

## DEVOTIONS MONDAY ( 3-23-20) EPHESIANS 6:10-20 THE ARMOR OF GOD

1. As I pray for our church and for each of you, it occurred to me that YES – we are ‘at war’ with a virus --- with which we must be smart, prudent and responsive with all of the resources and capabilities that we have --- individually and collectively. The secular news and resources are keeping us well informed along these lines of action & concern.
2. HOWEVER, I also see a BATTLE OVER OUR HEARTS, OUR SOULS & OUR MINDS. Jesus tells us in Matthew 22:37-39 that all that truly matters is to LOVE GOD with our hearts, souls, bodies and minds and TO LOVE OTHERS. THE CONDITION AND PROTECTION OF OUR HEARTS & MINDS & SOULS IS VERY IMPORTANT IN TIMES SUCH AS THESE and THEY ARE AT RISK IF WE DO NOT PROTECT THEM.
3. THIS BATTLE OVER THE CONTROL AND HEALTH OF OUR BODIES, MINDS, HEARTS & SOULS IS TRULY A “SPIRITUAL BATTLE” --- so the text from Ephesians 6:10-18 is particularly relevant and important to us today.

EPHESIANS 6:10-18 <sup>10</sup> Finally, **be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.** <sup>11</sup> PUT ON the FULL ARMOR of God, SO THAT YOU CAN TAKE YOUR STAND against the devil’s schemes. <sup>12</sup> **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,** but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>14</sup> Stand firm then, with the **belt of truth** buckled around your waist, with the **breastplate of righteousness** in place, <sup>15</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the **gospel of peace.** <sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, take up the **shield of faith**, *with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.* <sup>17</sup> Take the **helmet of salvation** and the **sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.**

<sup>18</sup> And PRAY in the Spirit on all occasions with **all kinds of prayers and requests.** With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

<sup>1st</sup> – Paul is reminding the CHURCH IN EPHESUS that they must BE STRONG in the areas that matter the most -- in matters of FAITH; in matters of the HEART, SOUL, & MIND. What is on the ‘inside’ of our lives is every bit as important (arguably more so) as that of the world in which we live --- therefore, it is absolutely essential for us to STAND FIRM and BE STRONG on the inside. **The “INSIDE” matters!!!!** It is the fabric with which we draw our energy and capacity to do and to be the people that God has called us to --- Paul’s instructions to the church in Ephesus is intended to give the church some tools that they may focus on SO THAT they use all that God has given them AND THAT they may intentionally prepare themselves for that end.

<sup>2nd</sup> – We must **BE STRONG** on the inside so that we CAN **STAND AGAINST** ALL the things that are swirling around us today (and every day). When I think about standing FIRM, I think about standing in the rolling waves and undertow at the beach --- I remember as a child “stabilizing myself” and trying to be firm – to not be moved by the waves. In this text, Paul is encouraging his audience to STAND FIRM and not be knocked over by the waves of life.

<sup>3rd</sup> – **What is the full armor of God?**

- A. **BELT OF TRUTH** --- we must discern what is true and what is ‘false news’ because our beliefs determine and drive our actions and behaviors --- DO YOU BELIEVE THE THINGS OF GOD? JESUS’ TEACHINGS? If we accept these as TRUE --- we ought to be living in ways that AFFIRM this TRUTH.
- B. **BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS** --- The life of Jesus and his RIGHTEOUS STANDING is extended to those who believe and receive his offer. The RIGHTEOUS STANDING of Jesus PROTECTS US AND COVERS US.

- C. **THE GOSPEL OF PEACE PROTECTS OUR FEET** – when I think of “PEACE” in this context I think about being at PEACE with GOD, OURSELVES, & OTHERS. Are you at PEACE WITH GOD, YOURSELF & OTHERS? If not, confess your broken relationships that need God’s healing touch and pray for forgiveness, the ability to forgive and for reconciliation.
- D. **SHIELD OF FAITH** – We see time and time again throughout the Bible that FAITH matters --- do we truly BELIEVE that God is our rock & refuge ... that Jesus will lift us up and enable us to do and be the people we need to be. It is important to note that FAITH EXTINGUISHES ALL THE FLAMING ARROWS of the evil one, who seeks to discourage our faith & spirit ... FAITH IS VERY IMPORTANT.
- E. **HELMET OF SALVATION** --- Easter celebrates Jesus’ triumph over SIN and DEATH. Jesus lived a perfect life without sin (so he overcame the power of sin) and then with his EASTER RESURRECTION, Jesus DEFEATED THE POWERS OF EVIL ... and Jesus now offers us the helmet of his salvation to us, which covers us with the authority of his triumph over sin and death.
- F. **SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD – THE BIBLE** --- The Holy Spirit uses the written Word of God (the BIBLE) to apply and relate God’s directions and game-plans for our lives SO THAT WE MIGHT LIVE AND EXECUTE ACCORDING TO GOD’S SPECIFIC WILL AND CALL FOR OUR LIVES.
- G. **PRAY** --- Prayer is our ultimate source of connection with GOD --- God speaks to us, God leads us, God inspires us and God responds to our deepest needs through PRAYER.

Dear God, please help us to STAND FIRM in the midst of all of that surrounds us thru these harried & threatening times. Help us to think each day regarding ways that we can SHORE-UP the armor of God SO THAT WE WILL BE STRONG --- body, mind, spirit, and soul. In Jesus’ name, AMEN.

In closing, I share with you the words of God to Joshua. ***“BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS. DO NOT BE AFRAID; DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD IS WITH YOU WHEREVER YOU GO.”***  
 Joshua 1:9

## DEVOTIONS TUESDAY (3-24-20) ROMANS 12:12

### God is Right Here Right Now

I have the privilege today to share a short devotional written by one of our members.

Romans 12:12 Be JOYFUL in hope, PATIENT in affliction, and FAITHFUL in prayer.

Our fellow church member writes:

“Would you believe that right in the middle of all of the immediate craziness and turmoil surrounding our nations -- especially with COVID-19 rushing out of control ... THAT GOD IS WITH US – READY TO HELP CALM OUR FEARS AND SHELTER US IN HIS UNENDING GRACE, LOVE AND CARE!

When we feel panic and are overcome with anxiety, fear, and obvious lack-of-control --- the care of God whispers to us, “FOCUS ON ME ... focus on my character – my being – my love.”

Even when we are in the eye of a hurricane, God’s presence is with us.

Take a deep breath and breathe in the Spirit of the living God ... feel his closeness and His hold upon you ... TRUST GOD with your heart & soul ... Try it, it works!"

Thank you, friend, for sharing your good words for today.

Again, today's verse: Romans 12:12 *"Be JOYFUL in hope, PATIENT in affliction, and FAITHFUL in prayer."*

And in my words...

**BE JOYFUL** ---- for HOPE brings us JOY --- friends, we have HOPE for this world and the world to come. As we go to sleep each night, we have a certain HOPE that the sun will rise and there will be a new day --- friends, we have HOPE based upon our experience and we have HOPE because God's word affirms God's faithfulness -- and God is Faithful.

**BE PATIENT** --- for in times of afflictions and challenges, with perseverance, faith and a steady path --- there will be a new day and there will be relief. Patience helps us to see more clearly, think more certainly, and act more effectively.

**BE FAITHFUL** --- God will never leave you and God cares. In PRAYER God focuses your heart and thoughts --- God inspires and you have the opportunity to share from your heart --- those concerns that are deepest to you. You'll be surprised how God uses moments of stillness with Him to quiet, inspire and lift you.

Friends, stay the course ---BE JOYFUL, BE PATIENT, BE FAITHFULL

And I now share with you a prayer that has meant a lot to me for many years. The prayer was written by Reinhold Niebuhr --- and while used primarily in the context of 'recovery' ... I find it useful during the day and even during nights that I feel too anxious to sleep ... enjoy.

### **The Serenity Prayer**

God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
And supremely happy with Him  
Forever and ever in the next. Amen

**Written by: Reinhold Niebuhr**

## DEVOTIONS WEDNESDAY (3-25-20) PSALMS 16: 1-2 & 5-11

Keep me safe, my God,  
for **in you I take refuge.**

<sup>2</sup>I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;  
apart from you I have no good thing." ...

<sup>5</sup>Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;  
you make my lot secure.

<sup>6</sup>The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
surely I have a delightful inheritance.

<sup>7</sup>I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;  
even at night my heart instructs me.

<sup>8</sup>**I keep my eyes always on the Lord.**

With him at my right hand, **I will not be shaken.**

<sup>9</sup>Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;  
my body also will rest secure,

<sup>10</sup>because **you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,**  
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.

<sup>11</sup>**You make known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.**

While I have been very concerned from the beginning --- I have maintained a general sense of God's presence and care. While the days forward are uncertain and the way will certainly include challenges and even sadness ... I was generally at rest and at peace.

However, last evening I woke about 4 am. For the first time during "all of this" I was fearful ... and anxious ... the money things ... the supply things ... 'not knowing how long' .... I had turned my attention inward. I walked around the house several times, I took some deep breaths and I crawled back into bed.

Still not able to sleep, I did what I have often done before and that which I have shared with you --- I recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm ... yet, I could not make it thru the first 3<sup>rd</sup> without losing focus and turning again to my anxieties. I then would catch myself and try again ...

FINALLY, I took another deep breath and asked God to help me recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. As I did this, I worked hard to focus on each phrase ... **The LORD is my shepherd .... I shall not have any needs or wants ... even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... Your rod and your staff guide me & protect me ...** and I began to feel God's calming care begin to push away the gloom ...

I recited and prayed the Lord's Prayer --- some of us call it the "OUR FATHER" ... I started to feel better ... AND THEN the lyrics to the hymn, **I NEED THEE EVERY HOUR** (written by Annie Hawkes and Robert Lowry in 1873) began to fill my mind.

I kept singing in my mind the chorus: **"I need thee; every hour I need thee; O bless me now my Savior, I come to thee."** ..... Several times I sang to myself .... And the next thing I know the alarm rang --- I seldom need an alarm, but I was sleeping so soundly I needed the alarm this morning.

My worries and anxieties had dropped off my legs and shoulders like shackles being cut away ... and I had peace --- I had clarity --- and I was ready for a new and busy day!!!!

FYI --- I referenced the old classic hymn that many of us grew up with --- for those of you who are younger or who may recall our Sunday praise and worship services – there is a more contemporary version of this song made popular by Matt Maher – you may want to look for in on You Tube --- it's called **Lord, I Need You** ... its chorus goes like this, ***“Lord, I need You, Oh I need You. Every hour I need You. My one defense, my righteousness, Oh God I need You.”***

God uses these choruses to minister to our soul ... our spirit ... and in doing so, it turns the outlook of our lives from ourselves to the God that we believe and trust.

The words of Psalms 16 do the same ... “Keep me safe dear God ... in you I take refuge (not the banks, not the grocery stores ... not Amazon or toilet paper --- BUT **“IN YOU I TAKE REFUGE!”**

“I keep my eyes on you Lord ... **and I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN**” (vs. 8) ... wow!

I leave you today with the last verse of Psalms 16, **“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with ETERNAL pleasures at your right hand.”**

Friends, I went through a crisis of belief last night ... and with a mind and heart crying out to God for rest ... God helped me through the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm; God helped me to embrace the Lord's Prayer; AND God reminded me of the important concept ---- THERE ARE BETTER DAYS COMING!

Dear God, please forgive me for allowing the things of today envelope me in gloom. Thank you for helping me to refocus and return my inner heart from the consuming things of today to the consuming things of YOUR PRESENCE and CARE --- for which we CAN BE SURE. I pray for our church – each member ... that as they to, wrestle with keeping their inner being TURNED TO YOU ... AND help us to remember the lyrics of today's songs, **“LORD WE NEED YOU ... EVERY HOUR WE NEED YOU.”** In Jesus' Mighty Name, AMEN.

## **DEVOTIONS THURSDAY (3-26-20) JEREMIAH 29:7 AND 10-13**

### **Part #1: Jeremiah 29:7**

<sup>7</sup> Also, **seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you** into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper ....

### **Part #2: Jeremiah 29:10-13**

<sup>10</sup> This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, **I will come to you and fulfill my good promise** to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> **For I know the plans I have for you,”** declares the Lord, **“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** <sup>12</sup> **Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, AND I will listen to you.** <sup>13</sup> **You will seek me and find me WHEN YOU SEEK ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.**

Good morning .... Today's devotional is a continuation of yesterday's reflection. I shared yesterday about being awake at 4 in the morning and being challenged by fears and anxieties of all kinds. Eventually, I shared how God helped me to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm; the Lord's Prayer (i.e. the Our Father) and Psalms 16.... And my self-consumption and fear had turned to opportunity, possibility and prospect.

As I have continued to whirl through the day's activities, Zoom Conference Calls, and all the various things that were needing attention, God gave me a realization...

I was awake at night and unable to sleep, in part because I was dwelling on the past!

I was worried that things were not the way they were ... I was regretting particular decisions and choices ... and my 'measure' was all the comparisons with things in 'the past'... not the future ....

## **TWO MAIN POINTS TODAY:**

- 1) It is important that we pray for our city for it is where God has placed us – as it succeeds and prospers ... we too will succeed and prosper AND just as important, God has us where we are so that we might share and work together to make our communities, our cities, and our families BETTER and STRONGER.

Friends, WE HAVE A PURPOSE AND A JOB --- God is not only concerned about us but also about the communities that we are a part of. That's why we need God's Armor (see Monday's devotional, Ephesians 6:10-18)

We have been blessed and enabled and God has called us to intercede for our communities and for one another --- our communities NEED us, as the church, as SHUMC, to be engaged and praying for its well-being!!!

- 2) God has a future for us ... with plans for our good and it is important that even when God is not obviously present, God is with us ... and as I needed to SEEK GOD FERVENTLY the other night ... SO TO --- we as individuals and we as a church NEED TO SEEK GOD'S FUTURE FOR US --- for there is no other time than a "**time such as this**" (Esther 4:14)

Beyond the obvious challenges and encouragement in these verses ... God showed me today that WHEN WE LOOK TO THE PAST and WHEN WE SEEK TO GO BACK TO 'HOW IT WAS' --- WE ARE SABOTAGING the LIFE THAT WE NOW HAVE AND THE PROMISE THAT GOD HAS NOW SET BEFORE US ... we will always struggle when we dwell on the past --- regurgitating old resentments, mistakes and disappointments ....

HOWEVER, when we pray for the present and begin to look forward to the future ... we can begin to dig ourselves out of the mire that we put ourselves and with God's help, essentially LIFTING US UP ... we can begin to be RELEASED from the past and OPEN TO A PROSPECTIVE FUTURE ... and the promise that IF WE TRULY SEEK GOD ... and PERSIST, (closing the door on all the negative feelings and fears that pull us) we are truly able to be LIFTED UP WITH EAGLES' WINGS (Isaiah 40:31).

SO --- let's covenant together with our families, our friends, our church, and our communities TO PUT THE PAST BEHIND; TO PRAY FOR THE PRESENT; and TO SEEK GOD'S PROMISE & HOPE for the FUTURE.

Dear God, THANK YOU for helping me to see the dangers of being drawn in, drawn down and overcome by fears and anxieties when we dwell on things that are in the past. Help us to accept where we are today and to pray for Your blessing upon those with whom we live and share life with today. Thank you for those that we share our life with --- our families (those that we get along with and those that we struggle with) ... our church ... our neighbors ... our community ...

GOD, WE PRAY AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS and WE PRAY FOR HEALING, PROTECTION AND STRENGTH as WE ENDURE AND FIGHT --- WE PRAY FOR THE HEALTH CARE WORKERS – WE PRAY FOR THE LEADERS OF OUR COMMUNITIES --- WE PRAY FOR THOSE THAT ARE 'OUT OF WORK' ... WE ASK YOU TO INTERCEDE FOR US AND OUR SITUATION --- YOUR KNOW IT BETTER THAN WE DO ... WE TURN IT OVER TO YOU.

AND GOD, we look forward to the day that this is in our past ... to the day that promises to be a 'better day' ...

And God, I pray for all of those who are now SEEKING YOU ... PLEASE MEET THEIR CRY and THEIR NEED for YOUR PRESENCE, YOUR COMFORT, YOUR STRENGTH, and YOUR HOPE FOR TOMORROW.

## DEVOTIONS FRIDAY (3-27-20) JOHN 15:1-13

**JOHN 15:1-13:** *Jesus is teaching ---- "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

<sup>5</sup>"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

<sup>9</sup>"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

**Just a few ideas or thoughts that jumped out at me from this portion of Scripture:**

1. Jesus is using a metaphor to illustrate how important it is that we REMAIN or STAY connected to him ... for he is the TRUE VINE that keeps the vitality of the Spirit life itself flowing through us – nourishing us and helping us to thrive AND to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.
  - IN WHAT WAYS CAN WE STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS?
  - ARE THERE THINGS THAT WE CAN DO TO STAY CONNECTED?
  - IN WHAT WAYS IS JESUS LIKE A VINE IN MY LIFE?
2. Fruitfulness is a sign of being connected to Jesus.
  - AM I BEING FRUITFUL FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD?
  - Think of the FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT (Galatians 5:22 & 23)
  - WHAT DETERMINES MY FRUITFULNESS?

3. Do you know the number of times that Jesus gave the direction to "REMAIN?" Anytime in Scripture that you see a verb or a noun used multiply times in close proximity there is a point to be made.
- Jesus directed the disciples to "REMAIN IN HIM" 6 times
  - Jesus directed the disciples to be aware that JESUS REMAINS IN US 2 times.

According to Webster's Dictionary – the 2<sup>nd</sup> most used definition of REMAIN is to "***stay in place with the same person or group.***"

This talk by Jesus is coming immediately after the Last Supper --- and it seems VERY IMPORTANT to JESUS to tell his disciples that are TO REMAIN --- TO SAY in RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM and WITH ONE ANOTHER.

What a good word for us today --- when times are tough --- when times are uncertain --- when chaos seems to be surrounding us everywhere --- when our world is turned upside down --- WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO JESUS?

THAT WE REMAIN CONNECTED TO HIM AND TO ONE ANOTHER.

WHAT A GOOD WORD FOR US TODAY!!!!

**APPLICATION:** When I read a text, I always try to note a couple of OBSERVATIONS (as I did above) AND THEN I ASK MYSELF --- "SO WHAT" or "HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO ME" or "IS THERE SOMETHING I SHOULD DO BECAUSE OF THIS?"

My word to you --- when life is swirling around us and our orientation is disheveled we need to remember one of the MOST IMPORTANT THINGS --- AS IT WOULD BE CRITICAL FOR THE DISCIPLES TO REMEMBER THIS GOING INTO GOOD FRIDAY AND THE TURMOIL THAT ENSUED & SURROUNDED THEM IN THE MIDST OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS ----

SO TO --- IT IS CRITICAL THAT WE REMEMBER TO TAKE THE TIME TO REMAIN CONNECTED TO JESUS AND TO ONE ANOTHER ---

- We can let ourselves grow dead ... or we can work to keep our connection to Jesus strong
- I encourage you to take 2-3-4 times a day when you take a few minutes to take a deep breath --- breathe out and breathe in and say – DEAR GOD, I NEED YOU ... HELP ME TO STAY CONNECTED TO THE LOVE, THE GRACE, THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH JESUS ... THANK YOU GOD, AMEN.
- Say a prayer for others and for the community several times a day
- Say a prayer AGAINST the Coronavirus
- Say a prayer to help and strengthen all the care givers
- Say a prayer for healing & protection
- AND pick 1 scripture a day to remember and recall throughout your day

Friends, this text – Jesus talking to his disciples just before he is taken to be judges, tortured and crucified --- Jesus wants his disciple to STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS AND TO ONE ANOTHER --- and then JESUS REMINDS THEM THAT HE LOVES THEM AND THAT THEY MUST LOVE (AND CARE) FOR ONE ANOTHER DURING THIS PARTICULARLY TOUGH TIME ...



NOT A BAD WORD FOR US TODAY!

I LOVE YOU --- AND GOD LOVES YOU MORE!!! 😊

Dear God, I pray today to be aware of whether I am 'connected' to you or 'separated' from you. I want to REMAIN IN YOU and YOU IN ME. Help me to confess and turn from doing things that separate me from you AND help me to do things that KEEP ME CONNECTED TO YOU & TO THOSE CLOSEST TO ME. THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME A DIRECT CONNECTION TO YOU. THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING ME A GROUP OF PEOPLE --- MY FAMILY & MY CHURCH FAMILY TO STAY CONNECTED WITH DURING TOUGH TIMES --- GOD, I THANK YOU. INVOKING THE POWER OF GOD, IN JESUS' NAME, AMEN.