cf. Romans 6:18-23).

4 - **Verse 2** contains an echo of charges against Paul, as does **verse 5**. Some are false apostles who are treacherous and who do preach themselves. The Corinthians are accepting them and rejecting Paul – a serious crisis! **Verse 7** is a beautiful metaphor. The Gospel is a great treasure placed in lowly containers (human preachers) to show God’s power. **Verse 10** seems to mean that Paul had physical scars that showed his willingness to suffer for Jesus’ (and the Corinthians’) sake. Again we hear a theme Paul keeps coming back to in **verses 16-18**: tough times don’t discourage us. We won’t quit, Paul says!

5 - How can Paul go on and endure so much? He keeps the goal of heaven before him (**verse 1**). The imagery here is of clothing, and wanting to be better clothed, i.e. to go to heaven. Again, Paul mentions the Spirit being a guarantee or earnest (**verse 5**). As in 1:22 this probably just means that the relationship we have with Deity *now* is a foretaste of the perfect fellowship we *will have* with the Father, Son and Spirit in that “building not made with hands.” So we must remain confident (**verse 6**) because we have faith (**verse 7**). All of life must be lived in view of eternity (**verses 9-10**), which for Paul means he isn’t like the false apostles who will do anything to please men. Paul knows it is the judgment of God that matters (**verses 11-16**). So he preaches the real Gospel, designed to reconcile sinful people with God through Christ (**verses 17-21**).

6 - As Paul continues his pleading for the Corinthians to accept him he now mentions the hardships he has endured (**verses 4-10**). Yet it is clear that some at Corinth are not interested in receiving the apostle (**verses 11-13**). There may be other applications of Paul’s admonition of **verse 14ff** but the context indicates primarily he has in mind pagan worship. We do well to remember that not all attachments with unbelievers are forbidden (see 1 Cor 7:12-16; 10:27). Paul does not want Christians forming attachments that would cause them to compromise their standards or their influence. Again, in this context, he is speaking of going to pagan idol worship.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Two keys emerge from reading 2 Corinthians. First, Paul has an incredible love for his brethren. He will sacrifice almost anything and put up with much hardship to help them know the Lord. Do I care for my brethren like that? Secondly, Paul is determined to do what is right and never quit doing it, no matter what happens to him. Do I let others or difficult circumstances discourage me? Paul says never, ever, give up!

Week 39 - 2 Corinthians 7-11

7 - After much pleading Paul rejoins the material he began in 2:13 when he spoke of sending Titus to them. **Verse 4** says he found Titus and Titus told him the brethren had received 1 Corinthians very well, even repenting! Paul is overjoyed (**verses 6-7**)! Real repentance may require making one feel bad but godly sorrow is a good thing because it brings about the repentance that saves souls (**verses 9-10**).

8 - Having been refreshed to hear such good news Paul now talks about another area of concern: the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. The Macedonian brethren to the north were giving in an extremely generous way (**verses 2-4**), because they first gave themselves (**verse 5**). Corinth had started this collection vigorously and with great intentions but they hadn't persevered and continued like they should (**verses 6, 10-15**). Note the way Paul motivates better giving: by appealing to the example of Jesus Christ (**verse 9**). Paul is very concerned that they complete their giving as it is close to time to take the contribution on to Jerusalem. He is sending a famous brother (maybe Luke or Barnabas) who will accompany their gift (**verse 18**). Paul himself is doing everything necessary to make certain there is no possibility of anyone even *thinking* there has been "monkey business" with this important contribution (**verse 21**). Integrity was important to Paul!

9 - The theme of giving continues in this chapter, as Paul urges with the Corinthians to do as they promised so they won't be embarrassed (**verse 4**). Some of the New Testament's most important teachings about giving are here. Make certain you get the principles of **verses 6-7**. Don't be misled by the "health and wealth" gospel that preaches giving just to get. This is certainly not what Paul has in mind (**verse 6**). God does bless us materially but that is so we can share and help others (note **verse 11**), not hoard up blessings for self and live in luxury. Paul wants the Corinthians to trust that God will take care of them and give freely and liberally. Some have tried to make **verse 13** mean the collection was for Christians *and* non-Christians but this cannot be. In **verse 14** Paul says the recipients are praying for the Corinthians. Can non-Christians pray? Further, elsewhere Paul specifically says that Christians will receive these funds (see Romans 15:26). Did Paul lie?

10 - You will note quite a change of tone in this chapter. After hearing from Titus (7:4) Paul seems quite cordial and happy. His admonition about giving in chapters 8 and 9 is light and gentle. Suddenly, we read Paul roaring at the brethren, and his tone is intensely personal. What happened? We are not sure but perhaps more news from Corinth arrived. Clearly some were outright rejecting Paul and his apostleship (note **verses 2b, 7, 10**). For Paul, everything now seems to be at risk again. So Paul makes a spirited attack on his enemies, sometimes even saying all of this is against his better judgment. The crisis is severe and Paul does not mince words about the troubles there. His critics boost themselves by commending each other and comparing themselves to each other but such is foolish and ungodly (**verses 12-18**).

11 - There may not be a chapter like this one anywhere in the New Testament! Paul is almost beside himself with concern about the Corinthian situation. False apostles are there, teaching error and telling the Corinthians Paul isn't really an apostle (**verse 3-5**)! To respond to this Paul uses a considerable dose of sarcasm and some tough talk. Yes, it was true that he didn't take wages from Corinth when he was there (**verse 7**) but how could that be construed to mean he was a fraud? He did that to help them (**verse 9**). The Corinthians seemed captivated by the boasting of the false apostles, but Paul (reluctantly) lists his own accomplishments (**verses 16-33**) and it is quite a list. Paul is the genuine article, a real apostle of Christ!

Applications from This Week's Readings

Although giving is a crucial part of Christianity we may give little attention to it. Our reading this week places giving front and center, asking us hard questions like "Have I given myself first?" "Do I give purposefully?" and "Am I giving sacrificially and joyfully?" Perhaps the most important question to ask is "Do I see giving as participating in God's work, something that I would beg to do?" The Macedonians are our example in giving, but too often we follow the haphazard ways of Corinth. Pray and consider your giving habits this week.

Week 40 - 2 Corinthians 12-13; James 1-3

12-13 - In 11:30 Paul mentions weakness. Here he furthers that line of thought as he talks about revelations from God. Did the false apostles claim some grand revelation? Well, Paul had seen some pretty spectacular visions (**verses 1-6**). **Verse 7** makes it clear the "man" Paul knows (**verse 2**) is indeed Paul. Regrettably there is so much speculation about Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (**verse 7**) that often Paul's point is badly missed. We need to be content admitting the text doesn't say what the thorn was, and therefore, we cannot and do not know what it was. Therefore, something else must be more important to focus on. Paul's point in **verse 10** is exactly where we need to give our attention instead of vain speculation about what we cannot know! Paul says he needs to be dependent upon Christ and that anything that keeps him dependent upon Jesus is welcome. What a lesson! Paul concludes the chapter warning that he is coming (**verse 14**)

and that there need to be some changes there or his coming will be sorrowful for all involved (**13:1**). The Corinthians may think they have some charges for Paul to answer, but he says it is time for *them* to do some soul searching to see if they are really disciples or if they have been drawn off course (**verse 5**). **Verse 10** may be the summary verse of the entire epistle: make some changes *now!*

Introduction to James - This epistle is often called the “Proverbs of the New Testament.” It is full of practical teaching, often composed with terms and phrases that Jesus Himself used. There are several James mentioned in the New Testament, but **1:1** probably references the brother of the Lord (1 Cor 15:7; Acts 1:14; 15:13-21; 21:18). He wrote to Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine.

1 - Verses 9-11 show reversal of common thinking. We think of the poor as lowly and the wealthy as exalted, but James turns that around. The rich man in **verse 10** is probably not a Christian. He thinks he has so much, but he will fade away (**verse 11**). Get the contrast from **verses 16-17** to **verse 13**: God doesn’t tempt but instead blesses. **Verses 19-27** put emphasis on listening to God’s Word and then *doing it*.

2 - Verse 5 sets up the contrast between the way the recipients were judging and how God judges. The Lord has always had an interest in the poor (Proverbs 19:17). It is just so that often the poor can humble themselves and trust God easier than the rich can. Too often the rich attack Christianity and its values (**verses 6-7**). Note how much of these verses come directly from Luke 6:20ff. **Verse 13** is puzzling. The readers need to show mercy to the poor, and should know that those who have been merciful will receive mercy instead of judgement on the Last Day.

3 - The implication of **verse 6’s** “set on fire by hell” is that the devil uses the tongue to do evil. James ends the paragraph on wisdom (**verses 13-18**) with a proverb about sowing in peace. This makes the contrast to 1:20. Human anger doesn’t produce righteousness but peace making will. This sounds a great deal like Jesus in Matthew 5:9.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Think about our world’s attitude toward riches and the wealthy. Contrast that with what we have read in James. What is *your* attitude toward riches? What can you do to move your attitude away from our culture’s thinking and toward James’ view?

Week 41 - James 4-5; 1 Peter 1-3

4 - Verse 2 speaks figuratively of brethren who are quarreling so much it is like they want to kill each other (see Matt 5:21-22). **Verse 5** is very difficult to translate and understand. It may mean God opposes arguing and warring and has given us His Spirit (who reveals the Word) to oppose such activity, or that God longs for His people to express love instead of enmity. **Verse 12** reminds us that only God has the right to judge.

5 - Verses 1-2 remind us of an Old Testament prophet attacking the rich who enjoy God’s blessings but have forgotten Him. Treasure will not save in the day of judgment (**verse 3**). What do we make of **verses 8-9** that sound as if the return of Christ is very soon? We should remember that for the Christian the Lord is as close as our own death. Further, we are to live as if we believe the Lord might come even today. These verses teach that urgency in day to day living. Why should the elders anoint the sick with oil (**verse 14**)? This famous verse puzzles us, but the explanation may be as simple as oil being used as medicine (see Luke 10:34). Note the “Lord will raise him up” not the oil, so we do well not to put too much emphasis on the oil! **Verse 20** should not be taken as a way to “merit” forgiveness but tells us God forgives the one who repents.

Introduction to 1 Peter - Peter’s epistle helps Christians, Jewish and Gentile, who were suffering for their faith. Written in the early 60’s, perhaps from Rome (see 5:13), the book has a warm and pastoral tone as it encourages Christians to stand fast in a hostile environment.

1 - The churches Peter addresses (**verse 1**) are mostly in the provinces in the northern part of Turkey. Paul evangelized southern Turkey. Peter appears to have gone north. In **verse 5** we see the activity of God (protects) and Christians (through faith, continued belief) coming together to assure salvation. **Verse 13** begins the response to God’s work by urging us to think and reason with our minds. “Gird up your mind” would be like our expression “roll up your sleeves.” Note the indestructible nature of God’s word (**verses 23-25**). What a promise!

2 - Verse 2’s reference to the Word as the agent of growth is impressive when we realize there are Gentiles in Peter’s audience. These had not grown up with the Old Testament Scriptures but were now admonished to study them. Peter says the Bible counts! **Verses 4-8** use stone imagery to describe our relationship to Jesus. This metaphor is common in Scripture (see Isaiah 8:14; 28:16; 51:1, Psalm 118:22; Daniel 2:34). The “cornerstone” is the most important stone in a building. **Verse 16** reminds us we are free to choose to serve God. That freedom is expressed, paradoxically, in service, not in selfishness. How do we honor “all men” (**verse 17**)? Peter means for us to recognize that God made every person and thus every person has value and significance. The chapter closes by appealing to the example of Christ who suffered and served. Read **verses 23-25** carefully as they ring with echoes of Isaiah 53.

3 - "Likewise" in **verse 1** ties to 2:13, where Peter begins direct admonition about various roles in life. **Verse 6** urges women to willingly show their husbands they accept their leadership. **Verse 7** challenges men to treat their wives right. Peter ends the section on suffering for righteousness sake (**verses 13-17**) with one of the most puzzling verses in the NT. What is **verse 19** talking about? "The spirits in prison" could be the disobedient of Noah's day but seeing them as disobedient angels better fits the use of the term "spirits" throughout the Bible. It seems that Peter is saying that after the cross Jesus made a proclamation of victory and condemnation to some who previously had rejected God. Even if we don't understand all the specifics the point is plain: Jesus subjected and triumphed over a difficult "audience" and thus Christians can count on Him to help them win victory, and even to triumph over their foes, as they are persecuted.

Applications from This Week's Readings

1 Peter 1:10-12 tells us that prophets and angels longed to know what we know: how God would reconcile sinners through the Christ. They didn't understand how the Messiah could suffer and be glorified. We do. We are "insiders" while prophets and angels were "outsiders!" The completed Word of God gives us such insight into who God is and how He operates and works. Be thankful for it!

Week 42 - 1 Peter 4-5; 2 Peter 1-3

4 - Verse 1 connects to 3:18. What are we to do with this information about Christ's suffering? We arm ourselves with the same attitude He had and we die to sin. The thought here is strikingly similar to Romans 6:7. The thought is that we are done with sin. **Verse 6** speaks of preaching to the "dead," which probably references people who are spiritually dead. **Verse 7's** "end of all things is at hand" means the second coming is to be viewed as always impending (see Luke 17:26-27). Therefore we need to control our minds, a common refrain in 1 Peter (see 1:13). **Verse 12** revisits the key theme of suffering.

5 - What can Christians look to for support in times of trial? Peter discusses elders and their responsibilities here (**verses 1-4**), as well as humble mutual support for each other (**verse 5**). The letter ends by naming Silas (Silvanus, **verse 12**) as the messenger (not the secretary) for Peter who is carrying the epistle. **Verse 13** intrigues us. Was Peter really in Babylon or somewhere else? Because there is some evidence Peter was in Rome many think this is a reference to that city. Mark in **verse 13** is John Mark, and is probably Peter's son in the faith.

Introduction to 2 Peter - 2 Peter is a special kind of letter (3:1), called a testament. This kind of literature was common in NT times. Testaments have two kinds of content. They contain admonitions the author wishes to give before dying, and then have some sort of revelation of the future. 2 Peter fits the pattern, with ethical instruction (1:3-11), and then in 2:1-3a; 3:1-4 Peter predicts the future: false teachers will arise. 1:12-15 has typical testament kind of language. Reading this as Peter's "last words" before death makes it powerful and moving. He is deeply concerned about false teachers and so puts inspired pen to paper one last time.

1 - Verse 4 tells of partaking of the divine nature. This may mean we become one with God by being united in purpose, action, sharing in His holiness, etc. **Verse 10** contains a tremendous promise to spur our spiritual growth. There are hints of troubles in **verse 16**. In **verse 19** Peter cites the Old Testament record as proof of what is right and true about Jesus. "Morning star" is a reference to Jesus (see Num. 24:17, which was taken as messianic in NT times, also Luke 1:17; Rev. 22:16). **Verse 20** follows this by teaching prophecy doesn't originate with the prophet. Since it is a message from God it cannot be molded or interpreted as one desires.

2 - The trouble with false teachers is clearly detailed here. **Verses 4-9** show that God can judge evildoers, having even judged angels (**verse 4**). We do not know anything about these erring angels so speculation is vain (some try to tie this to Genesis 6 but such is mistaken). Angels appear again in **verse 11**, where Peter says even angelic beings don't try some of the things these false teachers are so confident in. Balaam is the consummate example of a "prophet for hire" and is used that way repeatedly in the NT (**verse 15**). Read his story in Numbers 22.

3 - Verse 4 finds false teachers reasoning that because Jesus hasn't come yet He isn't coming at all! Peter responds by reminding his readers that God has destroyed the world before (**verses 6-7**) and will do so again (**verses 7-10**). How can we hasten the Lord's coming (**verse 12**)? In this context Peter must mean the preaching that causes repentance! Prayer, of course, would also play a part. The "new heavens and earth" (**verse 13**) is an expression from Isaiah 65:17-25 (see Rev. 21:1,8,27). It is not meant to be a source of speculation but consolation and motivation to right living (**verses 11-12, 14**)! Note that Paul's works were considered Scripture in NT times (**verses 15-16**).

Applications from This Week's Readings

Focus carefully on 2 Peter 3:11. The Lord will come again. Are you living in light of that truth or just holding it as an intellectual doctrine that does not transform you? Pray that you may more clearly understand the priorities that the eventual end of this world dictates.

Introduction to John - John's gospel is absolutely unique. It begins with a stunning prologue, omits much of the Galilean ministry material found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and never mentions the church or Lord's Supper. It does have Nicodemus, the Samaritan women, six miracles and tremendous teaching not found in the other Gospels. John's work is carefully crafted to bring us to one conclusion: Jesus is God's Son (John 20:30-31). Hence, his main topic is Jesus as the Messiah.

1 - Where to begin talking of Jesus? How about at the beginning? So John affirms Jesus' deity and power, even in creation (**verses 1-4**). The prologue turns dark when it says people didn't receive Jesus (**verse 5**) or the witness the Baptist bore to Him (**verses 6-11**). The whole question of the book is framed in **verse 12**: will we, the readers, believe? **Verse 14** picks up the key Bible theme of God's glory filling the Tabernacle as it says Jesus literally "became flesh and tented among us." Jesus' mission was to "explain" or "make the Father known" to us (**verse 18**). After this dazzling beginning, John (who never names himself in his gospel) presents the testimony of John the Baptist (**verses 19-36**). John says his baptism is part of all of his work: to prepare for the coming of the king (**verses 26-27**). The dawn of the Messianic Age was upon them. The way to get ready was to repent, and baptism was a sign of that repentance. **Verse 29** clearly picks up the imagery of Isaiah 53 and applies it to Jesus. We may wonder how John can say he didn't know Jesus (**verse 33**) but he means *as the Messiah*. The sign of the dove certified Jesus for John. We don't know what Jesus saw Nathaniel doing (**verse 48**) but Nathaniel is brought to faith.

2 - Many questions about the miracle at Cana (**verses 1-11**) detract from its purpose. This is not the place to argue social drinking (note that unfermented grape juice was considered a real delicacy in the NT world), or why Mary was so sure Jesus would do this miracle. The point is found in **verse 11**: it is a sign. **Verse 4's** "woman" sounds harsh but the term is not impolite in the original (see 19:26). **Verse 13** records Jesus going to the Passover. John has three of these feasts (cf. 6:4; 11:55). Jesus finds banking and business going on in the Temple, obstructing the ability of worshipers to prayer. Note his anger as He drives them out (**verses 15-16**). The Jews make a crass literal application of Jesus' words in **verse 20**, missing His point entirely. We must be careful when we listen to Jesus so we can truly hear what He says.

3 - Jesus' interview with Nicodemus is famous (**verses 1-15**). Nicodemus sort of "gets it" about Jesus (**verse 2**) but when Jesus challenges him to the radical change necessary to be in the kingdom of God, a change that can only be described as a "new birth" (**verse 5**) he gets lost. Is that because as a Jew he was quite sure he was already in the kingdom? **Verse 5** describes not two baptisms, but one: a "water-Spirit" birth. Jesus is speaking of water baptism. **Verse 8** is a mini-parable: just because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there. Jesus brings us the information about the kingdom and entrance into it that no one else can because He is from heaven (**verse 13**). "Lifted up" is a key term in John (**verse 14**; see also 8:28; 12:32, 34). The language changes in **verse 16** indicating that this is probably John's comments (despite the red ink in most Bibles). Note the past tenses and the reference to "God" instead of "My Father." Note the present reality of judgment in **verse 18**. Judgement and eternal life or death aren't something strictly future for John. **Verse 31** refers to Jesus ("from above") and John ("from the earth"). **Verse 33** has "seal" in some translations. It means the one who accepts John's testimony agrees with God's testimony.

4 - The story of the woman at the well is just a textbook study in how to patiently bring people along to faith. A key in the story is Jesus' emphasis on the value of both sowing and reaping (**verses 36-38**). The person who plants the seed is one with the person reaping in God's eyes. Watch the emphasis on Jesus as the giver of life in **verses 50, 51 and 53**. Three times we are told the boy was "lives" instead of "was healed." This sets up Jesus' teaching on being able to give life in chapter 5 (note **verse 26**).

5 - Textual questions about verse 4 abound, as some high quality manuscripts and reliable modern translations do not contain this verse (e.g. *ESV, CSB*). Verse 11 amazes. Instead of asking about the healing they are totally focused on the violation of their own rules about the Sabbath! Verse 14 does not mean the man was paralyzed due to sin. It means being lost is worse than being a cripple! Jesus' explanation for working on the Sabbath is that God works on the Sabbath (holding all things together, for example) and so He does what His Father does (verse 17). He develops this unity of purpose and work through to the end of the chapter.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Trace out the rejection of the Jews in chapter five. Why won't they believe? How do those barriers prevent faith today? Are you with the Pharisees or do you truly believe in Jesus?

5 - Verse 4 gives us the time frame: it is about one year to Jesus death. Jesus' sign has some unintended results (**verse 15**), leading to Jesus' withdrawal (**verses 16-25**). Notice that signs didn't always

work (**verse 26**). We are foolish to believe that the power to do miracles would result in more conversions today. Jesus challenges His audience to see that Moses didn't feed them, God did and that manna only fed their bodies not their spiritual needs as only He could (**verses 32-33**). How does the Father draw? See **verse 45**: "all be taught." What does Jesus mean by "eating His flesh and drinking His blood" (**verses 51, 53-56**)? Note the exact parallelism in "eat/drink and have eternal life" in **verse 54** and **verses 35, 40 and 47**. Those verses say "believe and have eternal life." Eating and drinking are just figures of speech for believing in Jesus. They don't reference the Lord's Supper. They refer to believing completely and fully on the Lord. That is what brings *life*. How do we come to believe in Jesus? **Verse 63 and 68** tell us: through the Words of *life*.

6 - Verse 2's feast means it is fall. Many translations have the word "yet" in the margin of **verse 8** ("I am not yet going") to explain why Jesus does go to the feast in **verse 10**. **Verse 13** contains the key idea in this section of John: people not believing in Jesus. **Verse 23** connects back to the events of 5:1-16 and the charge of breaking Sabbath. **Verse 31** shows how signs ought to work. **Verses 37-39** are centered in a water ritual that was done on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles to commemorate God giving Israel water in the wilderness. From Jesus comes living water, which becomes a blessing even for others (**verse 38**) around the disciple who believes. **Verse 42** demonstrates John's command of irony.

7 - The dominant question here is the authenticity of 7:53-8:11. Many scholars argue against it, and it is true that it is not in some very high quality manuscripts. Yet we wonder how such a story could float around for so long and then worm its way into the Bible! There are some evidences for its authenticity and one early writer speaks of its removal for fear of encouraging adultery. We believe it to be part of Scripture. **Verse 12** ties again to the Feast of Tabernacles as lights were used in its celebration. Jesus does not just bear witness to Himself (**verse 14**) but incorporates the testimony of the Father through the signs He does (**verse 18**). **Verse 33** is about spiritual bondage, not political liberty. Jesus' answer to the question of **verse 53** is "I don't make myself out to be anything. It is the Father who honors Me!" (**verse 54**). **Verse 58** is a strong claim to deity.

8 - Verse 5 connects to 8:12. We do not know why Jesus anointed the man's eyes with mud (**verse 6**). Again John confronts us with the evidence of signs (note **verses 16, 33**).

9 - This chapter continues the controversy and discussion of chapter 9 (note especially **verse 21**). Jesus is the Good Shepherd in contrast to the wicked Jewish leadership accusing Him. **Verse 7** makes it clear Jesus is *the way*, the only way to gain access to God. Read Ezekiel 36:10-15; 23-24 in connection with **verses 11-14**. **Verse 16** speaks of the Gentiles. The Feast of Dedication (**verse 22**) celebrates the cleansing of the Temple by the Maccabees in 164 BC. It would be cold so Jesus seeks the shelter of the porches (**verse 23**). **Verse 27** does not prove we hear the literal voice of Jesus today guiding us. "Sheep" is not literal in the verse, why should "voice" be? Further, the Jews *heard* His voice directly. It is not about hearing but responding and obeying! Jesus' argument from Psalm 82:6 in **verse 34** is difficult. The key is to see the charge: "you make yourself God" (**verse 33b**). Jesus replies (again) that He doesn't make Himself anything, the Father does. Note "to whom the word of God came" (**verse 35**). This is Israel at Sinai. The rabbis of Jesus' day understood the 82nd Psalm to mean Israel was given life (power over death) through the Law at Sinai. *Israel was believed to have become deathless (beyond death's power) and holy by receiving the Law.* If they obeyed its precepts they would live. Israel was called "god" because they were beyond death through Law. Understanding this we can see how Psalm 82 is a perfect defense against the charge that Jesus is making Himself equal with God. Jesus argues if God consecrated Israel and made them holy and deathless so that they may be called "god" then the One whom God consecrated and sent to earth can be called "God." In **verse 40** Jesus leaves Jerusalem. He will not return until the final Passover.

Applications from This Week's Readings

John shows stubborn resistance to Jesus all through these chapters. Yet each of us must decide: do I believe in Jesus? Will I "eat His flesh and drink blood," i.e. fully believe in Him or will I turn away from Him? Examine your faith in Christ. How robust is it? What is it based on? How can you strengthen it?

Week 45 - John 11-15

10 - Verses 9-10 are a puzzling answer to the disciples' objection. They seem to relate to the idea of Jesus having a fixed time ("the day") to do His work. Jesus may even mean that as He walks in the light (doing God's will) He won't stumble but the Jews that attack Him are destined to fumble around in darkness. Again John shows the disciples responding stupidly as they again don't grasp Jesus' full meaning (**verse 12**). **Verse 37** shows Jesus' signs working at least partially. John shows eye-witness knowledge in **verse 49**, as Caiphas was the high priest then (from AD 18-36). The chapter ends with things at a fever pitch (**verses 55-57**). Something dramatic is about to happen!

11 - Don't confuse this anointing story (**verses 1-8**) with Luke 7's story. They are not the same. In **verse 7** Jesus' statement may infer that Mary knew Jesus would die and had planned to use this ointment

for His burial. Deciding that the enemies of Jesus might prevent her from caring for His body she decided it was now or never, and did this great act of kindness. **Verse 10** records incredible unbelief. **Verses 12-19** record the Triumphal Entry. This is Sunday of Jesus' last week. What Jesus does is based on Zechariah 9 and is His most obvious and clear claim to be the Messiah. He is, however, not the Messiah they expect. He doesn't ride a war horse but a donkey. He is the King of Peace. Don't miss **verse 23**. The hour has come! **Verses 31-32** tell us four things happen when Jesus dies. He judges the world (condemning sin), casts out the devil (defeating Satan), is exalted ("lifted up"), and draws all men to Himself. How did God blind them (**verse 40**)? By sending the Light of the world that gave them the chance to believe and live! God does not overrule free will.

12 - Verse 2 mentions Judas to show that Jesus washed even the betrayer's feet. The reference to the devil simply means Judas was tempted to do wrong. He is responsible for his treachery. Note Jesus' certainty in the midst of such a crisis (**verse 3**). Sadly, some have turned Jesus' acted-out teaching into religious ritual, but the rest of the NT records no such foot-washing ordinances. The lesson is to *serve others' real needs*, not wash the feet of people who don't even need such a washing today! **Verse 18's** quotation from Psalms is about Ahithophel, David's trusted counselor who helped Absalom in his rebellion. **Verse 19** underlines John's purpose in writing this gospel. **Verse 23** speaks of John. He is the "beloved disciple."

13 - Verse 2 is terribly rendered in the KJV and NKJV, causing many to think everyone will have their own mansion in heaven. Yet this is not what Jesus says by any means. The ESV has "in my Father's house are *many rooms*." Jesus makes it possible for us to live *with* God, not up the street from Him! The sign/belief theme is found in **verse 11**. Other verses modify and help our understanding of prayer in **verses 13-14**. Jesus will speak further of this in chapter 15. Wanting to do God's will modifies what we will ask for (see 15:7). Look at the relationship language of **verses 23-24**! Note that **verse 26** is not a promise to you and I but the apostles. This is often misused today.

14 - Note how the branches are disciples (**verse 5**), not churches in a denominational structure. That also means that fruit here is not converting people (that would be making more branches) but the results of the Christian life in a disciple. All of this material is set against the backdrop of Jesus saying the apostles are His friends (**verse 15**). They are elevated beyond slave status to "friends of God," an electrifying thought. Jesus again promises the Holy Spirit *to the apostles* in **verse 26**.

Applications from This Week's Readings

15:7 is one of the most important texts on prayer in all of Scripture. Do you let your relationship with Jesus and the Word of God shape your prayer requests?

Week 46 - John 16-20

15 - Verse 4 reinforces the book's purpose to create faith. **Verse 5** does not contradict 13:36 and 14:5 because the emphasis here is on the present. Jesus says "You are not asking now." **Verses 9-11** reveal much of the Spirit's work. He "convicts" people of sin, of righteousness (the right way to live), and of judgment to come. This work is done, of course, through the Word the Spirit reveals. Is there any other way a person can learn what is wrong, what is right, or what the standard of judgment will be? **Verses 16-22** reveal the confusion and uncertainty still in the disciples' minds. **Verse 24** shows how we can pray in Christ's name, i.e. by His authority and based on what He has accomplished for us. Remember, verses appearing to give "carte blanche" to ask for anything in prayer must be understood in concert with other verses like John 15:7.

16 - In **verses 1-5** Jesus prays for Himself. He gave up His glory to come here and now prays that it be restored. **Verse 3** says "only true God" but certainly doesn't mean Jesus is deity! Once again, we must not camp on one isolated scripture! Jesus is simply emphasizing their relationship in redemption and setting monotheism over against the pagan idea of polytheism so prevalent in the NT world (see 1 Thess. 1:9). In **verses 6-19** Jesus prays for His disciples. **Verse 6** mentions the "name" of God, which is God's character and who He is. Jesus is praying God will keep His disciples firm and faithful. In **verses 20-26** Jesus prays for us! **Verse 22** references glory given to us. In John glory commonly refers to the manifestation of God's character or person, especially in this prayer. Jesus has given us that glory by explaining God to us.

17 - As we would expect, John's account of the Crucifixion contains material not in the other Gospels. The Romans play a much greater role, and Gethsemane is not mentioned. New material includes the trial with Annas, answer to the High Priest and slap, conversation with Pilate, Jesus carrying the cross, John and Jesus' mother and the cry from the cross. Please note: John and the other accounts can all be harmonized but such is beyond the scope of this material. **Verse 6** reveals Jesus' powerful personality. He has as-tounded them before (7:45-46) and here they are awed by His courage and authority. **Verse 13** shows how many Jews resented Pilate's predecessor deposing Annas in 15 AD. Some still regarded him as the true High Priest. **Verse 36** is a crucial statement about the Kingdom.

18 - Pilate's problem is he is a coward (see **verses 8, 12**). **Verse 14's** time frame is helpful. "Preparation" here refers to preparing the Sabbath (see Mark 15:42). John means this was the "Passover week's day

of preparation” which would be Friday. Pilate must have grinned at the admission he wrung out of the Jews (**verse 15**). They were willing to do or say anything to accomplish their dark ends. **Verses 26-27** are tender moments. It must have been terribly hard on Jesus to die in front of His mother. The “disciple Jesus loved” is John, the writer of this Gospel. **Verse 28** is probably citing Psalm 69:21. There is much discussion about what medical phenomenon accounts for **verse 34** but John’s purpose is much simpler: He just wants the reader to know Jesus is actually dead.

19 - Why doesn’t Mary know Jesus in **verse 14**? Perhaps her tears and the unexpectedness of seeing Jesus account for her slowness to recognize Him. **Verse 17’s** “don’t cling” is difficult to translate. Many opinions are ventured as to what Jesus meant. Probably best is the idea of “Don’t cling to me as if I’m going to disappear, I am real. Stop clinging to me and go share this good news.” **Verse 22** is a kind of symbolic action or acted out parable of what they would receive in Acts 2. **Verse 23** references the power that comes with preaching the Gospel. Sins are forgiven by preaching of the Gospel.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Chapter 20 shows how everything changes because Jesus is risen. How much thought do you give to the Resurrection? Have you considered where we would be if He had not risen? Think about it! What is the impact on you personally that Jesus arose? Read Paul’s sermon in Acts 17:22-31 and 1 Corinthians 15 if you need more to think about in this connection.

Week 47 - John 21; 1 John 1-4

20 - Verse 3 shows how the apostles were not sure what the resurrection meant. They went to Galilee to wait for Jesus (Mark 14:28) and while waiting, went back to work. Characteristically John has the insight while Peter is quick to do (**verse 7**). In **verses 15-19** there is the famous “feed my sheep” conversation. Much is made of the differing terms for “love” in this text but I do not believe there is a “deeper” meaning to be discerned by defining “phileo” and “agape.” Both verbs are used interchangeably in John (for the love of the Father for the Son, for example, in 3:35 and 5:20). The real key here is that Peter denied three times and now affirms three times. He is affirmed by Jesus and commissioned anew. **Verses 23-25** conclude John by making it clear John is the beloved disciple and he wrote this gospel.

Introduction to 1 John - Reading John’s epistles after reading his gospel is a delight because these letters are so tightly linked to the truths we just read. The language, style and emphasis are all the same. While John’s audience knows the truth about Jesus, they are under attack by false teachers (see 4:1; 2:18, 2:29-3:10). Some of the problems are theological, with a denial that Jesus came in the flesh (4:2; 2 John 7; 2:22). Other problems center on taking sin lightly, teaching that it is of no real concern (2:1). This may mean that we are encountering Gnosticism’s ugly teachings. Gnosticism was a big melting pot of philosophies and ideas, both Greek, pagan and even Jewish. It was not systematized but its many variants generally held two main tenets: matter was bad, and knowledge was supreme. So, if matter is bad how could God put on a material body? How important is sin if it is just something we do in our physical body anyway? John’s answers help every disciple better know and follow Jesus.

1 - Verse 1 refers to Jesus Christ. **Verse 3** features a wonderfully illustrative use of “fellowship.” Remember, in the NT “fellowship” is sharing in spiritual benefits (1 Cor. 9:23; 2 Cor. 13:13), and that is how John uses it here. **Verses 5-10** make it clear that God and sin are mutually exclusive. This means sin matters to disciples and must be taken seriously!

2 - John does not want any to consider sin “normal” or “natural” (**verse 1**). The Christian life opposes sin (see 3:8). The commandments John writes are not new (**verses 7-8**), because loving God and neighbor was part of the Old Law (Deut. 6:5). They are new in the Kingdom however. **Verses 12-14** contain words of encouragement, though why there is repetition and who precisely is meant here is difficult. **Verse 18** reminds Christians that it is always the “last hour” because Jesus could come at any time. John then speaks of “antichrists.” Here this isn’t some apocalyptic, end of the world figure, but simply those who teach error about Jesus (**verses 22-23**). Sometimes John uses the term without even “the” in front of it. The anointing of **verse 20** seems to refer to Holy Spirit given gifts, like the gift of knowledge. They had those gifts and needed to use them (see also **verses 26-28**).

3 - This chapter emphasizes sin’s incompatibility with Christianity and loving our brethren. **Verses 6 and 9** can confuse as some translations make it sound as if Christians don’t sin. However, both verses refer to the practice of sin, or remaining in sin. John has already said we can sin (1:7-8, 10; 2:1) so knows that Christians do sin. But Christians won’t remain in sin. The ESV has “no one born of God makes a practice of sinning” for **verse 9**. John then gets very practical with the concept of loving others (**verses 11-18**), including frank discussion of providing for others’ needs (**verses 17-18**). Note the tie in relationship (“abides”) and obedience in **verse 24**.

4 - Verse 2 isn’t giving the only test, but the first or beginning test. Just ask if they believe Jesus came in the flesh. Notice here that just because someone says they are led by God doesn’t make it so! Testing

such “messengers” is not just a good idea but required. John now revisits the theme of loving others, adding the motivation of God’s love for us (**verse 7**). Love isn’t something God just does, but is an integral part of His character (**verse 8**). the train of thought from v. 16 is finished. God is love, the person who lives in love remains in God, and God in him, in this mutual indwelling love is completed and is not afraid. **Verse 18** completes the thought of **verse 16**. We abide in God, and thus our fear dies. Sin leads to fear, but love to confidence. John is probably referencing here fear of final punishment.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Over and over, John makes practical our love for God. God is invisible making our relationship with Him hard to test, but the relationship we have with our brethren is visible and immediate. Nearly everyone claims to love God. Do you? Then what have you done for your brethren that shows it?

Week 48 - 1 John 5; 2 John; 3 John; Rev 1-2

1 John 5 - What does verse 6’s “water and blood” reference? Probably Jesus’ entire ministry, from His baptism to His death. The meaning here is that the true identity of Jesus can only be seen by looking at His whole life. Verse 8 seems to reference the Spirit (speaking through the Word), baptism, and the Lord’s Supper as three witnesses to Jesus’ authenticity. Verse 10 speaks of believing (internalizing) the witness of God. As we consider verse 14 alongside other passages on the matter of prayer, let us focus on “asking according to His will.” Verses 16-17 are famous, but simply mean that a brother who won’t ask for forgiveness (the sin that will lead to death) can’t be forgiven by someone else’s prayers. Salvation includes his own repentance for his own sins and asking God for forgiveness! The NKJV for verse 18 has “does not sin” but the ESV says “does not keep on sinning.”

Introduction to 2 and 3rd John - These two “postcard” epistles contain both doctrine and practical admonitions. 2 John seems to be addressed to a community while 3 John is clearly addressed to an individual. The purpose of both letters is to urge the disciples to continue in love toward real brethren, but turn away from false teachers.

1 John - Verse 1’s “elect lady” might be a certain woman John knew, or could be a figure for the church. The letter does seem to be addressed to a group with its many plural nouns. **Verse 7** shows the purpose of the epistle. Not “confessing Jesus coming in the flesh” would cover all the different errors taught about Jesus’ incarnation. **Verses 10-11** doesn’t mean you cannot say “hello” to a false teacher but you can’t give him a greeting, or show him hospitality, that would imply an official endorsement of him and his teaching. He is to be given no chance to propagate his evil doctrine.

2 John - Verse 6 means Gaius is supplying these brothers with their physical needs. In **verses 9-10** we see that living in the time of the apostles didn’t solve every problem. Apparently John wrote something and Diotrephes suppressed it! Instead of imitating Diotrephes be like Demetrius (**verse 12**).

Introduction to Revelation - How we approach Revelation bears much thought. Error has been taught because people arrived in Revelation with preconceived notions and ideas. However, if we look at 1:1 and 1:3 we see John telling us the events in this book will happen soon (note also 3:11; 16:15; 22:7; 22:12; 22:20). Further, the book was written to encourage NT Christian under the heavy duress of persecution. If we can keep our eye on these two facts, the book’s stated time frame and purpose, we will not go far astray, and speculative ideas will be easily dismissed. We will say more about understanding the signs and symbols of this grand book when we arrive at chapter 4.

1 - Verse 7 sets forth the theme of Revelation from the start. Jesus is coming to judge evildoers. Note that not every “coming” of the Lord is literal, but that this can be a figure of speech referring to a coming in judgment (see Isaiah 19:1 for an example of this kind of language). Beginning **verse 13** we are treated to an awesome sight, as John sees Jesus. We should resist trying to find some symbolic meaning in these colors and clothes. Instead of dissecting it let the picture of power and majesty stand intact and let it do its work: inspire and thrill and awe us. This is Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! He rules and reigns!

2 - The Nicolaitans of **verse 6** are a group that taught error but we do not know much about them. **Verse 14** reminds us of Balaam (see Numbers 22-25). Clearly someone is teaching that loose sexual standards are okay. **Verse 17’s** speaks of manna, a white stone, and a new name. What these mean specifically eludes us, but it is clear this is a blessing to he who overcomes. Jezebel, the wicked wife of Ahab, is named in **verse 20**, as again troubles with sexual immorality are plaguing the church. How does Jesus give the “morning star” (**verse 28**)? Since Jesus *is* the morning star (22:16) this probably refers to being in relationship with Him.

Applications from This Week’s Readings

All of the churches we have read about this week had good qualities and also problems. What can we learn from this as we look at our own local congregation? What would Jesus say to your local church if He

were writing to it? Try to see both positives and areas that might need improvement. Pray you will be a help to church to grow in a positive way and eliminate troubles and problems.

Week 49 - Revelation 3-7

3 - Verse 7 ties Jesus to the Messianic promises made to David (see 2 Sam 7, cf. Isaiah 22:22). One of the chief troubles the NT church faced was Jewish persecution. **Verse 9** brings that to the forefront, mentioning how they are not really the Israel of God. Notice Jesus' great willingness to forgive and receive penitent saints back into fellowship in **verse 20**.

Thoughts on Revelation 4-21 - Signs, Symbols, and Puzzles

Chapter 4 begins the Revelation in earnest, plunging us into a world of visions and signs. A few guidelines here may help us keep our bearings as we read along. First, don't forget the book's purpose and time frame from chapter 1. However we interpret these signs the material must relate to encouraging to persecuted first-century saints (see 2:10). Secondly, we need to treat this material as its nature demands. Too many find a meaning in every detail, interpreting every color, every stone, and "every paw on every claw" to mean something. In contrast watch how rarely Revelation assigns detailed specific meanings to its figures (see 4:5b). This is because apocalyptic literature (a kind of material common in the first century) was meant to deal in big ideas by presenting bold images full of action and fury. Dissecting it destroys it, as surely as trying to figure out what the hero's hat band stands for would ruin a good Western movie! We have to be content with its broad brush and big picture, and not look at the giant mural of God's fight with Satan through a magnifying glass. Finally, a word about the historical realities Revelation deals with. Clearly wild speculation about ICBM's and war with the Soviet Union is not what John was shown. How would that help persecuted Christians in the first century? Generally, a more careful view of Revelation has argued that it deals with the fall of Rome or the destruction of Jerusalem. I believe the data in the book should point to it being primarily about God's vengeance on Jerusalem. A full discussion of this is not possible here but note how the great city in Rev 11:8 and 17-18 is obviously Jerusalem. Further, the vision is dated during the reign of the sixth king (17:9-11), which would be during Nero's time, well before Jerusalem's fall. Perhaps the best argument against the book dealing with Rome is that Rome doesn't fall for hundreds of years, defying the book's promise of "shortly come to pass." Dogmatism and Revelation don't go well together, but eventually one has to make some kind of decision as to what this book is about. Thus, this material will follow the early date/destruction of Jerusalem emphasis.

4 - Verses 2-3 identify God. We need not make every color symbolize something here. The picture stands as powerful and awesome. The creatures of **verses 6-7** remind us of Ezekiel's creatures who bear God's throne (see Ezek 1:4-28; 10:1ff). They are amazing and incredible beings. We are privy to God's throne room here and the worship that goes on in it. What a scene!

5 - Verse 1's scroll represents the plan of God and the ability to execute it. Only Jesus can do that (**verses 5-6**). Note the obvious tie in "Lamb of God" to Isaiah 53. Jesus is worshiped just as God the Father was in chapter 4, a mighty statement of His deity.

6 - The seals are opened and amazing things happen. The first seal (**verse 2**) has been identified as Christ, the Roman Empire or even the spirit of conquest. It is hard to be certain. **Verse 4** is clearly war, perhaps the war begun in AD 67 when the Jews revolted against Rome. **Verse 5** shows the pain of war, as famine follows and prices for even a little bit of food get outrageously high. Of course, death (**verses 7-8**) follow war. We then see persecuted saints crying for justice, a major theme in Revelation (**verses 9-11**). Then there are great scenes of judgment that are notably similar to what Joel 2 and Matthew 24 use to talk of Jerusalem's judgment and destruction.

7 - The action in this chapter isn't hard to understand. A group of people are sealed for protection from all the trouble and tribulation that is occurring (**verse 3**). The difficulty is "Who are these sealed people?" This seems to be the faithful disciples. In **verse 9** the 144,000 (a symbolic number not to be taken literally) are seen in heaven, and are now a huge multitude. Perhaps this is the same group as in **verses 5-8**, now seen in heaven rejoicing.

Applications from This Week's Readings

Revelation often leaves people more than a little confused and feeling like they should see "more" here. But if you got that God is in control, that He is vitally concerned about the welfare of His people and He will judge the evildoers who hurt His church, then you got the message Jesus wanted the seven churches to have. Think carefully about the calls for perseverance and faithfulness under pressure Revelation contains. What are the implications for us today? What can you do to build more endurance?

8 - Some have commented that Revelation is like a grand symphony, with variations to a theme being played, added, and recombined as the movements go along. That is a fitting thought as chapter 8 sounds judgments that remind us of the seal judgments. Note the value of prayer (**verse 3**). Prayer causes God to act! Those actions are terrifying and terrible. The trumpets probably relate to the horrors of the Judean War. The first trumpet (**verse 7**) may be the warfare that occurred in Galilee, the second trumpet (**verses 8-9**) perhaps the battles in the Mediterranean, the third trumpet (**verses 10-11**) sounds like an important leader defecting (compare Isa 14:12ff), and the final trumpet (**verses 12-13**) seem to indicate conditions in Judea as the Roman armies swung south after Galilee.

9 - The fifth angel sounds and horrible locusts arrive, wrecking havoc (**verses 1-12**). There is much discussion and just as much uncertainty about their identity. They may represent the Jewish Zealots who took over the rebellion and killed many of their fellow Jews. Josephus describes the fierce infighting among the Jews even as the Romans marched against them! Perhaps the locusts and the huge army of the sixth trumpet just represent evil demonic forces at work. The sixth trumpet (**verses 13-21**) does summon a gargantuan army. The Roman general Titus brought armies from across the Euphrates to help his war efforts. The real emphasis is **verses 20-21**. Despite God bringing judgment people didn't repent. How sad!

10 - This chapter represents a pause in the judgments. A mighty angel (**verse 1**) appears and gives John a book (**verse 2**). The little book may be the rest of the message of Revelation (see **verse 11**). This is all very similar to Ezekiel 2:6-3:4 and probably means the same thing: John is commissioned to speak for God. Part of that speaking will be to warn that the time of delay is over (**verse 7**). Note the parallel in this verse and Luke 21:22, which certainly speaks of Jerusalem's destruction. Judgement is coming!

11 - John measures the temple (**verse 1**), which may be the literal temple, the church, or have a figurative meaning. **Verse 2** gives the exact amount of time it took the Romans to end the rebellion: 42 months, from February AD 67 to August of AD 70. The two witnesses (**verse 3**) are prophets (**verse 10**) and appear to represent the Old Law. Moses and Elijah often sum up the Old Testament as the Law and the Prophets (see Matt 17). They die when the Temple is destroyed because the Old Covenant was based in that Temple and its rites (**verses 7-8**). The world rejoices because it hated the Jews and their peculiar laws and customs (**verse 10**). Following their resurrection the woes finish and Jerusalem is utterly judged (**verses 14-19**). **Verse 19** shows that what was lost on earth is gained in heaven, as the literal temple is not needed and is now gone.

12 - The action here is not hard to follow. Jesus is born and the devil tries to kill Him before He can even begin His mission. Some of the specifics may be tougher. The woman of (**verse 1**) is not the church as Christ built the church not the other way around. This is probably the faithful remnant of Israel who kept the Messianic promises alive down through the centuries. There is no question the child is Jesus (**verse 5**), and that the remnant goes to the wilderness during the Jewish War for the 42 months it lasted, as Matt 24:16-18 instructed. The war in heaven (**verse 7**) is symbolic. The devil is defeated by Jesus' redemptive work (**verse 11**). The devil continues to attack the church (**verses 13-14**) but as **verse 6** described she flees into the desert where God provisionally protects her (**verse 16**).

Applications from This Week's Readings

One of the purposes of apocalyptic literature is to interpret the events happening on earth in light of the spiritual struggle going on between God and the devil. The destruction of Jerusalem looked like a military operation but was actually God's work, John says. We cannot always know how and where God is working today but let Revelation strengthen your belief that God is working and that there is still a battle going on between good and evil. Pray and ask God to help you find your part in this conflict and to fight very courageously.

Week 51 - Revelation 13-17

13 - The key question here is who or what is this beast (**verse 1**)? The best identification seems the obvious choice: the Roman Empire. The ten horns would be the tributary kingdoms that served the emperor. Rather than "symbolizing" the description of the beast (**verse 2**) we should just see a terrifying and strong foe. **Verse 3** may reference how many thought Rome would die when Julius Caesar was assassinated but it did not. Others see the myth that Nero would revive and rule again, but why would John mention a legend? Some see the beast as Satan, instead of the Empire that Satan used, and thus this could refer to the defeat of Satan at the cross. **Verse 10** echoes Jeremiah 15:2. The text is difficult to translate, and harder to be certain of its meaning. It may be a call for patience and perseverance. A second beast then appears (**verses 11-18**) who personifies false religion. He can do signs and sorcery, like Pharaoh's magicians (Exo 7-8). The key is he is a deceiver (**verse 14**). This is probably the religion of emperor worship, which was Empire-wide

in Nero's time. The marks of **verse 16** are not necessarily literal (we have a speaking beast calling fire out of heaven here - clearly literal - but then many make this mark absolutely literal!) but instead indicate submission and service to the Emperor. Those who refuse will suffer financial and social recriminations. **Verse 18** is heavily debated. Every six-letter name possible has been fitted to this scheme where a number equals a letter, but Nero Caesar seems to be the best fit when the purposes of the book are considered.

14 - This chapter shows that not all succumb to the beast and his pressures. A huge throng, as seen in chapter 7, worship God still (**verses 1-5**). Three angels make announcements warning not to fall in with the beast (**verses 6-13**). Then there are two reapings. Perhaps the first is the saints who were martyred (**verses 14-16**), while the second seems to be an image of judgment (**verses 17-20**). That judgment picture will be seen again and amplified in chapters to come.

15 - God's people are seen victorious. They have overcome and will now see a just and powerful God answer their cries for justice!

16 - The winepress scene in chapter 14 gives way to bowls of judgment poured out. These judgements represent terrible affliction and horror of every kind. It is not necessary for us to find exact correspondence to historical events. In the Jewish War there was every kind of misery and death imaginable, including starvation, famine, civil war, and slaughter at the hands of Roman troops. **Verse 6** is key. The punishment fits the crime, and the crime here is killing God's people *and His prophets*. Jesus said of Jerusalem "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matt 23:37). Much has been made of the three frogs (**verse 13**) but these seem to be demonic forces that join in the misery and havoc of war. All of Satan's forces gather at Armageddon (**verse 16**) but notice there is no battle. Judgment is simply announced and then it is all over (**verse 17**). Such is God's power!

17 - The key identification here is the harlot (**verse 1**). Many see her as Rome, but Rome was not guilty of spiritual harlotry, as Israel was accused of by the O.T. prophets (Jeremiah 3:1ff; Hosea 2). Further, the beast is Rome. The Empire carried the harlot, the city of Jerusalem (and the Jews) by allowing them special privileges and prerogatives no one else in the Empire enjoyed. **Verse 10** helps us date the book. The first six emperors were Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and then the sixth "which now is" would be Nero. Vespasian would be next, and his son Titus would be the eighth, hence being "of him" (**verse 11**). The ten kings of **verse 12** are the puppet kings or subservient kings who served Rome. Jerusalem did sit upon many people (**verse 2**), as Jews came from all over the world to worship there. Further, tithes from the Jews made her enormously wealthy city. This harlot or "great city" (**verse 18**) is positively identified in 11:8 as Jerusalem. She did rule, in a sense, by her authority over Jews scattered throughout the Empire.

Applications from This Week's Readings

We are very comfortable with civil liberties and Constitutional guarantees of the right to assemble and worship as we please. Do we take these freedoms for granted? What would you do if there was an outbreak of persecution today? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving that we have not had to live through such terrible times, and then ask God for more courage to be what He would have us to be in our (comparatively) easier day and times.

Week 52 - Revelation 18-22

18 - Verses 1-8 announce the doom of the city, and warn God's people to flee (see Matt 24:15-18). **Verse 3** says Jerusalem is judged for her fornication (religious unfaithfulness to God). Think of how the rulers conspired to kill Jesus because they saw Him as a threat to their standing with Rome (see John 11:48ff). The world laments Jerusalem's fall because of the economic consequences (**verses 9-19**). But while the world laments the righteous rejoice in God's vengeance (**verses 20-24**). Again note the emphasis on "prophets" and the close parallels to Matt 23:34-37 and Luke 11:49-51.

19 - God is praised for His victory (**verses 1-6**), and the victorious are invited to a great feast called the marriage supper of the Lamb (**verses 7-10**). **Verses 11-21** portray Christ going out to conquer and demolish His enemies. This may refer to the battle between the church and the Roman Empire. After Jerusalem was destroyed the Roman Empire did persecute the church (**verses 19**). But such efforts cannot possibly succeed, for they are fighting against God! The chapter ends again in triumph. The harlot has been judged and now the beast who supported her is judged and destroyed (**verses 20-21**). Is there a reference to the Word of God and Gospel preaching in the sword from Jesus' mouth (**verse 15, 21**)?

20 - This chapter is the premillennial position's mainstay. The teaching that Jesus failed in His first attempt to set up a physical kingdom and so will return to set up that literal kingdom and reign in physical Jerusalem for 1000 years is somehow pulled from these verses. Such contradicts other plain verses (like John 18:36; Mark 9:1; Col 1:13) and badly misuses Revelation itself. Note how the chapter says *nothing* about the second coming of Christ, a bodily resurrection, a reign of Christ on earth, the literal throne of David, or literal Jerusalem! Read carefully and we see that verses 1-3 tell us Satan will be bound for a long

period of time (the thousand years of verse 3). Remember, the book has been promising “shortly come to pass” but now leaps far ahead with a time frame of a thousand years. The binding of Satan during this time probably represents the power of the Gospel limiting Satan during the Gospel age (see Matt 12:29; John 12:31-32). We shouldn’t make the 1000 years a literal time frame any more than we would make the chapter one’s sword in Jesus’ mouth literal (see Deut 7:9 and Ps 50:10 for use of 1000 to simply mean “lots”). **Verse 4** means that the faithful, the overcomers, participate in Christ’s victory. “The rest” (**verse 5**) are those of 19:21: the unfaithful. The “first resurrection” (verses 5-6) is when one dies to go and be with Christ. The “second death” is eternal condemnation (see 20:14-15; 21:8). Thus, the second resurrection will be when our bodies are raised, making the first death be when we die physically. **Verses 7-9** tell us that after a while the Gospel will not have the binding effect it once did. Does this mean more and more people will turn from God’s word and not listen to it? So Satan rallies and persecution breaks out again (verse 7). “Gog and Magog” (**verse 8**) are from Ezekiel 38, where they appear as enemies of God’s people. They may attempt to attack the church but Jesus suddenly destroys them (verses 9-10). This may be Jesus’ second coming (see 2 Thess 1:7-9), which leads directly into a scene of judgment (verses 11-15). This may well be the Final Judgment of all humanity.

21 - Many see this as a description of the church, not heaven. However, key parts of the description just don’t fit the church on earth (note **verses 3-4**, also 21:3-4). After the judgment of chapter 20 eternity begins and heaven welcomes the saints! Note that the destroyed city is replaced with the New Jerusalem (verses 2, 10). The measurements of the city (verses 16-17) are enormous and the foundation stones, gates and streets are incredibly expensive and beautiful (verses 18-21). We don’t have to make each gate or mineral mean something. It all describes heaven as a place of magnificence, splendor and wonder. The literal temple has been destroyed but there is no need for such in this city (**verse 22**).

22 - This is God’s home (22:1), and someday we will live there with Him! The book concludes with its refrain that its main events will happen soon (verses 6-7, 10-12, 20). **Verse 11** probably just means there would be no time for last minute repentance. Note the repeated calls to remain faithful and not give up. Trust that Jesus will be victorious and stand with Him!

Applications from This Week’s Readings

Chapter 21-22’s pictures of heaven call to our hearts. Don’t focus overly on the wealth of golden streets or make heaven into some sort of grand retirement center. John focuses on being in God’s presence (21:3-4, 22; 22:1-5). Think about being with the Lord and pray that these grand scenes will move your heart to greater steadfastness and endurance.

***Congratulations on completing the
reading of the New Testament this year!***