**Daily Devotions**

**September 2022**

*09-01*

“Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!”

— Psalm 22:20

Scripture sometimes can come across as strange or alien. One example we read in vs. 20. In most modern cultures, people consider dogs as pets, cherished members of a family. In ancient near-eastern cultures—and in some parts of the world today—dogs live on the periphery. They consume garbage, and historically, dead bodies. In packs, wild dogs can even overtake an adult. Certainly, ancient Jews deemed them unclean.

Although most people today don’t see dogs (definitely not cats!) in this way, we’re still human beings. Like the ancients, we too fear powers over us and that which lurks beyond our control. The ongoing pandemic, for example. Like the ancients, God reminds us in vs. 28 of today’s reading, that, “dominion belongs to the Lord.”

God once saved those fearing the power of the dog and the wild ox. Today, God saves you—whatever power seeking to disrupt your life cannot overcome God’s infinite love.

Saving God, you do not despise, but rescue me. Remind me of your power. Amen.

Prayer concern: People living in fear

*09-02*

“So that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given”

— Galatians 3:22

The Apostle Paul was a church builder. The pressing challenge he faced was bringing dissimilar people together. God loves diversity—if it weren’t so the planet Earth would look far more plain and uniform, and different people would stand on the same side of everything. Clearly, this isn’t so.

Like the expansive diversity we see in plant and animal life, each person is as individualistic as the next. Even identical twins aren’t exact copies. However, differing worldviews sometimes bring about tensions. Nations rise up against nations. People go to war. In churches, people side whether the sanctuary’s carpet should be green or red!

Paul knew this, and God provided. The big fight in Paul’s day was how to bring together Jews and gentiles. The answer? Jesus. Christ served as the fulfillment, God’s message of welcome for all. The promises belong to all, no matter your worldview, especially today when divisions threaten to tear us apart.

Great Uniter, guide me today to listen. Amen.

Prayer concern: People different than me

*09-03*

“The Lord’s hand is not too short to save ”

— Isaiah 59:1

No limits—neither does this chapter in Isaiah read plainly—the poetry, exquisite—nor does it condemn without first stating what should be obvious, that God can save anything and anyone. Far too often, though, we forget that God can, and does, change people for the better.

I remember in elementary school a bully named Luke. He wasn’t someone who took your lunch money merely for the sake of funds. He wanted you to fear him. Then, Luke was out of school for three weeks. None of the other kids knew why.

It turned out Luke had contracted an illness and spent time in the hospital. Apparently, his life was threatened. After he returned, he changed. I suppose it might have been because he grew weaker, but I like to believe that God showed him what it was like to feel weak. Over the years, I became friends with him—not close, but enough to know that preying on smaller kids no longer drove him.

God convicts, yes. God also changes lives for the better.

Infinite One, you remind me that anything is possible with you. Amen.

Prayer concern: People thirsting for kindness

*09-04*

“‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ (v. 39)”

— Luke 8:39

I am a person living in recovery from addiction. For many years, I lived hidden within my secrets. I thought my secrets were like my own special room, where no one could hurt me. Instead, they were a tomb upon which I continually threw more dirt, burying myself.

Today’s story in Luke seems strange. Jesus travelled to a distant land. A man actively living death, separate from others, saw Jesus and recognized him. Jesus banished the powers—and their hold over the man—into unclean animals, pigs. The pigs charged headlong into the lake, drowning them, never to return.

Others seeing what Jesus had done, rose up in terror. If Jesus could do such things, who might else God save? The man, having been saved, begged to travel with Jesus. But Jesus urged courage, to share what God had done.

I dare to share, because others still suffer. Anyone can share what God does, and do so even without words. God saves. Spread the good news!

Encouraging Savior, strengthen me to share my story, that others might know you. Amen.

Prayer concern: The marginalized

*09-05*

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

— Exodus 3:3

Think back to a time when God stirred your heart. Maybe it’s when you gave birth to your child or the day your parents died. Some even experience God’s stirring presence in nature or while reading poetry. Spiritual high points come in a diverse multitude of types and flavors. Often, they are highly individualized. They help define—nearly without exception—who you are as a person and what stirs inside you.

Although we may not encounter burning-bush experiences like Moses, God continues to influence and mold the world through each of us. Today, ask yourself how you might point to God’s miraculous presence by sharing your spiritual high points with others. What’s more, how might you understand your neighbor better in hearing of their own experiences?

Revealing One, open my eyes to feel your presence and to point to your work in my life. Amen.

Prayer concern: For spiritual retreat centers.

*09-06*

“She came to test him with hard questions. ”

— 1 Kings 10:1

The Queen of Sheba doubted that Solomon could be as wise and glorious as reported. She wanted to see for herself that God had gifted the king with such extraordinary wisdom. Solomon not only lived up to her expectations, but surpassed them—the queen found a new perspective. What’s more, Solomon delighted her as much as he lavished her with his glorious presence. It must have been quite a sight.

The reality of a certain event might also confront our expectations of what we thought things would be like. I remember several times having dreaded going to some concert my wife dragged me to, only to discover it was much better than I originally thought. A new perspective and new prospects for change frequently come to those who approach them with an open mind. Our expectations often don’t reflect reality, and that can be a good thing. Our God is the God of wonderful surprises. What surprises does God have in store for you today?

Astonishing One, you delight me in ways I had not considered. Open my mind to you today. Amen.

Prayer concern: For those awaiting news.

*09-07*

“To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ”

— Ephesians 4:12

No matter the destination or the mode of transportation, one thing was for certain—my mother would never allow her family to starve or die of thirst. Sometimes, I thought it was a bit ridiculous. I mean, who really needs a full complement of sandwiches, cookies, tonic water, sodas and cheese for a one-hour boat ride?

However, just as her mother had taught her, being prepared for any possible contingency was much better than sticking it out alone, hot in the sun, without provisions. The writer of Ephesians would have agreed, in spite of that the early church was more concerned with providing for the work of ministry rather than worrying whether you remembered the pretzels.

The manner in which we are equipped and set out to do God’s work is through the bestowing of gifts. Each of us draws on these God-given blessings, often without thinking about them or even knowing them. The gifts persist, and so does the Body of Christ.

Thoughtful One, you have given me all I need to prepare. Send me forth to do your work. Amen.

Prayer concern: For providers and nurturers.

*09-08*

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters . . .the Lord, over mighty waters. ”

— Psalm 29:3

A major theme in the Old Testament concerns itself with the establishment of order. However, it’s not the nit-picky, overly-defined order of something like a legal document. In Genesis, God commanded the watery chaos to divide into land and sky. In today’s psalm, the voice of the Lord thunders in all its majesty and power to rule over the flood, which is another image of chaos or disorder. We do not only need to look to sweeping landscapes to witness God’s supremacy over power, though.

Each of us can distinctly recall a time from our past when chaos seemed to rule. One relevant example from my own life was my addiction to drugs and alcohol. The pandemic of addiction continues to blaze across the modern world. Chaos seems supreme, invincible. I felt hopeless. I believe God made manifest the recovery I experienced only through the thunderous power of God’s commanding voice. Chaos would not rule; life-giving order would prevail.

Chaos keeps breaking in to my life; claim your rule over it and give me your order, O God. Amen.

Prayer concern: For those who feel tossed about.

*09-09*

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go . . .’ ”

— Acts 9:15

Ananias questioned God’s orders: “Um, really? This guy Saul . . . he’s been a real jerk. Besides, he can throw me in jail!” On the other hand, God responded with a command and a plan. God let Ananias in on God’s plans that Saul would be the instrument through which all the nations of the world would come to know the love of Jesus.

We rarely have the luxury of knowing the rationale why we must do something, especially if it’s a lackluster job, but still needs doing. In those situations, we still share one aspect in common with Ananias—we do not know, nor can we control, the eventual outcomes from the assigned task.

It may seem little consolation that we simply need to carry out the orders, but embodying faithfulness in times of doubt never feels completely comfortable. The comfort we need to hear is that other servants before us have struggled with these same doubts, but God always provided. God will provide for you, too.

Stir your faithfulness in me to push forward through this day, O God. Amen.

Prayer concern: For those doubting the way forward.

*09-10*

“Then [Samuel] would come back to Ramah, for his home was there ”

— 1 Samuel 7:17

In my opinion, my seminary professors never did adequately cover what preachers should do with vast swaths of the Old Testament that deal with battles and other history. When I was a pastor, I had the luxury of using each Sunday’s assigned readings from a lectionary. Thankfully, many of these battle recollections are left out.

Now that I’m out of the pastoring profession, I still wonder the purpose of passages like today’s. Perhaps it’s only to reflect on the history of Israel. However, I can’t shake the inkling that there is something more.

The prophet and judge Samuel eventually returned home to complete his God-given, commissioned task. I can think of no more appropriate metaphor to remind us that, at the end of it all—no matter how quickly it passed or how difficult it was—God bids us return home. In God, we find our final resting place, after all the battles and difficulties life has to offer.

Remind me that I will find my way home in you, O God. Amen.

Prayer concern: For the homeless or those feeling lost.

*09-11*

“At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window on the ark he had made and sent out the raven.”

— Genesis 8:6

Main Idea: Despite humanity’s wickedness, God’s love is limitless.

It can be easy to remember this story of Noah as a telling of an angry God who destroyed all things and then promised never to do it again. But on second look, there’s much more to this story.

The story begins with the wickedness of humankind. People behaved reprehensibly; God had to respond. Remember, now, God’s relationship with humanity was only a couple generations old, so they’re barely past the honeymoon. God’s first reaction was sorrow and regret at what God had done, and God’s second reaction was to destroy every living thing above the water.

But then God recognized Noah and his righteousness and decided Noah would be worth sparing. And on second thought, maybe Noah’s family too. Oh, and the animals and creeping things. And birds. And the plants that can be used for food.

Despite God’s regret at the actions of humanity, God still couldn’t commit to destroy all that God had made. God loved God’s creation and found enough within Noah to rethink the plan. God would spare enough to start again. Not an ending, but a new beginning. God made with all creation a covenant and marked the occasion with a bow in the sky.

Not surprisingly, humanity continued its wickedness. Over the centuries, God created and re-created covenants with people, and people broke those covenants again and again. People still do.

In the US, today we are remembering the twenty-first anniversary of 9/11. The event is a stark reminder that humanity continues its wickedness, even now. Today we remember the wickedness that came upon us at the hands of our enemies. Tomorrow we may

need to reckon with the wickedness that comes upon others at our own hand. All of us are guilty and worthy of the destruction God had planned for the people in Noah’s time. But all of us are spared by the goodness, patience, and forgiveness of a loving God who is capable of seeing beyond our wickedness. Despite humanity’s limitations, God’s love is limitless.

*09-12*

“Why then the law? ”

— Galatians 3:19

Paul told the community in Galatia and we read his words today. He explained: we have the law because of transgressions.

But now we have Jesus, right? We don’t need the law (or any law, for that matter), correct?

Nope.

Laws serve the function to control sin, and even though we live on this side of the resurrection, there is still plenty of sin in the world.

What I find interesting about much of Paul’s writings in Galatians is that he, too, seems to have struggled with the concept of how previously established covenants between God and human beings still were valid. In a way, it’s similar to the struggle that people deal with when placing a new amendment within a country’s constitution to make it more relevant to the ever-changing social context.

Perhaps Paul was more human than we make him, and perhaps scripture serves as a witness for us — enshrined in Paul’s own words — that how Jesus and the Old Testament all fit together will be a question to last the ages.

God, the gift of your word drives me forward to learn more of your ways. Amen.

*09-13*

“I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. ”

— Galatians 4:20

The writings in scripture do not always affirm everything we do. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul’s tone had taken a radical shift from the other letters he wrote to early Christian communities. What’s important to recognize is that his admonishment was done out of love for the sake of the community.

I remember (not necessarily with fondness) the way my mother used to reprimand me when I was little. Children often don’t know right from wrong. Sometimes to make the correct behavior stick, an admonishment is necessary. What I also remember, though, is that my mother gave me many chances to learn and always loved me, no matter what.

I think the key for any person when we ponder this subject is that sin has consequences, and those consequences often hurt others as much as they hurt us.

Thanks be to God for second, third, and fourth chances! Thanks also to those who care for us enough to show us the errors of our ways.

Correct me when I’m wrong, O Loving Parent – I need your guidance. Amen.

*09-14*

“[W]hat are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

— Psalm 8

Like many today, I spend quite a bit of time reading and perusing information online. One infographic I saw on social media caught my attention. I became entranced looking at it for what seemed like hours. It showed the relative size of our solar system when placed into the enormity of our galaxy, the Milky Way. Zooming out further, our galaxy then took up a single pixel on my screen as the Milky Way was placed in perspective of the millions of other galaxies within the known universe.

It is mind-blowing and somewhat terrifying to conceive our lives are only microscopic grains of sand sitting on a beach filled with trillions of other specks. Despite this, we proclaim that God not only acknowledges our lives — with all our fears, joys, wonders, and hopes — but also that God crowns us with the task of tending the earth and being in relationship with God and each other.

Scripture calms our anxieties to remind us that even in the vast infinity of existence, God cares and will always care.

God, you calm my fears with the cries of the infant and in smiles on my friends’ faces. Grant me the conviction that you care for me always. Amen.

*09-15*

“… bearing with one another in love. ”

— Ephesians 4:2b

If you’ve ever had the opportunity to see how farmers once ploughed fields with beasts of burden, you will understand that a yoke (or harness) bears its full force into the animal as it pushes across the untilled earth.

Dealing with other people can sometimes seem exactly as much work as a team of draft horses sweating their way across a field, laboring in the hot sun. To bear another’s presence isn’t always easy, especially when the person grates on your nerves.

As followers of Jesus, God gives us the wisdom to view the task of bearing with (and for) each other in another light: we can bear each other’s burdens in love. This love isn’t a feeling or an emotion, although often positive sentiments can arise out of the situation. The love of Christ radiates continually for all people and in all relationships. Sometimes, we ignore God’s presence though and our relationships with each other suffer. Bearing another person’s presence (and their burdens) starts with plain work — it sometimes takes a concerted effort to allow another person to just be. But know, too, that God works in us by giving us the Son.

Gentle God, you maintain the unity in your Spirit through Jesus; work in me to bear others’ burdens in Christ’s love. Amen.

*09-16*

“[L]ove her, and she will guard you. ”

— Proverbs 4:6

The books of the Bible are filled with stories from a male perspective. The fourth chapter of Proverbs is no exception: “When I was a son with my father…” (v. 3). Feminist scholars have rightly acknowledged the dominant patriarchal slant to many of the ancient texts in scripture.

But perhaps because of this fact, when suddenly we encounter the feminine persona of wisdom, the imagery breaks forth and stands out, similar to a bas-relief sculpture’s fine lines. The father speaks to his son, imparting the advice that wisdom should be viewed as a loyal wife or a loving, protective mother for him.

Since I’m male, the image is effective; it works for me. However, I wonder how women perceive it. Do they see the comparison as another example of how female images are co-opted by men to serve their own purposes? Or does the comparison seat wisdom in a place of honor?

God created humanity as both male and female. Each perspective is valuable, both to understand and also to unpack the human condition. Maybe portraying wisdom in this way is less the desire to give women equal time and more the confession that an aspect of God — wisdom — is undeniably feminine, and a strong, caring guardian.

Holy Wisdom, keep me close and guard me. Amen.

*09-17*

“[T]he snare is broken, and we have escaped. (v. 7b)”

— Psalm 124:7b

God has appointed pastors and leaders of faith communities with many difficult tasks. One especially hard job is the interpretation of scripture. Every week (and sometimes more frequently), the ancient (and often obscure) words stare back into your pastors eyes. It’s as if the monastic scribe who once copied those words to pass God’s wisdom to another generation knew that, centuries from then, another faithful leader would be charged with reinterpreting and translating the message to the spiritually-hungry.

Of course, since the advent of the printing press, scripture is no longer delegated to the experts. Today, the stories in Bible do not even need to be contained in a book — anyone with an internet connection can instantly access, chapter and verse, any passage that exists. However, interpretation remains slippery, especially when it comes to particular passages that don’t seem to speak directly to us, much like today’s psalm.

How is Israel’s deliverance even remotely connected with us today? The pastor’s job is to answer that question, or at least begin the conversation with us how we, too, have escaped the snare of our enemies.

God, thank you for pastors and leaders who devote themselves to the study of your word. Amen.

*09-18*

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ”

— Genesis 12:1

Main Idea: God keeps promises, even if it takes a while.

God’s relationship with humanity was still fairly young. With the paint still drying on the covenant God made with Noah, God sought to solidify the covenant with one of Noah’s descendants. God chose Abram and Sarai, and God expected the blessings they received to become blessings for the world.

When Abram, Sarai, and Lot arrived at Canaan, the land God promised to them, they didn’t settle there immediately. They passed through the land and pitched their tent in the hill country east of Bethel. They were there—they passed through the land—but it wasn’t yet time for them to claim their God-given right to the land. God had bigger plans that would take years to develop. It would be a couple centuries before Jacob finally settled there.

The text doesn’t clearly indicate why Abram continued his nomadic lifestyle despite God’s promise of the land, except to say that there were Canaanites living in the land at the time. Certainly, that could have been a deterrent to settling there. Abram would need time to cultivate a large family that could be an intimidating enough presence to take the land from its current inhabitants.

To our sensibilities, a promise that cannot be fulfilled in our own lifetime is a promise broken. But in God’s time, a promise fulfilled for our descendants is just as

good as one fulfilled for us. This is especially so because the promise is not to bless the individual or even the family. The promise is to bless the family so that the family can be a blessing to the world. When we consider the outward movement of God’s blessing, the promise is fulfilled even as the blessings slowly unfold.

We are often told that life is short. Seize the day. No time like the present. This works best, however, when we don’t look at it as a call to impatience, but as an openness to opportunity. When we have a dream (especially when our dreams are driven by a sense of call), we do need to be ready to jump when the window of opportunity opens. But we can also find happiness and blessing during the waiting period. Sometimes a dream is the right dream, but now is not the right time. We can use that time to be a blessing, even as we prepare ourselves for when the timing is right for our dream to be fulfilled. We need not waste the waiting. Abram led a full life while he waited for God to prepare his family to be a blessing to the world. He lived his life to bless others long before God settled them in Canaan.

*09-19*

“[M]aking the most of the time…. ”

— Ephesians 5:16

I am a person living in long-term recovery from addiction. What this means to me is that, for over eight years now, I have not touched a drop of alcohol. When I was serving in western North Dakota as an ordained pastor, I struggled with depression and addiction. Although I would not trade the experience I gained in going to treatment (three separate times!), I deeply regret all the time I wasted in seeking oblivion.

Addiction continues to inflict pain and destroy relationships throughout the world. The stigma behind it prevents people struggling with alcohol or drugs from seeking the help they desperately need. As long as addiction remains firmly entrenched in the concept of moral failure instead of a real, treatable illness, people hurting themselves and their families will prolong their suffering.

As a community of believers following the example of Jesus, God calls us to make the most of our time. We can provide alternatives to those struggling with addiction or mental illness to find peace within a community committed to living, working, and even having fun together. What’s more, we can educate ourselves in the Spirit’s work through researchers to understand and treat addiction more effectively.

Fill my time not with debauchery, O God, but with your living, moving Spirit. Amen.

*09-20*

“They were to be educated … so that … they could be stationed in the king’s court. ”

— Daniel 1:5

The Book of Daniel exudes a wonderful diversity. The book is like a mosaic and a delightful fusion of stories, prophecies, and even a smidge of historical writings. Daniel is one of the few books of the Bible written in both Hebrew and Aramaic, two closely-related languages. Imagine you started reading a book in Russian, only to discover that halfway it changed to Ukrainian!

Despite all the interesting factoids about it, the story in Daniel is even more fascinating — particularly the actions of the young Israelite men in the Babylonian court. The Babylonians had sacked and destroyed their capital city, Jerusalem. The aggressors then took the best prizes from the temple, placing them in their own treasury. Beyond that, the Babylonians plundered the population’s greatest asset, their youth, and employed them into the service of a foreign king.

I don’t find it especially surprising that God provided for these wise, young men to remain pure despite their gentile surroundings — that’s one theme throughout the whole book. What’s astonishing is that the men chose to serve the foreign king in the best of their abilities; essentially, they helped their enemy. Perhaps God works through those we might not at first expect!

Open my eyes, God, to see your work everywhere and through many people. Amen.

*09-21*

“But you, O Lord, do not be far away! ”

— Psalm 22:19

Lions and dogs. Swords and the horns of wild oxen. Certainly this inventory would not translate well into a top-ten list of modern day threats!

However, everyone has at times experienced anxiety — and for many, tragedy. The threats to our personal existence and health are real. Added today the more existential threats to all of humanity like global climate change, nuclear proliferation, and the ramifications of overpopulation, it’s not easy to dispel all the worries we face.

The Psalmist’s words may have fit well into that cultural context. I’m sure it wasn’t very fun to be gored by a wild ox. Although we don’t suffer from threats like that, the fragility of life is still a reality.

May we continue to see that God provides respite for us. God is not far away, even in the midst of great stress and difficulty. We can always turn to God for help.

Ever-present One, show me that you are always near. Amen.

*09-22*

“See, the Lord’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ”

— Isaiah 59:1

The snippet of text you read above from the first verse of the fifty-ninth chapter of Isaiah might have you believing that the verses following have something to do with God’s saving power. However, scripture often goes in surprising directions. Certainly today’s full reading is no exception to that.

Because, wow — it is a depressing read! The prophet Isaiah did not pull any punches when laying out the futility of sin and Israel’s willingness to embrace its own path rather than the one God had guided them down.

Prophets today come in many forms. At best, the naysayers are often ignored. At worst, they are crucified (albeit in hyperbole and hopefully not literally).

Perhaps, back then, the scribe having taken down the words of the prophet Isaiah might have given pause after such an indictment against Israel. And maybe, we too, might look over our own behavior after seeing the wreckage we create instead of blaming an uncaring, distant God.

For God’s hand still is not too short to save, and God can hear our cries just fine.

Direct my life away from sin; show me your ways, O Lord. Amen.

*09-23*

“[Jesus said,] “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” ”

— Luke 8:39

Generally speaking, followers of Jesus from mainstream denominations can be quite shy about sharing how much God has done for them. Part of the reason, I believe, is that we fear that others will perceive that we belong to a church that is “in your face” and we wish to convert the other person. Some, perhaps, don’t fear others’ perceptions; rather, they simply keep their beliefs to themselves out of politeness or modesty. I suppose a third group would include those who don’t believe that God really has done something for them, or those who don’t think about it too deeply.

Most will not experience the life-changing act of healing that the Gerasene man had. However, the pure and simple truth is that God has gifted all of us with the miracle of life itself. Living in thanksgiving does not need to be flashy or dramatic (although it’s wonderful when this happens) — we can give thanks for another day, and share with others what a wonderful gift that is for us.

Life-giving One, thank you for my life today. Amen.

*09-24*

“Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ”

— Luke 1:64

One consistent experience I have heard from others about reading a passage in scripture is that people relate how they suddenly, while reading, saw a detail they never knew before. I have been reading the Bible for many years, and only now did I realize that Zechariah was mute before he spoke his prophecy about John!

Perhaps God works through holy scripture to highlight for us what we need to read in that moment. Ironically, a similar theme dwells in this story — Zechariah confirms Elizabeth’s choice of name for their son, and God immediately frees Zechariah’s voice to prophesy what is to come.

When we open our hearts to the living word of God, we see how God is guiding our lives to fulfill God’s promises in our time and place.

Open my eyes, ears, and heart, Lord, to live out your promises in the best way I can. Amen.

*09-25*

“Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.”

— Genesis 39:1

Main Idea: Despite Joseph’s impossible circumstances, he remained faithful to God.

Joseph did whatever the Lord asked of him. He led a life of integrity and hard work. He rejected the offer of his master’s wife to lie with her. Yet, despite all Joseph’s best efforts, the behaviors of others changed the trajectory of his life, and he ended up in prison.

We may not be able to relate to the details of this story (if you’re reading this, you’re likely not enslaved to an Egyptian master, nor are you pursued by your master’s wife). But the overarching theme is all too familiar. Most of us are obligated to a boss, a landlord or mortgage company, a relationship, the IRS. It is nearly impossible to live completely free of obligations, and often these obligations can push us into situations where we must decide how to behave based on the behaviors of others.

In Joseph’s case, he was in an impossible situation. To lie with the master’s wife would inevitably lead to imprisonment or death (these things are rarely kept secret forever). But to refuse her also landed him in prison. Either way, he was bound to suffer.

But Joseph always had freedom to choose how he would respond to his circumstances. He could have

taken his chances by choosing to lie with the master’s wife. Instead, he chose integrity, honor, and loyalty. In prison, he could have chosen despair and given up. Instead, he chose to learn how to navigate the system through hard work. Ultimately Joseph’s decisions to maintain his integrity and step up when opportunity arose led to unparalleled prosperity not just for him, but for all of Egypt and his own family. It took a long time, and he had to suffer greatly to get there, but that’s what life is. Life includes waiting and suffering, but also action and celebrating. No life is all bad or all good. Joseph chose to follow his heart, even when those decisions led to difficult consequences. When all else looked dire, Joseph always had the freedom to choose how he would respond and act. When he chose God’s path, he walked the entire journey alongside God.

*09-26*

“Let the righteous rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him. ”

— Psalm 64:10

A prominent theme in many psalms springs forth for readers when they are aware of it: evildoers will do evil, but they will receive their comeuppance through God’s mighty hand. God passed down a great wisdom for us through the Psalms, because, when we’re honest, we will realize that evil and evil plots will always be around. What’s more is that, in our personal lives, there will always be people who don’t like us, and even a few who actively wish to harm us.

The psalmist recommended one response consistently in nearly every psalm. It goes something like this: let God worry about the evildoers; follow God’s ways as closely as you can and take refuge only in God. This advice stands on a firm foundation for all human beings. It starts with the knowledge that trying to control and fight evil constantly in our lives will be as destructive for us as the evil itself.

Of course, I’m not suggesting that we passively stand by while evil reigns. Justice matters. And some will have the gift of fighting for what’s right more than others. However, God allows us to recognize the need to control outcomes can be equally destructive for us as the evil we wish to fight.

Refuge Bringer: grant me the peace today to simply be. Amen.

*09-27*

“[I]n the night also my heart instructs me. (v. 7b)”

— Psalm 16:7b

Have you ever laid awake at night because something was bugging you? It’s an experience many face, if not all of us. One particular recurring incident for me is especially troubling. Suddenly I wake and stare at the ceiling; nothing specifically has been bothering me. Then the thought comes — I call it “peering into the abyss.” It’s the thought that, after I die, everything I know and all of me will simply cease to exist. It’s terrifying!

The only thought that seems to banish this bothersome feeling is the recognition that I am not alone, that everyone — indeed, the entire universe — is stuck in the same boat as me. Added to that is the firm belief that I am not required to worry about such things, that in fact I cannot control what happens. In such depths at the bottom of a seemingly infinite hole, God reaches me. I can then rest secure once again.

You, too, will not be given up to the pit. God’s promises spark a light even in the darkest of nights.

Let me rest easy and fulfilled, knowing you, God, are always there for me. Amen.

*09-28*

“Whoever says, ‘I am in the light’, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ”

— 1 John 2:9

Social media stirs emotions. On one day, I find myself enjoying a silly little cat video from an old connection I hadn’t spoken with since my school days. On another, I burn in anger at a political post someone put up. As a freelance writer, it’s almost mandatory I be connected online—much of my work comes through it.

However, there are times I wish I could turn the whole thing off. Recently, the group Black Lives Matter has become active in our area. I agree with much of what they demand for racial justice. Yet, I also see the havoc wrought on social media, the hateful vitriol people whom I love type on their smartphones. What’s worse, I see the darkness rise in myself, and it disturbs me.

Although social media is a new technology, the human condition is not—people have hated others since the dawn of time. The wisdom of scripture beckons us to remain in the light, to open our closed hearts, to listen and learn, despite what poisonous words we may read on a screen.

God, the world changes quickly, but much is still the same. Guide us to your light, that the darkness may not overcome us. Amen.

*09-29*

“Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. ”

— Deut. 30:4

A standard feature in Deuteronomy is a promise of prosperity, but also a promise of curses. It’s important to take the historical setting into consideration: God’s people had disobeyed; God continually calls them back into the fold with the stipulation of following the law.

As a modern, it strikes me as a bit simple minded that God would place these ongoing conditions on the people. After all, didn’t God realize that they were only going to break the laws God had already set forth, once again?

However, the key passage in verse four is telling—God will never abandon the people, no matter to what ends of the earth they are scattered. It is comforting to know that you’re never going to be abandoned. As children, a great fear we all have is our parents leaving us, or getting lost in a crowd.

God, as our heavenly parent, will never abandon us. God only asks that we listen for the eternal voice, and that we follow where it leads us.

We thank you, God, that you gather us up into your arms, holding us tight, that we might follow your lead to remain near. Amen.

*09-30*

“How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. ”

— Psalm 119:9

Kids naturally make lots of mistakes. As a teenager, I know I had my share of mess-ups. As parents or adults who care for them, our inclination naturally leads us to protect them. We also worry. We don’t want bad things to happen.

To achieve the end of teaching them (or, at least to assuage our tempestuous worries), we guide them to attend worship in a faith community. We bring them to church, and sometimes drag them. Our hope is that the Word of God will at least stick, somewhere.

Churches also try new and different methods to reach youth. They invite praise bands to play more popular music. Youth workers schedule events to be fun distractions from the everyday.

Yet many churches continue to be frustrated with the lack of attendance, not only of youth, but also of their families. What is the answer?

I honestly do not know. Many argue about what to do. What I do know is God remains faithful. We must try our best to pass on that faithfulness to them.

We worry about the future, God. We worry about our youth. Help us keep steadfast in your Word that we might convey your love. Amen.