

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

- Acts 2:28

There’s a lot packed into this single verse. The first phrase reminds us that God has taught us the paths of life, the way in which we should live our lives, through His Word and through the example Jesus set for us. We know what following the path of life looks like; actually doing it is the tricky part. In the second phrase, we’re reminded that God is with us at all times and in all places. His presence can be a source of joy and comfort to us as we seek to live that path of life day-to-day.



Thoughts to Ponder: *As you go through the week, perhaps you could memorize and meditate on this verse. Do you consciously try to follow the path to righteousness laid out for you in the Bible? Do you focus your attention on God’s constant presence in your life, and does that knowledge fill you with gladness? Try to remain conscious of our Lord’s presence, even in your busiest moments. Talk with Him about whatever is on your mind. These tiny steps of daily discipline will keep you closer to Him on the path of life.*

- Resources: *Lutheran Study Bible, Jesus Calling by Sarah Young*

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Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name.

- Psalm 100:3-4

Know: a word that indicates certainty. So, what should we know? The Psalmist lists seven things in this Psalm to know about God: He is the only true God, we were made by Him, He calls us His, we’re under the Good Shepherd’s watch, the Lord is good, His love endures forever, and He is faithful when we’re unfaithful. Believing these rock-solid truths with our whole heart should create overwhelming gratitude, spurring us on to participate in each church service as if we’re celebrating the exaltation of a King, praising Him through singing and gladly serving Him through good works.



Truth. Transformation. Action. In this order. We receive truth first transforming and igniting an attitude of gratitude into action. Luther taught that Christianity is unique because we receive everything by grace. We cannot earn grace; we receive salvation by faith alone through Christ alone. With faith’s foundation we come to realize the depth of thanksgiving then respond in good works. That’s how thanksgiving works. It’s a response to something given.

Thoughts to ponder: *Will you shout with joy to the Lord? Will you praise His name? Will you do both to serve Him with gladness?*

- Resource: *NIV Bible*

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“He will cover you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.”
- Psalm 91:4

He that by faith chooses God for his protector, shall find in Him all that you need or can desire. Great security is promised to believers in the midst of danger. He calls us to gather near to him. He not only gives his flock comfort and calms our fears, but defends us. A buckler is described as a small shield that was used to aggressively stop or parry blows. He is a refuge that truly meets all our needs.



Thoughts to ponder: *How do we gather close to God in times when we are feeling anxious, threatened, out of control, and some of our usual connections to our faith are interrupted? Reading scripture, daily devotions with a friend, worship attendance and if necessary online, or educational sessions are just some options.* - Resource: Biblehub.com

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“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”
- Matthew 10:34

Some Scripture texts make us so uncomfortable we avoid them. Jesus’ words in the Gospel today are at the top of the list. A sword that divides families? No way! We tune Jesus out.



We can run from His words all we want, but there is no escaping them. Jesus’ words are literally and absolutely true. If we love anyone or anything more than Him, we are not being His disciple. We refuse to take up our cross and follow Him.

If we were not so blind and hard-hearted, we could see that the only way to truly and completely love our families is to love Jesus above all else. In doing so, we are set free to love our families for who they truly are. In choosing family members over Him, we turn them into idols. We expect them to do for us what only Jesus can do. No parent, spouse or child can bear that weight. They will let us down. Jesus never does.

Thoughts to ponder: In your daily devotions as a family this week discuss Jesus’ hard words or call a family member. Say out loud to each other, “I love you very much, but I love Jesus far more.”

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“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” – Matthew 11:28

This is a very familiar invitation that brings comfort to those that are struggling. Come, take the yoke, learn, and find rest. Doesn't this also sound a lot like a serious invitation to discipleship? Jesus reminds us that our labor to follow God's law on our own is heavy laden and bound to fail. No matter how hard we try, we are dominated by corruption, our own sin, and now even a virus. Jesus wants us to be yoked to Him who is gentle and humble. Jesus is calling us into discipleship, but He is the one pulling the weight. The only time our discipleship becomes burdensome is when we try to do the pulling on our own.



Thoughts to ponder: *Having experienced the burdens of a pandemic, we want to reflect on the frailty of our own lives and labors. How did Jesus give you rest? What did He teach us as His church? Meditate on the invitation to discipleship to you personally. When are you most tempted to pull the work of discipleship on your own?*

— Resources: Bible.org, ESV & Biblical Illustrator

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” – Romans 8:12-13

Since Christians live in the Spirit, they are no longer captive to the flesh and should no longer live according to the flesh. But, if we live according to its dictates, we will die. However, if we turn away from sin's appeal in the Spirit's power, we can enjoy eternal life. Believers, led by the Spirit, do have an active part in battling sinful habits.



Thoughts to ponder: *Paul addresses one of Scripture's most mind-boggling topics, man's struggle with sin. In Romans 7:15 Paul notes “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate.” Have you ever done something like that? Did you ever have a great desire to do what was right, but did not have the ability to carry it out? Why do you think such things happen? Paul says it is the sin that dwells within us. The answer is in Romans 9:30: “The Gentiles have attained righteousness by faith.” During the coming months will you constantly, in prayer, turn a struggle you have over to God?*

- Resources: ESV Study Bible; Life Application Study Bible

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

– Romans 8:19-21

Think back to the time of ‘social distancing’ that we experienced this spring. We were subjected to frustration as we watched our neighbors and friends avoid us, churches closed, streets like ghost towns, daily death and incidence numbers. We did not know when we would be liberated from the uncertainty: how many local businesses would survive; what would be the result of ‘distance learning’ by our students for four months; how many of our friends would be directly affected by the virus and the isolation it demanded. Assuming (as of this writing) it all ended, we felt a sense of new found freedom. It is a similar freedom and glory at a higher level that this scripture mentions.



Thoughts to ponder: *How can you incorporate the sense of freedom recently felt into your understanding of Paul’s letter to the Romans. This week practice focusing on the future freedom and glory that all we believers have been promised.*

– Resource: Lutheran Study Bible

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“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

– Matthew 13:47-50

This “Parable of the Net” is one of four parables in today’s gospel. I love parables. They tell a story illustrating some spiritual truth. This one teaches God’s rule includes a final judgement at the close of the age with the evil group being thrown into the fiery furnace.



Thoughts to ponder: *What happens to the righteous group that accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior, striving to faithfully follow His example, and looking forward to His promise of eternal life? How can I be sure what will happen to me? The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Focus on this thought every day. I pray this promise brings you the same great comfort it brings me!*

– Resource: Lutheran Study Bible

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

“Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”
– Isaiah 55:1

Imagine today’s populous being taken back in time to Isaiah’s day. Farmers and herdsmen, carpenters, masons, and metalworkers; all reliant on a provider and protector, for good crops and harvest, and protection from invading enemies. Many gods, but only one true God.



We certainly understand that without money we can’t buy milk or wine or any other desire or necessity. But, money also, does not buy the fulfillment of our spiritual needs. The gifts of the Lord, come to us without the need for gold or silver. The Word of the Lord feeds us, and keeps us in the life-giving gifts of Christ. As He works within us and maintains us in the faith through His Word and Sacraments, till that glorious day and that Holy Banquet in His Kingdom, where we pay no entrance fee, for it was paid for us, through Jesus Christ, on a cross.

Thoughts to Ponder: *The Coronavirus outbreak has changed us in ways. People were restricted; a lot of down time. Many of our smaller gods (entertainment, sports, shopping, on and on) were off limits. How did we before, are we now, and can we spend more time each day with family, friends, and neighbors with Jesus Christ as the focus, and His promises which cost us nothing?*
– Resource: The Lutheran Study Bible

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding? Who determined the measurements—surely you know! – Job 38:4-5a

These words are part of God’s answer to Job, after Job and his friends had wrestled with understanding God’s blessings of prosperity and with understanding suffering that comes, often to those who are righteous and very faithful. Those words almost leave one breathless to the power and wisdom of God. There is no way for us to fully understand the ways of God. Job never lost his faith in God, but he expected an answer from God. God did answer Job. Even though God has chosen to give us some wisdom, there will be events in this life that we will never be able to comprehend. We are asked to trust in the Lord. It is dangerous territory when we think we know better than God. We can take our complaints to God. We can use the books of Job, Psalms and Habakkuk as models of how to approach God in times of trouble.



Thoughts to ponder: *Do you have questions for God? God wants you to bring your concerns to Him. Yet remember that Jesus has promised that He will always be with us. Pray for this to be a comfort to you even when God’s ways are not fully understood.*
- Resources: Lutheran Study Bible, thetheologyofwork.org

BUILDING BLOCKS OF GROWING IN CHRIST

As regards the Gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. – Romans 11:28-32

Regardless of who we are, Paul tells us the experience of Jew and Gentile alike are parallel. Both are disobedient to God and deserve punishment and both receive mercy instead of punishment. Because of Israel's disobedience, we receive mercy and because of that mercy to us, disobedient Jews also receive mercy. God's plan has always been to draw us closer to Him through His mercy to us. All we must do is humble ourselves, acknowledge Him, and accept His mercy.



Thoughts to ponder: *During our time of isolation due to the recent pandemic, we had an enlightening Bible Study discussion concerning mercy. What does mercy mean to you? Have you accepted God's plan or do you have another contingency plan? How have you shown mercy to others and continue doing so?* – Resource: Lutheran Study Bible

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

– Romans 12:1

Biblical sacrifice is defined as “that which is consecrated and offered to God.” Here we’re being told to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. If we believe Christ died and rose, sacrificing His life that we may have eternal life, by virtue of our faith we have been made acceptable by His mercy. We become a living sacrifice by not conforming to this world. How can that be? Because as believers we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, not by our own power but by God’s transforming power through the Holy Spirit. We continue to be transformed, leaving worldly living and desires behind, desiring a deeper more meaningful life with Christ instead, looking toward the eternal vs. earthly desires. This is our spiritual worship...offering all of ourselves not just little bits of a Godly life. It is the will of God for every believer to wholly be a living sacrifice for Jesus.



Thoughts to Ponder: *Consider a simple prayer every day; more often if necessary: “Lord Jesus, help me desire you more than the desires of the world. Help me remain in Your Word daily that I may come to know you more every day to be an acceptable living sacrifice who worships you above all else. Amen.* – Resource: gotquestions.org

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Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. – Romans 12:12

As of this writing we're experiencing a global pandemic. Fear, anxiety and adversity prevail yet for Christians, the question must be asked: "From this verse, are these marks of Christian life and Christian duty evident in our day-to-day living?" Looking at the words, *rejoice in hope*, one might ask "How can I rejoice during trials?" The Hebrew meaning of 'rejoice' is to delight in, literally experience, and be conscious of God's grace, meaning 'through' the tribulation. As for *hope*, one might think, "I hope this trial passes quickly." Yet, hope is a 24/7 characteristic of believers living by faith of what is good, sure and certain. Regardless of walking through a pandemic or other trial, Christ assures us in John 14:27, "...My peace I give to you...let not your hearts be troubled, neither be afraid." As you patiently walk through any tribulation, having confessed your sins believing Christ is your Savior, you have been gifted with His grace and peace. Possessing these gifts, with prayer through the Holy Spirit you're able to give up the weight of fear and troubles in your heart to rest and rejoice in Him who carries you through even your darkest of times.



Question to ponder: *Do you let worry and anxiety adversely affect you? Through daily prayer ask God to transform your focus that you may constantly "rejoice in Him," and rejoice in hope.*
- Resource: Biblehub.com