

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED

VOLUME 1

50 DAYS WITH THE DISCIPLES OF THE APOSTLES



The Faith Once Delivered Volume 1:

50 Days with the Disciples of the Apostles

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Baker House Books

The Faith Once Delivered Volume 1: 50 Days with the Disciples of the Apostles

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Published by
Baker House Books
Spring, Texas

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Except - Quotations from The Shepherd of Hermas are from:
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/ante-nicene/vol-2-second-century/pastor-of-hermas/>

ISBN:

Library of Congress:

Edited by: Phil Baker

Cover design by: Phil Baker

For my Sunday night family:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,
for He who promised is faithful;
and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,
not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another;
and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

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Introduction

In 2014, I started a blog featuring excerpts from writings of the earliest Christians showing what they believed about various issues. At first, each post contained a few paragraphs of direct quotes without commentary, but eventually they turned into longer entries with shorter quotes and several paragraphs of devotional-style commentary. In 2016 I wrote my first book, *New: Wineskins and the Simple Words of Christ*, and then in 2017 I pivoted from blogging to podcasting. Two additional books followed with 2021's *Faithful Witness: The Early Church's Theology of Martyrdom* and 2023's *The Final Abominable Temple*.

All of these endeavors involved exposing readers to the beliefs of the earliest Christians, and my newest project is no different. In *The Faith Once Delivered Volume 1: 50 Days with the Disciples of the Apostles*, I show you, the reader, how the second generation of Jesus followers continued to believe, teach and live the words of our Lord. Imagine spending 50 days with men like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, who were personally disciplined by the original Apostles! I encourage you to join me on this journey and let these ancient writings deepen and refine your faith.

The Didache

Day 1

“There are two Ways: a Way of Life and a Way of Death, and the difference between these two Ways is great.”

- The Didache

The Didache, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*, is believed to be the earliest Christian document outside of the New Testament. It gives invaluable insight into Jewish followers of Jesus' understanding that the Old Testament Scriptures find their fulfillment in Him. The opening words state that there are two paths we can choose: the way of life, and the way of death. The original readers would immediately notice the similarity of that statement to the last book of the Pentateuch: Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28-30, the Lord sets before the Israelites two paths: The way of life and blessing, and the alternative way of death and cursing. The Lord then tells the people through Moses, *“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. ... But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14).”*

The Apostle Paul, also a Jewish follower of Jesus, quotes these same verses in Romans 10:5-10. However, instead of speaking about the Mosaic Law, Paul applies these verses to how one obtains the righteousness God desires, which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. For Paul, what is the commandment which is not too difficult for anyone to keep? *“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (10:9-10).”* At its core, belief in and love for the Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of the way of life.

Will you to choose life and submit to His Lordship today?

Day 2

"The Way of Life is this: Thous shalt love first the Lord thy Creator, and secondly thy neighbour as thyself; and thou shalt do nothing to any man that thou would not wish to be done to thyself."

- The Didache

The author of the Didache summarizes the way of life by citing the two greatest commandments. First: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Second: love your neighbor as yourself. In order to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must first love the Lord God and agree with His definition of love. Similarly, to fulfill the first commandment we must faithfully keep the second, for to love Him is to keep His commandments.

When an expert in the Mosaic law asked Jesus to explain the second greatest commandment, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Here, we see Jesus' words lived out, when the Samaritan man mercifully does good to one who despises him and gives without expecting anything in return. Whenever I read that parable, I am reminded of the father of a demonized boy who cried out to Jesus, *"I do believe; help my unbelief"* (Mark 9:24)! In like manner, I plead with my heavenly Father, "I do love You, Lord, but help me overcome my lack of love!" Our God gives grace to the humble, and His Holy Spirit will help us learn to walk as Jesus walked.

To whom is Jesus calling you to demonstrate the life-giving way of mercy?

Day 3

“What you may learn from those words is to bless them that curse you, to pray for your enemies, and to fast for your persecutors. For where is the merit in loving only those who return your love? Even the heathens do as much as that. But if you love those who hate you, you will have nobody to be your enemy.”

- The Didache

Before his conversion, the Apostle Paul was an enemy of the cross, and convinced by the Scriptures that he must do all he could to rid the world of Jesus' disciples. However, as Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Jewish Christians, the risen and glorified Lord manifested Himself to Paul, blinded him, and commanded him to continue into Damascus to meet a follower of the way named Ananias. The Lord told Ananias in a vision what had just happened to the zealous Pharisee, and instructed him to lay hands on Paul so that he would regain his sight. Understandably, this confused and frightened Ananias, for he was well aware that Paul had been given orders from the chief priests to arrest disciples of Jesus.

Aren't you glad that Ananias submitted to the Lord and blessed Paul in both words and actions (Acts 9:1-19)? That day, an enemy of the gospel turned into a friend and brother in Christ. A persecutor became an apostle. A man devoted to the destruction of the Way became an ambassador for the kingdom of heaven.

How can you be like Ananias and fulfill your calling as a minister of reconciliation?

Day 4

“Do not equivocate in thought or speech, for a double tongue is a deadly snare; the words you speak should not be false or empty phrases, but fraught with purposeful action.”

- The Didache

The word ‘integrity’ shares many qualities with the mathematical term ‘integer’, which is a whole number. As followers of Jesus, we are to be whole, not fractured. What people see should be who we really are. Our words should be fulfilled in our actions.

Unfortunately, integrity appears to be an increasingly rare quality. However, those who possess it serve as a powerful witness of the wholly truthful and dependable character of our Lord. If you are feeling the prompting of the Holy Spirit to grow in this quality, start by being honest about this struggle. Be honest with yourself, honest with God, and honest with others. God is near to those who call upon Him in sincerity (Psalm 145:18).

Will you be single-minded in the pursuit of authenticity?

Day 5

“Never give way to anger, for anger leads to homicide. Likewise, refrain from fanaticism, quarreling, and hot-temperedness, for these too can breed homicide.”

- The Didache

When Cain and Abel walked the earth, there were no commandments calling them to give offerings to the Lord. Yet, out of an overflow of gratitude, Abel freely offered the best of his flock to the Lord. Perhaps in response to his brother's actions, Cain gave some of his crops. God looked favorably upon Abel's offering, but did not hold the same view toward Cain's. Cain soon became jealous, then angry, and eventually murdered his brother.

We must guard our hearts against jealousy and anger. Those sins crouch at our door with a desire to destroy us. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:26-27 that when we allow anger to go unchecked, we give the devil a foothold in our lives. In the Koine Greek, that phrase paints a picture of giving someone the key to your house. We must not allow jealousy and anger to have this kind of access. It is imperative that we gain control of them.

Will you humbly invite a trusted brother or sister in the Lord to pray for you in your war against anger and jealousy?

Day 6

"Do not be a grumbler, my son, for this leads to blasphemy."

- The Didache

In 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul draws our minds back to the Exodus generation, and implores us to learn from their mistakes. He writes, "Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall (1 Corinthians 10:8-12)."

Like Paul, the author of the Didache gives a strong warning against the subtle, yet sinister qualities of complaining and grumbling. Long before the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, the serpent in the Garden of Eden whispered lies about the Lord to Adam and Eve. The first couple soon took the devil's bait and began to doubt the goodness. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and believing that complaining spirit led to blasphemous idolatry.

We should not consider ourselves immune to the allure of grumbling and complaining. Rather, we should humbly attack this insidious temptation with the weapon of gratitude. Remember the goodness of God. Count your blessings. Every good and perfect gift in your life is from Him.

Will you take the time today to list your reasons for giving thanks to the Lord?

Day 7

"Judge with justice, reprove without fear or favour, and never be in two minds about your decision."

- The Didache

The pattern of the world is to do good to those who do good to us. Those who have their minds set on earthly things bless those who are believed to be beneficial. Thus, the wealthy, the powerful, the beautiful, the talented and the influential often receive special treatment. However, that is not the way of the kingdom of heaven. Our King calls us to judge righteously, and not according to the wisdom of the world (John 7:24).

Too often, we hear and read stories of elder and deacon boards who cover up corruption within church leadership, while imposing discipline on those who lovingly and carefully seek to expose those deeds of darkness. When these unfortunate situations occur, it is usually due to a lack of the fear of the Lord, who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts when He returns (1 Corinthians 4:5). The fear of man is a snare to the soul, but the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.

How has a fear of man affected your judgement in the past?

Day 8

"You are not to withhold your hand from your son or daughter, but to bring them up in the fear of God from their childhood. ... See that you do not neglect the commandments of the Lord, but keep them just as you received them, without any additions or subtractions of your own."

- The Didache

The best lesson we can teach our children is to fear God. However, as it is often said: the best lessons are caught rather than taught. Our kids learn to talk and walk by imitating us. For better or worse, their understanding of the Lord is often absorbed by them in the same manner.

To fear the Lord is to keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. It is to depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it (Psalm 34:11-14). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and by it we avoid the snares of death (Proverbs 14:26-27). The eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him by placing their hope in His loving kindness, for He will deliver their soul from death (Psalm 33:18-19).

Whether or not you have children, are those who are following you learning the fear of the Lord?

Day 9

“The procedure for baptizing is as follows. After rehearsing all the preliminaries, immerse in running water ‘In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’. If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then sprinkle water three times on the head ‘In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’. Both baptizer and baptized ought to fast before the baptism, as well as any others who can do so; but the candidate himself should be told to keep a fast for a day or two beforehand.”
- The Didache

The Didache shows how seriously the original followers of Jesus took the holy act of baptism. The early Christians would fast and pray with the one who was seeking to be baptized, and the candidate would earnestly spend that time repenting of his or her sins before entering the water. Similar to the way the Israelites transferred their allegiance from Pharaoh to Yahweh when passing through the Red Sea, during the baptism ceremony the candidate would renounce loyalty to Satan and then pledge his or her allegiance to the Lord Jesus.

Additionally, baptism is the primary way that we identify ourselves with Jesus' death and resurrection. I have found that one of the best analogies to baptism is marriage. There is a renunciation of the single life and any romantic ties to members of the opposite sex. A pledge is then given to honor this person above everyone else through anything life can bring one's way. It is a solemn commitment of forever though whatever may come. And like putting the ring on your spouse's finger, baptism is the sign of your new eternal commitment to Jesus and your new forever family.

Have you forsaken all others to follow Jesus for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in life and in death to your very last breath?

Day 10

"At the eucharist ... No one is to eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptized in the Name of the Lord; for the Lord's own saying applies here, 'Give not that which is holy unto dogs.' When all have partaken sufficiently, give thanks in these words: 'Thanks be to thee, holy Father, for thy sacred Name which thou hast caused to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and everlasting life which thou hast revealed to us through thy servant Jesus.'"

- *The Didache*

In 1 Corinthians 11:26, Paul writes of the Eucharist, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."* The ultimate Faithful Witness went to war on our behalf, and gave His body and blood to bring us safely into His kingdom. Each time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we prepare ourselves to enter into the same spiritual struggle to use our bodies and blood to demonstrate to the world the truth of the Gospel. Thus, it makes perfect sense that the early Christians would only allow baptized believers in Jesus to take the Lord's Supper.

Similar to the way baptism is analogous to getting married, the Lord's Supper is also designed to function like a renewal of your wedding vows to Jesus until He returns. Thus, in taking the Lord's Supper, we not only renew our unconditional commitment to Jesus and His Church, but also remember that He is coming again to set all things right and transform us to be like Him, eternally communing with our Bridegroom. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not just symbols; they are as serious as marital vows, and with them we pledge our loyalty to the victorious risen Lamb who is coming again to bring us to Himself.

The next time you take the Lord's supper, will you recommit yourself to singular allegiance to the returning King?

Day 11

"If anyone comes and instructs you on the foregoing lines, make him welcome. But should the instructor himself then turn round and introduce teaching of a different and subversive nature, pay no attention to him."

- The Didache

You will never find a perfect church. Additionally, you will never find a pastor, teacher or lay Christian who agrees with every aspect of your theology. Not even your spouse will adhere to your beliefs 100 percent. So, aside from one's character, what is the most important thing to look for in a Christian leader or teacher? The Didache says they must be someone who teaches the faith once delivered to the saints. Followers of Jesus must teach what Jesus taught, for Jesus commands His disciples to, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20)."*

I've heard sermons insinuating that the Sermon on the Mount functions as a new Mosaic Law to show us our need for Christ. They have said these commands are not actually meant to be followed by Jesus' disciples since they are impossible to keep perfectly. I've also read teachings stating that all of Jesus' commands before His statement, *"It is finished,"* are part of the Old Covenant. Again, if that were true, then New Covenant believers are not bound by those red letters in the Gospels. There are good examples of the early Christians being able to disagree while maintaining unity. However, they would not sit under teachings like these on the simple words of Christ.

How do you feel about the red letters of Scripture?

Day 12

“Assemble on the Lord’s Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until they have been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice. For this is the offering of which the Lord has said, ‘Everywhere and always bring me a sacrifice that is undefiled, for I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is the wonder of the nations.’”

- *The Didache*

Outside of the New Testament, this is the earliest description of a regular Christian gathering. Consider each aspect carefully, and compare them what you’ve experienced in church services. What did they value? What do we hold dear? What were they trying to accomplish? What are our goals?

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, a primary way His followers act as a light to the nations is through godly conflict resolution. The Didache leans heavily on Matthew 5 in placing reconciliation and unity among the brethren as an imperative, not just for the sake of the body of Christ, but for unbelievers as well. Excelling in this area functions as a form of evangelism, for Jesus told us that when we radiate the love and light of Christ, the world, *“will glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).”*

What can you do to be more of a reflection of the early Church in your gatherings?

Day 13

"You must choose for yourselves overseers and assistants who are worthy of the Lord: men who are humble and not eager for money, but sincere and approved."

- *The Didache*

The church is a body, not a business. Far too often, elder and deacon boards become dominated by financially successful businessmen in the hopes that those who understand how to run a worldly organization can bring prosperity to the church. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with using one's God-given abilities to make wealth. However, the Apostle Paul did not think one's business acumen or financial portfolio was even worthy of consideration when determining if one is qualified to be an overseer.

Similarly, the Didache states that the primary qualification for these vital roles is to be someone who is worthy of the Lord. This is a callback to Colossians 1:10, where the Apostle Paul prays that the church at Collosae would, *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects."* In this context, 'worthy' (*axiós*) carries the idea of living in a way that matches the life of Jesus, who sought to reflect the holy nature of His Father at all times (Colossians 1:15).

Thus, overseers and deacons should be gentle, modeling the truth that the meek will inherit the earth. They should not be lovers of money, but rather devoted to our true Master and His heavenly kingdom. Our leaders need to be honest men of integrity, reflecting the One who embodies Truth. Finally, we they must be people who have proven themselves to be those who seek to serve, and not to be served. Men like these are to be honored, for they are a blessing to the body of Christ.

What can you do to encourage the godly leaders in your fellowship?

Day 14

“Be watchful over your life; never let your lamps go out or your loins be ungirt, but keep yourselves always in readiness, for you can never be sure of the hour when our Lord may be coming. Come together often for spiritual improvement; because all the past years of your faith will be no good to you at the end, unless you have made yourselves perfect. In the last days of the world false prophets and deceivers will abound, sheep will be perverted and turn into wolves, and love will change to hate, for with the growth of lawlessness men will begin to hate their fellows and persecute them and betray them.”

- *The Didache*

The Didache warns of a large-scale, Judas-like apostasy taking place within Christianity during the last days. It then states that maintaining authentic Christian community is a vital component of enduring with Jesus until the end. There is no such thing as a lone wolf follower of Christ. We are sheep and need the other members of the flock to help us stay faithful to the Lord. John 21 shows Peter still struggling in his faith even after meeting the risen Jesus. The disciples could sense Peter’s critical need for godly fellowship, and refused to let him go fishing alone. To his credit, Peter humbly allowed his spiritual brothers to be there for him, and spent the rest of his years tending to the Lord’s flock.

Like Peter after his confession and denials of Christ, we often face spiritual attacks following both victories and failures. After victories, we are tempted to believe more in ourselves than in the Lord. After failures, we can be deceived into believing that the Lord is not strong enough to save. Both of these attitudes are examples of pride, which comes before a fall. Antithetical to pride is humility. When we humble ourselves in our fight against the devil, we choose to depend on God’s grace and in His ways.

In these last days, will you choose to humble yourself under the Lord’s hand, trust in Him with all of your heart, and not lean upon your own understanding?

Day 15

"Then the Deceiver of the World will show himself, pretending to be a Son of God and doing signs and wonders, and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will work such wickedness as there has never been since the beginning. After that, all humankind will come up for their fiery trial; multitudes of them will stumble and perish, but such as remain steadfast in the faith will be saved by him who was accursed."

- The Didache

Other than the issue of Jesus' Millennial reign, the main divisive eschatological topic in modern Christendom appears to be whether or not Christians will face the wrath of the Antichrist and experience martyrdom at his hands. The universal testimony of the earliest Christians is that followers of Jesus will be persecuted by the Antichrist, and many Christians will fall away from the faith during his reign of terror. Also, they believed that though Christians will experience the wrath of Satan and the Antichrist, true believers who faithfully persevere will not experience the wrath of God.

Though they did not believe they were destined for God's wrath, the early Church did not fear the wrath of Satan or his Antichrist. They were not afraid of living through the Tribulation, and saw doing so as an opportunity to war against the devil by testifying to the truth of the gospel in a manner worthy of the gospel. The disciples of the apostles treasured Jesus above all, and thus viewed martyrdom as a blessing, a privilege and a powerful means of demonstrating to the world the indescribable worth of Christ. Also, they did not fear those who could kill the body, because they believed when Jesus returns we will be resurrected with incorruptible bodies like His and will be with Him forever. That was their blessed hope.

Is your hope placed more in escaping suffering or in the grace to be given you at the revelation of Jesus Christ?

Day 16

“And then the signs of the truth will appear: first the sign of the opening of the heavens, next the sign of the trumpet’s voice, and thirdly the rising of the dead - not of all the dead, but, as it says, ‘The Lord will come, and with him all his holy ones.’ And then the whole world will see the Lord as He comes riding on the clouds of heaven.”

- The Didache

The early Church believed in a version of imminence because the Lord taught a version of imminence. Like Jesus, the disciples of the apostles wrote that once the signs preceding the day of the Lord occur, then His return is truly imminent. At minimum, the New Testament describes four signs we can observe before the second coming of Jesus and the rapture of the Church. 1. The Antichrist declares himself to be God in God’s temple. 2. Massive amounts of Christians fall away from the faith. 3. The sun is darkened. 4. The moon is turned to something that looks like blood.

Regardless of your eschatological leanings, one point we can all agree upon is that the Judge of all the earth is returning to set everything right. So, how should we live in light of His soon arrival? Peter answers that question in his first letter, *“Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Peter 1:13-16).”*

Is there an aspect of your life that you haven’t yet set apart for the Lord’s special purposes?

Clement of Rome

Day 17

“Look at the holy Apostles. It was by sinful jealousy that Peter was subjected to tribulation, not once or twice but many times; it was in that way that he bore his witness, ere he left us for his well-earned place in glory. And Paul, because of jealousy and contention, has become the very type of endurance rewarded. He was in bonds seven times, he was exiled, he was stoned. He preached in the East and in the West, winning a noble reputation for his faith. He taught righteousness to all the world; and after reaching the furthest limits of the West, and bearing his testimony before kings and rulers, he passed out of this world and was received into the holy places. In him we have one of the greatest of all examples of endurance.”

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

Fourth century bishop, Eusebius, writes that Clement was the third bishop of Rome and the same man mentioned by the Apostle Paul as his co-laborer in Philippians chapter four. While Clement is often credited with being the author of this letter to the Corinthians, the epistle itself says that it is written by the colony of the Church at Rome. Thus, the author uses the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ when addressing the Corinthians. Therefore, we see that while the church of Rome was held in high regard by the early Christians, the bishop of Rome did not act like a 21st century Pope. Rather, Clement was one of many bishops and leaders around the known world who helped give direction and oversight to the body of Christ.

The main purpose of the letter is to call the fractured church of Corinth to repentance. To accomplish this, Clement relied heavily on both Old and New Testament Scriptures. When quoting the Old Testament, Clement exclusively used the Septuagint, the third century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. From the New Testament, he cited passages from Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, and Revelation. Additionally, this letter (written about AD 97) is the earliest document which discusses the deaths of both Peter and Paul. What an invaluable resource this is for Christians!

If you had the opportunity to be personally discipled by Paul, how would it affect your life?

Day 18

“Let us fix our thoughts on the Blood of Christ; and reflect how precious that Blood is in God’s eyes, inasmuch as its outpouring for our salvation has opened the grace of repentance to all mankind.”

- Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians

Here, Clement echos the teaching of his mentor, Paul, who wrote, “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all (Romans 11:32).” Thus, we who have already been reconciled to God by Jesus’ blood bear a great responsibility to those who do not yet believe. For, the Lord, *“reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).”*

The blood of Jesus justifies us who believe in Him, and saves us from God’s wrath (Romans 5:9). According to the riches of God’s grace, Jesus’ blood redeems us and provides forgiveness of our trespasses (Ephesians 1:7). By Jesus’ blood, we are able to abide in Him (John 6:56). Because of His blood, we become recipients of the promises of the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25). Through Jesus’ blood we have eternal life (John 6:54). Additionally, Clement reminds us that the blood of Jesus was shed for everyone, not merely a select few.

What are the implications of Jesus pouring out His blood for all mankind?

Day 19

“Christ belongs to the lowly of heart, and not to those who would exalt themselves over His flock. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Scepter of God’s Majesty, was in no pomp of pride and haughtiness - as it could so well have been - but in self-abasement. ... You see, dear friends, what an example we have been given. If the Lord humbled Himself in this way, what ought we to do, who through Him have come under the yoke of His grace?”

- Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians

What an awesome God we serve! What a humble King we worship! Our Lord and Teacher does not command us to do that which He refuses to model. Who embodied the first Beatitude better than Christ Jesus? *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).”* The greatest of all, the One who calls us to serve, became the servant of all and washed feet.

The Maker of heaven and earth, the One who calls us to carry our crosses daily, humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee would bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Where He is, His servants will be also.

Will you come under the yoke of His grace? Will you stay in step with the One who emptied Himself for the sake of others?

Day 20

"Let us turn our eyes to the Father and Creator of the universe, and when we consider how precious and peerless are His gifts of peace, let us embrace them eagerly for ourselves. Let us contemplate Him with understanding, noting with the eyes of the spirit the patient forbearance that is everywhere willed by Him."

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

What do you think about when you think about God? It's been said that what you believe about God is the most important thing about you. Do you truly believe that the Lord of the universe is good all the time? Do you believe the Judge of all the earth is completely trustworthy?

We must believe in the goodness of God if we are going to be ambassadors for the kingdom of God. Meditate on the humility of Jesus' incarnation. Dwell on the faithfulness Jesus exhibited as He resisted the temptations of the devil. Think about the loving patient endurance Jesus demonstrated in His arrest, torture and execution. Remember the goodness of our God as Jesus rose from the dead, keeping His promise and making a way for us to become His eternal sons and daughters.

What do you believe about God?

Day 21

“Think, my dear friends, how the Lord offers us proof after proof that there is going to be a resurrection, of which he has made Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead. My friends, look how regularly there are processes of resurrection going on at this very moment. The day and the night show us an example of it.”

- Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians

Genesis 1 has an interesting way of concluding each day’s events. We read in verse five, “And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” Evening to morning, darkness to light, death to life, dying and rising. Also, consider the order of events in that chapter. On day three, plants are created and the earth brings forth vegetation. Yet, the sun is not created until day four. How is that possible? This is an example of the way Genesis seeks to tell us who created the world and why. The early chapters of Genesis are more about theology than biology. Thus, theologically speaking, we see that on the third day, God miraculously brings life out of the ground.

For thousands of years God has been telling us that the Messiah would suffer for our sins and be raised from the dead. Jesus said the same thing numerous times during His ministry. And, since God kept His promise concerning Jesus’ resurrection, regardless of your questions, He’s also trustworthy for your regeneration, His second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement and the restoration of all things. Jesus’ resurrection is the most important event in history.

How should a confident expectation of your resurrection from the dead affect your daily decision-making process?

Day 22

And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. What shall we do, then, brethren? Shall we become slothful in well-doing, and cease from the practice of love? God forbid that any such course should be followed by us! But rather let us hasten with all energy and readiness of mind to perform every good work.

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

Here, Clement of Rome speaks to an insidious quality in the human heart: the drive to justify ourselves. Whether it be through making excuses for our sinful behavior, blame shifting or clinging to an inner disposition of exceptionalism, no attempt at self-justification can bring true peace. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness and judgment.

What makes us right with God? It is faith in the grace given to us in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can justify us in God's sight. So how should we respond to such amazing grace? He who has been forgiven much will love much.

Will you take the time today to consider the greatness of God's forgiveness toward you?

Day 23

“Let us spare no effort to obey His will, but put all our energies into the work of righteousness. A good workman can accept the reward of his labor with assurance, but the one who is idle and shiftless cannot look his employer in the face. That is why we must devote ourselves heart and soul to the task of well-doing, for everything comes from the hand of God and He has already warned us, ‘See, the Lord is approaching, with His reward before Him, to pay every man as his work deserves.’ ... So now do let us place all this boasting and confidence of ours in Him, and submit ourselves to His will.”

- Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable about a master who, before going on a long journey, gives each of his three servants exceedingly large amounts of money to manage until he comes back. The money is measured by a weight called a talent, and talent of gold is equal to 18 years wages. The first servant is tasked with stewarding five talents, the second is entrusted with two talents, and the third receives one talent. When the master of the house returns, the first and second servants doubled the money entrusted to them and handed it to their master. The man responds, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” What a generous master!

However, the servant who received one talent did not obey the directives of his master, but rather buried it and returned it as it was originally given. The servant explains his disobedience by saying he didn’t want to risk disappointing his cruel master, who reaps where he doesn’t sow. The master judges him by his own beliefs, calls the servant wicked and lazy, and has him thrown out of the house into outer darkness. As it has been said earlier: what we believe about God is the most important thing about us. If the servant had judged his situation justly, he would’ve realized how generous the master had been with him, and that proper assessment would have led to a totally different outcome.

Like the two good and faithful servants, do you recognize the extreme generosity and goodness of God?

Day 24

“So now, my friends, let us get on resolutely with our warfare under His unerring directions. Think of the men who serve our own commanders in the field, and the prompt and orderly obedience with which they go about their duties. Not all of them are marshals, generals, colonels, captains, or the like; nevertheless, each at his own level executes the orders of the emperor and the military chiefs.”

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

In his first epistle, Peter commands followers of Jesus to humble themselves and resist the devil. ‘Resist’ does not mean exercising self control, like refusing to fall into the temptation of eating another cookie. The word ‘resist’ is an ancient military term that paints a picture of an army taking its stand against an opponent as a resistance force. This is not a call to pacifism. This is a call to war. But we do not wage war against the devil using worldly weapons. When we choose to humble ourselves in our fight against the devil, we choose to depend on God’s power and in His ways.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you are called to join the Lord Jesus in the battle for the souls and allegiance of humanity. This war is not between you and whatever Caesar currently rules your country. God and His children are at war against the serpent of old, who is called the devil and Satan. Just as it was with the earliest Christians, we still overcome evil with good. We conquer our adversary by being faithful witnesses to the one who is the King of kings, Jesus Christ, the victorious Lamb of God.

Will you join the fight?

Day 25

“The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ. ... Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. ... Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand.”

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

All kingdoms have a king, a domain, laws, values and subjects. The kingdom of God is no different, and yet, because it is from heaven, it is completely different than all the kingdoms of the earth. The kingdom of God has no earthly king. Jesus is its king, He will never stop being king and no one has the right to change His laws. The kingdom of God has no geographic borders; it exists through whomever Jesus' Spirit has free reign. Excluding the realm of heaven or His eventual earthly reign at His return, this is King Jesus' domain.

The laws of the kingdom of God are first and foremost the commands of Jesus Christ, many of which are found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Jesus' life illustrates the values of the kingdom of God—the way He treated those inside the kingdom, those outside the kingdom, and the things of this world. These laws and values do not function as a new Torah to show us our need for Christ. No, these laws and values are the way Jesus expects His subjects to live. The subjects of the kingdom of God are those who have entered into a covenantal relationship with the King by grace through faith. They love Jesus, seek to obey Him and reflect His nature to the world. This is the kingdom the apostles proclaimed to the world, and we are called to follow them as they followed the King.

Have you embraced your calling as an ambassador for the kingdom of God?

Day 26

"Let us therefore implore forgiveness for all those transgressions which through any [suggestion] of the adversary we have committed. ... For it is better that a man should acknowledge his transgressions than that he should harden his heart, as the hearts of those were hardened who stirred up sedition against Moses the servant of God, and whose condemnation was made manifest [unto all]."

- Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians

The best things in life are usually going to be fraught with hardships. They will often require immense amounts of perseverance and courage. Courage is not an absence of fear and anxiety, but rather doing what is right despite fear and anxiety. This is the situation we find ourselves in when prompted by the Holy Spirit to confess our sins to a trusted brother or sister in Christ.

The thought of coming into the light often produces anxiety. Thus, it is tempting to avoid owning the truth by either pretending that everything is okay, minimizing the depths of our depravity by admitting to surface level issues, or placing the blame of our actions on others or events of our past. We've all chosen those paths at times, but today we can choose the way of life, which leads to a soft, malleable heart. We can choose to stay in step with the Spirit. By God's grace we can choose God's best for us and those around us.

Will you choose to be courageous and confess hidden sin to a faithful follower of Christ?

Ignatius of Antioch

Day 27

"It is true that I am a prisoner for the Name's sake, but I am by no means perfect in Jesus Christ as yet; I am only a beginner in discipleship."

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians

Ignatius of Antioch was a personal disciple of the Apostle John. Can you imagine being mentored by one of Jesus best friends? What an amazing opportunity to learn to walk as Jesus walked with someone who literally walked with the Lord!

When he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, an elderly Ignatius was being taken by Roman soldiers to the capital city to be executed for his faith in Jesus. Any Christian of the early first Century AD would look at Ignatius as one of the best living examples of a follower of the Lord. Yet, Ignatius calls himself a beginner in discipleship. It seems that the more we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, the more we realize our need to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What aspect of discipleship do you need to focus more upon this year?

Day 28

"There is only one Physician - Very flesh, yet Spirit too; Uncreated, and yet born; God-and-man, in One agreed; Very Life in death agreed, Fruit of God and Mary's seed; at once impassable and torn by pain and suffering below: Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know."

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians

What you just read is one of the earliest Christian creeds outside of Scripture. Ignatius masterfully describes Jesus as being both fully human and fully God. He displays Jesus as both uncreated and begotten of God the Father. He details the Son of God's incarnation, passion and exaltation.

Read this creed again and pay attention to how it rhymes, even in English. This is by design. It helps both children and illiterate adults retain eternal truths about Jesus. Notice, too, that this creedal statement of Jesus' divinity is circulating more than 200 years before the Council of Nicaea. More importantly, the oral tradition of Paul's gospel creed in 1 Corinthians 15 is believed by resurrection scholars to have its origin between AD 30-33. The gospel was, and is, a hill worth dying to defend.

In what ways has the gospel message brought transformation to your life?

Day 29

"Regarding the rest of mankind, you should pray for them unceasingly, for we can always hope that repentance may enable them to find their way to God. Give them a chance to learn from you."

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians

There are several key points we can derive from Ignatius here. First, he truly believes that it is possible that all people can be saved. Second, unrelenting prayerful supplications for the unbelieving world is crucial for them to change their mind about the gospel and turn from darkness to light. Third, unbelievers need to see the transformative power of the gospel lived out in us. We must model discipleship for them. That is how they learn what it looks like to obey Jesus' commands.

How does your heart respond when you encounter someone who rejects Jesus? Do you both believe that Jesus wants them saved and they can be saved? To what degree is your theology influencing your evangelism and prayer life?

How are you doing with modeling the gospel you want to see others embrace?

Day 30

“As the tree is known by its fruits, so they who claim to belong to Christ are known by their actions; for this work of ours does not consist in just making professions, but in a faith that is both practical and lasting. Indeed, it is better to keep quiet and be, than to make fluent professions and not be.”

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be work with special needs high school students. The past five years were quite humbling, as I was repeatedly faced with my inadequacies, shortcomings and lack of Christlike character. However, God does cause all things to work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. The blessings brought about from the daily frustrations of that job time-and-again proved God's promise in Romans 8:28 to be true.

Ignatius articulates one of those blessings in the quotation above. The fruit produced by faithful abiding in Christ Jesus is profoundly practical. Oftentimes, logic and reason proved ineffective in getting my students to calm down if they were having a violent episode. However, I learned that modeling the peaceful and gentle actions I wanted them to exhibit made more of an impact. It may've taken some time and I might've had to absorb a few blows, but the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit frequently proved to be a mighty agent of change.

How well do your affirmations about Jesus match your actions?

Day 31

“Everyone should observe the closest conformity with God; you must show every consideration for one another, never letting your attitude to a neighbor be affected by your human feelings, but simply loving each other consistently in the spirit of Jesus Christ.”

- Ignatius’ Epistle to the Magnesians

Living in community is hard. Being married is hard. Parenting is hard. Why? People are sinful, and if you’re reading this, like me, you fall in that category. It may feel counterintuitive, but hardship can actually be very good for the soul. In fact, the Apostle Paul encourages us to, *“exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope (Romans 5:3-4).”*

Instead of perceiving difficult people as hindrances to our happiness, perhaps we should view them as opportunities to develop greater hope in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. When we encounter frustrations, we often lose our cool, and what pours out is darkness that we’d like to deny exists inside us. However, it’s not as if those people and situations cause us to act sinfully; rather, they help reveal areas of our character that need the Holy Spirit’s refining work. They provide us a fresh look at our need of the saving work of Jesus, and a renewed appreciation for the deep love our Father has for us. Finally, we are given an opportunity to do the hard, but important work of walking in fellowship with the Spirit as ministers of reconciliation.

To whom is Jesus calling you to demonstrate His patient love today?

Day 32

“Never allow yourselves to be led astray by the teachings and the time-worn fables of another people. ... I want you to be unshakably convinced of the Birth, the Passion, and the Resurrection, which were the true and indisputable experiences of Jesus Christ, our Hope, in the days of Pontius Pilate’s governorship. God grant that none of you may ever be turned aside from that Hope.”

- Ignatius’ Epistle to the Magnesians

The early Christians believed that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. However, they also believed that God’s chosen people can be deceived because they saw examples of this happening in Scripture (see Galatians 3:1, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5 and Revelation 2:19-21). Thus, we need to develop deep roots in our faith by diligently internalizing and living out the gospel in community with other Christians.

The author of Hebrews speaks to this issue, *“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin* (Hebrews 3:12-13).” We need our brothers and sisters in the Lord to regularly remind us of the unchangeable truths of Jesus’ love for us as demonstrated by his incarnation, life, torture and crucifixion, and His transformative power toward us who believe as witnessed by His resurrection from the dead.

When you find yourself in the crucible of testing, will you follow the example of our Lord Jesus, who, when being tempted in the Garden of Gethsemane humbly called out to the Father and also asked His closest friends to pray for Him to stay faithful until the end?

Day 33

"I can foresee the devil's snares ahead. So let submission and unselfishness be your weapons against them; take a fresh grip on your faith (the very flesh of the Lord) and your love (the life-blood of Jesus Christ)."

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Trallians

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness on a 40-day fast. As those 40 days came to an end, the devil came to Jesus to thwart God's mission of redemption and restoration. The adversary laid three snares for Him. First, to use His power for fleshly purposes instead of for His Father's glory. Second, to put God to the test. Finally, to gain the world through idolatry and apostasy.

How did Jesus resist the devil and stay faithful to His Father? He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, and stayed focused on God's calling to be Servant of all. Jesus let submission and unselfishness be His weapons of warfare, and they proved divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

The next time you take the Lord's Supper, will you embrace the same mindset which was also in Christ Jesus?

Day 34

"For my part, I am writing to all the churches and assuring them that I am truly earnest about dying for God. ... This is the first stage of my discipleship; and no power, visible or invisible, must grudge me my coming to Jesus Christ. Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering, of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body - let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ."

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans

In Romans 8:38-39, the Apostle Paul writes, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* So often, we hear that passage interpreted as a statement of God's great love for us. However, early followers of Jesus used it to speak of their attitude toward their humble King through whatever may come.

Those who have been forgiven much will love much, and it's that type of gratitude which inspired Ignatius to endure overwhelming agony for the sake of dwelling with his Deliverer. When we look back over our time here on earth, we should be able to say with the Apostle Paul that the most grueling hardships we faced were only momentary, light afflictions which God used to produce for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison. Ignatius was future-focused and determined that by God's grace, nothing was going to separate Him from the love of God.

Is union with Jesus Christ your highest priority?

Day 35

“All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me; so far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be king of earth’s widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; He who rose again for us is my whole desire.”

- Ignatius’ Epistle to the Romans

In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus tells two parables about the kingdom of heaven which describe how we are saved by grace through faith. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”*

There are two ways we can look at this parable. The first describes Jesus’ gracious love for us. While we were yet God’s enemies, Jesus so highly valued us, the treasure in the field, that He joyfully gave all that He had to make us His own. The second view of this parable describes the proper faith-filled response to His gracious sacrifice. If we truly understand Jesus’ worth, we too should happily give all we have to be with Him forever. The loss of all things, no matter how initially painful, would be seen as rubbish compared to the everlasting joy of gaining Christ. It is by grace through faith that we are saved.

Do you treasure Jesus the way that He has treasured you?

Day 36

The priests of old, I admit, were estimable men; but our own High Priest is greater, for He has been entrusted with the Holy of Holies, and to Him alone are the secret things of God committed. He is the doorway to the Father.

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Philadelphians

One of the main points made by the author of Hebrews is that Jesus is the truer and greater One. He's the truer and greater Son of God. The truer and greater Messenger. The truer and greater High Priest. The truer and greater Moses and Joshua. The truer and greater Sabbath and Promised Land. The truer and greater Melchizedek. The truer and greater Tabernacle and Holy of Holies. The truer and greater Scapegoat. There's more, but I'm sure you get the point.

Going to church is good. Drawing near to God is better. Listening to Christian music is good. Drawing near to God is better. Serving others is good. Drawing near to God is better. Studying the Bible is good. Drawing near to God is better. When the activities listed above are used as means to the end of drawing closer to the Lord, they in their proper place, and can have a profoundly positive impact on our walk with Jesus. However, even these seemingly holy activities can also be used by Christians to avoid intimacy with the truer and greater One.

How will you draw near to the Lord in sincerity today?

Day 37

“I have seen how immovably settled in faith you are; nailed body and soul, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and rooted and grounded in love by His blood. You hold the firmest convictions about our Lord.”

- Ignatius' Epistle to the Smyrnaeans

Honeymoon phases are great, but they're not sustainable. Just like relationships have to be grounded in something stronger than attraction, our walk with Jesus needs deep roots if we are to endure the coming storms. How do we grow to be immovably settled in faith? The early Christians often turned to the multitude of Old Testament messianic prophecies when defending the faith, and those are vital, but they're not enough. There are many historical proofs of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and those too are vital, but they're not enough.

There's something about suffering together with another for a common goal that binds people together. Have you been nailed, body and soul, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, rooted and grounded in His blood? Head knowledge can't replace the experiential knowledge of daily carrying our cross and following the Lamb where He leads. Long dark nights of the soul are never pleasant. However, by persevering in our faith through those times of trouble we often grow to hold the firmest convictions about our God being our ever-present Helper.

In what ways have you experienced God being your ever-present Helper in times of trouble?

Day 38

I beseech thee, by the grace with which thou art clothed, to add [speed] to thy course, and that thou ever pray for all men that they may be saved, and that thou demand things which are befitting, Be studious of unity, of which nothing is more precious. Bear with all men, even as our Lord beareth with thee. Show patience with all men in love, as [indeed] thou doest."

- Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp

In certain battles, Roman soldiers would form a testudo, which means "tortoise". This shield-wall formation was quite complex and challenging to achieve, for it required not only skill, but extreme unity of the soldiers. Everyone must move together, acting with one heart and one mind for the testudo to display its true capabilities. In John 17:23, Jesus prayed for the unity of His disciples, that we would be one with each other and with our Lord, *"I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me."*

The Apostle Paul discusses the importance of unity of believers in 1 Corinthians 12:20-21, *"But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"* Perhaps this is one reason why Paul implores the Galatians, *"Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness (6:1)."* We are at war against the kingdom of darkness, and we need to move as one as we assault the gates of hell.

What can you do today to help foster unity within your local gathering of believers?

Day 39

"Be stedfast in prayer. Ask for more understanding than that which thou [already] hast. Be watchful, as possessing a spirit which sleepeth not. Speak with every man according to the will of God. Bear the infirmities of all men as a perfect athlete; for where the labour is great, the gain is also great."

- Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp

I've been in so many church meetings, and the vast majority have started the same: with a prayer asking God to bless what we're about to do. Then, we get on to the real work. Can you relate? Contrast that approach with what Oswald Chambers once said, "Prayer does not prepare us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work."¹

One of the biggest hinderances in my prayer life is pride. I hate feeling stupid or like I don't know what I'm doing, and true prayer, at it's core, is an expression of human inability. Maybe prayer is intimidating to you because you're not sure what to say. That's exactly where to start. Just pour out your heart to Him in with authenticity. God gives grace to the humble, and is near to those who call on Him in truth.

Like the disciples with Jesus, will you ask the Lord to teach you to pray?

¹ Oswald Chambers, "My Utmost for His Highest", <https://utmost.org/modern-classic/greater-works/>.

Day 40

“As stewards of God, and of His household, and His servants, please Him and serve Him, that ye may receive from Him the wages [promised]. Let none of you be rebellious.”

- Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp

Have you ever thought about why God didn't create you to be a mosquito? Or a salamander? Or a blade of grass? Why were you and I given the privilege of being created as image-bearers of the King of the Universe? Why are we here?

God created humanity to reflect His image in the world. Like King Jesus, we are here to serve, but it's so easy to lose sight of that fact. It's so easy to slip out of the mentality of a servant and steward, and begin to live like we're in charge. It's easy to forget that our lives are like the dew on the grass, which is there before breakfast and gone before lunch. In the blink of an eye, our time on earth will be over and we will be standing before the true King. Therefore, let us take the prudent perspective of Psalm 84, and declare that it's far better to be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.

What do you need to change to be a better steward of what God has placed in your care?

Polycarp of Smyrna

Day 41

"It does my heart good to see how the solid roots of your faith, which have had such a reputation ever since early times, are still flourishing and bearing fruit for Jesus Christ."

- Polycarp's Epistle to Philippians

When he was a young man, Polycarp studied at the feet of the Apostle John. In middle age, when Polycarp had become the Bishop of Smyrna, he was good friends with the Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, who was also a personal disciple of the Apostle John. Later in life, Polycarp would personally disciple one of the most prolific writers of the ante-Nicene period, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon. In his letter to the church at Philippi, Polycarp references passages from the New Testament books of Matthew, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter and Philippians.

Some believe that Polycarp had recently become the Bishop of Smyrna when John wrote the book of Revelation. Smyrna was one of two churches for which Jesus gave no rebuke. That, in itself, is high praise, especially for a man who would've been in his late 20's or early 30's. In his Epistle to the Philippians, the elderly Polycarp praises the roughly 100-year-old church for the way they continue to grow in grace and bear fruit for the kingdom of God. They haven't grown cold or stale, and they haven't become stubborn and unteachable. Like Polycarp, the followers of Jesus at Philippi are still flourishing in their faith. Getting older shouldn't equal less impact for Jesus, for the way we finishes our race is of highest importance.

When your race is coming to a close, will you still be bearing Kingdom fruit?

Day 42

"In Him, endurance went so far as to face even death for our sins; but God overruled the pangs of the grave, and raised Him up to life again. Though you never saw Him for yourselves, yet you believe in Him in a glory of joy beyond all words (which not a few others would be glad to share), well knowing that it is by His grace you are saved, not of your own doing, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ."

- Polycarp's Epistle to Philipppians

A few years ago, my son asked me to play full-court basketball with him at the gym near our house. Even though I hadn't played full-court ball in a very long time, I thought, "Sure! I'm a driveway champ. What could go wrong?" After about ten minutes I had to take myself out of the game, knowing that if I continued I would be cleaning my own vomit off the hardwood. Playing basketball in the driveway doesn't require the endurance that a five-on-five game demands.

Early in the Prophet Jeremiah's ministry, people from his hometown began threatening to kill him if he continued speaking for God. When Jeremiah brought his complaint to the Lord, he did not receive the answer he expected. *"If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, then how can you compete with horses (Jeremiah 12:5)?"* The hardship you're currently facing is designed to prepare you for what lies ahead.

These trials, as excruciating and confusing as they are, have come to produce in you the endurance needed to fulfill the calling God has on your life. So, *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4)."*

Will you trust in God's grace today and not quit when the going gets hard?

Day 43

If then we entreat the Lord to forgive us, we ought also ourselves to forgive; for we are before the eyes of our Lord and God, and we must all appear at the judgment-seat of Christ, and must every one give an account of himself.

- Polycarp's Epistle to Philipppians

Before Isaiah met God, he probably thought he was a pretty good person. And, in comparison to others, he probably was. However, his view of God and himself radically changed the day the Lord revealed Himself to Isaiah. What was Isaiah's response to this revelation of the Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Hosts? *"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6:5)."*

At this point in the story, Isaiah was having his worst day ever. He realized that his sin was utterly sinful and demanded judgment from the Lord. Yet, God responded in a way that Isaiah surely did not expect. *"Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven (Isaiah 6:6-7).'"* Isaiah just went from his worst to his best day ever.

The Lord then asked, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us (Isaiah 6:8)?"* Notice He didn't say where, how long, what the calling would entail, etc. Yet, Isaiah was so overwhelmed with the goodness of God that he immediately volunteered himself, *"Here am I. Send me!"* He who has been forgiven much will love much. The Lord God has given us a mission to be ministers of reconciliation, forgiving others as we have been forgiven.

Out of an overflow of love for the Lord, will you joyfully go wherever He calls you to go?

Day 44

"To deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to be Antichrist. To contradict the evidence of the Cross is to be of the devil. And to pervert the Lord's words to suit our own wishes, by asserting that there are no such things as resurrection or judgment, is to be a first-begotten son of Satan. So let us have no more of this nonsense from the gutter, and these lying doctrines, and turn back again to the Word originally delivered to us."

- Polycarp's Epistle to Philipppians

Perhaps the best known historian of the 1st Century AD is Flavius Josephus. Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat and member of the Sanhedrin, who changed his allegiance to Rome in AD 67 when Vespasian's armies began attacking cities in Galilee. Josephus was no friend of Christianity; however, in his *Antiquities*, he records many facts about Jesus. Josephus says Jesus was called the Christ and did many miracles during his ministry, which took place while Pontius Pilate was the procurator of Judea. He says Pilate executed Jesus on a cross, and His followers believed He rose from the dead on the third day.²

While some Gnostic sects said Jesus only appeared to be human, no opponents of Christianity in the first 3 centuries dared to say Jesus didn't exist. They used different arguments in their attempts to dissuade the masses from becoming His followers. However, Christianity continued to flourish because Jesus truly and bodily rose from the dead, just like He promised. Also, Jesus' disciples were fully convinced of His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and imminent return, and were willing to suffer excruciating deaths to show the world the truth of the gospel.

Do you believe Jesus is who He claimed to be? If so, will you receive all of His words for what they are: truth and life?

² Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities, 18.3.3", <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/flavius-josephus/antiquities-jews/book-18/chapter-3.html>.

Day 45

"I am greatly grieved for Valens, who was once a presbyter among you, because he so little understands the place that was given him. I exhort you, therefore, that you abstain from covetousness, and that you be chaste and truthful. ... I am deeply grieved ... for him and his wife; to whom may the Lord grant true repentance! And be then moderate in regard to this matter, and, 'do not count such as enemies,' but call them back as suffering and straying members, that you may save your whole body. For by so acting you shall edify yourselves."

- Polycarp's Epistle to Philippians

All we know about this man, Valens, is what Polycarp recorded about him in this letter. Valens, a former elder in the church at Philippi, became corrupted by covetousness, fell into sexual sin (perhaps with his wife's knowledge), and then used deception to cover his actions. We can infer these things from the text because those are the sins Polycarp counseled the Philippians to avoid. Church discipline was enforced and Valens was removed from fellowship, but this situation deeply wounded the church.

Understandably, Polycarp then implored them to not sin in their anger over Valens' actions, and to not let the sun go down on their anger. He also modeled for them the heart of the Lord, which grieves over sin and longs for the repentance and restoration of the sinner. Finally, Polycarp urged the Philippians to try to bring back the straying sheep, for if one member of the body suffers, the entire body suffers. However, restoration would not mean that Valens would reclaim his position as an elder, but the couple's genuine repentance would be a blessing to the church.

Do you know a former church leader who has fallen and strayed from the truth? Will you begin to regularly pray for that leader's repentance and restoration to the body of Christ?

The Epistle of Barnabas

Day 46

“Before we believed in God, the habitation of our heart was corrupt and weak, as being indeed like a temple made with hands. For it was full of idolatry, and was a habitation of demons, through our doing such things as were opposed to [the will of] God. ... Having received the forgiveness of sins, and placed our trust in the name of the Lord, we have become new creatures, formed again from the beginning. Wherefore in our habitation God truly dwells in us. ... This is the spiritual temple built for the Lord.”

- The Epistle of Barnabas

The Epistle of Barnabas was almost as important to the early Christians as the Didache. Since the letter does mention the destruction of the temple in AD 70, it cannot have been written before that time. However, because it does not address the second destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 132, it must have been written sometime between those two events. The body of the Epistle of Barnabas, similar to the Didache, is broken up into two main sections. The first section is comparable to the Book of Hebrews, in that it illustrates numerous examples of how Christ is the fulfillment of many Jewish customs and practices, as well as being a type, shadow or fulfillment of different aspects of Jewish culture.

Solomon's temple was supposed to be an earthly representation of God's spiritual temple in heaven, which the book of Hebrews speaks about in chapter nine. The innermost room, the Holy of Holies, was the place God designated to manifest His presence. The Apostle John called Jesus Christ the embodiment of the Holy of Holies (John 2:19-21), and the Apostle Paul wrote that we who have been born again by the Holy Spirit's regenerating power have also become the Holy Place of God's presence (1 Corinthians 3:16). What an amazing truth! Praise be to God for this incredible gift!

As His temple on earth today, how will you steward the presence of the Lord?

Day 47

"Let us be specially wary in these final days, for all our past years of faith will be no good to us if now, in these lawless times and in face of the many trials that lie ahead of us, we fail to offer such resistance as becomes God's children to the insidious infiltration of the Dark One. We must set our faces against any unprofitable trifling, and have a rooted aversion to the Way of Wickedness and its works."

- The Epistle of Barnabas

Just before He was betrayed and arrested, Jesus had spent hours in the Garden of Gethsemane praying. He earnestly cried out, *"Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will"* (Mark 14:36)." Jesus' entire life was marked by loving obedience to God the Father, yet it would have been for nothing if He refused to drink the cup of suffering for our sins in His last hours. Praise God that our High Priest stayed faithful to the end, which makes Him able to come to our aid when we are tempted!

There are many conditional promises in the Bible such as, *"If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him"* (2 Tim. 2:11-12)." Other passages don't have an explicit 'if/then' statement, but contain the same message. Revelation 2:10 is one such verse. Jesus told the church in Smyrna, *"Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."* It's not about how we start; it's about how we finish.

Will you walk as Jesus walked and draw near to the Lord's throne of grace, so that you may receive mercy and help in your time of need?

Day 48

"If you have to rebuke anyone for a fault, do it without fear or favor. Keep calm and mild; reverence the words you have heard, and bear no resentment toward a brother."

- The Epistle of Barnabas

Conflicts and confrontations happen in every family. Even in the best of relationships it is unavoidable. Here, Barnabas gives the Church four solid words of wisdom for confronting a brother or sister in Christ who has sinned. First, we must guard ourselves from partiality. Both a fear of negative consequences and a hope for future favors can tempt us to not deal fairly with the one in sin. We must only fear God and only seek His eternal rewards. Second, we need to do our best to stay calm and gentle in these potentially heated conversations. A gentle answer often turns away wrath, and helps those being confronted know that while we are against their sin, we are for them.

Third, Barnabas calls us to reverence the words we have heard. This is almost certainly a call back to an earlier portion of the letter, where the author described the ways of light and darkness. Similarly to the Didache's ways of life and death, Barnabas calls us to view Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount as a plumb line of sorts, by which every action is evaluated. Finally, we are exhorted to avoid holding grudges. Like our heavenly Father, we should be slow to anger and quick to forgive, patient when wronged and kind to all.

How do you need to change to better reflect Jesus' life-giving way of impartiality?

The Shepherd of Hermas

Day 49

“Happy are you who endure the great tribulation that is coming. And happy are they who will not deny their own life. For the Lord hath sworn by His Son, that those who denied their Lord have abandoned their life in despair.”

- The Shepherd of Hermas

The author of The Shepherd of Hermas was a Roman man named Hermes, whom some think was the brother of Pius, the Bishop of Rome. Most scholars believe the document was written between the latter first and mid-second centuries AD, and large portions contain apocalyptic verbiage similar to the book of Revelation. Like the Epistle of Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermas was included as an appendix to the Codex Sinaiticus, a manuscript of New Testament from the fourth century AD. A major theme of the letter is that as wealth increases, holiness often decreases. Additionally, the author calls the reader to prepare for the great tribulation by putting one's hope in the Lord, rather than the uncertainty of riches.

What good is it to gain temporal peace and safety if it brings eternal suffering? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? We must be prudent. In days just before His crucifixion, Jesus told those gathered around Him, *“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him (John 12:25-26).”* In the end, the choice to leave the world behind and follow Jesus to the cross will never leave His followers disappointed.

If you knew it was possible that you would live during the great tribulation, how would you prepare yourself and your family?

Day 50

As a smith hammers out his work, and accomplishes whatever he wishes, so shall righteous daily speech overcome all iniquity. Cease not therefore to admonish your sons; for I know that, if they will repent with all their heart, they will be enrolled in the Books of Life with the saints.

- The Shepherd of Hermas

As I write this, I am entering day two of having no power due to Hurricane Beryl passing directly over Houston, Texas. Even with air conditioning, summertime in my neck of the woods is not exactly pleasant. Praise God for portable coolers, USB fans, power banks, flashlights, gigantic limbs that barely miss falling on cars and roofs, french drains and running water! It could be much worse, and if believers are to live through the wrath of the Antichrist, American Christians like me should look at these situations as God disciplining His children so they will be better equipped to faithfully endure what is to come.

The word 'admonish' carries the idea of pushing against someone's reasoning by imploring them to repent and choose the way God deems right. Along with a plea to follow the way of life, a godly admonition includes a warning against choosing the way of death. Additionally, all discipline should be administered with a view toward achieving a bright and godly future. Our loving Lord is committed to helping us share in His holiness and cultivate the peaceful fruit of righteousness, so let us be grateful for the Lord's discipline. The blessings eternal outweigh what can hurt us, so hold on to your faith.

How do you regard the discipline of the Lord?

About the Author

Phil Baker lives in Texas with his wife, two children, and two dogs. He is the host of the podcast *Reclaiming the Faith*, and the author of the books *The Final Abominable Temple*, *Faithful Witness: The Early Church's Theology of Martyrdom* and *New: Wineskins and the Simple Words of Christ*. He has also produced several albums of original songs.

For links to all of Phil's resources, please visit his website at philsbaker.com.

In 2014, I started a blog featuring excerpts from writings of the earliest Christians showing what they believed about various issues. At first, each post contained a few paragraphs of direct quotes without commentary, but eventually they turned into longer entries with shorter quotes and several paragraphs of devotional-style commentary. In 2016 I wrote my first book, *New: Wineskins and the Simple Words of Christ*, and then in 2017 I pivoted from blogging to podcasting. Two additional books followed with 2021's *Faithful Witness: The Early Church's Theology of Martyrdom* and 2023's *The Final Abominable Temple*.

All of these endeavors involved exposing readers to the beliefs of the earliest Christians, and my newest project is no different. In *The Faith Once Delivered Volume 1: 50 Days with the Disciples of the Apostles*, I show you, the reader, how the second generation of Jesus followers continued to believe, teach and live the words of our Lord. Imagine spending 50 days with men like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, who were personally discipled by the original Apostles! I encourage you to join me on this journey and let these ancient writings deepen and refine your faith.



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