



## Daily Devotionals – September 11 to September 17, 2021

By Dr. Charles Qualls and Rev. Steve Gibson -- Franklin Baptist Church

**September 11 - Acts 7:9-16**

**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**

***Stephen's Speech before the Council***

<sup>9</sup>“The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favor and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. <sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all; <sup>15</sup> so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors, <sup>16</sup> and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

### **Devotion:**

In Acts Chapter 7, Stephen recites the salvation history of Israel. This history begins with God's promise to Abraham (7:2-8). Stephen picks up on Peter's speech and continues it with an explanation that God's ultimate intent was to bless all the families of the earth. This was a conditional salvation that was based upon the repentance of Israel. Abraham's wandering was depicted as following God's directions to move from place to place. The promise moves from Abraham to Jacob to Joseph to Jesus and now Stephen.

This wild tale is summed up in Joseph's answer to his brothers when they discovered that the brother they thought they had killed was alive. Joseph's brothers were afraid that they would bear Joseph's wrath. Instead he answered in a completely different manner, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Joseph was a man who appeared to turn disaster into triumph. If you recall his story, he was sold as a slave to Pharaoh, was imprisoned and yet he would become the Prime Minister of Egypt. Stephen's account could be summed up by two words: Grace and wisdom. William Barclay states, “Grace is a lovely word...it comes to mean the beauty of character. ... Joseph had a charm about him which was a good man.” Although treated unfairly by his brothers, he did not allow that to influence his life. He served each position, whether slave or prime minister, in the same fashion. He gave his best every single day. Stephen's grace was on display every day.

Wisdom, though a difficult word to define, is best illustrated by Joseph's life. Wisdom is, in essence, the ability to see things as God sees them. Stephen portrays Joseph as a typical prophet and patterns his ministry after him. And as such, Stephen's destiny, like Joseph's, is in God's hands.

What can we learn from this passage?

- 1) We need to look beyond the present to see the future.
- 2) It is a necessity to trust God in the present and the future.

- 3) We must be faithful to God's vision, not ours.
- 4) Our faithful service becomes our ministry, which is our gift to God.

**Prayer:**

Timeless God, encourage us to look beyond the present day situation to that future day when your kingdom fully comes on the earth. Amen.

**September 12 - Matthew 6:7-15**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***Do Not Be Like 'Them;' Just Be Yourself***

7 "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

**Devotion:**

*And, another thing while I have you...*

If you've ever uttered this phrase, then perhaps in Matthew 6 you may sympathize with the context that led to Jesus giving us a gift -- "The Lord's Prayer." Also referred to as "The Model Prayer," this same basic outline for prayer is paralleled in Luke 11. (Although there, the explanation is that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray!) Here, Matthew suggests that this happens as a natural part of Jesus' larger teachings that we know as "The Sermon on the Mount." These stretch from chapter 5 through chapter 7 in Matthew's gospel.

For our purposes today, I want us to feel invited...encouraged even...to approach God on our most genuine and sincere terms. If you feel unworthy, you're in just the right spirit to approach God. If you feel like you don't know how, you're probably in the perfect frame of mind to commune with the Divine.

Jesus has seen the conflated, showy and calculated religious efforts of the falsely pious. He wants us to know that God is not interested. If God is much of a God at all, then our Lord sees and hears the difference between religion-for-show versus our most humble and sincere prayers. Just before this, Jesus has taught on public "alms-giving."

In fact, let's close by looking at what Jesus said just before our scripture today -- *"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

**Prayer:**

Lord, help us to feel invited to approach you just as we are. Not for show. And not in fear that our prayers won't be "good enough." Instead, may we know that what you long for most -- is just exactly whatever we have to offer most sincerely. Amen.

## September 13 - Matthew 18:21-35

by Dr. Charles Qualls

### *How Often Should I Forgive?*

18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

#### **Devotion:**

In a previous devotion, I talked about some of the dynamics of "forgiveness." I discussed at length some of the risks or vulnerabilities of forgiveness. I also reminded you of several things that forgiveness is not.

For instance, forgiveness is not --

- Acting as though the offense never happened. It did, and nothing will change that.
- An obligation to try to "forget," for we are not as good at that as God pledges to be.
- An obligation to resume or continue on in a relationship that has been abusive or otherwise damaging. Sometimes, despite forgiving, we make the healthful decision to move on in life without a person who is too unhealthy to be with.
- An instant soothing of painful feelings we may have as a result of what happened. Sometimes, that grief and pain management takes a while!

Today, though, I want us to place Jesus' teachings on forgiveness within God's larger economy of grace. Because the "math" of forgiveness doesn't seem to add up at first blush. Jesus is introducing a parable here. The question that prompted this is born of the Mosaic Law and the legalistic mindset the Jewish people had. You might hear the question better this way -- "*Lord...just tell me precisely how many times I am obligated to forgive someone before I get to let loose on them like I really want to!*"

You may remember that most of Jesus' parables contained some exaggeration within them. No doubt, Peter was expecting a small maybe even perfect number like 7. Yes, 7 times should do. So, to make his point that forgiveness was a practice of grace rather than one of math...Jesus exaggerated. ***Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*** (Some translations say "70 x 7" which equals 490!) In other words, basically

infinite. Then came the parable to illustrate and teach. To a large extent, the grace we extend is the same standard by which we will be treated.

You see, the Gospel's great news includes the notion that in God's economy, things aren't always fair. Sometimes, what we receive from God is better than what would've been fair and understandable. By the way, if you heard my sermon last Sunday -- this text today is what Jesus taught in the very next verse. They are two connected parts of a larger whole. Hmmm...

**Prayer:**

Lord, help us when we need to forgive. It's not easy. But when we need to be forgiven, we sure hope someone else will. May we be humble. Amen.

**September 14 - Psalm 77**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***God's Mighty Deeds Recalled***

1 I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. 2 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. 3 I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. *Selah*

4 You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. 5 I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. 6 I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: 7 "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? 8 Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" *Selah*

10 And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." 11 I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. 12 I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. 13 Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? 14 You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. 15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

16 When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. 17 The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. 18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. 19 Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

**Devotion:**

You won't find much from Psalm 77 that is embroidered on a throw-pillow at your local Christian bookstore. You won't find pop-Christian t-shirts with quotes from this psalm, probably, nor bumper-stickers on the backs of cars drawn from here. It's tough to sell --

***"Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"***

No, on its surface this psalm is not *sweet, inspiring, positive* or *worshipful* -- to use words that some might employ in their reaction. But it just may be where YOU are today. Or in this season. It certainly is probably where all of us have been at some point. Which is exactly one part of its value. This is a psalm for all your other days.

One writer has compared this psalm to a valued poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.

***That loss is common would not make  
My own less bitter, rather more.  
Too common! Never morning wore  
To evening, but some heart did break.***

“Not a morbid preoccupation with loss or a secret delight in doubt, but the fact that individual perplexity seems to find solace in the fact of the universality of human uncertainty.” That’s what the commentary writer says. Let me try it the way you and I are used to hearing it put -- *misery loves company*.

Okay. What’s here for us? Read these words from the psalm and tell me you haven’t been so troubled that you don’t relate. If you take this psalm line by line, especially in its first half, the writer is chronicling the most troubled dark night(s) you may have had. Read these words and tell me your doubts about God haven’t sounded this way a time or three. Right?

What encourages me here is that the psalmist eventually lands in a place where their faith can still be affirmed. He is reaching back into the old, old story and telling of where God has been with humanity. He is bearing witness to his own faith story here, too. He draws upon the memories of his faith. I once interviewed a man for a magazine article on marriage. He and his wife had gone to the brink of divorce. One night, they went out to dinner to sort through things. They discovered that the thin thread they both still held onto was “...the memory of the fact that we had once loved each other deeply.”

**Prayer:**

Lord, in our worst nights may we have the honesty of this writer’s spirit. In our deepest doubts, may we have the memory that you have been a Mighty presence in our lives. Help us to follow the trail of testimony back to the light of your power! Amen.

**September 15 - Romans 14:13-15:2**

**by Dr. Charles Qualls**

***Do Not Make Another Stumble***

13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. 19 Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; 21 it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. 22 The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. 23 But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

***Please Others, Not Yourself***

15 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.

**Devotion:**

Let me start here. If you walk away from this today thinking that what you've just read is a little too open-minded, then your argument is actually with the Apostle Paul and our Holy scripture. Having said that, let me try to shine some light on this and see what we can take away from it.

The new church had been built largely around Jews. Even in Rome, the planting of the church and its base culture/practices were strongly informed by the very same Jewish roots that Paul shared. A good number of early Jewish Christians had fled there. The Law of Moses, the kosher practices and much of the early theology was really just transplanted Judaism with a Jesus flavor. So, it wasn't surprising that a good bit of Rome's arguments -- both internally and with their neighbors -- was around some of the legalism still latent from their old faith understandings.

Some meat was okay to eat, other meats were unclean. Some understandings of wine were permissive, others were not. Similarly at Jerusalem, they argued over whether a Gentile who wished to follow Jesus ought to become a Jew first and then be baptized into the Christian "way." Paul was tired of refereeing it all.

The retired Richmond pastor Ray Spence handles this passage beautifully. He says, "What Paul was basically trying to get across was this. *'If you believe it's okay to eat meat, then fine...eat meat to the glory of God. If you don't think it's okay to eat meat, then fine...don't eat meat, to the glory of God. If you want to drink wine, drink wine. If you don't want to drink wine, then don't drink wine. But stop tearing each other up with the little stuff. Life is hard enough without us Christians squabbling and ruining our witness over stuff like this. Just get away from each other if you can't do any better than that!'*"

I think the last 2 verses of our passage today cap it all off --

***15 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.***

Do you know why I think that's so important? Because here, Paul is summing it all up with Jesus' "Golden Rule." I grow weary of two things as a pastor in this age:

- 1) Christians beating me and each other up over little ticky-tack things, and
- 2) Wondering why we Christians can't "get" what Jesus said -- "***Love your neighbor as yourself.***"

Generosity matters more than always getting your way. Peace in the fellowship is more important than so many of the things folks want to practically go to war with each other over. Paint colors, the size of the worship bulletin, the color or size of a sign, whether we sing enough "old songs" or new songs. Just wear-and-tear. And God weeps.

**Prayer:**

Lord, forgive us when we lose perspective. Help us to do better. Amen.

**September 16 - Mark 11:20-25**

**by Rev. Steven R. Gibson**

***The Lesson from the Withered Fig Tree***

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>21</sup> Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup> "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

**Devotion:**

I wonder how many times people had shouted, "Rabbi, look!" This is the attention grabbing words that had surely been directed at Jesus throughout his ministry. The fig tree story follows the account of Jesus' last week on earth. The fig tree was the object of Jesus' anger because there was no fruit on it, but yet appeared to have fruit because of its appearance. This is followed by the cleansing of the temple (v15-17), the chief priests and scribes looking for a way to kill Jesus. What a start to Holy Week!

Today's passage recounts what happened when the disciples and Jesus traveled back into Jerusalem the next morning. As Peter exclaimed that the fig tree was withered away, even to its roots, Jesus answers his exclamation in an unconventional way extolling the disciples to "Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. <sup>25</sup> "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." (v17-25)

Have you ever spoken to a mountain and told it to move? Do you believe that anything that you ask in prayer will be given to you?

This passage frightens me and yet at the same time comforts me. It frightens me because the fig tree obviously refers to the temple -- the same temple that housed Israel's traditions, worship and values. The scribes and chief priests were continuing down the path of their sacrificial worship, yet deep down something has gone astray. The outward appearance was not indicative of its health. But, as troubling as the fig tree is, Jesus pivots to faith.

This scene points out that the worship in the temple had gone terribly wrong. The business of the temple had overtaken the ministry of pouring oneself out to the world as a service to God and to our neighbor. The temple's leadership had focused only inward and self-serving, rather than focusing outward. The temple had become a closed house for its members. Jesus' daring judgement causes our radar to go on high alert, because this hits close to home.

Churches must operate in a transparent manner and be aware of the "trap" of serving only its members. Churches must adopt the philosophy of Jesus who saw everyone as worthy of God's grace -- even those who are not like we are! Ethicist Donald Schrivr describes Christ's miracle of grace as "a company of forgiven forgivers."

In our lives, we discover the need of forgiveness, as well as the need to forgive. The truth is this -- if we are to be forgiven, then we must forgive.

Professor George Dewy Carter of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary once proclaimed in Chapel the following words. These words are now on a plaque outside the Chapel.

- It is not enough to profess.
- We have to practice.
- It is not enough to talk.
- We have to do.
- It is not enough to promise.
- We have to embody the promise.
- It is not enough to say. "Ain't it awful."
- We have got to get close to hurt.

In my mind, this portion should also include verse 26, "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

**Prayer:**

Lord of all creation, prompt us to not only love, but also to forgive. Amen

**September 17 - Exodus 15:22-27**

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

***Bitter Water Made Sweet***

<sup>22</sup> Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. <sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. <sup>24</sup> And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" <sup>25</sup> He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. <sup>26</sup> He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you."

<sup>27</sup> Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

**Devotion:**

Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink! As a child I would repeat that saying without any understanding of its consequences. Human life is dependent upon water to sustain life and no one except God can make water. As our physical bodies require water, so our spiritual bodies require God. A life without water is no life indeed, just as a life without God is no life indeed.

In today's passage, the Israelites experienced a water shortage. It is interesting to note that the water shortage was experienced after a **three-day** journey. It is fascinating that three days have connotations in both the Old and New Testament. The Israelites were leaving the Red Sea and they found their first body of water at Marah, but they could not drink it because of its bitterness. So what happened next? The people complained to their leader Moses -- doesn't this sound familiar?

Moses cried out to God, who provided relief in the form of a piece of wood, which Moses threw into the water and the water became sweet. Following this, the Lord made a statute and an ordinance and then put the people to the test. "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you." (V26)

Here we see a prescription for the people's safety and well-being. The people are utterly dependent upon God -- without God their life is precarious, at the best. Just as we depend upon God for water, we also depend upon God for life. In John's Gospel, water takes on a new aspect with the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. (John 4:7-15). Because life cannot exist without water, we cannot exist without the gift of life.

God's promise goes further because God is the one who heals the people. Healing involves many aspects of life -- to restore persons and communities and the whole earth to their rightful status of health. A living and active God is involved in all areas of our lives and as such, we should act in a manner that is pleasing to God.

The sum of this passage is that God calls all of us to obedience and our obedience will discover a new vision of our shared life together. Obedience leads to healing and often requires an intentional break with the old way. While healing is not cheap, those who trust the decrees of God and make the break with their prior life will find an oasis with abundant sweet water at the end of their journey. Robert Lowery wrote this text in 1864:



Ere we reach the shining river, lay we every burden down;

Grace our spirits will deliver, and provide a robe and a crown.

Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river;

Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

**Prayer:**

Persistent God, please stay with us on life's journey. Amen.