

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Weeks of
August 1 – September 9



Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction
of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

As the “dog days” of August are upon us and we prepare for the unofficial end of summer with Labor Day and the beginning of a new school year our worship services have a series of writings from the letter to the Hebrews. In these chapters we will discover the primary focus is on faith. In our worship we will explore how faith enables hope. Next how, that same faith enables us to live our lives in spite of many struggles with the certain hope of eternal life. This faith and hope come to us because of the ultimate sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross for our sins and the sins of the whole world.

Coming soon to Bethlehem!



All church & school Bible Study Beginning September 18th

Bethlehem will launch the **Red Letter Challenge** in our church, school and pre-school on September 18. The Red Letter Challenge gets its name from the words of Jesus that are often printed in red. It includes a special book to help us connect daily with Jesus' words, weekly small group studies and worship messages. Small group sign-ups and book distributions begin on August 28. If you would like to host a group in your home or at church or for more information contact John Brandt (jbrandt@bethlehemsaginaw.org).

Sign-up for your small group & workbook

Beginning August 28

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of

August 1 - 5

Faith Enables Hope: Hebrews 11:1-3

Aug. 7 (Prop. 14)	Ninth S. a. Pentecost	Gen. 15:1-6	Psalms 33:12-22	Heb. 11:1-16	Luke 12:22-34 (35-40)
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What Can't Be Seen

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 11:1-6

Historians say the Atomic Age began on July 16, 1945, when the first nuclear weapon was detonated in a remote desert of New Mexico. But Greek philosopher Democritus (c. 460–370 bc) was exploring the existence and power of the atom long before the invention of anything that could even see these tiny building blocks of the universe. Democritus comprehended more than he could see and atomic theory was the result.

The Scriptures tell us that the essence of faith is embracing what can't be seen. Hebrews 11:1 affirms, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." This assurance isn't the result of wishful or positive thinking. It's confidence in the God we can't see but whose existence is the truest reality in the universe. His reality is displayed in His creative works (Psalms 19:1) and made visible by revealing His invisible character and ways in His Son, Jesus, who came to show the Father's love to us (John 1:18).

This is the God in whom "we live and move and have our being," as the apostle Paul put it (Acts 17:28). As such, "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Yet we don't walk alone. The unseen God walks with us every step of the way.

Reflect & Pray

In a world where seeing is believing, in what ways do you struggle to live by faith in God? What has strengthened your faith, and in what areas do you need to rest in Him more fully?

Father, sometimes it's a struggle to believe what I can't see. Nevertheless, You've promised Your faithful love and that You'll never leave me or forsake me. Help me to rest in that promise.

Confident Hope

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

Today's Scripture & Insight:
Philippians 1:19–26

Dr. William Wallace was serving as a missionary surgeon in Wuzhou, China, in the 1940s when Japan attacked China. Wallace, who was in charge of Stout Memorial Hospital at the time, ordered the hospital to load his equipment on barges and continue to function as a hospital while floating up and down rivers to avoid infantry attacks.

During dangerous times, Philippians 1:21—one of Wallace's favorite verses—reminded him that if he lived, he had work to do for the Savior; but if he died, he had the promise of eternity with Christ. The verse took on special meaning when he died while falsely imprisoned in 1951.

Paul's writing reflects a deep devotion we can aspire to as followers of Jesus, enabling us to face trials and even danger for His sake. It is devotion enabled by the Holy Spirit and the prayers of those closest to us (v. 19). It's also a promise. Even when we surrender ourselves to continued service under difficult circumstances, it is with this reminder: when our life and work end here, we still have the joy of eternity with Jesus ahead of us.

In our hardest moments, with hearts committed to walking with Christ now, and with our eyes firmly fixed on the promise of eternity with Him, may our days and our acts bless others with the love of God.

By: **Randy Kilgore**

Reflect & Pray

**Make of me, Father, a willing servant in times of weakness
and times of strength.**

Sacrifices offered to God are opportunities to showcase His love.

Hope's Sure Foundation

My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 11:1–6

Lessons on faith can come from unexpected places—like the one I learned from my 110-pound, black Labrador retriever, “Bear.” Bear’s large metal water bowl was located in a corner of the kitchen. Whenever it was empty, he wouldn’t bark or paw at it. Instead, he would lie down quietly beside it and wait. Sometimes he would have to wait several minutes, but Bear had learned to trust that I would eventually walk into the room, see him there, and provide what he needed. His simple faith in me reminded me of my need to place more trust in God.

The Bible tells us that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). The foundation of this confidence and assurance is God Himself, who “rewards those who earnestly seek him” (v. 6). God is faithful to keep His promises to all who believe and come to Him through Jesus.

Sometimes having faith in “what we do not see” isn’t easy. But we can rest in God’s goodness and His loving character, trusting that His wisdom is perfect in all things—even when we have to wait. He is always faithful to do what He says: to save our eternal souls and meet our deepest needs, now and forever.

Reflect & Pray

**Almighty Father, thank You for Your faithfulness to always take care of me.
Help me to trust You and to rest in Your perfect love today.**

Don't worry about tomorrow—God is already there.

True Hope

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Romans 8:16

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Romans 5:1–11

Not long ago I visited the Empire State Building with a friend. The line looked short—just down the block and around the corner. Yet as we entered the building, we discovered the line of people stretching through the lobby, up the stairs, and into another room. Every new turn revealed more distance to go.

Attractions and theme parks carefully route their crowds to make the lines seem shorter. Yet disappointment can lurk “just around the bend.”

Sometimes life's disappointments are much more severe. The job we hoped for doesn't materialize; friends we counted on let us down; the romantic relationship we longed for fails to work out. But into these heartbreaks, God's Word speaks a refreshing truth about our hope in Him. The apostle Paul wrote, “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame [or disappoint us], because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:3–5).

As we place our trust in Him, through His Spirit, God whispers the truth that we are unconditionally loved and will one day be with Him—regardless of the obstacles we face. In a world that may often disappoint us, how good it is to know that God gives genuine hope.

By: **James Banks**

Reflect & Pray

Abba, Father, thank You that I can always trust in Your perfect,
never-ending love.

In Christ, the hopeless find hope.

No Impossible Obstacles

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 11:1–6, 13–16

As an adult leader, I arranged a student field trip to an obstacle course. We instructed students to slip into safety gear and scale an eight-foot wall. Those who went first encouraged each climber to trust the harness and keep moving forward without looking down. One of our students stared at the barrier as we secured belts and buckles around her waist. “There’s no way I can do this,” she said. Affirming the strength of her harness, we encouraged her and cheered when she climbed up the wall and stepped onto the high platform.

When we face problems that seem impossible to conquer, fears and insecurities can cause doubts. The assurance of God’s unchanging might, goodness, and faithfulness creates a strong harness of trust. This confident assurance fueled the courage of the Old Testament saints, who demonstrated that faith trumps our need to know every detail of God’s plan (Hebrews 11:1–13, 39). With conviction, we seek God earnestly, often standing alone when we trust Him. We can adjust the way we approach our challenges by viewing our circumstances with an eternal perspective—knowing our trials are only temporary (vv. 13–16).

Focusing on the steep climbs in life can prevent us from believing that God will bring us through. But knowing He’s with us, we can harness our uncertainties by faith as we trust God to help us overcome obstacles that once seemed impossible.

Reflect & Pray

How can you become more courageous in the face of an impossible task? How do you feel when you've accomplished something you didn't think you could do?

Father, thank You for being the Author and Perfecter of my faith, so that the measure of my faith when I face obstacles is reliant on Your strength, not my own.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
August 8 - 12

Faith Enables Action: Hebrews 12:1-2

Aug. 14 (Prop. 15)	Tenth S. a. Pentecost	Jer. 23:16-29	Psalms 119:81-88	Heb. 11:17-31 (32-40); 12:1-3	Luke 12:49-53 (54-56)
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Bad Faith, Good Faith

[Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.

Romans 4:20

Romans 4:18-25

“You gotta have faith,” people say. But what does that mean? Is *any* faith good faith?

“Believe in yourself and all that you are,” wrote one positive thinker a century ago. “Know that there is something inside you that is greater than any obstacle.” As nice as that may sound, it falls to pieces when it crashes into reality. We need a faith in something bigger than ourselves.

God promised Abram he would have a multitude of descendants (Gen. 15:4-5), so he faced a huge obstacle—he was old and childless. When he and Sarah got tired of waiting for God to make good on His promise, they tried to overcome that obstacle on their own. As a result, they fractured their family and created a lot of unnecessary dissension (see Gen. 16 and 21:8-21).

Nothing Abraham did in his own strength worked. But ultimately he became known as a man of tremendous faith. Paul wrote of him, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Rom. 4:18). This faith, said Paul, “was credited to him as righteousness” (v. 22).

Abraham's faith was in something far bigger than himself—the one and only God. It's the object of our faith that makes all the difference.

By: **Tim Gustafson**

Reflect & Pray

Lord, I want a strong faith in You, not just faith in myself or my abilities or in others. I am nothing without You.

Our faith is good if it's in the right Person.

No Such Thing as Ordinary

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

Hebrews 11:39

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 11:1, 32–40

When Anita passed away in her sleep on her ninetieth birthday, the quietness of her departure reflected the quietness of her life. A widow, she had been devoted to her children and grandchildren and to being a friend to younger women in the church.

Anita wasn't particularly remarkable in talent or achievement. But her deep faith in God inspired those who knew her. "When I don't know what to do about a problem," a friend of mine said, "I don't think about the words of a famous preacher or author. I think about what Anita would say."

Many of us are like Anita—ordinary people living ordinary lives. Our names will never be in the news, and we won't have monuments built in our honor. But a life lived with faith in Jesus is never ordinary. Some of the people listed in Hebrews 11 were not named (vv. 35–38); they walked the path of obscurity and didn't receive the reward promised to them in this life (v. 39). Yet, because they obeyed God, their faith wasn't in vain. God used their lives in ways that went beyond their lack of notoriety (v. 40).

If you feel discouraged about the seeming ordinary state of your life, remember that a life lived by faith in God has an impact throughout eternity. Even if we're ordinary, we can have an extraordinary faith.

Reflect & Pray

In what area of your daily life might God be calling you to exercise faith in Him?

How can He help you be more obedient and faithful in what you do every day?

Faithful God, please help me to trust and obey You always.

Faith-Stand

Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.

John 19:40

Today's Scripture & Insight:

John 19:38–42

Desmond Doss enlisted to serve in World War II as a non-combatant. Though his religious beliefs prevented him from carrying a gun, Doss ably served as a combat medic. In one battle, he withstood intense and repeated enemy fire to pull seventy-five soldiers in his unit to safety after they had been injured. His story is told in the documentary *The Conscientious Objector* and dramatized in the film *Hacksaw Ridge*.

A roll call of the heroes of Christian faith includes such courageous characters as Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, and Paul. Yet there are some unsung heroes like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who risked their standing with the Jewish leaders to take Christ's crucified body and give Him a decent burial (John 19:40–42). This was a bold move from a fearful, secret disciple of Jesus and another, Nicodemus, who had previously dared to visit Him only at night (vv. 38–39). Even more impressive is that they took their faith-stand *before* Jesus rose victorious from the grave. Why?

Perhaps the manner of Jesus's death and the events that immediately followed (Matthew 27:50–54) crystallized the fledgling faith of these fearful followers. Maybe

they learned to focus on who God is rather than what man could do to them. Whatever the inspiration, may we follow their example and exhibit courage to take risks of faith in our God—for others today.

By: **Remi Oyedele**

Reflect & Pray

In what ways have you lived courageously for your faith in Jesus? What can you do differently that might show your faith to the world?

Courage [is] not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. Nelson Mandela

Adolescent Faith

Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always.

Deuteronomy 5:29

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Deuteronomy 5:28–33

The teenage years are sometimes among the most agonizing seasons in life—for both parent and child. In my adolescent quest to “individuate” from my mother, I openly rejected her values and rebelled against her rules, suspicious their purposes were merely to make me miserable. Though we’ve since come to agree on those matters, that time in our relationship was riddled with tension. Mom undoubtedly lamented my refusal to heed the wisdom of her instructions, knowing they would spare me unnecessary emotional and physical pain.

God had the same heart for His children, Israel. God imparted His wisdom for living in what we know as the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:7–21). Though they could be viewed as a list of rules, God’s intention is evident in His words to Moses: “so that it might go well with them and their children forever!” (v. 29). Moses recognized God’s desire, saying that obedience to the decrees would result in their enjoyment of His ongoing presence with them in the promised land (v. 33).

We all go through a season of “adolescence” with God, not trusting that His guidelines for living are truly meant for our good. May we grow into the realization that He wants what’s best for us and learn to heed the wisdom He offers. His guidance is meant to

lead us into spiritual maturity as we become more like Jesus (Psalm 119:97–104; Ephesians 4:15; 2 Peter 3:18).

By: **Kirsten Holmberg**

Reflect & Pray

How has God’s wisdom helped you grow in your relationship with Him? In what area of your life do you need to heed His wisdom?

Loving God, help me to trust that You know what’s best for me.

The Next Chapter

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus,
the author and finisher of our faith. —

Hebrews 12:1-2

Today's Scripture:

Hebrews 12:1-11

Steve was almost 5 when his father, missionary pilot Nate Saint, was killed in 1956, along with four other men, by the Waodani tribe in Ecuador. But as a result of the love and forgiveness demonstrated by the families of the martyred men, there is now a growing community of believers among the Waodani.

As an adult, Steve moved back to Ecuador and became friends with Mincaye, one of the men who killed his father. Steve’s motto is: “Let God Write Your Story.” He says, “You have a lot of people . . . who want to write their own story and have God be their editor when [it] goes wrong. I decided long ago to let God write my story.” When Steve suffered a serious accident in 2012, he reassured his family: “Let’s let God write *this* chapter too.” His faith continues to carry him toward recovery.

The story continues to unfold for all followers of Jesus Christ. None of us knows how the next chapter of our life will read. But as we look to Jesus and “run with endurance the race that is set before us,” we can trust Him—the author and finisher of our faith

(Heb. 12:1-2). Jesus wrote the beginning of our story, and He'll write the next chapter and the ending as well.

Reflect & Pray

When we stand with Christ in glory,
Looking o'er life's finished story,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know—
Not till then—how much I owe. —McCheyne

Let your life tell the story of Christ's love and mercy to the world around you.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
August 15 - 19

Faith Endures Discipline: Hebrews 12:7

Aug. 21 (Prop. 16)	Eleventh S. a. Pentecost	Is. 66:18-23	Psalms 50:1-15	Heb. 12:4-24 (25-29)	Luke 13:22-30
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Traveling Light

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Hebrews 12:1

Hebrews 12:1-3

A man named James took an adventurous, 1,250-mile journey down the West Coast of the US—biking from Seattle, Washington, to San Diego, California. A friend of mine met the ambitious biker near the cliffs of Big Sur, 930 miles from his starting point. After learning that someone had recently stolen James' camping gear, my friend offered his blanket and sweater, but James refused. He said that as he traveled south into the warmer climate, he needed to begin shedding items. And the closer he got to his destination, the more tired he became, so he needed to reduce the weight he was carrying.

James' realization was smart. It's a reflection of what the writer of Hebrews is saying too. As we continue our journey in life, we need to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (12:1). We need to travel light to press on.

As believers in Jesus, running this race requires “perseverance” (v. 1). And one of the ways to ensure we can keep going is to be free of the weight of unforgiveness, pettiness, and other sins that will hinder us.

Without Jesus’ help, we can’t travel light and run this race well. May we look to the “pioneer and perfecter of faith” so that we won’t “grow weary and lose heart” (vv. 2–3).

By: **Katara Patton**

Reflect & Pray

What do you sense is weighing you down on your life journey? How might you persevere and be free of the weight that entangles?

Heavenly Father, I thank You for the race You’ve set before me. Please give me wisdom and discernment to steer clear of the sin that tries to entangle me and prevent me from running well.

Brave Your Storm

[Fix your] eyes on Jesus, . . . so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:2–3

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 12:1–3, 12–13

It was the evening of April 3, 1968, and a fierce thunderstorm was lashing through Memphis, Tennessee. Weary and feeling ill, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. hadn’t intended to give his planned speech in support of the striking sanitation workers at a church hall. But he was surprised by an urgent phone call saying a large crowd had braved the weather to hear him. So he went to the hall and spoke for forty minutes, delivering what some say was his greatest speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

The next day, King was killed by an assassin’s bullet, but his speech still inspires oppressed people with the hope of “the promised land.” Likewise, early followers of Jesus were uplifted by a stirring message. The book of Hebrews, written to encourage Jewish believers facing threats for their faith in Christ, offers firm spiritual encouragement to not lose hope. As it urges, “strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12). As Jews, they would recognize that appeal as originally coming from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 35:3).

But now, as Christ’s disciples, we’re called to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1–2). When we do so, we “will not grow weary and lose heart” (v. 3).

Certainly, squalls and storms await us in this life. But in Jesus, we outlast life’s tempests by standing in Him.

By: **Patricia Raybon**

Reflect & Pray

How do you respond to life’s spiritual storms? As you look to Jesus and His promises, how does He encourage you?

Jesus, You calm every spiritual storm. When tempests rage, speak peace to my soul as I put my hope in You.

Serve Continually

Has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you?

Daniel 6:20

Today's Scripture:

Daniel 6:10–22

When educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom, researching how to develop talent in young people, examined the childhoods of 120 elite performers—athletes, artists, scholars—he found that all of them had one thing in common: they had practiced intensively for long periods of time.

Bloom’s research suggests that growing in any area of our lives requires discipline. In our walk with God, too, cultivating the spiritual discipline of regularly spending time with Him is one way we can grow in our trust in Him.

Daniel is a good example of someone who prioritized a disciplined walk with God. As a young person, Daniel started making careful and wise decisions (1:8). He also was committed to praying regularly, “giving thanks to God” (6:10). His frequent seeking of God resulted in a life in which his faith was easily recognized by those around him. In fact, King Darius described Daniel as a “servant of the living God” (v. 20) and twice described him as a person who served God “continually” (vv. 16, 20).

Like Daniel, we desperately need God. How good to know that God works in us so that we long to spend time with Him! ([Philippians 2:13](#)). So let us come every day before God, trusting that our time with Him will result in a love that will overflow more and more and in a growing knowledge and understanding of our Savior (1:9–11).

By: **Keila Ochoa**

Reflect & Pray

Father, I thank You for the privilege of serving You. Help me to spend regular time with You in order to grow in my knowledge of You.

Time with God transforms us

Love That Disciplines

Do not despise the Lord's discipline.

[Proverbs 3:11](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Proverbs 3:11–12

When I took a family studies class in college, we were asked to write a “family history”—a record of the key events that make up one’s childhood. This included the patterns that characterized typical family life and the methods of discipline we experienced. We all had at least one instance of a parent misapplying discipline and leaving an emotional or physical scar. Understandably, traumatic experiences like these may affect the way we interpret our heavenly Father’s discipline.

In [Proverbs 3:11–12](#), the wise teacher invites readers to accept God’s discipline. The word *discipline* could be translated “correction.” As a good and loving Father, God speaks through His Spirit and the Scriptures to correct self-destructive behavior. God’s discipline is relational—rooted in His love and His desire for what’s best for us. Sometimes it looks like consequences. Sometimes God prompts someone to point out our blind spots. Often, it’s uncomfortable, but God’s discipline is a gift.

But we don’t always see it that way. The wise man cautioned, “Do not despise the Lord’s discipline” (v. 11). Sometimes we fear God’s discipline. At other times we misinterpret bad things in our lives as God’s discipline. This is far from the heart of a

loving Father who disciplines because He delights in us and corrects because He loves us.

Instead of fearing God's discipline, may we learn to accept it. When we hear God's voice of correction in our hearts or experience conviction when reading Scripture, may we thank God that He delights in us enough to lead us to what's best.

By: **Daniel Ryan Day**

Reflect & Pray

How do you recognize God's discipline? How do you sense the love of God in the midst of it?

God, help me to recognize Your discipline so that I can discover the freedom You offer.

Walking in the Light

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

John 1:4

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 12:18–24

Darkness descended on our forest village when the moon disappeared. Lightning slashed the skies, followed by a rainstorm and crackling thunder. Awake and afraid, as a child I imagined all kinds of grisly monsters about to pounce on me! By daybreak, however, the sounds vanished, the sun rose, and calm returned as birds jubilated in the sunshine. The contrast between the frightening darkness of the night and the joy of the daylight was remarkably sharp.

The author of Hebrews recalls the time when the Israelites had an experience at Mount Sinai so dark and stormy they hid in fear (Exodus 20:18–19). For them, God's presence, even in His loving gift of the law, felt dark and terrifying. This was because, as sinful people, the Israelites couldn't live up to God's standards. Their sin caused them to walk in darkness and fear (Hebrews 12:18–21).

But God is light; in Him there's no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). In Hebrews 12, Mount Sinai represents God's holiness and our old life of disobedience, while the beauty of

Mount Zion represents God’s grace and believers’ new life in Jesus, “the mediator of a new covenant” (vv. 22–24).

Whoever follows Jesus will “never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Through Him, we can let go of the darkness of our old life and celebrate the joy of walking in the light and beauty of His kingdom.

By: **Lawrence Darmani**

Reflect & Pray

**If you’re a believer in Jesus, how has your life changed since He came into it?
What are some ways you’d like to grow in your faith?**

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for bringing me out of darkness into Your marvelous light. Help me to avoid the darkness to continue walking in the light toward eternity.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of August 22 – 26

Faith and Christian Living: Hebrews 13:21

Aug. 28 (Prop. 17)	Twelfth S. a. Pentecost	Prov. 25:2–10	Psalms 131	Heb. 13:1–17	Luke 14:1–14
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Mysterious Helpers

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:2

Hebrews 13:1–3

Louise suffers from muscular dystrophy. While trying to exit a train station one day, she found herself facing a large flight of stairs without an elevator or escalator. On the verge of tears, Louise saw a man suddenly appear, pick up her bag, and gently help her up the stairs. When she turned to thank him, he was gone.

Michael was late for a meeting. Already stressed from a relationship breakdown, he started battling London’s traffic only to get a flat tire. As he stood helplessly in the rain, a man stepped out of the crowd, opened the boot (trunk), jacked up the car, and changed the wheel. When Michael turned to thank him, he was gone.

Who were these mysterious helpers? Kind strangers, or something more?

The popular image we have of angels as radiant or winged creatures is only half true. While some appear this way ([Isaiah 6:2](#); [Matthew 28:3](#)), others come with dusty feet, ready for a meal ([Genesis 18:1–5](#)) and are easily mistaken for everyday people ([Judges 13:16](#)). The writer of Hebrews says that by showing hospitality to strangers, we can entertain angels without realizing it ([13:2](#)).

We don't know if Louise and Michael's helpers were angels. But according to Scripture, they could have been. Angels are at work right now, helping God's people ([Hebrews 1:14](#)). And they can appear as ordinary as a person on the street. By: [Sheridan Voysey](#)

Reflect & Pray

What do you know about angels? Can you think of an instance when you may have encountered one without realizing it at the time?

Thank You, God, for the angels You send, meeting us in our time of need.

Outside the Camp

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

[Hebrews 13:12](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 13:11–16

Friday was market day in the rural town in Ghana where I grew up. After all these years, I still recall one particular vendor. Her fingers and toes eroded by Hansen's disease (leprosy), she would crouch on her mat and scoop her produce with a hollowed-out gourd. Some avoided her. My mother made it a point to buy from her regularly. I saw her only on market days. Then she would disappear outside the town.

In the time of the ancient Israelites, diseases like leprosy meant living "outside the camp." It was a forlorn existence. Israelite law said of such people, "They must live alone" ([Leviticus 13:46](#)). Outside the camp was also where the carcasses of the sacrificial bulls were burned ([4:12](#)). Outside the camp was not where you wanted to be.

This harsh reality breathes life into the statement about Jesus in [Hebrews 13](#): "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (v. 13). Jesus was crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem, a significant point when we study the Hebrew sacrificial system.

We want to be popular, to be honored, to live comfortable lives. But God calls us to go “outside the camp”—where the disgrace is. That’s where we’ll find the vendor with Hansen’s disease. That’s where we’ll find people the world has rejected. That’s where we’ll find Jesus.

By: **Tim Gustafson**

Reflect & Pray

How do you initially react to outsiders and misfits? In what practical way might you go to Jesus “outside the camp”?

Thank You, Jesus, that You don’t show any favoritism. Thank You for going outside the camp for me.

God with Skin On

Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

[Romans 12:13](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Romans 12:9–18

My husband left for a month-long trip, and almost immediately I was overwhelmed by the needs of my job, our house, and our children. A writing deadline loomed. The lawn mower broke. My children were on school break and bored. How would I take care of all of these things on my own?

I soon realized I wasn’t on my own. Friends from church showed up to help. Josh came over to fix my lawn mower. John brought me lunch. Cassidy helped with the laundry. Abi invited my kids over to play with hers so I could get my work done. God worked through each of these friends to provide for me. They were a living picture of the kind of community Paul describes in [Romans 12](#). They loved sincerely (v. 9), considered the needs of others rather than just their own (v. 10), shared with me when I was in need, and showed hospitality (v. 13).

Because of the love my friends showed to me, I remained “joyful in hope” and “patient in affliction” (v. 12), even the mild affliction of solo parenting for a month. My brothers and sisters in Christ became what one friend calls “God with skin on” for me.

They showed me the kind of sincere love we ought to show to everyone, especially those in our community of faith ([Galatians 6:10](#)). I hope to be more like them.

By: **Amy Peterson**

Reflect & Pray

God, thank You for placing us in communities. Help me to look out for others' needs and to show hospitality.

To whom do I need to be “God with skin on” today?

Welcoming Strangers

You are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

[Deuteronomy 10:19](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Deuteronomy 10:12–19

When my friends lived in Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, they were overwhelmed by the warm welcome they received there, especially from other Christians. Once they took some clothes and provisions to a couple from their church who were very poor, yet who were fostering several children. The couple treated my friends like honored guests, giving them sweet tea and, despite their protests, something to eat. As my friends left with gifts of watermelons and other fruits and vegetables, they marveled at the hospitality they experienced.

These believers embody the welcome that God commanded His people, the Israelites, to exhibit. He instructed them “to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” ([Deuteronomy 10:12](#)). How could the Israelites live this out? The answer comes a few verses later: “You are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (v. 19). By welcoming strangers, they would be serving and honoring God; and in showing them love and care, they would demonstrate their trust in Him.

Our circumstances might differ from the Moldovans or the Israelites, but we too can live out our love for God through our welcome to others. Whether through opening our homes or smiling a greeting to those we meet, we can extend God’s care and hospitality in a lonely, hurting world.

By: **Amy Boucher Pye**

Reflect & Pray

When you receive the gift of hospitality, how does that affect you? When you think about welcoming someone, does a specific person come to mind?

Believers show God’s love through the gift of welcome.

Real Hospitality

Offer hospitality to one another . . . use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:9–10

Today’s Scripture & Insight:

Genesis 24:12–20

“*Kumain ka na ba?*” (Have you eaten?)

This is what you’ll always hear as a visitor in many homes in the Philippines, where I’m from. It’s the Filipino way of expressing care and kindness for our guests. And regardless of your reply, your host will always prepare something for you to eat. Filipinos believe that true kindness isn’t just saying the standard greeting but also going beyond words to show real hospitality.

Rebekah too, knew all about being kind. Her daily chores included drawing water from the well outside town and carrying the heavy jar of water home. When Abraham’s servant, who was very thirsty from his journey, asked for a little water from her jar, she didn’t hesitate to give him a drink (Genesis 24:17–18).

But then Rebekah did even more. When she saw that the visitor’s camels were thirsty, she quickly offered to go back to draw more water for them (vv. 19–20). She didn’t

hesitate to help, even if it meant making an extra trip (or more) to the well and back with a heavy jar.

Life is tough for many people, and often a small gesture of practical kindness can encourage them and lift their spirits. Being a channel of God's love doesn't always mean delivering a powerful sermon or planting a church. Sometimes, it can simply be giving someone a drink of water.

By: **Karen Huang**

Reflect & Pray

Who do you know who might need some encouragement? What act of practical kindness can you offer to encourage them?

Heavenly Father, open my eyes to the needs of people around me. Give me the wisdom to know how to show kindness and care to them.

Minister of Loneliness

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

Hebrews 13:1

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Hebrews 13:1–8

Following her husband's death, Betsy has spent most days in her flat, watching television and boiling tea for one. She's not alone in her loneliness. More than nine million Brits (15 percent of the population) say they often or always feel lonely, and Great Britain has appointed a minister of loneliness to find out why and how to help.

Some causes of loneliness are well known: We move too often to put down roots. We believe we can take care of ourselves, and we don't have a reason to reach out. We're separated by technology—each of us immersed in our own flickering screens.

I feel the dark edge of loneliness, and you may too. This is one reason we need fellow believers. Hebrews concludes its deep discussion of Jesus's sacrifice by encouraging us to meet together continually (10:25). We belong to the family of God, so we're to love

“one another as brothers and sisters” and “show hospitality to strangers” (13:1–2). If we each made an effort, everyone would feel cared for.

Lonely people may not return our kindness, but this is no reason to give up. Jesus has promised to never leave nor forsake us (13:5), and we can use His friendship to fuel our love for others. Are you lonely? What ways can you find to serve the family of God? The friends you make in Jesus last forever, through this life and beyond.

By: **Mike Wittmer**

Reflect & Pray

Who needs your friendship? How might you serve someone in your church or neighborhood this week?

The family of God is intended to be the answer to loneliness.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
August 29 – September 2

Choose Life or Death: Deuteronomy 30:15

Sept. 4 (Prop. 18)	Thirteenth S. a. Pentecost	Deut. 30:15–20	Psalms 1	Philemon 1–21	Luke 14:25–35
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Choose Wisely

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Mark 8:36

Mark 8:34–38

Astronaut Chris Ferguson made a difficult decision as the commander of the flight crew scheduled for a journey to the International Space Station. But that decision didn't have anything to do with the mechanics of flight or the safety of his fellow astronauts. Instead, it pertained to what he considers his most important work: his family. Ferguson opted to keep his feet planted firmly on Earth so he could be present for his daughter's wedding.

We all face difficult decisions at times—decisions that cause us to evaluate what matters most to us in life, because one option comes at the expense of the other. Jesus

aimed to communicate this truth to His disciples and a crowd of onlookers regarding life's most important decision—to follow Him. To be a disciple, He said, would require them to “deny themselves” in order to walk with Him ([Mark 8:34](#)). They might have been tempted to spare themselves the sacrifices required of following Christ and instead seek their own desires, but He reminded them it would come at the price of that which matters much more.

We're often tempted to pursue things that seem of great value, yet they distract us from following Jesus. Let's ask God to guide us in the choices we face each day so we'll choose wisely and honor Him.

By: **Kirsten Holmberg**

Reflect & Pray

What choices have you made that drew you away from Jesus? What choices have drawn you nearer?

Jesus, I want to walk with You. Please help me to recognize and choose the paths that will foster a deeper connection to You.

Choosing the Trail

Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

[Matthew 7:14](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Matthew 7:13–14

I have a beautiful autumn photograph of a young man on horseback in the Colorado mountains as he contemplates which trail ahead to follow. It reminds me of Robert Frost's poem “The Road Not Taken.” In it, Frost ponders two pathways that lie before him. Both are equally inviting, but he doubts he will return to this place again, and he must choose one. Frost wrote, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5–7](#)), the Lord told His listeners, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (7:13–14).

On our journey through life, we face many choices about which road to travel. Many pathways seem promising and attractive but only one is the pathway of life. Jesus calls us to travel the road of discipleship and obedience to God’s Word—to follow Him instead of the crowd.

As we ponder the road ahead, may God give us wisdom and courage to follow His way—the road of life. It will make all the difference for us and those we love!

By: **David C. McCasland**

Reflect & Pray

Lord, as we go through this day, give us eyes to see the narrow road that leads to life and the courage to follow it.

Choose to walk the road of life with Jesus.

The Tree Whisperer

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season.

Psalm 1:3

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Psalm 1

Some call him the “tree whisperer.” Tony Rinaudo is, in fact, World Vision Australia’s tree maker. He’s a missionary and agronomist engaged in a thirty-year effort to share Jesus by combating deforestation across Africa’s Sahel, south of the Sahara.

Realizing stunted “shrubs” were actually dormant trees, Rinaudo started pruning, tending, and watering them. His work inspired hundreds of thousands of farmers to save their failing farms by restoring nearby forests, reversing soil erosion. Farmers in Niger, for example, have doubled their crops and their income, providing food for an additional 2.5 million people per year.

In [John 15](#), Jesus, the creator of agriculture, referred to similar farming tactics when He said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (vv. 1–2).

Without the daily tending of God, our souls grow barren and dry. When we delight in His law, however, meditating on it day and night, we are “like a tree planted by streams of water” ([Psalm 1:3](#)). Our leaves will “not wither” and “whatever [we] do prospers” (v. 3). Pruned and planted in Him, we’re evergreen—revived and thriving.

By: **Patricia Raybon**

Reflect & Pray

Where and how do you sense your soul being tended by God? What do you do to “delight” in Scripture?

O Gardener God, I yield my stunted places to Your pruning and watering, surrendering my dry places to grow green and revived in You.

Where Choices Lead

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous.

[Psalm 1:6](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Psalm 1

With no cell service and no trail map, we had just our memory of a fixed map at the trailhead to guide us. More than an hour later, we finally emerged from the woods into the parking lot. Having missed the turn-off that would have made for a half-mile hike, we took a *much* longer trek.

Life can be like that: we have to ask not simply if something is right or wrong, but where it will lead. [Psalm 1](#) compares two ways of living—that of the righteous (those who love God) and that of the wicked (the enemies of those who love God). The righteous flourish like a tree, but the wicked blow away like chaff (vv. 3–4). This psalm reveals what flourishing really looks like. The person who lives it out is dependent on God for renewal and life.

So how do we become that kind of person? Among other things, [Psalm 1](#) urges us to disengage from destructive relationships and unhealthy habits and to delight in God’s

instruction (v. 2). Ultimately, the reason for our flourishing is God’s attentiveness to us: “The Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (v. 6).

Commit your way to God, let Him redirect you from old patterns that lead to nowhere, and allow the Scriptures to be the river that nourishes the root system of your heart.

By: **Glenn Packiam**

Reflect & Pray

What friendships or habits do you need to make a break from? How can you create more time in your schedule to read the Bible?

Dear Jesus, give me the grace to turn away from the things leading me down the wrong path. Lead me to the river of Your presence, and nourish me with the Scriptures. Make my life faithful and fruitful for Your honor.

A Living Document

Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Psalm 1

In memorializing his grandfather’s work, Peter Croft wrote, “It is my deepest desire for the person who picks up their Bible, whatever version they use, to not only understand but *experience* the scriptures as *living* documents, just as relevant, dangerous, and exciting now as they were those thousands of years ago.” Peter’s grandfather was J.B. Phillips, a youth minister who undertook a new paraphrase of the Bible in English during World War II in order to make it come alive to students at his church.

Like Phillips’ students, we face barriers to reading and experiencing Scripture, and not necessarily because of our Bible translation. We may lack time, discipline, or the right tools for understanding. But Psalm 1 tells us that “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight

is in the law of the Lord” (vv. 1–2). Meditating on Scripture daily allows us to “prosper” in all seasons, no matter what hardship we’re facing.

How do you view your Bible? It’s still relevant with insight for living today, still dangerous in its call to believe and follow Jesus, still exciting in the intimate knowledge of God and humanity that it imparts. It’s like a stream of water (v. 3) that provides the sustenance we need daily. Today, let’s lean in—make time, get the right tools, and ask God to help us experience Scripture as a living document.

By: **Karen Pimpo**

Reflect & Pray

What barriers do you face when reading the Bible? How can you make space to listen to God’s voice?

God, help me experience Scripture as a living document today.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of September 5 -9

Searching for Sheep: Luke 15:6

Christian Education Sunday

Sept. 11 (Prop. 19)	Fourteenth S. a. Pentecost	Ezek. 34:11–24	Psalms 119:169–176	1 Tim. 1:(5–11) 12–17	Luke 15:1–10
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Wandering Off

Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.

Luke 15:6

Luke 15:1–7

Living near cattle ranches as he did, humorist Michael Yaconelli noticed how cows were prone to wander while grazing. A cow would keep moving, always looking for the fabled “greener pastures.” Near the edge of the property, the cow might discover some cool fresh grass under a shade tree. Just beyond a broken-down part of the fence was a tasty clump of foliage. Then the cow might push far beyond the fence and out to the road. It slowly “nibbled” its way into being lost.

Cows aren’t alone in their roaming problem. Sheep also wander, and it’s likely that people have the biggest tendency of all to stray.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons God compares us to sheep in the Bible. It can be easy to meander and "nibble our way" through reckless compromises and foolish decisions, never noticing how far away from the truth we've strayed.

Jesus told the Pharisees the story of a lost sheep. The sheep was of such value to the shepherd that he left his other sheep behind while he searched for the wandering one. And when he found the one that had strayed, He celebrated! ([Luke 15:1-7](#)).

Such is the happiness of God over those who turn back to Him. Jesus said, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep" (v. 6). God has sent us a Savior to rescue us and bring us home.

By: **Cindy Hess Kasper**

Reflect & Pray

In what way might you be wandering in the wrong direction? What's the first step you need to take to get back where you belong?

*Father in heaven, I feel lost. Have I wandered too far?
Redirect my heart and show me the way home.*

Lost but Found

Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.

[Luke 15:6](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Luke 15:1-9

When we discovered that my mother-in-law had gone missing while shopping with a relative, my wife and I were frantic. Mom suffered from memory loss and confusion, and there was no telling what she might do. Would she wander the area, or hop onto any bus thinking it would take her home? Worst-case scenarios spun through our minds as we began to search for her, crying out to God, "Please find her."

Hours later, my mother-in-law was spotted stumbling along a road, miles away. How God blessed us in being able to find her. Several months later, He blessed her: at eighty years of age, my mother-in-law turned to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Jesus, comparing humans to lost sheep, gives us this illustration: “Suppose [a shepherd] has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, . . . he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep’” ([Luke 15:4–6](#)).

Shepherds counted their sheep to make sure every one was accounted for. In the same way, Jesus, who likens himself to that shepherd, values each of us, young and old. When we’re wandering in life, searching, wondering about our purpose, it’s never too late to turn to Christ. God wants us to experience His love and blessings.

By: **Leslie Koh**

Reflect & Pray

Lord, You search for us and find us. Thank You for making us Your own.

Amazing grace! . . . I once was lost, but now am found. John Newton

God Our Rescuer

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered.

[Ezekiel 34:12](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Ezekiel 34:5–12

In the open sea, a rescuer positioned her kayak to assist panicked swimmers competing in a triathlon. “Don’t grab the middle of the boat!” she called to swimmers, knowing such a move would capsize her craft. Instead, she directed weary swimmers to the bow, or front, of the kayak. There they could grab a loop, allowing the safety kayaker to help rescue them.

Whenever life or people threaten to pull us under, as believers in Jesus, we know we have a Rescuer. “For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep . . . I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered” ([Ezekiel 34:11–12](#)).

This was the prophet Ezekiel's assurance to God's people when they were in exile. Their leaders had neglected and exploited them, plundering their lives and caring "for themselves rather than for [God's] flock" (v. 8). As a result, the people "were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them" (v. 6).

But "I will rescue my flock," declared the Lord (v. 10), and His promise still holds.

What do we need to do? Hold fast to almighty God and His promises. "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them," He says (v. 11). That's a saving promise worth holding tightly.

By: **Patricia Raybon**

Reflect & Pray

When you feel panicked, what's your typical reaction? What problem can you release today as you reach instead for God?

*Our rescuing God, when life makes me panic,
encourage me to turn from the rolling waves and always reach for You.*

Priceless Lives in Christ

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Luke 15:10

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Luke 15:8-10

Tears streamed down my cheeks during a frantic search for my lost wedding and anniversary rings. After an hour of lifting couch cushions and scouring every nook and cranny of our home, Alan said, "I'm sorry. We'll replace them."

"Thanks," I responded. "But their sentimental value surpasses their material worth. They're irreplaceable." Praying, I continued hunting for the jewelry. "Please, God. Help me find them."

Later, while reaching into the pocket of a sweater worn earlier in the week, I found the priceless jewels. "Thank You, Jesus!" I exclaimed. As my husband and I rejoiced, I slipped on the rings and recalled the parable of the woman who lost a coin (Luke 15:8-

10). Like the woman who searched for her lost silver coin, I knew the worth of what had been lost. Neither of us was wrong for wanting to find our valuables. Jesus simply used that story to emphasize His desire to save every person He created. One sinner repenting results in a celebration in heaven.

What a gift it would be to become a person who prays as passionately for others as we pray for lost treasures to be found. What a privilege it is to celebrate when someone repents and surrenders their lives to Christ. If we've placed our trust in Jesus, we can be thankful we've experienced the joy of being loved by Someone who never gave up because He thought we were worth finding.

By: **Xochitl Dixon**

Reflect & Pray

Whose salvation will you commit to praying for today?

Who can you share your testimony with?

*Father, thank You for reminding me that every person You create
is a priceless life worth saving.*

Love Won't Stop

Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.

Luke 15:6

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Luke 15:1-7

After I turned nineteen, and years before I owned a pager or a cell phone, I moved more than seven hundred miles away from my mom. One morning, I left early to run errands, forgetting our scheduled call. Later that night, two policemen came to my door. Mom had been worried because I'd never missed one of our chats. After calling repeatedly and getting a busy signal, she reached out to the authorities and insisted they check on me. One of the police officers turned to me and said, "It's a blessing to know love won't stop looking for you."

When I picked up the phone to call my mom, I realized I had accidentally left the receiver off its base. After I apologized, she said she needed to spread the good news to

the family and friends she had informed that I'd been *missing*. I hung up thinking she'd overreacted a bit, though it felt good to be loved that much.

Scripture paints a beautiful picture of God, who *is* Love, relentlessly beckoning His wandering children. Like a good shepherd, He cares about and seeks out every lost sheep, affirming the priceless value of every beloved child of God (Luke 15:1–7).

Love never stops looking for us. He will pursue us until we've returned to Him. We can pray for others who need to know that *Love*—God—never stops looking for them either.

By: **Xochitl Dixon**

Reflect & Pray

How does it encourage you to know that God continually pursues you in love?

How is He using you to reveal His love to others?

Heavenly Father, thank You for pursuing us with persistence and providing a safe place when we return to Your loving arms.