

St. Paul: Weekly Devotions

*Devotions on week's readings
for 09.13.15 (Pentecost 16b)*

Day One: Isaiah 50:4-10

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

Were you afraid of the dark when you were little? Most of us weren't really afraid of darkness – we were afraid of what might be in the darkness. Without being able to see we conjured up all kinds of imagined dangers. And, in fact, we were more at risk of accident or injury without our eyes to guide us.

We need a way to know the dangers around us. Soldiers will use night-vision scopes, infrared goggles, or radar to work in the darkness. But even with all this, they still need light of some kind to be able to move about safely.

God says that many of us walk in pitch darkness with no special tools. We are lost in darkness and fear, and we are far from him. But the Savior invites us to listen to his word and trust in him.

A blind person may be without light, but by careful listening she can sense the obstacles around her. If we listen to Jesus' word we too will be warned of the dangers that surround us, and find the safe path in the middle of them. King David said that he would guide us even in the shadow of the Valley of Death.

When we listen to the words of Jesus our darkness becomes light.

Maybe some parts of your life seem pretty shadowy right now. Your marriage, your family, your work may all be shadowed and it is hard to know what lies ahead. But listening to Jesus, you can know this: that there is no danger he cannot overcome. There is no failure he has not foreseen. There is no sin for which he has not paid. There is nothing that can snatch you from his hand.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, long ago you revealed to Isaiah your plans to save us. Now grant that we, who were in darkness, will hear your voice and follow you. Lead us out of darkness and into your marvelous light. Amen.*

Day Two: James 3:1-12

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

In many places that we go there are cameras to record what we do. Red light cameras, automatic speed trap cameras, and toll booth cameras monitor our driving. Security cameras at the bank and the ATM help keep us safe. Cell phone cameras are being used all over, recording us when we least expect it.

If you knew that everything you said was being recorded and analyzed, would you tend to speak more carefully? Maybe you would speak a lot less! After all, who knows what the effect of your words might be?

Our words might not always be digitally recorded, but they are being recorded in the minds of those who hear us, and they make a difference for good or evil. Our children hear us and imitate us. Our neighbors and coworkers hear us, and because we are

followers of Jesus, and represent him, their opinion of Jesus is shaped by our words. Their spirit is changed by our behavior.

James warns that we take a great responsibility when we presume to teach others. What is the only thing that could give you the courage to speak out in spite of that?

Thankfully, when we represent Jesus, we also show the world his forgiveness, mercy, and grace. When the world sees our weakness, then the perfect strength of Jesus can also become visible to them as we are humble and forgiven.

James warns us about presuming to be teachers. But he also says, “We all stumble in many ways.” Thanks be to God, we have a Savior who can pick us up when we stumble, and repair our faults.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you know that my words are not perfect. And yet, you have given me the task of speaking to certain people in my life. I am to be your voice for them. Lord, guard and guide my lips, and forgive me for my failures to speak as you would desire. Amen.*

Day Three: Mark 9:14-29

[A man whose son is demon possessed said to Jesus,] *“But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*

Can we have both belief and unbelief inside of us at the same time? Sadly, yes, we can.

Paul says that even though we believe, we are still plagued by sin. And we know that from our own experience. We do believe in Jesus, but that doesn’t prevent us from being tempted, from wrestling with our anger, fears, and desire to please ourselves.

Doubt is like any other sin. It comes from our tendency to rely upon ourselves instead of Jesus. We doubt because we only see our own capability, and our probable failure. And doubt nags at us, eating away at our confidence and our joy.

Worse than that, doubt doubles our distress. In an already hard situation, doubt torments us with the hope that Jesus might hear our prayers, and yet with the nagging suspicion that he doesn’t care, or can’t help.

So we can believe in Jesus, and yet at the same time we can be unbelievers.

What is the solution? For this man the solution was not that he must try harder. If you try harder can you stop being fearful? If you try harder can you stop thinking so much about yourself and your own desires?

Trying hard has solved many scientific problems, but it has not solved the problem of our human nature.

But this man said, “take pity on us and help us.” And that is what Jesus did. Jesus had mercy on him, and on all of us. It was Jesus who, out of his mercy, tried harder. It was he who did what we could not do. He not only saved this man’s son from the oppression of an evil spirit, but he rescued our spirits that were held captive by sin.

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” And he did.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I believe in you, but you know the many ways that I have wavered back and forth, tormenting myself with doubt. Lord, strengthen my faith. Do for me what I cannot do for myself. Amen.

Day Four:

“By Grace I’m Saved” (LSB #566)

By grace I’m saved, grace free and boundless;

My soul, believe and doubt it not.

Why stagger at this word of promise?

Has Scripture ever falsehood taught?

No! Then this word must true remain:

By grace you too will life obtain.

Uncertainty... that’s one of the few certain things in this world (right after death and taxes). Don’t we live our entire lives with a great deal of daily uncertainty?

Are you certain there are 9 planets in our solar system? It depends on who you ask. Are you certain that the speed of light is the upper limit of interaction between things that are far apart? Quantum physics, which Einstein called “spooky action at a distance,” suggests that we might be able to move information instantaneously. Are you certain that the institutions you depend on, your company, your church, your government, will still be here all your life? Many things we once thought permanent have gone away.

And yet, this hymn celebrates something that we have as a certainty, a guarantee, a known quantity,

an accomplished fact. We have been saved by God’s grace in Christ Jesus!

What a breath of fresh air, to hear this reminder, that this is for sure! Believe, and do not doubt, it says. God’s word has never misled you. And as you continue to test God’s love you find it always there, his forgiveness always waiting for you.

You should read, and even sing, the rest of the verses! Especially the last one...

By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying; In Jesus’ promise I rejoice; For though I know my heart’s condition, I also know my Savior’s voice. My heart is glad, all grief has flown, Since I am saved by grace alone.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, let your promise remove fear and doubt from my heart. Your love is my safe haven, my resting place. Amen.*

These devotions help us to think ahead about the Bible verses we will read in worship next week. They are written weekly by Pastor Don Neuendorf. You can learn more about our worship or our church at stpaulannarbor.org