

Journey of Faith

Devotional Blueprints



Immanuel Lutheran School
Grace Lutheran Church
Immanuel Lutheran Church

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Scripture Verses

- So I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD said to my father David, “Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.” 1 Kings 5:5
- The LORD said to Moses: “Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me.” Exodus 25:1-2
- I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1
- All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Acts 2:44-45
- I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. 1 Chronicles 29:17
- Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Romans 13:7-8
- Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7

Dear Fellow Kingdom Builder:

Someone once said that a Christian’s life is a work in progress. This certainly describes our community of believers! We have worked together and discovered a number of exciting things over the past years. We have discovered God’s great blessings when making contact with people (souls). We have discovered that the Gospel message moves hearts to share those blessings. We have discovered both the excitement and the blessings of people connecting with our ministry. Souls have been added, and we have the desire to share Jesus with even more! But a careful look at history will remind us that this project of our church has been going on for years. We are on a journey together!

As we review these exciting times, one might think that it is time to put up the feet and relax from our exhaustive efforts. However, the work continues. God’s blessings are still new every morning. The opportunities for Gospel ministry continue to present themselves in our community and the world. He invites us all to join together on that work in progress.

But we all need something to revive us from our weariness and to sustain us while we labor. That is the purpose of this little booklet. Our prayer is that this *Journey of Faith Devotional Blueprint* will be a blessing to you on our project. God promises to motivate and sustain His people through Word and Sacrament. We encourage all of you to be regular in your attendance in God’s house and at His table as we together journey forward in ministry.

Your Fellow Laborers,

Leadership Team

** The author of these devotions is Pastor David Laabs. We give him the credit and recognize his contribution. Cornerstone Stewardship Ministry, www.joyfulgiving.net*

Growing the Church: One Prayer at a Time

Epaphras is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. Colossians 4:12

Wrestling is an ancient sport. During the first century, wrestlers struggled for their lives, not for TV ratings. In the language of the day, the wrestling ring was called the *agone*, and the wrestlers were called antagonists.

Such is the word image that Paul uses to describe the work of prayer from the spiritual leader of the Colossian church, Epaphras. Paul says that Epaphras prays fervently (he uses this word root *agone*) for them. We would catch Paul's word play if we say that Epaphras agonizes in prayer for them. What a powerful image – and a biblical image, too – like Jacob wrestling with the angel all night for a blessing (Genesis 32:24-31) and like Jesus praying so fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane that his sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:41-44).

What is so important that Epaphras would pray with such anguish? That the Colossian church would grow in their knowledge of God's will and in their maturity of faith. As Paul would later say of Epaphras, "I vouch for him that he is working hard for you" (Colossians 4:13). Our church needs an Epaphras or two just now. We have some audacious goals before us. Speak to God in prayer about our church's challenges and urgently plead that he continues to bless our ministry. He's spoken to you through His beautiful Gospel promises.

Prayer

Lord, lead me in prayer to wrestle hard with your will. I will stand firm until I find your blessing. Continue to bless all of our ministries.

When Joy is Complete

The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must increase, and I must decrease. John 3:29-30

John the Baptist was a great man. Jesus said so himself. John was the last of the prophets. When people heard him preach, they trembled. He attracted disciples, crowds, and the attention of the press.

But when Jesus came, John never forgot his place. Despite being goaded by his disciples to be jealous of the early success of Jesus' ministry, John remained steadfast in his sense of place within God's plan. He rejoiced in the following Jesus attracted. He even helped his own disciples to join Jesus. The text above is John's explanation to his disciples. My joy is now complete. He must increase, and I must decrease.

Have you discovered this truth yet? Most of us think that joy increases as we increase – our wealth, our influence, our prestige, and power. But in fact, just the opposite is true. Lasting joy is not found at the top of the corporate mountain. It is not a reward for accomplishment. No, true joy is found where John the Baptist found it – by finding one's place in relationship to Jesus Christ.

He (Jesus) must continue to increase in significance in our lives, and we (our plans, ambitions, ego) must decrease. Are you ready to find joy? Look to Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, you must increase, and I must decrease. Lead me to find joy and abundant living in you! Amen.

The Flagrant Fragrance

While Jesus was reclining at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Mark 14:3

Can you imagine the scene? Jesus is talking with the men at the table. This was a proper setting. It was a place for invited guests only.

And then came this woman with the perfume. Who invited her? And who gave her permission to pour the entire contents of her perfume jar on the head of the guest of honor? As you can guess, this was not a Martha Stewart designed moment. Can you imagine the smell? You know the way to use perfume. Just a little dab will do, but she poured the perfume like football players dousing their coach with the Gatorade bucket. It was a flagrant fragrance!

Why waste so much expensive perfume? We do not know her heart for sure. Perhaps, she had experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. Maybe she just felt so grateful for him that she lost her head for the moment. Anyway, Jesus defended her heart – and her lavish gift.

In 48 hours, Jesus was stripped of his friends, his dignity, and his clothing as he was nailed to a cross. That dark day, the only thing his tormentors could not get off of him was the smell of that perfume on his head. As Jesus drew his breath in pain on the cross, did the smell of that loving gift strengthen him to be broken and poured out for us all?

Prayer

Lord, give me the grace to give to you as lavishly as you have poured yourself out for me.

More Than Asking

And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you: seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. Luke 11:9-11

Most of us are good at the first baby steps of prayer. It is easy to ask God to do something! Unfortunately, after the asking, we think that we are done, and that we are expected to do nothing.

The first step in any journey is critical. We do need to ask in order to receive; but asking is just the first step. Many more steps will make up a real journey of prayer. Jesus offers his disciples a model for such a prayer journey. Ask – yes, of course – but then seek, and finally, knock on the doors you find!

Seeking God's will is much more work than simply asking; it takes time, attention, listening, looking, searching. A journey of prayer will lead us far past asking, deep into new paths of seeking God's way for our lives. Along those seeking paths, we will find doorways – places where choices and decisions must be made. Do we have the courage and commitment to knock? When those new doorways are opened, will we step into a new way of life?

Simply asking demands little of us. Seeking means finding God's will in our lives, and such seeking will undoubtedly change us, redirecting us in God's ways. Pray confidently that God will bless us.

Prayer

Lord, I seek your will and your way in my life. Lead me down your paths for your name's sake. Open doors that I might find a new way of life!

Last Word, Lost Word

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, ".... do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Luke 10:17, 20

Being, doing, and having is a fairly accurate motto for most people today. For some, having is more important than the other two. They sacrifice who they are through what they do in order to have.

Everyone is big on being. Some pierce their parts or paint their bodies in order to pound the point, "Look at me. Notice that I am here, recognize my being." The more sophisticated way of doing the same thing is in buying houses that do more than hide us and cars that do more than carry us. It's another way of saying, "I am somebody! Look at me."

Then there is doing. Often the first question asked of a new acquaintance is, "What do you do?" Most can find their identity in "doing something."

Those who get there find that being and doing are never big enough. We want to be a part of some thing that means something. We have to belong to something greater than us.

Followers of Jesus returned from where being and doing had been accentuated. Look who we are because of what we've done was their common cry! Jesus would not let their focus stay on their own accomplishments. He said, Look beyond yourself. Look at what you are a part of. Our names are written in heaven! This is good to know as we begin our journey. Look at what God can accomplish through His people!

Prayer

Lord, lead me in prayer to wrestle hard with your will. I will hold fast to you until I find your blessing.

Touching All the Bases: Coming Home

But the King (David) replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God offerings that cost me nothing." 2 Samuel 24:24

Finally, we are ready to fill out a promise card. But this promise has become something more than a donation! We have first given ourselves to the Lord. We have prayed for God's will to be done in our lives. We have looked hard at our resources in order to find ways to make our faith real with our gifts. This promise has become a stewardship decision that shapes my life. I am growing in my discipleship! Any gift may help to grow the church, but through this gift, God is actually growing me!

The amount of my gift is not the measure of stewardship. Not everyone has the resources to make a million dollar gift, but everyone can make a sacrificial gift in proportion to their resources. Our gifts honor and worship God.

Does my gift grow out of a faith commitment in which I first give myself to the Lord? Is my promise a prayerful commitment that seeks God's will to be done in my life? Does my sacrifice make a real difference in my life by challenging me to step out of my comfort zone? Am I giving in ways that shape my living? If you can answer yes, then you are not simply sharing a gift – you are sharing your faith.

Prayer

Lord, if I give in ways that mean little to me, how would that honor and worship you? Let my giving be a special worship to you as my Lord and my God.

Touching All the Bases: Rounding Third

People should give what they have decided in their hearts to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7

P*raxis* means putting our faith into action. *Praxis* is the point where what we believe and what we do join together. To put it simply, it means walking the walk, as well as talking the talk!

Now that we have made a faith commitment and now that we have earnestly sought God's will in prayer, it is time to turn what we have learned into what we can do and will do. We are rounding third – finding ways to practice what we believe.

Now is the time to take inventory. Now is the time to ask, "OK, Lord, what have you equipped me and blessed me to do?" What resources do I have to give? How can I think creatively – outside the narrow box of my income and expenses – in order to give myself fully? Are there assets beyond my monthly income that I can give? Can I create new resources to give with my talents, gifts, and time? Does my faith commitment lead me to change other priorities in my life, reducing spending, and freeing resources for giving?

There is no one "correct" plan that is right for everyone. Making faith real is a unique journey for every individual. Everyone's heart and mind are moved to action in different ways. Your *praxis* is your way of walking the walk while you talk the talk.

Prayer

Lord, what have you equipped me and blessed me to do? I have heard your word. Help me to be a doer of your word.

A Partnership of Parts

So in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each belongs to all the others. Romans 12:5

The most important piece of a jigsaw puzzle is the piece that is missing. It only takes one errant piece to ruin the whole effort. Every part is important.

Synergy is a word better understood when divided. *Ergo* is Greek for work, while the prefix *syn* means together. When merged, it means "working together." But, there is more. It is better defined to mean the result accomplished being greater than the individual parts.

Sports teams demonstrate the meaning of synergy. Playing together makes them better than playing as individuals. However, one team member failing to do his/her part can make everyone lose. One musician not in concert with the orchestra will ruin the music.

A war plane was damaged and barely made a safe landing. The same plane was needed for a critical mission the next morning. A maintenance crew worked all night to make repairs. At dawn, the pilot asked the mechanic if the plane was good to go. "Sir," he replied, "if this plane does not complete its mission, it will not be because of me."

Your participation is unquestionably significant. Your part is needed to accomplish God's will. Thank you for being on the team that we call "our ministry".

Prayer

Lord, together we can just do more! In Your grace, we can do more than we ever imagined! Multiply our gifts, and grow your grace in each of us.

What's in a Nickname?

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostle's feet. Acts 4:36-37

The name “Joseph” is such a fine name, especially for a man of Jewish descent. In Hebrew, the name means “God’s added blessing.” This was the name for the cherished son of the patriarch Jacob. So why would the apostles give Joseph a nickname like “Barnabas?”

This Joseph was such an encouragement that a new name was in order. When the early church needed money to underwrite its ministry, he was there to make a generous donation. When Saul of Tarsus needed a friend to welcome him into the Christian church he once persecuted, it was Joseph who was that friend. When the church needed to send someone to encourage the new believers among the gentiles, they sent Joseph. When young Mark needed someone to believe in him and give him a second chance to serve as a missionary, Joseph encouraged him. Any wonder all of Joseph’s friends called him “Son of Encouragement?”

The church needs leadership and generosity again to underwrite its ministry. Please listen for his calling. Ask God for answers and be prepared to respond. Barnabas, where are you?

Prayer

Lord, give me the gift of generosity that I may encourage your work in our community and the world through my church.

Touching All the Bases: Turning at Second

This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’
Matthew 6:9-10

Still intent on making a stewardship decision? When you have decided to make your decision a matter of faith, then the next step is to seek God’s will. That means getting God involved in your decision and in your life! That means inviting God’s input and guidance. It means asking, “What would you do through me, Lord?” – and then genuinely seeking God’s will in your life.

Where does one ask God’s guidance and seek God’s will? How does one invite God to participate in his or her life? Those things happen as we intentionally spend time in prayer and God’s word. You now have opportunity to hear God speak to you as you listen to his Word in worship, devotionals and Bible studies.

A stewardship decision is a prayerful commitment. A stewardship decision invites God to the dialogue, involving God in the discussion. A stewardship decision becomes much more than just my sense of goodwill. It means discovering and acting in a sense of God’s good will.

Taking the turn at second base will take much prayer, as well as time for listening, learning, and reflecting.

Prayer

Lord, I want to honor your name. Lead me! Your will be done ... in me and through me. Let your kingdom come ... here in my life.

Touching All the Bases: Reaching First

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve (...) . As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. Joshua 24:15

Have you ever watched a tee ball game where the children are just beginning to learn baseball? Have you ever seen a child so excited to hit the ball off the tee that the youngster runs directly to third base and then races back to home plate to score?

Too often, we think of giving to the church as a financial decision rather than as a stewardship decision. We shortcut the ground rules, like the child running directly to third. As a result, we may make a donation to the church, but we do not make a stewardship commitment.

To make a stewardship decision, we have to go all the way around and touch all the bases. Reaching first means making a faith decision before we even consider the financial aspect of our giving. Reaching first means calling to account my life of faith before doing any financial accounting.

In 2 Corinthians 8:5, Paul says of the Macedonian church, “They gave of themselves first to the Lord, and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” Getting to first means determining my commitment level before deciding my financial position. It is seeing what Jesus did for me in my life. His love moves me to do everything, including giving, out of thanks for him.

Prayer

Lord, first let me give myself to you, and then let my decisions grow out of what I believe ... and out of what you gave for me.

With All Your Heart

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ..., But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Matthew 6:19-21

We tend to grow uncomfortable when the church talks about money. Why is that? Are decisions about how we live and how we use those resources unimportant? Is our faith supposed to be separate from our finances? Are not believing, praying, and loving more important?

Look at a revealing count of New Testament words: believe, believing – 275 times; pray, praying – 371 times; love, loves, loving – 714 times; give, giving – 2,162 times. God is not silent when it comes to giving.

Jesus knew that our treasures and our hearts are inseparably linked. For Him, talking about treasure was to reach more completely for people’s hearts. Remember the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19? We have no idea what happened between Jesus and Zacchaeus other than they had dinner together. But we do know that Jesus reached and dramatically changed that person’s heart. How do we know? Follow the money! Look at what happened with Zacchaeus’ treasure. Seeing where the treasure went, Jesus exclaims, “Today salvation has come to this house!”

Maybe we are uncomfortable with talk about money because the conversation is getting awfully close to the heart of matter.

Prayer

Lord, teach me to love you with all my heart – and with all my life. Let salvation come to this house!

With All Your Strength

“Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned.” Mark 12:41-44

After a long morning of teaching in the temple courtyard, Jesus took a break with his disciples. Sitting right across from the treasury, their gazes drifted over to observing many people who were making their offerings.

Never one to miss a teachable moment, Jesus asked his disciples about what they had seen. “Who put in more?” is the implied question. The answer is obvious to anyone reading or watching – those who gave the greatest sums put in more!

Jesus turns the tables on the obvious, teaching his disciples an important principle of giving. Giving is not measured by dollar amounts; giving is measured by how much we truly give of ourselves. Some who gave large sums offered out of their surplus gifts that they would never even miss. But what this widow offered meant the world to her, though it was a penny. Her gift affected her life. Her seemingly small gift is the one Jesus singles out for praise. She put in more of herself than all of the others. Even though she gave her last penny, she completely trusted that God would provide for her needs.

Commitments are not about equal gifts, but about an equal sense of sacrifice. God is interested in the attitude of the heart more than he is in the amount of the gift. Jesus gave his all. May his love move us to give to our Lord!

Prayer

Lord, each and every gift makes a difference to your church. Teach me to give in ways that actually make a difference in my life.

With All Your Mind

Offer yourselves as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is. Romans 12:1-2

Greedy is Good ... What motto is on your T-shirt? What priorities do you conform to? What do you give yourself to as a kind of living sacrifice? Anything advertising to make us the greatest, the most successful, the most famous can capture us and conform us to its own set of values.

A magazine ran a series of articles asking people, “How has your mind changed?” Some answered by telling how a relationship changed their racial prejudices, or how some tragedy or suffering made them more aware and compassionate.

It is an interesting question. Changing our mind is a difficult and rare thing – especially if the transformation means changing our directions, opinions, goals, and plans. But such change is exactly what Paul calls us to ... to be completely transformed by the renewing of our mind.

How has your life in faith changed your mind? How have your priorities changed? How has your life changed? Are you still conformed, or are you being transformed? Jesus’ sacrifice transformed our status before God and changed our every thought and action to serving him. What a wonderful miracle!

Prayer

Lord, lead me to see things differently, to think differently, to live differently. Reset my priorities. Transform my mind ... and my life!