

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

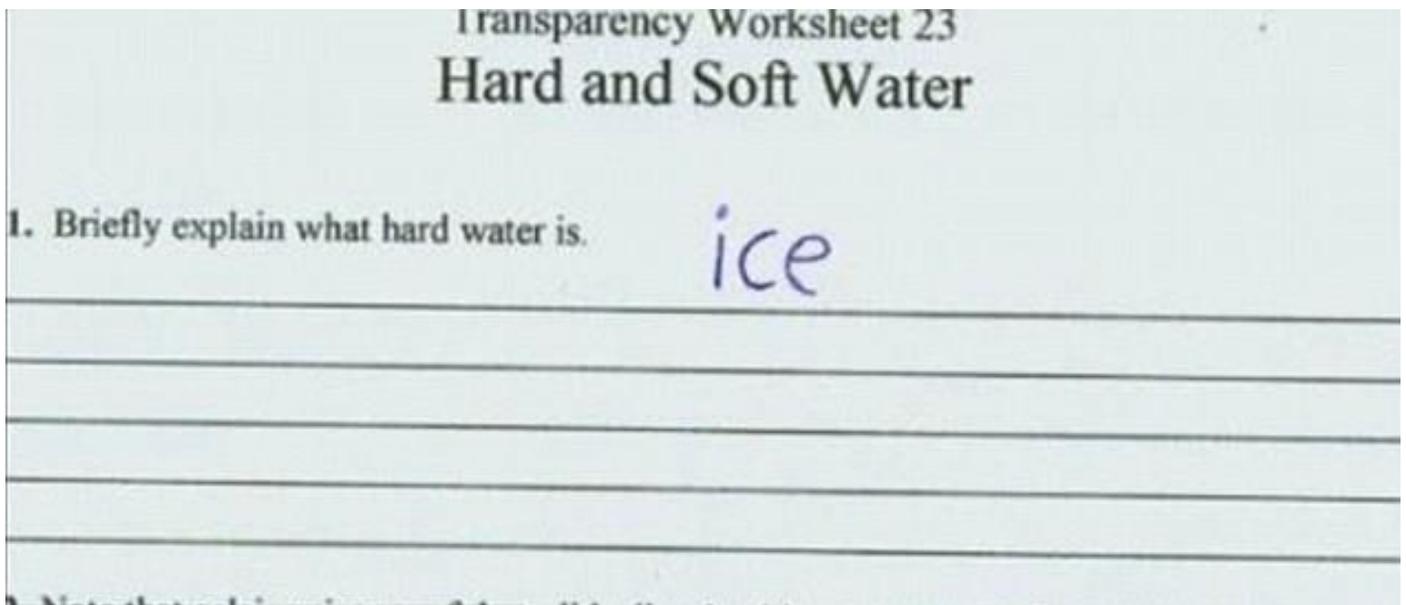
August 2017

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!

August 3 – *Certain Assumptions and Warlike Behaviors*



When I was younger, I thought I knew everything. I know that sounds trite and cliché, but the confession is true. I now realize that everything I thought I knew wasn't as solid as I thought it was, and that I was assuming quite a bit to get to where I was then.

Let me explain with this example: Scientists have been recently developing a space messaging system, technology that sends information into deep space in hopes of receiving an answer. Although we've been listening for otherworldly messages since 1985 with SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), and in 1974 we even sent a onetime 3-minute deep space signal to a specific star, now a new group called METI (Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence) plans on sending numerous messages out into the stars to see who is listening.

The initial idea of making initial contact with an alien civilization seems incredibly valuable and an enormous leap forward for humanity, but there are a variety of issues and conundrums that surround these actions, all of which are dependent upon several assumptions that we are making as a human race. For example, we assume that should we reach an advanced people, these beings would want to develop a friendship with us. By extending the olive branch to advanced worlds, how can we be sure that they will accept it? (If you look through the annals of history, when Columbus came to America, it didn't turn out so

well for the Native Americans.) We are also laboring under the possible delusion that as civilizations age, they become wiser and develop a totally peaceful existence. What if these advanced groups have only become more warlike? Some scientists have mentioned that they hope these civilizations are not angry or hungry, or we are in big trouble.

Also, when METI decides to send out its first message, there is debate as to what that message should be. How do we know that those receiving it will not interpret it as a declaration of war? Or an opportunity for colonization? Or a loud beacon alerting them of our presence, when staying quiet might be the key to our survival? And, with the universe being billions of years old, our world has only started thinking about contacting other worlds in the past hundred or so, while others might have been doing it for millions of years. Maybe we're one of the last worlds to the space party and are so far behind technologically that it may not be that other worlds don't know that we're here: maybe they just don't think we're worth contacting.

The only conclusion that can come from all this posturing is that we just don't know what's out there, what to expect, what to do, and we have no way of knowing any of it. Thankfully, scientists are fully aware of what they do not know, so discussions and debates ensue, unlike some Christians who are not aware of what they do not know and just self-assuredly assume instead.

In fact, there are times that Christians are so sure of what they assume that they will base it as their entire foundation for belief. As such, we assume that Jesus had long flowing brownish/blondish hair with brown eyes and light skin, as that is how He is often portrayed in art and film. Yet given His lineage and the area in which he was raised, He most likely looked more Middle-Eastern than Arian. We develop firm opinions on whether communion is actually Jesus' body and blood or if it is just symbolic of His sacrifice, and we condemn anyone who thinks otherwise. There are many that fully "know" what our own resurrection will entail, how long it will take, whether it will be bodily or spiritual, and how it will coincide with Christ's return, but if we are to be honest, we really have no firm clue.

The fact that we don't know is fine, but the problem arises when certainty comes when we are only assuming. Wars and church divisions have come from arguments based totally on a hypothesis, as Christians can stand so firmly on assumption that it overwhelms them to the point of forgetting the two basic elements of Christ's teaching: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12.30-1). At this point in His ministry, Christ knew that the various sects and lawmakers had so muddled every Jewish law that to be a follower involved too much specialized adherence and furious debate, so He boiled it all down to two laws. However, since then, we have developed so many firm assumptions that many of us confidently stand on shaky ground, when the only fixed foundation should be these two rules.

There is a distinct difference between what we believe and what we know, and when we swap the two, we risk alienating the world and each other. Instead of being immobile in your opinions, stop accepting assumption for fact and know that you do not know. Instead, embrace your brothers and sisters in Christ, in addition to the non-believer, putting love above all else, just as Jesus asks us to. Amen.

August 10 – *Quiet, Unpaid for, Kindness*

When my wife asked my son where his favorite sweatshirt was, his eyes went heavenward as he traced his steps over the last couple of days. After a minute, he came to the realization that he had absentmindedly left it in a heap in the sand at a playground a day after a major rainstorm. At that point, we considered it a lost cause, as it most likely was damp and moldy, but we could also tell how much the sweatshirt meant to him, so I volunteered to take him back. Upon arriving, we discovered the sweatshirt not where he had left it, but instead hung on a railing, underneath an awning, completely dry. Thanks to a random stranger, my son had his sweatshirt back in pristine condition.



A week later, the day after a fireworks display, I was running around the town lake when I spotted a child's Abercrombie zipper jacket in a heap down on the river bank. After a moment of quick reflection, I flashed back to how someone had hung up my son's sweatshirt. So, I ventured down to get this one, found a visible post by the road, and hung it there so the owner would hopefully find it. A day later, it was gone, most likely with the original owner.

Kindness can have a ripple effect, where one good deed gets passed on through a series of people. The "pay it forward" idea came into vogue a few years ago, where people would commit random acts of kindness without provocation, in the hopes that the receiver would find someone else on which to pass that kindness. So, we now read stories of fast food drive-thru lines where each person pays off the debt of the person behind them (with some streaks stretching up to 167 cars and beyond). Although pay it forward mentality is a great start, too often we do something for someone else with the expectation that they must do something for someone else, hence, the string of drive-thru payments. The real kindness in this scenario is that first person who pays for someone else, as they've paid double. I've read related stories where the cashier, after telling customers that their meal was paid for, then sits in expectation that these customers will now pay for the person behind them. (Wary be the person who breaks the chain.) So, although the sentiment is nice, the grumbling of the person who now must pay for the family of four behind them when all they wanted was a drink kind of breaks the intention of the process.

Although kindness begets kindness, the most effective approach is altruistic kindness (kindness for the sake of being kind) where there is a kindness effect without expectation of reprisal, paying it forward, or even of thanks. I never met the person who hung up my son's sweatshirt, but his or her impact was profound. Kindness is strong enough on its own to be an influence. Expected thanks and reciprocation are nice, but they diminish the effect that pure kindness has.

Years ago, I gave a gift to someone, and when he didn't react the way I wanted him to, I became frustrated and disappointed. However, I realized that the issue was not with the receiver, but with the giver. Instead of making someone's day better, I had centered it around myself and was looking to make myself feel good about having made someone's day better. What I should have done is given the gift without expectation, because kindness speaks for itself.

Recently, Coca-Cola developed a series of commercials and programs where the idea is that human kindness and decency is infectious: individuals exposed to kindness tend to improve their outlook on life, then finding moments of kindness to pass on to others without an expectation of reprisal or thanks. In the videos, people show kindness to strangers with no need of thanks or reciprocation. The reward is in the giving, thus making the world a kinder place. Kindness is so powerful that the author of Proverbs knew how much of an impact it can have: "Do not let kindness and mercy leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart" (3.3 NASB). As Christians, we can make the world better through kindness that speaks for itself: we do not need to speak for it. Our message of Christ's love is in our actions, not in our tongues.

Christ's example of unfailing, unreturnable, indescribable love on the cross is the ultimate model of kindness without provocation or expectation. Hence, when others hear of His selfless sacrifice, they have trouble coming to terms with His actions as this act of kindness is that powerful. This week, be kind for the sake of being kind. Don't worry about your impact, and don't expect thanks. And don't pick one act of kindness and be done; open the floodgates of the kindness you have to offer. Know that your kindness speaks for itself, and its silent words are more effective than anything you might have to say. Amen.

August 17 – *Argumentative Choices and Other Insults*

I've been given the middle finger a number of times in my life. Oddly enough, it's rarely been by any of my students (or at least not to my face). The majority of times have been while I've been driving when someone else on the road disagrees with a driving decision that I've made. When my son was 4, a man in another car gave me the middle finger within sight of both of us, and my son interpreted the gesture to me by saying, "Daddy, he's saying that you should only go one way on this road." Indeed, that other driver wanted me to go one way, although I'm not quite sure that where he wanted me to go was where I was driving to. Either way, these fingers haven't really altered my behavior or outlook much in life.



The other day, I watched with great curiosity as a middle-aged woman quickly zipped into a parking spot, cutting off another man just as he was about to enter from the other direction. He blared his horn at her and took another spot close by. As they emerged from their respective cars, they both began speaking at the same time, she with an apology (which would indicate that she knew she was at fault), and he with

accusation about how dangerous her maneuver was, followed by a vulgar name for her. At that point, she changed from being sorry to being offended, as she told him that he had no right to call her that. In that moment, the fault then went from her to him, as now he was wrong for calling her that name. He yelled at her again, now adding insults about the way she looked, but that addition only made his situation worse, because now anyone around him was offended by the way he was treating this woman.

When a problem arises where we are angry or offended, there are three types of argument approaches we can take: pathos, logos, and ethos. Pathos is when we respond using our feelings in an attempt to sway the other party, logos is when logic is used to persuade, and ethos is when reputation is referred to when trying to convince. The topic of argument and people involved usually dictate the approach. This gentleman driver clearly responded using pathos, showing how angry he was, whereas a logos approach would have been more effective. Had he avoided calling her anything inappropriate in his anger and instead used a logos approach by explaining the dangers of her driving, he might have curbed her future driving behavior, but now she was just dismissing him as just a jerk.

Christ was acutely aware of how to approach people in argument, choosing the most effective method to achieve the means He desired. Never one to act without thought, He expressed pathos when he kicked the money changers out of the temple, as had He tried to convince them to leave through logic or reputation (sharing that He was the son of God), He wouldn't have achieved His desired outcome. His Sermon on the Mount relied on logos, as He knew that He was talking to a crowd that already thought of Him as a great teacher, so He didn't need an ethos approach, and these people valued reason and logic, so pathos would have undercut His purpose.

In Luke 11, Christ is invited to eat with the Pharisees and the lawmakers, and after assessing the situation and His audience, He argues with the Pharisees first, by using an ethos argument to sway the entire group. Of all those at the table, He would have known that the Pharisees considered themselves the most strict and law-abiding of everyone, so Christ attacked their reputation: "The Pharisee was astonished when he saw that Jesus did not first wash his hands before the meal. But the Lord said to him, 'Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness'" (38-9). By showing the others that the Pharisees were only outwardly sinless, they would question the Pharisees' authority and listen more closely to Christ's teachings. Through Christ's shrewd choice of argument approaches, He achieved His purpose of having the others question the established authority.

When we find ourselves locked in argument, our go-to choice is often pathos, as we want to express our emotions. However, we need to take a minute and look towards the outcome of the argument: what do we want accomplished? When we identify our goal, we can then analyze our audience and see what approach works best to achieve that goal. Too often, like the man in the parking lot, we get caught up in the moment and say things we don't mean, and once they are out, we find that we've shot ourselves in the foot through our own efforts and our argument is null. Let's learn to reflect and act upon that reflection instead of thoughtlessly reacting to our environment. Take the time to take a step back and see how to best approach the moment, and often, your Christ-like reflection and approach will not only bring you the end you need but also bring peace into the situation. Amen.

August 24 – An Oasis of Christlike Generosity

At my yearly physical with my doctor, I told him how I had been running more and more over the past year. He encouraged me to train even harder and lengthen my runs to the point of a half marathon (13.1 miles). With his great advice, I jumped at the chance. However, the additional advice he gave me that I didn't heed might have been the more important: stay hydrated.

For some odd reason, I chose to run on one of the hottest days of the year for my long weekly run (while on my beach vacation, which only made the sun even worse). I'd chosen to run on the main running strip of the island, along with a good number of other runners as I find that running with others brings about encouragement and competition. Yet, halfway through my recently increased distance run, I found that I was quickly losing steam because of the 90-degree heat and relentless sunshine. I'd forgotten his advice,



and since this distance was new to me, I was unfamiliar with the toll it would take. Far from home and penniless (who brings a wallet when they run?), I was destitute, parched, and not sure I was making it home in one piece. Suddenly, like an oasis in the desert, I came across a huge cooler of bottled waters with a sign: Help Yourself. Apparently, one family on the island puts out a large cooler of free water for the runners daily. I grabbed one, hydrated, and spiritedly made it home all thanks to this family.

Part of it was the much-needed water at the right time, but more so, it was the completely selfless, unprompted giving from this household that gave me the encouragement to push forward. That this house put out water for those in need was enough encouragement to push me all the way home. They will never know the encouragement that they were to me, which makes their witness and actions even more powerful. Weeks later, their actions still resonate with me, and probably will for some time. But what about that offer of water to a thirsty runner had such an impact? It seems so simple a gesture, but when broken down, it shows the depth of that act.

It was faceless – Matthew 6 details the ways in which we as Christians should give to the poor. Of the many points Christ makes in his Sermon on the Mount, the first is in verse 2: “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others.” When we give, we usually like to get credit for our efforts. If we don't see the smiling faces and hear the thanks, we don't feel fulfilled. However, when those actions occur, the impact of the giving is lessened. That day, no one was standing near the water, no one was handing it out to us, no one was waving us onward. The water was merely there, and there was no one to thank. As a result, my reaction is not about how great that person or family is, but is instead about how inspirational that act is, with God's face taking the place of the family's.

It was unprompted – Christ continues in his instruction in verses 3-4 by discussing what should motivate a person to give: “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is

doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Not only should giving be faceless, but it should also not be prompted by anything. One hand does not indicate to the other to give. It gives because it can, like the people in the house. None of us were shouting on the streets about how we needed water. No one had passed out in front of their house. They just took it upon themselves to give where there might be a need.

It was selfless – As indicated in past devotionals, when we give, we should not expect anything in return. This house could have easily put a donation bucket next to the water, suggesting that we should “pay it forward” to upcoming runners, with our money being used to buy future provisions. However, nothing of the sort existed and not a thing was expected in return for their generosity.

If we want our giving to have an impact, we need to remember these three tenets when we give: be faceless, unprompted, and selfless. It sounds easy, but it’s much harder than we think, as we enjoy the returns on our efforts. However, with Godly recognition that comes through prayer and meditation, we can have our need for acknowledgement met, knowing that our giving is much stronger this way and our witness that much more powerful. When you give, and you feel the need to be recognized, ask God to fulfill that need for you so that your impact can reach its full potential. Amen.

August 31 – *Pain Threshold Adjustments that Allow for More*

Years ago, when I taught in an inner-city school district, almost all my male students had one of two dream jobs in mind: rapper or NBA athlete. They could imagine themselves on the court, scoring the winning basket, or lyrically mesmerizing a packed stadium, with both scenarios having their names chanted by thousands of admirers. I’d often ask them how they were planning on achieving this dream, and they would usually respond by telling me that it was just going to happen. I’d inquire about a plan, but they almost never had one, thinking that if they wanted it badly enough, they would achieve it. They could picture the end result, and they believed that the detailed image was enough to get them there.

There seems to exist a pervasive lie in our culture that if you want something enough, you will get it. However, this equation doesn’t factor in the cost of achieving that goal. Many of us want to have a great body and can picture

ourselves with one, but few are willing to put in the long grueling hours at the gym. Several want to be rich and can imagine how we’d live, but the idea of starting at the bottom and working your way up doesn’t appeal to many. We want a successful romantic relationship, but we treat love more as a feeling than an



action, and end up not acting much more beyond how we feel. We forget that work is needed to achieve our dreams, and to get what we want takes time, patience, and more importantly, pain.

One summer, I was visiting a pain-management specialist regarding an injury I had sustained in my shoulder. In helping me deal with my injury, he reminded me that he was in the business of pain management, not elimination. So, he then asked me an appropriately key question: how much pain was I willing to live with? How much pain could I tolerate in life? I considered the question, and came up with an expectation, as he explained to me that pain is not the sign of an unhappy life. With pains come gains.

We often feel entitled to have a pain-free life, but how does a pain-free life benefit us at all? Pain teaches and guides us. Most of us can agree upon the idea that there is no success and happiness without struggle, but we forget that we also need pain throughout the struggling process. If you're not feeling pain, you're not making any progress, and if we truly want to achieve beyond ourselves, pain is necessary, especially when it comes to happiness. Think about the last major victory or accomplishment you had in your life, and chances are there was a great deal of pain that preceded it. Without the pain, there is no reward.

To achieve the glittering goals we set for ourselves, we must be willing to put up with pain. Hence, if you want to be a successful rapper, you should be willing to endure the pains of practicing for hours every day, developing and sharpening a working sense of language and rhyme schemes, recording numerous songs, sending out demo tapes to promoters, working small clubs, building up a following, etc., with a similarly rigorous regiment for being an NBA star. If you aren't willing to have that much pain in your life, then the goal is not realistic or what you want is just a fantasy.

Similar to the pain in our lives and the ways in which it shapes us, in the smelting process of developing excellent tools, there is a great deal hammering, scraping with sharp objects, and heating with intense fire. From that process comes sharp, strong tools. Without the pain, the tool is blunt or weak. Isaiah 48:10 shows us a similar process when comparing the making of tools to the fashioning of our spiritual lives: "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction." If we want to be stronger in who we are, we must be subjected to the Refiner's fire, the pain and testing that brings us closer to perfection and closer in our walk with Him. Without it, we will never grow much beyond where we are now, and with a lifetime of wondering what could be with our dreams, we will look back at a mostly pain-free but stagnant existence, wondering with a disappointed glance what happened. We must invite and embrace pain in our life if we want to be refined and develop our level of success and happiness.

By inviting pain, we allow for risk, but we have become averse and fearful of negative experiences because we feel that our life is defined by them, thus deeming us failures. So, we tend to avoid risk and passively accept the lulling coldness of mediocrity. However, by taking risks and embracing hard and painful experiences, we develop ourselves in ways that help us grow towards a stronger, happier life, one filled not with regret but with satisfaction. Instead of asking yourself what do you want out of life, maybe it's time to find out how much pain you are willing to endure, thereby setting you on a course towards greater gains in life. Amen.

