

THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

REV. SERGEI SOSEDKIN
PALOS HEIGHTS, ILLINOIS

The life of every Christian can be aptly described as a daily journey of faith. This month Rev. Sergei Sosedkin invites us to reflect together on our spiritual journey. Let's take time together to focus on our journey's beginning and destination as well as its challenges and blessings. In these devotions the author draws upon various biblical passages and real-life stories to discover what makes for a fulfilling walk with Christ.

Rev. Sergei Sosedkin is the Russian-language ministry leader for The Back to God Hour. He is a native of Moscow, Russia. As a youth in Russia, Sergei was influenced by radio messages of The Back to God Hour, and he became a Christian when he was a teenager. In overseeing the Russian-language ministry today, Rev. Sosedkin works both at our office in suburban Chicago and in various locations in Russia.

OUR HEAVENLY GPS

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not
on your own understanding. Proverbs 3:5

The statistics are out, and it doesn't look good. According to a national survey of car owners, nearly 60 percent of drivers in the United States get lost a few times each year. Imagine! But you don't have to live in the U.S. to know the helpless feeling of being disoriented. I regularly get lost in the Russian cities I visit too.

Experts maintain that getting lost wastes our time, energy, and resources. Sometimes it can even put us in danger. Their advice is simple: before you go anywhere, make sure you have the right directions—or, better yet, a global positioning system (GPS) for navigating.

This month let's reflect together about our spiritual journey: its beginning and destination, its sharp turns and slowdowns, its challenges and blessings. Today's Scripture gives us a crucial piece of advice for every successful journey of faith. Before we can start "driving," we have to fully trust the Lord. The Bible often calls the Lord our Shepherd. In today's terms, we could say God is our GPS. Trust in this GPS, and you'll never get lost!

The Lord warns us against thinking we are smart enough to figure out our own way. He doesn't even want us to follow other belief systems. He tells us to turn to him in every part of our spiritual journey. If we acknowledge the Lord's leadership, he will make our path straight and see us through.

PRAYER

Our Lord, we are lost and disoriented without you. That's why we turn to you for direction in our spiritual journey. Guide us and make our path straight, we pray. Amen.

OUR SPIRITUAL NUTRITION

“Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of [him], so the one who feeds on me will live. . . .” John 6:57

What are your favorite travel snacks? What munchies do you take along when you go hiking or biking or on a road trip? Some people like energy bars; others prefer trail mixes of nuts and dried fruit; others go for fresh veggies like carrots or celery. These simple snacks give us nutrition that we need during our travels.

As we travel the journey of faith, we also need an energy source that provides strength and stamina. But here we have to be especially careful. Our trip will last a lifetime, so we need something more serious than a casual snack. Our journey can be ruined if we make the wrong choices. The Bible’s advice is clear: Jesus says that he himself should become our spiritual nutrition!

What does this mean? The living Father sent Jesus in order to find and save his lost ones. So all who turn to Jesus in faith, depending on him for spiritual food, can connect to the life-giving strength of God the Father.

Do you feel exhausted in your spiritual journey? Do you lack energy for your daily walk with Christ? Turn to Jesus, and he will replenish your strength. Remember that every day you need some time for reading his Word, conversing with him in prayer, and reflecting on the Lord and how he wants you to live. Let Jesus become your source of spiritual nutrition, and he will give you inner strength and life everlasting.

PRAYER

Our Father, we praise you for sending your Son. He is our only reliable source of spiritual nutrition and life everlasting. Continue feeding us on our daily spiritual journey! Amen.

THE LIVING WATER

“The water I give [you] will become in [you] a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
John 4:14

Yesterday we talked about road snacks. Today let’s consider drinking water. You are likely aware that about two thirds of the human body consists of water. No wonder we drink so often! On a journey, having fresh water is even more important than food.

In our passage for today Jesus talks with a woman in Samaria about water. He talks about good drinking water, and he talks about *living water*. In those days—and still today in the Middle East—fresh water is a precious resource. Everyone needs it to survive. But Jesus says that the water he gives *brings* life. It’s living water that wells up within us to give eternal life!

Many Old Testament verses speak of thirsting after God as one thirsts for a cool drink. God is called the fountain of life and the spring of living water. In our reading for today, living water refers to eternal life. Once we satisfy our thirst with living water, we will never thirst again. The Holy Spirit provides this living water in our soul for us to draw upon continuously.

No successful journey of faith is possible without access to living water. Only Jesus can show us the way out of our spiritual desert. Only Jesus can quench our burning thirst for God. Only the one Lord and Savior is able to give us this amazing gift that satisfies the deepest desire of our soul.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for spiritually refreshing our souls with living water through Jesus and by your Spirit. Help us to share this wonderful gift with all the thirsty people we meet. Amen.

A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

Yelena, a godly grandmother from the Ukraine, had joyful news to share. Her grandson became a Christian! He used to be the village drunk, and his family thought he would end up in jail. But the gospel has dramatically changed him. Yelena calls it a miracle. His neighbors still can't believe that he now welcomes people to his house not for a drink but for a Bible study!

In today's verses the apostle Paul says that when God's power and grace touch a human heart, a spectacular change happens. It's not some kind of masquerade or plastic surgery. In Christ a former sinner becomes a brand-new person on the inside.

As we reflect on this, let us remember that in the very beginning all things were made through Christ. But the original creation became polluted with sin. And now—again through Christ—we can become restored or created anew. Can you see why Christ plays such a crucial role in our walk of faith?

In Christ we become reconciled to God by making a faith commitment. Our relationship with God cannot be reestablished without his Son. And once we are reunited to God, we become Christ's ambassadors. God is making an appeal to others through us. Are you a new creation in Christ? If so, have you joined his diplomatic service, inviting others to be reconciled to God?

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, we praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ! In him we become a new creation. Bless our ministry for your sake as Christ's faithful ambassadors. Amen.

TRAVEL ATTIRE

Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus . . . and do not think about how to gratify the . . . sinful nature. Romans 13:14

Self-help books are well known for this bit of advice: *Dress for success*. Do you want to have a dream career? Are you longing for fulfilling relationships? Well, experts say that one thing you can do is dress for success!

I knew of a college graduate who had several job interviews lined up. He would dry-clean his whole business suit before every interview. He wanted to look perfect in order to land his dream job. I don't know if the dry cleaning helped, but he got the job offer.

In today's Bible passage the apostle Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with Christ. Is this something as superficial as a "dress for success" mantra? Of course not! Paul is talking here about having Jesus work in our lives. With the help of the Holy Spirit we need to put aside our sinful actions and behave decently in every area of life. That means no drunkenness, no sexual immorality, no constant fighting with others, no jealousy.

Paul tells us to wrap ourselves with Christ's goodness. We need to show outwardly what has taken place inwardly. Christ's grace is compared to the versatile Middle Eastern robe that keeps you cool in the hot sun and warm during cold desert nights. That's what we need in our journey of faith. Christ is our best "attire" to protect us from temptations and to help us witness to others about God's love.

PRAYER

Our Father, cleanse our hearts from sin so that we may clothe ourselves with Christ's grace, love, and goodness. Help us to be your faithful followers and witnesses! Amen.

THE LIBERATING TRUTH

“If you hold to my teaching, you . . . will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” John 8:31-32

As a Jehovah’s Witness for almost forty years, Ilya tried his best to earn his salvation, and he thought he was pretty good at it. But one day he heard a Christian radio program about salvation in Christ. For Ilya this was a real eye-opener. He started studying the Christian Bible and even visited a local Christian church.

Today Ilya is a member of an evangelical fellowship, professing Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He loves talking about the liberating power of the gospel. He says that studying the Bible has helped him break free from all the lies he was taught for so many years.

In our verses for today Jesus teaches about freedom and slavery. For him these are not just political but mainly spiritual conditions. Jesus’ message to us is crystal-clear: things like our religious background, our ethnicity, or our cultural heritage cannot set us free from our slavery to sin. We are too weak to liberate ourselves. Only God’s Son can set us free. And we find this real freedom when we hold to his teaching.

Note that “holding to” means much more than just listening to the gospel and politely nodding to it. Holding to Christ’s teaching means responding to biblical truth by believing it and changing our behavior. That’s how God’s truth sets us free. That’s how we become God’s children. That’s how our spiritual journey begins.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the liberating message of the gospel! Open our hearts and minds to your truth. Give us strength as we seek to hold to Christ’s teaching. Amen.

SURPRISING ENCOURAGEMENT

Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened . . . Hebrews 3:13

In 1958 the first Tchaikovsky Piano Competition was held in Moscow. A 23-year-old participant from the United States, Van Cliburn, played so masterfully that he received an eight-minute standing ovation. He won first prize, received a hero's welcome back in the U.S., and enjoyed coverage in the worldwide press.

Few people, however, know what Van Cliburn did with his prize, an expensive car. To the dismay of Soviet authorities, he donated it to the only evangelical church permitted in Moscow at that time. Van Cliburn had visited that church for Sunday worship and was so moved by the stories of persecuted believers there that he decided to encourage them in this unexpected way.

Encouraging one another is an important part of our daily walk with Christ. We live in a world corrupted by unbelief, sin, and, at times, persecution. How can we stay firm in our faith? Scripture gives us this recipe: love, encourage, and pray for one another. In God's grace, the Holy Spirit uses these acts of mutual care to see us through the most trying of times.

When fellow believers are struggling, be quick to extend your helpful, sharing hand. Be graceful and generous. Offer words of comfort and prayer, as well as tangible acts of help. Encourage people around you, and be surprised by how much you are encouraged yourself!

PRAYER

Father, we praise you for faithful believers who have encouraged us in our daily journey of faith. Give us your love so that we may become godly encouragers to others. Amen.

THE SEARCHING GOD

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee
from your presence? Psalm 139:7

A native of Russia, Tatyana was an unbeliever when she moved with her husband to his native Turkey. Before long she had everything she had always wanted: a loving family, two daughters, and a prosperous life. But something was missing. She felt empty inside and struggled with depression.

One evening Tatyana was tuning in to Radio Moscow, but instead she stumbled on the Russian broadcast of The Back to God Hour. Soon she wrote us a letter and requested a Bible, which we sent her. A few months later she wrote that she was reading her Bible and had prayed to Christ to accept and forgive her. "I still can't believe that the Lord Jesus found me, a Russian woman, in a faraway Muslim country!" she exclaimed.

In Psalm 139 we read about the searching and knowing God. His love goes far beyond geographic distances, political frontiers, and human circumstances. God knows our needs perfectly and cares about us. He sends his Holy Spirit to comfort and guide us in our journey of faith, even as we cross difficult and unfamiliar terrain.

When we feel hurt, when our situation looks bleak when we are haunted by dark, anxious thoughts, let us remember that we are not alone. Our loving and caring God is always near and is able to help. Turn to him, and he will lead you in the way everlasting!

PRAYER

Our searching and knowing God, please
guide us on our path as we walk with you.
Help us to be your faithful followers in good
times and bad. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE POWER OF GOD'S PROMISE

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm
and secure. Hebrews 6:19

In 1988 a terrible earthquake shook the country of Armenia. Thousands of people died. In one small town right after the earthquake a father rushed to his son's school, only to find the building flattened.

Many times this father had promised, "No matter what, I'll be there for you when you need me." Now it seemed hopeless, but he started removing some of the rubble. Others discouraged him, but he kept working. After 38 long hours of digging, the exhausted man heard a scream from beneath the rubble. It was his son's voice! Soon the father saw the first of 13 school children who had survived the quake. When the building had collapsed, they had been spared in a tent-like pocket.

This story appeared in the Armenian press and later in the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. But in the Bible we find an even more amazing story about the fulfillment of God's promise to save us, his children, through Jesus Christ. In Jesus our heavenly Father keeps his promise!

God's promise to save us is unchanging, and our strength for a daily walk of faith is deeply rooted in that promise. In our reading for today the Bible compares this hope to an anchor. Even when terrible storms of life besiege us, we should not fear. Thanks to our anchor, Jesus Christ, our salvation is always firm and secure, for God has promised!

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, thank you for your firm promise of salvation in Jesus Christ! Make us, your children, worthy of your fatherly promise, as we go about serving you! Amen.

HELP FROM ABOVE

“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”
John 15:20

Abdullah is a young man from the predominantly Muslim country of Uzbekistan. Five years ago he lost his parents and most of his siblings, so at times he feels very lonely. No, it wasn't a terrorist attack, a car crash, or some other tragic accident. Five years ago Abdullah became a follower of Jesus Christ, and in response most of his Muslim relatives turned away from him.

Sadly, Abdullah's story is not uncommon. Even if we live in a tolerant society, we may experience rejection by family members, friends, and neighbors because we follow Jesus. In our reading for today the Lord tells us not to be surprised if we are hated and persecuted on his behalf. Many people don't know the true God, and they often harass Christians. Spiritual arrogance is the main reason for this hatred.

Jesus knows what we are going through when we suffer on his behalf, for he was persecuted terribly. And just as he promised, he sends us the Spirit of truth to encourage us and help us tell others about God. The Holy Spirit is with us every day, guiding us in our journey of faith. And once the Spirit breaks down people's arrogance toward God, relations are easier to repair.

From a recent letter we received from Abdullah, we learned that he has reestablished relations with his younger sister. How? She has also become a Christian!

PRAYER

Our Father, we praise you for your Spirit, who comforts us when we are rejected or persecuted because of your name. Help us witness to people who don't know you. Amen.

THE BOOK FOR ANY AGE

From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures,
which are able to make you wise 2 Timothy 3:15

Do you remember when you saw the Bible for the first time? If you come from a Christian home, you probably don't. When I was growing up in the former U.S.S.R., however, the Bible was banned. Only a few people had one. I saw my first Bible when I was 16. It belonged to my friend's grandfather, a devout Baptist.

I still remember how my friend pulled this precious Book from its hiding place—and for a few brief moments I flipped through its pages. But soon my friend took the Bible from me and hid it again. Two years later I managed to acquire a Bible of my own. Needless to say, I couldn't stop reading it!

Today's verses tell us that Timothy learned the Scriptures from a very young age. What a blessing that must have been! Those of us who didn't grow up in a godly home often feel somewhat disadvantaged. But in a sense, we are blessed much more than Timothy. He had access only to the Old Testament. Today we can study the Bible in its entirety!

Inspired by God, the Bible has many uses. The most important of those is that it makes us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." By studying the Scriptures, people of every age can acquire godly wisdom for their journey of faith. That's why this Book is so precious to sincere believers.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for giving us your holy Scriptures! Regardless of our age, help us study your Word daily so we can become wise for salvation through faith in Jesus. Amen.

SPIRITUAL CHECKUP

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:24

Something strange happened to me as a teenager. I was working on some electronic equipment, and I was so deeply immersed in the project that my mouth was a bit open as I concentrated. As I cut a tiny piece of wire with sharp pliers, it shot off unexpectedly. I felt that little piece of metal hit my lip and then stick somewhere in my throat!

That night I experienced sharp pain, and the next morning I rushed to the hospital, where the doctor first X-rayed my throat and then ordered a full-body scan. Finally she said, "I don't see any metal in your body. That piece never got into your mouth. Your pain might feel real, but it's not."

Sometimes physical pain can be deceiving, and this can also happen spiritually. Our concepts of God and ourselves can seem very real, but they might not be accurate. Just as we visit a doctor to check our physical health, we must always seek an objective picture of our spiritual condition from the Great Physician.

Scripture is God's powerful scanner. God uses it to tell us if something is wrong in our heart—and how to fix it. Scripture also teaches us how to live out our faith in healthy ways that please God.

Through his written Word, the Lord who searches our hearts equips us for the journey of faith.

PRAYER

Lord, as we study the Scriptures, open our eyes to the truth about you and about ourselves. Heal us with your inspired Word and lead us "in the way everlasting." Amen.

WISDOM AND STRENGTH

God chose the foolish things of the world . . . [and]
the weak things of the world 1 Corinthians 1:27

In 1978 Pyotr, a Christian teenager, was drafted into the Soviet Army. It wasn't long before everyone in his military unit knew he was a "churchman."

One day an officer demanded that Pyotr publicly denounce his faith. He refused. The officer pointed his handgun at Pyotr's head: "Denounce your God right now, or I'll shoot!" Pyotr quietly closed his eyes and prayed. A gun's click broke the silence. A misfire? A moment later—another click! Pyotr trembled, but he remained faithful to Jesus. The upset officer realized that his cruel games wouldn't work. He threw his gun back in its holster and yelled at Pyotr to get out of his office.

When Pyotr remembers this story today, he doesn't think he was such a brave and committed Christian. But somehow in God's grace he managed to remain faithful. Pyotr was one of the "weak things of the world" that God uses "to shame the strong."

We know the limits of our flesh and intellect. But in Christ God chooses us, the weak and often foolish people, to be his disciples. By God's grace we become his strong and wise followers.

It's not up to us; it's up to God. We have no right to boast. We can only praise our almighty Lord for the miracle of transformation—and humbly ask him for more strength and wisdom in our daily walk of faith.

PRAYER

Almighty God, we are weak, but you are strong. Please make us your faithful disciples. Give us the strength and wisdom we need in order to serve you faithfully. Amen.

HEAVENLY ADOPTION

In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ . . . Ephesians 1:4-5

I met a Christian couple on my way from Chicago to Moscow. Our connecting flight was delayed, and we started talking. They were flying to Russia to adopt an orphan, a little girl. This would be their first time to meet her.

As they showed me her picture, they were excited to welcome her into their family. They wanted to take good care of her and share their faith with her. Clearly they loved this child even before meeting her. Without even seeing her, they were willing to sacrifice money, time, and effort to make her their daughter.

The gospel story is similar, except that it's much bigger. God loves us so dearly that he chose us to be his children—even before the creation of the world! But in order to fully adopt us, he needed to deal with human sin. That's why he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to die for us. In Jesus we find our salvation. In him God the Father adopts us to be sons and daughters in his international family.

How should we respond to God's bountiful love? The Bible tells us that we should love God first of all and that we should also love one another. No wonder Christianity is called the religion of love! Encouraged by God's love for us, we seek to reflect God's love back into heaven and into this world.

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, how excited we are to be, through adoption, your sons and daughters in Jesus Christ! Help us to respond with love to your love. Amen.

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS!

“Be strong and courageous The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you” Deut. 31:7-8

When Valentina became a Christian, she was excited about her new life in Jesus, and she thought everything would now be wonderful. But her unbelieving husband didn't want her to attend church. Soon he left her, even though she was pregnant with their second child. Then Valentina had to deal with her mother, who pressured her to get an abortion.

As we come to Christ, we often have high hopes and expectations. But things don't always go our way. All Christians experience difficult times, but God always supports and encourages.

Valentina was encouraged by a Back to God Hour message on abortion. She decided that abortion was not an option. Then she discovered this beautiful passage: “Be strong and courageous The LORD himself goes before you” What a call and a promise! The charge came from Moses as he transferred leadership to Joshua, who would lead God's people into the promised land. Despite obstacles, the Lord would provide.

In Valentina's case the Lord provided through her church. The church people helped with clothing for her new baby, and they provided temporary housing. They also helped Valentina find a job after the baby was born.

Valentina knows that the Lord provides. Do you know this truth as well?

PRAYER

Father, we thank you for your firm promise to never leave us. Help us to always be strong and courageous in our daily spiritual journey. In Christ we pray! Amen.

OUR JOYFUL FAITH

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad. . . . Rejoice in the LORD . . . and praise his holy name. Psalm 97:1, 12

Can you imagine becoming a refugee in your retirement years, violently uprooted from your community and finding yourself in a new place with no family, church, or retirement benefits?

That's what our listener Maria had to face at age 68. In her letter she openly talks about her sense of loss, being far from her family and church and having many unbelievers for neighbors. Yet Maria's painful experiences haven't made her bitter. Actually she is excited. Recently she started a neighborhood Bible study, and she is praying for an even greater outreach ministry. Maria writes about God's presence in her life.

If you have a cell phone, you know that if you go outside of your coverage area, the phone is useless. But God's grace is not like that. If we belong to the Lord, we are never outside his "coverage area." And that applies not only to our geographic location but also to any situation in our lives. That's why the psalmist can't stop praising his Lord!

Regardless of our external circumstances, the Lord always reigns, and his loving reign extends to every corner of this world and every part of our lives. God protects us, his children. He nourishes us with his Word and encourages us with his Spirit. That's what makes biblical Christianity so positive and joyful!

PRAYER

Lord, your loving reign makes us joyful. We praise you for guarding our lives and delivering us from evil! Be with us on our journey of faith, as we continue serving you. Amen.

A WIDOW'S GIFT

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." Mark 12:43

Who is the most generous giver today? You've likely heard of Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who runs the largest foundation in the world. You may also know about the generosity of Warren Buffet, who pledged the largest stock donation ever. Today's major philanthropists are very rich, their names are well known, and most of them are men.

But when Mark writes about giving, he draws our attention to someone who is poor, nameless, and a widow. On her way to the temple treasury she follows some wealthy and seemingly generous people. And guess what? Jesus says she makes the most generous donation! Somehow her gift of two small copper coins is more generous than the gifts of the wealthy.

We don't have to be rich to make a generous donation for the Lord. True giving means more than simply opening our wallet or writing a big check. It's about unlocking our hearts to God first and then fully trusting him in everything, including our financial well-being.

Jesus expects us to be generous when serving him, and he has every right to demand that. Just a few days after he met the widow, Jesus gave up his life—the most generous and loving act in all of history. That's why he rejoiced about the widow's generosity. That's why he calls us to be generous and sacrificial today.

PRAYER

Father, we praise you for your generous gift of salvation through your Son. Give us the generous spirit of that widow as we live out our gratitude to you. Amen.

TAKE A BREAK!

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all [his] work. . . . Genesis 2:3

In my teens I enjoyed reading Alexandre Dumas's novels set in 17th-century France. Among other things, Dumas describes the express mail delivery in Europe at that time. A messenger would ride a horse to total exhaustion or even death; then he would get a new one and ride on, until he reached his destination.

As a city boy, I was shocked to learn that it's possible to ride a horse to death. I thought that such a powerful animal couldn't die from exhaustion like that. But my father confirmed it to be true.

This problem applies not only to horses, however. What do you say when people ask, "How are you?" Do you immediately roll your eyes and exclaim, "Busy!?" How does your calendar look? Do you have time for God and spiritual renewal?

We live in a world that pushes us to run faster and work harder. A businessman in Russia boasted to me that he was working so much that he barely had time for Sunday worship. "You really think you are stronger than God?" I wondered.

In the Bible we discover the God-ordained pattern of life. God labors for six days and rests on the seventh. During our journey of faith we all need regular time off to rest and be spiritually recharged in God's presence. So let's not skip the rest areas on our spiritual journey!

PRAYER

Our Father, we need your wisdom to follow the healthy patterns of work and spiritual rest. Help us to stop running so that we can take time for you. In Jesus, Amen.

WALK THE TALK!

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:18

When our radio listeners contact us, they usually send a letter or an e-mail. Nikolai, a farmer and hunter from Siberia, mailed to our Russian office a short note along with a bearskin! He wanted to support our ministry but didn't have cash. So he sent a skin he had recently hunted, and he asked us to sell his gift and use the proceeds to buy Bibles for the poor.

Soon we became the recipients of other gifts—such as dried fruits and honey—all from Nikolai. More recently he has been sending us cash contributions, and with every gift he encloses a note of encouragement and some brotherly criticism of our radio messages.

Actions speak louder than words. When Nikolai writes notes or sends gifts to us, we know he cares. That's what today's passage is about. According to John, talk is cheap if it is not followed by concrete actions.

When I was graduating from Bible college, our professor told us, "Congratulations. You have all learned how to speak as true Christians! Now the challenge is to always live out your beautiful words." That's a challenge for everyone who is on a journey of faith. Are we walking the talk?

Our salvation in Jesus is a free gift. Now we are called to do good works out of our thankfulness for salvation, showing our genuine love for God and neighbor.

PRAYER

Lord, we praise you for your salvation in Christ! In him you have shown us what true love is. Teach us how to love not only with words but also with tangible actions! Amen.

JARS OF CLAY

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God 2 Cor. 4:7

When Marina returned from the hospital, she was excited because in her hospital room she had heard something amazing. In plain, heartfelt words another patient, Antonina, had told her about God's grace and explained how to be spiritually healed by Christ's wounds. Antonina invited Marina to visit her church when they were both out of the hospital.

Marina couldn't wait for Sunday! In church she gave her life to Jesus. Later in a letter to us she wrote, "When I entered the hospital, I was so depressed. But I learned about Jesus and was encouraged by his gospel. It's all thanks to Antonina, who cared enough to talk to me."

What made Antonina such an effective evangelist? I believe it was her willingness to share the treasure in her heart, the gospel. Paul writes about treasure hidden in jars of clay. In the Middle East it was customary to keep jewelry and gold coins in such jars. The containers looked modest, but inside were precious objects.

Similarly we might have a humble appearance. Our speech and biblical knowledge might be imperfect. But we are blessed by the precious good news of Jesus in our hearts. As we continue our journey of faith, let's remember that the power is in the message, not the messenger! Let us generously share our testimony so that God's grace might touch even more souls around us.

PRAYER

Our Father, despite all our weaknesses and imperfections, you give us a great calling. Help us to tell others about the hope we have in you. Use us for your glory, not ours. Amen.

LIFE TO ITS FULLEST

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life . . . to the full.” John 10:10

A faithful radio listener, Yekaterina, age 55, lives in the Ukraine. She became a Christian five years ago. Her son is an unbeliever and a drug addict. In Yekaterina’s own words: “He doesn’t value his life. He can see that he is perishing, yet he doesn’t believe that there can be a different life with God.”

Of course, this description of a sad spiritual and physical predicament applies not only to Yekaterina’s son. Many people all over the world live with an empty heart, with no hope or sense of purpose. What can the gospel say to them?

In our reading for today Jesus talks about a radically different life. But he first warns us against the thief who steals, kills, and destroys—who is interested only in himself. Then Jesus tells us that he came to this earth for us. He gives up his own life in order to grant us the gift of life—life to its fullest!

This life is much richer and more amazing than anything this world can offer. Full life in Jesus is eternal, and yet it starts immediately. It’s simple, yet rich. Life in Christ is so different because at its foundation is God’s grace, love, and forgiveness.

How is your journey going today? Do you feel God’s purpose in your daily actions? Thanks to Christ, we can now enjoy life in God’s presence—life to its fullest.

PRAYER

Father, we praise you for the full life you have given us in Jesus Christ. Because of his death we can live. Help us to tell others about his wonderful gift of purposeful life. Amen.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me
... will have the light of life.” John 8:12

Alexei was in his early 30s when he lost his eyesight because of a rare illness. His wife, friends, and relatives soon left him. Only his loving mother stayed. Depressed, he spent his days listening to the radio. That’s how he heard the good news of Jesus for the first time.

Alexei contacted us, and I had the privilege of visiting him several times and presenting him with a New Testament on tape. He told me that he enjoyed the Gospel of John the most. Why? Because John often contrasts light with darkness. Alexei could really relate to that contrast.

In today’s passage from the gospel of John, Jesus calls himself the light of the world. He truly is the light who fully reveals to us God’s love and the way of salvation. In his light we see ourselves for who we really are—sinners in need of a Savior. His light removes the darkness of sin from our lives and shows us the road ahead.

Alexei’s physical vision was impaired, but the Lord blessed him with keen spiritual sight. When he heard the call to believe, Alexei gave his life to Jesus. I still remember the words of his testimony: “I am blind, but I see the light of Christ. And for me that matters the most.” Have you seen the beautiful light of God’s salvation? Have you let this light shine into and transform your life?

PRAYER

Father, thank you for sending your bright light into our dark world. In Christ’s light we see not only our sinfulness but also your glorious salvation. Shine, Jesus, shine! Amen.

SEEK HIM!

If . . . you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart . . . Deut. 4:29

When Konstantin got into a terrible car accident, he vowed that if he would survive he'd devote the rest of his life to God. Miraculously he walked away with no serious injury. Three years have passed. Today Konstantin is honest enough to admit that he hasn't kept his promise. Actually he is still wondering which religion he should follow.

Konstantin lives in Russia, but his story rings true everywhere. We all know of people who made a promise to the Lord when they were in trouble. But then things got better, and they forgot their promise to God. In fact, the Scriptures teach that we all, at some point in our lives, have been promise breakers.

In today's passage we read about Israel's pattern of relations with the Lord: rebellion against God leading to expulsion from the promised land; repentance resulting in restoration. God's people went through this cycle again and again. God eventually revealed that the only way out of sin and rebellion is through Jesus Christ, who gives us new life through his Holy Spirit. In him we can live and grow in grace by the Spirit's power.

If we feel lost in our faith journey today, if we have broken our promises to God, let us turn to God and be encouraged by this beautiful truth: "The LORD . . . will not abandon . . . you or forget" his promises to you.

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, forgive us for promises that we made to you and then broke. By your Holy Spirit teach us to be fully committed to you, and guide us each day. In Jesus, Amen.

BABIES IN CHRIST

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. 1 Peter 2:2

Albert and his wife Danube live in the small Baltic country of Lithuania. Albert is 70 years old, and his wife is 68. They became believers in Christ and joined the church only 15 years ago. Albert writes: "We are still young children of God, and we have so much to look forward to in our walk with Christ!" This couple is excited about Sunday services, prayer meetings, and Bible studies at their local church.

When did your journey of faith begin? Are you enthusiastic about your walk with Christ? Or are you maybe feeling spiritually bored—tired of reading the Scriptures and hearing about God?

In today's verses Peter addresses a diverse audience of believers. He speaks to mature Christians and to those who have just heard about Christ. But Peter's advice to both groups is the same. He tells his readers first to get rid of negative attitudes that can be harmful to our relationships with God and others. Then he urges them to crave the "pure spiritual milk" of the Word of God. Believers should be just as eager for God's truth as newborn babies are hungry for mother's milk. It's not childish or immature; it's healthy!

As we keep feeding on the Word of God, we grow in our understanding and appreciation of God's grace—and that makes us interested to know him more.

PRAYER

Lord, help us get rid of any negative attitudes we might have. Renew in us a sense of wonder and excitement in our walk with you. Nourish us by your Word and Spirit. Amen.

OUR DAILY EASTER

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus 1 Peter 1:3

When terrorists stormed his school in southern Russia, Alex Pospelov, age 13, became one of the hostages. Like other students and teachers, he spent long hours on the gym floor, guarded by heavily armed men. The hostages were all thirsty, hungry, and afraid.

A terrorist noticed that Alex, an Orthodox Christian, was wearing a small cross. He pointed his machine gun at the cross and demanded that Alex confess Allah. But instead the boy stammered, "Christ is risen!" At this tense moment, all Alex could remember was a traditional Easter greeting, even though it wasn't Eastertime.

Do we realize that every Sunday we gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord? In Peter's words, we are given a "new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus." This hope, our eternal inheritance, comforts us in the midst of suffering. It's a firm foundation of our saving faith, and it is more precious than gold. Alex might have been confused, but in the face of death he found the best words to say.

As Easter draws near, we will again hear the great news that Christ died for us and is risen from the dead. We will be reminded that the foundation of our living hope is best described by the ancient greeting "Christ is risen!" Our daily walk of faith is meaningless if we are not walking in the light of this great truth.

PRAYER

Lord, we praise you for the living hope that we have in your Son's resurrection. Thank you that in good times and bad we can lean on this great truth: *Christ is risen!* Amen.

DO NOT FEAR!

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.”
Isaiah 41:10

As a young woman, my grandmother Natalia lived through World War II: occupation, deaths of relatives and friends, bombardments, and hunger. She didn't like talking about those cruel experiences. But she often recalled her long prayers in the cold basement where her family hid in fear. They thought they were going to die, and yet somehow she sensed that the Lord was near.

In today's passage the Lord tells us, “Do not fear, for I am with you.” God knows we will go through difficult times in our lives. There will be hard moments when we'll feel scared and helpless, lonely and insecure. From our reading for today, though, we can note three reasons not to fear.

First, God has called us from the ends of the earth and chosen us to be his. That's the surest proof of God's love and concern for us. We are his!

Second, God is with us. He knows what circumstances we are going through, and he is suffering with us. He is near!

Third, the Lord reminds us that he is our God. He is on our side, and he is faithful!

As we journey through life, it's important to remember that even in the midst of terrible struggles the Lord is with us. That's why we should not fear. In his amazing grace, God will strengthen, help, and uphold us.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for being with us even when we go through difficult times. Your love comforts us, and your presence gives us strength. Praise be to you always! Amen.

REAL TREASURE

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
Matthew 6:21

During World War II my grandfather Ivan, still a teenager, served in the Red Army as a machine gun operator. The battles on the Russian front were dreadfully bloody. Thousands were killed daily.

It was illegal to steal from the bodies of dead enemy soldiers, but rules are often broken during war. My grandfather's friend Rustam gathered a sizable collection of German watches. He would often lovingly inspect his collection. My grandfather pleaded with Rustam, “Stop taking those watches off the dead Germans! It's bad. Besides, we might get killed at any moment. What will you need your collection for then?” In a battle in Poland my grandfather was badly wounded and his friend Rustam was killed. My grandfather never learned what happened to Rustam's watches.

Our world is different today. But people still have an unstoppable desire for possessions. They're willing to break rules and compromise their conscience to get rich.

Jesus puts wealth into perspective: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). We know we can't take our earthly treasures with us when we die. So why risk eternity? Jesus advises us to collect heavenly treasures by serving God and our neighbors. This is the surest investment: our account in heaven is insured by God himself.

PRAYER

Our Father, help us to be good stewards of our earthly possessions. Guard our souls against greed, and give us wisdom as we gather treasures in heaven. Amen.

BE FAITHFUL!

“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10

Nikolai Antonovich’s life story would make a great movie. Originally from the Ukraine, Nikolai was shipped to Nazi Germany as a teen slave laborer. There he heard and responded to the good news of Jesus. Then, back in the U.S.S.R. after the war, he witnessed to others. And because of these “subversive activities” he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in labor camps.

Nikolai received amnesty after the death of dictator Joseph Stalin. So the prisoner returned home, served his local church, got married—and he and his wife raised four children. Recently he wrote us a letter of encouragement, saying, “Remain faithful to the very end, and one day I hope to meet you all in heaven!”

Nikolai’s words are profoundly biblical. The Scriptures encourage us to remain faithful to God regardless of circumstances. In our reading for today we find the words of Jesus to the persecuted church: “Be faithful, even to the point of death”! Don’t let difficult times turn you away from God. Lean on his grace, love, and faithfulness, and you will receive the crown of life.

Some people switch allegiances more often than they change their wardrobe. But the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We must remain faithful to him, from the beginning of our walk of faith to its end, knowing that his strength makes our faithfulness possible.

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, in this world of unfaithfulness encourage us to be always faithful. Help us to endure as we press on toward the eternal life you have prepared for us. Amen.

LOVING OUR ENEMIES

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”
Matthew 5:44

I heard this story from a dear friend of our ministry. She grew up in the Netherlands during World War II. Under the Nazi occupation of her homeland her Christian family was ordered to house a young German officer. Understandably he was an unwelcome enemy.

One day this young man received a small package from Germany. He was so excited—his mother had sent him warm woolen socks! Something moved in the hearts of his unwilling hosts. In the midst of the war’s hatred, death, and suffering, they could see a human soul in this enemy. They invited him to church and included him in their family devotions. On this small front, Christian love dealt a blow to the hatred of war.

Our Scripture reading for today highlights a seemingly impossible command: “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus sets before us the ideal of perfect love, God’s high standard that we must always strive for.

Jesus knows that at times we are tempted to demonize our enemies. But he wants us to see humanity in them, to overcome evil with good, and to wear down hatred by showing love.

As we walk in Christ, we are surrounded by all kinds of people. We must remember that we are called to love not only our friends but also our enemies.

PRAYER

Lord, in the bright light of your perfection we see our own imperfections. Fill us with your Spirit, we pray, so we may learn how to love others, even our enemies! In Jesus, Amen.

DEPARTURE TIME

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 Timothy 4:7

Every journey has a beginning and an end. Though our life with Christ will never end, we know that our journey on this earth is not going to last forever. One day we will stand in our Creator's presence.

Today we are looking at Paul's preparations for this important meeting. His thoughts about the end of his life on earth are filled with stirring emotion and striking imagery. He is honest with us in his sadness, just as he is strong in his Christian hope.

When Paul reflects on his years as Christ's apostle, it may surprise us that he uses language from the sports world. Paul says he has successfully finished the race, observed all the rules—the teachings of Christ. He has kept his faith, and now he is ready to accept his award from the Judge—a beautiful crown of righteousness.

Throughout his ministry Paul trusted his Savior. He is doing the same as he nears the end of his spiritual pilgrimage on this earth and looks forward to a new adventure in God's presence.

When our journey runs its course, will we be able to say we have fought the good fight and kept the faith? Will we be awarded the crown of righteousness? God's grace is leading us every day, and only by this grace can we be faithful, credited with Jesus' righteousness and crowned to live in his presence forever.

PRAYER

Father, every hour on this earth is a preparation for meeting you. Lead us always in your ways, and make us worthy in Christ to receive your crown of righteousness. Amen.

A PLACE PREPARED BY JESUS

“Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. . . .” John 14:1-2

An experienced traveler knows the value of making hotel reservations. The very thought of a comfortable room waiting for you at your destination makes you feel more relaxed. The trip goes more smoothly when you have advanced reservations.

In our reading for today Jesus speaks of hospitable lodging at the end of a long trip. He tells us, his followers, not to be worried during our journey on the road to eternity. We have to trust in the Father. In his heavenly house there are many rooms. And the Son prepares a special place for us. The best medicine for a troubled heart is to trust in God.

As we study this passage, we discover two important facts. First, Jesus promises us more than just temporary housing. The Greek words refer to “dwelling places,” and that implies permanence and stability. Once we move into that heavenly sanctuary, we won’t have to worry about finding new shelter again. Second, we won’t have to look for that place on our own. On this earth, it can be challenging to find an unfamiliar location, even with good directions. But Jesus himself will return to show us the way.

The reservation confirmation for this heavenly lodging is going to be very simple. It’s safe in the hands of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Have you trusted him fully?

PRAYER

Our Father, what a joy it is to know that Jesus has prepared a place for us in your presence! Help us to overcome our worries and to trust in you fully as we journey with you. Amen.