



January 2010

Life in the Lord:
a Practical Help for Worship, Prayer, and Life!

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"Young Jew as Christ" by Rembrandt.

When you write your Christmas letter twelve months from now, what will it say? We may ask, "*What does the year ahead have in store for us?*" But "the year ahead" does not exist yet – how can "a year," which is an inanimate object, have anything for us – good or bad. A better question is, "*What does **the Lord** have for me this year?*" The Lord certainly exists; the year ahead is in His hands. He may have many exciting opportunities and great challenges for us in the days, weeks, and months to come ...

We can also ask, "*What do I intend to make of this year?*" We have a lot of say about what happens in the months to come, too. Every moment of every day we will make choices that will shape how the year will unfold for ourselves and those around us. Some decisions will be big ones: to change jobs or homes. Some will be smaller: vacations? New volunteer activities? Some will be minor: what do I wear today? Some will probably not matter a lot (like what is for supper tonight?); others will make a huge difference for yourself and for others: to give to support a ministry, to volunteer with youth, to move, to marry, to have a baby ...

How can we make good, godly decisions? Proverbs helped us think this through last fall. This winter we'll think about this question some more, too, as we think about the Ten Commandments – great words of wisdom, life, and guidance from the Lord.

Our prayers are from Peter Marshall, Scottish Presbyterian minister, who became Chaplain to the U.S. Senate (*The Prayers of Peter Marshall*, edited by Catharine Marshall). The cover painting is by Rembrandt.

Monday, January 4: Exodus 19

Some people struggle to know God: He is so holy, awesome, powerful, and "other" that they think they cannot possibly "know" Him. Other people see God simply as a buddy whose advice they might take (if it fits with their own plans) and who gives them nice fuzzy feelings through music or spiritual "experiences."

Exodus 19 reminds us that God is holy, awesome, and powerful. We dare not make His wisdom "optional" to our lives. Obeying Him is a matter of life or death! But at the same time, God comes near us; He wants to know us and be known by us. The two realities of God's closeness to us and distance from us are held in tension (theologians refer to this as God's 'immanence' and His 'transcendence').

As we have just celebrated Christmas, we have been reminded that God does love us so much that He came amongst us! Now He is within us as Holy Spirit. That's about as immanent as God can get! At the same time, there has been a sense of awe and holiness to Christmas – angelic hosts, magi from Parthia, immaculate conception ... God is also transcendent, very much in control of the universe and everything in it.

As we begin a new year, let's remember the holiness, majesty, and awesome sovereignty of God ... and His personal love for each one of us ...

My Father, sometimes you seem so far away, as if you are hiding, as if you are determined to elude all who seek you.

Yet I know you are far more willing to be found than I am to seek.

You have promised, "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall surely find me."

And you have assured me that you are with me always.

Help me now to be aware of your nearness as I am of the material things of every day.

Help me to recognize your voice with as much assurance as I recognize the sounds of the world around me.

Help me find you now in the privacy of my heart, in the quiet of this moment. I would know, my Father, that you are near me and beside me; that you love me and are interested in all I do, you are concerned about all my affairs.

May I become aware of your companionship, as he who walks beside me. At times when I feel forsaken, may I know the presence of the Holy Spirit who brings comfort to everyone when we are willing to surrender ourselves to you.

May I be convinced that even before I reach up to you, you are reaching down to me. These blessings, together with the unexpressed longings in my heart, I ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen

Tuesday, January 5: Deuteronomy 4:1-14

This winter we will be looking at some of God's commandments. When we think of God's commands – like

the Ten Commandments, for example – we can have the attitude: *"Following God takes all the fun out of life! I don't want to have to follow God's commands!"* In fact, God's commands are intended to give life! *"Follow my commands so you may live ..."* God says (4:1)

God's commands

- are NOT tests to see if we can achieve a standard of perfection;
- are NOT killjoys intended to take all the fun out of life;
- are NOT unnecessary restrictions to make us miserable.

God's commands

- ARE boundaries that help us keep ourselves, other people, and our community safe for all;
- ARE directions for how to live life fully, joyfully, completely, and well (like Proverbs);
- ARE wisdom: God knows how we work best, how creation works best, and how community works best; if we follow His wisdom, life goes well – for us, our family, neighbourhood, and world.

Through His commands, God is giving us the "Owner's Manual" to full and godly lives, to healthy and inclusive neighbourhoods, to a safe and sustainable world. Why wouldn't we listen to the Maker's wisdom? After all, the Maker knows best. Why do I find God's commands hard to follow?

As a pilgrim, conscious of life's varying scenes, may I learn by faith, my Father, to cling to you.

I know that you will be in the future as you have been in the past.

I know that you will lead me on through all the tomorrows as you have led me through the yesterdays.

I know that you will not let me go, even when I, in willful neglect and indulgence, try to wander from your way.

As I set my face toward the New Year, I know full well that it will bring many changes.

The old must give way to the new.

Time does not stand still, nor the world cease from its turning. Please give me the courage and fortitude that will enable me to stand upon my faith as the Spirit of the living Lord gives me strength. In your strong name I pray. Amen

Wednesday, January 6: Deuteronomy 6

The "Statement of Faith" or "Creed" of Israel was this: *"Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength"* (6:4-5). Notice that it is a statement of theology, belief and conviction: there is only one true God, the God who reveals Himself to us through Scripture. But it is also a statement of action: I need to personally respond to this God in how I live. Intellectual belief is not enough; I am called into a loving relationship with God.

God is clearly showing us the importance of hearing, knowing, and living God's commands. It is one thing to *hear* God's word. It is another thing to *know* God's Word. It is one step further to actually commit and discipline yourself to *live* God's Word. *"I may 'know' something,"* writes Linda Cannell, *"but what is more important is that I have 'learned' something"*... learning means that it actually changes how I live.

Cannell asks, *"Is biblical literacy knowing facts about the Bible? Is it enough just to know the major themes and concepts of Scripture? Is it adequate to know in general story form, the most popular stories in Scripture? What will help persons fashion a suitable frame of reference for biblical understanding and practice of the Christian faith?"* Her answer is found in Deuteronomy 6: there's a step beyond hearing, knowing, and living God's commands: we are all called to pass on the faith as well, to teach God's Word.

We teach as much by our behaviour as we do formally teaching our beliefs. Our actions speak at least as loudly as our words. So our challenge is to put our faith into practice in such a way that people see our convictions in our conversations and our doctrine in our decisions. And we also need to explain why we do the things we do. God calls us to live in radical consistency with His word. Why do I find that so difficult? In what ways do I consistently fall short?

Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, *"Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words."* As we seek to share Jesus' love with our family, friends, colleagues and neighbours, this is wise counsel.

I can – I need – to pray for God’s help. I also need to discipline myself to living faithfully. How will I cultivate self-control and discipline to do what is right? How can I pass on the faith – in deed and word?

*Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for the things I have done that make me feel uncomfortable in your presence.
The fine front that I polished so carefully for others to see, does not deceive you.
For you know every thought that has left its shadow in my memory.
You have marked every motive that curdled something sweet within me.
I acknowledge, with sorrow and true repentance, that I have desired that which I should not have;
I have toyed with what I knew was not for me; I've been preoccupied with the self interest;
I have invited unclean thoughts into my mind and entertained them as honoured guests;
my eyes have often been deaf to your whisper; my eyes have often been blind to the signs of your guidance.
Make me willing to be changed, even though it requires surgery of the soul, and the therapy of discipline.
Make my heart warm and soft, that I may receive an except now the blessing of your forgiveness,
the benediction of your “Go in peace – and sin no more.” In Jesus’ name. Amen*

Thursday, January 7: Matthew 5:17-20

What is Jesus’ attitude toward the Old Testament commands?

We may dismiss them out of hand ... after all we are under God’s grace, right? Right! Absolutely we are saved by God’s grace; we are not saved by keeping the law. However, as people saved by God’s grace, we are called to live as God’s people. We live the principles of the commandments – not to earn our salvation – but because it’s the wise way to live. Life simply goes better when we live by God’s wisdom. We as;sp ;ive by God’s copmmands because we love and trust our lovingly Heavenly Father!

Jesus is not telling us that we have to keep the commandments in order to to earn our salvation or be good enough for God. He is saying that the basic principles by which God created the universe, us, and human society are still valid: if we want to live full and satisfying lives, in good relationships with God and our neighbours, we will still live by these commands. They simply work. And obeying God’s commands is also one key way we express our love for God. We follow His wisdom to honour Him.

Jesus’ differentiates between “the letter of the law” and the “spirit of the law.” If we live the “spirit of law” – loving God and loving our neighbour, we will inevitably live out the “letter of the law.” But if we just follow the law out of a hollow sense of duty it will be empty and lifeless. The “spirit of the law” is that “*I love the LORD my God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my strength,*” and that, “*I love my neighbour as myself.*” Is that the attitude I bring to every relationship and every situation? How can I live like this, today?

*I dare to pray that something will happen to me in your presence. Lord, I know I need to be changed!
For the visions that once swept across the leaden skies of monotony, like white winged calls, have dimmed and faded,
and I need to see them again. Open my eyes!
Shame fills my heart as I remember the aspirations I've breathed before you, the vows I made, the resolves that were born,
the seedlings of consecration that were planted in my heart.
I blush to remember the withering blight that touched them all – my failures, my shortcomings.
Lord, I confess before you that: I have had longings and nudges from you which I did not translate into action;
I have made decisions without consulting you, and blamed you when things went wrong.
I have said that I trusted you, yet have not turned my affairs over to you.
I have been greedy for present delights and pleasures, unwilling to wait for those joys which time and discipline alone can give.
I've often sought the easy way, have consistently drawn back from the road that is hard.
I have been fond of giving myself to dreams of what I'm going to do some time, it have been slow in getting started to do them.
Forgive me for all the intentions that were born and somehow never lived.
These, Lord Jesus, are sins, grievous in your sight,
Grievous in mine! And now I claim your promise to change me.
Please do for me what I cannot do for myself.
Lead me into a new tomorrow with a new spirit.
Cleanse my heart, create within me new attitudes and new ideas, as only you can create them.
For these good gifts I thank you Lord. Amen.*

Friday, January 8: Galatians 2:11-21

The first Christians wrestled with their relationship to the Old Testament law. Paul catches Peter being a hypocrite. Peter had felt free, as a Christian, to eat with anyone (quite rightly laying aside a petty Jewish law that said you could only eat with other Jews). But when some very Jewish Christians arrived, Peter became exclusive again. Paul challenges Peter for his hypocrisy. And Paul emphasizes that we are saved by Jesus' death on the cross – not by observing the Old Testament law: *"The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"* (2:20-21)

Do you know people who are still living "under the law"? Their faith is all rules and regulations: they have little joy, sense of freedom, or genuine relationship with Jesus? Pray for them. Encourage them to really meet Jesus. We are free from those picayune restrictions the Jewish rabbis foisted on people.

At the same time, Paul does not advocate a wild amoral lifestyle! In fact he stresses the opposite! *"Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."* (Galatians 5:16-25)

When we walk in step with the Spirit, we will walk consistently with the moral and ethical principles in passages like the Ten Commandments. They help us understand some of the temptations of our sinful natures and help us establish boundaries of right living – with God and with other people.

Do you feel like you are in step with the Spirit? Read the fruit of the Spirit, above: are you growing in these virtues? How do you need to continue to grow?

O Lord, I pause to look back on the long way you have brought me, on the long days in which I have been served, not according to what I deserved, but by your loving mercy. Let me meditate upon the dark nights you which have come, the sinister things from which I have been delivered – and have a grateful heart.

Let me meditate upon my sins forgiven, for my shame unpublished – and have a grateful heart.

I thank you, O Lord, that, in your mercy, so many things I feared never came to pass. Fill my heart with thankful praise.

Help me to repay in service to others the debt of your unmerited benefits and mercies. May the memories of sorrows that disciplined my spirit keep me humble and made me grateful that my God is no celestial Santa Claus, but a divine Savior.

In his name I offer this sacrifice of praise. Amen.

Saturday, January 9: Deuteronomy 5:1-7 (Sunday's text)

Why should we listen to God? Why should we take His wisdom seriously? Because He is the One who created the universe and everything in it! He is the One who saved His people from slavery in Egypt. He is the One who has saved us from our sinfulness through Jesus. He is the One who loves us unconditionally.

God gives us His commands because He loves us ... not to make us miserable!

Because He has set us free from the bondage of sin, He wants us to stay free ... and not to regress back into behaviours that enslave us, leave us feeling guilty, and haunt our memories. The truth is that we can become enslaved by work (it becomes our central purpose for living), leisure (we can be obsessed with getting the little white ball in hole on the green or by the latest Xbox game to the point that this is the only thing that gives us joy in life), addictions (gambling, alcohol, etc). We need to look at our lives critically –

am I enslaved by something? What do I look forward to most? What gives me joy? What is my purpose for living? What shapes the important decisions of my life? How do I feel about the answers I'm hearing?

We should love God – and God alone – first and foremost in our lives, because of His amazing love for us. Why would allow anything or anyone else be first in our lives?

Our Father, grant that in the days of this new year I may feel your love, a love that surrounds me, a love that will not let me go but will ever bring me back – back to your side, back to your will, back to your way. That is the way in which I would walk. O Lord, though all of us like sheep have gone astray, like sheep, we are tired – tired of missing your path and stumbling along paths of our own choosing. Like a sheep, I want to return to your fold. I would come back to you, confessing that I'm not proud the mistakes I've made, not too proud of my record as I look back over last year. I am conscious not of my successes, but of my failures. I am in no boastful mood, O Lord, as I look into a new year. I ask for your forgiveness for my stupidity and my obstinacy, for the blindness of my heart, for the wrong choices that grieved you and subtracted from my own happiness. Humble and grateful, I open my heart to receive the great miracle of your grace. I thank you for the fresh, strong wind of your Spirit which comes to bring refreshment, cleansing, and perfect peace. Amen.

Sunday, January 9: Psalm 86

"Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (86:11). This psalm is a wonderful prayer for God's Spirit to fill us, guide us, and help us walk in step with the Lord.

*Hear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am devoted to you.
You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you.
Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.
Hear my prayer, O LORD; listen to my cry for mercy.
In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me.
Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.
All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.
For you are great and do marvellous deeds; you alone are God.
Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.
I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths of the grave.
The arrogant are attacking me, O God; a band of ruthless men seeks my life – men without regard for you.
But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.
Turn to me and have mercy on me; grant your strength to your servant and save the son of your maidservant.
Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame,
for you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me. Amen.*

Monday, January 11: Mark 12:28-34

The first of these commandments, *"You shall have no other gods before (or besides) me,"* emphasizes that there is only one God. In those days, the surrounding cultures almost all believed in multiple deities – the Egyptians, Canaanites and others all had pantheons of gods. These cultures believed their various gods controlled the weather, crops, having children, success in war, etc., etc. So they prayed, sacrificed, and devoted themselves to these gods.

"Whatever our heart is obsessed with, that is our God ..." writes John Maxwell. What is your heart obsessed with?

Philip Yancey muses, *"What modern idols (or gods) make God seem ... trivial? What tends to reduce the surprise, the passion, the vitality of my relationship with God? Most days I am not so conscious of choosing*

between a god and God; the alternatives do not present themselves so clearly. Rather, I find God edged out by a series of small distractions. A car that needs repair, last minute plans for an upcoming trip, a leaky gutter, a friend's wedding – these distractions, mere trivialities, may lead to a form of forgetfulness that resembles idolatry (worshipping other gods) in its most dangerous form. The busyness of life, including all its religious busyness, can crowd out God. I confess that some days I meet people, work, make decisions, talk on the phone, all without giving God a single thought."

When Jesus is asked which command is most important, He goes right back to the creed of Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *"The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength'"* (Mark 12:29-30). The first command calls for a life dominated by a relationship with God ... a loving relationship, in which we make Him – His word, will, Kingdom – the joyful obsession of our hearts.

*Forgive me, O God, for my small concept of the heart of the Eternal, for the doubting suspicion with which I regard the heart, love, and wisdom of God. Give me more faith! I have so little faith ... or so I say.
Yet I have faith in people – in cheques and banks, in trains and airplanes, in cooks, and in strangers who drive me in cabs.
Forgive me this stupidity: I have faith in people, who I do not know,
and yet I am so reluctant to have faith in you who knows us all together.
I am always striving to find a complicated way through life when you have a plan, and I refuse to walk in it.
So many of my troubles I bring on myself. How silly I am ...
Please give me a faith that I can deposit in the bank of your love,
so that I may receive the dividends and interest you are so willing to give me.
I ask this all in the lovely name of Jesus Christ, my Saviour. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 12: John 14:1-14

Who is this God who demands to be first? He is the God who delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. He is also the God who showed His love to us, supremely in Jesus Christ! Our God is not some abstract philosophical idea. He is the God who has done things in the past. God became a human being in Jesus, so that each of us could know and understand God in a personal way. Jesus died on the cross for us, to save us from our unholiness and sinfulness, so that that perfect personal relationship between God and ourselves is possible. He is the one who rose from the dead! He is the God who lives in our lives in the present.

Sometimes in a multi-cultural, religiously pluralistic culture, we accept the line that *"All religions are true; it doesn't matter what you believe."* None of the great world religions teaches that! Islam doesn't! Hinduism doesn't! Certainly Judaism doesn't! Neither does Christianity! *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one come to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). This does not mean we are intolerant people! It doesn't mean we are bigoted or narrow-minded. It does mean we have conviction! It does mean we believe there is only one true God – this God who saved the Israelites, revealed Himself to us in Jesus, died on the cross, and rose from the dead! He is unique.

The other issue in this commandment is not so much one of intellectual belief, but one of practical loyalty. Philip Yancey writes, *"A friend of mine was stopped dead in her tracks by a skeptic. After listening to her explain her faith, he said this: 'But you don't act like you believe God is alive."* Do you act like God is alive?

Does the fact that you believe Jesus is God and God is real – the one, true God – make a practical difference in your life? *"This commandment,"* writes John Maxwell, *"calls for a life dominated by a relationship with God ... God must control every area of our lives. He must dominate our checkbook and fill our calendar."*

In practice, is God your god? With what is your heart obsessed? What controls and influences the decisions you make in your life? Is it God? Or something else? The "other things" may be very good ... concern about a secure retirement ... concern about our family ... concern about our career ... concern about our health ... But we can be so concerned about the "good" things we forget the "best" thing of all – a personal relationship with the God who loves us!

*I do need you, Lord. I need you now. I know that I can do without many of the things that I once thought were necessities.
 But without you I cannot live, and I dare not die.
 I needed you when sorrow came, when shadows were thrown across the threshold of my life, and you did not fail me then.
 I needed you when sickness lay a clammy hand upon my family, and I cried you, and you heard.
 I needed you when perplexity brought me to a parting of the ways, and I didn't know how to turn.
 You did not fail me then, but in many ways, big and little, you showed me a better way.
 And though the sun is shining around me today, I know that I need you even in the sunshine,
 and I shall still need you tomorrow. I give you my thanks for that constant sense of need that keeps me close to your side.
 Help me to keep my hand in yours and my ears open to the wisdom of your voice. Speak to me, that I may hear you
 giving me courage for hard times and strength for difficult places; giving me determination for challenging tasks.
 I do not ask for an easy way, but just your grace that is sufficient for every need, so that no matter how hard the way,
 how challenging the hour, how dark the sky, I may be enabled to overcome.
 In your strength, who has overcome the world, I make this prayer. Amen.*

Wednesday, January 13: John 14:15-29

"If you love me," says Jesus, "you will _____" (John 14:15). You will what?

"Obey what I command!" To make sure we get the point, Jesus says again, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me." (14:21). And again, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching ... He who does not love me will not obey my teaching" (14:23-24). Do we get the point???

Love is not really an emotion – although it can be influenced by and can result in very strong emotions! Love is really a choice. Although I may "fall in love" with someone emotionally, I have to choose to follow through on that with actions that honour that love by how I live – I do loving things. And as I do loving things, my love moves from being just an emotion to being a lifestyle by which I seek to honour, please, and bless the person I love. For instance, I (emotionally) love my wife and kids very much. But I also choose to try to show my love every day by expressing love through my words, actions, and choices. To just say, "I love my wife" but either to never show that to her or to be too busy to give her any time – or, even worse, to say unkind or hurtful things – means my talk about love doesn't mean much!

If I love God, I don't rely on an emotional feeling either. If I say "I love God" but never show that, am too busy to give Him a thought or any time – or, even worse, blame Him for my problems or use His name in vain – my talk about love doesn't mean much. Love for God – like love for a person – is expressed through my words, actions, and choices. My love for God needs to move from being just an emotion to being a lifestyle by which I seek to honour, please, and bless God. That is a choice I have to make every day. Every moment of every day. Every situation in every day.

The good news is that I am not alone in this! Jesus promises His personal presence – the Holy Spirit – to be my "wonderful counsellor." Jesus tells us **three** times: "If you love me you will obey what I command." He says **four** times:

- "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter/Encourager/Counselor/Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth." (14:16-17)
- "When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." (14:20)
- "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them." (14:23)
- "When the Father sends the Comforter/Encourager/Counselor/Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit – He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." (14:26-27)

The Spirit guides me as I read Scripture, pray, talk with wise Christian friends, and seeks His guidance. Lord, help me make wise choices that honour you, today ...

*Father, I'm beginning to know how much I miss when I fail to talk to you in prayer,
and through prayer to receive into my life the strength and guidance which only you can give.
Forgive me for the pride and the presumption that make me continue to struggle to manage my own affairs
to the exhaustion of my body, the weariness of my mind, the trial of my faith.
In a moment like this I know that you could have worked your good in me with so little strain, with so little effort.
And then to you would have been given the praise and glory. When I neglect to pray, mine is the loss. Forgive me, Lord.
Let not, I pray, any future forgetfulness of mine, or a false sense of self-sufficiency, any spiritual laziness,
or doubt of your faithfulness keep me from taking everything to you in prayer.
I thank you that the fresh breath of heaven is blowing away the close, damp air of all my failure, of every doubt and fear.
I ask you for that soul tonic of prayer that shall reburnish my faith, brighten my hope, revive and rekindle my love.
In your name, I pray. Amen.*

Thursday, January 14: Deuteronomy 5:6-10 and 1 John 1

"I am a jealous God," says the Lord. Does that sound odd to you? Think of it this way ... In a typical wedding I ask the bride and groom questions like this: "Will you have this woman/man to be your wedded wife/husband, to live together according to God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honour and keep her/him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep only unto her/him, so long as you both shall live?" The answer is "I will!" Then the couple give their vows: "I take you to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give you my troth (or solemn promise)."

People go into marriage with the promise and assumption of permanence and loyalty to their spouse. And they expect permanence and loyalty in return! In the context of the covenant of marriage, it is a perfectly proper to be concerned about unfaithfulness or concern about being replaced by a rival: a bride says to her partner, *"Place me like a seal over your heart, or like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, and its jealousy is as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love; neither can rivers drown it"* (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

Being "jealous" in this context is not envy; it is "a passionate concern for loyalty and faithfulness"! What would we think of a wife who was not concerned about whether or not her husband is faithful to her? What would we think of a husband who is not jealous of his wife's love and who would not burn with jealousy if she sought the love of another man? What would think if God did not care about our faithfulness? What would think of a God who didn't care if we wandered off after other gods?

God says, *"I am a jealous God."* That is a good thing! This means God takes His promise of love for us so seriously, He does not want us wandering off after other anyone or anything less than Himself! In the first commandment He says, *"Have no other gods before me."* In the second commandment, He says, *"Ok, you have no other Gods. Know this: I love you so much, and I want you to love only me! I will be jealous if you love anyone or anything but me!"* He knows that nothing else can satisfy us. He knows we will come to harm if we put someone or something else first in our lives.

At the end of this passage, God says, *"I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands."* (Deuteronomy 5:10). This is good news! God loves us so much!

The truth is that God has given His love to us completely – He loves us so much He gave us His one and only Son. Do I love Him, faithfully, in return? As I make choices do I ask myself, first, "What decision honours the Lord?" As I move through my day, do I pray to Him constantly, bringing all the issues of my life under His direction?

1 John 1 reminds me that I always fall short – I need to be honest about that. But God delights to forgive. Confess your struggles to God and know the joy of His forgiveness ... Come with confidence, knowing that your life – your past, present and future – is safe in His hands:

*Lord Jesus, as I look into the future, may no fear assail me.
 Help me to be as confident that you will be with me in the future as I know you have been in the past.
 I know that my Christianity is no insurance policy against trouble, rather the guarantee that you'll be with me in the trouble.
 That should give me a strong heart and confident faith.
 For so long as you're beside me, loving me, helping me, what have I to fear?
 Bless me this day as I try to live as a Christian.
 Where I am inclined to be satisfied with myself as I am, make me willing to be changed.
 Give me a more sincere kind of faith, a stronger faith, a more live-able faith, not a religion that only smacks
 of Sunday, but the kind of faith that can be used on Monday and will not have evaporated by Saturday.
 Hear me as I pray, standing on the threshold of time. You alone can equip me for the tasks and duties that are mine.
 May I may do my very best. In your strong name I pray. Amen.*

Friday, January 15: Deuteronomy 5:8-10 (Sunday's text) and 1 John 2:1-17

God says, "You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind, or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea ..." On the surface, this looks like God saying, "Don't make a statue of a bird, or cow, or fish and worship it!" Some cultures used to do that. As a result, at some points in history, people have used this command to prohibit religious art. Many Protestants have been negative toward any form of religious art (except for a few paintings of Jesus). There is some merit in this. Sometimes people do venerated statues of saints, special medallions, or other talismans as "good luck charms."

But this commandment is not really about art – statues, paintings or anything else! God is a creative, artistic genius Himself! Look at the world around us! God's art gallery (creation) can help us appreciate and worship Him. In the Old Testament, God commands His people to make beautiful art work for worship.

This is a command about our hearts. Idolatry is about an exchange that we can make in our hearts. It happens when we exchange something – anything – that isn't God to replace God Himself. It happens when we allow God to be pushed out of the centre of our lives and allow something else to be the most important factor in shaping our lives. We can put all sorts of things in God's place ...

- Our career can become what dominates every choice we make;
- Money, our portfolio, or our retirement income can shape every decision;
- What others think of us – our dress, haircut, fitness, accessories – may be most important;
- Hockey, golf, bridge, poker, curling, vacationing can be number one ...

This command speaks about the condition of our heart before God. Is He first in my heart? Or have I allowed something else to be number one? What is influencing the big decisions of life I am making today?

John writes, "Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever" (1 John 2:15-17). Lord, help me get my priorities straight!

O Lord Jesus, I remember that you have said: 'Do not lay out for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt.' Deliver me from falling in love with things. Help me rather to love people, to love principles, to love righteousness, to love you.

You have commanded me to 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,' and then you promise that if my heart and mind and soul and will are thus dedicated, I should receive as dividends at the very things I seek – and abundant ministry to all my needs. Oh God, help me to believe this.

Help me to practice it, that I may find for myself that the promise is true, that all my needs shall be met.

You have invited me 'to ask, to seek, to knock' – assuring me that if I ask, it shall be given to me; if I seek, I shall find; if I knock, it shall be opened to me. Help me to believe that, O God. Give me the faith to ask, knowing that I shall receive.

Give me the faith to seek, believing that I shall surely find.

Give me the faith and persistence to knock, knowing that it shall be indeed opened to me.

Help me to live the Christian life in daring faith and humble trust, that there may be worked out in me, even in me, your righteousness and goodness. With a sense of adventure, I make this prayer. Amen.

Saturday, January 16: 1 John 2:28-3:24

A man works in an office tower downtown. Once in a while he sees a woman getting on or off the elevator. Sometimes he sees her in the coffee shop around the corner. Week after week, month after month he notices her. He may have caught her name. But he never speaks to her. He never spends time with her. He imagines all sorts of things about her. In his heart he begins to think he loves her! Certainly he'd be jealous if he saw her with another man. If anyone were to say anything bad about her, he would be indignant. He creates an "image" of who he thinks she is. But it is only an image. It's not really her. If he were to actually speak with her, what might happen? He may discover she is far less glamorous than he supposes. Or, he may discover she is far more amazing than he ever could have dreamed! How his life could change, if he'd only made the effort to know her ...

That's what we often do with God! We have a "picture in our minds" of who we think God is – it's probably not a statue carved out of wood or metal. That's not the point! The point is we have an "image" of God in our minds. And we settle for that. We watch Him from a safe distance. We have a vague emotional attachment to Him. We say we believe ...

But do we really know Him? Do we spend time getting to know God Himself, personally? Do we spend time praying with Him? Do we spend time reading His word? Do we hunger and thirst to learn more about Him? Do we want to have a passionate, personal relationship with Him? Do we want to live in a way that pleases Him? Do we get annoyed at all those small distractions that crowd out God?

Philip Yancey writes, *"I confess that some days I meet people, work, make decisions, talk on the phone, all without giving God a single thought."* Does it upset me when I cannot find time to spend with the one I love? It should! If it doesn't, we may have fallen into the most insidious form of idolatry – believing in a God who is out there somewhere – who doesn't seem to care if we love Him or not – who is "safe" – but who is also powerless. Possibly we see inklings of Him on Sunday mornings at church – that makes us feel good. We're pleased when we hear other people talking about the difference God makes in their lives. We're offended when we hear a televangelist's pleas for money or moral failure, or when someone misuses God's name. But that's it. God is distant. He is a belief, but not an experience. He is an idol.

John reminds us of Jesus' amazing love for us – He gave us His Son; He calls us His dear children! We are called to a personal relationship with our loving Father. The vision God gives us in the very beginning of Scripture – His perfect vision for what our lives should be like – is of Him walking in the Garden of Eden in a personal, perfect relationship with Adam and Eve. God's vision for us as His people is to walk, day-by-day, moment-by-moment with Him. It's about building a personal relationship with us that's exciting, real, dynamic, life-changing ... For instance, it changes how we treat other people.

Do you know Jesus in a personal way? Is He a real part of your life, right now? Pray that He would be your constant companion, your ever-present guide, and your teacher in every circumstance of life.

Forgive me that as I have grown, my faith has been blighted with doubts, withered with worry, tainted with sophistication.

*I pray, Lord, that you would make me like a child again in faith – not childish, but childlike
in the simplicity of the faith that is willing to trust you, even though I cannot see what tomorrow will bring.
Please give me that childlike faith, that simplicity of mind which is willing to lay aside all egotism and conceit,
which recognizes vanity for what it is
– an empty show which shows I am incapable of thinking the thoughts of God, which is willing to be humble again.
Then may I feel once more as the child who whispers his love to you,
tracing with chubby little fingers the pictures of Jesus in a picture book –
those pictures that portray you, Lord Jesus, with a hurt lamb in your arms or a child on your knee.
Help me, even now, to feel again like that, that I may be as loving, as trusting, as innocent, as grateful, as affectionate.
And as I am willing to kneel again as a child, may I discover the glory you have revealed again,
and find the wonder of it gripping my heart and preparing me for your peace.
So shall I, along with the children, enter into the kingdom of God, and know it, and feel it, and rejoice in it.
In your name, who dared to come to earth as a little child, I pray. Amen.*

Sunday, January 17: 1 John 4:7-21

Do you remember how you were changed when you fell in love for the first time (even if it was only a crush)? He/she occupied your thoughts. What did you do? You changed! You started hanging around where that person was. You suddenly developed an interest in the things that he/she was interested in. You wanted to be around that person all the time. You dreamed about him/her. You wanted to please her/him. You did all sorts of things to make that happen!

"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world ..." He came to be with us. He experienced what we experience. He spent time with us. In response, why wouldn't I want to really get to know God? Why wouldn't I want to spend time with Him? Why wouldn't I want to develop an interest in the things that God is interested in? Why wouldn't I want to please Him and do the sorts of things that honour Him?

When we accept Jesus as our Saviour, by faith, God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, becomes alive in us. *"God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us"* (1 John 4:13). That's God's promise. Imagine what kind of a change the love of God – the dynamic, Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered love of God – could make in your life!?

- **Pray** – ask God for a real, personal experience of His love. That may mean confessing sin in your life that is preventing that from happening. It will probably mean reordering your priorities.
- **Spend time** – read the Bible, eager to know more! Pray constantly, without ceasing.
- **Get excited!** – listen to music! Read books! Spend time with God's people. Think about all that God has done and is doing for you and in the world! Talk about that with other people – Christians and non-Christians.

God is a jealous God! He eagerly desires your love! Don't settle for anything less than the real thing! Discover the power of God in a life-changing way!

*I love You, God, with a love as strong as death, with a love that flashes like fire.
Many waters cannot quench that love; neither can rivers drown it ...
I take you to be my God, to have and to hold from this day forward,
for better or for worse,
for richer for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
even death will not tear us apart, but finally bring me into your perfect presence!
There to I give you my troth.
God, help me to love You in humility, in awe, in Spirit, and in truth!*

Monday, January 18: 1 John 5

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome ..." (5:1-3).

We are children of God! That is a mystery that deserves some deep pondering ... spend some time reflecting on that truth!

Reflect also on this: *"Now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life"* (5:20). We are invited into a personal relationship with God.

Wise children listen to their parents – when Mom says, *"Don't touch the red element on the stove,"* she is not giving me a heavy burden, she is saving me from pain! The commandments God gives us are not

unnecessary burdens created to make our lives difficult; they are blessings to keep us from pain!

God's commands are there to give us principles to live by – they are keys to life! True life – eternal life – life as it was meant to be lived – can be a reality **now** as we live by God's guidelines in our relationships. His commandments lead us into good relationships with the people and world around us.

"Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts"(5:21). That's wise counsel as we reflect on the second commandment.

What do I need to learn from this passage?

*Lord Jesus, you know the things that are trembling on my lips, stirring in my heart, and along the corridors of my soul, walking on tiptoe across the cloistered spaces of my consciousness, looking expectantly upward, making prayers without words, breathing aspirations that have only wings.
Hear me, I pray, as I call upon you for help, for strength, for peace; for grace, for reassurance, for companionship; for love, for pardon, for health, for salvation – for joy. Hear me, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 19: Deuteronomy 5:11 (Sunday's text)

This sounds simple enough, doesn't it? It simply means that when we swear or curse, we should simply not use His name(s): "God," "Jesus," "Lord," etc. Right?

Yes! It is good never to use our Lord's name(s) as a swear word! Of course, it is good not to use any swear word at all! Swearing is a symptom of deeper issues ...

- When I swear in a moment of crisis (like hitting my thumb with a hammer) it may mean there is an unhealthy level of anger or frustration already in my system. I am living on an emotional razor-edge. I need to deal with my emotions in a healthy way. Using cuss words is not the answer!
- If every 4th or 5th word I utter or think is a swear word, or such words are just normal parts of my vocabulary, I need to examine what's going on deeper inside. Am I angry? Resentful? Afraid? How is my relationship with the Lord? With other people? (Do I need to reread 1 John???)

But this command actually goes MUCH deeper than simply the words that happen to cross my lips. In Proverbs we read, *"My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a **good name** in the sight of God and man."* Your "name" speaks to your character. It refers to your reputation. It is a reflection of who you are.

This command reminds me of who God is, of His character. His "name" refers to who He is – the holy, powerful, loving God who saves me. Do I speak of the Lord in my conversations? If people know I name Jesus as my Lord, do I live like that? Are my actions consistent with my words?

*Father, I am tired, wearied with the strains that life imposes upon me, the pressures under which I'm forced to live.
You did not design me to live like this.
I thank you, my Father, for a moment like this, when I may forget the sounds that have beaten upon my eardrums with relentless monotony. I thank you for a moment in which I can no longer hear the chattering of typewriters [computer keys?], jingling of bells, jangling of money on counters, whining of cash registers, ringing of telephones, and noise of traffic.
And now, I forget all these – and think only of you.
Please make within my heart a quiet place.
I release to you my demand to see what the future holds.
I rest in you, content to know your love and care in this present hour.
I release to you my struggle to cram too many activities and competence into every hour.
I rest of the knowledge that all of eternity, an infinitude of time, is your great gift to me.
I release to you the greed and over-ambition that has made me try to grasp too much of life too quickly.
Help me to be content with simple tasks directed by you, done heartily and joyously as unto the Lord. Amen.*

Wednesday, January 20: Psalm 42

There are many names given to God in the Old Testament. For the next few days we'll reflect on some of these names for God and what they can teach us about who God is. We will be able to know Him and worship Him better as we learn more of His character.

In Genesis 1:1 we read that, "*In the beginning GOD created ...*" When you read the word "God" referring to our God in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word is "*elohim*."¹ This word is used to refer to God almost 3000 times, including 9 times in Psalm 42.

"*Elohim*" comes from the Hebrew word for "strength" or "power." That's a good way to describe God isn't it? – the Strong and Powerful One.

Often the name "God" is combined with other adjectives; these tell us more about Him and His character:

- God Creator of the earth (Isaiah 45:8)
- God of the Beginning: (Deuteronomy 33:27)
- God of all the earth (1 Kings 20:28)
- God of gods and Lord of lords (Deuteronomy 10:17)
- God Most High (Psalm 57:2)
- God, Judge of the earth (Psalm 58:11)
- God of eternity (Isaiah 40:28)
- Living God (Jeremiah 10:10)
- God of salvation (Psalm 18:46)
- The God who is near (Jeremiah 23:23)
- God of Forgiveness: (Nehemiah 9:17)
- Your God in whom you trust (2 Kings 19:10)
- God of my mercy (Psalm 59:17)
- God of my strength (Psalm 43:2)

What do I learn about my God, named "*elohim*"? This mighty Creator is also my salvation, comfort, strength and many other things! Like the author of Psalm 42, I can put my hope in Him! As you read Psalm 42, notice all the qualities of character about God that are revealed. How do you know God better now?

*Father, I know it is not right for so much of my hope, joy, and peace to be stolen from me everyday.
Yet sometimes there seems to be no escape from the treadmill of my daily life.
I ask you to help me, to guide me into a finer way of living.
Check my impulse to spread myself so thin
that I'm exposed to fear and doubt, to the weariness and impatience that makes my temper wear thin, that
robs me of peace of mind, that makes skies gray when they should be blue, that stifles a song all along the corridors of my heart.
May I have: the mercy of God to forgive me; the strength of God to make me resolute do your will; the grace of God to be kind,
tender, and affectionate to others; the patience of God to believe in the ultimate triumph of his kingdom on earth.
This I ask in his name in whom all peace resides. Amen.*

Thursday, January 21: Psalm 80

"*El*" is another name used for God about 200 times in the Old Testament. "*El*" is the basic root word of "*Elohim*"² and is often combined with other words to emphasize other qualities of God's nature. For example:

¹ "*Elohim*" is actually a plural word, but is always used with a singular verb when referring to God. There are two explanations for this: First, it is a "plural of majesty" (in the same way the Queen may say, "We think ..."); there is a long tradition of monarchs speaking in the plural to emphasize they speak for the entire community. Second, from Genesis 1:2 on, God is described as a unity of one God in which there are three persons – Father, Son, and Spirit. The plural term "*elohim*" is one Old Testament inkling of the Trinity. For a discussion of this use of the plural to refer to God, see Harris, Archer and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*.

² "*El*" is the singular form of "*elohim*" – used less than one-tenth as often as the plural form (see footnote 1). Like "*elohim*," "*el*" conveys a sense of strength and power.

- *El HaNe'eman* – our Faithful God (Deuteronomy 7:9);
- *El HaGadol* – our Great God (Deuteronomy 10:17);
- *El HaKadosh* – our Holy God (Isaiah 5:16);
- *El De'ot* – our God of Knowledge (1 Samuel 2:3);
- *El Emet* – our God Of Truth (Psalm 31:6);
- *El Yeshuati* – the God Of My Salvation (Isaiah 12:2);
- *El Elyon* – our Most High God (Psalm 7:10);
- *El 'Olam* – our Everlasting God (Psalm 41:13);
- *El Shaddai* – God Almighty (Genesis 17:1-2 and 47 other places, including 4 time in Psalm 80)

In addition, "El" is a key word in names such as Gabriel ("Strength of God"), Michael ("Who is like God?"), Daniel ("God's Judgment"), Israel ("One who has struggled with God"), Ishmael ("God Hears"/"God Listens"), and Immanuel ("God is with us" Isaiah 7:14).

Psalm 80 is a wonderful prayer. Occasionally we feel like God has left us. We feel that our prayers go nowhere. In Psalm 80, Asaph prays that God – God Almighty (*El Shaddai*) – would be near us, comfort us, protect us, and help us grow as strong, fruitful vines (you may wish to read John 15:1-8 and think about how this complements Psalm 80). Bring your life, struggles, hopes, fears, joys, dreams, disappointments, celebrations, past, future – and this very moment – to God Almighty, Everlasting, Most High, All-knowing, All-Holy ... your Salvation. Immanuel – God is with us!

*Father, I ask you to take from me now all that harasses and annoys,
all that has laid upon my heart burdens of anxiety and care, all the guilt and shame that weighs me down.
I thank you for the stillness of this time of prayer – this oasis in my busy day when I can relax before you,
lay my burdens down, and hand over to you all my anxieties, failures, and aspirations.
At this moment, I open my heart to receive your blessing, knowing that in your presence:
the furrows are being smoothed from my brow, the lines from my face, the load from my heart, that doubts from my mind,
the fears from my soul, the lost hopes from my dreams – and I am at peace.
And now I thank you, not only for quietness without, but for the quietness at the heart of the universe and for quietness within.
In your peace, I pray. Amen.*

Friday, January 22: Daniel 9:1-9

In most English translations of the Old Testament, God is referred to as "Lord" (capital "L" then lowercase) and "LORD" (all capitals). These refer to different Hebrew names for God. Today we will consider "Lord" (capital and lowercase) – Hebrew "Adonai"; tomorrow we look at "LORD" (all capitals) – Hebrew "Yahweh."

"Adon" is the Hebrew word for a lord or master. It was the common word for the person who had absolute power over your life, to whom you owed ultimate allegiance, and whom you served. The lord owned everything – you were his property (in Genesis 40:1, Pharaoh is the Hebrew slaves' "adon" in Egypt). Of course human lords can be good ... or terrible!

Scripture uses this word, "Adonai,"³ to describe God. The Lord is the One to whom I owe ultimate allegiance, whom I serve, and who – whether I like to admit it or not – has absolute power over my life. But my Lord is a loving Master. I know He will do what is best for me, always.

It is worth keeping in mind that all I am and all I have really does belong to the Lord. My talents, gifts, abilities and opportunities are gifts from Him – but they are ultimately still His. I am called to use them for His glory. All the material possessions I have – my investments, salary, possessions – are gifts from Him (He gives me the ability and opportunity to earn income). I am called to use them for His glory.

We are the Lord's stewards – caretakers of the His world and caretakers of what He has given us. How can

³ "Adonai" is the plural of "adon." Like the plural term "elohim," "adonai" is always used with a singular verb. This is another plural of majesty and Old Testament foreshadowing of the doctrine of the Trinity (see footnote 1).

I use the gifts He has given me wisely and well, for His glory?

Daniel 9:1-9 used the name "adonai" ten times. It is a wonderful prayer of confession and repentance. As we come before our Lord – our Master – today, let us come humbly, acknowledging that we often fail, but also knowing that we are in the presence of a Lord who loves us, forgives us, and lifts us up renewed ...

*Lord, you said that our Father in heaven notes even the fall of a sparrow to the ground.
Help me to believe, O God, that you are concerned not only with the rolling of the spheres in their orbits,
but even with me, my doubts, and complexities.
I know all too well the bitter results when I've tried to run my life my own way, when I try to steer my own craft.
Please come aboard, Lord Jesus, and set a true course,
for I am weary of life's demands, tired of my own blundering ways.
Please give me a clear light to shine upon my troubled way.
Please give me clearer directions.
Where I have missed the way and wandered far, please bring me back at whatever cost to my pride.
Please take away my stubborn self-will, for I know that in your will alone is my peace.
I seek that peace.
I pray in that name which is above every name, even Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.*

Saturday, January 23: Exodus 3

You may notice that often in the Old Testament the word "LORD" is all capitalized. This is the Hebrew word "YHWH" or "Yahweh."⁴ This name for God is by far the most common – used approximately 7,000 times. "Yahweh" is the special name that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush: God said to Moses, "I am (YHWH) who I am (YHWH). This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM" (YHWH) has sent me to you.' ... This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation." (Exodus 3:14-15).

"Yahweh" comes from the Hebrew verb "to be." The actual tense of the verb is impossible to tell – it could be past, present or future – or all three! The name declares God's absolute being – the source of everything, without beginning and without end. God is. Period. God was. Period. God will be. Period.

The Jews stopped pronouncing this name by about 200 A.D., afraid of breaking the second commandment. To this day, when Jews publicly read Scripture, instead of pronouncing the name "Yahweh" when they come to the word "YHWH," they will say aloud "Adonai." To represent this substitution, our English translations commonly use the all-capitalized word "LORD" to represent the Hebrew word "Yahweh." If you want a challenging verbal exercise, try reading aloud one of the Psalms with several "LORD"s in it, but instead of reading aloud "LORD" say the actual Hebrew word, "Yahweh" (e.g. Psalm 3:1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)!⁵

Like other names for God, Yahweh is often combined with other descriptors:

- *Yahweh Yireh* (or Latinized – Jehovah-Jireh) – "The Lord will Provide" (Genesis 22:14);
- *Yahweh Rophe* – "The Lord who Heals" (Exodus 15:22-26) – this implies spiritual, emotional as well as physical healing; God heals body, soul and spirit;
- *Yahweh M'kaddesh* – "The Lord who Sanctifies" (Leviticus 20:8) – by forgiving our sin;
- *Yahweh Shalom* – "The Lord our Peace" (Judges 6:24). Shalom means the peace that results from

⁴ Ancient Hebrew was only written in consonants – vowels were only added to the written script between 500-1000 A.D. Therefore no one knows for sure how the word YHWH was to be pronounced. However, regular verbs in Hebrew are all four letters, with a vowel between the first and second letters and between the third and fourth letters (making each verb two syllables). The vowels "a" and "e" are common vowels used in verbs. Therefore most scholars believe this name for God should be pronounced "Yahweh."

⁵ Christians have never been as superstitious about pronouncing YHWH as the Jews were. But how was the word to be pronounced? We now know that "Yahweh" is probably the most likely, reflecting the common construction of Hebrew verbs. However one innovative concoction was to take the consonants from YHWH (or in Latin "JHVH" – Latin does not have "y" or "w" so they substituted letters), and add the vowel sounds from a completely different word – "Adonai." The result – J – a – H – o – V – ai – H. An artificial word created by shuffling together the consonants and vowels of two completely separate words! This artificial new word – "Jehovah" became very common! Note this is NOT a biblical word at all. It is not a Hebrew word. The first recorded use of this form dates from the 13th century: Raymundus Martini, a Spanish Dominican monk, used it in his book *Pugeo Fidei* (c.1270). Is it OK to use the word "Jehovah"? Sure! But do remember that it is not a biblical word, but an artificial creation: a medieval blending of two completely separate words.

- being a whole person in right relationship to God and to one's fellow man;
- *Yahweh Rohi* – "The Lord our Shepherd" (Psalm 23).

God was in the past – He will be in the future – He is in the present. Right now He is with you. Praise Him. Celebrate His love. Rejoice in His presence.

*Lord, thank you that you know what it means to be human; you understanding and sympathize with my life.
 You walked upon this earth and have not forgotten what it is to be tired,
 what it is to know aching muscles, as you worked long hours at the carpenter's bench.
 You have not forgotten what it is like to feel the sharp stabs of pain, or hunger, or thirsty.
 You know what it is to be forgotten, to be lonely.
 You remember the feel of hot tears running down your cheeks.
 I thank you that you were willing to come to earth and share the weaknesses of the flesh,
 for now I know that you understand all the things I am called upon to bear.
 I know that you, my God, are still able to do more than I ask or expect.
 I pray that you would bless me, not according to what I deserve,
 but according to the riches in glory of Jesus, my Lord. Amen.*

Sunday, January 24: Psalm 91

We honour the Lord's name because we honour the Lord! As you read Psalm 91, reflect on the great and wonderful God we have!

*Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
 This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him.
 For he will rescue me from every trap and protect me from deadly disease.
 He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter me with his wings.
 His faithful promises are my armor and protection.
 I will not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies in the day
 I will make the LORD my refuge; I will make the Most High my shelter,
 no evil will conquer me; no plague will come near my home.
 For he will order his angels to protect me wherever I go ...
 The LORD says, "I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name.
 When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble.
 I will rescue and honor them. I will reward them with a long life and give them my salvation."
 Thank you, Lord. Amen*

Monday, January 25: Acts 3:1-16

When I sign a cheque, I am putting my name on a piece of paper, promising to pay a certain amount of money in cash. My name, signed on the cheque, is my bond. I am promising that I enough money to cover the cheque's value. When the church goes to cash the cheque, the money will be there. My name on the cheque is only as good as I am; my name represents me – my character, integrity, and financial resources.

The phrase "*in the name of Jesus*" is used repeatedly in the New Testament. People are healed in the name of Jesus, baptized in the name of Jesus, given power in the name of Jesus, forgiven in the name of Jesus ... The actual word "Jesus" is not some magic combination of five letters. The "name of Jesus" is a metaphor for Jesus Himself – it is actually Jesus Himself who heals, gives power, and forgives. The phrase "*in the name of Jesus*" is like a signature on a cheque – it represents the reality, Jesus Himself. It is His actual character, power, and resources – His Person – that is the real One at work.

Sometimes we are tempted to think the little phrase "*in the name of Jesus*" is a magic charm – as long as we remember to include those exact words in every prayer, God has to answer, right? No ... The phrase simply serves to remind us of the awesome, loving, self-sacrificing God who holds our entire life and reality in His hands. We always defer the ultimate best response to our prayers to His wisdom – He knows best!

Sometimes He will give us what we request. Other times He challenges us to be patient and wait. Still other times, in His wisdom, He knows that what is best is not to give us what we want or think we need.

"In the name of Jesus" reminds me to be humble: I accept His wisdom; I defer to His sovereignty; I give Him all thanks and glory. And I worship Him for who He is – the great and loving God behind the name.

*Lord, forgive me that when life's circumstances lift me to the crest of a wave, I tend to forget you.
Yet, like an errant child, I have blamed you with my every failure, even as I credit myself with every success.
When my fears evaporate like the morning mist, then vainly I imagine that I'm sufficient unto myself, that material resources and human resources are enough. I need you when the sun shines, lest I forget the storm in the dark.
I need you when I'm popular, when my friends and those who work beside me approve and compliment me.
I need you more then, lest my head began to swell.
Oh God, forgive me for my stupidity, my blindness in success, my lack of trust in you. Be my Saviour in success.
Save me from conceit. Save me from pettiness. Save me from myself!
And take this success, I pray, and use it for your glory. In your strength I pray. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 26: 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

The church in Corinth had many problems. One of their issues was that there were rival factions. *"Some of you are saying, 'I am a follower of Paul.' Others are saying, 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Peter,' or 'I follow only Christ'"* (1:12). In the past we might have seen it in inter-church rivalries: "I am Baptist," or "I am Anglican," or "I am charismatic" ... We might see it in a church, too: "I want us to be an emergent church," "I want more traditional music," "I want to be more contemporary," or "If I ran the church ..." Some part of our humanity always things "I know best ..." or "My way is the best way ..."

Paul emphasizes what it is that unites us as Christians: *"I am writing to God's church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on **the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, their Lord and ours"* (1:2). We are united by the name – the identity, the reality, the person – of Jesus! I can get so caught up in my preferences and our differences that I ignore our common bond – our identity as saved and holy people, united by the real presence of Jesus in our lives. I need to celebrate our common faith!

*"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, **in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought"* (1:10). What divides us is almost always trivial compared with what unites us.

One of the ways we can honour the name – the reality – of Jesus is to work through our differences to model the unity, love, compassion, forgiveness, and grace to which Jesus calls us. That doesn't mean I "give in" on something I feel strongly about. It does mean that I do and say everything in love – out of love for God, and in the spirit of loving my neighbour – seeking first God's Kingdom ... not my own agenda.

*You know, Father, the misunderstandings that have arisen between me and other people – friends or family.
Perhaps I have spoken harsh and thoughtless words.
I know this rift grieves you; you would be far more impressed with the sacrifice of reconciliation on my part than with any vows of loyalty or material gift I could make to you.
I dare not make this a prayer for you to change _____; this person is your responsibility.
I know that always I must begin with my responsibility – myself and my own shortcomings.
In subtle ways I confess to you that I have used friendship to cushion and make comfortable my own ego.
All too often I have sought my friends for my own pleasure and convenience;
all too seldom have I thought of what pleasure I could give.
You have asked me to love my neighbors and friends to the extent that I love myself.
That, Lord, would be a lot of loving!
Enable me now to let all false pride go.
Give me the grace of the outstretched hand and the open heart.
Give me the courage that will enable me to go to _____ and be the first to say,
'I have been wrong here and here and here. I'm sorry. Forgive me.' Amen.*

Wednesday, January 27: Deuteronomy 5:1-11

The first four commandments all relate to our relationship with God. We are called to *"love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ..."* (Deuteronomy 6:5). Think about how each of the first three commands fulfills this great command:

- *"You shall have no other gods before me"* – how does that reflect the command to *"love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ..."*
- *"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them ..."* – how does that reflect the command to *"love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ..."*
- *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ..."* – how does that reflect the command to *"love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ..."*

These commands in Deuteronomy 5 really help us think through how we can keep the great command to *"Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ..."* How do I love the Lord wholly and completely? By NOT having other gods, having a false image of God, abusing His name, etc.

How else can I show I love God?

- What else would I NOT do?
- What would I do?
- Is there anything I am doing regularly that I need to stop?
- Is there something I could do regularly that I am not doing, but I should begin today?

*Lord, what is the matter with me that I am so fitful and moody, so changeable –
one moment professing my love for you, and the next moment yielding to temptations that lure me away from you?
One moment cheerful, smiling, and kind, and the next, glum and surly.
Lord, I do not understand myself! What a strange creature I am!
Yet I do not pray, my Father, that always everything should be the same,
for I would get tired of unending sunshine, and long for a shower of rain.
I do not pray that my way may always lie on level places, for then I would long to see a mountain.
I do not pray that my lot always be favoured with pleasant strains of music, for then I would long for the ministry of silence.
But I do pray, O Lord, that there might be some pattern of consistency in my relations with you.
Teach me how to maintain life on an even keel,
that with a balanced life of faith and trust in you, and kindness and love towards others,
I will not be at one moment up in the sky and at the next at the bottom of a well.
Help me to walk with my hand in your hand, knowing you yourself came down to the mountain tops to walk in the valleys.
So may I not give way to despair when I, too, must return to the valley, but know that the trail will wind upward again.
The whether on the mountaintop or in the valley, may I always be aware that you are walking beside me.
And if you are with me, what difference does it make where I am? In your name, I pray. Amen.*

Thursday, January 28: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

This is the most wordy of the ten principles. I wonder if this command is so long because it is really important? ... or because people just don't get it? ... or because it needs a more thorough explanation? ... or because it is so counter-intuitive? ... or all of the above?

Stuart Briscoe describes his childhood: *"We went to Sunday morning church, Sunday afternoon church, and Sunday evening church. In between those services, we played no games and could not play outside; instead we prayed or read or took part in quiet family conversations. Once my parents got a radio, they never switched it on on the Lord's day. Neither would they dream of going to a restaurant on a Sunday; that would require someone else to work."* While Briscoe's childhood may take Sabbath-keeping to an extreme, many Christians hold to some form of this approach today. Sunday is special. We act differently. Farmers don't farm. Students don't study. Businesses remain closed. Organized sports are unplayed.

As Christians we may argue that as people of the New Testament, we are under grace, not the law. We do not have to follow the old Sabbath-keeping principle. We are free to do whatever we like, any day of the week. To impose special regulations onto Sundays is to put ourselves under the bondage of a legalism that God has delivered us from in Jesus. And you know what? We're right! We do not earn God's love by legalistically observing certain activities (or non-activities) for a specific 24 hour period. We do not earn our salvation by observing these laws!

However! ... the point of the guideline is NOT to give us a legalistic way to live one day of the week! The point of this principle is to give us life – life as God intended it to be lived!

Notice the explanation God gives for the Sabbath. The Israelites, as slaves in Egypt, had been responsible, day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out, without days-off, sick days, or vacation, for making bricks and building edifices for the Pharaohs of Egypt. They were slaves. Slaves had to sacrifice everything – their family, time, health – their lives – to work for their earthly masters, to build earthly monuments ...

It is significant that when God brings the Israelites out of Egypt, He frees them from that slavery! For the first time in generations they will have their own land, establish their own farms and businesses, earn their own money, and make their own living. And for the first time in generations they won't have to work all-day, every-day, year-in, year-out. They are free at last! God does not want them to slip back into that kind of workaholism – now a self-imposed workaholism – in which you sacrifice your family, time, health – your life – to build earthly monuments ... God wants people to take time to truly live ... in freedom ... in community with one another and with their loving God!

When we rest on the seventh day, we are reminded that it is God who has saved us. For the Israelites, the great saving act of God was His miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. For us, the great saving act of God we know is Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. In fact, one of the main reasons most Christians celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday (not the Jewish Sabbath day of Saturday) is because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. We keep the Sabbath to give thanks to God.

Whom do we admire? The Donald Trumps of the world? The people who work, work, work ... I think we ought to admire people who have balance in their lives: people who know how to work hard, but also who know how to rest; people who do their best, focused and conscientiously, but also take quality time with their family, friends, and Lord. Such people may not be the gold medal athletes at the Olympics, they may not be CEOs of major corporations, but I suggest they probably have a better quality of life – family, time, and health – than the super-achievers. These are the ones who really live life to its fullest.

What about you? Are you a slave to your work? The Sabbath principle is a call to balance – ensuring you make time for God, your family, and your health a top priority in your life.

*Father, teach me that, as your child, worry has no place in my life.
I know that it helps nothing.
I know that by worrying I cannot add a single cubit to my stature. I know that fretting overcomes no difficulty.
Often in the past, Lord, I have come to you with heavy heart and burdened life.
And you have answered my prayers and graciously lifted the burden from me.
Yet with a strange perversion, I still refuse to leave my burdens with you.
Always I gather them up – those heavy bundles of fears and anxieties – and shoulder them again.
Do now for me what I cannot do for myself:
please break these habit patterns, reverse the direction of my negative thoughts,
lift from me once again all anxieties and apprehensions.
Give me in their place a calm and confident trust in you.
Make me willing to live just one day at a time.
May my heart re-echo to your promise that only as I rest in you can the desires of my heart be given to me.
And now help me to do my part by placing a guard around my thoughts,
by resolutely refusing to return to my old haunts of distrust.
I thank you for your love for me and for your help. Amen.*

Friday, January 29: Ecclesiastes Exodus 20:1-11

The Ten Commandments are recorded in Deuteronomy and also in Exodus 20.⁶ This is the only command that is significantly different in the two versions (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). Read this command carefully in Exodus 20:8-11. What is reason for the Sabbath in this version?

When we rest on the seventh day as God rested, we are reminded that it is God who created the heavens and the earth! The Sabbath day pattern (one day of rest in seven) was ordained and established by God. God has set an example for us. It wasn't that **God** needed rest ... He was establishing a model for us, because **we** need rest. Not just landowners, but everyone needs a day of rest (even foreigners, servants, and animals!). The implication is that we are created – in our essence – to have a balance of work and rest. Our bodies, minds, souls, spirits, and relationships do not thrive in a constant state of work. We are fully human – fully the people God created us to be – when we work with the rhythm God built into our fundamental being – that involve a pattern of hard work and rest.

This commandment follows and reinforces the previous three. One of our primary human failings is that we forget God. We get so busy in our lives that we end up, perhaps more by default than intention, nudging God from the central focus in our lives and replacing Him with something else. Very often what ends up taking centre stage in our lives is work.

"Human beings were created to live and work in the earth. Alienated from God as the source of our fulfillment and rest, we endow work and the whole economic enterprise with a significance beyond its God-given role. Work itself and the material product it generates can then become an idol to be served without the limitation of God's own higher claim on our lives. In fact, it can come to dominate the whole of life and to define our very being ('you are what you do'), thereby usurping the God in whose image we are made. This idolatrous potential is particularly evident in our 'workaholic' and 'economaniac' society. The command to rest from work on the sabbath day forces a pause in this compulsive process and reminds us that time, like the earth itself, belongs to God, as does everything by which we are able to create wealth (cf. Deut. 8:17f)" (Christopher Wright).

The Sabbath is designed to protect us from making work the central focus of our lives – to keep God at the centre. In the regular routine of our lives, at least once per week, we are to take time to remember that there is only one God, that we are to have no substitutes (idols) in His place, and that His name is holy.

Forbid it, Lord, that my roots become too firmly attached to this earth, that I should fall in love with things. Help me to understand that the pilgrimage of this life is only an introduction, a preface, a training school for what is to come. Then shall I see all of life in its true perspective. Then shall I not fall in love with the things of time, but come to love the things that endure. Then shall I be saved from the tyranny of possessions which I have no leisure to enjoy, of property whose care becomes a burden. Give me, I pray, the courage to simplify my life. So may I be mature in my faith, childlike but never childish, humble but never cringing, understanding but never conceited. So help me, O God, to live and not merely to exist, that I may have joy in my work. In your name, who alone can give me moderation and balance and zest for living, I pray. Amen.

Saturday, January 30: Mark 2:23-28

The central idea of Sabbath is to help people ... not to put us in bondage!

But the Jewish rabbis had developed literally thousands of petty rules and regulations. All work – classified in 39 different ways – was absolutely forbidden. If a wall fell on someone, for instance, it was permissible to remove enough bricks to see if the person were dead or alive: if they were dead you left them till the next day; if they were alive you could help them only enough so they didn't get any worse – but you could not

⁶ The word "Deuteronomy" literally means "The second law" – it is a retelling of the original commands. Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address to the Israelites shortly before his death. He takes this opportunity to retell the principles by which the people are to live. The Exodus passage tells the story of the first time the commands were given on Mt. Sinai.

help them get better until the next day. That would be work. You could bandage a cut finger with a plain bandage on the Sabbath – but you could not put any ointment on the cut; that would be work.

In Christian history, things have often not been much better. Alice Morse Earle writes about Puritan New England: "*Lists of arrests and fines for walking and travelling unnecessarily on the Sabbath were given in great numbers, and it was specially ordered that none should 'ride violently to and from meeting.'* Many a pious New Englander was fined for his supposedly ungodly pride, and his alleged desire to 'show off' his 'new colt' as he 'rode violently' up to the meeting-house green on Sabbath morn. One offender explained in excuse of his unnecessary driving on the Sabbath that he had been to visit a sick relative, but his excuse was not accepted. A Maine man who was rebuked and fined for 'unseemly walking' on the Lord's Day protested that he ran to save a man from drowning. ... William Blagden, who lived in New Haven in 1647, was 'brought up' for absence from meeting. He pleaded that he had fallen into the water late on Saturday, could light no fire on Sunday to dry his clothes, and so had lain in bed to keep warm while his only suit of garments was drying. In spite of this seemingly fair excuse, Blagden was found guilty of 'sloathfulness' and sentenced to be 'publicly whipped.'" (<http://www.fullbooks.com/Sabbath-in-Puritan-New-England4.html>)

Religion – as a controlling system – is a horrible thing! But Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus. The challenge of Sabbath is to make the time – on the first day of the week – to cultivate our relationship with God and with those dearest to us. Sabbath gives us time for those we love ...

Jesus, I come to you for a blessing, to seal within my heart the inspirations and memories of your work in my life.

*I ask you for the blessing of: quietness when my heart is troubled, rest when my soul is weary,
new faith and courage when I feel exhausted by the tasks of the day.*

*I would rest now in you, and find in this hour your stillness and your peace to bring me into quiet harmony with your will.
I give you thanks for: every challenge that this day will bring, every new vision of you that will wing its way across my skies,
every whisper of you that I will sense in the beauty of your world, every thought of you that will come in quiet moments,
every need of you that will bring me back again to you in prayer. Watch over me through the hours of the day.*

*Refresh me in spirit as well as an body. Help me to face the tasks of this day with steady faith and without fear,
conscious of your presence in your guidance, knowing that I am yours, as I have placed all my trust in you.*

I know that you are still able to keep that which I've committed to you. And now may the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon me and abide with me now and forever more. Amen.

Sunday, January 31: Psalm 92

The subtitle of this psalm says: "*A psalm. A song for the Sabbath day.*" Make this your Sabbath prayer:

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to the Most High.
It is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning, your faithfulness in the evening,
accompanied by the ten-stringed harp and the melody of the lyre.*

You thrill me, LORD, with all you have done for me!

I sing for joy because of what you have done.

O LORD, what great works you do!

And how deep are your thoughts.

*Only a simpleton would not know, and only a fool would not understand this:
Though the wicked sprout like weeds and evildoers flourish, they will be destroyed forever.*

But you, O LORD, will be exalted forever.

Your enemies, LORD, will surely perish; all evildoers will be scattered.

But you have made me as strong as a wild ox.

You have anointed me with the finest oil.

My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies; my ears have heard the defeat of my wicked opponents.

But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon.

For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house.

They flourish in the courts of our God.

Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green.

They will declare, "The LORD is just! He is my rock! There is no evil in him!"

Amen