

imagine

GOSPEL RENEWAL

30 Day Prayer Guide



Notes

- 1 J.I. Packer, "Introductory Essay to John Owens' *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*," www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html.
- 2 The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985 edition, p. 1790. (Introduction to Ephesians)
- 3 Timothy Keller, *Center Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012, p. 48.
- 4 J.I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010. We are using multiple quotes and ideas from chapters 5, 6, and 7.
- 5 Keller, *Center Church*, p. 36.
- 6 Keller, *Center Church*, p. 54.
- 7 The NIV Study Bible, p. 377. (Notes on 1 Sam. 2:12)
- 8 Keller, *Center Church*, p. 31.
- 9 J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1973. p. 206.
- 10 Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 201.
- 11 Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 229.

30 Day Prayer Guide for Personal Gospel Renewal

North Shore Community Baptist Church

Foreword

The need for Spirit-led Gospel Renewal among Christians and churches in the west has been noted by writers and pastors for a long time. And with our world, and especially our country, spiralling into increasing disregard for God, this need is acute enough for all of us to see. Perhaps God is forcing our hand.

Historically there have been church-wide renewals from time to time here in New England, and we refer to them as "revivals." That we need such a thing again in our day is apparent. God's church, full of broken but forgiven people, needs constant renewal. But the church, of course, *is* those people, so this renewal actually needs to take place continually in individual hearts. We know historically as well that these are not things we can accomplish by ourselves. The transforming power of the gospel is something God alone can bring about.

That is not to say it is inappropriate for us to seek renewal. The Scripture is full of injunctions that we seek God with all our heart, and instructions that we are to walk diligently and carefully with the Spirit in all godliness. In fact there is a real connection between our earnest seeking and God's response. That is why renewals, whether individual or collective, have always begun with special times of repentance and prayer by God's people. Gospel Renewal is about having God and his grace becoming larger and deeper in our hearts and lives, nothing short of a work of the Holy Spirit in us. And we have our Lord's promise that this is very much something the Father desires to do as we ask (Luke 11:13).

As NSCBC sets a vision for a gospel movement on the North Shore, it is clear that there must first be some measure of Gospel Renewal among us. While we preach about it and teach about it and talk about it, we know it is something God must do among us in response to our having aligned our hearts with Him in prayer. We have no illusions that this is something to be accomplished in 30 days. What lies with us is simply to be earnest and faithful in seeking, so this prayer guide is only meant as a nudge toward what is really a lifelong practice. Nor do we have any sense that we are all necessarily starting at the same place. So we each start where we are, asking God to meet us there and move us ahead in ways and at a pace He chooses. Whether He chooses to work in us one at a time or collectively, we expect the results will be for His glory.

May it be so.

Dave Sweet
August 2016

Day 1

Who is the gospel really for?

You may think this a strange question. Obviously the gospel is for *us* and for all lost people, right? One of the simplest definitions of the gospel shared by J.I. Packer is “God saves sinners.” That clearly is a message of the Scriptures. We all certainly qualify as sinners, and unfortunately as such we are very quick to embrace the idea that things rightly focus on us. But that is not all the Bible says about the gospel.

For example, Ephesians 1:3-14 repeatedly makes the point that all the things God has done for us in the gospel are ultimately for His glory. In Revelation 14:6-7 we see an angel sent to proclaim the gospel to all nations. Read his gospel message and you will see that it is entirely concerned with God being feared, glorified and worshiped—not much about us or our need. It is a basic fact that the salvation being offered to us in the gospel is not only for our personal benefit (although it certainly is that), but is principally to bring praise and glory to God.² All this is about Him first of all, not us, and this is at the very heart of Gospel Renewal. Even Packer’s little definition calls for a focus on God . . . his first word.

Obviously God’s love and mercy and grace *are* extended to *us* in the gospel, and Gospel Renewal is about how *we respond in our heart* to these things; head knowledge is not enough. The power of the gospel for giving us new hearts lies in our being changed to love and revere God as the giver of good gifts, but our proneness to still make our own way is why we need renewal—daily.

As we apply this to our vision of outreach, this renewal is key. We understand that a burden for lost people is an important part of our motive for outreach. But we can be weak on this, and a motive driven by people’s needs alone can easily dwindle—human need is bottomless. The more lasting motive is a burden for how a fallen world really is robbing God of the love, praise and worship that should be flowing to Him. God himself being our “highest treasure,” as John Piper argues, brings the motive critical not only to our witness but also to every area of our Christian walk.

That’s where we begin.

Prayer points:

Spend some time before the Lord discerning where He stands among the treasures of your heart. Then ask Him to establish and grow in you a heart that treasures Him above all else, and to make that the defining thing about who you are and all that you do. Obviously this is not a one-time prayer!

Day 30

Afterword

For 29 days we were asked to pray for ourselves individually to grow in our experience of the gospel. By now it should be apparent that this is a matter for continual prayer until the Lord takes us home. We are called to boldly approach God for help in our time of need (Heb. 4:16), and our time of need for growing in Christ is *all* the time.

But we also have been doing this together as the people of NSCBC. So on this closing day, let’s shift to praying for one another and the entire congregation. Our goal is for the church as a whole to be a culture that is alive with the gospel in a way that will impact the North Shore.

Prayer points:

Ask God to be moving the heart of every person in the congregation toward a more vibrant experience of His love and grace as shown in the gospel.

Ask Him to make us, through the gospel, into a church where love, reconciliation, and mutual upbuilding truly describe how we relate to one another.

Ask Him to give wisdom, perseverance and gospel grace to all who provide leadership, and all who do the many works of ministry among us.

Ask Him to give us a strong common vision for becoming people who personally live the gospel before others, both inside and outside the church.

Ask Him to help us all better understand this culture in which we live, and how He would have us change to better reflect the gospel to the real needs of the North Shore.

Ask Him to bring us closer to other like-minded churches with a heart to work together for the gospel.

Day 29

Above and Beyond

In his book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer asserts that our adoption as God's children "is the highest privilege that the gospel offers."⁹ Adoption rises even above the other benefits of the gospel—election, regeneration, justification, glorification, and all. The reason adoption is higher, he says, is because while these wonderful things repair the legal breach we have caused as creatures by our sin, adoption actually welcomes us into God's family. "The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again."¹⁰ Having God as our Father is a privilege unique to those who by His grace have experienced the gospel (John 1:12-13).

Packer acknowledges that somehow this truth has not been kept in the forefront since the time of the Reformers (16th Century), having been overshadowed by a primary focus on justification itself. So it may take some getting used to. But as you think about it, the blessing of this is immense. Not only has God restored your original position as his creation, but now He brings you into his presence as a son or daughter—all through the merits of Christ.

All of this comes from Packer's 19th chapter entitled "Sons of God," which you are strongly encouraged to read. The chapter ends with a number of very thoughtful questions, a few of which are repeated here:

"Do I understand my adoption? Do I value it? Do I daily remind myself of my privilege as a child of God?

Have I sought full assurance of my adoption? Do I daily dwell on the love of God to me?

Do I treat God as my Father in heaven, loving, honoring, and obeying Him, seeking and welcoming His fellowship, and trying in everything to please Him, as a human parent would want his child to do?

Do I think of Jesus Christ, my Savior and my Lord, as my brother too, bearing to me not only a divine authority but also a divine-human sympathy? Do I think daily how close He is to me, how completely He understands me, and how much, as my kinsman-redeemer, He cares for me?

Does the family likeness appear in me? If not, why not?"¹¹

Prayer points:

Thank God and rest in Him as your heavenly Father. Ask Him to have all the benefits of the gospel, and your privileged position as his child, encourage your heart and be seen by all.

Day 2

What is the gospel really for?

Another strange question. We all know the gospel is the "good news" of Christ's work for our salvation. When we accept by faith Jesus' substitutionary death for us on the cross and His resurrection from the dead to open the way for us to spend eternity with Him, we receive a new heart and life—we are saved. Praise God for that! But the Bible speaks of salvation in broader ways than that as well. For instance, Paul speaks of our "being saved" in an ongoing sense, and also our arrival in heaven as the final "salvation of our soul." Understood this way, we can read Romans 1:16-17 as the gospel being "the power of God unto Salvation [capital S] for all who believe." This means that the gospel has to do with more than just our initial coming to Christ, but with our whole experience as believers—beginning to end.

Tim Keller observes that Christians particularly in the West have taken to thinking that the gospel is only the ABC of our Christian life—that is, only for our initial salvation. Then because of our strong inclination to still take things upon ourselves, we act as though the rest of our growth and perseverance is up to us. One result is our tendency to make the Christian walk a matter of rules. Instead, Keller asserts that we need to see the gospel as the A-Z of our life in Christ.³ The heart of wonder, gratitude and submission that comes from a deep understanding of all God alone has done for us in the gospel is the only true source of the power and motivation needed for every part of the Christian's life.

In their book *Grounded in the Gospel*, J.I. Packer and Gary Parrett have taken Keller's illustration a step farther by producing a full alphabet of reasons why a lifelong focus on the gospel is crucial for every believer. In their words, we are not to move on *from* the gospel (as if moving on to "deeper" things), but rather deeper and deeper *into* the gospel, because the gospel itself is the "plumb line" for all of our walk with God. With their kind permission, we will use these reasons as the focus of our next 26 days of Gospel Renewal prayer.⁴

This is a part of how we "adorn the doctrine of God" (Titus 2:10).

Prayer points:

How narrowly defined is your understanding of "the gospel"? How much have your actions reflected the idea that "once saved we need to take it from there"? Ask the Lord to open up your mind and heart more and more to all the glories of the gospel, to rest in all He has already accomplished and provided for you, and to produce in you a bedrock gratefulness that will sustain you every day and in every circumstance ahead.

Day 3

A–Alignment

“We must continually teach and learn the gospel because it is to be the ‘plumb line’ for our doctrine and our living. We are to measure all our teaching to ensure that it is in line with—that is, conformed to—the glorious gospel of God (1 Tim. 1:11). If our teaching about God, humanity, sin, salvation, the church, last things, and whatever other doctrines we may teach do not accord with the gospel then they must be rejected. Likewise, our way of living must conform to the sound doctrines that flow from the gospel. If, like Peter and Barnabas, we begin to act in ways that are ‘not in keeping with the truth of the gospel’ (Gal. 2:14), may God raise up for us a Paul-like brother or sister to confront us and correct us.”⁴

The apostle Paul is continually reminding the churches that it is the gospel that he preached and that they received by which they were saved, and against which they must check everything they were thinking, saying and practicing in order that they might avoid error. In Tim Keller’s words, “. . . the gospel is what brings unity to all that we do. Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel. Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one ‘main thing’ of a church”⁵ Perhaps you hadn’t noticed, but this is why Pastor Bobby is always careful to bring every sermon, from wherever in Scripture, to a point of how it relates to the gospel.

We can rely on our God to tell us things exactly as they are, and He has done that in the full message of the gospel spelled out for us in the Bible. It is His plan from before the foundation of the world, and He has carefully given it to us so that we will know it and live by it. It follows, doesn’t it, that the gospel is the main thing we need to know well so we can be led by it? We will not improve on it by focusing in only on certain truths of Scripture. If the gospel is the “plumb line” then that’s the place to which we always need to return.

Prayer points:

Do you know the gospel clearly and deeply enough for it to be the “plumb line” for all that you think, say and do as a follower of Christ? How large does the gospel loom in your mind and heart? Pray for a wider and deeper vision of how the gospel relates to everything in your life—a safe anchor for your soul.

Day 28

Z–Zeal

“May God stir both our own hearts and the hearts of those we are called to serve with an authentic zeal for the gospel, and for the Christ of the gospel. We have seen how fully this marked Paul’s life. We could certainly say the same of Jesus, whose first public words were a call to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15) and whose entire ministry *was* gospel. All that Jesus said and did and was, in life and in death, was a display of God’s good news for humanity. In all the ways we have addressed throughout this chapter and more, may we and our readers never be lacking in zeal but keep our spiritual fervor as we serve the Lord (Rom. 12:11) in and through this glorious gospel, the good news of Christ.”⁴

When the disciples saw Jesus clearing out the temple, they realized they were seeing the fulfillment of Psalm 69:9: “. . . zeal for your house consumes me . . .” Zeal is not something we have; it is more like something that has us. In fact, it comes from fully giving ourselves away. In Jesus’ case, He said that He did nothing on His own, but only what the Father instructed Him to do (John 5:30; 6:38). That should be the same for us. Zeal is something God sends to us when we give all of ourselves to Him. That’s also why godly zeal always goes back to Him. What God gives us zeal for is Himself. So it is both from Him and for Him. That of course is exactly what the gospel shows us. God gave Himself for us in order that we might give ourselves back to Him.

Zeal can be a hard thing for us, because we do indeed hold this treasure in fragile vessels. It’s our propensity for holding ourselves back that gets in the way of zeal, and of anything we try to do for God. By grace alone, He is willing to use us in ministry anyway, inconsistent though we may be. Still, it is our goal that whatever we do, we do for Him. And for that we need a full heart acceptance of, and response to, the gospel.

Prayer points:

Express to God your desire to give and do all for Him. Ask Him to help you trust that even in your weakness and failure, His love for you and His hold on you remain secure. And ask Him to give you a zeal for His great name.

Day 27

Y–Yielding

“The gospel must be continually set forth before church members because it is in view of God’s mercy that we are provoked to yield our lives fully to God as living sacrifices (Rom. 6:13; 12:1). It is the kindness of God displayed in the gospel that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4) so that we no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died for us and was raised again (2 Cor. 5:15).”⁴

If stop signs were ignored as routinely as yield signs are, driving would be more hair-raising than it is. Yielding doesn’t sit well with people of the 21st century, which only goes to show that our nature hasn’t changed since the fall into sin. Yielding to one another is hard unless we first have truly yielded ourselves to God in response to His grace and mercy. And that is a byproduct of the gospel. Not that all Christians are courteous drivers, but that is a telling point.

Yielding is at the center of the gospel, and of course that began with Jesus himself. We have never been asked to yield godly prerogatives—we don’t have any. But for our sakes, Jesus yielded what was rightly His. So He clearly has the right to expect that we will in turn yield to Him what we have been given, which is ourselves.

What part of the gospel most makes you want to yield yourself to God? Is it the incarnation, where He was willing to take on our humanness to fully identify with us and stand in our place? Is it the great care with which He unfolded his plan of salvation through generations so we could understand it better? Is it the grace with which He brought truth to bear on every aspect of our life? Is it the cross and everything He accomplished there for us? Is it the power of His resurrection which confirmed the adequacy of all He had done and brought victory over our last enemy? Is it His righteousness with which He covers us even while we are still on the way? Is it the reconciliation which fills the God-shaped hole in our hearts? Is it His gift of the Holy Spirit so we are not left alone? Is it the love that is behind it all?

Any one of them might do. But we have them all—and more. The gospel is full of yield signs.

Prayer points:

Thank God for modeling for us what He asks us to do. Ask Him to help you begin each day by yielding to Him again.

Day 4

B–Belief

“We must continually teach and learn the gospel because even Christians struggle to truly believe God’s good news. The message of the cross is both countercultural and counterintuitive. To the world it is foolishness and weakness. To our flesh it is simply too good to be true. And Satan—that accuser of the brethren—continually speaks a contradictory word to our hearts. He accuses us before God as surely as he accused Joshua the high priest (Zech. 3:1). Hearing all this we, with full knowledge of our failings, struggle to believe the truth of the gospel. To believe it at an appropriately deep level, with an appropriate appreciation of all that it presupposes and implies, is a lifelong task. We must hear it again and again and ask God to seal its truth in our hearts. ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’ (Mark 24:9).”⁴

Christians have long had the practice of identifying themselves as “believers,” so one would think we have a good grasp of what the word means. Living as we do some centuries after the rise of rationalism and scientific thought, however, it may well be that our understanding of belief has been skewed toward the mind and less toward the heart. When the Bible speaks of believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord, it is always referring to something far beyond simple mental perception and assent. Saving belief in the gospel refers to a life-altering conviction of mind, heart, soul and will that God’s good news is not only *true*, but is very specifically *true for me* and involves a joyful surrender of myself to Jesus. For some this is a cataclysmic event in time, while for others it may be a much slower period of increasing awareness. For all it is a matter that is subjected to a whole range of challenges from the realities of our being sinners in a sinful world.

In light of this, Gospel Renewal can mean widely different things to different people. For some it can be a careful consideration of the evidence as to whether this transformation has ever really taken place. For others it is a process of realizing just how much this world and its ways have grown up like weeds crowding out what should be a joyful life with Jesus. In every case it is a work in our life that only God can bring about, so it begins with turning intently to Him.

Prayer points:

What do you mean when you call yourself a believer? How strong is the evidence to support your claim? Ask God to graciously pour out his love and assurance that you belong to Him, and that He has done and is doing all that you need. Be open as well to things He may want to address and change. Bringing you into His kingdom has been His plan from before the creation of the world, and He is more than able to do it!

Day 5

C—Contextualization

“Paul was determined ‘to become all things to all people’ for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-23). He knew that the gospel could and should take on different cultural forms in different cultural settings. Yet when we export the gospel to others, we may be guilty of confusing it with our own cultural trappings. For example, we know that some missionaries have been guilty of imposing their own Western cultural forms on those to whom they carried the gospel. Though this error could be conscious and express cultural imperialism, it is more often unconscious and reflects a lack of discernment about which aspects of our own Christianity are truly gospel-driven, and which are culturally driven and therefore variable. To help us avoid such an error, it is critical that we continually study the heart of the gospel so that we may better distinguish the treasure we bear from the jars of clay in which we bear it.”⁴

The gospel has always been—and must always be—contextualized. Otherwise it would be inconceivable for humans to understand grace and truth from the infinite, transcendent, all-knowing Creator of all things. How was God to get this message down into small, sin-damaged, dark hearts and minds? The scriptures are an amazing record of how He did it over centuries, through stories and events and prophetic declaration, using dozens of ordinary human authors under the direction of His Spirit. All of it without so much as a single deviation from the truth. Many of His messengers themselves were led to contextualize again as they carried the gospel to various people and regions. And of course Jesus himself used a wide range of parables and other images to preach the gospel. So the whole point of contextualization is to *not* compromise the truth, while being sensitive to the hearers’ ability to understand.

For our part, contextualization does not necessarily imply we need to create new ways to present the gospel story. That’s way beyond most of us. It does, however, imply that we need to be sensitive to hearers, and be sure we are not distorting the message or putting up unnecessary barriers in its way—our own thinking, attitudes, prejudices, sophistication, and Christian jargon. We need to put feet to our statement that we are just common people, but with an uncommon hope.

Prayer points:

Ask God to show you any things in your heart and life that are barriers to others simply seeing and being drawn to Christ in you. Ask Him to help you be open to ways to allow the truth to be clear and winsome in the context of your life and relationships.

Day 26

X—Xenophilia

“The actual Greek word we have in mind here is *philoxenia*, which literally means ‘love of strangers, foreigners, aliens.’ Our coinage, if such it be, means exactly the same. In our English New Testaments, *philoxenia* is rendered as ‘hospitality’ (Rom. 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9) and ‘to show hospitality to strangers’ (Heb. 13:2). Such love of strangers is a required attribute of church leaders (1 Tim. 3:2). In the final judgment Jesus will either commend or condemn based upon whether or not people have welcomed ‘the least of these’ (and thus welcomed Christ himself; Matt. 25:35, 43). Jesus is the great model for *philoxenia*, as is indicated in the gospel narratives as well as in the whole wonder of His incarnation and passion. Indeed, we were not merely strangers to Him; we were God’s enemies when He died for us (Rom. 5:8). In declaring such love, the gospel also calls us to imitate it (1 John 4:10-11).”⁴

We tend to think of hospitality as a practice; for instance, we view the value placed on hospitality in Eastern cultures as axiomatic. And God certainly expected Israel as a people to practice hospitality. But even with them He was looking for more than a practice, and the gospel underscores that. On the level ground under the cross, it is only appropriate that our hearts be toward all who have been made in His image, regardless of who and where they are. Without that focus, the practice is less than God means it to be.

Why was Jesus so successful at it, even though He never owned a home or a dining room table? Clearly it was because His heart was perfectly open and loving to all, and that kind of heart is something people everywhere immediately recognize. We are just as quick to recognize when that heart is *not* really there, even though we may enjoy the practice. We appreciate whatever hospitality we can get!

Gospel hospitality is always referring to the heart, not just the practice. And it is precisely the gospel, and the God of the gospel, that has the power to bring about that heart change. Reaching out with the gospel to the North Shore is first a matter of the heart, which again is why we start with Gospel Renewal. Wherever we are in regard to having a heart for people, we can all stand to be more like Jesus. If we *all* had more of His heart for people, that would be a powerful witness.

Prayer points:

Ask God to continue to grow your heart for all people. Ask Him to prepare you to engage genuinely with people who are increasingly hostile to Christians and the church. Ask Him to help you see beyond the hostility to our common need for the gospel.

Day 25

W—Worship

“We must continually teach and learn the gospel because there is simply nothing else that evokes worship and adoration as the gospel does. A quick survey of the hymnody of the church through the past twenty centuries makes this clear. The best hymns—ancient and contemporary—which have shown themselves to have staying power have always been gospel-obsessed. God is glorified, Christ is exalted, and the cross and Christ’s atoning work are central. The same is true of the other key elements of Christian worship—our preaching, our confessions, our prayers, our sacraments. Take away the gospel and Christian worship simply ceases. A sampling from the thousands of gospel-centered hymns of the church will make the point:

Not the labor of my hands can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

Further comment, we think, is needless. The gospel as sung in hymns like this moves us endlessly to wonder and adore.”⁴

Let’s just add two verses of a more contemporary worship song.

When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within;
Upward I look and see Him there, who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free;
For God the Just is satisfied, to look on Him and pardon me.

Behold Him there, the risen Lamb, my perfect, spotless Righteousness;
The great unchangeable I AM, the King of glory and of grace.
One with Himself, I cannot die, my soul is purchased by His blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God.

Prayer points:

Ask the Lord to help your whole life to be worship because of the gospel.

Day 6

D—Depth

“As we noted earlier, we do not move from the milk of the gospel to the meat of something else, but from the milk of the gospel to the meat of the gospel. Even Paul, concluding his exposition of the gospel and preparing to move on to its implications for life, closes his argument in awe and wonder: ‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out!’ (Rom. II:33).

The wonder of how deep and powerful the gospel is—especially as it works its way into believing hearts—is well articulated in this Puritan prayer:

BLESSED Lord JESUS,

No human mind could conceive or invent the gospel.
Acting in eternal grace, thou art both its messenger and its
message, lived out on earth in infinite compassion,
applying thy life to insult, injury, death,
that I might be redeemed, ransomed, freed.

Blessed be thou, O Father, for contriving this way,
Eternal thanks to thee, O Lamb of God, for opening this way,
Praise to thee, O Holy Spirit,
for applying this way to my heart.

Glorious Trinity, impress the gospel on my soul,
until its virtue diffuses through every faculty;
Let it be heard, acknowledged, professed, felt.”⁴

Why are we so content to be skin deep in matters that should be of major importance? Could it be because we consider so many other things more important? When we elevate wrong things to overriding importance, the Bible calls them idols. And chief among those idols is surely ourselves. One of the truest responses to a clear understanding of the gospel is utter humility before God—grateful that He has done so many awesome things for *me* purely out of His love and mercy, things that are entirely beyond my ability to do for myself, things I do not deserve. It’s only from this perspective, as our idols shrink and die, that the importance of the truths of God’s good news grow and grow. And the larger the right things grow the more we appreciate how deep they are.

Prayer points:

Ask the Lord to help you identify and forsake idols, and to replace them with a desire to see deeper and deeper into the powerful truths of the gospel—truths that will transform you more and more into who He wants you to become.

Day 7

E–Evangelism

“The gospel is food for believers. But it is also the only saving medicine for those who have not yet believed. And we are compelled by the love of Christ to declare this good news to all people. St. Francis of Assisi told his friars not to preach unless they had permission to do so. But, he added, ‘Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds.’ Francis’s words have often been paraphrased along these lines: ‘Preach the gospel always; use words when necessary.’ The fact is that words *are* necessary, every time. We are always witnesses to the gospel (Acts 1:8) and, as witnesses, we shall be called upon to *testify*. When we are, we must be sure to get the message of the gospel right for there are many counterfeit ‘gospels’ in the world.”⁴

Surely Packer and Parrett are right that obedience to and love for Jesus is a compelling force for us to “preach the gospel.” Likewise, we need to know the gospel itself very well to avoid a fear of not sharing it properly. But might there be other reasons why so many of us fail to testify as we ought? Here are some suggestions:

1. *A lack of real concern for God to receive the glory He is due.* In contrast, a desire to share the gospel is a major result of allowing God himself to become our highest treasure.

2. *Avoiding unbelievers as a way of avoiding the ways of the world.* But Jesus didn’t do that, and He calls us also to be *in* the world while at the same time being removed from its spirit. Admittedly that is a challenge, but being disconnected from the world’s people and not just from its ungodly influences doesn’t fulfill what He has asked us to do.

3. *Not having the full transformation of the gospel evident in our lives, for whatever reason.* This may be the most common culprit of all. To be sure, God can still use us in reaching people even when we are sadly lacking, but God’s plan is hearts and lives full to overflowing with the humility, love, grace, wisdom, thankfulness, and joy that comes from fully embracing the gospel ourselves. Without that, what “testimony” do we have to offer? It’s not our perfection that we have to offer—not in this life!—just evidence of what God wants to do. Again, we are common people with uncommon hope.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you simply *be* a witness, rather than beating yourself up for failure to do witnessing. Whatever renewal that might call for, ask Him to bring the power of the gospel into play. That’s what it’s for, because we don’t have any power of our own.

Day 24

V–Vision

“Keeping our minds focused on the gospel can help us align our hearts to God’s own heart. We so easily fall into pettiness and needless division when we are not prizing the things God prizes. Jesus endured the cross and its shame for the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2), a joy which we take to refer to the fact that through suffering and death He would bring many children to glory (Heb. 2:10-18). Paul likewise endured all manner of things for the sake of the gospel and in the furtherance of its saving ministry (1 Cor. 9:23; Phil. 1:12-13; 2 Tim. 1:11-12). A clear vision of the goal imparts great fortitude in struggling toward it and great forbearance in the face of distractions from it.”⁴

The Scripture says we perish inside as people when we don’t have a vision (Prov. 29:18). As important as it is for churches to have a local vision of what God is calling them to be and do, that likely is not what is primarily in mind here. The visions that most impacted the characters of the Bible consisted of times when God himself rolled back the clouds, as it were, and allowed them to catch a fuller glimpse of Him as He truly is—high and lifted up. That’s a vision the whole world will see one day, and it will cause the bowing of every human knee.

For the apostle Paul, the gospel was that kind of vision. Whenever he contemplated the truths God revealed about Himself in the gospel, it generally caused him to deviate from his written argument long enough to break out in praise and worship. It can make his argument a little harder to follow at times, but the spirit and meaning of these “detours” are very clear and important. In the gospel we see God’s person and heart for us in compelling and humbling ways—a vision we very much need to keep.

Out of that vision come other visions, of course. Vision for how our hearts and actions need to be every day. Vision for loving and caring for each other in the church. Vision for people to see and hear their true need for Jesus. Vision for justice and compassion in a world where they are so painfully lacking. Even a church’s vision. But the point is that all of these come from seeing God *first*, a vision we get in large part from the gospel.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you see Him supremely in the gospel. Ask Him to make that vision a transforming force in your life. Ask Him to let flow out of that vision all the ways He wants you to see the people and circumstances He brings your way.

Day 23

U—Unity

“A clear gospel focus in our preaching and teaching has the potential to contribute to the unity of the church. In the latter half of the twentieth century one frequently seen example of this was the evangelistic campaigns of Billy Graham, which typically featured the cooperation of a great diversity of congregations and denominations. At the beginning of this century new movements are afoot for the sake of the gospel that aim to be both evangelical and ecumenical. We never seem to achieve perfect consensus here because we need to constantly wrestle with variant details of conviction and, of course, with all kinds of intellectual spin-offs of our fallenness. But magnifying the gospel as our central point of reference can help us keep a variety of lesser concerns in proper perspective (Phil. 1:18).”⁴

As we alluded to yesterday, the gospel is not everything in Scripture, but a very *specific* part of its message. As evangelicals we hold that gospel to be the *central* message, and all the rest of the Bible as providing important background for, or implications of, that message. The gospel is the core of the Christian faith, and having that in common should be a strong point of unity for Christians. The gospel is our commonly held beautiful gift. To whatever degree, and for whatever reasons, we fail to recognize and cherish that is to our shame.

Not everything we hold in common is a source of unity. We all had in common our drowning in sin and brokenness; we seem to grasp in common an undue focus on our differences—neither one a unity to which we should aspire! But the *good* news of Christ is radically different from that. It means we are now all in the same rescue boat! We are now all adopted members of one new, eternal family. We have one common Brother and Lord. We are all kept by the one promised Holy Spirit. We are together the beneficiaries of the core truths of the gospel. That should result in a joyful unity that trumps whatever other individual distinctions we notice. In fact that unity is what God plans to use as key evidence of His wisdom, to silence all who oppose Him (Eph 3:10). Our unity in the gospel is very important to our heavenly Father, and therefore to us.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you see above all else the unity of the gospel that you share with brothers and sisters in Christ. Ask Him to free you from the critical spirit that Satan works so hard to keep alive in us all. Ask Him to help you recognize and set aside differences with others that should not rise to the level of impeding our unity in Christ.

Day 8

F—Fidelity

“Faithfulness to the true gospel calls for ongoing study and obedience. It calls as well for watchfulness, lest false gospels be introduced. The battle against counterfeit gospels has always been part of church life. Even in the first century Paul battled against such, as did Peter and Jude and John. Like Paul we must be resolved that we will tolerate no other ‘gospel,’ even if it comes from a heavenly angel or springs from our own imperfectly sanctified hearts, and we should expect the same fidelity with whom and to whom we minister (Gal. 1:6-9). Only a constant learning and reviewing of the gospel can ensure that we will be astute enough to separate the chaff from the wheat.”⁴

Your heritage as a Christian in the West includes decades of attacks on the gospel, even from within the church. Of course orthodox biblical theology itself has been massively altered over many years by liberal theologians, and a lot of tainted ideas about the faith continue to circulate from that. But the cult of self that underlies much of our Western culture today has also taken a toll, so “what the Bible means to me” has become the norm for many. Carefully listening to what *God* has said and aligning ourselves with *that* has fallen on hard times (2 Tim. 4:3).

Seeking to be a gospel-centered and Word-driven church is an important part of combating this problem. But this is not just a task for our teachers and preachers; all of us have to play an active part in being committed to Scripture. That includes a readiness to hold our own personal understanding with some humility, and recognize that the Spirit has often used the collective wisdom of his people to keep us on track. That’s where creeds have come from, and even the Bible as we know it today is the result of years of careful study and consensus by Spirit-led people of faith. Obviously not all of us are Bible scholars, but a strong desire to know what God has said, and to obey it, is incumbent on us all. That will mean we each need to spend time and effort in studying the Scriptures. And it particularly means we need to know well just what the gospel is, so we can both live and share it. By implication that also means we need to recognize what is *not* truly the gospel. The old adage of being able to spot counterfeits by knowing the real thing applies. Spiritually that can be a life or death issue.

Prayer points:

Whatever your inclination to and comfort with study, ask God to help you be a true receiver of his Word. Ask Him to take it well beyond just your mind and thought, carrying it deeply into your heart, will, and conscience. Ask Him to bless you with the power of the gospel, and to protect you from powerless substitutes.

Day 9

G—Grace

“We need to continually learn and teach the gospel because gospel-centricity assures and propels us toward grace-centricity. When we swerve from the gospel we lapse into either antinomianism or legalism. Neither can offer the true beauty or savor of Christ. To be in the presence of individuals or congregations who are not grace-centered is enervating and exasperating. Let us then learn and relearn the glorious gospel that we may ever stand fast in the true grace of God (1 Pet. 5:12) and may ‘grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forevermore. Amen’ (2 Pet. 3:18).”⁴

It is keenly important for us to experience personally that the gospel is all about grace. The very essence of our sinful nature, of course, is to think of ourselves much “more highly than we ought” (Rom. 12:3), even to the point of putting ourselves in God’s place. So accepting that there is *nothing* we can do ourselves to reconcile us with God just runs against our sinful human grain. Tim Keller calls this our “default mode”—the thinking to which even Christians automatically return time and again.⁶ When we revert to it in terms of the gospel, it means we put limits on God’s grace, and reserve some ability to save ourselves—an idea referred to as “works righteousness.” When we revert to it in terms of our behavior, we easily wander into “legalism.” Both can be deadly to our faith. Instead, Keller says, “Putting our faith in Christ is not about trying harder; it means *transferring our trust* away from ourselves and resting in Him.”⁵ Our salvation is entirely accomplished and kept by the grace of God.

The implications of this are huge. When we experience God’s grace we rest in Him and in what He has fully done for us. When we experience God’s grace we are humbled. When we experience God’s grace we become grateful. When we experience God’s grace we realize we too must be gracious. When we experience God’s grace, we want others to experience it also. All the power and motivation for our Christian walk, witness and practice come from our first experiencing the grace of God ourselves. The incumbency and ability to always keep grace and truth together come from our first experiencing the grace of God as well. Without God’s grace, we are still lost. And when we stray from God’s grace in any degree or direction, we are heading into trouble.

Prayer points:

Thank God for his grace, and ask Him to let you experience it newly every day. Ask Him to free you from any sense that you must do something to earn his acceptance. Ask Him to have His grace be the transforming experience of your life. It is a key part of Gospel Renewal.

Day 22

T—Theology

“We saw above that both our doctrines and our manner of living must be in alignment with the gospel. While errant theological thinking on a variety of issues can lead us to a twisted gospel it is more to the present point that an errant gospel can unleash a host of heresies. It is worth noting that Satan is a competent theologian with great skill in confusing and misleading with regard to God’s truth.”⁴

With our fallen human minds at work, the practice of theology can become hopelessly detailed and even obtuse, so it is little wonder that for many Christians it is a source of confusion and even distaste. But at heart theology should be just true words about God, words without which we would be totally in the dark. God has in a wonderful way shared with us words that make Him known, and which we can understand. We all need theology; it’s part of who we are.

So just what is the gospel about which we are to be clear? It is the very *specific* message that “God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into a right relationship with Him and eventually to destroy all the results of sin in the world.”⁸ Yet the gospel is not a simple message; it is deeply profound, affecting everything. And it is the grounds for a lot of theology. Some examples:

Man’s condition:	Created by God; rebellious and fallen in sin; spiritually separated from God and dead; facing God’s judgment; unable to save himself.
God’s action:	Chooses to save people; sent Jesus to live a righteous life, die as the acceptable perfect sacrifice in their place, rise from the grave in triumph over sin and death for them, ascend into heaven as their mediator, come again to lead them into glory; gives them the Holy Spirit as their guide and guarantee.
Man’s response:	Accept Christ totally by faith as Savior and Lord; live for Him in thankful obedience.
Results:	New hearts; forgiveness; reconciliation; righteousness; resurrection to eternal life; adoption into God’s family.

As a Christian you already know more theology than you perhaps thought. But knowing it more fully and clearly so we can share it well is a goal for us all.

Prayer points:

Ask God to give you a clear picture of the important truths that make up the gospel message, and to make them dear to your heart.

Day 21

S—Salvation

“Intricately related to the above is the whole wonder of salvation. Scripture is quite clear that the gospel ‘is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’ (Rom. 1:16). As we have already noted, this is not a truth pertaining only to evangelism. The gospel saves those who believe, first to last, through and through. It includes all the wondrous doctrines of our great salvation, including election, regeneration, justification, sanctification, glorification, and much more. For this reason alone, the gospel must remain central in all the ministries of the church.”⁴

Being saved is something we *do* talk about, but it means so much more than that we are now safe. The scope of the gospel is God’s complete plan, put into action throughout all of human history, to take us all the way through to being what He created us to be in the first place—creatures who simply reflect His perfect glory. We have probably all heard the first statement of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Salvation is not just for this life! It goes on forever and ever, guaranteed by His unbreakable promise.

But it’s hard for us to really catch a vision beyond this world of time and space. The gospel is meant to help us in this regard. A part of its purpose and power is to create in us a longing, a looking forward, which Paul describes as a people who “love His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8 KJV). Perhaps this is easier when we feel the pressure of all the terrible evil of this present world. Then again, it is a beautiful world He created for us to enjoy, and we still do enjoy it. The challenge of the gospel is for us to see just how much more beautiful than His creation is the one who created it. And it holds out the promise that what He has in store for us ahead is beyond our imagination (1 John 3:2-3). It follows that if our eyes are increasingly filled with seeing the God of the gospel, we will increasingly desire to be where He is.

How much we need to see our salvation in that way. Imagine how much our day-to-day life would change if we did. That’s a work in us only God can achieve, and He has set it in motion in the gospel.

Prayer points:

Ask God to make the gospel a means for you to see more and more all that He is. Ask Him to give you not only a deep sense of belonging to Him now, but also a longing for all that He has in store for you one day in His presence.

Day 10

H—Hope

“We focus on the gospel also because it is the source of our hope. In face of the brokenness that fills the world around us and rises up within our own hearts, what hope do we have? Apart from the gospel we have none. But in the gospel is a great and steadfast hope, and from this hope springs forth faith and love sufficient for each day (Col. 1:5). Diminished ‘gospels’ may promote, on the one hand, easy believism, or on the other hand, may put a burden of salvation back on human shoulders rather than locating and leaving it in the hand of God. These deviations can offer no certain hope. The glorious gospel is a blessed hope indeed (Titus 2:13), an anchor for the soul (Heb. 6:19). Christ in us is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). This is the hope held out in the gospel (Col. 1:23). With such a hope fixed within our hearts—based upon the certainty that God has made us His children and the confidence that we will be with Christ and like Him forever—we long for and labor toward becoming more like Him even now (1 John 3:1-3).”⁴

The apostle Paul reminds us that at one time we were common people with no hope because we were “without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). The gospel changes the hope part of that assessment, or at least it should! Every part of the gospel message—God choosing us and giving us new hearts to be able to hear Him; our having been justified, redeemed and made righteous in Christ; our being raised with Christ now and one day remaining in His presence forever, all because of His love and grace—is meant to give us this uncommon hope. If this hope is always alive and active in our hearts and memories, it should make a huge difference in every circumstance of daily life, no matter how dire.

Therein lies a challenge for us as believers. We can be very prone to let this hope grow dim, and allow life’s hard circumstances to loom very large—this physical existence can seem so much more “real” and immediate. It has been suggested that one remedy for this is to preach the gospel daily—to ourselves! Certainly rehearsing the deep things of the gospel and reminding ourselves (and one another) of them frequently is a good habit to develop. Because the challenges of this life are indeed common, but the Christian’s hope from the gospel is not.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you find ways to rehearse often the wonderful things He has given you in the gospel, and to give you the gift of encouragement for fellow believers. Ask as well that this hope would become more near and dear, so that it is present to comfort in every time of need.

Day 11

I—Intimacy

“Through the gospel we are invited into a living relationship with the living God. In the love proclaimed at the heart of the gospel God has adopted us into His family. ‘How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God, and that is what we are’ (1 John 3:1). The Holy Spirit empowers us to believe the good news and is sent into our hearts, enabling us to cry ‘Abba, Father’ (Gal. 4:6). Rehearsing the gospel in our worship, teaching, preaching, fellowship, and service helps us to nurture and celebrate this unfathomably intimate relationship.”⁴

The term “intimate relationship” can easily be misunderstood, especially when used in connection with God. It does not mean “fully at ease” in the sense of being casual or taken for granted; after all, we are talking here about our Creator and Sustainer, the One whom we are often told to fear (in a good way). Nor is it appropriate to think of this “intimate relationship” as meaning “kindred spirits” in the sense of our having everything together in common with God; we don’t. Nor should we expect it to bring a mutual sharing of everything in terms of knowledge, ideas and feelings; with God’s being transcendent in every way, we never fully know Him—His ways are most often far beyond us. So we need to be careful in using the word “intimacy” in relation to God.

What the term does mean, however, is that our relationship is by God’s persistent initiative, something He has pursued across all time and space, with infinite love and at unthinkable cost. It means that our relationship is strong beyond breaking, lasting forever. It means that He knows us infinitely better than we know ourselves, and that this relationship is individual and personal despite our weakness and our being undeserving. It means that He is caring and providing as a good father, so that we are being treated as close members of a family. It means that, for all this, the relationship is not one way, but one to which we can contribute in ways that He accepts and values. And it means the relationship is one of love—love that far transcends our limited practice here on earth.

Prayer points:

Thank God today for all the ways He has, by his own initiative, chosen to enter into a parent-child relationship with you. And ask Him to help you grow in grace so that you can become more and more the kind of child He is eager for you to be.

Day 20

R—Righteousness

“In the gospel ‘a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last’ (Rom. 1:17). Paul’s argument in the letter to the Romans is deep and complex, but we submit that the gospel reveals God’s righteousness in at least these two ways. First, it is a declaration that God *himself* is just and righteous, for the gospel teaches that in Christ our sins have been fully propitiated as a basis for his forgiving of us (Rom. 3:24-26; 1 John 1:9; 2:2). Then, second, through the gospel God declares *us* righteous as we put our faith in Christ Jesus. Thus in the gospel God demonstrates ‘His own justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus’ (Rom. 3:26). It is truly vital beyond words that we faithfully preach and teach this gospel.”⁴

Propitiation is another of our seldom-used words, even though it speaks of a deep truth of Scripture—Jesus having fully borne and therefore satisfied the Father’s wrath over our sin. It is precisely because God is righteous that his righteous anger and judgment over sin is completely appropriate and just. And it is precisely because Jesus is righteous that He alone could take that wrath on Himself for us and triumph over its consequences. There are some who argue that this is an impossible thing, but it is a biblical truth. Without it God’s justice would not have been served and we would still be lost.

What it meant for Jesus to go through this on the cross is far beyond our understanding. But we can understand what it has meant for us—we are no longer under God’s wrath for our sin; instead we are now righteous once again in his sight, having been given as a covering the righteousness of Christ himself. Maybe “understand” is too strong a word, but it is critical that we realize that it is true, and be thankful beyond words for it.

This “imputed righteousness” is only one of the truths given to us in the gospel, all of them meant to transform our hearts and lives. Our freedom in Christ, our love and praise, our desire to honor Him through righteous lives, our peace and hope all depend on it. We let it languish only to our spiritual deficit, and to the depreciation of Christ’s name.

Prayer points:

Thank God that His wrath is something we no longer have to face because of what Jesus in grace and love has done for us. Ask Him to grow in you a deeper awareness of how He has made you righteous, and a deeper desire to live in a way that reflects the righteousness that is now yours in Christ.

Day 19

Q—Quickening

“Though by nature we were dead in our trespasses and sins and were objects of God’s wrath, God quickened us—made us alive with Christ—through His love and grace (Eph. 2:1-5). This God did, and still does, as we believe the gospel, putting our faith in Jesus Christ. Lutheran theology especially emphasizes the notion that the gospel is God’s quickening word, spoken to us in infinite mercy. We need to hear this word continually for our own sakes and speak it faithfully to others.”⁴

We know a little about what it means to be “dead in our trespasses and sins.” But it’s much more important that we now know what true life is. The contrast ought to be something we experience and welcome deeply. How sad if, being made alive in Christ, we still feel dead to some degree. That is not how we were meant to be.

Many things can pull us in that direction. We all are very conscious of our sin and weakness, and while the Spirit shows us those things so that we will always return to our Father for forgiveness, our enemy uses them to drag us down. We can still be very enamored of this world and all that it offers, even though it often means we are loving the gifts more than the giver. We can be just plain lazy, or worn down by a lot of what life brings to us each day. We can think or study ourselves into questions and doubts. We can even be glazed over by an abundance of biblical truth when we fail to keep a strong link between knowledge and practice.

God has put antidotes in place for this, the first being to tend carefully to our relationship with Jesus. The church can be an antidote, through both our corporate worship and our challenging and encouraging one another. Service and outreach can play a role when they come from a thankful heart. And all of these are best informed and empowered by a full knowledge and appreciation for the simple message of the gospel. There is plenty—having been chosen, given a new heart, declared innocent, righteous and forgiven, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, hidden in Christ at the Father’s right hand, and adopted as God’s child—to keep us alive if we pay attention to them. Rehearsing the gospel to ourselves regularly is very effective.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you understand the gospel fully and well. And ask Him to use that gospel truth to empower you in all the antidotes against falling asleep spiritually.

Day 12

J—Jealousy

“We learn and teach the gospel because we are called to be jealous for those we serve. The apostle Paul declared to the Corinthian believers, ‘I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him’ (2 Cor. 11:2). If we think jealousy is unbecoming in the apostle, we should remember that God himself is a jealous God (Exod. 20:5). True love that is covenant based is properly jealous concerning the parties in that covenant. We must keep the true gospel before the eyes of those whom we teach and serve so that they will avoid what Paul feared for the Corinthians—that is, that they should ‘be deceived by the serpent’s cunning’ and ‘somehow be led astray from [a] sincere and pure devotion to Christ’ (2 Cor. 11:3). Deeper acquaintance with the true gospel will help believers recognize and reject the preaching of ‘another Jesus’ and a ‘different gospel’ (2 Cor. 11:4).”⁴

As Drs. Packer and Parrett mention above, being jealous on behalf of one another’s spiritual condition is a good thing. And being jealous on God’s behalf, for His honor and glory and renown, might even be seen as something akin to His own jealousy. Unfortunately we have enough examples from life where the word jealousy has more often referred to things that are unhealthy or selfish. We’re not accustomed to using the term in positive ways.

But have you ever thought of being jealous toward yourself? Jealous, for example, about your commitment and faithfulness to Jesus? Jealous in the sense that you want to guard yourself against wandering away, or being careless or neglectful? Jealous for your new life in Christ? Part of the definition of jealousy is “vigilance in holding on” to something, and there are many things worth holding onto, the truths and benefits of the gospel among them. One of the blessings we receive is that in His jealousy God himself is both holding on to us and for us—far better than we can. But we have a part to play in this matter as well. He is pleased when we are jealous for Him and for all the things we have received through His grace.

Prayer points:

Thank God for holding on to you, and for you, even in your weakness. Ask Him to help you be vigilant in turn, anxious to honor Him and to keep close to your heart all He has given to you.

Day 13

K—Knowledge

“We continually learn the gospel, even as believers, because the gospel is the revelation of the knowledge and wisdom of God. Though the message of Christ crucified seems foolish to many in this age, ‘to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (I Cor. 1:23-24). The gospel is ‘a message of wisdom among the mature’ (I Cor. 2:6), a message that is ‘God’s secret wisdom’ that has been hidden for ages (I Cor. 2:7). But ‘God has revealed it to us by His Spirit’ (I Cor. 2:10). ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord that he would instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ’ (I Cor. 2:16). Would we grow in the knowledge of God’s wisdom? Would we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our lord Jesus Christ? Then let us remain steadfast in the gospel.”⁴

“In OT usage, to ‘know’ the Lord is not just intellectual or theoretical knowledge. To know the Lord is to enter into fellowship with Him and acknowledge His claims on one’s life.”⁷ That seems to be succinctly true, and is useful when applied to the general word *knowledge* also. We don’t really know something until it moves from just being information to having meaning and significance—applying to us in some way. To do us any good, most knowledge needs to be put into practice.

We gain a lot of knowledge about God from the gospel, which is what makes the gospel so important. But just as with all the other Bible “knowledge” we can acquire, it can too easily be piled up in a benign heap of facts or ideas—things we accept but don’t ever use. In Christian history, this has sometimes been called “dead orthodoxy”—mentally knowing the right things but to no particular effect. If we have spent significant parts of our lives in academic pursuits, this is a very real danger. It can be a hard thing to reverse, something God needs to do in us.

Accepting the facts of the gospel is not enough. We also need to experience the truths of the gospel. Only then can we be said to “know” it, and this is the only kind of knowledge that can truly set us free—knowing Jesus.

Prayer points:

Reflect on where the gospel resides betwixt your mind, heart, and life. Has it made the full journey inward? Ask God to not let the gospel languish somewhere along the path in you, but to carry it all the way to an active, powerful and joyful presence. May none of us ever hear Jesus’ surprise announcement: “I never knew you.”

Day 18

P—Passion

“Passion comes from the Latin *passio*, meaning ‘suffering.’ We celebrate each year the Passion of our Lord when we attend to the historic remembrance of Holy Week. Likewise, whenever we partake of the Lord’s Supper together we ‘proclaim the Lord’s death til He comes.’ It is given to us not only to believe in Christ the Suffering Servant but also to suffer for Him ourselves (Phil. 1:29). Paul saw his own suffering for the gospel and for the building up of the church as an active participation in the afflictions of Christ (Col. 1:24; Phil. 3:10-11). We must be forthright in teaching our congregants, by word and by example, that this is part of our calling as well.”⁴

We don’t often use the word passion in its meaning of suffering. Nor do we especially like the idea that suffering is an inherent part of accepting the gospel. It’s a subject we prefer to avoid. Scripture expresses experiences of suffering through the laments in the Psalms, Jesus’ prayers in Gethsemane, and elsewhere. These passages indicate that suffering is not something we need to welcome humanly or something that God expects us to just embrace with silence. But we cannot avoid suffering itself.

What Jesus faced as He approached the cross is absolutely beyond our comprehension or our ability to endure—the Holy God becoming sin; the perfect fellowship of the Trinity somehow being interrupted; receiving the Father’s total wrath. The Scriptures declare that any suffering we may have to face is light by comparison. But Jesus’ whole life was one of suffering, and *that* is our model. So while it may indeed not be welcome, suffering is to be received with understanding that it is for good reasons, not the least of which is our being identified with Him.

And we are not left to endure simply in our own strength and resources. Especially here the gospel is key. It’s only in the gospel that we fully see what Christ suffered. It’s only in the gospel that we are fully moved to awe and thanksgiving that His suffering was not only on our behalf, but spared us from having to bear it ourselves. It’s only in the gospel that we are exposed to what love and grace God has given to us. How very important it is, then, for the truths of the gospel to deeply reshape us into people who expect and accept suffering as a natural, even honorable, part of giving ourselves to Jesus.

Prayer points:

Ask God for forgiveness for whatever avoidance of suffering for the sake of the gospel may have been your pattern. Ask Him to so transform you by the gospel that it expresses itself in a life that may very well involve suffering in Jesus’ name. Ask Him to help you endure.

Day 17

O—Obedience

“The gospel calls forth obedience (Rom. 1:5) in at least three ways. First, we must obey the gospel by believing and receiving this good news (John 6:29). Second, the faith that saves works itself out in obedient living by God’s empowering grace (Phil. 2:12-13). Third, we are to obey Jesus’ command to bring this gospel to the nations (Matt. 28:18-20). In our ministries of teaching and formation these calls to obey the gospel must be clear and unequivocal.”⁴

As fallen human beings, we have obedience all wrong. It seems to be a fundamental human conviction that obedience is the way to God. Obey and we’re in. We take the initiative of obedience, and hopefully He will respond. That’s the foundation of every religion in the world except one. That’s behind the theology of churches that turn away from the gospel and opt instead for just trying to practice the Sermon on the Mount. And it’s a pernicious tendency even among believers.

Why is this conviction so wrong? In a word because for us it’s impossible. As Paul teaches again and again, if we insist on being reconciled to God through our obedience, then we must obey *all* of God’s law, perfectly (Gal. 3:10-11). We can’t. And *any* instance of thinking we can is an offense against God and His grace.

So what *does* obedience mean for us? Exactly the opposite—God reconciles us completely by *His* initiative, which enables us to *respond* with obedience by receiving the gospel (1 Peter 1:2). We respond in obedience out of thankfulness and love for God (1 John 5:3). Faith leads to obedience, not the other way around (Rom. 1:5). For Christians, obedience is not the cause of our salvation, but its result.

Certainly Christians are then called to a life of obedience. He is still God; He has not changed, nor have His standards. But the desire, the motivation, and the power to live that life all come from a growing understanding, appreciation, and experience of the amazing truths of the gospel. Without that we fall back into the old formula, and left to our own devices obedience is still impossible.

Prayer points:

Thank God for the grace that empowers you to obey and follow Christ. Thank Him for the righteousness of Christ by which you are now covered as you seek to walk with Him. Thank Him for the forgiveness which is yours while you are still growing. And ask Him to continually open to you the deep riches of what He has done for you in, and what you receive through, the gospel.

Day 14

L—Love

“The gospel is the revelation of God’s abounding love: ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). We do well to immerse ourselves and the saints we serve in that good news. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, for example, is an ongoing, multisensory reminder of Christ crucified (1 Cor. 11:26). God’s gospel love also calls forth love as a response. The Lord’s Supper both declares God’s love and demands that we love one another in turn (1 Cor. 11:27). John, ‘the beloved apostle,’ makes these truths very clear. ‘This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another’ (1 John 4:10-11). And again he writes, ‘We love because He first loved us’ (1 John 4:19). Would we see love grow in the hearts of God’s people and reach to their neighbors—both saints and sinners? Then we must school them continuously in the gospel of love.”⁴

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” The love of God for us is one of the most important theological truths of the Christian faith. How much we believe and experience the love of God for us personally, therefore, is a very important matter. At the same time it is something many Christians still struggle with to some degree, which is perhaps why Paul makes this a focal point of his prayer for first-century Christians (Eph. 3:17-19).

Certainly every facet of the gospel speaks loudly of God’s love. So having a deep knowledge of the love of God for you is another key aspect of Gospel Renewal. Any lack at this point has significant consequences for how well we can love as *we* ought—loving God in return, loving one another in the church, loving others who are outside of Christ, even loving our enemies. It will also impinge on our peace, joy, and hope that should come from the gospel. Realizing we are loved by God is a deeply fundamental motivation and power for all of our responses.

Prayer points:

Ask God to protect you from all the arrows of Satan aimed at calling His love for you into question. Ask Him to open Scripture to you each day in such a way that His love for you is clearly seen and received. And ask Him to take the love He pours into you by the Spirit and make it work out into every aspect of your life and relationships.

Day 15

M–Mission

“And why must we continually learn and teach the gospel? We do so that we may not lose sight of the great work that God is doing in our day. God is actively involved in the wondrous work of reconciling all things to Himself. It was for this that the Son of God came forth. ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19). And this work continues in and through us, the body of Christ, gathered and dispersed throughout the world today. The very work for which the Father sent the Son, the Son has now sent His church to continue (Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21). And He promises to be with us always. *Being* in His presence must be taken as seriously as *doing* the work of true mission, for mission can only have power and a cutting edge when Christ is indwelling us and we Him.”⁴

Treasuring God above all else will include being concerned about the things which He treasures; and that would be the whole rest of the world! If you were to sit down with a concordance and find all the places throughout the Bible that speak about “the nations,” it would quickly be apparent that God’s very focused agenda from the beginning has been to reconcile people from the whole world to Himself. He has not abandoned that agenda, and if we could only see all that He is doing even today to accomplish it, we would simply be amazed. Unfortunately it takes getting outside of our myopic bubble to really see what is going on—which is one reason why short-term mission trips can be meaningful. Just getting outside our white fence could help as well.

How do we go about getting a heart for the North Shore? For the world? First by being swept up in the deep meaning and implications of the gospel. We can certainly learn things by paying attention to the desperate need that is out there, but only seeing it all through God’s eyes can reshape our heart along the lines of His heart. And one of the most powerful expressions of God’s view of things is the gospel itself—spoken by His actions to make reconciliation possible. So Gospel Renewal is not entirely for our benefit. It’s also about equipping us to play a part in His agenda.

Prayer points:

Ask God today to lift your eyes away from your usual circumscribed focus and begin to give you a glimpse of what He is doing all around the world. Ask Him to share with you the burden that is moving Him forward. Ask Him to make you dissatisfied with any lack of active involvement in his agenda where He has placed you.

Day 16

N–Narrative

“We must ever study the gospel because it is the apex and summary of the great narrative of God’s redemptive activity in the world. . . . It is into this Story that we have been called. In an age when many deny the existence of a single metanarrative that applies to all persons, it is more critical than ever that we know the biblical narrative and tell it faithfully to others, asking God to convince hearts as we do so that this is their Story as well.”⁴

The term “metanarrative” has surfaced a lot in recent years. It refers to any system of comprehensive truth that adequately explains all of life. And the context in which it is used today is the pervasive loss of hope that there is any such thing. Religious belief (and especially Christianity) is seen as having been disproven hundreds of years ago when reason and science took over Western thinking. Now after two world wars and continuing human evil, trust in reason and science is crumbling as well. Pessimism about truth itself has reduced us to each person holding his or her own view of things, with nothing for us to believe in together. Welcome to the twenty-first century Western world.

As Christians, we know by the grace of God that there *is* a fully reliable metanarrative—His truth as revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ. That puts us at serious odds with the culture around us today. People love the idea that their personal view is as valid and true as anyone else’s. But God’s truth teaches us that people have been created in His image, and have all the evidence they need to know He exists, leaving them without excuse. Further we know by experience that this gap is something God desires to reach across by His Spirit. God’s story is the only one people need, and we have been given the assignment to share it with them, unpopular or offensive though it may be.

The key narrative of that story is the gospel. We need to be compelled by the gospel as it has come to bear deep fruit in us, so that in clarity and conviction we can declare it to the world. Nothing else will reach them and turn them to Jesus.

Prayer points:

Ask God to help you understand the gospel clearly, and to daily deepen the conviction of its reliable truth in your own heart. Pray for eyes to see around you those whom He is preparing to listen to the greatest Narrative of all. And ask for the grace and courage to speak the truth of the gospel sensitively but boldly.