



Theme: Restoration and Renewal – Life and Pandemic

“Learning as we Go... Grow!”

Weekly Memory Verse:

⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. –Romans 5:5

Spiritual Formation or Family Activity Ideas for the Week: Before you gather as a family or group, invite each family member to choose one person, living or dead, whom they admire or consider to be a hero or a heroine because they went through something difficult. Suggest ideas such as athletes, singers, scientists, performers, leaders, or teachers. Ask each person to bring a picture or an item that represents this person. After you have gathered, have each person share about why they admire their chosen person. Affirm the Christ-like qualities in each admired person and gently point out the not-so-Christ-like qualities in each. Next, bring out a Bible. Talk about the characteristics of God. Remind everyone that no matter who we admire in life, God always needs to be placed at the top of our list as those we admire and follow. Pray and ask God to help each person place God first always.

Monday, August 30 – Read Romans 5:1-5. The apostle Paul sketched the spiritual process through which every Christ-follower can develop a character that meets life’s dark twists and turns with hope and trust, not despair. Greek literature often showed humans growing more noble through terrible suffering. And Paul said that as we meet trouble with God’s grace and hope, we grow.

- “Realists” would have told Paul his preaching about Jesus had no chance to even alter the unbeatable Roman Empire, much less outlast it. We can see how “realistic” that view was. Do you tend to believe that hope is mostly delusional and hurtful, or do you have Paul’s view that hope, based on God’s saving love, grows from strong character? What role, if any, has hope played in keeping you going this last 18 months?
- When, if ever, has the cycle of trouble, endurance, character, and hope brought you a sense of God’s love being “poured out” in your heart? Paul also wrote in Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” How close to “overflowing” is your inner supply

of hope today for good situations, hard ones, or a mix? How can you open your heart to let God fill you to overflowing with hope?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I like the idea of overflowing with hope—but, often, I also know I don't. Keep me open to the ways you seek to fill me to overflowing and make me a fountain of hope for those around me. Amen.*

Tuesday, August 31 – Read James 1:2-5. Every life has challenges—sometimes minor, other times tests that strain the very fiber of our being. James urged Christians to meet life's tests as “occasions for joy.” He didn't mean the tests were pleasant. He saw that times that test us, in small or large ways, are chances to grow endurance. God uses that endurance, James went on, to “complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing.”

- James offered an honest view of life: there will be hard times. How can our faith shape the way we view these testing times? James urged his readers to see the tests as “occasions for joy.” When have you learned something important from a trial you faced? How have you seen God use hard times to test and grow your faith toward greater endurance and maturity?
- James was not naïve. He knew our human hearts are not at all inclined to see tests as “occasions for joy.” That's why in verse 5 he added that God will freely give wisdom to anyone who asks. In what ways does God's ability to “grow you” through life's challenges help you view hard times differently? How have you needed God's wisdom during the last year? Have you been able to find it?

Prayer: *God of wisdom, the world seems drastically changed, and I don't like some of those changes at all. Help me find ways to grow in resilient maturity through the wisdom you offer me. Amen.*

Wednesday, September 1 – Read Isaiah 40:26-31. God's people have endured many “pandemics” in history. One was the exile in Babylon after 586 B.C. We often only read the last two verses of today's reading, spoken to people the victorious Persian Empire freed to return to Jerusalem. But in the full passage, the prophet didn't just say, “Hey—things are better.” He based the hope of renewed strength, not only in better conditions, but in the trust that the creator God could and would create a better future, both short and long term.

- Have there been times during the last 18 months when you have felt like the Israelites in Isaiah 40:27: “My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament”? Are there parts of your life right now that tug at you to feel that way? In what ways can you rebuild trust in the Creator who “doesn't grow tired or weary” of caring for you?
- Babylonians, like many people in that part of the world, believed the sun, moon and stars dictated humans' fate. In verse 26 the prophet “demoted” the sky “gods.” Which of today's false gods seem to control life? What helps you see they are ultimately under the control of God, who deserves your allegiance?

Prayer: *Lord God, I hear or read about so many agencies or forces that shape my world for good or ill. Teach me to trust that, sometimes quietly, your great power is always working for the good of your world. Amen.*

Thursday, September 2 – Read Jeremiah 29:4-7 and 12-14. Babylon took many Hebrews into exile in 597 B.C., and then destroyed Jerusalem utterly in 586 B.C. In that interim, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Hebrews who were already in Babylon. He offered no false comfort, but told them they should settle down, cultivate gardens and promote the welfare of the foreign city where they now lived. Even as captives in that foreign land, he urged them to live as good stewards.

- Some “prophets” told the Israelites that God would send them back to Israel within two years (see Jeremiah 28:3). If you had been an exile, wouldn’t you have wanted that to be true, rather than Jeremiah’s “care for your part of Babylon” message? Have you ever been disappointed with God’s timing? How do you maintain patience and hope when things aren’t working out the way you’d wish when you wish?
- In that same message, Jeremiah told the Israelites (on God’s behalf): “When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me” (Jeremiah 29:13). In what ways was the quality of their connection with God essential to them being able to live as good stewards even in exile? What do you believe it would mean for you to seek God “with all your heart”? How might that change your ways of relating to others and caring for the planet?

Prayer: *Lord God, thank you for the beauty of the whole earth, not just the one little part where I live. Thank you for inviting me to work with you to steward the precious earth you’ve given to us in trust. Amen.*

Friday, September 3 – Read Galatians 5:14 to 6:10. When the apostle Paul lived, many Romans believed that “do whatever you want” pretty much defined “the good life.” That idea is still around today. But Paul vividly contrasted a Spirit powered life with the negative outcomes that come if we live only to satisfy our selfish desires. He left no doubt which life he believed is better. Then he urged the new Christians in Galatia to be the best spouse, parent, neighbor, friend they could possibly be—not just for other people, but for God.

- Which of the nine traits Paul said you get to have as a Christian (chapter 5, verses 22-23) do you already find most present in your life? Which of them are you most eager for the Spirit’s power to grow more of in you? Are there any of them you think, “I don’t have it—not sure I want it?” What is your part in nurturing a soul “climate” in which all the fruits of the Spirit can grow?
- Scholar N. T. Wright wrote about Galatians 6, “You want to fulfill the law, do you? Very well: but let it be the law of the Messiah! The ‘law’ in view here is the law of giving oneself in love and humility to serve others. This, rather than showy behavior which highlights one or two individuals, will be the sign that they are really ‘spiritual’.” How have other Christ-followers helped you carry your burdens during the last year and half? When has Jesus moved you to help carry another’s burden in his gentle way?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, relieve me of the worry of trying to compare my life and work with someone else’s. Remind me that you, and only you, are the master and Lord I ultimately aim to please. Amen.*

Saturday, September 4 – Read John 14:25 to 15:5. Jesus told his followers that he was leaving them his peace, even with evil people plotting to kill him. He said his peace rested on the Holy Spirit’s presence with them, “not as the world gives.” Even at times of great fear, when the forces of hate or darkness seemed about to overwhelm them, they didn’t need to be troubled or afraid, but could find Jesus’ peace. But that peace depended on maintaining a firm connection to Jesus through his Spirit’s presence with them, in the same way a branch on a grapevine (a common sight in that area) could only flourish and bear fruit if it remained connected to the vine. That may be one of the most important lessons we have learned (or relearned) during the past year and half.

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “The peace which the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble and from refusing to face things. The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace of conquest. No experience of life can ever take it from us and no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can ever make it less. It is independent of outward circumstances.” In what ways during the past 18 months have you experienced the difference between the peace Jesus gives and the types of peace the world offers? Jesus used the image of a vine and its branches to illustrate how we relate to him. What spiritual practices have helped you to most fully live into Jesus’ call to stay constantly linked with him? In what ways has your connection with Christ led you to bear fruit for God’s Kingdom?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you are the vine; I am a branch. Keep me so closely connected to you that I will be a branch that bears good fruit. Amen.*