

**Daily Devotionals**  
**To Encourage Franklin in Such a Time As This**  
By Dr. Charles Qualls and Rev. Steve Gibson -- Franklin Baptist Church

This brief series of daily devotionals are designed to speak into the days in which we live. But we frame that sacred time in the challenging days of the Covid-19 or Novel CoronaVirus that is spreading across our globe.

Take in these daily words of devotion. We hope you will experience wisdom, perspective and yes even hope!

They draw from the Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings by date.  
(All scriptures will use the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted)

**Saturday, January 30 - Matthew 8:28-9:1**  
**by Dr. Charles Qualls**  
***Jesus Restores Two Demon-Possessed Men***

28 When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. 29 “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

30 Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. 31 The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.”

32 He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. 33 Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. 34 Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

9 Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town.

**Devotion:**

This story is fascinating. Not just because of what Jesus did here. I’m afraid that my church folks usually fly off in one of two directions with a story like this, neither one of which is ideal. We’ll either get fascinated and want to obsess over what a “demon” might be, thereby missing the whole point of the story. Or, we’ll be so off-put by not knowing what to do with mention of a demon that we miss the whole point of the story. Let’s do neither of those.

We're not really sure what to make of all the action here. If you let that be okay, you'll move sooner to the points of the story. That'll be the spiritually mature thing to do. In my opinion, we should be sure to notice 3 specific things:

- In v29, these “demons” or spirits so clearly recognize Jesus that they call him by a correct title (Son of God) and they know that “his time has not yet come.” That is profound.
- Jesus demonstrates power here in being able to cast them out and move them into a herd of pigs.
- The reaction of the villagers is quite telling: All too often we don't care quite as much what God wants to do -- or what God is up to -- as much as we do what's happening in our bank accounts. In this story, Jesus messed up a good portion of the local economy and because of that, they wanted him gone. They didn't care about his obvious divinity and power!

Someone has observed -- correctly I fear -- that politics and religion for most people are emotional rather than rational. It breaks my heart to agree, but I do. Both culture and church folks alike have taught me to. What is it that causes you or me to reject God's presence (or movement or purpose) because it's interfering too much with the way I feel about something important to me?

**Prayer:**

God, help me to allow Jesus to be “Lord” of my life, and not just in title only. Help me to hold nothing else so dear that I would reject him. Amen.

## **Sunday, January 31 - Mark 1:21-34**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

### ***His Fame Began to Spread***

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching -- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him

about her at once. <sup>31</sup> He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup> And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

### **Devotion:**

*At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.* I was so shaped by my early spiritual upbringing that, I confess now, the “reluctant Jesus” threw me a bit at first. Early on, especially in the old Church Training programs I went to, we were instructed to be “bold witnesses.” We were scared half to death, quite frankly, with the notion that if we denied Jesus (or somehow otherwise failed to claim him) he just might deny us in front of God the Father one day.

So, when I eventually noticed a Jesus in the Gospels who often said, “Go and tell no one,” I didn’t know what to do with him. Yet that’s exactly what Jesus did for a time. He would heal someone and say, “Go and tell no one.” He would transact some miracle or divine some secret and ask the person in the story to be sure that no one knew it was he who had done so.

Take a look at these three vignettes we get in today’s scripture. Especially in the first one, the presence of “a man with an unclean spirit” gets our attention. Go ahead and admit it: The action any time there is someone possessed with a ‘spirit’ of some kind is riveting. Yes? So much so that we could be distracted from the true power those stories hold for us. Because as always, Jesus’ fantastic deeds are never the point as much as the message that comes with the deeds. “Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus commanded the spirit. Why did he command silence? We’ll learn that Jesus’ divinity still was not a public matter. “His time had not yet come.”

As I mentioned yesterday, it should strike us when it is the “demons” or unclean spirits who most readily discern Jesus for who he is. Meanwhile, our Lord’s own disciples were still getting their minds around it all.

Jesus was slowly revealing his authority now. As always, we should let Jesus be Jesus. Rather than wanting him to be bigger than life at all times, we should let him tell his own story. Why might he, at first, have told people to keep his deeds and powers a secret? We’d do well to journey with that curiosity. Among other things, today’s scripture will challenge us to use whatever authority or strength we may have with compassion and humility. Jesus has much to teach us.

### **Prayer:**

God, give us grace and patience to let you tell us the story rather than trying to force it along ourselves. May we see Jesus for who he is, and let him be the focus rather than the easy distractions. Amen.

## **Monday, February 1 - Acts 21:17-26**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

### ***Paul's Arrival at Jerusalem***

17 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. 18 The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. 19 Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

#### **Devotion:**

Oh my goodness. The things we strain at while missing the bigger picture that God wants us to see.

Here is the apostle Paul, now years after his own conversion. Probably approaching 30 years or more after the death of Jesus Christ. He has been at the temple with some of Jesus' old disciples. Word has reached them that Paul was working primarily among Gentiles now. He and James have spoken, and Paul has had trouble with the temple police.

Why? Because people did then at the church what some people do nowadays in churches. They caught about half the truth and jumped to a harsh judgment because someone didn't hold a position that was in lock-step with theirs. I can't as much fault the temple priests, sadducees and pharisees. They had a tradition and a theology that was thousands of years

old. Although I completely agree with Jesus about their excesses and shortcomings, their system was just that -- their system.

The feeling, though, is that there was also considerable squabbling from within the Christian movement. We know that Paul, Peter and James, for instance, would have sometimes heated disagreements about tradition and practice. Did a Gentile need to first convert to Judaism, and after all of the ritual practice and requirements had been met, then (and only then) move on into a uniquely Christian practice? (This was the position of the so-called "Judaizers" of the New Testament) Or, should a Gentile be able to skip all that and simply practice this new "Way," as the fledgling Christian sect was called? Ultimately, Paul would be imprisoned by the temple officials and he would appeal his case all the way to Caesar.

What should we do with all this? If we have no standards, morals or expectations we cheapen the ways of the faith. But if we move to legalistic and rigid judgmentalism, we are just as wrong as Jesus felt the temple elites were. As in so much of life, the truth is somewhere in-between.

**Prayer:**

Lord, save us from ourselves. Save us from extreme voices that would focus on rigid fundamentalism. But also help us to care enough to want to please you. Amen.

**Tuesday, February 2 - Numbers 22:22-28**  
**by Dr. Charles Qualls**  
***Balaam and His Wise Ass***

22 But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

24 Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. 25 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

26 Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. 27 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. 28 Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

**Devotion:**

What. You thought I had thrown a curse word into today's title?

I can still remember the day we arrived at this scripture in Dr. Tom Smothers' Old Testament class. He said, "Today, we're going to study the story of Balaam and his wise ass!" Well, some of us giggled because that was about the naughtiest thing we'd encountered yet in a seminary classroom.

Most all of us were also intrigued, though, because we weren't familiar with the story. Turns out this one hadn't popped up in our children's, youth or vacation Bible school literature as we were growing up!

This is the story about a talking donkey who understood what was going on, while his human beat him because the human couldn't see what the donkey could. Now, what would YOU call this story? God has placed a calling upon Balaam's life. Like Jonah in his story, and like the apostle Paul in Acts, Balaam was on the clock! Instead, he couldn't perceive the presence and movement of God even as well as his donkey.

Perhaps any of us should sympathize a bit. Our confirmation-bias can color our religion all too heavily. This is not good, though. In fact, that kind of living is actually us operating on autopilot pretty much. We want to be guided by God, not by our assumptions and blindspots, our biases and prejudices. So, faith is to be alive. It is supposed to be an always aware experience.

**Prayer:**

Lord, may these cautionary tales grip us. May they help us to want to see and hear you, to respond and be available to you. Continue to call, and give us ears that we might hear you. Amen.

**Wednesday, February 3 - Jeremiah 29:1-14**  
**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**  
***Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles in Babylon***

<sup>29</sup> These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup> For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets

and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup>for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

<sup>10</sup>For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

### **Devotion:**

Many people know this passage, especially the key verses 11-14. This passage brings comfort in times of trouble. This passage brings security when the world is spinning out of control. This passage renews the promise of God -- God is always with us, that we are not alone.

This chapter addresses the need for the exiles to accept two realities: 1) To remember that even in their exile, the God who brought the exile is the same God who is at work for their ultimate good, and 2) To remind them of the danger of listening to false prophets. Those in exile were encouraged to accept their servanthood. The Hebrew people have an interesting pattern -- seeing God's blessing, then forgetting God. Their punishment is often forced servanthood. This particular incident is 70 years in exile. Even in exile, God casts a vision for his people.

This passage calls our attention to the paradox of divine activity in the Scripture. God's saving work was and is planned and will come to pass. The Lord's doing sometimes/often involves judgement, yet in that punishment, the promise for good continues to give hope. Being in exile is one of the cruelest punishments known. The Hebrews longed for their home, just as we long for a return to normalcy.

Today, our exile is the isolation that bears down on us because of Covid. When will this current exile end? We can see a faint light at the end of this extremely long tunnel that we call Covid. Remember that our hope and our encouragement comes from God.

Remember and rest in the words from God:

<sup>10</sup>For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places

where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

**Prayer:**

Holy God, inspire us to remember your promises that encourage us in our exile. Amen.

**Thursday, February 4 - Psalm 147**  
**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**  
***Praise for God's Care for Jerusalem***

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

<sup>2</sup> The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

<sup>3</sup> He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.

<sup>4</sup> He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.

<sup>5</sup> Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

<sup>6</sup> The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground.

<sup>7</sup> Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre.

<sup>8</sup> He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills.

<sup>9</sup> He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.

<sup>10</sup> His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; <sup>11</sup> but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

**Devotion:**

This Psalm is usually broken into three sections: V1-6; 7-11 and 12-20. Our devotion will attempt to cover sections one and two.

Each section begins with an imperative and is bounded by *hallelujah* and the observation concerning praise. Following verse one are the reasons to praise: Because God is gracious, the Lord gathers the outcasts of Israel, the Lord builds up Jerusalem; he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds; he names the stars; casts the wicked to the ground. There are ample reasons to give God praise.



In the second section we are implored to sing praise to God with thanksgiving in our hearts. Why? Because God takes care of the earth by covering the heavens with clouds, supplies rain for the earth which causes grass to grow to feed the animals. God's delight is not in the swift or the strong, but with those who fear him, who hope in his steadfast love.

We are encouraged because the God who created us also has a desire to have a relationship with you and me. If we doubt God's provision for us, all we have to do is look at the earth and observe the tenderness which God bestows on it. Aren't you and I more important than the earth? Yes, and this is because of the words found in the Gospel of Luke, 12:27-28.

"Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>28</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you -- you of little faith!"

Friend, are you troubled? Do you doubt God's provision? God is ready, willing and more than able to meet you in your need -- ask and the Lord will provide.

**Prayer:**

God, our provider, you wait for your children to call upon your name and seek your presence. Teach us that nothing is too small or insignificant to you. Thank you for always being our refuge. Amen.

**Friday, February 5 - Galatians 5:2-15**  
**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**  
***The Nature of Christian Freedom***

<sup>2</sup>Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup>Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. <sup>4</sup>You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup>For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

<sup>7</sup>You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup>Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup>A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. <sup>10</sup>I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. <sup>11</sup>But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. <sup>12</sup>I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup> If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

### **Devotion:**

Paul's writing is both justified and abhorred. It is justified because Paul warns against any standard for Christians except faith in Christ. It is abhorred because circumcision remains an issue for the church. Paul thinks that it would be a mistake for the Galatians to be circumcised, and writes very forcefully about the issue. For today's Christian, what is all the fuss about?

Paul states in verse 6 that there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision in Christ. The only thing that counts is faith working through love. If a Christian convert agrees to be circumcised, then they are reverting back to the Jewish roots. Circumcision is a backward step into the Law, a step that leads to slavery. For Paul, the Law returns a person to slavery and if a person can be saved through the Law, then Christ died for nothing. In Paul's mind, the Galatians will nullify the grace of God as they become circumcised.

There is a point that is easy to overlook. Just as Franklin Baptist has membership requirements, circumcision was a requirement to become a believing Jew. If the Galatians underwent circumcision, then they were taking a step backward. In effect, their actions were negating the actions of Christ.

Circumcision has been replaced by faith working through love.

In essence, the only requirement to become a part of God's family is to believe. And if we believe, then that belief will manifest itself by our faith working through love. Our faith, kindled by God, will necessarily involve action on our part. Faith working through love is the power of God at work in a person to change the world. The type of faith that Paul writes about is not dependent on doctrinal issues, it is an active faith that springs from God himself and concerns God's action in our world.

### **Prayer:**

Faithful God, our sure source of comfort and strength, remain with us during these days of Covid. Amen.