

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

June 2017

by Rob LoAlbo

Join us in spirit every Thursday at 9:00 PM, and pray with us for 10 minutes. These devotionals are posted on Facebook every week to assist in that prayer and commitment. For those not on Facebook, below are those posted weekly devotionals. Use them with us as a way to join our prayer group.

We look forward to “seeing” you there!

June 1 – Seeds of Violence, the Size of an Ant



I horridly stared at my bathroom floor as hundreds of ants marched their merry way back and forth across, creating a steady stream from one corner to the next. In years past, I had some trouble with these small critters, as when the weather warms up, they tend to emerge. However, nothing prepared me for what now lay before me.

I spent some time brainstorming a solution. We have a basic rule in our house, where nothing is allowed to die. We tend to remove mice and insects from our home and relocate them outside or down the street. Yet, an infestation was another issue. I thought about sweeping them all up, but I knew that they would either just return or that there were just more where these came from. (Most likely, both scenarios were probable.) So, I began to consider instant extermination, immediately killing hundreds of ants and

betraying our household rule.

However, I reconsidered and decided on a different approach. I spent time examining their traffic pattern and noticed that they were coming in and out of a small hole at the base of the bathtub. I took some clay and filled the hole, as hundreds of confused ants ran roughshod. When I returned a few hours later, they had all left on their own and haven't returned since. From a very small action of non-violence and patience came great change.

When faced with difficult and dire situations, as a society we don't always stop and think of how to respond in a slow but non-violent way. Governments tend to find a bigger bomb, bigger guns, or additional soldiers, attempting to overpower the enemy through swift violence and intimidation. The Dalai Lama, the wise Buddhist leader of Tibet and a strong proponent of non-violence, when faced with intimidation from China to rejoin their republic, was threatened with violent means. Faced with a moral dilemma of how to respond, many of his people desired him to rise up and fight off the militia, but the Dalai Lama knew that his people were outnumbered and would most likely be slaughtered. Instead, he adopted a stance of patience, understanding, and non-violence, and has managed to maintain it for the past 60 years. He has been quoted as saying, "Through violence, you may 'solve' one problem, but you sow the seeds for another." As such, he has been able to preserve his people, stand his ground on his beliefs, and avoid a mass genocide.

Responding with violence is quick and easy, whereas non-violence takes great patience and time, as seen through the Dalai Lama's example. Similarly, Christ's example leading up to and on the cross reflects that non-violent and patient approach. When Christ was arrested, Simon Peter struck the high priest with his sword, cutting off the priest's ear. Christ quickly admonished him: "Put your sword back in its place...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26.52). Throughout His trial, Christ refused to fight back. On the cross, Christ could have called down all manner of angels and struck down everyone, saving Himself, but he chose not to. Through His patient and non-violent example, He conquered death, saving us all from condemnation.

In my classroom, I have found that when my students are loud and rowdy, if I respond by being louder than they are, it only adds to the chaos, with me shouting them into submission. It becomes a power struggle. However, if I am silent and wait patiently for them, they quiet themselves down and the wild spirit of chaos is eliminated from the room. Struggle does not exist. If we take time to respond to strife and chaos through choices that reflect patience, quiet, and peace, we achieve a far greater result than responding with our basest instincts, many of which are rooted in our sinful nature. This week, when you find the desire to engage and fight back, choose disengagement and patience, and you will find that the fruit it produces will bring you, and those around you, peace. Amen.

June 8 – *Love, Despair, and Cupcakes*

Apparently, the afterlife is a tricky business. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, 89% of Americans firmly believe in Heaven. Most likely, they all have similar ideas as to what it looks like: clouds, flowing rivers, delicious food, endless entertainment, etc. However, in that same poll, Americans were asked about "the other place," and it was found that only 64% of those who responded believe in Hell. Do we as a country think that people are not punished in the afterlife? Do those remaining 25% think that everyone gets a free ride into heaven?

Perhaps this disparity exists not because we doubt in the existence of Hell, but because we have varied ideas as to what Hell is. We don't really take time to grapple with the belief of Hell, because frankly, we don't understand it.

Jean-Paul Sartre once stated that, "Hell is other people," and although it feels like it at times, Hell must be much more than that. Of those who believe in Hell, most if not all agree that suffering plays a key role. Isaiah 66.24b describes that suffering with this visual: "The worms that eat them will not die, the fire that

burns them will not be quenched."

Yet no matter what we imagine with our human minds, I must think that it doesn't even approach what Hell's suffering is really like.

However, this past weekend, I think I caught a glimpse of Hell at the local Cupcake Festival.

It sounded so good on paper:



cupcake competitions from over 50 vendors, a virtual conglomeration of confections. The streets would be lined with all sorts of sweets ready for our tasting and purchase. With salivating taste buds and high hopes, we embarked. As we approached the vendors, we witnessed a wide variety of people with delicious-looking cupcakes in their respective carrying containers. Our hearts leapt with excitement and anticipation.

Yet, as we got closer, our hearts sank as we saw large crowds surrounding all the booths. We thought about waiting in line, but found that for the most part, the lines were not moving. We pushed onward towards booths further up the block, only to find the same length of lines everywhere, all preventing us from getting any cupcakes. I could literally see the cupcakes at the vendor stands, but couldn't get even the slightest bit close to purchasing them. It reminded me of the old parable that describes Hell as a massive, delicious banquet where everyone seated at the table cannot eat, as they are unable to bend their elbows.

At the festival, I could see Heaven and hope for it, but it was just out of reach, the true nature of Hell. So maybe Hell should not be defined by what it is, but what it is not; not what it has, but what it lacks. In Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost," Hell is described as the polar opposite of Heaven, where everything in Hell is defined by what it lacks in comparison to Heaven. The poem describes Heaven with eternal peace and light, where Hell has flames that radiate insufferable heat and eternal darkness. 2Thessalonians 1.9 describes Hell as being, "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Maybe then we should look at Hell as the complete absence of God. Perhaps Hell should be defined by how impossibly far it is separated from everything that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (Philippians 4.8), all qualities that are from God. To be that far from the goodness and glory of God, that

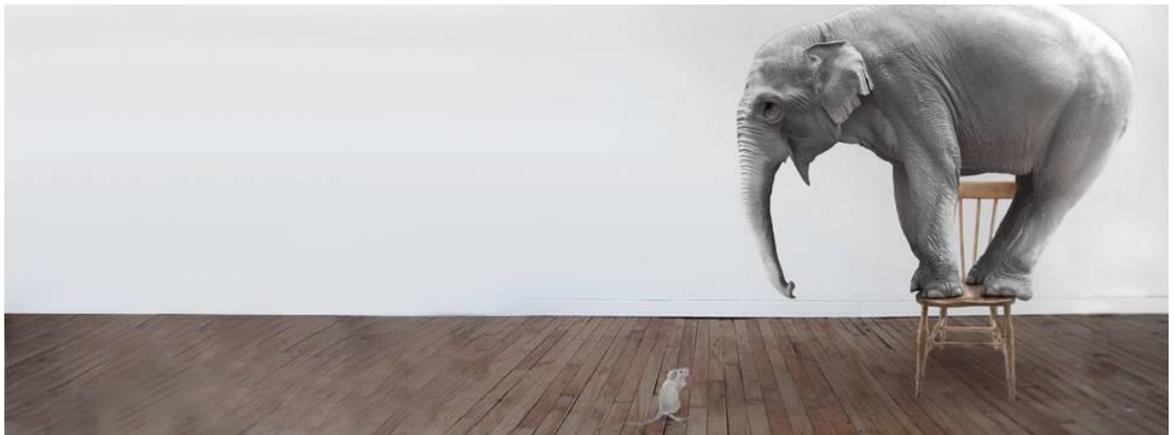
truly is Hell, and makes it completely devoid of hope. To conceptualize that thought, think about the amount of time we spend on this Earth asking for God to be a part of our lives, with Him answering that call, and imagine what it would be like if when we asked, we knew that God would never show up. If we frame Hell around the idea that it's a place with a total and complete absence of hope, our true motivator, then we quickly realize that without hope there is nothing but empty despair, the true character of Hell.

In realizing what Hell is like, we more deeply understand the contrasting gift that is Heaven, giving us hope for an amazing eternity. With hope in our hearts and an eye to the promises of the future kingdom, we know with great certainty that eternity with Him is most assuredly not out of reach. Amen.

June 15 – *Fear of All the Wrong People and Things*

Fear is a natural part of our humanity, often seen as a survival instinct, where we fear what can cause harm. Take a mental tally of your own fears, and you will most likely find that your healthy fears are the ones that keep you out of trouble.

According to a recent Washington Post survey about what it is that most Americans fear, topping the list was



“public speaking” (with “heights” following closely behind). Given that a great deal of my graduating seniors need to give a TED Talk as their senior culminating project, I’ve witnessed firsthand the fear that enters when a person is told that he or she needs to present a grandiose idea to a large group of people for ten minutes. They are frozen in place just thinking about it. Their survival instinct of self-preservation and avoiding public judgement is normal, as they attempt to maintain their credibility amongst their peers.

The rest of the list of surveyed fears consisted of such expected categories as drowning, needles, zombies, and clowns. Yet nowhere on the list is there evidence that we have a fear of God. When suggested, most scoff at the idea of being afraid of God, yet in fact, we have a deeply serious lack of fear when it comes to God, and we are not nearly as afraid of Him as we should be.

When most people are asked to characterize God, they conjure an image of a loving mentor who passively died on a cross, adhering to the nurturing father that is portrayed in so many sermons and homilies. However, we quickly forget the side of God that characterizes Him as one of judgement and condemnation, a God who despises sin and actively fights against evil. 18th Century theologian Jonathan Edwards knew that a healthy fear of God would keep his congregation from sin, as his sermon “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God” pictured the Christian as one who “dangles precariously over Hell...a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose

wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell." If it is this image that is invoked, how is it that we lack fear when we purposefully offend His word?

Illustrating the point of how much we lack said fear, take a minute and Google the words "caught" and "scandal" together and see the multitude of news articles that come up. When we commit sinful behaviors, we are more afraid of being caught in the eyes of men than in the eyes of God. The Google search for "scandal" and "apology" also turns up a tremendous number of articles, as we only confess our wrongdoing when we are caught. If we truly feared God, more articles about people openly admitting their wrongs would appear when we search "scandal" and "confess."

Proverbs 3.7 give this advice: "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil." When we fear Him, His wrath, and His punishment, we reflexively reject evil. If we lack that fear, we turn a blind eye to evil, allowing it to enter because we don't fear the one who can bring consequences.

Many argue that this image of God is very Old Testament, where His consequences often included the outdated idea of wiping out whole tribes and nations, bringing grandiose punishment to those who opposed Him. Yet consider the Acts 5 story of Ananias and Sapphira, a husband and wife Christian couple who, when they sold land for donations to the church, held back money for themselves, and when asked about it, lied about how much they were giving. Peter questioned the husband about his lying to the apostles: "'What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.' When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died" (Acts 5.4b-5), and when his unknowing wife similarly lied later in the story, she followed suit and died, as well. They could hide their misdeeds from man, but not from God, and because they feared man and not God, they continued in their sinful misrepresentation, thinking that they were not being watched.

It has often been said that when speaking publicly, a good litmus test for appropriate speech is that you should never say anything that you wouldn't want your mother to hear or that could be read allowed in court. Perhaps this barometer should also include "or in front of God." God truly sees all things we do, yet we continue to sin, foolishly thinking that because we don't see Him, He doesn't see us. By embracing a healthy fear of God, we are not as quick to embrace our sinful nature and embark on the wrong path. Although we may not drop dead because of our actions, if we fear God, we are kept from that wrong path and are put back on a path towards Heaven, one that keeps us from sliding into an eternity without Him. Amen.

June 22 – *Feeble Attempts Beyond our Expiration Date*

With the now warm weather and springtime growth comes a host of fresh vegetables and fruits. While visiting our local fruit stand, our eyes go wide with the deliciousness that nature presents, yet often our eyes are bigger than our appetites, and we end up buying more than we need. Now normally, that purchase isn't a problem, but with all of what we are buying being local produce, the shelf life on a lot of these items isn't very long. The amount of purchases that must be thrown out to the animals can be heartbreaking, but at least someone is enjoying them.

With spring produce and warm weather also comes spring cleaning, when we go through our pantry and refrigerator, looking for things that have found their way to the back and as such have become neglected

and lost. More often than most, these items are well past their expiration dates, and despite looking just fine, have gone bad on some level. Moving on to our medicine cabinet in this cleaning frenzy, we traditionally find a multitude of no-longer used medicines that have also migrated past their expiration dates, and are now not as effective as they once were, or just aren't healthy to consume. The power of time takes its toll on all things, apparently.

Time seems to be the enemy of us all. Most things of this world don't age well and have a point where the rising tide of time overtakes what is best in all things. Even wine, despite getting better with age, reaches a point where it turns to vinegar. When I walk the hallways of high school and spot young couples in love, by measuring the flames of passion that radiate, I can usually judge with a decent amount of certainty how quickly those flames will extinguish and the relationship will expire. And despite our best efforts, our bodies don't escape the ravages of time. Most scientists and physicians suggest that, given the proper diet and treatment, the human body can work perfectly for the first 40-50 years before it starts to break down on its own, and that's if we treat it well. Founding father William Penn said that, "Time is what we want most, but what we use worst." Time is a commodity, but we often don't trade well with it.



Like our bodies and things of this world, each of us have an expiration date, too. At some point, death will be the great expiration collector and will come for us. What makes us

different, though, is that often there is no telling as to when that expiration date is. The Bible and other pieces of literature are filled with warnings about the fleeting nature of life, about how we must seize every moment of every day, or about how we don't know how long we have. Proverbs 90.12 give us this advice: "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." If we realize that our time is limited, then we will most likely use our time wisely, and the biggest concern should be where we are headed after our expiration date.

A great deal of the population, when considering the afterlife, feels that it's not something they need to think about at this point. They've got time. Yet if we live with this foolish notion, like rotted fruit, we will find ourselves out of time before we know it. We need to live wisely while we still have time, and for many, that means committing our lives to Him as soon as possible. With no knowledge of how much time is left, as even tomorrow may be our last day, we must firmly stand on the promises of His kingdom, and not the possible failing promises of a long life. Assurance is found in what we know for sure, not in what we think may be. If we live knowing that any day might be our last, then our decisions, especially those about the afterlife and what we are truly living for, will be handled with grace and wisdom, and our future will be secured. Amen.

June 29 – Currency, Reputation, and Fake News

One of the best classes I ever took in college was World Religions. As a seemingly confident Christian, I sat in the front row with my other Christian friends, ready to defend whatever attack this professor was going to bring, but instead of victory I found myself unexpectedly whittled and sharpened. Throughout the class, whenever I made a statement about my faith, I was challenged by the professor to back up my beliefs. I could no longer just point to the Bible as my evidence, suggesting that it's true because the Bible says it is, but was forced to fully explain why I believed what I believed, citing history, hard evidence, archaeology, and science for the supports to my faith. To just suggest that it was true because I felt it wasn't enough: I had to justify it with facts. Going into the class I knew *what* I believed; coming out of the class, I knew *why* I believed.

When it comes to being a Christian, truth is our currency. We deal in truth in all things when it comes to our faith and in making strides for our own spiritual journeys along with advancing His kingdom. Jesus claimed that there is freedom to be found in knowing what is true. When Christ speaks in John 8.32, He claims that if we adhere to His teachings, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," while in 14.6, Jesus says that, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Without truth, we have nothing but a handful of lies along with a destroyed reputation. To speak truth and know what is true is to have the power to be free. So, in all things, we must know the complete and absolute truth behind what we do and what we say, or like the prisoners in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, who viewed nothing but projected shadows on a blank wall and believed them to be their reality, we run the risk of believing a false reality, and nothing says false reality more so lately, than fake news.

To be clear, fake news is the (mostly) online existence of sensationalist and exaggerated news stories whose sole purpose is to spread misinformation for reasons that include, more often than not, financial or political gain, usually through social media. These stories are usually not backed up by legitimate factual sources and are based in rumor, speculation, and falsehood. You would think that truth usually rises to the top in these instances, but few check the background of these stories for sources and to confirm what is claimed to be true in these scenarios, as we post them to our social media accounts with the intent to shock and outrage those who read. That's one of the main draws of fake news and what makes it so appealing: it initially makes us seem informed and grants us the attention we so often crave.

Yet, if we are actually dealers in truth, we must look beyond the sensationalistic nature of these stories and see what truth, if any, lies in them instead of blindly reposting them for our friends and family, wielding them wildly like a rusty sword that divides and infects our relationships with false rhetoric and illogical conclusions. And when the real truth comes out, reputations are ruined, and no one wants to believe what we have to say any more. Our truth has become tainted and our message soiled. Our currency is worthless.

So how do we handle truth in the era of fake news? Test it, repeatedly. Don't just accept news, but put it through a wringer. Research it, and get to the bottom until you are absolutely sure of its validity. Find your



evidence and know why it's true, or not. Then, if it's not true, reject it. If you're unsure, keep it to yourself. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt." If we are serious about Christ and His truth, we cannot risk being caught with anything less than the truth. Our testimony is our most useful tool, and without truth and a reputation for honesty, we are hobbled as warriors for Him. Nothing destroys a witness like the smallest bit of falsehood, enclosing him or her within the impenetrable walls of an inescapable prison. Remember that only truth will set you free. Amen.

