

**First Fifteen: May 2-6**  
**Focus Scripture: John 10:22-30**

**Monday: Psalms 78:1-30**

**Going Deeper:** What does it mean to put your hope in God. (See Ps 78:6-7) What does it mean to say you believe in something? Both hope and belief are more about what we do and how we engage with others than the ideas and thoughts we say we possess. Faith is often understood as a noun, but I would suggest Jesus understood faith as a verb, and it is revealed as we put our faith into practice, revealing our hopes and beliefs through tangible expressions. This Psalm is directed to those who would hear and listen to its instruction. It may sound like a rebuke, and it is, but its intent is not to criticize as much as it is to help us see our humanity clearly, as well as understand the depth and persistence of God's grace. (Look at Ps 78:37-39) The two verses that stand out from our reading of the first thirty verses of this Psalm are 22 and 30. In Psalm 78:22 the Psalmist lifts up humanity's persistent struggle, *"they had no faith in God, because they didn't trust God's saving power."* (CEB) This is the crux of our struggle. Do we believe, can we place our hope in God, will we trust God is good and will give and/or lead us to what will make us whole and bring us peace. The compounding element within this struggle is found in Psalm 78:30 *"But they didn't stop craving – even with the food still in their mouths!"* (CEB) Can we trust God to lead us to what will truly satisfy, the life that will bring us joy, peace, and fulfillment? There is a balance here we must understand, we are to trust God's love to give us what we need, and yet we must also engage and use the gifts and abilities we have honed through practice, and education and hard work. This balance between faith, hope and belief is where trust begins to grow and take root as we accept all we have are indeed the gifts of God's mercy and provision, not merely the result of our own hard work.

**Prayer:** Lord of love, thank you for your presence with me today. Open my eyes to where you have blessed me, providing me with opportunities and stamina to work hard and use these blessings to help me become who I am. Lord help me realize who are always near and you desire what is always best for me. Amen.

**Tuesday: Matthew 21:23-27**

**Going Deeper:** Some say Alexander Hamilton is the originator of the saying "If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything" and some don't. It doesn't really matter who said it, its meaning remains unchanged, hold true to your commitments and when called upon stand tall and state your case. I see this as the central issue within this exchange recorded by Matthew's gospel. The question that is being asked of Jesus was centered on the origin of his ordination (often translated as his authority); they wanted to know who had given him the credentials to speak and teach within the temple area (and beyond). They were disturbed because he had not come through the "proper" channels. They were troubled by their people's response to his teaching, and they wanted to know more about him... but not necessarily about the message imbedded in his teaching. We see the implications of this quote of notoriety within their thought

processes. Jesus' question regarding John's baptism invites them to make a stand, to declare their faith and in whom and what they believe, and in their failure to answer his question they betray their own faith.

**Prayer:** God of mercy, help me stand up when I am called to answer what I believe in and whom I place my trust. Help me to answer the questions of my faith by how I practice it throughout this day. And when necessary, give me the words to share when I am called to do so. Amen.

### **Wednesday: Matthew 21:28-32**

**Going Deeper:** This parable is a continuation of Jesus' response to the temple priests question "by whose authority are you doing and teaching these things?" As you read the story Jesus shared with them what do you hear Jesus asking us to consider in his question about which son was faithful to his father's desire? On face value it appears to be about follow through or doing what you have committed to do. This message is clearly present, but if we dig a little deeper into his question, such as the specifics of the father's request... *"go and work in the vineyard today"* the implied message to work in the vineyard most likely was a challenge to do the work of the kingdom of God. Jesus understood himself, as well you and I as being connected to God through his use of the image of the vine and vineyard in John 15:1-8 where he proclaims, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper."* In this story of the two sons in Matthew 21, he appears to be breaking down the barriers of appearance and practice calling us to focus less on the appearance of things and give greater attention to living faithfully. I also hear a message of grace in his words. I believe Jesus calls each of us to embrace our faith while being fully awareness that all of us may begin with a less than stellar attitude... but nonetheless we preserve and trust God's love and grace.

**Prayer:** Which one will I be today my Lord... Help me align what I say with how I embody my faith. Make me aware of when I come up short and give me grace when my heart is slow to engage. Amen.

### **Thursday: Romans 5:1-8**

**Going Deeper:** These verses are a summation of what the Apostle Paul introduces in Romans 4, as he unwraps the mystery of God's grace. Grace is based upon our faith that God will do what Jesus revealed at Easter... God's desire is to forgive sin and bring healing and restorative grace into our lives. As I have said in previous First Fifteen Devotions, sin is not the misguided individual behaviors we most likely are accustomed to considering as sins. The sin to which Paul refers is the disconnect between ourselves and God due to our desire to control our lives, as well as the lives of others. Sin is a rebellious self-centered me first attitude that relegates the needs of others as less important than our own. What Paul wants us to see is God's grace is given to us not after we have reached some level of proficiency or performance, grace is given before we even begin to try! I know this is contrary to how most of us think and operate, but look at Romans 5:8... *"But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners*

*Christ died for us.*" (CEB) I hear Paul encouraging us to understand our faith helps us get back up and move beyond our struggles trusting God uses these moments to help us grow in our understanding of how to live our lives guided by our faith and God's love for all of us.

**Prayer:** Lord of light, truth, and love... I am a sinner, and I am thankful for your love and grace. Open my eyes and deepen my understanding of where I still fight against you and seek to hold onto my wants and desires beyond my trust in your provision. Help me see others and their needs and understand your love is for all of us and you have invited me to use what you have given me to help others. Open my eyes my Lord and deepen my understanding. Amen.

**Friday: Mark 9:17-24**

**Going Deeper:** This interaction recorded in Mark 9 is filled with many details that I suspect can become distractions to what I believe is the primary point of this story... faith! It begins as Jesus returns with Peter, James and John and he is immediately thrust into the middle of a struggle about faith and its expectations. A boy has been brought to the disciples and they were unable to help him. Mark tells us an argument arose, but he does not give the details. We can only imagine, but I suspect it was along the line of so many arguments, who's to blame! Jesus calls for the boy to be brought to him and it is here that I believe we discover the central message in this story for all of us. The father is desperate... *"if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us"* I love Jesus' response, *"If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes."* (Mark 9:22b -23 - CEB) What is our expectation from faith? Do we seek and need an immediate solution? Do we expect a problem free life since we are people of faith? Jesus' statement of the possibilities of faith do not assure us of this, only that through faith God will lead us to a grace filled resolution of hope and leading us toward wholeness. I also suspect the cry of the father is not far off from the best response, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24 – CEB)

**Prayer:** Our God of amazing grace, the question of blame and fault often dominate our lives and relationships. Forgive us when we get caught up in this game. Help us quickly realize when it is happening and give us the faith to say no, I will not continue to be involved. Lord of truth, mercy and love help me remember this story of faith and see it not as a matter of lacking faith, but a prayer of acknowledgment that asks for more, clearer and deeper faith. Amen.