



Daily Devotionals – December 11 to December 17, 2021

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

December 11 - Philippians 3:7-11

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

Forgetting What is Behind

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Devotion

This Advent is so very different. We are trying to prepare for the Christ Child, yet our hearts are not festive. We put up lights and trees, but somehow this seems like a futile effort. After all, why go to all of this in such an uncertain time.

While we may not know for sure, I surmise that the Apostle Paul may well have had some of the very emotions that we experience. Paul had devoted his entire life toward the making of Jesus Christ known to all. Ever since that dramatic scene of the Damascus Road, Saul's name was changed to Paul. And ever since that fateful day, Paul's ministry was to share Christ with the Gentiles -- yes, even you and I!

I'm certain that Paul became weary in repeating how his name was changed (not the actual event, but reminding people that he once was Saul, but now is Paul). After what seemed like the millionth question, I would be very surprised if Paul did not grow weary in his ministry.

Likewise, today it is easy to grow fatigued in ministry. Today with all of the Covid news, we kind of become inoculated with the news. We grieve for what was, yet we long for what will be. While we wait for what will happen with Covid, we continue to pray. We pray for that promised time "when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling; and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing." (Edmund H. Sears, 1849)

I so look forward to the singing of Christmas Carols with our church family, but sadly, that will not happen this year. So, what are we to do? I believe that we should adopt Paul's perspective as found in verses 10 and 11:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming
like him in his death, 11 if somehow
I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

I am convinced, dear friends, that our celebration will be festive if we adopt Paul's passion and perspective.

Prayer:

Loving and all present God, thank you for the privilege of knowing, serving and celebrating your most amazing love. Amen.

December 12 - Matthew 21:28-32

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The Parable of the Two Sons

28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Devotion:

What do you think?

That is the question we are asked in v28 at the beginning of the parable. That will be the same question we are left to deal with even as this devotion ends. *What do you think?* is one of the important questions each of us must attend to any time we read from the Bible.

Jesus was at the temple. Again. He had gone there, as was his custom. Several momentous trips to the temple in previous days had already occurred. Jesus had taken a whip and driven out the money changers a few days ago. He had healed the blind and the lame, which only caused more trouble. Children had cried out to Jesus, acknowledging his greatness. The religious authorities were nonplussed about all this. Now on his way in on this day, he has cursed the fig tree.

You can feel the building momentum. The showdown at Calvary looms just ahead here in Matthew's gospel. Now, Jesus gets into an exchange with the temple leaders wherein they question his authority. This parable we read today is the second portion of his response to them. Its central message is not complicated to crack.

One son in the parable hesitated at first, but was eventually faithful in doing what his father had asked. The other son was all talk. He said he would go and work in the vineyard, but did not. Initially, we aren't thrilled with either of them. When Jesus asked the leaders who then had done the will of the father, they readily agreed it was the first son. Then Jesus turned the parable on them by saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter into God's kingdom before they did. In other words, even "sinners" had understood who he was. But the religious leaders did not seem to.

This Advent, we get a fresh chance to be reminded what the voice of God sounds like. We get another chance to remember who our Master is. At Advent, we get a renewed charge to go forth and do faithfully as the Babe has sent us. *What do you think?*

Prayer:

Lord, soften our hearts. Help us, O God, to be faithful not just in talking about you, but in doing what you ask of us. Talk is cheap, Lord. May we ever remember. Amen.

December 13 - John 1:6-8, 19-28

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Who Are You?

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Devotion:

Who are you?

That is another important question to be asking this Advent, or any other. This time, the question is posed to John the Baptist. But all of this season gives us chance after chance to ask Jesus the very same thing. *Who are you?*

John the Baptist had his own answer ready when asked. "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord...'*" He was the one announcing the awaited Messiah. God had looked upon humanity and shown favor in the form and presence of the Christ child. Now, in John's preaching, it was time for the people to understand that God had come near.

It's fascinating what else John says about this one whom he is to announce. "I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandal." That is, John did not even see himself worthy to wash Jesus' feet. This dirty job normally reserved for a servant was one that John did not feel he should even do. That is how lofty a conclusion he had reached about God's son sent to live among us. *Emanuel. God with us.*

You and I live our lives and sometimes we also encounter God-come-near. We reach way back into the recesses of our very souls and come out with the most honest question we can think of: *Who are you?* What you or I conclude will show how we are going to live. For our beliefs about God-in-Christ shape our ethics, our values and our actions. So, what is your answer? Do you trust the Jesus of the scriptures? Who IS he, when you get up close to him?

Prayer:

Lord, this Advent may we cease holding you at arm's length. May we fight through our defenses and let you instead come to us. That we may behold you in truth. Amen.

December 14 - Ephesians 6:10-17

by Dr. Charles Qualls

The Whole Armor of God

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the

shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Devotion:

Okay, I think a lot of Christians who follow what I refer to as “pop-Christianity” can get a little silly with this stretch of scripture. I’ll confess that. I think they rob Paul of the richness he intended with this important commendation to the Ephesians. I am also not so given to “...ghosties, ghoulies, hobgoblins and things that go ‘bump!’ in the night.” So, I probably mean something different from some of you when we read the apostle’s mention of “spiritual forces of evil.” In fact, I am convinced that my understanding of that phrase may well be scarier and more dangerous than any notions of a little red guy with a pitchfork tail who’s out to make your favorite football team lose this Sunday.

So, what DO I think Paul was telling the Ephesians here? What could we hear on an Advent Monday from this that could grow our faith? (Notice, my aim is always to disciple you, rather than to “make you feel good, warm or fuzzy.”) I will revel you with a little parable that I think applies. You’ve heard it before, maybe even months ago in a daily devotion here.

A young couple had just put their young daughter to bed one night. She was tucked in upstairs, and that often signaled the part of their night where they caught up on deferred things. Maybe the dishes still needed to be washed. They could now. Maybe their favorite show was coming on. They would watch it now. So, on that night she had just gotten to sleep when they heard a loud “thud!” overhead.

Both of them rushed up the staircase, taking care not to trip and get hurt. They threw her door open and found their little daughter sitting on the floor crying. She had fallen out of bed. They scooped her up, and the Mom brushed her hair out of her face while the Dad dried her tears. Finally, one of them asked “Honey, what happened?”

The little girl replied, “I guess I fell asleep too close to where I got in.”

Still today, if we view the apostle Paul’s counsel here as practical and thorough, his prescription for how a Christian ought to live each day is meaningful. His words were written to a people who were impressive, but who needed to take more seriously the notion of actually reshaping their lives with their faith rather than just claiming it as a means to Salvation. He didn’t want them to fall asleep so close to where they got in.

If I were to summarize Paul here, he might be saying, “Life is hard enough. Don’t make it harder on each other or on yourselves. Live like you actually believe what you claim to believe. Be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.”

Prayer:

Lord, this Advent may we find moments...even just moments...where we push past the challenges of the season. And past the warm feelings of the season. Instead, may we be reflections of your integrity, demonstrations of your truth and confirmations of your love. Amen.

December 15 - Acts 3:17-4:4

by Dr. Charles Qualls

Times of Refreshing

17 “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. 18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, 20 so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, 21 who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. 22 Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he

tells you. 23 And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people.' 24 And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. 25 You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' 26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

4 While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, 2 much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. 3 So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

Devotion:

Peter and John were talking with a large gathering of people in Jerusalem. Jesus had only recently ascended to Heaven after the Resurrection and a period of days when he appeared to them. Now, the Holy Spirit had descended upon the early church. The fledgling Christian movement was hitting a new stride.

This Advent as we reflect our way toward the celebration of Christ's birth, moments like these are precious. This is how our faith was nurtured and passed along until now. These two men, who had traveled and ministered with Jesus, were telling about him firsthand. So, if you need to now, go back and read what they are saying about who Jesus was.

Meanwhile, the temple police enforced the prevailing culture. They didn't like what these Jewish men were saying, so they had them locked up! Peter and John are confronting the church with the reality that it killed Jesus. The Crucifixion happened because a majority were silent while a minority called for him to be put to death. Jesus was popular. He had a large following. Still, because he posed a threat to the leadership he was done away with. The majority of the people stayed silent, and were therefore complicit in Jesus' execution.

This Advent, like the crowd in Acts 3 who have had the light come on finally -- what is it that the Lord might like to make clear to you or me? What is it that we may finally see clearly this year of years? Push aside the American Church's struggles that would once again make us feel so in the minority. Push aside popular culture's indifference to our faith. For this moment, this is between you and the Holy Spirit. Just like in Acts 3.

Prayer:

God of our hearts, speak to us clearly. Help us to see with clarity what it's time for us to see. That could vary for each of us. But at Advent, we share a need to see the Christ Child once again for who he is. Make this a time of refreshing. Amen.

December 16 - Mark 9:9-13

by Rev. Steven R. Gibson

The Coming of Elijah

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. ¹¹ Then they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" ¹² He said to them, "Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?" ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him."

Devotion:

If your spiritual journey resembles mine, then your journey asks questions. Questions about both specifics and details in the here and now and questions concerning items that are large scale and yet to come. Questions about my family and yours and the fates of our friends. Our questions are poignant, especially this Advent when we have the questions and apparent contradictions of our faith. How do we find the answers to our

questions? How can we walk as the prophet Isaiah said, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light?" (Isaiah 9: 2a)

Here is a summary of the backstory. The mountaintop experience was not for everyone, only Peter, James and John were permitted to travel with Jesus to the top. Having been at the mountaintop, and experienced all that occurred, the disciples had many pressing questions of Jesus as they began their journey down the mountain. But, the questions began even before they began their journey. At the top of the mountain, Jesus was transfigured and his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Remember that it was Peter who wanted to build three dwellings on the mountaintop, one each for Elijah and Moses who joined Jesus at the mountaintop. It was then that a voice from a cloud (God) spoke to them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7) After God spoke, the disciples found only Jesus.

This must have been difficult for the disciples because they followed Jesus' call. It must have been hard for the disciples because they were not quick learners. It was challenging for the disciples to apply the teachings of Jesus to their lives. Although not in the passage, can't you hear one or more of the disciples saying, "We've never done it that way." Or, "If Jesus would only learn to do ministry *my way* everything would be great." Added to their anxiety was the command of Jesus to keep silent about the glorious vision they had just witnessed. Jesus explained his true identity and purpose and that it must remain secret a little while longer. Leanne Pearce Reed has this to say about this scene:

"For the first time Jesus explained that his true identity may be shared only after his death and resurrection. Now the reason for the silence became clear: The glory manifest on the mountaintop does not reveal the full identity of Jesus. His glory and His suffering could not be separated; the glory of the mountaintop must be understood in light of his suffering, death, and resurrection to come."

We have arrived at the main point of this passage -- to teach us how difficult it is to follow Jesus. Discipleship is not for the faint of heart! This leads us to the great divide in today's church: The prosperity theology teaches that your faith will be rewarded in this lifetime. Prosperity theology teaches that you will be rewarded financially because of your faith. The Gospel of Jesus teaches that we must lose our life in order to gain life. Jesus gave the concrete example of Elijah, who returned as John the Baptist and was treated terribly, "they did to him whatever they pleased" (V13). As difficult as it was and is to understand, Jesus had to suffer and die before he could be resurrected into newness of life.

While this concept of discipleship is very challenging, it also offers comfort. We can find comfort that suffering does not indicate God's absence -- most of God's faithful servants face suffering and adversity. Even while we are suffering, we take heart that the Son of Man who suffers with us is also the Son of God who reigns in glory. Suffering may well be a part of our stories, but suffering is not the final word!

Prayer:

All powerful God, thank you for walking with us, even in the midst of our suffering. Amen.

December 17 - Hebrews 1:1-4
by Rev. Steven R. Gibson
God Has Spoken by His Son

¹ Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Devotion:

The book of Hebrews is written with literary artistry that is unmatched in the New Testament. This letter is often referred to as a sermon due to its logical development of themes. The book opens with a concise statement of faith and right out of the shoot acknowledges that God is the object of both the Old and New Testaments. This God has spoken through the prophets of old, but in these last days has spoken to us by a Son. The connotation is obvious, the prophets were sent to prepare the people for the coming of the Son, Jesus. This Son is not any son, but is appointed by God to be the heir of all things. This Son, Jesus, was God's agent of creation. This Son, Jesus, is the perfect representation and reflection of God's glory. This Son, Jesus, sustains all things with his powerful word. The power and authority of Jesus is emphasized by his sitting down at the right side of the majesty on high, thus signaling his completed work for our behalf. He is superior to even the angels because he inherited a name that is better than theirs. To sum it up, Jesus is all powerful.

The opening statement of faith leads us to believe that a lengthy sermon is about to begin, and yes it does. We are reminded that God still speaks, probably not so loudly that everyone might hear, but rather softly, consistently and lovingly. God speaks -- are we anticipating God's word?

We travel this Advent down a familiar path, yet with uncertainty in our midst. We wait in silence. We anticipate in silence. We prepare in silence. Much of our lives are so very different that we are on edge. Friends, the good news this Advent is found in the Christ, whose birth we anticipate. This Christ has traveled with other pilgrims, just like us. If you feel depressed, take solace because others are also depressed. It is when we hunker down in our homes that we miss the familiar.

I believe that this season of Covid is teaching us how to hope. We all hope for that day when our normal returns, but that may not happen. Maybe one of the concepts that God is trying to teach us is that following the Covid restrictions the world might be ready for a reset. Hopefully we all have learned that Jesus Christ is sufficient for all of us.

Light the fire, the fire of life,
let the candle reveal his glory.
Jesus Christ has come to earth
and for us shall come again.

David Montoya, 1997
Celebrating Grace Hymnal, 82

Even so Lord Jesus, quickly come!

Prayer:

Come to us Lord, even in our darkness. Give strength to us that we might continue our journeys. Forgive us when we lose sight of your power and glory. Amen.