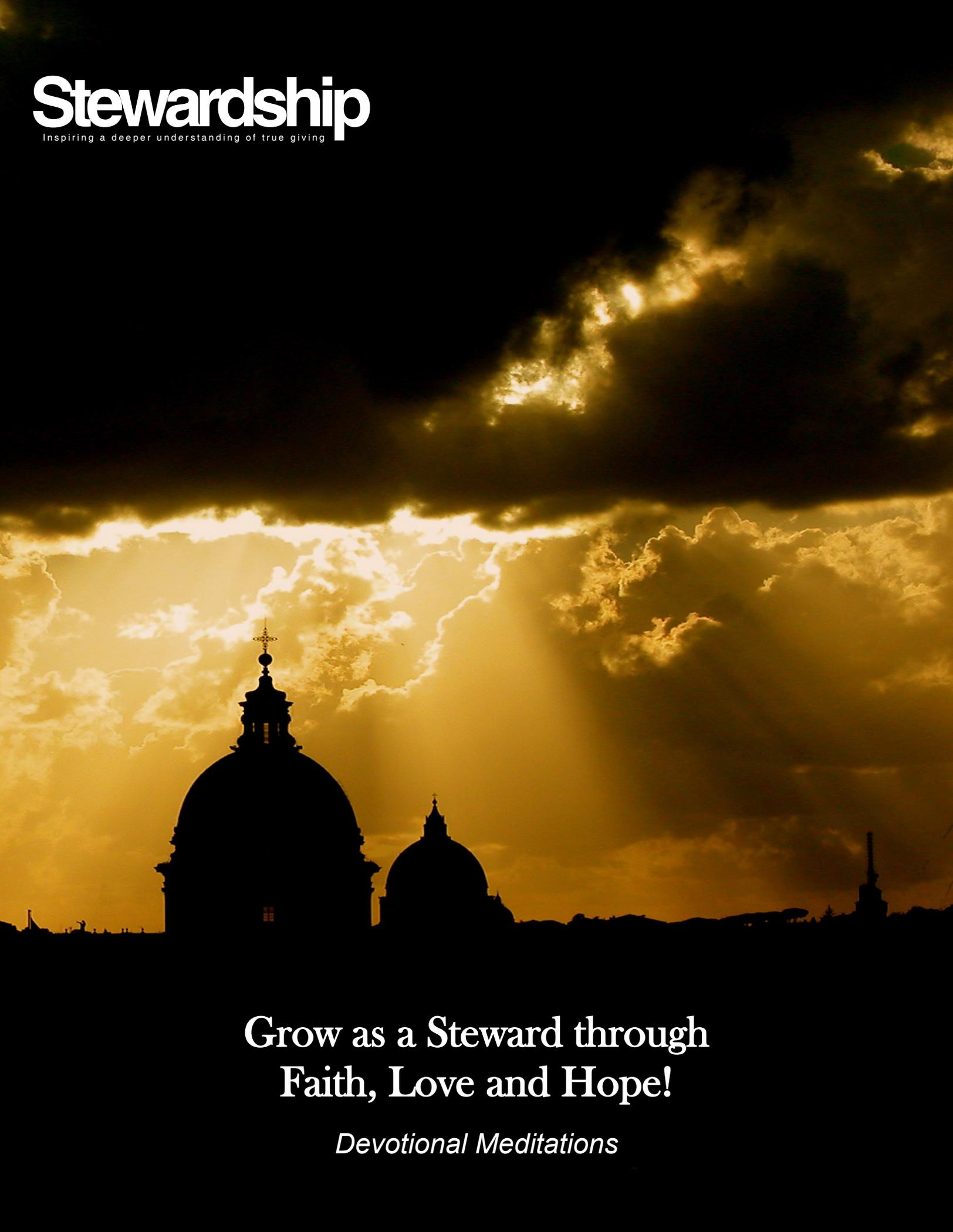


Stewardship

Inspiring a deeper understanding of true giving

A dramatic sunset scene with a golden sky filled with dark, textured clouds. The sun is partially obscured by the clouds, creating a bright, glowing effect. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several domes and spires of a building, likely a cathedral or church, are visible against the bright sky. The largest dome is on the left, with a cross on top. Other smaller domes and spires are visible to the right.

Grow as a Steward through
Faith, Love and Hope!

Devotional Meditations

Grow as a Steward through Faith, Love and Hope!



“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Thessalonians 1:3

Devotional Meditations

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Week One



Grow as a Steward through Faith

Love through Faith

Theme verse: *“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”* Luke 17:6

What is it that precedes the disciples’ request of Jesus to increase their faith? It is Jesus’ command to count others so precious as to avoid putting any kind of temptation in their paths.

How is this possible? If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that, in and of ourselves, we cannot follow these commands. Then we, like the disciples, must ask of our Lord, *“Increase our faith.”*

How does Jesus respond to their request? He assures them that even faith as small as a mustard seed can accomplish great things. It is God who gives the faith, and it is God who gives us the ability to act on it. It is God who gives us the love through faith that sacrifices our own desires for the good of others, love through faith that knows no limit, love through faith that serves instead of asking to be served.

It is faith that gives us such love for God and our neighbor that we serve and help and give without thought of reward, so that *“when [we] have done everything [we] were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’”* (Luke 17:10).



Prayer: *Dear heavenly Father, certainly, in order to measure up to your standards, we must ask you to increase our faith. Still we fail, for we do not love you with our entire beings, nor do we love our neighbors as ourselves. Therefore, we thank you for the gift of your Son who has met your standard of perfection and has lived that standard in our places. Forgive us, Lord, for our failures. Teach us to depend on you. Give us grace to be obedient to your command to love others as you love us. Through Christ we pray. **Amen.***

Faith Empowers God's Stewards

Theme verse: *"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."* John 14:12

The writer of Hebrews defines faith: *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"* (Hebrews 11:1). Faith enables us to be God-pleasing stewards. *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6). The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is known as the "Faith Chapter." From Abel down through the ages, the writer names the heroes of faith, listing their accomplishments, preceding each one with "by faith."

Through faith, we understand that our stewardship is God working in and through us. It is not what we do, not what we give, not how we serve – but what God does, what God gives, how God serves, and our response to his love and gifts to us. God has shown us his plan for our lives. *"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:10). This is the definition of stewardship: doing the good works which God has prepared for us to do. God empowers and equips us to be faithful stewards. God has chosen us to carry out his work on earth. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit ... fruit that will last"* (John 15:16).

It is through faith that our pastor confidently enters the pulpit to speak forth the Word of the Lord. It is God's message, God's gift, and he is only the channel through which it flows. Through faith, the servant humbly steps forward to serve. His only motive is that God may receive the glory as he offers his hands, feet, lips, his whole body, soul, and mind in service. Through faith, the teacher diligently prepares her lessons, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit, studying the Word of God, and looking into the hearts of her students. God creates the learning; his Spirit creates the faith. As stewards, we are the faithful vessels that God uses. Through faith, God can make us into his faithful stewards.



Prayer: *Lord, you are the creator and source of all good things. We thank you for the privilege and opportunity that you give us to be the stewards of your creation. We thank you for the faith that you give us which enables us to carry out your will. We thank you for your love and grace. Help us to be faithful stewards in telling others of Jesus' love. We pray that you will continue to work in us so we can be the stewards that you created us to be. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

Being a Faithful Steward

Theme verse: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10

What if your pastor asked you to give a testimonial about your life as God’s steward? If you were asked to share how you manage and care for God’s property, what would you say? Have you considered what a faithful steward is expected to be and to do?

To be a God-pleasing steward, we need to acknowledge that God is the creator and source of all things. As the creator of all, he owns everything. God’s property is on loan to us. As stewards, we are to manage what he has entrusted to us responsibly and for God’s purposes. As God’s stewards, we are not to be passive managers, but active and involved. We are caretakers and managers of God’s gifts so we are accountable for what we do with his gifts of time, talents, and money. As faithful stewards, we can glorify and honor God with lives of service and faithful use of our gifts.

Stewards live a life expressing gratitude to God for both our created and our redeemed lives. We live a life of saying “thank you” to God for his love and mercy. Stewardship is faith in action. Filled with God’s grace, we share our gifts with others.

To answer the question, “Are we being faithful stewards with our lives and gifts?” we may want to check our calendars and checkbook registers. Faithful stewards would have times marked on their calendars for helping others, church meetings, and Bible studies. We would be spending time in prayer and attending worship services. Through faith, we try our best to use our time doing God’s will. Our checkbook register would show weekly offerings being made to God through our church, and there would be some checks written to help the needy. Our calendars and check registers will show us what and where our priorities lie.

God has blessed us as stewards with many blessings, but the decision is ours whether or not we will use those gifts for the work of the Lord. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God enables us to use our gifts faithfully. May God grant us grace to be the faithful stewards that he wants us to be.



Prayer: *Lord, we give you praise and thanks for who you are and all that you have done for us through your Son Jesus. Forgive us, Lord, when we fail to thank you or lead the lives that you have called us to lead. Help us to respond as faithful stewards to your love, goodness, and mercy. May all that we do and say give you praise and glory. In Jesus’ precious name we pray. Amen.*

Faithful in All Things

Theme verse: *Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much." Luke 16:10*

In this verse, Jesus is saying that a faithful person will handle God's gifts faithfully regardless of whether they have few or many gifts entrusted to them. What we do with what we have shows our faithfulness.

A faithful person will do the small things well. One day a young man went to a bank to apply for a job. After his interview, he was leaving the bank and happened to notice some trash on the floor. He picked it up and put it in the waste paper basket. Seconds later, he helped an elderly lady with the door. Unknown to the young man, the man who had interviewed him for the job was observing him. The young man was promptly summoned back and given the job. The employer's comment: "Anyone who pays attention to the small things as you just did needs to work here."

Unfortunately, we Christians may incorrectly think that small things aren't important to God. We may have the attitude that God isn't concerned with the small amount of money or other gifts that we have been given. In the Bible, God spoke mightily through the little that people had. God used the widow and her two mites to teach us a lesson about sacrificial giving. He used the small amount of flour and oil that the widow of Zarephath had to demonstrate obedience. Jesus used the loaves and fish of a young boy to reveal how God can magnify a small gift. God commends our faithfulness with small things, and he doesn't overlook what faithful people do with small things.

Through God's Word, we understand that small things do count. Because we understand our need to be faithful with all things, we should ask ourselves how we are handling the seemingly small things in our lives. Are we handling small things well in our homes, jobs, and churches? Can non-Christians see a difference in us? With God's help, we can be faithful with ALL that we've been given. Through our faithfulness, God will be glorified.



Prayer: *Lord, we are people who often think bad thoughts and make poor decisions. We are in need of forgiveness so we plead with repentant hearts for your mercy. You give us so much for which we give you praise and thanks. Please grant us the faith that we need to be faithful with the small things so you can trust us with more things. Help us to live lives that give you honor and glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Faith Determines the Amount

Theme verse: *Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give." Matthew 10:8*

We, as God's stewards, should be praying for guidance as we consider the question, "What percentage of my income will I give to the Lord through my church?" Our faith will set the percentage. Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you*" (Matthew 17:20). Giving is more a faith issue than a financial one. Many individuals and/or households enjoy a good income, but lack the faith to release it.

We need a faith that dares to sacrifice. Can we be called generous givers when our giving does not cause us to go without at least one single purchase or event? Are we willing to give a sacrificial percentage to God's Kingdom? God does not ask us to give things up just for the sake of giving something up, but he does ask for meaningful self-denial that characterizes our whole lives.

As we answer the question what percentage or proportion to give, we may want to consider God's arithmetic: \$10 minus \$1 for Jesus equals \$10 plus! For unbelievers, this arithmetic does not make sense, but Christian givers who have given proportionately have experienced true spiritual arithmetic. Many have discovered, to their delight, that the remaining part of their incomes goes even further after they have given generously of their first-fruits. Proverbs 11:25 reads, "*A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*" St. Paul made a similar statement: "*Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously*" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Whether God gives us much or little, we are called by faith to give generously. It has been said,

*"It's not what you'd do with a million
If a million would e'er be your lot
But what you are doing at present
With the dollar and quarter you've got!"*



Prayer: *Dear heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us faith so that we can acknowledge your love, grace, and mercy for us. Help us always to trust and obey you. We pray that you will use us to tell others of your love. In your precious name we pray. Amen.*

Faith that Pleases God

Theme verse: “*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*” Hebrews 11:6

The first gifts that we read about in Scripture are the offerings made by Cain and Abel who were the sons of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 4:2-4 we read, “. . . *Now Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.*” Cain and Abel brought offerings or gifts for the Lord. Because one worked the land and the other raised animals, their gifts were different.

Between the two brothers there is also an indication of a difference in the attitudes of their hearts. While Cain wasn't concerned about giving the first or best of his crop, Abel gave the firstborn of his flock. God looked with favor upon Abel's offering. God looked into the hearts of both Cain and Abel as he looks into our hearts. He saw Abel's humble faith. By his gift, Abel showed his sincere gratitude for all that God had done for him.

We need to understand that it's not the size of our gifts and offerings which makes them acceptable to the Lord, but rather it is the attitude of our hearts and minds toward God. God wants our gifts to be an expression of our love for him. He wants us to give cheerfully rather than grudgingly. He wants us to give out love through faith. We are told by the writer of Hebrews that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

May this story of giving by Cain and Abel help us to examine our attitude toward giving. If we are not giving our first and best out of faith and love to the Lord, God does not look with favor upon our giving. May God grant us all faithful, loving, and giving hearts.



Prayer: *Lord, we thank you for giving us the ability and desire to give to you. Grant us strength to give our first and best to you. May we always use our lives and resources to give you honor and glory. Use us as your instruments of love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Week Two



Grow as a Steward through Love

The Father's Great Love

Theme verse: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* John 3:16

Those days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday had to have been long, dreary, hopeless days for Jesus' followers. Sometimes we go through days like that: someone we love is battling a terminal illness; we don't get the promotion we had been promised; the kids are rebelling and having trouble at school; we don't think anyone understands what we're going through.

Never, though, are we beyond hope, for those days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday have passed. We know that the victory has been won. We know our troubles are but *"light and momentary"* (2 Corinthians 4:17). When we focus on God through his Word, we get a different perspective. For example, meditate on these words from 1 John 3:1: *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* Examine the word "lavish." Without limit, God has given his love; he gave his Son to show us the depth of his love and to take away the wall that we built between him and us with our sin. And now he calls us his children! He doesn't just call us children – he has made us his children!

Easter brings us another promise – that, just as Christ has been resurrected from the dead, we, too, will be raised to spend eternity in his presence. And there *"we shall be like him"* (1 John 3:2). In the meantime, let us keep focusing on Christ and use the gifts our Father has given us in order that more souls might join with us before his throne of grace.



Prayer: *Lord, please open our eyes and hearts so we can better see your love at work in our lives. Help us to understand that we exist only out of your love and grace. Keep us resolute and firm in our love for you. In your precious name we pray. Amen.*

Loving All People

Theme verse: *Jesus said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” John 15:12*

Jesus showed his tremendous love for us by going to the cross to suffer and die for us so that we can be reconciled with our heavenly Father. Christ’s love is in us, and he asks us to reflect his love to others. As Christ loved all people, we are called to love all people whether or not they like us.

Former President Abraham Lincoln exemplified the ability to reach out in love to an enemy. His staff often criticized him for his positive treatment of his sworn enemies. One of the president’s enemies once stated in print that he thought Lincoln was an obvious incompetent in the White House. The nature of the critic’s attack on Lincoln even degenerated to the level that Lincoln’s physical features were compared to those of a gorilla. Later, when war broke out between the States, Lincoln asked that critic to serve as his secretary of war.

Lincoln’s advisers were appalled with the president’s actions. When they asked him why he would choose his critic for such an important post, he responded that he thought Stanton was the best man for the job. When they advised him that he should seek to destroy his enemies rather than treat them like friends, he reminded them he was destroying his enemies when he made them his friends. When Lincoln died some years later, Stanton was standing by the president’s bedside. As he watched Lincoln breathe his last breath, he uttered the words, “There dies the greatest ruler of mankind the world has ever seen.”

We show our spiritual maturity by how we respond to those who have treated us wrongfully. It is easy to show kindness to friends or people who treat us with kindness. God’s love is most evident when we show our love to those who dislike us or mistreat us. It is by God’s grace that we are enabled to show Christian kindness to all people.



Prayer: *Lord, you show your love for us in so many ways. You’ve placed us in a wonderful world filled with all that we need to sustain and enjoy life. You love us so much that you sent your one and only Son to the cross to atone for our sinful ways. We thank you for your love. Help us, Lord, to share your love with those around us. Grant us strength to show love and compassion to all people so you will be glorified. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

Love Makes Us Do It

Theme verse: *Jesus said, "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." Romans 12:13*

A young girl was dying. Her only hope lay in a complete blood transfusion, but she had a very rare blood type. Only her brother, even younger than she, had the same type blood. His parents and doctors explained the situation to him, giving him time to ask questions. He agreed and, without delay, he was laid on a bed, the needle was pushed into his tiny vein, and slowly his blood seeped from his small body into the bag hanging from his bed. He lay quietly as the nurse stood next to him, ready to attend to any need he might have. "How do you feel?" she asked. "Ok," he answered, "but, Nurse, when do I die?"

What love this little boy had for his sister! What must he have thought when, from his limited knowledge, it seemed that his own parents were willing for him to sacrifice his life in order to save his sister's.

The boy's love for his sister can help us see how much Jesus loves us. Jesus suffered abuse, torture, persecution, and death for all of us. "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). He demonstrated his tremendous love not because of our worthiness, but because he is a God of tremendous love. Jesus' love for his heavenly Father and for us changed the world. Through his death and resurrection from that death, we through faith, have received the forgiveness of our sins and life eternal. God's love for us in Christ is that power that enables us to love him. "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19).

The love of Jesus empowers us to be his stewards. Because of Jesus' love, we change from people giving to a need to people responding out of love. Certainly, we give to needs such as our church budget, Christian causes, and people, but our primary reason for giving is out of love and commitment to Jesus. When needs arise, Jesus opens our eyes and hearts so we can respond to those needs. However, our primary reason for giving is a desire to express our gratitude and thanksgiving for our Lord and the love that he shows us every day. Because our love for Jesus is our motivation for giving, our giving becomes joyful. Love changes our giving from an obligation to a privilege.

We live in difficult and changing times. How wonderful it is that, as Christians, we know that there is the certainty that Jesus always reaches out to us and loves us. May our lives and our giving genuinely reflect his love for us.



Prayer: *Lord, you fill us with love which we are to share with our families, neighbors, and co-workers. We know that we can love because you first loved us. Place in us the desire and strength to seek out opportunities to share the love that comes from you with others. May our thoughts and deeds bring you honor and glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Stewardship Is a Matter of the Heart

Theme verse: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*
Matthew 22:37

God gives us the privilege and opportunity to be his stewards. Even though God gives us all things, he still allows us the freedom to choose whom or what we will serve. Whether we are stewards for the Lord, for ourselves, or for some other master depends on what controls our hearts. What or whom we love, serve, and follow is dictated by what our hearts value as most important. The choices we make reflect what is in our hearts. Satan is doing everything possible to take the love, compassion, and peace from our hearts that only Jesus can place there.

In Matthew 6:21 Jesus said, *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* We can paraphrase this by saying, “Show me your treasure, and I will show you your heart.” What we treasure the most receives our time, energy, money, and heart. Each of us determines where his treasures lie. What do you love and treasure the most? Unfortunately, some of us may find treasures in our homes, careers, cars, hobbies, or investments. God continually invites us to make him our treasure. If our hearts are right, our treasures will be right.

Jesus spoke about the relationship between the condition of a tree and the fruit that it bears. *“Make a tree good and the fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit”* (Matthew 12:33). In the same way that the condition of the tree determines its fruit, so will the thoughts of our hearts dictate our words and actions (vs. 34-35). When our hearts are filled with God’s presence, we reflect God’s love, goodness, and kindness. When our hearts are right with God, our eyes are opened to the opportunities to serve and help others. When God controls our hearts, we willingly use our time, talents, and money in ways that glorify him. Good hearts produce good fruit. Through time spent in God’s Word and through participation in the Sacraments, God changes our hearts, making us into faithful disciples and stewards for Christ. As Solomon wrote, *“Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life”* (Proverbs 4:23).



Prayer: *Lord, we thank you that you give us the privilege and the opportunity to be your stewards. Grant us the faith that we need to be God-pleasing stewards. Help us to see stewardship as a free and joyous activity in using our lives and resources for your purposes. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

Giving from the Heart

Theme verse: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give’.” Exodus 25:1-2

In God’s Word, we find many examples of people who gave in a loving and generous way. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul uses the Macedonians as an example of people who, in their extreme poverty, gave beyond their ability. Because of the famine in Macedonia at the time, they didn’t have a surplus to give from; however, they put God first and trusted him to provide. Out of overflowing joy, they gave from their hearts.

For another example of giving from the heart, we can look at the Widow’s Offering found in Luke 21:1-4. In this story, Jesus is at the temple in Jerusalem speaking to his disciples. In the verses just preceding Luke 21, Jesus tells his disciples that the Pharisees were roaming around in their long, flowing robes making sure people saw them and oohed and aahed about them. In a gaudy display of vanity, they tossed big gifts into the temple treasury. In contrast, the widow quietly dropped in two small copper coins which was all she had. She gave from the heart, and she placed her total trust in God. She was relying on him for her future care. Although the Pharisees gave larger gifts than the widow, they were chastised for having hardened hearts from which they gave to the temple. They gave for recognition and praise. Even though the widow gave only a small gift, Jesus praised her for her generosity because he knew she gave from a loving heart.

A third illustration of one giving from the heart is Zacchaeus. Before he met Jesus, his money was his god so he hoarded it. When Jesus changed Zacchaeus’ heart, he cheerfully gave away half of what he had and four times to those from whom he had cheated. With a changed heart, he gave generously.

God wants our giving to come from hearts filled with gratitude for who God is and for all that he has done and continues to do for us. As our faith grows and matures through spending time in God’s Word and participating often in the Lord’s Table, our attitude toward giving will change from being an obligation to being a privilege. May God change and fill all of our hearts so we can experience the joy of giving to our Lord and Savior.



Prayer: *Lord, you are a loving and giving God. We pray that the Holy Spirit will transform us into loving and giving people. Help us not to grip our money tightly. Grant us generous hearts so we will be willing to share our blessings with others. We pray that our generosity will be an example to others which will encourage them to grow in the grace of giving. To you belong the honor and glory. Amen.*

Loving Our Neighbors

Theme verse: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Galatians 6:10

In the story of the Good Samaritan found in the tenth chapter of Luke, the Good Samaritan not only helped an injured person, he took him to an inn where he paid for his room and care. The Samaritan sacrificed money, time, and possessions, and risked his own health and safety for the wounded person. He fulfilled the Golden Rule. By putting no limits on how far he was willing to go to help this stranger, the Samaritan demonstrated the love we should have for our neighbors. He followed Jesus’ command to “Go and do likewise.” Helping others may mean more than calling 911. We may need to get involved, get our hands dirty, and go the extra mile.

Why don’t we become more involved in helping others? One explanation could be that we have become so smug and settled in our material luxury that we are blind to the opportunities to reach out to others. We forget about the thousands and thousands around the country and world who are starving in body and soul. Like the priest and the rabbi who passed by the injured person, we possess the attitude that what is mine is mine and I’m going to keep it.

God will get our attention in many different ways. One day someone observed a wonderful lesson from the little birds hopping around in search of bits of food. Some snowbirds were busy picking up the crumbs that had been thrown out the window. One of the birds apparently had a stiff neck. Because of its injury, it could not stoop over to pick up the crumbs. But the other birds assisted by picking them up and dropping them into his open bill.

God has placed in each of us a heart that can be trained to be unselfish. Through the redeeming sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ who faithfully gave his own life, we can show love to others. The love of Jesus, strengthened in us by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament, flows through us so we can show love to people around us.



Prayer: *Lord, the story of the Good Samaritan gives us a wonderful example of how we can share the love that you have given to us. Help us to be ready and willing to come to the aid of those who need our support. Lord, remove our attitudes of indifference and grant us loving and giving hearts. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

Week Three



Grow as a Steward through Hope

Hope in God

Theme verse: *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”* Romans 15:4

Do you have a roof over your head? What about money set aside for retirement? Surely you carry house and vehicle insurance. And probably long-term-care insurance as well. Now, is your heart at ease? You’ve taken care of everything, right?

It certainly is wise to plan ahead, especially so that we will not be burdens to others, but listen to the words of Paul as recorded in 1 Timothy 6:17: *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”*

In this Scripture, Paul reminds us that worldly wealth is still uncertain. He boldly states that, if we’re trusting in worldly wealth, we are acting arrogantly. The only thing that is certain is God’s love for us. He loves us and enables us to make our livings. He loves us so much that he “richly provides us with everything” – and here’s the surprising part – “for our enjoyment”!

How do you plan to “enjoy” God’s rich blessings to you? Take a cruise around the world? Buy a new luxury car every year? What really brings you enjoyment? God has blessed us, not so that we can enjoy his gifts by hoarding them, but so that his purposes in the world can be fulfilled. In verse 18, Paul tells us how to enjoy the gifts God gives us: *“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”*

When our hope is in God, we have no need to amass worldly wealth. When our hope is in God, we trust him to provide for us all that we need and even more so that we’ll always have something to share. In 2 Corinthians 9:10-11, Paul makes this point with these words: *“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”* God has called us to be his stewards. He also enables us to carry out his will. And there’s another bonus! Not only will we receive enjoyment from sharing God’s gifts, *“In this way [we] will lay up treasure for [our]selves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that [we] may take hold of the life that is truly life”* (1 Timothy 6:19). Put your hope in God.



Prayer: *Lord, there are many things in this world that we can attach our hearts to and place our security in. Grant us discerning hearts that help us understand that our only security is found in you. Help us to faithfully read your Word which will encourage us to place our hope and trust in you. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

God's Grip Gives Us Hope

Theme verse: *“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’.”* Hebrews 13:5

Isn't it amazing that birds go to sleep on their perches and never fall off? This is because God has created them so that, when their legs are bent, the claws contract and grip like a steel trap. The claws will not let go until the knees are unbent. The bended knee enables the bird to hold tightly to its perch.

As strong as this grip is, it is not as strong as the hold God has on us. Think about Daniel, a young man in a pagan environment. With all the temptations and threats around him, he was safe because of God's everlasting grip. On his bended knees before his open window, he prayed every day – three times a day – giving thanks for God's protection, and God didn't let go of him, even in the den of lions (Daniel 6:10-22).

We might also consider Joseph who, through all the twists and turns of his lifetime, found one constant: “The Lord was with him” (Genesis 39:3, 21, 23). Taken away from his family at a young age, immersed in an idolatrous culture, tempted by Pharaoh's wife, he was safe in God's everlasting grip.

Like both Daniel and Joseph, we live in a sinful world. We may not be facing false accusations and a den of lions, but we too face temptations and threats. We too earnestly pray for God's protection and safekeeping of our souls, and his Word assures us that we can rest secure and have hope in his everlasting grip. May God grant us the faith to put our hope in God who promises to keep his grip on us always.



Prayer: *Lord, you are so gracious to me. You gave your Son to die for my sins, and you give your Spirit, who, through Word and Sacrament, convicts me of sin, builds faith in me, and keeps me close to you. Thank you for your everlasting grip on me, even when I let go of you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

The False Hope of Wealth

Theme verse: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul.” Matthew 16:26

In Luke 19 we read the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who was a wealthy man. Zacchaeus, knowing that Jesus was passing by, climbed the sycamore-fig tree in order to see him. When Jesus reached the spot where Zacchaeus was, he said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Out of joy and gratitude, Zacchaeus told Jesus that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and if he had cheated anyone he would give back four times the amount. Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”

Zacchaeus was more than willing to give, he was eager to give. Having come to a knowledge of who God is, he was excited about giving his earthly possessions for the glory of God.

Contrast Zacchaeus’ reaction to that of the Rich Young Ruler (Luke 18:18-30) who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him he must keep the commandments. Because Jesus knew the Rich Young Ruler’s god was his riches, he added, “*Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me*” (Luke 18:22). Unfortunately the Rich Young Ruler placed his love and security in his riches so he went away sadly.

Jesus did not demand that everyone become poor to be his disciple, but in this case he knew that the young man, although he had tried to be a model of virtue according to the Jewish law, was actually an idolater in violation of the first commandment. His god was his wealth.

Jesus correctly gauged Zacchaeus’ spiritual condition by his willingness to part with his money, and he also saw the hardness of the heart of the Rich Young Ruler who was unwilling to part with his money.

Often money is a barrier to our spiritual growth. Money can possess us. Jesus said again and again that there is no security in wealth. Our society identifies possessions with happiness and an adequate income with security. Do we possess our money or does our money possess us? Does our behavior suggest that we, like the young man, are idolaters of money? Do we place our hope in money? If we hold onto our earthly treasures with a tight grip, we need to question where our hearts are. If we look at our pocketbooks we will see where we have our priorities. Our giving is a true indication of our commitment to the Lord.

May God grant us all faithful and discerning hearts so that we will place our hearts and our hope in God alone.



Prayer: *Lord, we thank you for the opportunity that we have to work and earn an income. Grant us wisdom to be good managers of the money that you entrust to us. Help us develop a proper attitude toward it so that it doesn't become overly important and help us to see that money is a tool to help extend your kingdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Conveying Our Final Messages of Hope

Theme verse: *“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”* John 14:2

Most people want to put off thinking about and preparing for the time when the Lord will take them to his eternal home. We need to be prepared though, because only God knows each person’s timetable. Whether we are given short or long lives, we can take a final opportunity, through a will or trust, to share a message of our love for and hope in Christ for life eternal and a gift to continue our faithful stewardship. Our last will and testament can provide an encouragement to our families and friends to grow in their faith. Through a Christian Preamble, which is the way we can begin a will or trust, we can take a last opportunity to witness to our loved ones.

If our will or trust gives a final testimony of our trust in the Lord, it will be a real source of encouragement to those we leave behind. It will comfort our families and friends to know that we believed and trusted in the promise that Jesus gave in John 11:25-26, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die . . .”* If a Christian preamble is in a will, our message will go beyond our families and friends, because a will is filed in probate court which is public record.

A will or trust is also a wonderful time to put our love for the Lord into action with a gift for the Lord’s work through our churches. For many Christians, this may be the biggest gift they make. Bequests in our wills express the message of Christ’s importance to us. A gift for the Lord’s work acknowledges God’s ownership of our lives and things and that we are simply returning them to God who provided them for our use. As J. Gregory Pope said, *“Planning an enduring gift that supports and perpetuates the Gospel message is a significant—sometimes final—witness of a faithful and maturing disciple in response to the grace of a loving God.”*

May God grant us all an abundant measure of his grace so our final messages will bring glory to him.



Prayer: *Lord, you are the source of all good things. Out of love, you have given us life and blessings to sustain life. Because of sin, our life on earth will end. Help us to prepare for our deaths by sharing our hope and faith in you through our Christian estate plans. Grant us generous and giving hearts so we can continue our faithful stewardship at death with our accumulated assets. In your precious name we pray. Amen.*

Giving Expresses Our Hope in and Our Gratitude for Jesus.

Theme verse: *“For what I received I passed on to you . . . Christ died for our sins . . . was buried . . . raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . .”* 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

An old legend tells of a man visiting Africa who was amazed to find boys playing marbles with diamonds. The boys, however, found nothing unusual in this; this was the only kind of stones they knew.

There is a danger that the familiar can lose its value. What wonderful truths we hear each Sunday from our pulpits! What gracious gifts we regularly receive through the Sacraments! What a treasure is the Word of God which we own and can read whenever we wish! What value do we place on these things of God? How long can God trust us as stewards of his Gospel if we treat it so lightly and neglect the opportunities to spread his Word?

In the New Testament, hardly any facet of the Christian life is discussed more often than that of giving. The Bible teaches that it is the obligation of all, the rich and the poor, to give regularly, proportionately, and in the name of and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that giving is an act of faith, of thanksgiving, and of gratitude for our God and for what he has done for us.

Let us pray, then, that we would once again comprehend the sacrifice that has won our eternal salvation. Let us tell others of the wonderful hope and love that can be found in Jesus. Let us place our gifts in the offering plates as though they were the nail-scarred hands of Jesus.



Prayer: *Our gracious heavenly Father, Giver of every good and perfect gift, forgive our indifference to your goodness and instill in us passion for your Word and a desire to use all you have given us to spread the Good News of eternal life in Jesus. Amen.*

We've Won!

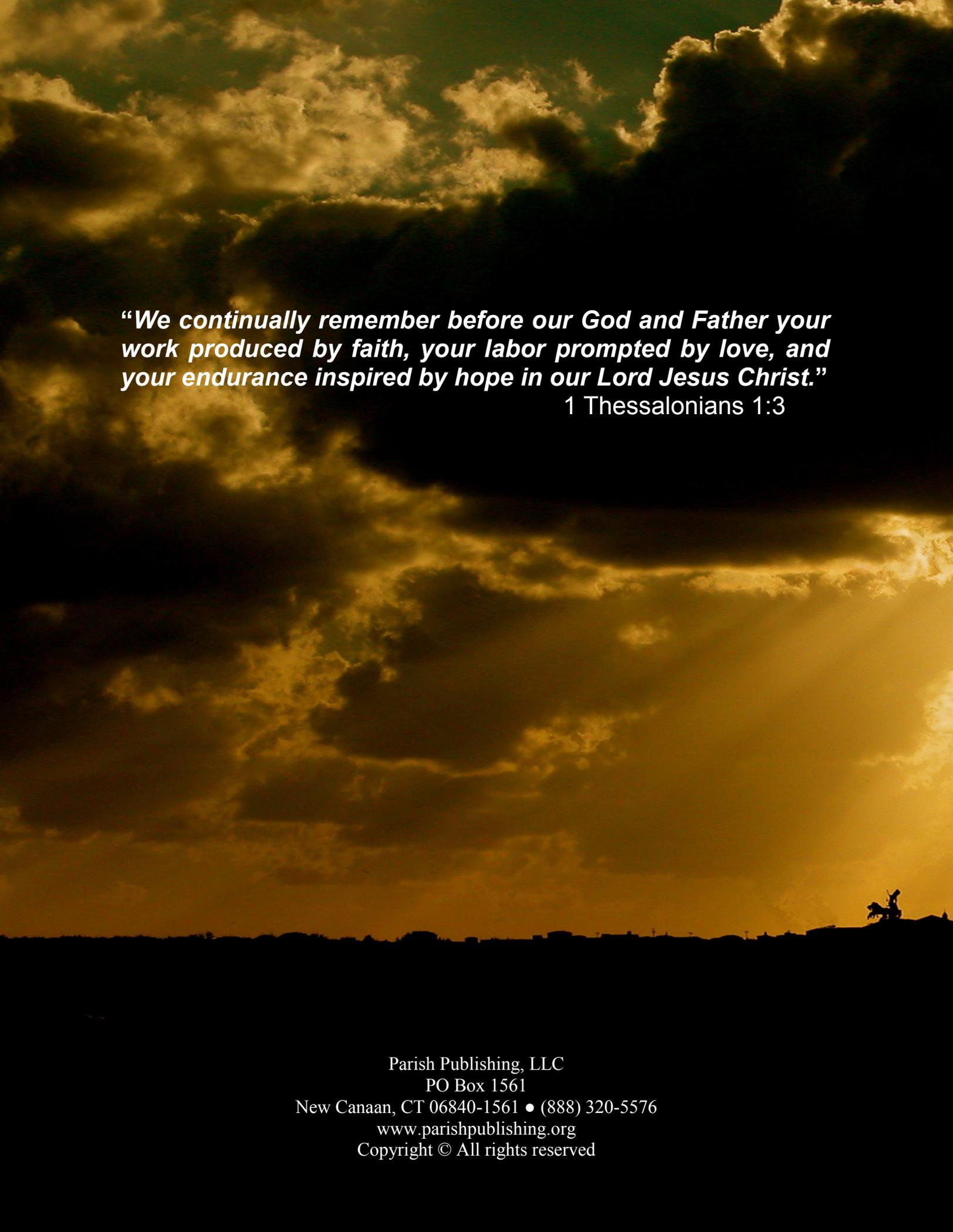
Theme verse: *“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed . . . the dead will be raised imperishable, and the mortal with immortality . . . The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

We've all been stung by death. Children die. People in peak physical condition die. Sickness or age or accident creeps up on us, and we all die. Sounds morbid, doesn't it? But death is a final and painful reality. When death comes to one we love, no matter the age of the person, we are stung. For some the sting remains, even though it may be eased by passing time. When death comes to a Christian, however, the sting of death is momentary. We who mourn do not mourn without hope, for we know that death is not the end.

The disciples who watched their Savior hang on the cross were stung by his death. They mourned without hope, for they didn't know his death was not permanent. That hopelessness turned to great joy, though, when Christ appeared to them alive! Because he rose from the dead, we too shall rise. Death could not triumph over Christ and it cannot triumph over us. Through Christ, we've won! Death is defeated. Eternal life begins at our Baptism and carries us into Heaven. Jesus comforted his disciples with these words of hope. *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”* (John 14:1-3). What a profound mystery this is! Our only response is to cry, “Thanks be to God!” The sting of death is removed because, in Christ, we've won!



Prayer: *Dear Lord, you have taken away the sting of death through your death and resurrection. You have given us new victorious lives to live in you each day. Keep us steadfast in faith until the end and use us to spread the Good News of victory in Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.*



“We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Thessalonians 1:3

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