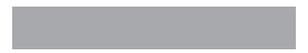


LIVING
IT OUT



**DAILY
BIBLE
STUDY**



CEDARCREEKCHURCH

Christmas Is Over

Christmas Day came and went more than a week ago. Can you believe it? After all the waiting, all the parties, all the gift exchanges, all the cookies, and everything else that accompanies the Christmas season, it's over. You've probably already packed away your decorations and moved on to embrace the winter for what it is: cold. If you're one of those people who still has your decorations up, kudos to you. You're a trooper and are hanging on to whatever remnant of Christmas is left. However, at some point, all of us move on from the Christmas season.

If the Christmas story is as powerful as we know it to be, shouldn't it last a little longer than it does? Can the Christmas season last longer than post-Thanksgiving to December 25th? Yes, if we're defining Christmas correctly. If we're celebrating the birth of Jesus, then of course we can celebrate it all of the time, and we should!

A challenge in this is that our lives move quickly, and we tend to operate in a forward-thinking mindset. We are always looking forward, and always planning. While this is a good thing, it can cause us to miss out. As Ferris Bueller said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

When we look at the birth of Jesus, one of the more fascinating parts of the story is Mary's response. Tucked away in Luke chapter 2, is a fascinating verse that gives us a glimpse of how important Jesus' birth was to Mary.

Luke writes, ***"⁹but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often."*** This verse might not give you pause, however, it should because it challenges our forward-thinking mindset. Mary, who gave birth to Jesus Christ, spent time reflecting on the events we read about 2,000 years later.

But how does this relate to us? Obviously, none of us have experienced what Mary did, but we've all experienced Jesus. Throughout your life, haven't you had memorable experiences with him? As Christians, we should reflect on these moments, because they can do a lot for us. They can inspire us to continue following Christ, they can encourage us in our doubts, and they can reinvigorate a dull spirit.

Take some time to reflect on the following questions:

How has this year been for you?

How has God surprised you this year?

What were some memorable experiences from this year? How was God connected to these experiences?

Prayer

God, help me to take pause today and reflect on the good things you've given me. Help me to reflect on the most amazing gift you've ever given: your Son. Amen.

This post was written by Andy Rectenwald, the Director of the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.

Where Do You Come From?

A question people occasionally ask someone they are meeting for the first time is, "Where are you from?" Knowing where a person hails from provides context that enables us to learn more about them. For instance, we would expect a person from a Muslim country or Taiwan to possess different cultural customs and behaviors than someone from Sweden or Ohio. As individuals, we can learn about ourselves when we reflect on where we have been during different phases and seasons of our lives. As Christians, thinking back on who we were and what we were like before we decided to follow Christ can make us ever more appreciative of the gift of salvation that Jesus Christ purchased for us with his life.

In today's Scripture, Paul, uses words such as foolish, evil, and disobedient to describe who we were before we repented and followed Christ. While these aren't flattering descriptors, they are deadly accurate. He calls us "slaves" in our former life. Do you know what the Biblical meaning of slave is? *Slave!* That's right; Paul is stating that we were completely dominated, totally imprisoned, and unable to break free from the lusts and desires of our previous nature. We were pathetic and helpless creatures.

So why should we think back to what a wretch we were then? Because remembering what we were like and where we came from helps us to appreciate the immeasurable value of God's gift of a new life and his promise eternity without sin, pain, or sadness. We have been given something that no amount of gold or jewels or treasure could purchase: liberation from our sinful, despicable nature and the gift of a new life and eternity in a sinless, perfect world one day. What is even more amazing is we did, not nor could we ever, do anything to earn this gift. It is only because God is so loving, amazing, and merciful that he has bestowed such blessing upon us. **When we consider how far God has brought us from our former self and existence, the correct response should be overwhelming awe and eternal gratitude. Where did you come from?**

Titus 3:3-5

³Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other. ⁴But—"When God our Savior revealed his kindness

and love, ⁵he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.”

Circle the adjectives Paul uses to describe us in verse 3. What emotions do those words evoke in you about the person they describe?

In verses 4-5, circle the names and pronouns of the person Paul says saved us. How many times are we given credit for this gift? What did we do to merit this gift? What does this tell you about the giver of this gift?

Prayer

Think about what you were like before you came to know Christ. Thank him for suffering so much for such an undeserving person like yourself, and for doing it gladly, all for you. Let him know you are grateful beyond description because he is loving beyond comprehension.

Farewell, 2016

If you're like me, as you bid farewell to 2016 this past weekend, your thoughts quickly pivoted to the year ahead. Some of us made resolutions (some of which have already been broken) and most of us at least pondered what 2017 will have in store. Increasingly, it seems, our nature as a society is to look forward – not always with patience – figuratively straining our necks to see what is next.

But before we turn our gaze to peer through the windshield at the year ahead, let's take one last glance into the rear-view mirror to appreciate the year gone by.

As an appreciation of God's love, consider how he generously blessed you this past year. Was it a personal event, such as the birth of a child, a union with a new spouse, recovery from an illness, or perhaps an opportunity that permitted you to better provide for your family or others in need? Or was it an experience with God himself – the gift of deeper spiritual understanding and growth, or even feeling God's hand guiding you to more fully use your gifts to further his kingdom? Whatever his gift, take time to thank him for his love and generosity.

All of God's blessings are worthy of our appreciation, but none compares with his ultimate blessing – the gift of his grace.

The closing week of the "Surprised by God" series featured scripture from the book of Titus. Earlier this week, the *LivingItOut* Bible study dug into the book of Titus to examine how we have fallen short of God's example by being foolish and disobedient, and how God saved us, not because we were deserving, but because of his mercy. Today, as we explore Titus 3:6-7, Paul tells us of how God has generously given us his spirit and, through his grace, made us right and provided us the confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

God's blessings are not only wondrous; they are also essential. It is by no other method than accepting him as our Lord and Savior, and in doing so receiving the gift of his unmerited grace, that we obtain salvation.

The amazing thing about God's grace is that it both humbles us *and* gives us confidence. Think about that. Too often, we associate being humbled with shame or possessing low self-esteem. But as author and theologian

C.S. Lewis famously wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.” Our humility comes from knowing that we do not deserve God’s grace; from thinking of ourselves less in terms of the credit for achievements.

At the same time, our confidence comes from knowing and believing that our eternal destiny is secure – again, not because of our own works, but because of those of Jesus. The result is a confident humility that serves as a powerful tailwind in our walk with God.

Titus 3:6-7

6He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. 7Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

Questions

For which of God’s blessings were you most grateful this past year?

What does God’s grace mean to you ... and for you?

What can you do you more fully appreciate the humility and confidence that are inherent in the gift of God’s grace?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your love and blessings, and most of all for the unmerited gift of your grace. Help me to appreciate the humility and confidence that come with your gifts, and to live my life buoyed by the confident humility that your grace provides. Amen.

This post was written by Todd Romain, a regular editor and contributor to the LivingItOut Bible Study.

Is My Sin Actually Bad?

It's so amazing. How lucky are we to have such a merciful God that even though we've sinned against him, he offers his forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus? We know that through Jesus we will one day be in Heaven, not because of the things we've done, but because of God's mercy. What does this mean for us now, though? When we're saved, God calls us to live as Christ-like as possible, not because we gain right-standing with him, but because we love him. It's a way of telling him, "You've done so much for me, so I want to do this for you."

Do you find yourself struggling to break an old bad habit? Is there sinful behavior in your life that you wouldn't want your fellow church-goers to know about? "But God forgives us, so what's the big deal?" Sin is so normalized and even celebrated in some corners of our culture, that it may seem that your particular tough-to-break sin isn't really all that bad. If you find yourself clinging to one particular sin, know that in God's point of view, sin looks like chains dangling from our feet. It's preventing us from living the way he wants, from being utilized in his plan to the fullest. It keeps us separated from him. God knows our sin is bad for our souls. God hates sin. Our sin killed Jesus. Jesus was killed to set us free from sin, not to allow us to sit in it. We need to hate sin, too.

In Titus 3:8, Paul tells us to devote ourselves to doing good. This isn't so that we can earn our way to Heaven; that's not possible. Jesus is the only way. But God gave us this gift, and we are so clearly undeserving of it. So instead of taking the gift for granted, we need to celebrate it by doing as God asks. Live righteously, show God's love, run from sin. A very wise-beyond-her-years woman from my LifeGroup told us that she shows God's love and mercy, not because it comes from her, but because God's love is so great, that it is pouring out from her; it can't be contained. How beautiful is that concept? God has done so much for us, let's show our love for him by sharing his love with others and living right.

Titus 3:8

This is a trustworthy saying, and I want you to insist on these teachings so that all who trust in God will devote themselves to doing good. These teachings are good and beneficial for everyone.

What does this passage mean for your life? Where specifically do you feel God is calling you to do good?

Is there a sin in your life that you cling to? What would it take for you to let it go?

Pray this prayer:

God, thank you for the greatest gift in the world: Jesus. It is amazing that even though I have sinned, and will continue to fall short of your glory, you have offered your forgiveness. Please help me to never forget the vastness of this gift, and to show you I'm grateful by living as Christ-like as possible. Help me to rid my life of sins that get in the way of your plan for my life. Amen

This post was written by Ashlee Grosjean, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Daily Bible Study.

What Do We Do With God's Surprise?

Brexit, Trump, Hurricane Matthew, Zika, Rio, Pokémon Go, Prince, and Mother Theresa are all names that will stand out in the years to come when we remember 2016. It was a year of surprises – some good, some bad. It was a year of increasing violence in many parts of the world and a year of increasing fear. Some have even dubbed 2016 as “the worst year ever.” While I doubt this is “the worst year ever,” we’ve definitely had our fair share of surprises. How has God surprised you this year? Did you thrive, survive, or struggle in 2016?

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at how different people in the Bible were “Surprised by God.” In every case, God took something unexpected and used it to bless his people. We end the year with a sense of hope, possibilities, and eager anticipation. The hope and wonder of Christmas are then transferred into the new year. Something in a new year awakens hope of change, of improvement, and of possibilities.

When we look at how God gave us his best and most costly surprise, we can only stand back in amazement. God, the Creator and Sustainer of the earth, chose to come and live among the people he created. In ancient times, the people believed whenever the gods came to roam among the people, trouble always ensued. They were always trying to appease their gods. These gods were vengeful and temperamental. They demanded blood – most often human blood. They crushed rebellion and the people lived in fear. These were the gods people in biblical times understood. Yet the true God came as a baby, innocent and helpless. He surprised us with his arrival and he then surprised us with his humility, wisdom, and grace, and finally his death. He became the sacrifice so our blood would not need to be spilled.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul beautifully presents the surprises we experience in the life of Jesus. He died so that our sinful nature could be put aside and we could become new. Not only does he give us the opportunity to become new but he also gives us the privilege to bring others into this new life with us. He has surprised us by making us new. Our responsibility is to rise and live as we are: a new creation. We are to put off our old and sinful nature and embrace the new life we are called to live. As Andrew Peterson so beautifully says it in his song *All Things New*:

Rise up, oh you sleeper, awake

The light of the dawn is upon you
Rise up, oh you sleeper, awake
He makes all things new

The world was good
The world is fallen
The world will be redeemed
O hold on to the promise

The stories are true
That Jesus makes all things new
The dawn is upon you

2 Corinthians 5:15, 17-18

¹⁵He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

¹⁷This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun. ¹⁸And all this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.

What are the surprises of God present in the above passage?

How can you begin the new year in a way that reflects that you are a new person in Christ?

Pray this prayer:

God, thank you for new years and new beginnings. Thank you for being a God of surprises, surprises that are always for our good. Thank you for sending Jesus to take our punishment so that we can be made new and free in you. Help me to live in such a way that those around me see that I am a new creation and want to enter this new life as well.

This post was written by Julie Mabus, a regular contributor to the LivingItOut Bible Study.