Spirit through the bond of peace (4:4). Jesus had come to unite them and use them to sharpen one another, doing ministry and sharpening minds and character. The false teachers of their day would be no match for a body of believers growing in Christlikeness, love, and truth.

 Paul also wanted them to grow in holiness, leaving behind the old habits and sinful practices of their culture and former lifestyles. When they walked with Jesus, they would take their eyes off themselves and be able to practice self-control and extend grace and compassion. This behavior would affect home, church, and work relationships. He finished his list with his desire for them to fight spiritual battles through prayer and persistence.

 Pray for personal growth in holiness, equipping, and prayer. Pray for your church to increase in unity, truth, and ministry.

Saturday, December 9, 2017—Philippians 1-4

 Imagine being imprisoned for years for a crime you did not commit. Imagine waking each day with no prospect of release on the horizon. What kind of emotions would you deal with on a daily basis?

 Paul was in a Roman prison, but he had certain privileges not commonly afforded all the incarcerated. Luke says for two years he welcomed all who came to see him in his rented house (Acts 28:30), and he wrote four significant letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul did not allow his imprisonment to hinder his preaching and teaching. He also did not allow it to dampen his spirit. Highlighted most significantly in his letter to Philippi, Paul knew true joy even in prison.

 Paul’s joy was rooted in at least two tangible realities—the Philippian church was thriving, and the preaching of Christ was expanding the Kingdom. He knew his purpose was to make much of Christ, but he also knew to die would take him home and be even better (1:21). He could not lose! There would continue to be suffering, and he told the Philippians to expect the same (1:29), but taking on the mind of Christ would enable the necessary humility and power to walk with Him and glorify Him.

 Their faith brought joy to Paul, and he encouraged them to continue working out that faith (2:12-13). His hope was that they, too, would rejoice in the Lord (3:1, 4:4) no matter what they faced. They could do all things through Christ who strengthened them (4:13). Praise God you can do the same. Pray for true joy to develop in your soul.

*Read the Bible Through 2017*

Week 49

Sunday, December 3, 2017—Romans 12-16

 Paul wrote his letters to inform and inspire his readers. He discussed matters and urged action. The indicative led to the imperative.

 After his lengthy discussion of the gospel and a brief discussion of Israel’s place in the gospel story, Paul turns his attention to application. How can the Romans live out the truth of the gospel? The first task was personal, presenting their lives as living sacrifices (12:1). In view of what God had done, their appropriate response was to offer every part of their lives for His glory. This manifested itself in deepening love and unity as well as increasing service through the faithful use of spiritual gifts.

 Their walk with Christ also affected the way they lived in the community. They were to submit to the governing authorities because God had established them for His glory (13:1). This self-sacrifice was an important step in maturity. As they learned to take their eyes off themselves, they would increase their capacity to love God and love others. Whether with the government or the church family, they were serving Christ. “Let us, therefore, make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (14:19). The willingness of believers to bear with one another and live sacrificial lives speaks volumes to an unbelieving world.

 Though he had never been there, Paul loved the Romans and had commonality with them through Christ. Pray for an increasing love in your heart for all believers and specific growth in your love for your church.

Monday, December 4, 2017--Acts 20:2-22:30

 Falling asleep in church can embarrassing but never life-threatening . . . unless you're sitting in a third-story window late at night. Paul was on a farewell tour with many of his disciples and churches, so he was teaching late into the night when Eutychus fell asleep and fell out of the window. Paul revived him and went on his way in the morning.

 The stories for days would likely have been about the miraculous revival of the fallen young man, but long-term the discussion would have centered around the final charge Paul had given. He called the elders of Ephesus to a similar meeting and told them his life was worth nothing if he did not finish the task set before him--testifying to the grace of God (20:24). He was sure he had done all the work God had given him in that part of the world, and he was ready to return to Jerusalem and to wherever God sent him from there.

 Paul knew hardship awaited him. The people who loved him were convinced of the same, yet they concluded, "The Lord's will be done" (21:14). Arriving in Jerusalem, Paul quickly faced great trouble.

 What kind of assurance do you have about the completeness of your obedience? Are there disciples who will grieve your absence yet be equipped to continue the work of the Kingdom because of your influence? Pray for effectiveness in making disciples and willingness to trust the Lord's will no matter how difficult things become.

Tuesday, December 5, 2017—Acts 23-25

 Paul knew from the Spirit’s leadership he was going to face difficulty in Jerusalem. He did not know what that would be, but he went boldly towards in. In the inevitable conflict, God was faithful in at least two ways—He gave Paul wisdom, and He assured Paul of His presence (23:1-11). To have the right words at the right time and to know Christ is walking alongside in the valley of the shadow of death are empowering.

 This wisdom and presence did not ease the tension. In fact, things grew worse. Paul’s enemies devised a plot to kill him, yet Jesus had assured Paul he would testify in Rome, so Jesus made a way for Paul’s safety. God also made a way for Paul to testify boldly about the gospel. Standing before his accusers and Governor Felix, Paul defended and described his belief in Christ. His goal, he told Felix, was to keep his conscience clear before God and man (24:16). For two years, Felix kept Paul in prison. Though not a free man, he had certain freedoms not afforded to all prisoners, he was safe from his enemies, and he had the opportunity to share the gospel.

 Felix eventually gave way to Festus who offered to take Paul to Jerusalem to have him stand trial, but Paul instead appealed to Caesar. His circuitous journey would finally take him to Rome as he had long wished.

 Pray for a faith which trusts deeply and shares boldly.

Wednesday, December 6, 2017—Acts 26-28

 Paul stood before one of the most powerful men in the world and had the opportunity to defend himself against the charges the Jews brought against him. He explained he had lived by the strictest Jewish regulations, and he discovered how Jesus, despite Paul’s initial disagreement, fulfilled all the hopes he ever had because of his faith. They could not agree with him about Jesus, so they wanted to kill him. He asked, “Whey should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (26:8).

 Jesus changed Paul, and he had since that time gone from place to place preaching repentance, telling people to turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (26:20). This teaching, and specifically its power through the resurrection of Jesus, made Paul a target though he himself only taught what Moses and the prophets had promised (26:22). Paul’s testimony was so compelling, Agrippa told Festus Paul would have been freed if he had not appealed to Caesar.

 Paul’s journey to Rome was nothing short of an adventure. Storms, hunger, shipwreck, and snakebites were only part of the story. Paul remained faithful in prayer, proclamation, and ministry, and he had certain freedoms as a prisoner in Rome which allowed him to continue the same there. Circumstances don’t change the lordship of Christ.

 If someone gave you the opportunity to defend your existence, what would you say? Would there be enough evidence you follow Jesus? Could you point to Old Testament promises He fulfilled? Could you quote New Testament principles that guide your life? Pray for authentic faith.

Thursday, December 7, 2017—Ephesians 1-3

 Those who believe in Jesus find themselves united in Him regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or geography. They have the same Holy Spirit living inside as a guarantee of the future and a guide for the present. Paul celebrated this blessing as he wrote while far away in prison.

 Prayer was a vital habit for Paul, and he prayed regularly for the church in Ephesus. Over and again he asked God to reveal Himself to them so they would know Him better. Paul wasn’t satisfied with their salvation. He longed for their sanctification—that they might continually become more like Jesus and less like their former selves. He reminded them of their past—they had been dead in their transgressions and sins (2:1), but because of God’s great love He made them alive in Christ.

 God sent Christ not to make bad people good but to make dead people alive. This life was the only way the Ephesians would discover their intended identity—to be the masterpiece of God—and to do the good works He planned for them to do (2:10). Jesus did all the work for salvation and would provide all the power for sanctification. The Ephesians needed only to walk more closely with Him day after day.

 Paul prayed for a growing awareness of the greatness and love of God as well as a growing unity among believers. This growth and strength would testify to spiritual powers about the majesty of God (3:10). Pray for your personal growth and community involvement will glorify God.

Friday, December 8, 2017—Ephesians 4-6

 During the Christmas season, children give special attention to their “wish” list. What will make Christmas extra special? Because of their youth (and because they don’t have to pay for it), kids ask for a lot.

 When Paul wrote the Ephesians, he began by speaking of the blessings in knowing Christ and the power He had to bring the spiritually dead to life. He prayed with gratitude for what God was doing in them and prayed for their growth in knowledge of Him and unity with one another.

 Then, Paul began his “wish” list. Because all the things he wrote were true, he wanted them to make every effort to keep the unity of the