



We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

- Colossians 1:3-6

Dear Church...If you were writing a letter to the church today, what would you say? For the early followers of Jesus, letters were the primary way of communicating, and church leaders sent letters to churches they had visited or planted to continue to encourage and instruct them. So what can we learn

Dear Church...

from these early letters, and what can we imagine God wanting to say in letters to the church today?

Dear Church...

MAY 2 FREE TO LOVE GALATIANS 5:13-26

(Parallels Disciple Bible Study Week 28: The Son Shall Set Us Free)

Martin Luther, as he launched the Protestant Reformation, emphasized Paul's teaching that we are justified by faith, not by works. But if we don't have to follow any rules or laws to be loved by God, does this mean we can do anything we want? Paul, in his letter to the churches of Galatia, answers "no". Followers of Jesus are free, yes, but free not to do whatever. Followers of Jesus are freed from sin to model the way of Christ, which is to serve others.

Followers of Jesus are freed by Christ not to do whatever one desires, but to serve one another in love.

MAY 9 GUIDANCE 2 TIMOTHY 2:22-26

(Parallels Disciple Bible Study Week 29: A Pastor Gives Guidance)

Written to Timothy and Titus, but more broadly addressing the early church, the "Pastoral Letters" focused on affirming central doctrines of faith, identifying false teachings, living as the family of God, and avoiding the lure of wealth. If you were going to write a letter to guide loved ones in living in faith every day, what would you share?

Followers of Jesus engage with the church and the teachings of Jesus, always seeking guidance and growth.

MAY 16 EXTRAORDINARY HEBREWS 10:19-25

(Parallels Disciple Bible Study Week 30: Our Great High Priest)

Do you ever feel like you're just going through the motions? In difficult times, do you find it hard to hold onto hope and stay strong in your faith? Do you ever feel ready to give up? Hebrews, addressed to an audience where some followers were falling away in the midst of pressure and persecution, reminded those who were listening that Jesus offered a better way, inviting his followers to experience the extraordinary in God's love.

Followers of Jesus experience God's extraordinary through faith in Christ.

Dear Church...

Dear Church...

MAY 23 THE LORD IS NEAR PSALM 34:18

The past year has been difficult for many people, and it leaves us wanting to ask God questions. So is it ok to ask questions of God? Is it ok to cry out? Where is God in the mist of the pain and suffering? We turn to the Psalms and find we are in good company, and within the poems and songs we find both pain and hope.

Followers of Jesus trust God enough to share all thoughts and feelings.

MAY 30 HOLY 1 Peter 2:9

(Parallels Disciple Bible Study Week 31: A People Set Apart)

As followers of Jesus, should our lives look different than those around us? If so, how? If not, how do people know we follow Jesus? God calls us to be holy, but what does that mean? How do we live holy lives without seeing ourselves as better than others?

Followers of Jesus answer the call to live holy lives that reflect God's love and grace.

Dear Church...

DAILY QUESTIONS

MAY 3-8

FREE TO LOVE

Monday	Read Galatians 1:6-10. What is the "gospel" that Paul preaches and that some are deserting?
Tuesday	Read Galatians 2:15-21. What is the difference between being justified by works of the law and being justified by faith in Christ?
Wednesday	Read Galatians 3:23-29. What does it mean to be "one in Christ Jesus" (NIV)?
Thursday	Read Galatians 4:17-20. What alienates us from one another, and what draws us together?
Friday	Read Galatians 5:13-26. How does Paul's teaching on freedom differ from the freedom we often talk about as Americans?
Saturday	Read Galatians 6:11-16. What rules of today, like circumcision in the time of Paul, are used to say some are in and some are out in the kingdom of God?

MAY 10-15

GUIDANCE

Monday	Read 1 Timothy 1:3-6. For you, what are the central doctrines (or teachings) of the Christian faith?
Tuesday	Read 1 Timothy 3:1-13. What leadership characteristics are to be expected of followers of Jesus?
Wednesday	Read 1 Timothy 5:1-8. How would you describe the relationship of faith and family?
Thursday	Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 and 17-19. How does the Bible challenge the values of our culture today with regard to money and stewardship?
Friday	Read 2 Timothy 2:22-26. How does God's Word call us to guide each other in faithful community?
Saturday	Read 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8. When the time comes, what would you write about your faith in a farewell letter to loved ones and the church?

Dear Church...

MAY 17-22

EXTRAORDINARY

Monday	Read Hebrews 1:1-4. What words or phrases would you use to describe how Jesus is extraordinary?
Tuesday	Read Hebrews 2:5-18. What does it mean to you that God, in Jesus, was fully human, experiencing what we experience?
Wednesday	Read Hebrews 6:1-12. What are the "better things" (6:9 in the NIV) we experience when we follow in the way of Jesus?
Thursday	Read Hebrews 10:19-25. What does it look like to live into the extraordinary life God offers us in Jesus?
Friday	Read Hebrews 10:26-39. What lures us back into sin or causes us to give up or lose faith in God?
Saturday	Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Who are the people, past or present, who encourage you to be a faithful follower of Jesus?

MAY 24-29

THE LORD IS NEAR

Monday	Read Psalm 22:1-11. Do you think God accepts our frustration and anger in difficult times? Why or why not?
Tuesday	Read Psalm 23. What images of God bring you comfort in the midst of grief and suffering?
Wednesday	Read Psalm 30. When has God pulled you through suffering, grief, or difficult times in your life?
Thursday	Read Psalm 34. What do you think it means that the Lord is "near to the broken-hearted"? (NIV)
Friday	Read Psalm 90. How can the Psalms help us face death and grief?
Saturday	Read Lamentations 3:19-33. Where, as followers of Jesus, do we find our hope in the midst of suffering and grief?

MAY 31 – JUN 5 HOLY

Monday	Read 1 Peter 1:1-9. How can hope in Jesus carry you through times of trial or suffering?
Tuesday	Read 1 Peter 1:13-2:3. What does it mean to you to be holy?

Dear Church...

Wednesday	Read 1 Peter 2:4-10. What is the difference between being "holy as God is holy" and being "holier-than-thou"?
Thursday	Read 1 Peter 4:1-11. What does a life lived for God look like?
Friday	Read 1 Peter 4:12-19. When have you suffered for doing what was right or for living out your faith?
Saturday	Read 2 Peter 1:3-11. As a follower of Jesus, what does it mean to be called or set apart in order to participate in what God is doing?

FREE TO LOVE

SERMON ON MAY 2, 2021

Choose a question to get started!

- **What is a law or rule that you think is really important in our society?**
- **What is a law or rule that you think is kind of silly?**

Read Galatians 1:1-10.

Some scholars believe that Galatians may have been the first letter that Paul wrote and sent. The area of Galatia was in what is today modern Turkey. Barnabas and Paul had visited there on Paul's first missionary journey, stopping in Pisidian Antioch, a city on the edge of the region. The context of religious life in Galatia is important for understanding what Paul is writing. The region was dominated by the teachings of a Jewish rabbi named Shammai. For Shammai, strict adherence to the Torah was important. God-fearing Jews were not given a place in the assembly or at the table. From this culture, Jews in Galatia that became a part of the Christian community carried this teaching with them, meaning if a Gentile wanted to be fully included, they must first be circumcised and follow the Torah in full. But a new community of Jesus followers was also forming, and in this community, Gentiles were fully included without conversion. To address the divisions caused by these different views, Paul writes to this church community that he had planted.

- **What are the issues that cause tension in the church today?**
- **How are they like, or unlike, tensions in the time of Paul?**

Read Galatians 2:15-21 and 3:23-29.

Dear Church...

For Paul, the Gospel of Christ is a Gospel of inclusion – everyone is welcome at God's table. Paul says in verse 15 and 16, all are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not in works. Paul uses the pronoun "us" as he says this, so he is including the Jews. All are set free from thinking that kosher eating and other things we do can earn our way into God's love, or justify us. Does this mean Jews don't have to practice Torah? For Paul, the answer was "no". That was never a question. The very calling of the Jews was to practice the Torah to show the world how to walk according to the Spirit. They didn't follow the law to earn God's love. They followed the law to do the work of God in the world. So the question Paul answers is whether the Gentiles had to practice the law to become part of the community. To this, Paul says "no". In fact, the Gentiles have a unique calling to a new audience: to show that all people, through faith in Christ, have a seat at the table. If Gentiles are yoked to rules in order to be a part of God's people, the message of the Gospel, "God's grace available to all through faith", is lost.

- **What is the difference between being justified by works of the law and being justified by faith in Christ?**

Read Galatians 5:13-6:10.

So if Gentiles are freed from the specific teachings of the Torah, does this mean they can do anything they want? The benefits of laws and strict codes are that everyone knows what the boundaries are. If you're following laws, you clearly know whether you are walking in God's ways or not. What do you do without these boundaries? Is freedom from the law just a license to sin? Paul anticipates this question and answers no. This freedom from law is not to be used for self, but for God and others. How do you know if you're walking in the Spirit? The fruit of your life. Paul refers back to what Jesus teaches, that his disciples will be known by their fruit. Paul isn't saying don't have conversations about appropriate behavior or what the way of Jesus looks like. He's inviting the Galatians to base these conversations not on the black and white of rules but on the results of one's words and actions, and when that fruit doesn't reflect the love of Jesus, we need to treat each other gently. Paul then says the place to start that conversation is testing the fruit of our own lives.

Dear Church...

Followers of Jesus are freed by Christ not to do whatever one desires, but to serve one another in love.

- **How does Paul's teaching on freedom differ from the freedom we often talk about as Americans?**
- **What does it mean to be free to serve one another?**
- **Where you see the church bearing fruit, or not bearing fruit, today?**
- **Where do you see your life bearing fruit, or not bearing fruit, today?**

FaithFit Challenge!

Each day this week, choose a different fruit of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In prayer, create a list of ways that you see this fruit on display in your life, and ways you would like to grow in your life in exhibiting this impact of the Spirit.

Dear Church...

GUIDANCE

SERMON ON MAY 9, 2021

Read 2 Timothy 1:3-5.

As we celebrate Mother's Day, we notice in the Bible that Timothy's faith came from his grandmother and was passed on to him through his mother.

- **Describe the women in your life that have shared the faith with you.**
- **What is something that you learned from your mom, or a mother figure, in your life?**

Read 1 Timothy 1:1-6.

The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are known as the Pastoral Letters, or Pastoral Epistles. They are filled with guidance addressed to Timothy and Titus, early leaders alongside Paul, but they spoke more generally to how to structure and lead the church. One of the important issues seemed to be adherence to the central doctrines of faith, and the appearance of false teachers who were leading the church into "meaningless talk" (verse 6, NIV) that had taken the focus off of God's work.

- **For you, what are the central doctrines (or teachings) of the Christian faith?**
- **In today's community, what conversations take the focus off of God's work, off of our mission?**
- **In our quest to grow in our faith, what is the difference between fruitful conversation and debate and vain or useless conversation and debate?**

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

The first letter to Timothy also lifted up the importance of teaching and leadership in the church, presenting both characteristics of good leaders and the need to respect spiritual authority and leadership.

- **What makes a good teacher or leader in the church?**

Dear Church...

- **What characteristics should be expected of leaders in the church?**
- **In today's world of distrust and cynicism, what is the place of trust, respect, and authority of church leadership?**

Read 1 Timothy 5:1-8.

Family also appears as an issue of importance in the Pastoral Letters. Like Romans and Galatians, these letters use the wording "brothers and sisters," emphasizing the church community as a family. 1 Timothy provides a section on guidance for how to care both for one another and one's own family.

- **How is the church like a family, or not like a family, for you?**
- **How would you describe the relationship of faith and family?**

Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 and 17-19.

Both 1 and 2 Timothy warn of the luring away from God that can come with money or wealth. Sometimes 1 Timothy 6:10 is misquoted as saying that money is the root of evil. Note that this isn't what it says. The larger context encourages both contentment and generosity, guiding those with wealth to stay focused on God and use what they have been given for the good of the community. In money, as in all of these issues facing the early church, the followers of Jesus are encouraged to be open to guidance and teaching grounded in the love of God and neighbor.

Followers of Jesus engage with the church and the teachings of Jesus, always seeking guidance and growth.

- **How does the Bible challenge the values of our culture today with regard to money and stewardship?**
- **How might God be guiding you to grow in contentment and generosity?**

FaithFit Challenge!

Dear Church...

Write a letter of encouragement to Clay Church.

Need a place to start. Imagine what Paul might say to the church today, and write a letter based on that reflection. Or, imagine writing a farewell letter of final discourse, and share what you would want to say to your family and your church family. Or, in ideas and language that speak to today's context, write a letter that addresses some of the same issues as the Pastoral Letters – the central doctrines or teachings of the Christian faith, avoiding false teachings, church leadership, being the "household of God", caring for family, and handling money.

I'd love to see your letters. Feel free to share them with me. – Pastor Brian
Email them to bdurand@claychurch.com.

Dear Church...

EXTRAORDINARY

SERMON ON MAY 16, 2021

Choose a question to get started!

- **What is something that you find amazing?**
- **Who is someone whose faith is a model for you?**

Read Hebrews 1:1-4.

The Book of Hebrews most likely was written to a Jewish audience who knew the book of Leviticus and the Psalms, which are often quoted and referenced. The text of the letter implies that some followers of Jesus were giving up and turning back to former ways of life, likely due to persecution and suffering. The overarching theme of the letter is that Jesus offers a better way, a clearer vision of everything contained in God's word.

- **What words or phrases would you use to describe how Jesus is extraordinary?**

Read Hebrews 2:5-18.

Hebrews repeats the words of the Psalmist, "What is humanity that you think about them?" (2:6 in NIV). *You matter to God!* That is why God came to you, to us, as Jesus. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we share not only in the humanity of Jesus, but in His resurrection and His glory. CS Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*, "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." For the author of Hebrews, as Lewis affirms, everyone is invited to participate in the eternal offered through the resurrection.

- **Do you think of yourself as ordinary, or extraordinary? Why?**
- **What does it feel like to hear that you are invited to participate in Christ's glory?**

Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

Dear Church...

Anselm of Canterbury was a Benedictine monk, theologian, and philosopher. In his treatise *Why the God Man? (also translated as Why God Had To Become A Human Being)*, Anselm contended that humanity could be forgiven and restored only if one who was both fully divine and fully human took it upon himself to offer his own life on our behalf. God would have to be fully human to reach humanity, he argued. And Jesus would have to be fully God to save us. Hebrews teaches the same, that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus who, by becoming human and suffering death, frees us from sin and the fear of death.

- **What does it mean to you that God, in Jesus, was fully human, experiencing what we experience?**

Read Hebrews 10:19-39.

Our lives are not ordinary, but extraordinary. However, we can choose to live into the extraordinary, or deny it. We live into it by following the way of Jesus, who leads us into the kingdom of God, into unwavering grace and unending life. We deny it by surrendering hope, giving up, turning to sin and away from God.

Followers of Jesus experience God's extraordinary through faith in Christ.

- **In our day-to-day living, what does it look like to experience the extraordinary life God offers us in Jesus?**
- **What lures us back into sin or can cause us to give up or lose faith in God?**

FaithFit Challenge!

Search the book of Hebrews for encouragement.

This week, read the book of Hebrews. Each time you see the word "therefore", write down what the author says to do to increase hope and strengthen faith.

Need a cheat sheet for the verses that contain "therefore", here you go:

Dear Church...

Hebrews 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, 4:11, 4:14, 6:1, 10:19, 12:12, 13:15

Dear Church...

THE LORD IS NEAR

SERMON ON MAY 23, 2021

Choose a question to get started!

- **What has been the hardest part of the last year in the midst of the pandemic?**
- **Where have you witnessed the Holy Spirit moving during this last year in the midst of the grief and suffering?**

Read Psalm 22:1-11.

The Psalms are like an ancient hymn book, filled with songs and prayers of God's people. As a society, we have this idea that it is wrong to cry out to God, or to be angry at God, or to lament our circumstances or how the world is unfair. Yet the Psalms are filled with examples of all of these emotions and responses.

- **Do you think God accepts our frustration and anger in difficult times? Why or why not?**
- **Is it ok to cry out to God that things are unfair or ask where God is in the midst of struggle and hardship? Why or why not?**

Read Psalm 23.

Think about this for a moment. Psalm 23 has been passed down across centuries, thousands of years. The words have become the lyrics in numerous songs, and often those gathered for a funeral or memorial service will recite the psalm together, knowing them by heart. The words and images have power as they capture God's promises. And while no images can fully capture God's essence, the pictures painted by the Psalms often help us understand God's presence and grace.

- **What images of God bring you comfort in the midst of grief and suffering?**

Read Psalm 30:1-12 and Psalm 34:1-22.

Dear Church...

While the Psalmist often shares deep pain and grief, sometimes even blaming God, often the words then turn to hope in God's promises. Psalms 30 and 34 are examples of Psalms of praise, reflecting on God's saving grace.

- **When has God pulled you through suffering, grief, or difficult times in your life?**
- **What do you think it means that the Lord is "near to the broken-hearted" (NIV)?**

Read Psalm 90:1-17.

We don't like to talk about death. We'll do anything to avoid the subject. By avoiding the conversation, however, we often find that we have so much to work through when the time is near for a loved one. And not talking about it can make the grieving process more difficult.

- **What makes death hard to talk about for you?**
- **How can the Psalms help us talk about and face death and grief more appropriately?**

Read Lamentations 3:19-33.

The book of Lamentations is a collection of five funeral poems offered for Jerusalem after its destruction at the hand of the Babylonian empire. These songs of lament capture the distress, the grief, the pain, and the realization of sin and fault. While most of the poems are dark and sad, they're not without hope as they wrestle with where God is in the midst of the suffering and how to respond.

Followers of Jesus trust God enough to share all thoughts and feelings.

- **What can make it hard to "wait quietly" for God's deliverance (NIV)?**
- **How does it feel to hear that God doesn't "willingly bring grief or affliction" to anyone (NIV)?**

Dear Church...

- **Where, as followers of Jesus, do we find our hope in the midst of suffering and grief?**

FaithFit Challenge!

Write your own Psalm.

Reflecting on the year past, on the impact of COVID on your life and the lives of those you know, what do you want to say to God. Using the Psalms as your guide, write a prayer or song in your own words. What do you want to say to God? Where do you sense God's presence? Where do you find hope?

Dear Church...

HOLY

SERMON ON MAY 30, 2021

Choose a question to get started!

- **What is something that makes you unique?**
- **When has someone presented themselves as “holier-than-thou”?**

Read 1 Peter 1:1-9.

1 Peter 1:3 includes these words, “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope...” This and other references to baptism and water have led many scholars to believe that 1 Peter has roots as a sermon for early church baptisms. It was common for such sermons to be put into letters and distributed throughout area gatherings of Jesus followers. This sermon and message seems to speak to an audience that was suffering for their faith, calling for holy living by the vows of baptism, even in the midst of persecution and suffering.

- **How can suffering be a test of our faith?**
- **How can hope in Jesus carry you through times of trial or suffering?**

Read 1 Peter 1:13-2:10.

The Temple, in Old Testament times, was where God dwelled. First Peter uses this image to say that the people who are the church, the early followers of Jesus, are together becoming a house where God dwells. This temple is built not with bricks, but with “living stones”, holy living that embodies God’s love.

- **What does it mean to you to be holy?**
- **What is the difference between being “holy as God is holy” and being “holier-than-thou”?**
- **Have you ever thought of yourself, as the letter asserts, as part of the royal priesthood? Why or why not?**

Read 1 Peter 4:1-19.

Dear Church...

We can't escape times of suffering in life. Evangelist Billy Graham once said, "Suffering is part of the human condition, and it comes to us all. The key is how we react to it, either turning away from God in anger and bitterness or growing closer to Him in trust and confidence." First Peter suggests that holy living isn't defined by how one handles times of joy and celebration, but how one handles times of challenge and suffering.

- **What does a life lived for God look like?**
- **When have you suffered for doing what was right or living out your faith?**

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11.

Often, when a pastor is in the room, everyone else defers to the pastor as the one who should pray. He or she is the "holy" one among the group. The Bible, however, asserts that all who believe are "called" and "elected" for the work of God in the world. Some call this the priesthood of all believers. Martin Luther wrote, "There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests . . . between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do."

Second Peter teaches that all have received what is needed from God to "participate in the divine nature" (verse 1:4 in the NIV), and then lists the attributes and qualities that appear in the lives of those who answer God's call.

Followers of Jesus answer the call to live holy lives that reflect God's love and grace.

- **As a follower of Jesus, what does it mean to you be called, or set apart, to participate in what God is doing?**

FaithFit Challenge!

Dear Church...

During the week ahead, answer God's call to be a part of the "royal priesthood" through an intentional act of serving someone.

Ideas:

- Offer to pray out loud with someone. Don't worry about the words. The Holy Spirit will fill those in for you.
- Write a note of encouragement to someone.
- Use your social media to offer praise to God for others to see.
- Speak up and confront gossiping, gently and with love.
- Offer hospitality by greeting and welcoming someone you don't know in church next Sunday.