

APRIL PRAYER GUIDE

April 1 – Read Ezra 10:2.

Then Shekariah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.

Those Israelites. Most hard-hearted batch of people on the planet! Maybe the most-block-headed folk in history! I mean what is wrong with them? God doesn't garble His words. And just to make sure there was no misunderstanding, He didn't just speak them – He made sure they were written down. And if that was not enough – He set up a rhythm of life that 1 of 7 days they hit the pause button, gathered together and praised Him and were reminded of, and instructed in, the words He had spoken to them. But the bone-heads run off and date, fall in love with, and marry those who are outside of the faith. Their hearts go pitty-pat and God's instruction goes out the window! Sheeeez. Hormones surge and promises of devotion get trampled underneath. Wow.

And that was just one aspect of their continued defiance toward God. They were casual about Sabbath keeping. They gave God leftovers. They ripped each other off. They worshipped idols. They did their best to fit in with culture instead of conforming to God. If I'm God, I'm hitting the 'smite em' button.

But look at the verse - ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.*** I'm glad God's God and I'm not – aren't you? ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.***

BUT IN SPITE OF THIS- those words are a well of life. They are a salve and a balm. They are good news, indeed! Read them again. ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.*** Wow.

Ever act like a block-head with God? Ever give God a nudge and tell Him 'outta my way so I can do my will'? Ever know His word, understand His desire and trample it underfoot anyway? Unfaithful. That's what they are called. That is who they were. ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.*** Read that again slowly - ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for YOU.***

Good news isn't it? I don't know about you but when I read that my heart rejoices and breaks at the same time. It rejoices in the message – but is broken by the need for it. I don't know about you but I will always relish, rejoice in, trust and hold fast to the extension of hope undeserved. But I also give myself 100% and with God's help to the reduction and removal of the things that call for ***the in spite of.***

So today sit with God let Him speak to you these words - ***But in spite of this, there is still hope for YOU.*** Receive them. Trust them. Let their authority silence any other voice or claim. Then would you ask the Spirit to work with you and in you to draw your life more deeply and fully into faithfulness? Today, thank God for such hope and ask Him to point you to someone who needs to hear those words of reassurance. Then be His messenger.

April 2 – Read Micah 7:7

But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.

I love fishing! I mean, put me in a school of blues – and I'm happy as a hog in slop! Throw me in a bass haven when they are biting and I'll throw lures until my arm falls off. I have fond memories of catching crappies by the dozens! I love fishing – I mean I am crazy about it!! - until I have to wait. Staring at a bobber for hours is my version of what hell is like. Cast and cast – move and cast – cast and float – change lures – try different baits and depths – in my opinion is as much fun as getting my fingernails pulled out – sloooooowwly. And who on earth ever even thought sitting on the middle of a frozen lake over a little hole in the ice watching for a flag to flip was even a SANE idea, let alone a fun one?

So I guess I'm not really much of a fisherman and I don't really love it. Cause when love is involved – waiting is not only tolerable it is positively charged!

Reread today's verse. **But as for me....my God will hear me.** Period. Done. Matter of fact. No doubt. **My God will hear me.**

So watching, waiting, holding fast to hope – makes sense. And IS possible. If a guide took me out to an Alaskan stream and said 'Martin, look – it's going to take some work. We'll likely have to move around a bit – try a few spots, experiment with some different baits – but, Martin, I promise by the end of the day you are going to walk back to the truck with a 28 pound salmon hanging over your shoulder.' I'll fish. And I'll love it.

My God will hear me.

Seems to me, that ought to do something to us. Seems to me, that ought to spark something in us. Micah thinks so, too - **But as for me... watch, hope, wait....**

How are you at that? I hope you are lovin' it – cause one thing is for certain - **our God will hear you.**

April 3 – Read Revelation.

All of it. Go ahead. A lot in there, isn't there? I mean it is packed! Wars! Voices! Angels. Demons. Banquets. Declarations. Crazy full book! Chock full of stuff. But did you notice what was missing? In all its 22 chapters; in all its unfolding drama – the word 'hope' does not appear.

Not once.

Crazy, huh?

Not really. You see, hope looks ahead. Hope is focused and holds fast to what has not yet come. In Revelation, the hoped-for arrives. So no more need for it.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:12-13)

Praise God today not just for 'hope' but for His promise that our hope in Him will not disappoint.

Four Milers – God is at work in amazing ways. I have learned to never take that for granted. Your prayers move God's hand and open heaven's doors to pour out blessings. Thanks for your partnership.

Martin

April 4 – Read 1 John 1:1.

Nothing like first-hand experience – especially with God. Did you notice John's logic? He had experiences. Powerful ones. Personal and direct ones. But he frames them in two realities – 'what was from the beginning' and 'concerning the Word of Life.' John's experience takes shape and form within the context of solid history and theology – 'what was from the beginning.' And it is anchored in the truth of Jesus Christ and His teaching and person – 'concerning the Word of Life.' Smart man.

We live in an age when our culture lets 'experience' trump good logic, solid theology, and discoverable history – and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Two things to pray about: first, pray that as a church we firmly root our faith in a solid understanding of our faith, its history and the Scriptures. Secondly pray for our church and the church in America – there is a hard push to adapt our faith to culture's experiences. You can see this in current sexual practices, marriage debates, ethics, the all-religions-are-equally-valid debate, and more. Pray that Christians will stand as light and do so with the most loving hearts on the planet. Second, pray for Four Mile – that we be a community that holds fast to Jesus – and unwavering trust and obedience to His word as truth – even when that sends us in a counter-cultural direction with our lives and lifestyles.

April 5 – Read 1 John 1:2-3.

I love those words – 'the life was made manifest.' Manifest = unveiled, made visible, right there to see.... Pascal once said that 'we should make our faith less of a religion and more of a love affair.' I agree. It would be more life-giving and more attractive, as well as 'more manifest' to outsiders. When a Christ follower does that, he/she just can't help themselves – they have to 'proclaim' it. That kind of relationship (fellowship) can't be contained! When you have a living, thriving, heart-thumping relationship with the Father who is Creator and Sovereign God and His Son who is the Risen Savior and Lord over all – and His family of followers - you want everyone to get in on the action!! And you can't help but 'fellowship' with those who share that relationship with you – why, they're family! Eternal life family.

So are you 'Johnish' about your faith – you can't keep it in and you can't stay away? Is your faith personal and relational and contagious? Talk to God about that today.

Pray that at Four Mile our 'fellowship with God, Jesus Christ and one another is so vibrant and life-giving and real and rich that it is undeniably clear that our fellowship is heaven on earth! Also, if there are any hindering factors in your life to that kind of vibrant relationship with God and God's family would you bring those before God and confess them and ask Him to give you the courage to make things right?

April 6 – Read 1 John 1:4.

True 'fellowshippers' are anti-hoarders. Rather they are courageous and joyful tellers and inviters. They want to give away what they have. They want everyone in – and they will go to crazy ends to get them in.

Question – who are you sharing the good news with... intentionally ... so that they might join the 'fellowship' of Christ's brothers and sisters? Have you invited anyone lately who was not a Christ follower to join with you as you joined God's people in fellowship and worship?

The names you put on the orange post it notes – is there a red dot on it yet marking you having a conversation about faith, or making an ask to join you at worship?

Many who profess Jesus find this part of their faith fearful rather than joyful. I understand that – it's risky, sometimes awkward. But it matters.

And I'll tell you what – the day you sit in the church pews and watch your friend or coworker or relative or family member – sit and have their heart moved and profess their faith in Jesus Christ and step into the waters of baptism you will experience heaven's joy.

Eternity exists. We have been given the good news on how that can happen – in fact, we have been given the good news of the only way that can happen.

So today, pray for two things. Pray for clarity. Ask God to give you His heart on this matter – He has appointed His people as His ambassadors, we are here as the church to proclaim Christ – Savior of the world. Let God's love for the lost

fill you – Jesus was convinced that there is an eternity without God, without love, without truth, without grace and He came and did all He could so nobody had to experience that.

Second pray for courage. Easter is near. Ask God to tune your heart to people around you. What would it look like if every person who is part of Four Mile Church was used by God to help 1 other person find their way into the Father's kingdom and together we celebrated as they stepped through the waters of baptism and into the 'fellowship' of God's people and into a whole new eternity in this coming year.

Would you give yourself to that? Talk to God about that. Also pray for Four Mile that we be white-hot on reaching people, loving them, sharing the truth of Jesus Christ with them.

April 7 – Read 1 John 1:5.

God is Light.

Pure. No shadow. No darkness.

Think about that today.

Enter into His presence – Light.

Let it wash over you. Penetrate you. Cleanse you. Thank God today for being Light without wavering.

April 8 – Read 1 John 1:6.

Can I be honest? I see professing believers living counter to this word of God regularly. To say we love God and at the same time to 'walk in darkness' – means to profess faith & relationship with Jesus Christ, but live in a way we know is counter to God's heart and revealed truth in Scripture.

It is self-deception John says.

Notice he is not talking about professing faith and to occasionally fail. We all do that. But rightly handled we are broken by it to the point of honest confession and there, through the blood of Christ, find relief of His forgiveness; and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the encouragement of other Christ followers, we turn away and once again 'walk in the light.'

But to 'walk in darkness' is to know the truth and yet reject it by living a lifestyle counter to it – without repentance, without confession and to still believe all is well between you and your heavenly Father.

God is light. His work and leadership in our lives lead us to lives marked as 'holy' – reflections of His truth and light.

First sit with God today and let the Spirit speak to you. Any 'walking in darkness' that needs rectified? Look at your relational life, sexual life, your words, how you handle God's resources, your work life, your character, etc. Second pray for the church – ask God to send a fresh wind of renewal through His family – such that there is awakened a passion for holiness – not in a self-righteous, condemning way – that's not it – but in a way that is driven by a love for God and a desire to reflect his heart, character and truth in all areas irrespective of what everyone else is saying or doing. As someone said 'let us hate the sin in us' so that we can bear the love of Christ through us.

April 9 – Read 2 Kings 13:18-19.

¹⁸ Then he said, "Take the arrows," and the king took them. Elisha told him, "Strike the ground." He struck it three times and stopped. ¹⁹ The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times."

I don't know if I have ADD or ADHD or PQRSTUV or a bad case of mindlessness or early onset dementia. But I find myself bored quickly. I don't know how many trips I made down stairs or over to another office or room and before I get to the destination I have already forgotten why I was going there! I start one thing and get involved in another and forget about the first. I brew cups of coffee and an hour or so later find them sitting on the Keurig, having forgotten I put them on. That's downright sacrilegious. Scary, ain't it?

But I'm not alone. Jehoshaphat had a similar struggle. The prophet told him to take a handful of arrows and whack the ground with them. He did. Then he stopped. Bummer. His lack of persistence cost him dearly. His ADDDD (arrows down, down, down, done) cheated him out of the full blessing God had available and desired to give to him. 'The man of God was angry' and the king got gypped. So do you, and so do I when we stop doing what God has directed us to do too soon. But you are like me – you get distracted. You get bored. You forget. You figure 3 is enough. And you miss out on what God had in store for you.

Don't ask me why God doesn't give fine print with his instructions to us – like 'strike the arrows on the ground' but adds a warning that 'if you stop too soon you will have serious side effects, but continued regular use has been shown in studies to increase benefits exponentially.' But He doesn't. He just tells us to do stuff that we can quickly tire of, get distracted from or question the benefit of. So we stop. And we miss out. Today consider that in your time with God. Any places, activities, ministries, steps where God called you to start where you've gotten distracted and stopped? If so confess and get back to it. You won't regret it. Today pray for our church and churches across our country and around the world – most churches start with a fire for mission and making a difference and helping the lost find hope and life in Jesus. Then they stop. Ask God to rekindle that passion and reenergize that inertia.

April 10 – Read Matthew 5:44-46.

⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

Falling in love is a piece of cake. In fact, falling in love with a piece of cake is a piece of cake! Love is invigorating. It is joy-filled, heart-thumping and energizing. Until it doesn't. And I don't have to tell you that loving an enemy doesn't do all that stuff for you, or in you.

That's why we stop.

That's why we love those who love us (qualifier here – who love us the way we want to be loved, to the degree we feel we need loved, with the kind of love we want to be loved with!) That's why not too many run around quoting this verse or putting it on signs to hold up at rallies and baseball games. 'Love your enemies' for most, makes about as much sense and seems about as possible as telling them 'jump to the moon.' We love love – and we love vacations, surprise bonuses, shopping (with a load of cash or a zero balanced credit card) – we love the smell of a new car, getting together with good friends and listening to our favorite tunes – oh, and we love those who love us.

Jesus says. 'SO?' 'Loving those who love you? Tax gatherers and serial killers do that,' Jesus tells us. Kingdom of God people go further. 'Love your enemies...' We won't even go to the same church as they do!! That has to be a scribal misprint. What the original text said was 'hate your enemies' or 'get even with your enemies' or 'gossip about and slander your enemies' or 'avoid your enemies' or 'divorce your enemies' or 'stop talking to your enemies'....

Love your enemies? Why?

Why Jesus would you even ask such a thing? Jesus answers that question. Did you notice? ‘that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’ You can spot my kids. My kids look like me. (poor buggers) My kids sound like me in the phrases they use, the sound of their laugh and how they interact. And my kids, in many ways – act like me. So do the Father’s kids.

Loving those who love you - everyone is capable of that and nearly everyone does that. No big deal. Loving your enemies!?! That will mark you – it will mark you as one of His kids. Did you catch the next sentence? ***He (the Father in heaven) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous.*** He just can’t help Himself. It’s the way He is.

So the Father loves those who love Him and loves those who don’t. He can’t help Himself.

And just an fyi – reminder sort of things – He loved you when you were an enemy to Him. Aren’t you glad? He is simply calling us, in this passage, to remember that, repeat that, and trust that, going further in that in this world is the best thing to do. Pray about that today and may I encourage you to be honest and specific. Who is your enemy? Or who are your enemies? Who is it you avoid? Who is it that makes your blood boil and heart race and blood pressure go up simply by seeing them? Who do you talk about or think about in critical, judgmental, hurtful ways? Etc. Jesus calls us to go further than simply loving those who love us.

Will you?

Pray about that and pray also today that the Spirit of God would move in and through our church to take seriously God’s call to extend love and work toward reconciliation with all people – spouses, exes, kids, parents, siblings, bosses, employees, neighbors, business partners, etc.

April 11 – Read Acts 1:4.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.”

Why didn’t Jesus just give it to them? Right there. On the spot. Why wait? What’s the sense in having them hang around – which actually ended up to be a good number of days? Weren’t there people to save? Wasn’t there a mission to chase? Ministries to build? Churches to start? After all, God is God, isn’t He? ‘Just say the word....’ and all that. Why wait? Now I know – I know all the theologians are shaking their heads and making noise – about the full redemptive process and God ordained order, etc.

But God is God. The Holy Spirit has been waiting since the dawn of time for this. Surely He was ready. And the Father promised –says so right there in the verse!! ‘Stay in Jerusalem.’ Wait. He doesn’t tell them how long. Doesn’t tell them what to do with their time. Why make them wait???

I don’t know.

Neither do you.

All I know is that in the end, the wait was worth it.

Can I say to you the same holds true in your waiting? I don’t know why God has you on hold. I don’t know why you are sidelined. I don’t know how long it is going to be, or exactly what you are supposed to be doing in the meantime. I just know if God has you in the waiting room – in the end the wait will be worth it. There is a gift ahead. There is a provision for you. Power in store.

So don’t lose heart. Don’t take a short cut. Don’t settle for quick, or chase after easy. When God hits the pause button in some area of your life – the wait will be worth it. So if you or someone you know is in the waiting room by God’s design

– will you pray about that? And let God know you will wait until He releases the gift and sends you on the next stage. Also will you do as these first disciples did – use your waiting as a time to get better connected with God’s people and more closely connected to God?

April 12 – Read Mark 10:21.

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

That rocked his world I bet. Imagine one Sunday you bring a friend of yours to a worship service. His heart is stirred. His eyes are opened. He receives new life. After the service this person hangs around until the crowd thins and walks up to the pastor and shares his exciting story of how he has come to faith in Jesus! A brief celebration is held. Then in all seriousness the guy looks at the pastor and asks, ‘what must I do to live this life fully?’ Pastor says, ‘one thing you lack – go sell everything you have, give the money to the salvation army and come join us in following Jesus.’

Come on – be honest – what would you have told your friend if they told you that was what happened? Me, too.

Or consider a faithful mom – well off financially, raised her kids in the church, held fast her marriage, served in ministries but hungered for more. So at small group she shares with the others about this hunger that she believed God has stirred in her heart for more of Him and deeper kingdom life. The group agrees to pray and ask God for ‘next steps.’ (that is an awesome group!!) Next meeting they catch up – then one of the members speaks up – ‘I’m not sure what to do with what happened since our last meeting – nothing like this has ever happened with me before. I’ve been praying about what (let’s call her Linda) Linda said last time – and this verse just came to my mind – I wrote it down and later that night I opened my bible and it was Mark 10:21. And Linda, I have this sense this might be Jesus’ word to you. ‘Jesus loves you and says one thing you lack – go sell everything you have, give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.’ Everyone looks at Linda. But then one after another a chorus breaks out – ‘that’s crazy! something just like that happened with me – same verse!’ ‘Me, too.’ ‘And me!’ Now everyone is looking at Linda. Silence. Linda suddenly doesn’t like this small group any more. That is, unless she has settled two issues in her heart and with regard to walking in faith – any time Jesus asks us to give up or give away anything in our lives – in the end, it is a net win, not loss. In the end, it will be far worth it.

Also – Jesus owns it all.

Consider today the verse, the question and the offer. Is Jesus ripping this guy off, condemning him to hardship, being unfair or unrealistic OR is he offering him the deal of a lifetime?

Then pray about this – are you holding on to anything Jesus has been asking you to release? Talk to him about that.

April 13 – Read Matthew 26:39.

³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Read that again. Notice the plea of Jesus. ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.’ Huh? Did Jesus suddenly have doubts about His Father’s ability to do things? Was Jesus so disturbed by what lay ahead that His trust in His Father was breaking down? ‘My Father – if it is possible....’ Did Jesus suddenly come to a strange and surprising realization that maybe the Father was not sovereign over all things in this world!?

Of course not.

Jesus’ ‘if it is possible’ was not a question of ability, it was a question of process. IE ‘Father if it is possible to not have to go through what is ahead and for You to still accomplish what you want and for me to fulfill my purpose – let’s just skip this part.’ I think we get confused about that sometimes. Maybe a lot. We know – in a way – that all things are possible for God. Jesus even told that one dad that when he brought his demon possessed son to be healed. ‘Lord if it is possible,

help my son.' Jesus replied 'if it is possible? All things are possible with God.' The angel Gabriel told Mary the same thing – 'How can this be?' 'nothing is impossible with God.'

So we get the line blurred between 'nothing is impossible' with God and 'not everything we want is what He intends.' We can learn from Jesus here. He was passionate. He was honest. He was direct. He spoke up. He affirmed the Father's capability. And He was surrendered. 'Yet not as I will, but as you will.'

So may I suggest you go a 'little further today' and learn to pray from Jesus' prayer? Flip flop his words. Start not with claiming stuff, or touting your faith, or bargaining, etc., but start with the surrender – 'Father what I want and what I am committed to is not my will but yours be done. That said – if it is possible, Father – would you cure this cancer; restore my marriage; help me find a good job; break that addiction; stop that war, etc. etc.

Today – I want you to know – as long as what you desire or think you need and how you need it is in line with God's good character and righteous way – it is possible. So pray about it today as Jesus prayed about his pressing need that day.

April 14 – Read John 12:35.

³⁵ Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going.

Interesting – today is Good Friday.

Darkness fell.

Real darkness.

From all appearances, in that moment, darkness overtook the Light.

Lies, deceit, abused power, manipulation, whips and curses, taunts and jeering, hammers, nails and thorns were poured out in a fury to snuff out the Light.

Darkness fell.

For a time.

Then dawn came, rock cracked and Light emerged. Risen!

But for a few days, those who saw the Light and walked near it – were sure darkness had won. Not so. Light emerged – victorious. Brighter than even they had the gall to imagine!

These disciples knew both the power of the light and the terror of the darkness. I believe that fueled their every step and every decision from that point on.

The Light is here – the chance to walk in it is incredible, it is a blessing, a gift – walk in it while we have it. Where the Light goes, we go! Where the light stops, we stop. What the Light asks, we do!! We follow the Light! (sounds like a song or something, doesn't it?)

Those few days not only guided their steps and shaped their decisions – it also burned in their hearts. It was forged into their highest passion and was formed as the center piece of their message – ***you are going to have the light just a little while longer!! Walk while you have the light – before darkness overtakes you!!!*** They knew the wonder of the Light and the horror of the dark. They also understood the profound choice every last person makes in their life – darkness or Light.

Pray about that today. Pray that as follower and we as a church that we walk in the Light and call to those in the darkness to join us. And that we do that with all the passion, risk, resolve, zeal and fervor that truth deserves.

April 15 – Read Luke 24:29.

²⁹ But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

I like these guys. They are totally bummed out. Heart’s broken. Dreams dashed. Feeling a bit stupid they had believed in something whole-heartedly and now it looked as though it was all a ruse. They felt betrayed by their religious leaders – their distrust in the government was reinforced. The bond that held them together with others and filled their hearts with hope and their souls with life – was broken. A stranger joins them on the way. Catches up on the latest news of all the happenings in the big city of Jerusalem. Then walks with them and tells them stories from the Old Testament. As they walked and listened it says ‘their hearts were warmed.’

That’s a pivot point – for them and for you.

Jesus often approaches us incognito. Jesus often tries to teach us from old dusty words but bringing them with a new vitality. Pivot point. Do you say, thanks I feel better now? Do you have a prayer and send him on his way – or do you ‘strongly urge – plead, request – him to stay with you? So often I think we thank Jesus for walking with us in hard times, speaking to us in down times, cheering us up, making us feel better but miss out on the real richness because we quickly move on instead of lingering.

Consider that today – are there places and ways Jesus is intersecting with your life and you are missing out on the full richness because you are too hurried, too busy, etc.? Where might he be waiting for you to ‘strongly urge him to stay with you for a while?’

Caution! It will inconvenience your life. Might cost you some. But keep in mind – you might just get your eyes opened. Pray about that today.

April 16 – Read Acts 13:44.

³⁴ God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, “I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.”

Yes He did! And if your life is hidden in Him, God is going to do the same for you!!!

It’s Easter.

Good news! Do your happy dance!

See you in church!!

April 17 – Read Romans 13:12

¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

You know I’ve always thought of night and day as partners. One ebbs, the other grows. Then back again – a sort of astronomical dance. Light and dark - Trading places but dynamically connected – partners working in sync. Night and day - A symbiotic union. A true thing of beauty and wonder.

I thought that. Until I took physics and read my bible.

Seems far from being connected, they are at odds. Instead of a dance their interaction is actually a war. Though they may interact – they can't coexist. It is not possible for it to be light and dark at the same time. They wrestle with each other. They fight. One or the other will win the day. Light, the apostle tells us, functions as an 'armor.' It is – so to speak – a protective covering. A shield or a covering against the dark. ***The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.***

What Paul is saying is the end is near for the darkness. It's time is almost over. Soon – there will be only Light. So he makes a suggestion – ***'put aside the deeds of darkness.'*** They have a shelf life. They are on a time clock. They will be annihilated.

So why invest in something that is destined for destruction? Why inhabit a life that cannot endure? 'Put aside the deeds of darkness' is the call. But Paul knows us all too well – easier said than done. Darkness has its allure. Its deeds offer their rewards. The realm of darkness is well inhabited and quite familiar. So he gives us not only the reason for leaving, he points us to the power for leaving. ***Put on the armor of light.*** Hanging in the light isn't just nice, it's effective. It is a deterrent to deeds of darkness. A shield against the night.

So let me apply. Often times we miss the connection. We struggle with 'deeds of darkness' and lose. We get caught in 'night' living and can't seem to make our way out. So we pray against it. Get accountability for it. Cast the devil out of it. But stay the same. May I suggest another approach? The one Paul offers.

Spend more time in the light. 'Armor up.'

Instead of bemoaning your failures, wringing hands over the darkness you seem unable to escape, instead of staying stuck in the life-sucking cycle of engaging in deeds of darkness – repenting in moments of light – falling back into darkness – jumping over again to light – over and over and over and wondering why God won't help, wondering why prayer doesn't work, wondering why good intentions go bad, wondering why trying church didn't change anything – instead of all of that, spend more time walking in the light.

Sounds crazy, I know. Seems almost ludicrous. But light isn't just nice. It's armor. And as John 1:5 tells us, light shines in darkness and the darkness cannot prevail against it. Light – it's Armor. Impenetrable by the night. Unyielding to dark. ***The night is nearly over.*** Destined for destruction. Paul tells us it is not just a good idea to stay out of it and away from it. It's totally possible.

'put on the armor of Light.'

So where do you wrestle with darkness? What conversations do you hope certain people don't hear? What activities do you hope nobody ever discovers? What habits do you work overtime to keep hidden and in the dark? What 'dark' thoughts or habits do you wrestle with? Could it be that the reason, or part of the reason that they just won't go away is that you have neglected the need to spend more time, more thought, more energy in the light? Seem crazy? Try it. You might just find that God knows what He is talking about.

Oh – by the way – did you know that physically speaking darkness does not exist? Yeah – not as an entity in and of itself. Darkness is simply the effect of the absence of light. So it's definite. When the light comes, darkness is done. Pray about that today. Ask God to show you how you might more effectively 'put on the armor of light' so that you can more permanently put aside the deeds of darkness.

April 18 - Read 1 Samuel 10:22.

So they inquired further of the LORD, "Has the man come here yet?" And the LORD said, "Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies."

The man they were looking for was Saul. The soon to be first king of Israel. God picked him – but he did not want the job. And truth is after several good years he made a mess of the job. But that was not because God made a wrong choice. That was because God's choice mishandled God's call. But back to the point. God had identified the man for the job. A man of faith and capabilities. A man he fully intended and in fact did equip and empower with His indwelling Spirit

to faithfully accomplish the job. But for Saul it was nothing doing. So you have this funny picture of a 6'8" young man trying to hide behind a pile of luggage. They find him. The Spirit fills him. And even with all his myriad of insecurities and hang-ups the fortunes of Israel begin to take a turn for the better. I wonder how often God's appointed, Spirit filled provision for the growth and expansion of His kingdom here on earth – goes missing? Hiding amidst baggage? Afraid of the call. Fearful of the cost. Not feeling adequate to the task – unaware that God always equips us for whatever His call is to us. Now there aren't many 'king' spots open these days in God's kingdom – but there are plenty of servant leader vacancies. (that might be a factor?) Vacancies there not because God has run out of sons and daughters to call – but vacancies because for whatever reason(s) the calls go unanswered. And two things happen - the kingdom pays the price, the called live lesser lives. Both are grievous losses. So today consider – is it time to step out of hiding. Today pray that every Christ follower would develop God's heart for His people, the church. And pray that, out of that, every Christ follower would joyfully and trusting in the power of God's Spirit take their appointed place in building up the body of Christ and stewarding the gifts and life God has given them for His sake. Pray also for those already serving – pray that they steward those responsibilities faithfully.

April 19 – Read Acts 4:17.

But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

Funny. The opponents of God's church understood something the members often forget. The church's progress is never a matter of our programming. The church's power to lay hold of lives and further the redemptive purposes of God is not the result of our awesome worship, terrific children's ministry or the best youth program in town. The spread of God's kingdom into the world is not the result of well planned, creatively staged, brilliantly marketed events, retreats, rallies, concerts or evangelistic crusades. Not that any of those things are particularly bad or wrong. They're just not the thing that advances and grows the kingdom of God here on earth. Church people forget. But the church's enemies are clear.

Read the verse again. ***'We must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.'***

That is a threat aimed at the heart of God's kingdom here on planet earth. Of course, you know the threat was not heeded. The followers continued ***to speak to anyone and everyone in Jesus' name.*** Proclaiming hope. Declaring resurrection from the dead. Offering freedom from sin and guilt. Opening a doorway to healing, life, joy and peace. All in Jesus' name.

And the church grew. Did it ever! Daily! It spread through families, across villages, through regions, from nation to nation and down through decades, centuries and millennia. Not because its marketing efforts improved. Not because its strategic methods were refined. Not because its talent pool increased so its programs and services had more pop and were more relevant. Not because the church got buildings or met in storefronts or came up with a 100 goofy words to try to attract people like – 'emergent, missional, relevant, exponential, thriving, secret, next gen, seeker, etc. etc. etc.' Those things might help. They could get the church a hearing.

But you can have all those things and more, along with the greatest talent and brightest brains the earth can produce. But if the warning is heeded – ***"we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."*** - the spreading stops.

Period.

The kingdom continues to spread around our world. In amazing and unprecedented ways. But in our country the spread has ceased – some decades ago. And may I say it – it is for the very reason expressed in this verse. Far from warning Jesus followers to stop speaking in His name – you almost have to threaten them to get them to speak to anyone in Jesus' name!! That explains a lot.

So today let's focus not on the world or the church out there. Today pray about our little corner of the kingdom. Ask God to give us a Spirit-filled boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus to anyone and everyone. Yes, of course with grace, of course with love and of course with respect – and yes, of course, perhaps more in our day than ever before in our

nation, there are plenty who will react, plenty who will threaten and plenty who will seek to silence. But pray we have the heart and faith and allegiance to speak in His name anyway. Do that and the reality of the verse will become the reality of our lives nothing **'can stop this thing from spreading further among the people.'**

IN HIS NAME – LET US SPEAK.

April 20 – Read Acts 13:42.

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.

Church, you are blessed. I know you have outstanding teaching in children's ministry. Awesome teaching in student ministry and ROCK. Adult classes are the bomb. And Sunday morning – well what can I say!? If I only had better hair and bigger whiter teeth - Move over Joel Olsteen! Seriously though – consider, has your life been blessed with good, competent, accurate, helpful, challenging teaching about God through God's word? I think so. Good seed sown.

But reread the verse. How often has it stirred something in you such that you needed to pursue it further? How often have you taken what you heard and said to someone – 'you know I want to dig deeper into this'?

'The people invited them to speak further about these thing....'

Further matters. Further is an indicator of hunger. Further indicates that something happened more than ears being tickled – further shows thoughtfulness and indicates desire. To ask to **speaking further** is to move past hearing a good message and reflects deeper consideration, serious intent and, potentially, movement into new growth.

Church, I don't know what you do when you leave church, I don't know what you do when you leave student ministry or ROCK or Kidztown. But I know what I hope and how I pray. I hope and pray what you hear about, God stirs in you a longing to go further. And not just one to get further away from church so you can get to the game, the deck, the golf course or on the boat. But a hunger to go further into truth. Further into the kingdom life. Further in your love and devotion and understanding of our amazing God.

Further. It matters.

Today consider the seed God has cast into your life. For it to take root, for it to grow and develop, for it to endure and thrive, for it to bear much fruit – it must not only be received – it must be taken further. Further explored. Further engaged. Further understood. Further discussed. Further meditated over. Further studied. Further applied. Imagine students, church members, visitors walking out of our services, classes, studies and inviting each other, inviting the leaders or teachers to go grab a cup of coffee or a meal **to speak further about these things.**

Further... it matters. Pray about that today. Pray that this year will be for you a year to move further.

April 21 – Read Titus 1:1.

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness

You know, I could just tell you to read yesterdays prayer guide. The thoughts are very close. Must be an important idea then.

Paul had focus to his life. Paul traveled a lot. Nearly from one end of the Roman Empire to the other. No planes. No cars or taxis. Feet and boats, mostly. He had amazing experiences. Everything from miracles of God to shipwrecks at sea; audiences with dignitaries and nights in prison. A wild ride. Amongst the people, Paul was waved off as a lunatic and declared a god in human form! Paul murdered Christians – then spent his life looking over them. He had the privilege of

Roman citizenship, the honor of studying with the greatest teachers. He was a tentmaker and in many ways lived as a nomad. His enemies and haters far outnumbered his handful of loyal friends. But Paul lived with focus. Read the verse again.

Paul after his conversion used everything at his disposal, including the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to **further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that lead to godliness**. His life had focus. A kingdom-of-God focus. As a result, it had impact. Kingdom impact. Beyond the bounds of this world impact. An impact we still feel today.

Focus - **to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness**. Paul wasn't trying to make converts, accumulate church goers or help people be religious. His focus was to form disciples. And he had a formula. Godly lives was the anticipated outcome. A deepening trust (faith) and a deepening understanding (knowledge of the truth) were the ingredients. Paul was focused. His focus worked. Then and now. But it requires both – we must move further in the faith and further in our knowledge of truth. Those steadily engaged and rightly done – transform our living – toward godliness.

Allow me to break this down a little further – to further the faith of God's elect – is to get God's people to trust Him more. And that, simply put, is demonstrated in obedience. Faith is trust, and trust is obedience. And to further their knowledge of the truth – is to seek God personally. To desire to know Him and to engage in those avenues which He has given us through which that happens – most importantly through His self-revealing word. The first without the second is dumb at best, and dangerous at worst. What sense is there in trust and obedience of someone you do not know? Doesn't make sense and truth is, rarely lasts.

And on the other hand to know God truly and then to not trust or obey Him – well, let's just say something is amiss in the knowing. Maybe it is information without personal connection. Maybe it is skewed or false information. Who really and truly knows God and yet would defy Him? Demons do – but you aren't one of those.

So today consider the focus of Paul's life. Do you share that focus? Are you seeing the evidence of it in growth in godliness? Second are you helping any others 'further' along in their life as a follower of Jesus? It was never intended to be the focus of Paul alone, but is God's call to us ALL to live as servants of Jesus Christ to **of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness**.

Focus. Impact. They go together. Pray about that today.

April 22 – Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.

Faith is a private thing but is never hidden. Real faith, growing faith always has the visible AND. Read the verse again.

Paul is not affirming these Christ followers for two things – he is affirming them for one – their faith. He observed, received reports and came to a conclusion. A joyous one. Their faith was growing more and more. Paul did not possess a magical 'faith indicator' meter he would wave over Christians' heads or clip to their little finger or have them walk through as they entered for worship services. He didn't hand out faith surveys or questionnaires. None of that. And faith then is as private and personal as it is now. But faith then is also as it is now that its presence and its growth can never be hidden. Invisible faith always shows in its visible 'AND.'

Read it again - **because your faith is growing more and more, AND the love all of you have for one another is increasing.**

The presence and growth of faith produces the community and substance of love. Divine love. Jesus said it – the mark of a true disciple (the presence of genuine hidden faith) is the disciples' love for one another – that simply reflects His love

for them. That's one of the follies and deceptions of the modern movement to claim to have a deep faith and real love for God but have no desire or need for the church. True faith drives you to genuine love of the brothers and sisters.

I can claim an amazing trust in, respect for, and understanding of my wife Laurie – and if I never spend time with her, OR stay away from her because she made me mad once or lived in ways that were irritating or inconvenient to the way I preferred to live – you would be dead right in questioning my claims. Genuine faith forms the heart of God in you. That is why true faith drives you to genuine love of the brothers and sisters. Growing faith will never separate you from that, rather it will make you more willing, as well as more able, to sacrifice and serve for the sake of that. Genuine faith always shows itself in the visible AND.

You cannot have a growing faith in God without the fruit of an increasing love for His family. Period.

And like with Paul when you see such faith and especially when you see it growing more and more – that is reason to thank God for those who have such. Consider that today. Do you see this in your own life? Thank God – and pray for it to grow more and more! Do you see it in others – thank God for them and why not be like Paul and go out of your way to let them know you noticed and you are grateful.

April 23 – Read Hebrews 12:4-7.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?

I have a confession to make. I can no longer stand to watch the news. Don't get me wrong – I keep up with current events via reading. But news reporting is off my 'to do' list. And some of it has to do with the current political climate. But mostly my 'no news watching' decision was based in what I view as a more fundamental trend. News reporting in my opinion has over the last decade or so morphed into hype building. Breaking news! It's going to snow tomorrow! Stock up – stay indoors yada yada yada. News flash... a thunder storm is on the way!!! Latest updates.... on the scene reporting – warnings and alerts and flash updates and scrolling breaking news... News reporting has changed. And in my opinion not for the better. They take small things and try to make them appear big. They take normal things and shape them to look threatening. They take truly news worthy things and twist it and turn it and ride it and interview 20 people about their opinion on the matter to the point of being ridiculous. So I quit watching, and read more. I like it better that way. Today's talk shows and news channels can learn from the writer of Hebrews I think.

Reread the passage. ***In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you..."*** Breaking news!!!! you struggle against sin! Emergency update – sin is out to get you!! News flash – war against your new life in Christ has been declared – you are under attack!! None of that. No hype. No flashes, or on the scene reporting, no 'who do we blame' or 'how could anyone ever...' No lining up experts or getting Dr. Phil's take on things - Just simple day to day – ***'in your struggle against sin...'*** No an ***'if you struggle against sin'*** - no, ***'how could you struggle with sin'*** no – ***the reason you struggle with sin....and so and so are the ones to blame'*** Just simple, matter of fact, not news just reality – ***in your struggle against sin...***

Refreshing.

But there is more – not a news flash, just a reminder. No emotion stirring, just resolve building btw – in your struggle in case you have not noticed ***you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*** I like that. No rah, rah, no guilt manipulation, no drama, no 5 easy steps to overcoming. A simply reminder that you have not yet exhausted your ability to resist. You have more to give to the fight. Kind of like growing up when you were playing a game and took a really hard shot, or had a terrible looking crash – maybe even saw stars, got a stinger and an entire part of your body

went numb, twisted things around in a way that made other people groan – went over to the sideline, regrouped with the team and someone looked at you – looked over the ding and said, ‘you’re good, rub some dirt on it and get back in there.’

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

That’s not news, it’s just life – comes with the kingdom of God pursuit. If you are going to live holy you are going to struggle with sin. Get over it and stay at it. Get help if you need to. But do not give up. (btw the comment about not yet resisting to the point of shedding your blood – is a reference to Jesus who in His struggle against sin – [ours not his] - did resist to the point of shedding blood) And then the writer continues by reminding us that discipline is good. In fact, he refers to it as a ‘word of encouragement!’ Because ultimately our Father is in charge of this universe. And as a son or daughter of His, any struggle He allows in our lives He uses for our growth and benefit. Simply put, our struggle against sin – is never wasted. Consider that today and pray about it. Walk with God to the places where you are struggling against sin. Ask Him to help you see it as He sees it. And ask Him to help you fight it the way He wants you to fight it. And lastly tell Him you trust Him to use it for your growth and His glory. Pray also today for someone you know who is wrestling with sin.

April 24 – Read 2 Timothy 2:16.

Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.

You’ve heard the phrase. Maybe someone once said it of you. Perhaps you used to describe another person. ‘That person is going somewhere.’ Usually it is given as an affirmation. Normally it is used to express positive potential, to describe drive that will one day bear fruit. The phrase is a marker and a prophecy – ‘yes, right now they are here – but give it time, give it time and this person, with what they bring to the table –the sky is the limit...’ The phrase is interesting – don’t know if anyone has ever done a study on its predictive ability. Might be interesting to see.

But on the other hand I would suggest that the statement ‘this person is going somewhere’ is 100% accurate. It is a failsafe prophecy. Everyone who utters it is a prophet. But it’s a fixed gig. Truth is that every life of every person whether the words ‘that person is going somewhere’ were spoken over them or not – they ARE going somewhere. It’s a fact of life. As inescapable as breathing. As necessary as a heartbeat. And more powerful than either.

May I personalize the thought? ‘You are going somewhere.’ And the choices by the way are extremely limited. The desired pathway (as far as God is concerned and to the degree God is involved) is further and further into godliness and holiness, i.e living the life God intends. The other choice is reflected in this verse. ***Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.***

Do you get the scripture’s gist here? It is not saying just that ‘godless chatter’ is bad or hurtful. It is saying that such things are powerful. It is not only that such things are coming out of our mouths – it is far more insidious – such things are taking you somewhere. **You are going somewhere!** Want it or not. Like it or not. Dismiss it or not. Imagine you are the exception or not. **You are going somewhere.** And the options are two: either into greater and richer godliness, or into deeper and darker ungodliness.

God of course – prefers the former.

And my guess is so do you. So do most, really. But we all know that what gets us to a great destination in life is not what we desire, but what we do. A great future does not become reality based on our dreams, but because of our decisions.

We are going somewhere. You are going somewhere. Thus the warning. ***Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.***

So today pray about this. Where are you going with your life? And contrary to a baseball game, or sporting event – the chatter matters. Listen to it. And if necessary – change it.