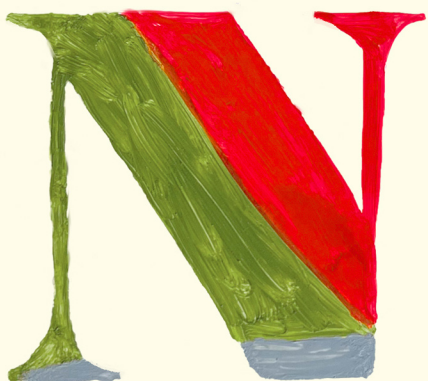
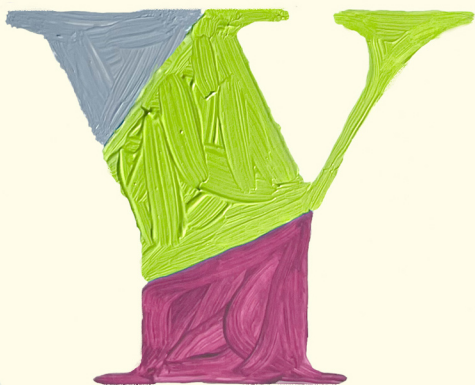
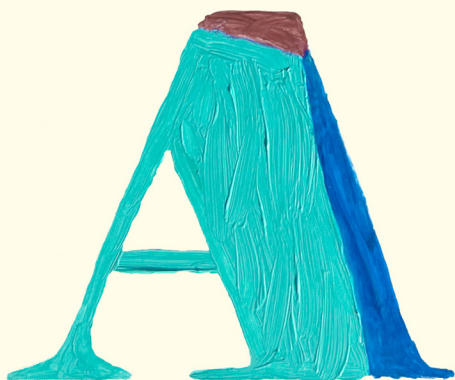


SUNDAY MATTERS



PAUL DAVID TRIPP



52 DEVOTIONALS TO PREPARE YOUR HEART FOR CHURCH

“The Lord has called the whole family of God to come and sing together to him. This book will help tune our hearts to do that!”

Keith and Kristyn Getty, hymn writers, “In Christ Alone”

“*Sunday Matters* is a book that matters. In this brilliant new devotional, Paul Tripp encourages us not to give up the habit of meeting together—reminding us just how profound a gift our corporate worship can be. In recent times many around the world had the blessing of the gathered church temporarily taken away. As we bounced back, we remembered once again that we are better together, and we treasured the unparalleled dynamic of the living God dwelling among his people. We were never made to go ‘lone ranger’—that’s not how the kingdom of God works—and this book is a beautiful and timely reminder of that. Tripp is an inspiring writer, and each of these fifty-two chapters will lead you deeper into the glory of the gathered church.”

Matt Redman, worship leader; songwriter, “10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)”

“Each act of corporate worship serves to help God’s people rehearse and remember the goodness of the gospel. From the call to worship to the benediction, we need a greater understanding of what we are doing when we gather and why we do it. *Sunday Matters* has helped me see with fresh eyes the beauty and wonder of corporate worship, and I pray it does the same for you.”

Matt Boswell, hymn writer; Pastor, The Trails Church, Celina, Texas;
Assistant Professor of Church Music and Worship, The Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary

“Getting myself and our three young sons out the door to church was pure chaos at times. Tears and yelling were often involved, from me more than them. Paul David Tripp helps every single one of us remember why going to church matters and how to prepare our hearts to worship and encounter Jesus there each week. I wish I had this book years ago! This is a gift for you and your whole family.”

Ann Wilson, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*; author, *Vertical Marriage* and
No Perfect Parents

Sunday Matters

Books by Paul David Tripp

40 Days of Faith

40 Days of Grace

40 Days of Hope

40 Days of Love

A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You

A Shelter in the Time of Storm: Meditations on God and Trouble

Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide for Parenting Teens

Awe: Why It Matters for Everything We Think, Say, and Do

Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad

Come, Let Us Adore Him: A Daily Advent Devotional

Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry

Do You Believe: 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life

Forever: Why You Can't Live without It

How People Change (with Timothy S. Lane)

*Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping
People in Need of Change*

Journey to the Cross: A 40-Day Lenten Devotional

Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church

Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God

Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make

My Heart Cries Out: Gospel Meditations for Everyday Life

New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional

Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family

Reactivity: How the Gospel Transforms Our Actions and Reactions

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Relationships: A Mess Worth Making (with Timothy S. Lane)

Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts

Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense

Sunday Matters: 52 Devotionals to Prepare Your Heart for Church

War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles

Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy

Sunday Matters

52 Devotionals to Prepare Your Heart for Church

Paul David Tripp

Sunday Matters: 52 Devotionals to Prepare Your Heart for Church

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*To all the pastors whose words Sunday after Sunday
have caused me to fall in love with the gospel and
the Savior, who is the hero of its hope.*

Introduction

LIKE EVERY HUMAN BEING, I grew up in a less-than-perfect family. But one positive thing my family did marked me forever. Every Saturday night my siblings and I, one after the other, would take a bath and then deliver our shoes to my dad to be polished, all in preparation for the Sunday morning worship service at the Toledo Gospel Tabernacle. There was never a debate about whether we would be going. There was no need to fit church into the family schedule. The weekend schedule of the Tripp family was planned around the one thing that we would never think of missing: Sunday worship.

For that, I will be forever grateful.

It seemed like we were always the first family to arrive. My dad hated being late for church. And because he had lost much of his hearing in World War II, we always sat right up front so he could hear. I heard well over a thousand sermons, preached from all over God's word. I learned all of the great hymns of the faith, many of which I can still sing by memory. I learned the core doctrines of the faith as I sat there with Mom and Dad. I grew up thinking that "going to church" was a normal part of life. It didn't seem religious to me or superspiritual or some kind

of unique commitment. From my youngest days, it seemed to me to be a thing that all Christian families did. For my family there was no exception to this Sunday rule. Even when we were on vacation, my mom and dad would locate a church for us to attend. I am so thankful for the way this important spiritual habit was nailed into my understanding of life.

But as I look back, I don't think my mom and dad ever talked about preparing our hearts for worship. The conscious and intentional worship of God is the highest calling and most wonderful thing a human being could ever do and, because it is, it is a location for spiritual war. That war is fought on the ground of our hearts. The enemy of our souls will do anything he can to keep us from participating fully, from hearing clearly, and from committing to God more intentionally through gathered worship. It is easy to enter worship unready. I remember my mom and dad arguing on the way to church, which resulted in all of us walking into that big building riled up inside. I remember crying in the car because I thought my worn-out shoes looked silly, and then thinking about it throughout the whole service. I remember as a teenager being more excited about meeting a girl at church than I was about meeting with my Lord.

Maybe you're distracted by unpaid bills, with no plan to be able to pay them. Maybe you hit Sunday morning with a struggle to trust God because he doesn't seem near or caring. Maybe marriage coldness and conflict make it hard for you to go to worship without being distracted by all those happy couples around you. Perhaps you come with a struggle with the leadership or direction of your church. Maybe you're going through a period of coldness of heart. It could be that success and power have become more attractive to you than a life that pleases God. Maybe physical weakness makes

the whole experience unpleasant and uncomfortable. Perhaps you're brokenhearted at the spiritual state of your children, so much so that it's hard to think about anything else. It could be that your job has gotten you down and has become a huge thought burden to you. Maybe you're grieving a miscarriage, the loss of a loved one, the demise of a lifelong dream, the betrayal of a friend, disappointment with God, or a significant family trauma. Maybe self-righteousness and self-sufficiency have diminished your hunger for what gathered worship has to offer. Or perhaps the gospel doesn't captivate and excite you as it once did.

The fact that we are God's children doesn't give us a ticket out of the harsh realities of life in this sin-broken world. Somehow, someway that brokenness will enter each of our doors. The Bible tells us that between the "already" of our conversion and the "not yet" of our homegoing, we will all face temptation and we will all groan. Life right here, right now is often burdensome and hard. So we tend to carry our burdens with us, like the heavy backpack of a young school student, and these burdens often distract us from the richness of corporate worship.

All of this means that often on Sunday morning we're not spiritually ready for the profoundly important thing we're about to do: offer to our Lord the worship that he deserves and open our hearts to instruction from his word. We often don't approach gathered worship with joyful, grateful, and expectant hearts. So I offer this to you. Here are fifty-two brief devotionals to help prepare your heart for the beauty of what Sunday worship has to offer you. My prayer is not just that this preparation will help you to be able to more fully participate in God's wonderful gift of corporate worship, but more importantly that your continual participation will transform your relationship with your Lord and the way you live

INTRODUCTION

your life. May this devotional cause that weekly formal corporate worship to spill over into your daily life, so that your life becomes a hymn of worship to the Savior who rescued you, adopted you, and daily works to draw you near.

Sunday 1

Corporate worship is designed to remind you again and again that the most valuable thing in your life you could have never earned or deserved; it was and is a gift of divine grace.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, but in the rush and press of life I can lose my mind. No, I'm not talking about going insane and needing to be institutionalized. I'm talking about a much more subtle form of insanity that often inflicts me and a vast number of my Christian brothers and sisters. There are moments in my life when I lose my gospel mind. There are moments when I live as if God does not exist, the Bible had never been written, and Jesus had never lived, died, and rose again. I'm not referencing an intentional walking away from the faith but rather a deformative gospel forgetfulness. Why do I call it *deformative*? Because in these moments my life is no longer formed by a vibrant rest in a surrender to my Lord but rather it is deformed by other things in and around me. There are times when I lose sight of what is truly important and valuable in life and, when I do, it alters what

I desire, how I think, what I say, and the things I do. I am sure I am not alone.

Perhaps during an argument with your husband, wife, or friend, securing affirmation as being right (for once) becomes the most important thing to you. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you find yourself doing whatever is necessary to get that job promotion. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you're willing to destroy your relationship with your neighbor over a boundary dispute. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you rip vengefully into your teenager because you're tired of being disrespected. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you cling to an unending obsession with your weight and appearance. You have lost your gospel mind. Perhaps a lifestyle dream is leading you into crushing debt. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you harbor a pattern of internet sexual sin. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you feel an overwhelming anxiety about what people think about you and how they respond to you. You have lost your gospel mind. Or you might demand to be in charge and in control of your relationships. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe you are passive and complacent when it comes to your faith. You have lost your gospel mind. Maybe patterns of envy and bitterness have robbed you of your joy. You have lost your gospel mind.

Because the radical, life-shaping, and hope-giving values of the gospel are nowhere reinforced in the surrounding culture, we all live in constant need of fundamental gospel-values clarification. We all need to be reminded again and again of what is truly valuable and, therefore, what should be truly formative in life. I'm sure you are aware that it has never been more difficult to keep the worldly, materialistic, and degospelized values of the culture around us at bay. It is harder than ever to quiet the cacophony of voices and

think with gospel clarity about what is truly important. It's hard because we now carry in our pockets or purses all of those voices in a single piece of powerful technology. It is nearly impossible to overstate the influence of Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media on how we think about ourselves and life itself. In those moments when you're not actively doing something, it's hard not to reach down, pull out the device, and surf once again. It's hard not to feel the need to post your life, and then compare your life to others who are posting their lives. Meanwhile, it's hard to see the ways in which these powerful habits of influence have caused you to forget what is truly valuable in life.

But as is true with every other spiritual danger in our lives, God, in grace, meets us at our point of need with just what we need. What is one of the primary ways our loving Savior meets us as we struggle not to lose our gospel minds? He meets us with the gift of his church. He knows that we need help. He knows we are not spiritually hardwired to make it on our own. So he has ordained his church to regularly gather, that we would remember once again, grieve once again, celebrate once again, and go out and live in light of the beautiful values of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These regular gatherings of God's people are not first an obligation; they are a gift. They are not first a duty; they are a welcome. They are the Father pulling you up on his lap, whispering in your ear that he loves you, reminding you of who you are and of the surpassing value of being in his family, and then putting you down and sending you on your way.

The regular gathering of the church is designed to lovingly confront us with the fact that the most valuable thing in life can't be earned. The most valuable thing in life cannot be humanly achieved. The most valuable thing is life can't be purchased or

owned. The most valuable thing in life is not an experience you will have. The most valuable thing in life is not something you will get from people in your life. The most valuable thing in life is an eternal gift of divine grace. It is my eternal forgiveness, my eternal acceptance into the family of God, and the guaranteed destiny that is mine as a child of God, all secured for me by the righteous life, substitutionary death, and life-giving resurrection of Jesus. The most valuable thing in all of life is my union with Christ. By grace, he is in me and I am in him. This union means I don't have to be spiritually and emotionally imprisoned by past regrets, I don't have to live fearfully and powerlessly in the present, and I don't have to be crippled by anxiety in the future. Gospel values allow me to live at the intersection of humility and hope. They allow me to live with a radical honesty about my own weaknesses while living with courage as well. They lead me to live for a glory greater than my own, to be generous as God has been generous to me, to forgive as I have been forgiven, and to pursue growth in spiritual maturity more than I pursue any other kind of success in my life. No, I don't mean that I quit doing all the things that every other human being must do (job, relationships, finances, physical health, entertainment and leisure). Rather, these domains of my life take on new meaning and purpose because they are no longer the places where I look for life, but are now the places where I joyfully live out the life that I have been given by redeeming grace alone.

May we look with anticipation to the weekly gathering as a gift, just as we would look with anticipation at opening a gift handed to us by a loved one. Corporate worship is God's weekly gift to us, wrapped in the grace of Jesus and given by the one who created us, knows us, understands the temptations that greet us in the broken world we live in, and offers us the help we need. This gathering

reminds us that God will never grow tired of us, never regret that we are in his family, and never walk away in disgust. No, he welcomes us to gather once again, and in gathering to remember, and in remembering to have our values clarified, and in having our values clarified to have the worship of our hearts reclaimed and our living reordered. May we receive his gift of the gathering of his church with joy, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25).

Scripture: Matthew 6:19–21 and 13:44–46

Reflections: What habit are you tempted to lose your *gospel mind* to, and how can regularly gathering with God’s people remedy that? To whom or what do you tend to look for *life*?

Family Discussion: Read the above Scripture passages and ask family members to name something that worshiping should remind us of (e.g., the extraordinary value of the gospel). Ask children to name some gifts they have received this year. Discuss how corporate worship is God’s weekly gift to us, and how it is so much more valuable than other gifts.

Sunday 2

Corporate worship is designed to encourage you to cry for help to the one who always knows exactly what you need and who will meet you with boundless love, infinite wisdom, incalculable power, and inexhaustible grace.

ALL TOO OFTEN we find it hard to reach out for help. Yes, we know we weren't designed to go it alone and we know we are less than perfect, but we still hesitate to say, "I'm not doing well, and I need help." Often pride props up an external veneer that keeps those around us thinking we're doing just fine, when we are not fine. Pride makes us want to project that we are mature, wise, and capable. So when asked how we're doing, we'll give platitudinous non-answers like "Things have been tough, but the Lord is good." Or we'll give situational answers to personal questions. Someone asks us how we are, and we say, "It's been a rough week." Notice that there is no personal information there. You have talked about the situation, but not about how you are doing in dealing with it. All this keeps us from getting the help that we all need.

The reality is that each one of us is unfinished, still in the middle of God's lifelong work of maturing and transforming grace. We all live in a broken world that is groaning, waiting for redemption (Rom. 8:22–23). We all face things that God has brought into our lives that we would have never chosen or planned for ourselves. So we all face moments when we feel unprepared, confused, inadequate, disappointed, grieved, or fearful, and we're not sure how to think about or respond to what is now on our plate. We all know that we fall short of God's holy standard. We all know that there is more for us to learn and understand about God's will and plan for us. We all know that we still need to do a better job of living in light of what we say we believe. Perhaps your marriage is more of a struggle that you thought it would ever be. Maybe you're overwhelmed at the task of making sure your disabled child has every resource he needs. Or maybe there's a heartbreaking conflict in your extended family. Perhaps things in your life have caused you to silently doubt the goodness of God. Maybe as a Christian in a secular university you are tired of being misjudged, misunderstood, and mocked for your faith. Maybe you've been hurt by your church, and you don't know what to do next. Or you may be living with the sting of the disloyalty of someone you thought was your best friend. Maybe you're confronting the physical and relational trials of old age. The reality is that all of us need help all of the time.

To be human is to need help. Think of Adam and Eve. God created them with no physical or spiritual flaws; they were perfect. Not only that, but they lived in a completely perfect world where everything was in its right place, doing what God created it to do. And to top it all off, they were living in a perfect relationship with God. You would think they couldn't possibly be needy, but they were, because God did not design them to live independently of

him or of one another. Healthy independent living is a delusion. So, immediately upon creating Adam and Eve, God talked to them because they did not understand who they were and how they were designed to live. Only in a life of submission to, fellowship with, and dependence upon their Creator would Adam and Eve be what they were supposed to be and do what they were designed to do. They were perfect people in a perfect world and in perfect relationship with God, but they still needed help. We need help not just because we are sinners or failures in some way, but because we are beings designed by a wise, loving, and good God for dependent living. You don't have to regret your need for help. It should not make you feel guilty. You shouldn't let shame keep you from seeking the help you need. You shouldn't let pride, the fear of what people will think, or how others will respond keep you from seeking the help that not only *you* need, but that everyone around you needs as well.

Here's the good news. The best help ever is available to you as a child of God. It's not a help that comes from your spouse, neighbor, friend, pastor, coworker, parent, or counselor. No, there is someone who always knows exactly what you need, when you need it, and how it is best delivered. This means that you are never caught in a situation where you are completely without help. One of the purposes of the weekly gatherings of the community of faith is to encourage us to confront our fear and pride and to comfort us with the fact that we have a Father who knows just what we need and who has lovingly committed himself to meet those needs. The gathering of the church is not an assembly of religiously independent people celebrating our successes, all dressed up parading ourselves before one another and before God. No, the church is the gathering of the needy, the weak, the broken, and the confused. But we are

eternally loved and accepted by the one we worship and entrust ourselves to. We gather because we are not okay and we need to remember that God is for us, in us, and with us and, because he is, we have glorious hope and help in our time of need.

The words of Philippians 4:19 get me up in the morning: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Consider, too, what Peter says as he writes to suffering people: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). God promised to supply everything we need not only for eternal life but for godliness. What is godliness? It is a God-honoring life between the “already” of our conversion and the “not yet” of our homegoing. Peter is talking about God’s ready supply of divine resources to meet our need for help right here, right now in the place where we are living and with regard to the challenges we are facing. Reflect also on what Paul writes near the end of his treatise on suffering in Romans 8: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (8:31–32). The cross of Jesus Christ is our guarantee that the one who met us at our greatest point of need (our sin) will continue to supply what we need. If he went to this extent to meet the need of needs, would it make any sense for him to abandon us now?

The regular gathering of the church is the assembly of God’s needy children. This gathering is a welcome to lay down our pride, our self-sufficiency, our delusions of independent strength, our fear of what others will think, and our self-righteousness, and to humbly open our hearts, confessing our need once again to the one who has the power and willingness to help. We gather once again to be reminded of how this willing God meets us.

God meets us with mercies that are always new.

God meets us with boundless love.

God meets us with infinite wisdom.

God meets us with incalculable power.

God meets us with inexhaustible grace.

And because he does, we do not need to let fear, guilt, or shame paralyze us. I know that I need that reminder again and again. So, this Sunday gather with your needy brothers and sisters. Lift up your hands in faith and reach out for your Father's help and drink in all the reminders in song and word that he is good, kind, loving, and faithful. And with a joyful heart remember once more that he cares about his children and will never turn his back on their needs.

Scripture: Psalm 54:4 and Hebrews 4:16

Reflections: In a culture that encourages independence and even isolation, how can we begin to practice humble dependence upon God?

Family Discussion: Read aloud Hebrews 4:16 and discuss who we can turn to when we need help. What is the *throne of grace* and who is seated on it? Talk about any barriers in life that might deter you from asking for help.

Sunday 3

Corporate worship is designed by God to give you eyes to see, a mind to understand, and an open heart to receive the bad news of the gospel (sin) and the good news of the gospel (grace) in ways that transform your heart.

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS with the internet and the intrusive power of social media is the constant onslaught of bad news. We no longer carry the hardships of just our personal life, but we are daily greeted by every bad thing that happens around the world. Wars are fought before us in real time; battle scenes, with their destruction and gore, instantly become videos on our Twitter feeds. It's hard to avoid the darkness of the culture around us, the anger of people, and the constant telling and retelling of hard things that are out of our control. I think we carry a burden of fear and dread unlike what has ever been carried before, because we are exposed to more sad things than people have ever been before. It wears on us. It is exhausting and disheartening. It makes us feel small, the victims of things we now carry but have no ability to change. In fact, I recently told my wife, Luella, that I was tired of all the bad

news and I wanted to watch something mindless that would give my weary brain a break.

However, there is one kind of bad news that you and I often work to deny but that we desperately need to face. Facing this news is a matter of life and death, even though it is the worst news ever. Willingness to open your heart to this deeply bad news will set your life on a gloriously new trajectory that literally has no end. This is bad news that you and I need to hear. Without this news we will fail to understand ourselves, our relationships, and the world we live in. Most importantly we will fail to understand the deep need we have for what the person and work of Jesus can offer us.

We need to hear, understand, and accept the bad news of our sin. I find David's description of sin, in his heartfelt confession in Psalm 51, to be very helpful. Here he describes sin with three words: *transgression*, *iniquity*, and *sin*. *Transgression* is a willing stepping over of God's boundaries. It is like parking in the no-parking zone even though I've seen the sign. It is a pattern of choosing what you want to do even though it violates what God has commanded you to do. Sadly, apart from divine rescue, this spirit of rebellion lurks in all of our hearts. The word *iniquity* pictures moral uncleanness. Think of water that has alien chemicals in it that will hurt you if not purified. *Iniquity* tells me that sin is not just a behavioral problem, something that I do, but more foundationally it is a heart problem; it is something that I am. My deepest problem, apart from God's grace, is not just that I do sinful things but that I am a sinner. Because sin is part of my nature, I cannot escape it on my own. I can run from situations and people, but I cannot run from myself. The rhetorical question of Jeremiah is helpful here:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin
 or the leopard his spots?
 Then also you can do good
 who are accustomed to evil. (Jer. 13:23)

The Ethiopian is dark-skinned by nature, and like any human being, he has no ability to change his skin color. If he dyed his skin, a new layer of skin would grow in his natural color. The leopard is spotted, and even if you shaved that leopard clean, its spots would grow back. So it is with sin. Since it is a matter of our nature, we have no ability to escape it and, therefore, no ability on our own to live a consistently good life in the eyes of God.

The word *sin* is meant to picture our inability. Sin renders us lame and weak, constantly falling below God's holy, wise, and loving standard. Imagine spending a hundred years with a bow in your hand, trying to hit a target, and every time you launch an arrow, it falls short. Despite your best intentions and efforts, nothing changes; your arrows always fall short. So it is with sin. Sin makes it impossible for us to live up to the standard of who the Creator designed us to be and what he designed us to do. These three words—*transgression*, *iniquity*, and *sin*—powerfully depict our need for the rescuing, forgiving, accepting, transforming, empowering, and delivering grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. They should cause us to give up on our own righteousness, to let go of our dreams of self-reformation, and to cry out for help. These words should drive us to a state of spiritual hopelessness that causes us to abandon hope in our efforts and throw ourselves in hope on the Savior.

But we have a problem. One of the most serious aspects of sin is that it is deceitful. Sin blinds. I have no problem seeing and being concerned about the sin of others, but I can be blind to

my own sin and a bit offended when someone calls me out. It is vital to admit that because sin still lives inside of us, none of us have a completely accurate view of ourselves. We like to think that no one knows us better than we know ourselves, but the blinding power of sin means that simply is not true. But it's also vital to understand that sin carries with it a double blindness; not only am I often blind to my sin, but I am often blind to my blindness. I look at myself like I'm looking in carnival mirrors, where I see myself but with significant distortions. I need help to see myself accurately, to grieve, and to seek and celebrate God's redeeming grace.

Corporate worship, the regular gathering of God's people, holds up a huge mirror week after week. It is the world's most accurate mirror, one that doesn't simply give us an accurate view of our physical appearance but that has the power to reveal and expose the true thoughts, desires, and condition of our hearts. What is this mirror? It is the word of God. The Scripture read, sung, and expounded functions, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, as a mirror, enabling us to see ourselves as we really are, so that we will seek the grace that we deeply need. Because of remaining sin, we need this heart-exposing ministry again and again. I am thankful that week after week, God has used the corporate gathering for worship as an instrument of accurate spiritual sightedness in my life.

Why do I need this regular flow of bad news? Because without it, the good news of the righteous life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection of Jesus would neither interest me nor seem important to me. It is the crushing bad news of sin that causes me to long for the gloriously good news of all that Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for me. It makes me cling to his grace because I know I have no other hope in this life and in the one to come.

And it makes me want to extend that same grace to those around me who likewise have no hope without it.

This Sunday once again stand before God's mirror. Let it break through your blindness, let it expose your need, and let it cause you to throw yourself once again into the healing, forgiving, and restoring arms of your Savior.

Scripture: Jeremiah 17:9–10

Reflections: Why is it so difficult to recognize our own sin? How can we see ourselves as we really are, and why is it important to do so?

Family Discussion: Read aloud Jeremiah 17:9–10. Ask what this verse means when it says that the heart is *deceitful*. Discuss whether or not a mirror is useful if it doesn't show what we really look like. Discuss whether it is enough to look in a mirror just once in our lives. Why not? Compare this to weekly worship which, through the word of God, shows us our sin and extends grace to us.

Sunday 4

Corporate worship is designed to turn your fear into trust, your complaints into praise, and your independence into willing submission.

I WISH I COULD SAY that I always perfectly trust and rest in the Lord. I wish I could say that everything I do is rooted in faith and not in fear. I wish I could say that everything I do and say is shaped by a willing submission to God's will. I wish I could say all of these things, but I can't. In my sane moments I am able to see that there is still spiritual struggle within me, that the desire for my own way collides with my commitment to live God's way. Sometimes I am confused about what God is doing, when fear wrestles with faith. I know theologically that God is in control, almighty in power, always near, and perfect in wisdom, love, and grace, but I don't always live like I actually believe these things are true. Sometimes I have a bit of the spirit of Jonah in me. You remember that God called Jonah to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, but Jonah ran as far as he could in the other direction. The boat he took to make his escape was caught in a storm (sent by God), and the sailors on

the boat tried to figure out why. They found Jonah asleep in the bottom of the boat, and asked him who he was. Jonah replied, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). Jonah said that he feared the Lord, but his actions in the face of God’s call didn’t look like the actions of a man whose heart was shaped by a deep reverential fear of the Lord at all. All of us are like Jonah at times; what we say we believe doesn’t seem to shape the way we live.

Three things still live inside of us that tend to get in the way of a life of faith, that is, a life that is shaped by what the Bible has to say about who God is, what his will for us is, and what he has provided for us in the grace of his Son. Fear, complaint, and independence are all obstacles to a willing, joyful, faithful, and restful life of faith. The regular gathering of the church for worship and instruction has been designed by God to be one of his most valuable weapons in our fight against these.

Fear. Because we live in a fallen world that does not function as God intended and because evil was unleashed on the world in that horrible moment in the garden of Eden, we have legitimate reasons to fear. The sufferings of life in this fallen world will enter your door. Bad things will happen. So fear is not always wrong. In fact, there is a kind of fear that is the only thing that has the power to disarm all other fear. This kind of fear is not a paralyzing, anxiety-producing dread, but rather a reverential awe and willing submission that gives your heart a remarkable peace and calm. The fear I’m talking about is fear of God. When you have this kind of fear, you are so blown away by the glorious glory of God, his almighty power, his infinite wisdom, his boundless love, and his inextinguishable grace that all other fears are unable to capture and control the thoughts and desires of your heart. A biblical knowledge

of God, his character, his will, and his plan can break your bondage to all other forms of fear.

We therefore need the gathering of the community of faith for worship and instruction because it is so easy to become God-forgetful. I wish I could say that I look at everything through the lens of the presence and glory of God, but I don't. I still have moments when I fall into God amnesia, when I don't have my God-glasses on. And when I do this, life in this fallen world looks impossibly fearful. Very often my fear is really God-forgetfulness. I need—again and again, by spoken word and worship—to have the eyes of my heart filled with the glory of my glorious Savior, Lord, friend, and King. I need this so that what I crave, what I think, what I decide, what I say, and what I do are shaped by the fear of rest and not the fear of dread. I love the gathering of the church for corporate worship because I need again and again to be awakened out of my God-forgetfulness, and I'm sure you need this too.

Complaint. Sin is self-centered. It is about what I want, when I want it, who I want to deliver it, and how I want it to be delivered. Sin places in me a desire to rule the world so that it does my bidding, and it causes my heart to be a personal pleasure center rather than a worship center. Therefore, complaint becomes more natural than thankfulness. Sin makes me reduce the field of my focus and concern down to my wants, my needs, and my feelings. Grace gives us eyes to see and hearts to love a greater glory than our own. It is God's grace alone that has the power to break our worship of ourselves and gives us hearts that worship and serve the one who made and sustains us. But as long as sin, with its self-orientation, still lives in us, our hearts will be pulled between gratitude and complaint. I wonder how many of us would have to admit that it is much easier on any given day to find more reason

to complain than to praise. Would those who live with us or near us say that we are grateful? How often do we wonder where God is and what he is doing? How often are our hearts focused on what we don't have rather than on the lavish gifts of grace that have been poured down on us from our Father in heaven? Are we quicker to grumble than to give thanks?

I need to be reminded again and again of who I am and what I have been given, not because I have earned or deserve these gifts, but because of the loving and lavish generosity of the King of kings and Lord of lords, who by grace is my Father. Perhaps you've experienced your heart come to life in a worship service or in the middle of a sermon. I know I have. Maybe you have left a corporate worship service with an entirely different set of emotions than you came into the room with. I know I have. Maybe in the middle of a great hymn or worship song, you've been convicted that you tend to complain more at God than offer the gratitude of your heart to him. I know I have. Corporate worship is designed to give us eyes to see the myriad blessings that are ours as children of God, so that our lives would be shaped by worship and not complaint.

Independence. The greatest lie ever told was spoken by the serpent in the garden, when he proposed to Eve and Adam that it was possible for them to live independently. The worst decision ever made was when Adam and Eve decided to step away from dependence on and submission to God, thinking that they could somehow, some way be like him. Sin is fiercely independent. It is about self-rule. Sin hates authority. The life of sin is built on the delusion of independence. It buys into the fantasy that we are smart enough, powerful enough, and righteous enough to live on our own. As long as sin still lives in us, independence will

war with submission to God in our hearts. That's why we don't really like being told what to do and why we chafe against little laws (think traffic or parking) in our lives. Parents, this is why your children debate you when told what they can eat, when they have to go to bed, or what they can watch on Netflix. They aren't just resisting the issue at hand; they are fighting authority. Sin reduces all of us to little self-sovereigns, loving rule more than loving being ruled.

So we all need to be reminded of the humbling truth that we are not wise enough, strong enough, or righteous enough to live on our own. We need the narrative of creation-fall-redemption, which is the overarching theme of Scripture, to confront us with the disaster of human independence and the danger it places us in if we give it room in our hearts. We need to be reminded that we find in God and God alone what we will never find in ourselves. He is the wisdom we need. He is the power we need. He is the righteousness we need. Life, in its eternal fullness, is only ever found in a willing submission of your heart and life to him. Grace doesn't lead us from dependence to independence, but rather from independence to a deeper and deeper dependence on God.

This week in the gathering of God's people, be glad that the artifacts of fear, complaint, and independence that still live in your heart will be exposed, and you will be lovingly welcomed once again to the best life ever, one that is lived in a practical, street-level, heartfelt dependence upon and submission to God.

Scripture: Isaiah 41:10 (fear), Philippians 2:14–15 (complaint), and Proverbs 3:5–6 (independence)

Reflections: In which of the obstacles to a joyful life of faith (fear, complaint, or independence) do your actions and thoughts not reflect what you say you believe? What could prompt you to remember to be trusting, thankful, and submissive to God?

Family Discussion: Ask members of the family to choose one of the above obstacles, and challenge them to memorize all or part of the corresponding Scripture passage, depending on age and ability. Discuss how God's word through corporate worship reminds us to trust him, practice thankfulness, and depend on him.

Sunday 5

*Corporate worship is designed to define for you,
explain to you, and celebrate with you the wonder
of the grace of your eternal union with Christ.*

ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL, heart-changing, and life-giving truths of the gospel is the truth of our union with Christ. When you hear “union with Christ,” do you understand what it means? Do the glory of those words fill your heart? Does the thought of your union with Christ give you reason to get up in the morning, even when life is hard? Does it make you never tire of singing and celebrating God’s grace with your brothers and sisters in the faith? Do you know what your union with Christ has to do with who you are and what you do every day? Do you grasp how it is meant to infuse you with help and hope? Do you know how it is meant to produce in you a heart of humble, unshakable gratitude right here, right now? Do you live in the peace and rest of what it means to be united to Christ by faith?

There is a reason union with Christ is such an important truth to understand and live in light of. Human beings made in the

image of God live life based not on the *facts* of their existence but rather on their *interpretation* of the facts. God designed us to be meaning-makers. This capacity was given to us so that we could know God, know ourselves, and understand God's revelation of himself and his will for our lives. One of the most important aspects of this meaning-making function is our grappling with the question of who we are. Somehow, somehow we are always assigning to ourselves some kind of identity. *Who am I?* The way you answer this profound question will shape the way you live your life. So it is vital for you to know that you have not just been forgiven by God and accepted into his family, but by grace you have been united to Christ. Your "in Christ" identity changes everything about your understanding of who you are and what your hope and potential are as a child of God. Understanding your union with Christ will change the way you think about and live in your marriage. It will alter your thoughts about your capability as a parent. It will change the way you approach your friendships, your life at your university, the way you think about your money and your sexuality, and a host of others things.

When it comes to the magnitude of the truth of our union with Christ, I think it is impossible for us to be taught about it too much, to be reminded of it too often, to sing about it too repeatedly, or to meditate upon it too deeply. The heart of the gathering of God's people should never be about what we are called to do for God, but it must always be about what he has done in his Son for us. The focus of this worship gathering is first on *being* and then on *doing*. And the center thought of what we are now as the children of God is our union with Christ. All of the gorgeous blessings of God's grace, which we examine and celebrate when we gather, flow out of the fact that by the power of God's grace,

lost and foolish rebels have been united to Christ. Whether you understand it or not, your union with Christ changes everything for you. You have not just been forgiven; you have not just been accepted; you have not just been guaranteed a future. You are now living in the context of something that changes everything for your past, present, and future. You, believer, have been united to Christ. This reality and identity is more important than any other identity you could ever assign to yourself. Let me explain.

There is no better place to go to understand this union than Ephesians 1. Paul's passion for people to understand who they are and what they have been given in Christ is evident in verse after verse. As you read, pray that God would open your heart to the wonder of what we are about to consider:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. *In him* we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth *in Christ* as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who

were the first to hope *in Christ* might be to the praise of his glory. *In him* you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:3–14)

You could spend months meditating on the magnitude of what this passages says about who you are and what you have been given as a child of God. For now, let's focus on what Paul wants you to understand about what it means to be "in Christ."

Every spiritual blessing. Everything you need in order to live as God has called you to live, in every situation and relationship of your daily life, with every grace you need to do so, along with the guarantee of a glorious future without sin or suffering, are yours because you are in Christ.

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world. Before the world began God set his love on you and chose you to be the recipient of his justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying grace, so that you can stand before him holy and blameless. Because you are in Christ, you are not alone in your battle with sin. God's inexhaustible grace will keep doing its work until that work is complete.

In him we have the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. We no longer have to be paralyzed by sin's regret or defeated by sin's shame, because in Christ all of our sins—past, present, and future—have been forgiven, by means of his shed blood on the cross.

In him God has made known to us the mystery of his will. Our eyes were once blind and our hearts closed to the life-giving,

life-changing wisdom of God's truth, but in Christ these mysteries have been opened and illumined to us. This is why our hearts respond to God's word.

In him we have obtained an inheritance. Peter says that this inheritance is being kept in heaven for us (1 Pet. 1:4). There is glory beyond our ability to conceive that awaits us, which we could have never earned or deserved, but which is ours in Christ.

In him we might live for the praise of his glory. In Christ we are blessed to live for a glory greater than our own, for a kingdom way better than our own, and for the praise of a King who is not us.

In him we were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. This means that because you are in Christ, your relationship with God is never at risk, never at stake. Your relationship with God and your place in his eternal family have been sealed forever. Your continued obedience doesn't guarantee your standing with God; being in Christ does.

We often enter the public gathering of God's people having lived during the week in a state of "in Christ" amnesia. Sadly, our emotions, words, and actions have been negatively affected, because we have forgotten who we are and what has been lavished on us in Christ. So we need to hear again and again the amazing grace that is ours because we were chosen before the world began to be *in Christ*. This grace is not just a future reality; it provides everything we need to be what God has chosen us to be and to do what he has called us to do right here, right now. We simply can't gather enough, hear too often, or reflect too deeply on the warehouse of blessings that are ours in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 8:1–2

Reflections: From the above passage, reflect once more on how much you as a believer have to celebrate because you are *in Christ*.

Family Discussion: Ask family members to discuss one area of their lives or thoughts that should change because of their union with Christ (e.g., marriage, parenting, friendships, sexuality, etc.). Discuss the things that cause us to forget who we are and what has been lavished on us in Christ. What is the remedy for this *in Christ amnesia*?