

FINDING GOD



IN



VIDEO GAMES

**A COLLECTION OF TWELVE-MONTH THEMED DEVOTIONALS
FROM THE WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES AND BEYOND**



Acts 17:27-28a

God did this so that they
would seek Him and
perhaps find Him,

though He is not far
from any of us. For in
Him we live and move
and have our being.

By Steven & Arielle R.

Finding God in Video Games

A Collection of Twelve-Monthly Themed
Devotionals from the Worlds of Video
Games and Beyond!

Steven and Arielle R.

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DEDICATION

To my co-op partner in both gaming and in life...
my beautiful wife. You inspire me, encourage
me, and without you none of this would exist.
I love you 3000.

INTRODUCTION

If we haven't been formally introduced, let's fix that right now. We are "Finding God in Video Games", and over the past ten years we have been sharing daily devotionals, videos, and articles on the spiritual analogies and practical applications we have found from our various gaming and other "nerd culture" experiences and how we incorporate those into our passion for following the Lord. In our third devotional book, we have taken twelve of our favorite franchises from across our various fandoms and created a themed collection of devotions that we pray you will find entertaining, encouraging, and most importantly drawn closer to the Lord after reading them.

Use of the games, characters, and movies within these pages are not considered a recommendation or gauge of their appropriateness for all ages, maturity levels, or beliefs. We strongly encourage all to follow the Lord's specific guidance for them on what is beneficial to spend their time absorbing.

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Nintendo

Day 1: Kirby and the Importance of What We Choose to “Consume”

Kirby is one of the most identifiable characters in all of gaming, but it is his unique method of learning new skills in his games that makes him truly stand out... he consumes an ability and then becomes capable of using that power. As Kirby literally demonstrates the axiom “we are what we eat,” he must intentionally choose what he absorbs based on what capabilities he wants to possess and utilize. If his upcoming mission benefits from the ability to wield a sword, he must seek out and “consume” that skill so he can use it later in battle... and if he doesn’t take time to absorb the most beneficial things, he can’t access them when he needs them the most. If Kirby only eats useless items, he will enter these battles unarmed and unprepared.

Our world is full of both content for us to absorb and battles for us to fight, and what we choose to consume determines how prepared we are for the challenges we will face. Time spent with the Lord in prayer and invested in Bible study arms us with His wisdom and provides us with the abilities we will need to overcome temptations and tear down enemy strongholds, so let’s take the time to prayerfully consider what meets His criteria for beneficial absorption and “consume” that today. We are as spiritually ready for the challenges of today as we choose to be.

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Philippians 4:8

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23

Day 2:

Dr. Mario's Secret - Overcoming Evil With Good

While most of Mario's gaming adventures are designed around demonstrating his physical acrobatics, in his exploits as "Dr. Mario" he gets to show off his more cerebral side by carefully matching doses of medication with the viruses that he is seeking to cure. His skills as a fire-throwing, turtle-stomping daredevil are pretty useless in this domain... this mission field calls for healing, not battle. These viruses can't be defeated by Mario using the same strategy that they are fighting him with... he can only resolve these conflicts by confronting their "evil" with the "good" medicine that he is carrying, carefully aligning his actions to provide a heaping dose of loving care to overcome their hateful antics.

While Christ certainly sent out His followers to tear down the wicked spiritual strongholds of darkness on this planet, the human souls we encounter during these missions need to see His love and peace demonstrated, not our skills in fighting fire with fire. It is not in the strength of our arguments, but through the sincerity of our kindness and love in the presence of these conflicts that the Lord's light shines brightest.

Let's fight today's battles HIS way, confronting anger and hate with patience, love, and grace... in a world desperately searching for healing, His truth shared in genuine love is the only cure.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21

Day 3: StarFox 64 - “Do a Barrel Roll”!

When a supporting character in a video game gives us instructions, it is typically designed to be helpful, acting as an in-game representative of the game developer to give us clues on how to solve a problem or encouraging us to try a specific technique to advance. But when this “friendly advice” is given in a demanding manner, it only leads to frustration and rejection. For example, the more I heard Peppy bark out “Do a Barrel Roll!” in StarFox 64, the more I wanted to do everything BUT a barrel roll because of the way he was communicating it. Peppy had positive intentions but suffered from flawed execution, so his guidance came across in an unhelpful way.

When the Lord reveals His truth to our hearts, it is an exciting feeling, but in our zeal to share it with others who may not have received that specific enlightenment or direction yet, we can sound a lot like Peppy urgently commanding us to do a “barrel roll.” For those who haven’t yet chosen to follow Christ, the path we are on makes very little sense, and our directional guidance simply doesn’t compute. His eternal wisdom sounds foolish until His Spirit brings His words to life, so let’s share what He’s placed on our hearts with love while patiently showing those we are trying to reach the same grace that He has shown us.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18

These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:13-14

Day 4:

Samus, Metroid, and Surprising Answers to Prayer

In the early days of video games, strong female protagonists were virtually non-existent... so the “helmet removal” reveal of Samus Aran at the end of the first Metroid game on the NES was a pretty big deal. But Nintendo’s willingness to subvert an early gaming stereotype by making her the hero was exactly what this intergalactic mission called for, and for years she’s faithfully served as the heroic bounty hunter this series needed. Sure, Link and Mario were certainly the perfect fit for their specific adventures, but they didn’t have the necessary skills to solve the type of puzzles that Samus was uniquely designed to handle. She was the perfectly chosen heroine we didn’t even know we should be asking for.

The Lord’s answers to our prayers will typically come in a very different manner than we want or are expecting, and if we’re only prepared to accept His solutions to our problems on our terms, we will miss out on His divine provision while we wait for our preferred resolution. Even Christ was rejected by the very souls He came to save because they didn’t recognize the Messiah they’d been praying for standing in their midst... so let’s open our eyes and ears to however He chooses to answer us today. His responses will always defy our assumptions and expectations... that’s how we know that it came from Him.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”
Isaiah 55:8-9

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
Ephesians 3:20-21

Day 5:

Mega Man - Balancing Free Will and an Optimal Path

My original console gaming experiences were pretty linear affairs... games like Super Mario Brothers simply took me from one level to the next, while Zelda gave me a rudimentary feeling of exploration while still guiding me along a predetermined path. But then along came Mega Man, a title that boldly let me choose every possible path from the very beginning... freedom that was both a blessing and a curse. Sure, I could choose to face the levels in whatever order I wanted, but if I didn't confront and defeat Ice Man in battle before trying to take on Fire Man, I wouldn't possess the abilities that I needed to succeed in that fight. Even in a non-linear game experience, there is always an optimal path to the best possible endgame if we search for it.

While the Father has given each of us free will to pursue anything our heart desires, choices that we make outside of His will always place us in predicaments that we weren't meant to face in this manner. His perfect plan for our lives will still feature challenges, but when we surrender to His guidance, we will face these trials in His divine order, allowing Him to fully prepare us for them in advance. If we are in over our heads in our current battles, let's return to Him in prayer and allow Him to show us what steps we missed so He can direct us back onto HIS perfect path.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil.
Proverbs 3:5-7

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand.
Psalms 37:23-24

Day 6:

Pikmin - The Importance of Being Part of a Diverse “Body”

The Pikmin series features some of the most unique protagonists in all of gaming... taken individually, these tiny beings appear relatively weak and helpless, and at first glance the world around them seems too large, hostile and cruel for any of them to survive. But the secret to their success is that they never face these challenges alone... by following the direction of their leader and combining each of their diverse strengths to complement their fellow Pikmin’s weaknesses, they take on and overcome these “super-sized” challenges. And through their intentional (and often sacrificial) collaboration with each other, this collection of seemingly mismatched souls becomes an unstoppable force for good... all because they chose to come together as one unified body to follow one “master’s” voice.

As individuals, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the challenges of the world around us and feel under-qualified for the missions we have been called to complete... but that’s because we weren’t designed to take these on alone. In the body of Christ, our differences are necessary and meant to be complimentary... and it is only when we choose to put aside our personal agendas, place our limited capabilities in the Master’s hands, and unselfishly work together for His purpose that we will see mountains move.

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

Romans 12:4-5

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Day 7:

“Paper Mario” - A Deeper Experience Requiring a Larger Commitment

The “Paper Mario” series of games represents a massive departure from the simple “run and jump” side-scrolling adventures of a standard Mario game... these titles feature a narrative with actual depth, exploring each character’s motivations through thoughtful dialogue and true character development. But this deeper gaming experience also requires a deeper commitment from the player... while most of the stories in the Super Mario series are “paper-thin,” allowing us to run through them quickly, the Paper Mario series is designed to reward those seeking more than a casual gaming experience.

If our interest in God is limited to getting us into the best possible eternal endgame, we have missed the entire point of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. He didn’t come just to offer us a path into heaven... He came to bring us into a deeper, fully reconciled relationship with our Heavenly Father. But this journey isn’t designed for a casual fan... we will only find as much of Him as we choose to seek out. Let’s open our eyes to the true purpose of our adventure and allow this new perspective to change the way we view our current circumstances in life... these levels were designed to draw us closer to the Lord. And if we are truly searching for Him with all our hearts, He’s promised we will find Him.

So that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.

Acts 17:27

And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

James 4:8a

Day 8: Mario and Sonic - Finding Common Ground Through Unified Purpose

For years, Nintendo and Sega's respective mascots existed in an adversarial relationship... as the competing public faces for their brands, the idea that we would ever see Mario and Sonic coexist on the same console (much less team up in the same game) only existed as a pipe dream in the hearts of gamers worldwide. But when Sega moved on from developing hardware to focusing exclusively on crafting games, those dreams finally became a reality. The unlikely crossover between these two gaming icons finally happened, delivering multiple games that proved that the Blue Blur and the world's most famous plumber are truly better together.

Our eternal adversary's greatest tactic in his war against the body of Christ is sowing seeds of division. When we stand together in unity with one heart of love, sharing the mind of Christ, we can tear down every spiritual stronghold... but when we turn against each other and allow our nonessential doctrinal disagreements to become internal battlefields, we do Satan's work for him. Throughout the Bible, we are literally begged to work together as one body to do the Father's will on this planet, so let's put away our arguments and unproductive points of contention and allow our combined mission of reaching others with the love of Christ to bring us together as ONE.

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 1:10

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Day 9: Pokémon - Gotta Catch 'Em All!

The Pokémon franchise is one of the largest on the planet, captivating massive audiences for years and challenging them to fully explore each game with one mission in mind... “Gotta catch ‘em all!” But finding and collecting all these Pokémon isn’t easy or automatic... players don’t simply set a Pokémon trap out on the ground, go home and relax, and wait for one to step in it. We must get out of our comfort zones and meet them where they are, diligently searching for each one. Every Pokémon is unique, and if we truly want to “catch them all,” we are choosing to embark on a sacrificial journey of seeking and finding them on their terms, not on our own.

The Great Commission was a command to GO, not sit back and wait for those who need Christ to come looking for us. We have each been charged with bringing the full truth, love, hope, and grace of Christ to the entire world... but just as every Pokémon must be approached differently, we must allow His Spirit to guide us in the way that others are most prepared to receive Him. Christ often went very far out of His way to share His messages with hungry souls in need, and He customized His approach and His invitation to “come and follow Him” to each soul He met. Let’s open our eyes to the mission field surrounding us today and go catch ‘em all!

Then the master said to the servant, “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.”
Luke 14:23

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.
Matthew 28:19-20

Day 10: Splatoon and a "Painting" Priority

While most competitive games in the “shooter” genre tend to focus on eliminating adversaries, Nintendo’s Splatoon series flipped the script by prioritizing painting prowess over traditional combat tactics. Victory in Splatoon can’t be achieved simply by taking out rivals... in order to succeed, participants must use the tools at their disposal to conquer the blank canvas of the environment rather than simply knocking each other out of the match. The winning team is determined by whoever invested their time in the wisest manner, covering the level with the most paint and changing the color of the world around them... one intentional splotch of paint at a time.

Every one of us is carrying a paintbrush that actively paints the world around us with color, and our actions (both intentional and accidental) leave an impact on the souls of everyone we meet. With the lasting impression of our words and deeds in mind, what color palette will we choose to paint our environment with today? Are we dipping our brushes into the same paint buckets our opposition uses to paint darkness and division and expecting light to emerge? Or are we carrying a paintbrush dripping with love, joy, peace, and grace that leads others toward Christ? We’re all painting something today... let’s leave behind a picture we would be proud of.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.
Matthew 5:14-16

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.
Ephesians 5:8-10

Day 11: Wii Shovel-ware and “Platform Standards”

After all these years, the Nintendo Wii console still stands as one of the best-selling hardware platforms of all time, selling over 100 million units during its' lifetime. But despite those incredible numbers, the final legacy of the Wii was a bit of a mixed bag, with some of the best titles ever released sharing the same shelf space with some of the worst games ever made. The Wii gave us truly incredible titles like Super Mario Galaxy and Twilight Princess, but it also brought “shovel-ware” ... large quantities of poorly made, low-quality titles that were not an effective representation of what the Wii was truly capable of delivering when it kept its' standards high.

As “living platforms” demonstrating the Lord to all who are observing us, what we say and do always matters... and our quality standards are defined by whatever is true, noble, just, pure, lovely, virtuous and praiseworthy in the eyes of the Father. When we let His life shine through us, we bring His light into the darkest of places, but when our words and actions are inconsistent with His values, we combine His fresh water with a bitter aftertaste. We are ambassadors for Christ, representing Him at all times... even when things are tough, let's rise above the standards set by the world around us and deliver words of life and light that meet His seal of approval.

Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?
James 3:10-11

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.
Matthew 12:35-36

Day 12: Mario “World -1” and a Way that Seems Right

Back when the original NES Super Mario Bros. game first came out, I heard rumors that there was a secret level hidden within the game... the mysterious “World -1.” After a bit of research (that mostly involved asking friends and buying gaming magazines for clues), I finally cracked the code... I smashed the specific blocks at the end of World 1-2 that would activate this secret world, jumped awkwardly through a wall, and finally found the entrance I was looking for. But once I dove down that warp pipe, I learned the painful truth... “World -1” wasn’t some magical place—it was an inescapable prison. After all that work, all it offered me was an infinite, pointless loop of endlessly treading water until my time expired. The only way out? The reset button.

Life is full of many pursuits, but the true value of each is measured by what they offer at the end of the game. I’ve personally wasted years of my life chasing shortcuts and “pipe dreams” that promised fulfillment but only led to a prison of my own design. While following Christ may feel restrictive at times, His guidance is designed to save us from hidden traps, unnecessary pain, and an ending that we will regret. Rather than seek out alternatives to the loving directions of our Creator, let’s embrace the wisdom of His protective limitations. His way is the ONLY way.

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.
Proverbs 14:12*

*For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:20-23*

Day 13:

The Console Wars - Sega Does What “Nintendon’t”?

The original “console wars” between Sega and Nintendo got a little bit feisty... both companies battled it out for the hearts (and wallets) of the gaming audience in each successive console launch by adding new features and additional processing power. Sega upped the ante with their marketing slogan, “Genesis does what Nintendon’t,” attempting to distinguish their platform by mocking what Nintendo’s consoles didn’t do. But the house that Mario built didn’t rise to the bait... Nintendo ignored Sega’s taunts, choosing to craft the games and systems they wanted to make and refusing to allow Sega to drag them into fighting this battle on their terms. The result? Nintendo is still making video game consoles to this day... and Sega is not.

In our real-world missions for Christ, we will be tempted to lower ourselves to the standards of the world around us to remain relevant... but that path is a race to the bottom of the barrel that nobody wins. The eternal wisdom of the living God doesn’t need to be updated to fit into our modern culture, and His words are not a secret to be ashamed of. His kingdom is still standing while every earthly empire has crumbled... so let’s share Him openly and confidently, without any “shame in our game,” while maintaining His high standards in everything we say and do.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Romans 1:16

We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:23-25

Day 14: From the Virtual Boy to the 3DS - Right Dream, Wrong Timing

While Nintendo is known for making some of the most successful and beloved gaming hardware of all time, that doesn't mean they haven't made a few missteps along the way. With the "Virtual Boy," Nintendo accurately forecasted the emergence of 3D gaming, but in their rush to be first to market, they created a Frankenstein monster of a product... a gaming system with a monochromatic screen display that caused both eye pain and headaches for the poor souls who gave it a try. In the future, Nintendo would finally execute their dream of a 3D gaming system with far better results, and the incredibly successful Nintendo 3DS handheld was born... it was the right idea and the right company, but it just wasn't the right time or way for them to do it.

The Lord will place many dreams in our hearts, but there is often a future time and place for His fulfillment of them. The visions He gives us will provide us with the direction we need so we can develop ourselves toward His endgame, but if we aren't patient, we will find ourselves making an "Ishmael" version of His plan that is a poor substitute for the "Isaac" experience that He promised us. We can't rush His process, so let's patiently allow Him to guide us step by step while placing our full trust in His perfect timing. The Lord is never late... just later than we want.

And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.

Genesis 17:18-19

For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.

Habakkuk 2:3

Day 15: The Duck Hunt Dog - Adding Insult to Injury

The gaming villain who had the greatest impact on me at a young age wasn't Ganon, Ridley, or even Bowser... it was the Duck Hunt Dog. It wasn't because he was threatening, malevolent, or scary... as a matter of fact, this nameless antagonist wasn't even a problem until I missed the mark. But as soon as I made a mistake, he immediately popped up to point his finger at me and laugh at my misfortune. In my frustration, I would target him with my zapper multiple times in a feeble attempt to silence him... but the Duck Hunt Dog was invincible and impervious to my attacks.

Other gaming villains could be defeated even if my approach wasn't completely flawless, but silencing the Duck Hunt Dog demanded a level of perfection that I simply didn't possess.

Every one of us misses the mark in life, and as followers of Christ and fellow recipients of His grace, we are called to forgive, repair broken fellowship, and restore our repentant brothers and sisters in Christ. In a world full of "Duck Hunt Dogs" who rush to mock others' failures and judge those who've fallen, we are called to show the same grace that the Lord has shown to each of us... not add insult to injury. Those who have fallen to sin have suffered enough... the Lord's church should be known as the place where all who seek forgiveness and grace will find it.

So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

John 8:7-11

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:1-2

Day 16: From the WiiU to the Switch - Making Masterpieces from Missteps

While the Nintendo Switch has surpassed all of Nintendo's previous home consoles in units sold and will go down in history as one of the most successful platforms of all time, it launched on the heels of one of Nintendo's greatest failures... the Wii U. Nintendo's first attempt at a touchscreen-based console was a massive misstep that was met with complete consumer apathy, and the poor sales of the Wii U caused many to doubt the gaming giant's future. It would have been easy for Nintendo to give up after such a massive setback, but five years later they took everything they had learned and launched the Switch, creating the perfect hybrid console for at home and on the go. The Wii U's failure was just one chapter in the story that led to the Switch.

We've all made mistakes that we regret, but if we place our destiny into the hands of the Lord, we will find that He'll take even those areas that represent our deepest failures and use them to serve a higher purpose. King David committed one of the greatest moral failures ever recorded, but after the painful consequences that followed, he and Bathsheba had another child who would become the wisest and most successful king in history... and if we place the crumbled mess that we have made out of our lives into the Lord's hands, He will make a masterpiece out of it, too.

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14

Day 17:

Nintendo 64 - From Super Mario to Superman

The Nintendo 64 console was home to many of the best video game releases of all time, but that doesn't mean that it always got it right. The same platform that gave us all-time classics such as Super Mario 64, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, and GoldenEye also brought us one of the worst games to ever exist... Superman 64. But this misfire didn't cause

Nintendo to quit making games or even give up on the Nintendo 64 hardware... They simply stopped releasing terrible Superman games and moved forward from that mistake. And it's a good thing they did, because many of the N64's greatest hits remained ahead of them... patiently waiting on the other side of that "green ring flying" failure.

If the Lord were limited to using perfect people to accomplish His will, He'd have a pretty short list of people to choose from, because we have ALL sinned and fallen short. And if our sinful failures disqualified us from being used by Him, we'd need to get rid of every part of the Bible that isn't written in red letters. When His followers are ready to move forward in repentance, the Lord is waiting with nail-scarred hands of forgiveness. From Moses and David to Peter and Paul, the Lord didn't give up on those who got it wrong but chose to finish their game strong... so let's turn that page today. His best for us is yet to come.

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

1 John 2:1-2

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12-14

Day 18: Bubble Bobble and When Jesus Doesn't Simply "Take the Wheel"

One of my earliest gaming co-op experiences was "Bubble Bobble," a game featuring a pair of little dragons whose only offensive weapon is... wait for it... blowing bubbles. To clear the level of adversaries, each dragon first had to trap their antagonists in a "bubble," followed by physically "popping" the bubble to eliminate them. Simply surrounding the enemy with a bubble wasn't enough, and attempting to attack them prior to "bubbling" them would result in failing the level... the dragons had to work together, encasing each of these obstacles in bubbles and then taking the appropriate action to pop them to clear the stage and move forward to the next level.

Many times in my life, I've reached out to the Lord in prayer about my problems, surrounding them with a "bubble" of prayer, hoping that He would just make them go away. While there are times our omnipotent Father will solve these needs without any actions required from us, He tends to use our times of prayer to guide us on what specific actions we should be taking rather than simply "taking the wheel." David couldn't just pray Goliath away... he still had to physically go face his giant so the Lord could show up and deliver victory through him. Let's encase all our problems in prayer today... while planning to be the obedient conduit that He works through.

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

James 2:15-17

For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

Philippians 2:13

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

Day 19:

Mike Tyson's Punch-Out - Finding Joy in our Trials

Playing Mike Tyson's Punch-Out was both an addictive and frustrating experience due to its learning curve that required a lot of trial and error to advance. But it certainly stuck with me... decades later, I still remember the exact techniques required to dodge Bald Bull's charge attack or block Great Tiger's punches. While I didn't always appreciate getting stuck on a specific opponent until I memorized how to defeat them, the adversity Little Mac faced on his way to his climactic battle with Tyson was designed to ensure that we had developed both the patience to endure his attacks, as well as learned the skills that we'd need to defeat him.

When I think of trials and tribulations, joy isn't usually the first word that comes to my mind... but much like the list of opponents we had to conquer on our path to that Tyson showdown, each battle we face in life is used by the Lord to grow specific skills in us, as well as develop the patience that we will need in the larger battles ahead of us. And if we are willing to accept and embrace these moments that He is using to teach us and help us grow, these lessons will become memorized patterns of behavior that we'll never forget. So, let's find the joy in our journey today... not because of the test itself, but because these tests will become our testimony.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Day 20: Nintendo - Are You Playing With Power?

In the early NES console years, gamers looked to Nintendo's consoles to replicate our experiences with the games we played in the arcade, but because the 8-bit platform lacked the power to produce identical graphics and gameplay, we received titles that were similar in name but played like a weak knockoff of the real thing. I wanted to bring home the action from games like Double Dragon or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles arcade game, but the NES versions of these titles played like a watered-down version of the real thing because the platform lacked the power to perform in the way I expected them to.

Christ's followers are called to demonstrate His love and accomplish His purpose on this planet through the power of His Spirit in us, and any attempt to perform these functions in our own power and strength will fall flat. We can't simply attempt to emulate others' relationships with the Lord or even our own previous experiences and expect a positive outcome. We are called to be living conduits for the Lord, "live streaming" His love, mercy, and grace, not a mimic or a weak imitation. Authentic fruit only comes from an intentionally connected relationship with the Lord, so let's unplug that emulator so we can powerfully demonstrate the living God in our real world... real power requires a real connection.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

Day 21:

Luigi's Mansion and Overcoming a Spirit of Fear

Luigi tends to play a supporting role in most of his brother Mario's adventures, but the Luigi's Mansion series of games shoved him directly into the spotlight... without his usual group of friends and allies to support him. Alone and in a very unfamiliar environment, Luigi's immediate emotional reaction is fear, but this mission was specifically designed with him in mind. All the tools he would need to press through the darkness surrounding him would be provided along the way... he just had to move forward in confidence that this game wouldn't have his name on it if it wasn't meant for him to play.

The Lord will frequently lead us into places far outside of our comfort zones to complete the missions in life that He has for us... and if our current situation is causing us to feel fearful or alone, that's an indication that we are depending on our own strength and capabilities to succeed instead of trusting in the Lord to light our way and leaning on His power to save the day. The omnipotent God who knows the exact number of hairs on our heads and tracks the location of every sparrow on this planet placed us in this position for a reason... so let's find peace by fully trusting in His plan for us and have confidence He will supply all our needs along the way. He's far bigger than anything we're afraid of.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31

Day 22: The Truth About Tetris - A Destiny Hidden Under the Surface

Nintendo changed the gaming world forever with the release of the NES home console, but it was the “Game Boy” that brought them to an entirely new frontier... a dedicated handheld gaming system. To launch their most ambitious project yet, Nintendo needed a “killer app” ... a game that would resonate with the widest possible audience while showcasing the capabilities of their new portable system. But it wasn’t Mario or Donkey Kong who was chosen for this critical mission. It was a simple, unknown little game called Tetris... an iconic puzzler that didn’t look like much on the surface, but it contained the perfect blend of pick-up-and-play accessibility with an addictive gameplay hook that would carry the Game Boy to unprecedented sales and permanently alter the way we all play games.

On the surface, Tetris didn’t look like a title that would carry an entirely new platform, but those little monochrome blocks were exactly what the world needed... and similarly, the Lord doesn’t select us for our missions in life based on what others see on the outside. He looks at our heart, choosing to use these simple vessels of flesh and blood to carry His message with the power that comes from His Spirit. Let’s not permit our perceived limitations to talk us out of what we have been sent to do. He designed us for this.

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Day 23: The Infamous Konami Code - Cheating the Game, or Cheating Ourselves?

Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A... that simple series of inputs known as the “Konami Code” was a game-changer that I used many times to finally conquer the games that I was stuck on. But this “cheat code” that made my path easier was hiding a secret... punching it in didn’t help me become better at any of these games. Instead, I learned some magic button presses that promised all of the gain without any of the pain, allowing me to bypass the process that was designed to guide me along a path that would truly earn the ending I was seeking. While these shortcuts made my life easier, they cheated me out of developing the skills that future titles would require... or more accurately, by using them I cheated myself.

The presence of the Lord in our lives doesn’t mean that our prayers are a magical “cheat code” to bypass our challenges in life... it just means we’ll never have to go through them in our own strength or face them alone.

These trials are the way we grow in our faith and build our character, gaining valuable skills that our future battles will require. Let’s bring our every need to the Father in prayer, knowing that if He chooses to guide us through these struggles instead of simply bypassing them, it is for a good reason... one He can’t allow us to skip.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

1 Peter 4:12-13

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

Day 24: Super Princess Peach - From Small Beginnings to “Showtime”

While Mario tends to be the star in most of Nintendo’s Mushroom Kingdom adventures, over time each of his companions has found their own personal missions in their respective spin-offs. After playing supporting character roles for years, each of them has received their turn in the spotlight in games like the Luigi’s Mansion series, Captain Toad’s Adventures, and Princess Peach’s Showtime. Their roles may have seemed small and inconsequential at first, but it was these humble beginnings that established them so they could handle the pressure of carrying their own title when it was their time to shine.

As followers of Christ, we will often find that He will guide us through missions of seemingly low importance and minimal impact for His kingdom, but these smaller roles are the testing grounds for larger purposes that will be revealed at the proper time. Just as David trained privately by wrestling with local wildlife to protect his sheep before he took on Goliath and emerged as the defender of Israel and their future king, we will all walk through private challenges as a means of preparing us for our future responsibilities. These small beginnings aren’t always fun, but the Lord uses them to develop our character for our next mission. And when we are faithful in the little things, the Lord will entrust us with more.

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.

Zechariah 4:10a

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.

Luke 16:10

Day 25: Nintendo Power Magazine - Insight for Today, Hope for Tomorrow

One of the things I miss the most about the early Nintendo years was the Nintendo Power magazine... from learning cool tips and tricks to assist me in my current games to providing me with information on upcoming releases, this publication was a monthly must-read. When I wasn't in a position to engage in my hobby, I could still saturate myself with the articles within its pages, discovering all-new adventures to take on as well as gaining insight from trusted fellow gamers on how to overcome my current battles. I was such a fan that I even carried it around in public without shame, because I wanted to have access to it wherever I was.

The most valuable and important resource we possess in life is the written Word of God... the eternal wisdom it presents for both application in our daily lives as well as gaining insight on the Almighty Himself is a gift we can often take for granted because of its accessibility. If we truly understood the power of the Bible to change not only our lives but the lives of others, we would spend intentional time in it every day, taking it everywhere we go without any sense of shame. His words help us fully process our last battle, guide us through our current challenges, and prepare us for our next adventure, so let's make some time to stop and absorb His wisdom today.

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17

Day 26: The Nintendo Entertainment System - "Co-op" Built in From the Start

While it might sound obvious in retrospect, one of the most critical design decisions Nintendo made when developing their home gaming console was including more than one controller port. Even though most arcade games were single-player experiences at the time, Nintendo had the foresight to understand the future of gaming would be best experienced by gamers playing together in community with each other. Whether taking turns in the original Super Mario Brothers or playing cooperatively in Contra, the act of gaming together with a partner might not always make the game less challenging, but sharing the journey was always more fulfilling.

Every time the Lord sent His disciples out on missions to serve Him, He placed them into pairs or groups first. We weren't commissioned to serve Him as lone wolves... we were designed to fight these battles in true community within the body of Christ, joined by our fellow servants and co-op partners in life as well as ministry. Taking on a game that was designed for 2-4 players by yourself isn't just a lonely way to play, it is a reckless and unproductive strategy that typically results in frustration and failure. Let's be the hands that help raise up someone else's arms in their battle today, because we weren't designed to beat this game alone. We're better together.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.
Matthew 18:20

Day 27:

Nintendo's Wii Sports - Making the Game Accessible to All

The Nintendo Wii certainly had many highlights during its run, but the one game that definitively determined the success of this unique console was

Wii Sports. The simplicity and accessibility of playing games like tennis, bowling, and boxing not only gave us one of the most popular games of all time, but it also gave gamers an accessible way to share their hobby with friends, parents, and even grandparents who might've never picked up a controller otherwise. Wii Sports made it easy for everyone to participate regardless of their skill level... we just needed to bring it to them so they could experience it and see for themselves.

As followers of Christ, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to bring His message to others in all its simplicity, but when we overcomplicate His grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness, we make approaching Him harder than He designed it to be. While pursuing the full depth of knowing the Lord and growing in Him is a lifelong journey, Jesus paid the price of access in full so the initial path to Him could be simple and free. Jesus was welcoming to all who came to Him with open minds, sincere hearts, and a desire for truth, so let's share the Lord today in the same manner that Jesus did during His earthly ministry by making a relationship with God accessible to all. He WANTS to be found.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1, 4-5

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Acts 17:27

Day 28:

Don't Take it Personally - A Mushroom Kingdom Mindset

The very first time I loaded up the original Super Mario Brothers on the NES, I was transfixed... I couldn't wait to explore this colorful, magical world and unlock all its secrets. And shortly after I entered the level, I met my very first citizen of the Mushroom Kingdom... a small, mushroom-looking character who looked a little bit angry and was headed in my direction. I ran up to him so I could introduce myself and learn more about this strange place... but he wasn't very friendly at ALL. As a matter of fact, this character that I later learned was a "Goomba" was downright hostile to my presence, as were all his friends. But his reaction to me wasn't anything personal; he was simply responding to his scripted coding to attack me on sight.

The attacks that we experience in life may often feel very personal, but they shouldn't be taken that way... they are a scripted response by the spiritual darkness we are surrounded by due to the light that we carry and the destiny that we possess as followers of Christ. Let's avoid reacting to the challenges of today from a place of bitterness and anger at our obstacles and see them for what they truly are... products of a coding designed to resist our presence and prevent our progress. Darkness will always push back at His light, but it can never overcome it.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

1 Peter 4:12-13

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

Day 29: The Tetris Effect - Understanding God's "Good Gifts"

While I've always enjoyed playing Tetris, my least favorite part is waiting for the right block to come my way. Whether I've crafted the perfect setup for a "line" to clear multiple rows or simply need a specific shape to appear, sometimes it feels like the game knows exactly what I want and is refusing to give it to me. Block after block would drop down from the top of the screen, each a different shape than I was seeking... but as this pile of unwanted blocks accumulated, I realized something: by deciding what I wanted to receive in advance, I didn't recognize the gifts I was receiving for what they truly were. Instead, I resented or ignored them simply because they didn't meet my concept of "good gifts."

The Lord only gives us good gifts... it's in His nature. But if we have a specific idea of what a "good gift" is that doesn't align with the destiny He designed us for, it will feel like His gifts aren't as "good" as they truly are. Even a good gift is unappreciated when received by a heart that has the wrong expectations, so rather than looking at the gifts others have received and placing our hopes on those, let's look at the unique bricks He has given us and ask Him to guide us on what He wants us to build with them today. They may be in a different shape than we expected, but they will be exactly what we need.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.
James 1:17

What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!
Matthew 7:9-11

Day 30:

Mario and Luigi “Brotherhood” - Different Servants, Unique Callings, One Lord Over All

Most of my earliest gaming memories were on the original NES playing Super Mario Brothers with my sister... but while we were both playing the same game with the same objective, we each approached the way we played the game very differently. While I would zip through each level as quickly as possible, skipping anything that wasn't a power-up or extra life, she took her time collecting all the coins, breaking every block, and engaging each adversary. Because our unique play styles resulted in an inequity in our play time, I became frustrated waiting for “my turn” ... but we were both heading in the same direction and sharing an identical goal... our paths just took us there in two different ways.

In the body of Christ, we're all called to serve the Lord differently. Some of us will hold positions of organized ministry, while the rest of us will act as His ambassadors in our workplaces, homes, and schools. Many of us will marry and have children, while the missions of others may be designed with a single-player experience in mind. But if we're all following His unique call on our lives, we shouldn't be jealous of the gifts or callings another possesses or judge the way they were called to serve. Let's all be grateful for the gifts we've been given... and be even more appreciative of the gifts He has given to others.

Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:4

Now John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side.”

Luke 9:49-50

The Legend of Zelda

Day 1: The Irony of “The Legend of Zelda”

Of all the ironic twists that exist in the world of video games, one of the greatest is that Link, one of the most well-known characters in the entire gaming world, is the star protagonist of a franchise named after somebody else. Despite playing primarily as Link for decades, the series is called “The Legend of Zelda” ... this is Princess Zelda’s story, not his. But in his quiet, humble submission to the greater narrative being told, Link moved beyond being a mere “plot device” to taking his place in the pantheon of gaming’s most iconic heroes... in his unselfish pursuit of making sure that Princess Zelda “finished her story”, he found the meaning and purpose in his.

The narrative of this world we live in tells us to do whatever makes us happiest, but our pursuit of purely selfish endeavors will never lead us to meaningful outcomes or long-term happiness. In our decision to follow the Lord, we aren’t simply choosing to place the needs of others before our own... giving our lives to support the completion of other’s stories is now our life’s work. Christ came to be a servant of all, and He commanded all who would follow Him to do likewise. There is no “Legend of Zelda” without a Link... and it is only by committing ourselves to serving every “Zelda” around us that we will find the meaning and purpose we were designed for all along.

*Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being.
1 Corinthians 10:24*

*Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.
Matthew 20-26-27*

*It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one’s own glory.
Proverbs 25:27 ESV*

Day 2:

Fight, Flight, or Choosing the High Ground?

From my very first experience playing Legend of Zelda on the original NES through the Zelda games of the modern era, I've found a very important fact to be proven true over and over again... no matter how diligently I work to clear a specific area of enemies, if I leave that screen and return to the same location later on I will find that they've all respawned. Frustrated, I would apply myself once again to eliminating these low-level adversaries... but I soon learned it was just a waste of my time. These battles had no connection to my true mission, they didn't create an impact that would resonate beyond that moment, and engaging in them only slowed me down... some fights simply aren't worth winning.

As followers of Christ, we will all be presented with battles every day, and many are directly tied to our mission in service to Him... but we aren't meant to stop and engage in every adversarial interaction. By intentionally and prayerfully submitting each to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can identify the difference between a stronghold we have been assigned to tear down and a wild-goose chase that only results in a hollow victory at best. Let's avoid casting our pearls where they aren't appreciated and maintain the high ground... the only way to win some battles is by choosing not to play.

*It is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel.
Proverbs 20:3*

*Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.
Matthew 7:6*

*But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.
2 Timothy 2:23-25*

Day 3: Appreciating Navi's "Navigation"

In the interest of being 100% honest, I have a confession to make... I haven't always been Navi's biggest fan. Having my game interrupted by Navi's persistent cries of "Hey, LISTEN" isn't my favorite part of playing a Zelda title, but while Navi's constant reminders to listen and look in a specific direction may not always be appreciated, there are MANY times that Navi's intervention gave me exactly the guidance that I needed. Without Navi's watchful eye and voice of direction to point out something I was missing, I would've remained stuck where I was at because I couldn't see something that was crystal clear from Navi's higher point of view.

The gentle reminders of the Holy Spirit in our ears guiding us on what we should be doing may not always find us to be a fully appreciative audience... especially when we'd rather go our own way. But we lack the perspective that our omniscient Heavenly Father possesses, and it is through those whispers that He brings back to our remembrance what we've been taught as well as guides us into what we've yet to learn. Let's tune our ears to His voice today... the answers that we've been searching for may be hidden in plain sight, just waiting for us to stop, open our hearts in prayer, and listen.

*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.
John 14:26*

*When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.
John 16:13-14*

Day 4:

Circle-Strafing - The Struggle With “Actively Waiting”

When “The Legend of Zelda” series made the big switch to 3D gameplay, the way we played the game also changed dramatically. While many games featured the combat concept of “circle-strafting” over the years, in “Ocarina of Time” this became a core strategy to not only succeed, but to survive. Mindlessly hacking and slashing our way through enemies was no longer an option... we had to “lock-on” to our target, slowly circle around them while dodging their attacks, and patiently wait for a window of opportunity to open. Circle strafing might feel like nothing was happening other than wasting our time, but it didn’t mean we weren’t doing anything. It just meant we were “actively waiting” until the time was right for us to make a move.

Patiently walking around the “walls of Jericho” that stand between us and the answer to our prayers is never easy... but what we choose to do with our time while we wait for these walls to fall is important. Just as the people of Israel had to march around their walls daily until the Lord brought them tumbling down, we will all spend time “circle-strafting” our destiny until our own doors in life open for us... and during this waiting period we should be both actively praying and preparing until it is time. The Lord will always do His part so don’t lose heart... just keep circling.

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!

Psalms 138:1-4

But these things I plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, do not despair, for these things will surely come to pass. Just be patient! They will not be overdue a single day!

Habakkuk 2:3

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart. “Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

Luke 18:1, 7-8

Day 5: Majora's Mask – A Unique Transformation for Every Situation

While almost every gaming protagonist typically grows and adapts to the demands of the story they are in, Link takes this one step further by LITERALLY becoming what his missions required. From his willingness to acquire and apply each of the unique masks in “Majora’s Mask” to his transformation into a wolf in “Twilight Princess”, Link demonstrated his full commitment to saving others by surrendering himself and his approach to be shaped by the specific needs of each of his quests. One mission called for a Goron mask while another demanded a Zora’s touch... and by submitting himself to become what each situation needed, he was able to save them all.

Each of the unique missions that the Lord has called us to complete will compel us to adapt both ourselves and our approach to what that specific quest demands. Some require a higher degree of subtlety and sophistication, while others will call for more blunt and direct tactics... and it is the Lord alone who determines the best way to proceed. Reaching every possible soul for Christ can’t be achieved through a “one size fits all” mentality... each requires a tailored, nuanced approach by a vessel fully surrendered to His guidance. Let’s listen for the leading of His Spirit today, becoming the fully malleable clay He can mold into the perfect shape for every situation.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22

And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

Jude 1:22-23

Day 6:

Jars of Clay and the Purpose Hidden in our Pain

In the land of Hyrule, commercial banks must be in short supply... that's the only logical reason I can come up with that explains why everyone keeps all their life's savings stashed in pots around their house. But if I'm being honest, I'm glad that they chose such a strange way to store their valuables... the rupees and other objects these breakable containers held were incredibly critical to Link's mission to save their kingdom. It may seem unkind and maybe even a little but unnecessary for me to advance in my quest by breaking, slashing, and smashing these vessels to find the treasure they contained inside, but that's the only way their true value was revealed as they played their part to help Link along his way.

Just as the clay pots in the Legend of Zelda had to be broken before they revealed the treasures concealed within, we are all fragile beings made from dust... human "jars of clay" designed to be broken and poured out for the benefit of others during their times of need. The life experiences that left us "broken" were not caused by our loving Father, but when we place them into His hands He will use these moments of brokenness to serve a higher purpose. Let's be the extension of Christ's nail-scarred hands for others today... the hidden treasure contained within our pain is exactly what someone else desperately needs.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

But now, Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter, and all of us are the work of Your hand.

Isaiah 64:8

Day 7: Answers to Prayer and A “Twilight Princess” Hidden in Plain Sight

Most of us are probably familiar with the phrase “never judge a book by its’ cover”, but the minds behind The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess did us one better by teaching us we can’t judge a princess by her presentation. While Midna did not always behave in the manner that we were expecting, ultimately it was her actions and the sacrifices she was willing to make that would save the day. Our preconceived notions based on our experience with previous games in the series led us to believe that Princess Zelda was the “Twilight Princess” we were looking for, but the only character who could break the mirror and finally bring peace to both realms was the ACTUAL Twilight Princess Midna... a heroine who had hidden herself in plain sight all along.

The answers the Lord provides to our prayers will often come in forms we wouldn’t expect or even prefer... and the hands He chooses to use are often attached to a very surprising soul. From Jael (the hidden heroine Israel needed) to David (the harp-playing shepherd destined to be the future king) to Christ Himself coming to us from Nazareth, a city that “nothing good comes from”, our Father will rarely deliver the victory we are seeking in a way we’ve heard or seen before. Let’s treat everyone as if they’re an answer to one of our prayers... because some of them are.

As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.
Ecclesiastes 11:5

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”
Isaiah 55:8-9

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”
John 1:45-46

Day 8: Ocarina of Time and a “Song of Storms”

Of all the equipment that Link possesses, the one that is the most powerful is also the one that most of us wouldn't traditionally consider as a weapon for battle... his ocarina. Sure, his sword and shield are valuable offensive and defensive items for surviving many of the attacks that he faces, but when Link stops to play his ocarina, he uncovers entirely new solutions that the rest of his arsenal would never have provided. And in an interesting twist, it is through the previous struggles that Link faced and overcame that he was taught the songs he would play in future predicaments... songs that could disrupt his environment and opening doors that couldn't be accessed any other way.

Just as Link only unlocked the full potential of his ocarina by discovering songs that could only be learned through the trials he faced, every battle we face represents an opportunity to learn a new song of praise that we wouldn't possess otherwise. In the midst of whatever battle we are struggling with today, let's stop and pull out our “ocarina” and use our voices to praise our God... we may be surprised at the solutions that are provided as well as the hidden power of the songs that are only learned by those who have walked hand-in-hand with the Lord through the valley of the shadow of death to the other side.

I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth— praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord.

Psalm 40:1-3

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed.

Acts 16:25-26

Day 9:

Link - A Silent Protagonist and the Importance of Watching Our Words

For years, one of Link's most consistent and defining characteristics was that he didn't really have much to say. While many adventure games give their protagonists robust dialogue trees or at least an opportunity to share their thoughts, the developers of the Legend of Zelda series made the decision to limit what he said to keep the story focused less on him as a character and more on the actual narrative that was unfolding. And perhaps that is one of the primary reasons that Link has remained such a consistently beloved and iconic character across multiple generations of gamers... his limited vocalizations ensured that this series of games avoided any unnecessary distractions from Link and kept our attention fixed on the things that mattered most.

While we aren't called to be silent protagonists in our respective stories, every word we choose to share should be aligned with our primary mission of serving the Lord. Our words carry the power to either point others towards Christ or draw attention away from Him, and even our most well-intentioned efforts to help others can be damaged by just a few poorly chosen words. Let's be intentional gatekeepers of every word that comes out of our mouths today... if what we are sharing isn't speaking life or imparting grace then it probably doesn't need to be said at all.

*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.
Psalm 141:3*

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will
eat its fruit.
Proverbs 18:21*

*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for
necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.
Ephesians 4:29*

*If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue
but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.
James 1:26*

Day 10: Slingshots, Shields, and the Importance of "Practice"

The Legend of Zelda series doesn't typically hold our hands and guide us through every step of our journey, but when we acquire a new tool such as the slingshot or boomerang, we're forced to "practice" with it before we're permitted to move forward into areas where proficiency with it will be required. While nobody truly enjoys practice, these brief training interludes ensure we are fully trained in the use of these items before returning to the overworld, where far less forgiving targets await us. Learning the subtle nuances of the slingshot in practice prepares us for situations when our lives will depend on it... because the time is coming when it will.

There are many seasons in our lives when we may feel like we aren't moving forward or even accomplishing anything of significance, but these times aren't painfully pointless pauses in our game... they are practice. In our Heavenly Father's infinite grace, He doesn't permit us to advance to battles that require skills that we haven't fully developed yet, so He sends us on smaller quests to practice with them... at times, He even uses the already planned attacks of our adversaries to cultivate them. Don't lose heart if today feels like another boringly painful practice session... these are the places where our skills with wielding our shield of faith are fully forged.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-3

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Day 11: An Ever-Changing Game for a Growing Franchise

There's been many shifts in the ways that we've experienced the Legend of Zelda series over the years... the classic top-down perspective of the original NES title, the side-scrolling style of its successors, the 3D adventures we have enjoyed starting with the release of Ocarina of Time, and the open-world titles we are exploring now. And while each of these changes flipped us around and disrupted our comfortable status quo, each shift in gameplay style and perspective was critical for the continued growth of the franchise as well as to ensure that the series maintained its relevance in each console generation. Sure, there are certain titles in the Zelda timeline that may not be our favorites, but they still blazed the trail that led us to the games we're playing now.

We all experience seasons in life when it feels like everything is going "sideways" on us... but these unwanted changes in the way that the game is being played are used by the Lord to change our perspective and alter our point of view, moving us beyond our familiar routines and into a place where new skills are learned. It isn't easy, and it certainly isn't comfortable, but He knows what challenges lie ahead of us and He lovingly prepares us for them before our future path requires it. Let's embrace the changes He is introducing in our lives... He has His reasons.

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

Isaiah 55:8-9

Day 12:

Link, Zelda, and Becoming the Answers to Someone Else's Prayer

For most of the time in the “Legend of Zelda” series of games, we play from the point of view of Link on his quest to save both Zelda and her entire kingdom... but this Princess is no mere damsel in distress. Zelda shows up many different times throughout the franchise to serve unique and critical purposes (in different forms and even under different names) as she does everything from giving Link guidance, providing him with equipment, and even taking up arms alongside him when the mission calls for it. Zelda may be the one Link was sent to rescue, but in the completion of his service to her we will often find she was saving him at the same time.

In the missions that the Lord calls us to, serving others is the primary objective... and at times, we may feel like we are giving up more than our fair share of our personal dreams and selfish pursuits so that others can achieve theirs. But this perceived inequity is a facade... it is through our service to others and placing their needs above our own that our lives find their true meaning and purpose. Rather than seek our own interests, let's ask the Lord to use us to become the answer to someone else's prayers today... those who we have been sent to help may be the very ones that He uses to support, guide, and equip us in ways we never would've anticipated.

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.

1 Corinthians 10:24

Day 13:

Link vs. Dark Link - The Battlefield of our Will

There are two words that tend to instantly strike fear into the heart of even the bravest and most experienced Legend of Zelda player... “Water Temple”. While every dungeon in a Zelda title has a very specific means of completion, the Water Temple levels are notoriously unforgiving in their approach... there is only ONE way to solve them and move forward, there are no shortcuts, and they won’t simply bend to our will. And while there are always enemies throughout the level and a boss fight at the end of every temple that we face, the Water Temple in “The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time” featured one of the most diabolical opponents yet... Link had to face down and defeat the dark version of himself.

In our real-world battles, our most dangerous adversary isn’t other people, demonic forces, or even Satan himself... it is our own stubborn will, the part of us that wants to do things OUR way and solve the puzzles that we face on OUR terms. We shouldn’t be surprised that we must deny our darker impulses daily and surrender our will to the Father... even Jesus had to stop and pray for the strength to submit to the Father’s will and silence His desire to do things differently. Let’s yield our minds, thoughts, and actions in prayer to the Lord before trying to force a solution today... His way is the only way.

He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will.”

Mark 14:35-36

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2

Day 14: From Big to Small, A Strategy for Them All

Adversaries in the world of The Legend of Zelda range from the small and seemingly harmless to gigantic and terrifying... and during my time in the game I learned not to be afraid of the large enemies nor to underestimate the little ones. All the opposition I faced, no matter how they physically presented themselves, are just lines of code... each were designed with a uniquely programmed pattern of attack behaviors, a pre-set health bar, and in many cases an implanted weak spot that will only be revealed if I'm patient and observant. All of them are dangerous if I approach them carelessly or over-confidently, but none of them should be feared... they were all built to be defeated by a fully prepared warrior walking in wisdom, humility and faith.

Many times, the challenges that we face in life can feel either small enough for us to handle without the Lord's help or too large to be solved at all, but neither of those are true. The smallest temptation is still dangerous enough to defeat an overconfident soldier who has let their guard down, and the most visually terrifying opposition can't prevail against a warrior walking in humble submission and obedience to Him. Let's yield our controller to Christ in every battle that we face... none of them are too big or too small for Him, and we will need His help in each of them today.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling.
Psalm 46:1-3

Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.
Song of Solomon 2:15

Day 15:

Legend of Zelda Four Swords - It is Dangerous to Go Alone

Ironically, the series that originally taught us that “it is dangerous to go alone” all those years ago in the first Legend of Zelda title has primarily existed as a single-player experience in each of its’ incarnations. But all of that changed when The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords released and finally gave us the ability to play cooperatively with three more adventurers and battle our way through the story as a team. Four swords are certainly much better than one, providing not only additional hands to help share the burden but companionship that made even the most challenging battles easier to face and conquer.

If Jesus Himself brought His three most trusted friends with Him into His most critical spiritual battles, then it stands to reason we should do the same. From the Father’s original decision that “it was not good for man to be alone” to the time the Lord sent out seventy of His followers in pairs, the message is clear... we are designed to serve His will in a cooperative state with our fellow believers. Being part of the body of Christ isn’t simply symbolic, and it isn’t something we achieve by passively attending church a few days a week. Lone wolves don’t make it far in a game built for partners, and every Paul needs a Silas and a Luke. It truly is dangerous to go alone, so let’s bring our “fireteam” into battle with us today.

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.”

Matthew 26:36-38

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12

Day 16: No Cheat Codes Permitted

While there are certainly many secrets to seek out and find in a Legend of Zelda title, it's one of the few franchises that doesn't contain "cheat codes" that artificially make the game easier. If we desire to acquire the best tools and weapons that the game possesses, there isn't a shortcut to bypass the natural progression of the game and unlock these earlier than intended. Like every other "Link" playing the game, we must patiently accept the pace of the story as well as endure and complete all the "prerequisite" battles that must be won before we gain access to them. Behind every mission, side quest, and minor boss fight is a purpose... to press us into becoming more skilled with the tools we have already been given as well as prepare us for the new abilities and major battles ahead of us.

While I don't always appreciate the slow pace of the Lord's victories in my life, after the battle is over it becomes clear why I couldn't simply use a "cheat code" through my prayers to skip it... it was only by enduring that struggle that I learned how to faithfully use the gifts that it unlocked. He uses the challenges we face so we can prove our faithfulness in the little things before moving on to the bigger ones, so let's pray for more than just victory in our situations today. Let's ask Him what He is trying to teach us through them.

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.

Luke 16:10

And the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you little by little; you will be unable to destroy them at once, lest the beasts of the field become too numerous for you.

Deuteronomy 7:22

Day 17: A Beautiful Mosaic Made up of Many Confusing Parts

While there are a handful of titles released in the Legend of Zelda series that are direct sequels to a previous game in the franchise, the majority of them didn't have a obvious connection to each other... until Nintendo finally decided to release a book with an official timeline that took all these seemingly disconnected events and placed them into one comprehensive narrative. From giving us a clear starting point with Skyward Sword to our current adventures in the Breath of the Wild saga, these events didn't come together as one cohesive story at the time we played them... but once the creator revealed their connections even the most confusing chapters finally made sense.

In our lives, the events we are experiencing often feel random, with no clear narrative that makes these challenges and our collection of currently unanswered prayers make sense. But that is because we lack the perspective of our Creator, who knew every part of our story from the very beginning (including how it ends). What we're currently living through might seem hard to understand at this moment in time, but let's fully trust in the Lord (including the parts of His plan we can't currently see) and follow Him in faith anyways. One day we'll see these events and the purpose they were designed to serve as the beautiful tapestry He was crafting all along.

Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure".

Isaiah 46:9-10

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

Day 18: The “Pieces of Heart” Hidden in our “Dungeons”

At the beginning of our journey in the Legend of Zelda, we typically start out with a small number of “hearts” that represent our health bar. As we play through the battles, endure the challenges, and solve the puzzles that the game throws at us we can discover additional “heart pieces” that increase our vitality... but these valuable items aren’t just lying around on the ground in plain view. They must be intentionally searched out and found by pressing through each trial and unlocking the reward at the end.

And as our collection of “heart pieces” increases, we are in a better position to take on the larger boss fights and more challenging obstacles ahead of us... and we’ll need every piece of heart we can find.

The challenges that we endure in life may feel arbitrary or pointless at the time we are going through them, but the hidden value they contain isn’t typically revealed until we’ve fully pressed through them to the other side.

In His infinite grace, the Lord uses these dungeon experiences and even our enemy’s attacks to build up our faith to the level that our upcoming battles will require. Each painful trial we face might not appear to have a visible reward right now, but let’s trust in His process... the “heart pieces” we are acquiring by trusting Christ in this testing period holds the key to our future victories.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Day 19: Private Obedience Before Public Victories

There's a good reason why we don't turn on a Legend of Zelda game and immediately head into a fight with Ganon, the evil mastermind behind most of the entries in the series. We are neither prepared nor equipped to win that battle at the beginning of the game. He would laugh at our flimsy wooden sword, our meager health bar, and our complete lack of training. At this point in our adventure, we haven't yet acquired the skills or items needed to succeed in a matchup of that magnitude. Rather than letting us face an opponent we're not ready for, the developers of the game guide us into private arenas first... giving us space to gain and develop the abilities we'll need before we're called upon to use them in a fight we can't afford to lose.

Public triumphs, like Christ on the cross, are always preceded by private victories, such as Christ in the garden. Just as David defeated lions and bears in secret before facing Goliath on a larger stage, the Lord prepares us for life's biggest missions by teaching us obedience and submission in our "behind-the-scenes" battles. Even Jesus endured hidden tests to bring His flesh into submission before His most critical mission. Let's prove ourselves faithful in our private battles today... our obedience in secret matters more than we know.

Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Hebrews 5:7-8

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Matthew 6:7

Day 20: Working in Mysterious Ways

Over my years of adventures with the Legend of Zelda series, I have found that there are parts of each game that don't make a whole lot of sense.

Even after the final credits have rolled, I'm often left wondering why certain things happened, as well as why others did not. Some portions of the game feel oddly placed, overly contrived, or simply unnecessary because I never saw a meaningful connection between them and the larger narrative being told. Sometimes the story is a quest across time to solve problems that exist in both the past and future... and other times, it's about a giant fish. Each game tells an important story in its own unique way... it's just not always done in the way I would've told it.

There are many parts of our stories that won't make any sense to us on this side of eternity... pains and losses we endured without explanation, side quests we completed with no visible purpose, and entire episodes that ended differently than we would've preferred. Because we have a limited perspective, the reason behind many of these events will remain a mystery until we reach the other side. Let's release our need to understand His ways and accept that He has instructed us to follow Him by faith, not by sight. His answers are far beyond our comprehension anyway.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 12

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?"

Romans 11:33-34

Day 21: The Problem with Taking a “Hack and Slash” Approach to Every Situation

In the worlds of Hyrule and beyond, I typically lean towards a “hack and slash” approach, even when the game provides me with more nuanced options. A mission that’s designed for a slingshot? No thanks, I have a sword. Facing an objective that requires stealth and patience? Meh... who needs stealth when you have a sword? Dealing with a problem that requires a boomerang? Hmm... looks like a great place to try out my sword. While there are certainly situations that were designed to be solved with a sword, others require the subtlety and pinpoint accuracy of a slingshot. As much as I prefer my comfortable, “one-size-fits-all” approach to problem-solving in my games, the methods I employ must match the purpose of the task if I want to succeed.

The souls we have been sent to reach for the Lord on this planet will require tactics that are as diverse as the challenges they are facing in their lives. Just as Jesus tailored His approach in how He healed both bodies and souls in His earthly ministry, we must listen for the guidance of His Spirit to demonstrate similar flexibility in how we take on our missions. Let’s allow Him to shape our words and actions for every situation we face today so we can reach others with grace and love while still sharing His full, uncompromising message of truth accurately and effectively.

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Colossians 4:6

And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

Jude 1:22-23

Day 22: Breath of the Wild: Content Beyond the Endgame

When we finally reach the end of a Legend of Zelda title, typically all that remains for us to do is to passively watch a few last cutscenes and enjoy the soundtrack as the final credits roll. Sure, there may be a “New Game +” mode that allows us to replay the adventure, but it wasn’t until the release of Breath of the Wild that we finally received additional post-game content in the form of new DLC that provided us with fresh challenges to take on.

Now, to be fair, accessing these expansions does come at an additional cost... but paying the price of admission is well worth it for the opportunity to have an even deeper experience with the game that we love.

There is so much more to our walk with Christ than simply accepting His offer to “come and follow Me” ... in the same way His followers graduated into disciples, apostles, authors, missionaries, and more, there is SO much more to explore beyond the “endgame” of accepting His gift of grace. Our new birth in Christ isn’t simply a “New Game +” experience, living our old life the same way we did before just under a new save file, it is a calling to utilize our gifts as ministers of the grace we’ve received to the benefit of the entire body of Christ. There are more missions to explore beyond receiving salvation... that’s where the game truly begins.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.
Ephesians 4:11-12

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.
1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Day 23: Recharging our Sword by Taking the Time to Heal

Link's iconic "Sword Beam" attack from the first "Legend of Zelda" on the NES was a powerful, game-changing ability, but it carried a specific requirement for its usage... Link had to be at 100% of his health with every heart filled for it to work. The power to throw my sword across the screen made dispatching enemies both large and small so much easier that it changed the way I played the game... if I took any amount of damage, I quickly returned to a healing fountain or alternate means of healing to fully restore my health and regain access to it. While it took me out of the action temporarily, keeping my heart filled at all times was a priority because I was much more effective when I was in full health.

It is inevitable that the daily battles we face in life will leave our armor a little worse for the wear, and as a byproduct of our adventures we will often feel depleted as our "hearts" take damage... that's why even Jesus Himself would take frequent breaks from His mission to step away and pray, restoring His strength for the next battle. Let's avoid the stubborn urge to remain on the battlefield in a weakened state and follow the Lord's example of refilling our "heart containers" as often as we need to. We are more effective when we deliberately take a break from the action and reconnect with Him.

But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31

So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Day 24:

Discovering the Answers to Our Prayers in Someone Else's "Side Quest"

"Fetch quests" in role-playing games are a pretty standard part of the experience, and The Legend of Zelda is no exception. Sure, there is an evil warlord trying to take over the planet... but someone still must deliver milk and round up chickens, right? While these "errands" in most games are typically just filler content designed to pad out a game's length, in The Legend of Zelda series they tend to have a much deeper purpose that is hidden from view until we've completed them. Concealed within these small, personal side quests are the keys to unlocking future doors, discovering new abilities, or learning new songs for our ocarina that will change the way we play the rest of the game.

In the body of Christ, we will often find that it is when we choose to unselfishly apply ourselves in service to others that the full potential of the gifts we've received is finally revealed. Many of the stubborn doors that won't open for us are waiting for a key that lies in someone else's hand. If we feel like we have reached an impasse in our own personal progress, let's turn our attention to the problems that we are already equipped to solve in someone else's life. We may find that we were sent to be the answer to their prayers, and the "side quest" that helping them takes us on is the Lord's answer to our own.

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

1 Peter 4:10

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Galatians 6:9-10

The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.

Proverbs 11:25

Day 25: Evil Intentions that Reveal a Hidden Purpose

One of the reasons Link became one of the most relatable heroes in the gaming world is due to his humble beginnings... he wasn't a prince, a soldier, or even someone seeking greatness. He was just an ordinary, unremarkable person living a quiet existence before an unavoidable destiny was thrust upon him that changed his entire world. His simple life was completely disrupted by Ganon's evil schemes, pressing Link on a journey to save the kingdom that he would've never taken on his own, revealing the hidden purpose for his life that was only unlocked by the undesired catalyst of an enemy's evil plotting.

Our starts in life are rarely an indication of the purpose we will serve for the Lord... people like Joseph, Ruth, and David were living out their completely normal and ordinary lives before unexpected tragedies and the evil machinations of others guided them into an intersection with their divine calling. If our current chapter in life feels pointlessly painful or lacks any obvious connection to serving a greater purpose, let's look at their stories for an encouraging reminder that our challenges are not only seen by the Lord, but they are used by Him to spark our destiny. The actions of others that were meant to bring us down are what He uses to lift us up to places we couldn't have reached otherwise.

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

Day 26: The Importance of Preparation Before Battle

It would be the height of overconfidence and arrogance to head into the most challenging battles in the Legend of Zelda without any of my armor equipped... and many times, we aren't aware of the degree of difficulty ahead of us until we are already in over our heads. After I learned this lesson the hard way too many times, I don't simply head off into the unknown unprepared anymore... I take the time to equip myself in a manner that fits the caliber of the opposition that I know populates the battlefield around me. I may not face any "boss battles" today, but when I do, I will already have my armor on, so I am fully prepared for the unexpected.

If we knew in advance that our enemy's most diabolical schemes were waiting for us as soon as we stepped outside, we would start our day with intentional prayer and arm ourselves with encouraging Scriptures like our lives depended on it. Unfortunately, today's "boss fights" won't necessarily announce themselves in advance, and if we only prepare for the challenges that we built into our schedules, we won't be properly equipped for the unexpected trials that await us. Let's take the time to equip our spiritual armor today before we march out onto this battlefield for souls... overcoming unanticipated battles is only possible through prayerful preparation.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.
Ephesians 6:11-17

Day 27: Taking Up Our Own Cross

Over the years, there have been millions of fellow gamers who have taken on Link's mission to free Hyrule from Ganon's evil grasp... but even though countless others have played and beaten the game successfully, I haven't experienced victory in my own play-through of the game until I've personally picked up a controller and taken on the challenges of the game for myself. Simply watching others finish their story in an online video or even beside me on the couch is not a replacement for taking up my own sword and carrying my version of Link across the finish line... my save file is my personal story to finish.

While it is true that Christ carried the cross that sets us free from sin and offers us right standing with the Father, He also made it clear that we each have our own daily cross to carry as well... not to earn victory ourselves, but to participate in the victory He purchased. He permanently defeated the enemy of our souls by His death and resurrection, but believing in His victory is only part of the mission... we must also take up our own cross each day and follow in His footsteps to truly experience this abundant life ourselves. Let's look at our daily cross a bit differently today... not as a burden to carry, but as our means of participating in the story that He finished, but we must still choose to play.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Matthew 16:24-25

And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

Matthew 10:38-39

Day 28:

Majora's Mask – The Problem With “Faking It Until We Make It”

“The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask” earned its place as one of the most beloved titles in the entire series due to its unique gameplay hook of acquiring and equipping the different masks that Link uses to navigate the puzzles throughout the game. Solving the game's challenges required us to find and put on different masks for each situation, and by the game's end, we'd amassed a collection of over twenty masks to change the way others saw us and open new options for Link to finish his quest. But while this was the only way to succeed in this game, it isn't a great strategy for us in our real-world adventures.

If I'm being honest, I've felt the need to acquire many “masks” as I've played through this game of life, pretending to have peace or projecting joy when I didn't really possess them so I could fit in with others and meet their expectations. But we aren't called to “fake” our way through this life by putting on a “mask” of love, kindness, joy, or peace. We are called to “put on Christ” so those fruits will be organically generated through our connection to Him, no matter what our current circumstances are. Let's avoid putting on masks and trying to “fake it until we make it” ... let's allow whatever environment we are in to press us closer to the Lord, and as we grow in Him, our lives will authentically reflect more of Him.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:22-24

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

Romans 13:14

Day 29: Finding Peace and Joy During the Battle

Every story in the Legend of Zelda series that we play through has one very important thing in common... Link is surrounded by enemies who wish to do him harm from the moment he sets out on his quest. But this doesn't make these games feel overbearing or unpleasant... we still find moments that make us laugh and warm our hearts right during these battlefields full of adversaries who would love to wipe that smile off our faces. Even in the presence of Link's most dangerous foes, we can find both peace and joy because we know that Link's story was designed for us to win.

It is easy to let the challenges that surround us to affect our moods, hurt our feelings, and rob us of our joy and peace, but Jesus guaranteed us that we would have both abundant life AND tribulations in this world. We aren't alternating between experiencing joy and enduring trials, we're invited to enjoy His peace DURING our troubles no matter how big they are. He invites us to eat at His table in the very presence of our enemies, keep our smiles, and find our joy in Him... not because these struggles aren't real, but because He is with us through them.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.

Psalm 23:4-5

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 16:11

Day 30: "It is Dangerous to Go Alone"

One of the most well-known quotes in gaming came from the original Legend of Zelda, when at the beginning of his adventure Link is told, "It's Dangerous to Go Alone." Ironically, Link is then immediately sent out all alone with nothing more than a sword to keep him company... not quite the companionship he had in mind. While being armed did at least provide Link with the ability to defend himself through the challenges he would face, I have a feeling he would've preferred a companion in his adventures to help him solve puzzles and take on waves of enemies rather than just a weapon to protect him on his quest.

While the Bible is absolutely our most potent weapon against the spiritual darkness that is at war with us, we are NOT sent out alone into our respective battlefields. As a matter of fact, without an active connection to Christ and His Spirit dwelling in us, we are completely incapable of completing ANY of the missions He has for us on this planet. He didn't simply arm us with His Word and wish us good luck; He promised to never leave us or forsake us because He knows it is too dangerous for us to go alone. Before we head out on our adventures for the day, let's make sure we take Him with us everywhere we go and follow His path. We will only face today's battles alone if we choose to.

For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Hebrews 13:5b

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

John 15:4

Day 31: The “Echoes of Wisdom” that Develop in Quiet Places

In *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom*, Nintendo finally made Princess Zelda herself the primary playable character in the series that bears her name. While she has often taken on an active role in saving her kingdom, Zelda has primarily played a supporting role in her own franchise up to this point. Now it’s finally her time to shine, and all the years that Zelda put into growing as a beloved character with serious skills of her own—rather than simply as a princess needing saving—are finally paying off. It took a long time for her to get here, but she wasn’t just waiting for this to happen. She has been actively preparing for this moment the entire time.

Many times in our lives, we may feel like we aren’t even the main character in our own story, watching the Lord use others in powerful ways while we struggle in obscurity. But the Father has a place for each of us in the narrative He is writing, and if we are faithful to draw near to Him and develop ourselves in these private places, He will reward us with opportunities to serve Him and His kingdom in His perfect time. Let’s put this “development time” that He has given us to good use... the spiritual growth that exclusively occurs in these quiet places is critical to the success of our future missions. We aren’t passively waiting—we are actively preparing.

A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time.
Isaiah 60:22

But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.
Matthew 6:7

Kingdom Hearts

Day 1:

Axel's Redemptive Journey to a Keyblade of His Own

Axel might have started his journey on the villain's side in the Kingdom Hearts series, but he is the poster child for starting out wrong and still finishing strong. Despite serving Organization XIII and antagonizing Sora and his friends for much of the series, he experienced a change of heart and chose to serve as an ally and supporter to those who he had previously persecuted and joined them in their cause. While the way that he lived his life and the decisions he made left much to be desired, Axel had always been destined to wield a Keyblade of his own all along... and Axel's redemptive journey gives hope to all who have "lost heart" due to the sins of their own past.

If you are anything like me, it can be very difficult to forgive ourselves, move forward from our "unworthy" past, and serve the Lord in the presence of those who know exactly what we once were. But our redemption is meant to give hope to those who share a challenging backstory like ours and are searching for more than just forgiveness and absolution. We aren't meant to embrace the Lord's grace just so we can sit on the sidelines. We were given a fresh start to our story as well as a "Keyblade" of our own as the Lord works through us to push back against the same darkness that once oppressed us and bring hope and light to all seeking to be set free.

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:13-14

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight.

Colossians 1:21-22

Day 2:

Sora, Roxas, and the Battle to Share One Heart

The characters of Sora and Roxas exist in a unique duality in the Kingdom Hearts series... they are two distinct beings originally connected by one single heart, with each seeking control of their own individual destiny on their own terms. As the “Nobody” that was created when Sora briefly became a Heartless, Roxas simply wanted to live his own life in his own way, but his will was at odds with the destiny that Sora possessed. It was only when Roxas chose to fully yield his body and surrender himself to be absorbed into Sora’s purpose that Roxas finally found what he was looking for... a life and a meaning beyond the conflicted existence that previously defined him.

Much like the struggle between Sora and Roxas, we will all find a war within ourselves each day for control of our thoughts and actions, and this duality can make us feel like we have two minds competing in one body to live two different lives. Fighting a war from within may seem impossible to win, and without the power of Christ it is a battle that we are doomed to lose. But when we willingly submit our minds and bodies to the will of Christ in these times of conflict, a solution can be found, and it is only by bending our knee to His Spirit and denying our selfish desires that we become who we were truly meant to be... a vessel that is willingly ruled by the mind of Christ.

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?

James 4:1

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:21-25

Day 3:

Kairi - A “Princess in Heart” in Her Own Right, Hidden in Plain Sight

At the beginning of the Kingdom Hearts series, the character of Kairi appeared to be little more than a classic “damsel in distress”, existing only in service to Sora’s over-arching story... but initial appearances can be deceiving. Kairi’s destiny was more than to simply act as a catalyst and press the plots of others forward... she was a “Princess of Heart” in her own right, hiding in plain view with a critical purpose of her own until it was time for the truth to be revealed. As Kairi faithfully helped and supported her friends in their journeys, her future unfolded and her place in the Kingdom Hearts story was finally made clear... her light was designed to shine so those who were trapped in the darkness could find it.

The story of our lives can often feel like it exists as a backdrop to someone else’s larger narrative, and as our dreams fade into the background it can be easy to feel forgotten or even mistakenly believe that we possess a destiny that is inferior or unimportant. But the Lord who directs the flight path of every sparrow never loses sight of us, and while our dreams can feel delayed our destiny cannot be denied... there aren’t any unimportant roles in His kingdom. No matter where our path takes us, He designed us to carry His light into these dark places, unlock the doors that we are the unique key to opening, and set those captives free.

*The Lord will work out his plans for my life— for your faithful love, O Lord,
endures forever.
Psalm 138:8a*

*You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand,
and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before
men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.
Matthew 5:14-16*

*Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to
the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head
are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many
sparrows.
Matthew 10:29-31*

Day 4: Overlooking Insults, Showing Kindness and Grace

The Kingdom Hearts series is filled with serious characters dealing with complicated existential issues, and right in the middle of all this angst and turmoil stands Goofy... a kind and gentle soul who prefers a shield to defend his friends over a weapon to attack his foes. But Goofy's kindness is certainly not a weakness... his refusal to allow the actions of others to dictate his emotional responses or even alter his demeanor proves that he is one of the strongest characters in the game. As others complained about the unfairness of their treatment and swapped insults for insults, Goofy stayed true to his North Star, remaining cheerful and kind even in the darkest of times.

In a world where becoming offended is easier than ever and swapping insults with those who disagree with us has become commonplace, we are called to rise above our fleshly instincts to respond in anger and demonstrate the kindness and compassion of Christ instead. As our Lord hung on the cross, He endured all the insults that were hurled at Him without attacking back or even defending himself. Instead, He used the limited breath remaining to Him to ask the Father to forgive them of their ignorance. It isn't a sign of weakness to overlook insults and choose the path of peace when others attack us... it is where we reveal the character of Christ within us the most.

Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.
2 Corinthians 12:10

A person's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.
Proverbs 19:11

Day 5:

Donald Duck - Compassion Vs. Condemnation

The importance of a healer in any party can't be overstated, and Donald Duck's role in supporting his teammates in Kingdom Hearts is essential to the advancement of the entire story. But Donald doesn't simply heal his teammates from a safe and comfortable distance... he is in the battle with them, acting as both a healing protector and a cooperative partner in each of their battles. The funny part is that Donald doesn't even agree with most of the ideas and decisions that Sora and his crew decide to take on, but he still provides them with healing support anyways, choosing to heal their wounds rather than judge the wounded.

No matter what "ministry" the Lord has called us to, we are ALL called to serve Him as ministers of reconciliation... we are all "healers" in a fellow player's story, providing prayer, love, and support even when we disagree with the decisions that they made that led them into this position. Jesus came to be a "physician to the sick", choosing to guide the wounded back to health and into a reconciled relationship with the Father. Let's step up and be the "healer" in someone else's battle today, even if it was their own poor decisions that caused their pain. Saying "I told you so" or "you should have known better" has never saved a single soul... the loving prayers of a fellow sinner saved by grace is the healing medicine that they need.

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

James 5:16

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Day 6: Using our Resources Wisely, not Wastefully

Whether it is the healing items and elixirs that prove to be incredibly critical in battle or the in-game currency that is necessary to purchase additional accessories and armor, one thing is true of ALL of the resources available in each of the games in the Kingdom Hearts series... there may not be an infinite supply of them, but there is always enough to accomplish our mission if we choose to use them wisely instead of wastefully. The creators of the game ensured that all the items that are necessary to advance and finish the game would be present during our journey, but as the player we still have a responsibility to allocate them with thoughtfulness and care, so we make the most of what each resource offers.

The Lord will always supply exactly what His faithful followers need for the battles each of us face in life, but we are still expected to be good stewards of the resources He has provided. We have each been gifted with finite amounts of time, energy, finances, and opportunities to act as ambassadors of the Lord during our time on this planet, and our intentional use of each of these perishable resources will determine how successful our missions in life on His behalf are. Our time, our words, and how we choose to spend them each day matters, because we never know how much we have left. Let's invest them wisely.

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8

There is desirable treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise, but a foolish man squanders it.

Proverbs 21:20

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever.

Amen.

1 Peter 4:10-11

Day 7:

Importance of “Equipping our Armor” Before Battle

One of the reasons the Kingdom Hearts series is so popular is its’ accessibility, featuring a style of gameplay that can be successfully enjoyed by even the most casual gamer. But these missions still require effort and participation by the player to complete... success is only achieved through a combination of preparation and execution. From gathering the correct materials to synthesize items, seeking out and acquiring specific pieces of armor to optimize our load outs, and performing the platforming and combat actions that advance the story, these battles aren’t automatically won. Sora and his crew might be exceptionally gifted, but these gifts must be cultivated and applied before victory is earned.

While the weapons that we’ve been called to wield in our day-to-day battles are spiritual rather than physical, there are still things we must do in our physical realm as the Lord’s servants to work in these fields until He returns... and these tasks will require our intentional spiritual preparation to physically accomplish. Our willingness to serve the Lord is important, but it is only one part of the equation. Achieving success in today’s missions also requires prayerful preparation, deliberate Bible study, and intentional activation of our gifts. Battling the darkness isn’t a passive process... let’s equip our armor before we hit the battlefield.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Ephesians 6:10-13

Day 8: A Beautiful Tapestry Built From Diversity

On paper, the entire concept behind Kingdom Hearts doesn't sound like it should work. Square Enix, the developers responsible for crafting serious gaming narratives like the Final Fantasy series, decided to create a game that would not only incorporate Disney cartoon characters like Goofy and Mickey Mouse but would tell a story set in very unrealistic worlds like the underwater kingdom of the Little Mermaid. In anyone else's hands, this project would have been a disaster... but the creators of the game took these distinctly different pieces and pressed them together in a way that showed respect to each of these diverse franchises while also combining them in a way that transformed them into a masterpiece.

The strength of the body of Christ is in our exceptional diversity. We are each called from different backgrounds to serve specific roles so we can accomplish unique purposes for His kingdom. We make up a beautiful tapestry made up of some broken pasts, brilliant minds, lovable leaders, and a few of us that are just a little bit "Goofy" like me... but we have all been designed to bring value to His body by combining the gifts that we've been given together. Let's treat each member of His body with respect even when our approaches are a little different. Only a kingdom of unified hearts can reach souls for Him.

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

Romans 12:3-5

But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

1 Corinthians 12:18-22

Day 9: Setting Ourselves up for Disappointment?

The tremendous success of the first two titles in the Kingdom Hearts series placed an even larger amount of pressure on Kingdom Hearts 3 to be one of the greatest games of all time... and those lofty expectations grew to a level that would've been impossible for any sequel to fulfill. While Kingdom Hearts 3 is a solid and enjoyable entry in the series, many fans and reviewers expressed disappointment in it because it wasn't everything that they hoped that it would be, allowing themselves to be let down by promises that had never been made in the first place.

If I'm being honest, many of my personal prayers have placed expectations on God that He never actually promised. He is the omniscient Ruler of the universe, not a vending machine waiting to attend to my every whim. The Lord promised to supply all our needs, but that is based on HIS definition of the word, not ours. When we set our hearts on the Lord doing things for us that He never guaranteed, we set ourselves up for disappointment and disillusionment. Jesus disappointed many of His followers who were expecting a conquering Messiah instead of a sacrificial Lamb, but rather than giving them what they were asking for He gave them what they truly needed. Let's humbly come to the Lord in prayer for everything we lack while keeping in mind He isn't our personal genie... He is our King.

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:31-33

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

Day 10: Playing the Waiting Game

The Kingdom Hearts franchise launched over twenty years ago, and as a major fan of this series since day one it has always felt like the wait for the next entry in the mainline series is PAINFULLY long. Sure, there have been some handheld spin-offs to keep us occupied between each chapter, but these just build our anticipation for the next major release in the story.

While waiting for our bigger questions to be answered may feel unnecessary and frustrating, the delay has given the developers time to gain access to entirely new worlds and characters that they can add to the franchise that weren't previously available or even in existence when the first Kingdom Hearts was released. The wait may seem long, but it is both necessary and worth it.

When the answers to our prayers seem to be taking longer than we'd prefer, it's important to keep in mind that the Lord's will for our life doesn't exist in a vacuum... there are multiple moving parts involving others who may not be in the position they need to be to join us on our journey yet. He isn't delaying His answer just to see how patient we can be. He is putting together a larger solution to our problem than we can comprehend that answers more prayers than just our own. Let's be patient in our waiting season knowing this "delay" is part of a bigger answer.

*For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hurries toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it delays, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay long.
Habakkuk 2:3*

*The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.
Lamentations 3:25-26*

Day 11: A Default Difficulty Setting Dilemma?

I tend to play most video games on their default settings, but when my young daughter wanted to play Kingdom Hearts with me, I chose to drop the difficulty level down to the most casual setting so she could experience the story for herself without frustration. One day she will probably play it on a higher level of challenge, and eventually she will grow and surpass my gaming skills... but she isn't even in kindergarten yet, so today we will play at the level she is able to. Her time for the tough stuff will come soon enough... for now I just want her to fall in love with the joy of playing video games the same way I did when I was her age.

As we seek to reach others for the Lord, we must remember that we all found Him first in simple, childlike faith. It is our role to introduce others to Christ, guide them into His mercy and grace, and disciple them in patience and love. And it is the Holy Spirit's job to confront and convict each of us in the areas of our lives that need repentance and transformation. The Lord provided us with the blueprint for discipleship during His time on earth, guiding His followers to bring their burdens to Him for relief rather than making them even harder for them to carry. Let's share Christ and His truth the way it was designed for us to receive it... in its' beautiful simplicity that can be heard, understood and accepted by a young child.

Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:2-3

For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Matthew 23:4, 13

Day 12: Grappling With “Goodbye”

At multiple points in Kingdom Hearts, we are given access to “guest characters” who join our party and help us out for a little while, but they don’t get to travel with us beyond the world they were designed for. Ariel, Beast, Tarzan and many more became critical allies during one part of our story, but as we moved on to the next level their path diverged from ours because their story required them to stay behind in their own. While it would be nice to bring Beast’s power or Ariel’s healing abilities with us into our next chapter, we have new friends to meet and different missions to complete. They didn’t stop caring about us... their destiny just lies on a different path than ours.

The parting of paths in our lives is never easy, especially when those who helped us through some of our most challenging times are either unable or unwilling to join us on the next leg of our journey. But just as John the Baptist wasn’t meant to be present for the entirety of Christ’s earthly ministry and both Paul and Barnabas eventually parted ways as they each pursued different paths, our stories will also be filled with both friendships and farewells. Let’s enjoy our intersections with the friends we make for as long as they last and wish each other well when they reach their conclusion... these unwanted endings are how the Lord leads us to new beginnings.

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4-5

For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.
Colossians 2:5

Day 13: An “Unqualified” Protagonist

On the surface, Sora looked like a very unlikely protagonist when we’re first introduced to him in Kingdom Hearts... he was small, young, had no combat skills to speak of and could barely win a simple foot race with his friends. But he didn’t become the “Hero of Light” because he was the strongest, biggest, fastest, or the best in combat situations... there were plenty of individuals to choose from who were more “qualified” than him if that was the criteria. Sora’s destiny was an unearned gift, and the Keyblade chose him to wield it despite his lack of obvious external qualifications because of the quality of his heart. Sora offered himself as a willing vessel to serve others despite his limited skills, and it was his humble, obedient heart that saved the world.

If I’m being honest, I often feel like I’m far too flawed, unimportant, and insignificant to make an impact for the Lord in the world around me. I’ve messed up too much, my platform is too small, and my very best efforts are too weak to have an impact. But the Lord doesn’t call us based on our perceived qualifications, He chooses and uses vessels who are willing to serve His purpose despite our limitations. It’s when His Spirit works through our obedient hearts that He is glorified, so don’t fret. Using unknown, under-qualified souls to change the world is the Lord’s specialty.

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Day 14: Hope for the “Nobodies”

The “Nobodies” that impede our progress in the Kingdom Hearts games are a truly tragic group of opponents. They are beings who are made up of a body and soul, but unfortunately, they don’t possess a heart. Due to their missing heart, it isn’t surprising that they make life more difficult for Sora and his friends... these adversaries are simply seeking what they are lacking from the wrong places and serving a villain who is manipulating those desires into performing his bidding. But being a “Nobody” isn’t a hopeless case... Axel, Roxas, and Namine were all restored as whole beings because Sora cared enough to move past the challenges that they caused for him and instead helped each of them become the “Somebody” they were always destined to be.

As beings created by the Father for fellowship with Him, we have all been designed to live in His presence... and without His active presence in our lives there is a massive empty spot inside us that can’t be filled by anything else. Until I received His grace, I spent my life feeling like a “Nobody” and wasted an enormous amount of time and effort seeking to fill that missing part with all the wrong solutions. Rather than judge others for the ways they have tried to fill the God-shaped hole in their hearts, let’s show mercy and compassion as we lead them to the hope that we’ve found.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

John 3:16-17

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:5-6

Day 15: A Mission Designed for a Trio

One of the core themes in the Kingdom Hearts series is teamwork, and as Sora embraced his destiny to confront and defeat the darkness that was threatening his world, he found support from some very unexpected sources. Throughout his adventures he was joined by Donald and Goofy, two characters who would've been voted least likely to succeed in saving the universe. But the unexpected combination of these three unique but unified hearts forged the perfect fireteam to tear down enemy strongholds and restore light and hope to their realm... a result that they could only have achieved in tandem with each other.

One of the primary weapons our enemy uses against us is isolation, seeking to separate us not only from our Heavenly Father but from each other as well. We were designed to serve the Lord in community with each other, and even Jesus needed His personal fireteam of Peter, James and John to support Him in His earthly ministry everywhere from His highest of highs to His darkest challenges. Our companions may not always be who we would've chosen for these moments, but the Lord placed them on our path for this purpose. Let's lock arms together as we prayerfully support each other in the battles we are each facing, because we'll need each other today. Our missions were built for partnership.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.
Matthew 18:19-20

Day 16: Unwanted Delays or Intentional Development?

While Kingdom Hearts often allows the players to decide the order in which we explore some of the worlds it contains, we can't simply go straight from Traverse Town to our final destination at the beginning of the game. Each world we face has gradually increasing difficulty levels as well as areas that require items and capabilities that we haven't acquired yet and allowing us to advance into these areas before we are ready will just result in frustration and disappointment. While this may feel like an unfair or unwanted limitation, the game is simply preparing us for these more challenging levels before we get there. There is a time and a place for confronting Ansem, and we have some preparation to do before we get there.

We all face roadblocks in life that can feel like unfair limitations, and knowing the Lord could easily grant us the desires of our heart with one word from His lips can cause us to resent His lack of action. But just as Joseph endured pits and prisons while he was being prepared in private to become a prince, these areas we would rather bypass are the places where critical skills and abilities are developed that we will need later in our stories. Even Christ endured a cross before His crown, so let's look at the level we're currently in from a different point of view today. It's not an unwanted delay... it's intentional development.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Hebrews 5:8

Day 17: The Wayward Souls with Messy Backstories Chosen to Save the World

At the center of the Kingdom Hearts' story is a group of damaged, flawed, unlikely heroes... some of them were "Nobody's" searching for a body and life of their own, many were flawed and troubled souls who were still struggling with their own personal battles, and several even started off serving the wrong side before eventually finding their way into the light. But despite their messy backstories and even the poor decisions some had previously made, they were still chosen to be part of the team that would work together to save the world... and even their complicated past became part of their future purpose.

Some of the most encouraging verses to read in the Bible are the names of those who were chosen to be part of the genealogy of Christ. God could've picked anyone to have a place in His family tree, and yet He deliberately selected the heartbroken and battle-damaged Ruth, the harlot with a heart of gold Rahab, the trickster Jacob, and even the adulterous David and Bathsheba to be part of His Son's lineage. But these broken, damaged, and even previously sinful souls were grafted into the vine through His grace because He looked beyond who they had been and what they had done and saw who they would become. And it's an invitation that He still extends to every one of us... even a wayward soul like mine.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are.

1 Corinthians 1:27-28

But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you."

Isaiah 43:1-2

Day 18: Gummi Ship Blues

The gameplay in the Kingdom Hearts series is broken up into two segments... the fun part where we get to run, jump, and fight bad guys, and the less enjoyable parts where you must travel between worlds using the “Gummi ship”. As I’m sure you guessed, I don’t enjoy the Gummi ship portions at all... they feel like they came from an entirely different game that I never wanted to play, and if I had the choice, I would skip them. But part of the story is getting to my destination, and even though flying the ship feels different (and much less fun) than the platforming segments I enjoy, it’s all a part of the game... and if I want to play it, I must accept the entire package.

Some parts of our Christian walk will feel great (like receiving undeserved love, grace and favor from the Lord), and other portions will feel a lot less enjoyable (like forgiving those who never apologized to us, waiting on the Lord for answers to prayer, or turning the other cheek). But all of these are critical components to the larger story that He is telling through our lives, and our times of pain, frustration, and struggle are used by Him to prepare us for our next mission. Rather than simply accept these “Gummi ship” parts of our walk with Christ, let’s embrace the lessons they are designed to teach us and trust that they’ll all make sense when arrive at our next destination.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

Psalm 34:19

May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

1 Peter 5:10

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:12

Day 19: Coping With the Inflexibility of a “Save Point System”

Unlike most modern titles that typically allow us to save our game anytime and anywhere that we want to, Kingdom Hearts sticks to a rigid “save point” system that forces us to come to a specific place on the map to save our progress. While this may seem like an unwanted limitation by the game developers on the surface, each of these designated checkpoints guide us to specific places on each level that our journey **MUST** pass through to proceed as well as provide a defined safe space for us to return to if we fall in battle. Sure, finding one often means we have a challenging battle ahead of us, but it is only by following these navigational mandates that we reach the endgame that we have been seeking.

In the stories of our lives, we will all experience some unwanted “checkpoints” that alter the path that our lives have taken... many that are from our own poor choices, and some from the actions of others. But in my experience, I have found that even these undesired events are what led me to the relationship with the Lord that I have now, and without these “anchor points” in my life I would be an entirely different person than I am today. Let’s not waste another moment wondering “what if” or regretting mistakes we have repented of. These save points will all make sense one day, and the Lord will work these things together for our good.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.
Ecclesiastes 3:11

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

Day 20:

Kingdom Hearts x Super Smash Brothers - Shining the Light Wherever We Go

After years of exclusively being found in the Kingdom Hearts series of games, fans were shocked and delighted to see Sora finally appear in another title as a playable character in Nintendo's Super Smash Brothers Ultimate. While Sora's adventures with Mickey and his friends in the Kingdom Hearts franchise reached a massive audience of appreciative gamers, joining Mario and his pals in their game brought Sora to an entirely new group of players that may not have ever even heard of Kingdom Hearts or considered playing a game in this series before. Growing the Kingdom Hearts family wouldn't happen by Sora waiting in a comfortable place for others to come to him... he had to join them in their battles and show what being a "Hero of Light" is all about.

Our relationship with the Lord isn't meant to be limited to our homes, churches, and our private devotional time. The evidence of His presence in our lives should shine in every adventure we take on... from our places of work and school, to sitting in a doctor's waiting room, to simply standing in line at the grocery store. The talents and gifts the Lord has blessed us with were designed for active participation in the world around us, so let's look for opportunities to serve others in their battles today and shine His light wherever our journey takes us. This Keyblade was designed to travel.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.
Matthew 5:14-16

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.
Colossians 3:17

Day 21: “Melody of Memory” - A Matter of Timing

There are very few games that are as perfectly set up for a rhythm-based spinoff as Kingdom Hearts, and “Melody of Memory” makes good on that potential with an exploration of the story from a completely different style of gameplay. In this game, timing is EVERYTHING... while the action-based entries in the series are designed to support more of a freestyle approach for Sora and his pals, this one requires players to match their movements to specific button prompts that are timed to the music. While waiting for just the right time to press them demands both patience and restraint, advancing in the game only occurs when our efforts are coordinated with the rhythm that has been established by the game creator.

Following the Lord in obedience is all about His “timing”, and even our well-meaning attempts to do the right thing at the wrong time will always end in disastrous results. The Lord has carefully planned and orchestrated our story and every action we are meant to take in life in a very specific rhythm, intertwining our movements with the needs of others and the world around us at specific dates and times that cannot be rushed. Let’s resist the urge to “freestyle” our walk with the Lord and fully submit ourselves to Him each day, including when He tells us to “pause”. He will guide our steps to align with His perfect timing.

Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.

Psalm 37:7

Then Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready.”

Matthew 7:6

Day 22: Taking Time in the Middle of the Battle to Heal

In most of my modern gaming adventures, my characters can “auto-heal”, and by simply getting out of combat for a few seconds they can catch their breath and recover from even the most devastating of injuries. But in Kingdom Hearts, passive healing isn’t on the menu... Sora and his friends aren’t able to simply take a break while they are fighting, so they must intentionally stop what they are doing and heal themselves and each other in the middle of the battle. While this takes time and feels a bit inconvenient, it’s a necessary part of the game that forces me to stop and heal the damage I’ve taken so I have the strength to move forward.

The real-world battles that we face each day can feel so overwhelming, urgent, and demanding that we can easily forget to reach out to the Lord for support and healing while we are still in the middle of our struggle, not just once it is over. It is when we’re in the heat of our battle that it is most crucial for us to stop and take the time to pray for peace, grace, wisdom, and strength to not only survive this trial, but to stand tall while we are enduring it. The Lord promised we would all face tribulations in life, but He also promised that we would never have to face these challenges alone. If we are heading into the fire today, we can rest assured He’s standing in the fire with us.

In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears.
Psalm 18:6

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
Hebrews 4:16

Day 23: Becoming All Things to Save Some

One of the design choices that has made the Kingdom Hearts series so popular with gaming audiences across every walk of life is all the unique worlds it contains for Sora and his pals to explore. But this level of variety requires a great deal of flexibility from our heroes... from The Little Mermaid and Winnie the Pooh to Toy Story and Tron, each mission Sora takes on brings him to a new area that requires him to change everything from his physical appearance in that level to even the style of gameplay in many instances. Success in each specific mission was rarely convenient... it called for him to step far outside of his comfort zone so he could align his efforts with the unique problem in each world that he was trying to solve.

Our service to the Lord will rarely involve us doing things that we find comfortable or easy, because that would make it tempting for us to depend on our own strength and capabilities instead of His. Jesus didn't tell Peter to simply share His good news from the comfort of his fishing boat at his convenience... He took ordinary fishermen, pulled them out of their comfort zones, and turned them into fishers of men. We should expect that acting as ambassadors for His kingdom and fulfilling His missions will lead us down some challenging and unfamiliar paths... reaching every possible soul means stretching ourselves out to save them.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Day 24: The Importance of Choosing our “Soundtrack”

Music is one of the defining features of the entire Kingdom Hearts series, and its’ iconic soundtrack does more than provide a little bit of ambience... it changes the way we perceive the area that we are in. Each song causes us to either relax and casually explore the environment or grip our controller tightly in dread of what is coming next. From the cheerful tones that play while we romp around Destiny Island to the haunting dirge that lets us know we’ve arrived at Hollow Bastion, the music is designed to set the tone of each area. Fortunately, we can still “change the mood” of the room we are in while we are playing the game... by choosing to listen to an uplifting song like the “Sanctuary” theme, it reminds us we are destined to overcome these dark places, not allow them and their “mood music” to define our environment.

We will all face dark times and challenging trials in life, and the soundtracks we choose to listen to while we are walking through them have a massive impact on how we perceive our circumstances. We don’t always get to choose the “level” in life that we’re currently walking through, but we DO get to make the decision to enter them with a melody of praise in our hearts and an attitude of gratitude. Let’s deny our environment the power to dictate our mood... let’s flip our soundtrack to a joyful noise so the Lord can break our chains.

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.
Acts 16:25-26

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Ephesians 5:19-20

He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth— praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord.
Psalms 40:2-3

Day 25: Healing Others, Helping Ourselves

While the real-time combat in Kingdom Hearts is fun and keeps the action lively, replenishing Sora's health or MP in the middle of combat can be a bit tough to pull off. Fortunately, he's not in the battle alone... his partners

Donald and Goofy can provide support with actions and items that strengthen and heal him when he is getting weak, and Sora can do the same for them. Now, there is an inconvenient catch to this... healing others requires the "healer" to take time out of their own part of the battle to unselfishly serve someone else's needs. But healing others is the gift that keeps on giving... their renewed strength helps lead the entire team to victory, and a healed teammate is now able to help others who find themselves in a position of similar need later.

The act of interceding in prayer for each other is one of our most important responsibilities as fellow team members in the body of Christ. But if we're being honest, we can get so overwhelmed dealing with our own personal challenges in life that praying for the needs of others isn't always the priority that it needs to be. As Job learned through his battles, it was only after he obediently prayed for the restoration of his friends that his own blessings in life were unlocked, and it is our willingness to intercede for others in the middle of our own storms that our victories in life are found.

And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Job 42:10

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

James 5:16

Day 26: Dealing With Closed Doors

Even though each world in Kingdom Hearts is open to us for general exploration, there are still many areas within each level that aren't designed for us to interact with. There are doors that we can't enter, areas in the distance that we can't reach, and even entire buildings that look real but are only a facade. While finding a closed door can feel frustrating and disappointing, the truth is we aren't missing out on anything... because these areas that appear fun and exciting on the outside don't contain anything. They may look like viable destinations that contain hidden treasures, but the designer of the game knew exactly what we would need for our adventure and where we are meant to go. Doors that don't lead anywhere productive or contain anything worth finding are meant to remain closed.

The Lord has prepared a unique and specific path for each of us, and along the way we will all see doorways in life that were not designed to be accessible to us. Some closed doors are meant for us to open later, while others are simply not ours to unlock. But one of the greatest proofs that we are walking in faith is our ability to accept a closed door from the Lord without needing a reason why. His grace is sufficient for us, He knows what He's doing, and even these closed doors are all part of His perfect plan.

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
2 Corinthians 12:8-9

Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.
Isaiah 30:21

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens".
Revelation 3:7

Day 27: Victory Comes to Those Who Prepare

When playing Kingdom Hearts, I've often found that it's the intentional choices that I make BEFORE a mission to prepare for it that determines how it winds up playing out. From deciding how to invest the skill points that I've acquired to which items I equip before engaging in battle, I either set Sora and his pals up for success or unintentionally increase the degree of difficulty. A wise explorer takes the time to thoughtfully allocate their "XP" to critical skills and equip their very best gear before entering areas that could potentially require them and taking on the challenges of the game poorly equipped or under-prepared always ends with reloading a previous save to try again. We don't always know what's coming, but we should always be prepared and equipped for anything.

All of us will face some real-world battles today, and how we choose to prepare for them BEFORE they happen is the key to experiencing victory over these challenges. Let's start our day out by putting our armor on... intentionally absorbing the Lord's words into our hearts ensures we are fully equipped for whatever challenges we will face, and taking time to prayerfully seek His guidance before every decision we make opens us up to applying the "XP" of His divine wisdom. Let's suit up... the Lord wouldn't have provided us with all this armor if we weren't going to need it today.

*Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.
Psalm 119:11*

*Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.
Ephesians 6:10-13*

Day 28: A Reminder About Judging Others

Who remembers the first big decision we all had to make in Kingdom Hearts... making the choice between taking the sword, the shield, or the staff? At such an early stage of the game, I didn't feel prepared to make a decision that could have long-lasting ramifications on how I played the game. But that wasn't the last choice I had to make... along the way, I made decisions about how to level up my party, which items to equip, and the order I took on challenges. Some were the right call for me and my style of play, and others were choices I'd later regret. Either way, the game would reveal if these were wise or foolish choices... and I was the one who'd have to deal with the fallout. All of us play the same game, but how we get to our ending is a unique story... no two play-throughs are identical.

It's easy to be critical of the way others choose to play the game of life, and judging how our fellow servants follow Christ (even with the best of intentions) is far above our pay grade. How do we know what choices others felt forced to make before they fully understood that decision? And how do we know what they had to give up in exchange? We will all start in different places, serve the Lord in different ways, and follow different paths to His endgame, so let's resist the urge to judge. That is the fatal first step into self-righteousness.

*There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?
James 4:12*

But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Romans 14:10-13

Day 29: Unwelcome Detours that Reveal an Unexpected Destiny

While Kingdom Hearts is a fairly linear gaming experience, it doesn't mean that every item that our missions require or each character we are tasked with helping are easily discovered... many are only revealed when we are forced off our preferred path and into an area that we never intended to explore. While these moments may seem like an undesired time-wasting detour at first, they are often the places where I discovered something that I didn't even know I should be searching for. Whether it was a valuable item that changed the way I played the game or a path to helping someone I didn't know was there, these unwanted diversions helped push Sora to places he wouldn't have reached any other way.

We will all face unwanted detours in life, but these inconvenient situations are often used by the Lord to advance His kingdom in ways that wouldn't have happened otherwise. Many times, these are the paths that He uses to guide us to our destiny the same way Joseph found in his journey from prison to prince... and other times these diversions are a divine intersection to reach one singular soul for Christ like Paul and the repentant jailer. If we allow Him to open our eyes to the possibilities beyond our present discomfort, we will find that He truly does work out all things for good... according to His purposes, not ours.

*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God,
to those who are the called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28*

*But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in
order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20*

Day 30: A Kingdom for EVERY Heart

My favorite part of the Kingdom Hearts franchise has always been the incredible diversity of all the characters that make it up. Gaming icons such as Cloud Strife and Auron from the Final Fantasy series battle alongside Disney's Donald and Goofy... all while exploring levels based on films featuring cinematic icons like Jack Sparrow or Tron. But this incredible mix of complicated protagonists and larger-than-life cartoon characters works because they're all serving the same story in different ways... saving the world takes a team who understands that the things that make each of them unique and different from each other is what gives this team its strength.

We're all called to serve the same Lord, but we will each serve Him in different ways... and the uniqueness of our calling and purpose means it will look different for every one of us. The diverse ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus meant that one of them lived off locusts and honey in the desert while the other ate and drank with those He was sent to save... each of them served the same kingdom in different ways based on the specific calling they were given by the Father. Rather than expect every member of this team to follow Christ in an identical manner, let's embrace the way we've been gifted to serve Him... as a kingdom of unique hearts joined together as one.

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" But wisdom is justified by her children.
Matthew 11:18-19

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.
Romans 12:4-5a

Halo

Day 1:

The Original Halo Trilogy: Chapters that Don't Always Make Sense Until the Story is Finished

Playing through the original Halo trilogy back when the games first launched vs. replaying them now is a VASTLY different experience. In my first playthrough, this seemingly basic “space marine saves the world” story quickly gave way to some surprising (and occasionally unwelcome) twists and turns. From exposing the hidden purpose of the iconic Halo rings, to the betrayal of 343 Guilty Spark, to former enemy the Arbiter evolving from a lethal adversary to a valuable and critical ally, each chapter wouldn't have made much sense if played without the added context of the others. But after the trilogy was complete, even the cliffhangers I didn't appreciate the first time I played them finally made sense... they were serving a larger story.

The story that the Lord is telling through our lives will often feel like chaotically disparate chapters when viewed from our limited perspective, and they aren't always easy to appreciate while we are living through them. But each event is a very intentional page He has written in our book that won't necessarily make sense to us until the final sentence is written in both our narrative and the connected stories that are being told in the lives of others. In His perfect time, His purpose for the cliffhangers and betrayals we're enduring will be fully revealed... and then we'll finally understand.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:12

Day 2: Those Pesky Grunts - The Hidden Danger of the “Little Foxes”

My most stunning and disappointing defeats in Halo rarely occur at the hands of adversaries like the massive Hunters or the Elite soldiers piloting those lethal Covenant battle tanks. Even though they are incredibly dangerous, I can see these challenges coming in the distance and prepare for them in advance, approaching them with a cautious strategy because I’m fiercely aware of the threat they contain. Instead, it’s the tiny grunts that tend to appear out of nowhere with plasma grenades in their hands that cause most of my problems. Their smaller size and seeming insignificance compared to those larger enemies make them very easy to underestimate, and that is what makes them so deadly. It’s always the little foxes that do the most damage.

The Bible is full of cautionary tales that remind us to guard against the hidden dangers of the “little foxes” ... heroes like David and Moses who took down giants and kings but were defeated by one glance at a bathing Bathsheba or striking a rock in an angry outburst. Our most dangerous battles in life are often concealed in the seemingly small temptations of a quick look at something we shouldn’t or giving in to a moment of anger, so let’s guard our minds, eyes, and mouths today against these hidden grenades. Our testimony can be destroyed by one moment of weakness.

*Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.
Song of Solomon 2:15*

*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.
1 Corinthians 10:12-13*

Day 3:

From Slipspace to Unreal: The Importance of Building on the Right Foundation

Halo's move from utilizing their own propriety "Slipspace" technology to announcing they will build all future Halo content using the "Unreal" game engine is a pretty significant decision... the studio has finally accepted the limitations of their own software design and are choosing to use a proven, superior engine going forward. While this was a humbling and costly decision to make, they can't build the future Halo experiences we all want on an old, flawed, or insufficient foundation. The only way to deliver a new Halo title that is worthy of the name is to change the way they create the game starting from the ground up.

The choice to follow the Lord in our lives must also be accompanied by our willingness to fully submit to His "game engine" in every decision we make if we want to enjoy the blessings and benefits He has promised us. He isn't an "add-on" or supplemental DLC that we download into our daily routine... the mission of His Spirit is to rebuild our entire way of thinking from scratch on HIS foundation. Trying to simply add His wisdom to our old way of doing things in an attempt to have the best of both worlds will only end in frustration... His promises are real and will always come true, but He can't bless what He didn't build. Let's construct our lives on His foundation and design so we can enjoy His blessings today.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:10-11

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

Matthew 7:24-27

Day 4:

Master Chief's Missing Pockets: A Disadvantage by Design?

For all of Master Chief's advantages over his video game peers, he possesses a "limitation" that most of them don't share. While gaming protagonists like Solid Snake carry an entire armory with them into their respective battles, the Chief is only able to carry two weapons at a time...

apparently his armor doesn't share the same pocket design as Snake's sneaking gear. But what may seem like a disadvantage is just a difference

between the games they are in and the unique nature of their adventures... the Chief wouldn't have any use for a cardboard box in the places his story takes him. An unlimited arsenal of equipment choices sounds nice, but the Master Chief's "limited" load-out has always been more than enough for him to win the day.

The uniqueness of each of our callings for the Lord means that every one of us will be equipped differently for our respective missions... some of us have received talents in speaking, writing, or sharing songs while others have been gifted with earthly resources or serve Him in positions of high visibility to grow the kingdom. Instead of wishing we were chosen for different missions in life or that we possessed the "pockets" of gifts that others received, let's open our eyes to the callings we were given. He didn't design us with limitations... He crafted each of us for a purpose.

Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4:9-11

Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began

2 Timothy 1:9

Day 5: Master Chief, Arbiter, and the Importance of Forgiving the Past to Save the Future

The surprise pairing of the Master Chief and the Arbiter that turned these bitter opponents into unlikely allies was one of the best parts of the original Halo trilogy... for both of them to be the heroes that their situations required, they had to put the pain they had previously caused each other behind them and choose to work together. While letting the past actions of the “villains” of each other’s respective stories go wasn’t easy, the mission at hand and the lives that were at stake were much larger than the grudge they were carrying. By releasing their grip on the anger and bitterness that they were carrying towards each other, their hands were finally opened to receive the help and support that only the other could give.

Forgiveness is more than a willingness to simply let something go... it is an intentional decision to allow someone who has wronged us in the past to grow. Just like the example that Ananias and Saul showed us, it’s only when we choose to release each other from the burden of the sins that we’ve committed against each other that healing can occur for BOTH parties involved. When we show the same grace, mercy and forgiveness that the Lord has given to us to those who have acted in an adversarial manner to us in the past, we will often find the support we have been seeking and praying for was hidden in plain sight all along.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21

Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.”

Acts 9:13-15

Day 6: The Worst Grenade Throw Ever, of All Time

Despite my best intentions, I've found that many of my grenade throws in Halo can do more harm than good. Even though I'm exclusively targeting my opposition, the splash damage that these powerful weapons unleash combined with the unpredictable movements of others occupying the same battlefield often causes unwanted harm to those I never intended to impact. Even a perfectly placed plasma grenade stuck to an adversary can still injure a fellow teammate who is in proximity to the blast zone. While advancing my team's objectives is the name of the game, collateral damage in a team-based game is a pretty good indication that I'm doing it wrong. The best grenade toss is still the worst grenade throw of all time if it injures my own team in the process.

As Christ's followers, we are called to continue His mission of seeking and saving the lost... but when we throw around our words without allowing them to be properly guided by His Spirit, we are essentially lobbing grenades of truth onto the battlefield without seasoning them with His grace and love. Let's not grieve the Spirit of God by wielding His words like a weapon against the vulnerable souls around us, sharing the wisdom of the Scriptures without proper context. The whole purpose of sharing His good news with others is to reach out in love and set them free.

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Colossians 4:5-6

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

Ephesians 4:29-31

Day 7: Master Chief's Painful Backstory - Serving Through the Scars

The backstory of the Master Chief isn't pretty... the ordinary boy known as John-117 endured horrific traumas that permanently scarred him to transform him into the super soldier that we know and love. While his heroic path doesn't absolve the actions of those who used their positions of power to manipulate and disfigure him, these painful events were still used to serve a valuable and critical purpose. No, it wasn't fair that he was forced to suffer at the hands of those who lacked a moral compass, but he didn't allow his past to make him bitter or angry. Instead, he chose to use the very experiments that could've destroyed him to save the world... including the souls who were responsible for causing all this pain to him in the first place.

We've all endured different moments of trauma and pain in our lives due to the selfish actions of others, but if we choose to submit our scars to the Lord, He will turn these events that could've destroyed us into a powerful testimony of His grace to preserve us, grow us, build us up, and save others. Even Jesus carries scars that serve as a permanent reminder of the evil that men are capable of... but His scars also prove that in the hands of our Heavenly Father, even those actions that were meant to harm us can be used by Him to achieve a purpose beyond our comprehension.

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.
Romans 5:3

Day 8:

Halo's Hunters - Solutions Hidden in Plain Sight

I'll never forget the first time I faced a Hunter in Halo... actually, make that TWO Hunters since they like to work in pairs. They were the most powerful enemies that I had faced in the game at that point, and I quickly found that running up to them while unloading my weapons to overwhelm them with brute force was a pretty ineffective strategy. Even the Master Chief was no match for them in a head-to-head battle of strength vs. strength, but there was a hidden path to victory buried beneath their seemingly impenetrable armor... a cluster of exposed nerves on their back concealed a weak point that was easily exploited if I chose to patiently pursue the solution the game developers designed for me instead of trying to push through it my own way.

No matter what situation we find ourselves in today, the Lord will always be faithful to provide a solution to every predicament and a way to escape each temptation we face... but these answers are typically "hidden in plain sight" and are only revealed when we choose to follow Him in blind faith.

Just as the Lord's hidden provision for Abraham only appeared after he obediently offered his son, it is only when we fully commit ourselves to relying on the Lord's strength and following the directions He has provided that His answer for our situation will finally come into view.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son. Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Hebrews 11:17, Genesis 22:13-14

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

Day 9:

The Relationship Between Master Chief and His Helmet

One of Master Chief's defining qualities in every chapter of the Halo game series is that he knew how to keep his helmet on... unlike a certain live-action TV show Master Chief who couldn't ever seem to find his. While the decision to keep the Chief in his armor during the games is certainly a much more practical one (since he's almost always in a dangerous combat situation), there is a deeper reason as well... it allowed the character of the Master Chief to transcend who John-117 once was and represent something even greater and more iconic. When an enemy sees him, they don't see a mere human soldier... they are staring into the visor of an unstoppable Spartan warrior.

When the Apostle Paul describes the various aspects of our faith as pieces of armor, he calls our head covering the "helmet of salvation" for a reason. When we choose to place the saving work of Christ over our heads, our spiritual enemies are no longer facing a fallen, flawed, broken, wayward soul in battle. They see a forgiven and redeemed child of the Almighty God walking confidently in His authority on this planet. We are not who we once were before we put on this armor... we're defined solely by our standing in Christ. Let's snap our helmet on in confidence today... our enemy isn't facing us in battle, they're facing the undefeated, sovereign King of Kings.

But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.
1 Thessalonians 5:8-10

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.
Romans 13:14

Day 10: Plot Twist - False Prophets and Blind Guides

One of the biggest plot twists in the original Halo trilogy was how the Covenant forces completely misunderstood the true intention of the Halo rings... the Covenant “prophets” were not only misinformed, but they were blindly leading their entire coalition of allies into annihilating the entire universe. Their promise of taking all who followed them on a “Great Journey” into wonders beyond their dreams was built on a convenient collection of misinterpreted half-truths, and through their manipulation they coerced those looking for a greater meaning in their lives into committing to a deceptive false religion that would only result in their own destruction. False prophets indeed...

The most dangerous lies that we contend with in life are those that are intertwined with half-truths by souls who have fallen for their own deception. While they may be sincere in what they believe, they are still sincerely WRONG. Jesus repeatedly warned His disciples about the dangers of false prophets and blind guides who either intentionally prey on the misinformed or accidentally lead their well-meaning followers into destruction. Our only defense against being misled by these flawed interpretations is to hold every message that we hear up to the light of the entirety of Scripture for validation. There are only two roads in life to choose from, and only the narrow way leads us home.

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.
Romans 16:17-18

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
1 John 4:1

Day 11: Energy Shield Limitations - A “Recharging” Reminder

I’ll be the first to admit that I am a reckless Halo player... the knowledge that I’m playing as a Spartan soldier who is covered from head to toe in powerful Mjolnir armor that is reinforced with a built-in energy shield causes me to feel a little bit more invincible than I really am. As a result, I tend to dive headfirst into battles that would have benefited from a little bit more finesse... and that beeping sound in my helmet serves as a painful reminder that my protective energy shield isn’t infinite. In that moment, I have two choices I can make... I can either ignore that warning and hope that I can outlast my adversaries (which rarely works), or I can pull back from the battle and give my shields the opportunity to recharge.

Even as followers of Christ, we are not immune to temptation... and the spiritual armor that we’ve been given requires frequent and intentional recharges throughout our day to keep us fully protected. If even the Son of God Himself consistently disengaged from His daily battles to get away and pray to the Father for strength and guidance, then we will certainly need to do the same. Failure to pray creates an opening to stray, so let’s step away from the battlefield to recharge our shields throughout our day today... even the world’s most unstoppable Spartan knows the importance of taking a knee when it’s needed.

And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren”.

Luke 22:31-32

Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Matthew 26:41

So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Day 12: Moving on From the Past - The Key Capturing the Flag

Halo multiplayer matches contain some of my greatest gaming triumphs as well as many of my most embarrassing gaming failures. Sure, I have captured my fair share of flags and controlled plenty of hills over the years, but I've also fallen completely off the map and tasted my own rocket's splash damage more times than I care to admit. But the beginning of a new match starts off with a clean slate, and if I want to succeed in this new opportunity, I must leave all my previous mistakes in the past and move forward. While it's important to learn from those errors so I don't replicate them in the future, continuing to dwell on what's behind me prevents me from being fully present for the task in front of me.

We've all made sinful mistakes in our past that we wish we could undo, but no matter how much we regret them we can't go back and change what we see when we look in our rear-view mirror. But Jesus didn't die for our sins so we could let them continue to live rent free in a mind and body that He paid the ultimate price to redeem. The Lord has offered a fresh start to every soul who receives it, and in the eyes of the Father every sin that we have repented from has already been forgotten. Let's purge them from our memories once and for all... today is a new round, the scoreboard is 0-0, and that flag isn't going to capture itself.

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:12-14

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Psalms 103:8-12

Day 13:

Halo Multiplayer - An “Unequally Yoked” Predicament

When you play enough social multiplayer Halo matches online it is inevitable... members of the opposing team that JUST finished playing a ferocious and contentious match against me get split up, with a few of them ending up on my team for the next round. And in many cases, these new “teammates” are still loyal to their real-life friends who are on the other side... and as a result they sabotage my team’s efforts to win through a combination of intentional “friendly” fire on my team, refusing to pursue match objectives, or intentionally costing our team points. They are still loyal to their original squad because their alignment with me is only a temporary situation.

The verse that commands us not to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers” is a challenging verse of Scripture to unpack. It is NOT advocating that we live our lives completely disconnected from those who do not share our faith or behave in a manner that is unkind, unloving, or uncaring towards them. The only way to reach others is to REACH out to them... but we must also bear in mind that anyone that does not have Christ seated on the throne of their hearts is guided by competing priorities that will reveal their true loyalties when conflict occurs. Let’s be kind to others always, while ensuring that all our alignments in life share a common commitment to the Lord at their core.

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

2 Corinthians 6:14

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:24-26

Day 14: Dealing with the Delay to “Finish the Fight”

If you were there for it, then you remember how excruciating the long wait between the release of Halo 2 and Halo 3 was. Sure, most games require us to be patient for many years before their sequel emerges, but because of the way Halo 2 ended with one of the biggest cliffhangers in the history of gaming, this felt worse. Instead of giving us a feeling of closure before teasing the next chapter in the saga, the game abruptly ended right when we thought we were about to drop into the most exciting mission yet. Three LONG years later our patience was rewarded with the proper ending to the trilogy... and while waiting is never fun, the delay between chapters made us appreciate finishing the fight even more.

When we are reading the Bible and flipping from page to page it can be easy to forget that the promises the Lord gave people like Abraham, Joseph, and David were more than just years in the making... there were DECADES between their revelation and their resolution. Similarly, the dreams and visions that He places in our hearts are rarely brought to pass immediately after we receive them. His promises are designed for very specific times, and even the “delays” that we experience are all part of His perfect plan, so don’t lose hope if the wait seems long ... finishing the fight is what our Heavenly Father does best.

*For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hurries toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it delays, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay long.
Habakkuk 2:3-4*

*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.
Isaiah 55:11*

Day 15:

343 Guilty Spark - Addressing the “Spark of Guilt” in our Lives

Out of all the adversaries that we encountered on and off the Halo ring, 343 Guilty Spark was the most dangerous. While most of our enemies had the decency to confront us directly, 343 Guilty Spark appeared to be a friend before attempting to wipe us out along with the rest of sentient life in the universe. Sure, it told us the truth about the Halo rings (setting them off will destroy the Flood), but it left out a very important side effect (it only works by destroying their food supply, specifically us). The information that Guilty Spark provided was technically accurate, but it only shared the portions that served its’ agenda with complete disregard for all the lives it would destroy in the process. In games and in life, truth without grace becomes guilt without hope.

While the truth contained throughout Scripture is designed to convict us of our sins and inform us of our need for a Savior, by submitting our past failures to Christ and choosing to follow Him we are given His grace that FULLY sets us free from the burden we once carried. That “spark of guilt” that continually reminds us that we are unworthy, broken, and undeserving of a new life in Christ is technically accurate, but the completed work of Jesus finishes the equation. He offers absolution by balancing truth with grace so we can silence that Guilty Spark in our heads... permanently.

*For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
John 1:17*

*If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
1 John 1:6-9*

Day 16: Strategies for Facing (and Surviving) the Flood

The Flood were truly horrifying enemies in Halo for multiple reasons, but it was their method of attack that made them so challenging to defeat. Taken individually, they are small and relatively weak, and from a distance they aren't much of a threat... but that is why they never hunt alone. The Flood conceal themselves in small, enclosed spaces before overwhelming their prey through a lethal combination of surprise and sheer numbers... and even the most well trained and fully armored Spartans can quickly find themselves overcome by their relentless assault. The key to defeating the Flood is to neither give into our fear nor underestimate their capabilities. We must stay calm, find a defensible position, and remember that we are destined to defeat them.

One of the most potent attacks of our spiritual enemy is to come in like a flood and overwhelm us with a multitude of small problems, paralyzing us with battles that seem to be coming from every direction. If he can get us to feel outnumbered by the volume of challenges we're facing, even a tiny issue that would've never derailed us by itself can feel insurmountable.

When these moments come, let's stop and remember the magnitude of the God we serve and keep our eyes fixed on Him through the flood we're in. No matter how large these waves look, He's still in control of the storm.

So shall they fear the name of the Lord from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.

Isaiah 59:19

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

1 John 4:4

Day 17: Halo's Supporting Cast of Characters - Carrying Each Other's Cross

While most of Master Chief's journey during the original Halo trilogy is a solo experience, he didn't save the universe alone... across each of his adventures he was joined by different co-op partners who provided him with critical support in his moments of need. Some of his allies (like Cortana) were present almost every step of the way, while others (like the Arbiter) were on a parallel path that didn't intersect until the moment called for it... and a few showed up just long enough to drop off a Warthog before disappearing from the campaign completely. Master Chief may have carried the burden of being the "Reclaimer" on his back, but it was his support team who carried him to the finish line.

It's easy for us to see ourselves as the "main character" in our stories in life and focus on our own challenging crosses to bear, but our biggest contribution for the Lord may come in the form of being a support partner in the story of a fellow follower as they fulfill their own missions for the Lord. While I'm sure he had plenty of his own problems, the one moment in Simon the Cyrenian's life that changed the entire world was the day he carried someone else's cross. In our journeys today, let's seek opportunities to be a co-op partner for another soul in need. The most important "cross" we end up carrying in life might be one that belongs to somebody else.

Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus.

Luke 23:25

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

Day 18: Legendary Challenges, Weary Arms, and Helping Hands

Taking on some of the “Legendary” challenges in Halo is rarely a one-person job, and being able to invite a friend to help in some of the more difficult chapters is often critical to overcoming them. But their “support” is only truly supportive if they pick up a controller and drop into the campaign with me... having someone simply sit on a couch next to me and criticize my choices from the safety of the sidelines without being willing to jump in and help isn’t very helpful. I need a partner who is willing to dive into the fray, get their hands a little bit dirty, and support me with overcoming these challenges that I couldn’t handle on my own.

All of us are surrounded every day by hurting souls who are burdened with weary hands and heavy hearts, and as ambassadors of Christ we are called to help raise their arms up and lift them closer to His healing grace, not tear them down further than they already are. No matter how someone gets into the situation that they’re in, nobody needs a backseat driver who provides advice with their mouth but lacks mercy in their heart. They need someone to climb into the warthog with them and help them out. Judgment and criticism may come easily to us, but we have been called to show mercy and compassion. It’s only when we demonstrate our faith through our loving actions that any of our words truly matter.

But Moses’ hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

Exodus 17:12

Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men.

And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven you. I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”

Mark 2:3-5, 11

Day 19: The Covenant Energy Sword - The Weapons Formed Against Us

We may not remember the exact moment, but we probably remember the FEELING of picking up the Covenant energy sword for the very first time in Halo. My previous experience with this game-changing weapon was limited to seeing it wielded against me by the Elite soldiers who were trying to destroy me, and seeing one of these ignited in the darkness was NEVER a good thing. But this same item that once struck fear into my heart when it was held in the hands of my enemies has now brought me many of my greatest triumphs... what was originally designed to intimidate and destroy me has now become a source of strength that sends my opponents running for cover.

As we follow the Lord, we shouldn't be surprised that our enemy is forging weapons against us... the Bible basically guarantees that will happen to all of us. But these attacks that were designed by our enemy to destroy us and crush our spirits are the same tools that the Lord will repurpose in our lives to unlock our greatest victories. The cross that was intended to silence Christ was the very weapon used to change the world, so let's not allow the presence of these enemy attacks to discourage us. Let's pick up the very same tools that were crafted to break us down and turn them into the powerful testimony that we will use to overcome the darkness with His marvelous light.

"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me," says the Lord.
Isaiah 54:17

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.
Revelation 12:11

Day 20: Halo's Energy Sword - A Weapon Designed for “Close Quarters Combat”

While the Covenant energy sword in Halo is an incredibly powerful weapon that can quickly shift the tide of any battle in the right hands, it does contain a built-in limitation... it is exclusively designed for close-quarters combat. To be effective, the player can't simply hide in a safe position far away from the battlefield and throw it at people from across the map. They must be willing to get up close and personal in the heat of the battle to make an impact. While unselfishly placing ourselves in harm's way involves a great deal of risk, these trenches where the fiercest battles are fought are where victories are won.

In our daily battles against spiritual darkness, our “sword” wasn't designed to do damage from a distance... it was built to bring hope to the hopeless in their moment of need by shining His light in the deepest and most active part of the battlefield. Acting as the hands and feet of Christ on this planet isn't something we can accomplish if we're unwilling to get our hands a little dirty in the process, and His most critical assignments will rarely take place within our comfort zones. Let's embrace the reason that the Lord equipped us with a sword in the first place... to do the work of Christ in the places where He is needed the most with boldness, fulfilling our mission to use our sword to break chains and set captives free.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Ephesians 6:12-13

Day 21: An “Always Present Help” ... If We Choose to Accept It

While the original Halo trilogy primarily focuses on the exploits of the Master Chief, the truth is he wouldn't have made it very far if he didn't have the voice of Cortana in his helmet to guide him along the way. Even the most powerful Spartan in the universe needed the support of someone who was LITERALLY in his head, helping him achieve mission objectives that he never could have accomplished on his own. Cortana consistently reminded him of his priorities, helped him avoid hidden traps, unlocked doors he couldn't open, and provided access to information he didn't possess... and because he chose to listen to her guiding voice, they were an unstoppable team.

We aren't alone in our missions in life, either... if we have chosen to follow Christ, we have been given the gift of constant access to the very Spirit of God dwelling inside of us to provide us with “in the moment” guidance in every situation we face. And if we choose to place His written word into our minds, His Spirit in us will even bring it to our remembrance in our moments of need. But He can't answer questions that we don't choose to ask or remind us of words we've never read... so before we start our missions today let's absorb His word into our hearts as well as intentionally keep the lines of communication open for His wisdom in all we do. Help is just a prayer away.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.
John 14:26

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.
Colossians 3:16

Day 22:

Master Chief's Limited Dialogue - Watching our Words

The Master Chief carried the weight of saving the entire universe on his shoulders, so he is never found wasting his limited time or his even more limited words engaging in pointless arguments or unproductive disputes. But being a man of few words has some pretty valuable benefits... rather than expending his energy participating in lengthy dialogue trees that don't resolve any of the conflicts surrounding him, he ignored the comments of others and focused on completing his mission. And because the Chief demonstrated restraint in what he chose to say and when he chose to say it, it added greater meaning and value to his words when he chose to speak.

Thanks to all our modern technology, the ability to communicate with each other across the entire planet has never been greater... but to our shame, we often use these gifts to engage in pointless, divisive arguments with others that only diminish the value of our words and distract us from our actual mission. Christ didn't waste His limited time engaging in petty verbal conflicts, so let's follow His example and avoid the pitfall of engaging in unproductive conversations that are often fueled by anger rather than guided by His Spirit to share His truth in compassion and love. Harsh words (even when true) spoken without mercy and grace doesn't save souls... love does.

*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
Proverbs 15:1*

*But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.
And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.
2 Timothy 2:23-25*

Day 23:

Halo's Transition from Bungie to 343 Studios - Missing the "Creator's" Touch

The original Halo games that were crafted by Bungie are widely regarded as not only the high points in the series, but rank among some of the best video game experiences of their generation... unfortunately, the campaigns developed by Microsoft's 343 studios after Bungie's departure haven't achieved the same level of success. While the recent titles in the series continue the original story, feature the same characters, and even possess many new and impressive technical enhancements, the original "creator's touch" is clearly absent from these releases... no matter how hard they try, we can all tell that these games were not made by the original team. Nobody knows Halo better than the hands that lovingly designed this franchise in the first place.

No matter how well intended our efforts are in the activities we take on in life, the Lord simply cannot bless what He didn't originate. As our Creator, He designed us with a specific destiny in mind, and only what we build on His foundation will last, both on this planet and in eternity. Rather than waste our time and efforts on pursuits that only advance self-serving goals, let's prayerfully align our intentions, words, and actions with His divine purposes in all that we do. The Lord will always bless and protect the work of our hands when we build on His unbreakable foundation.

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

Psalms 127:1

Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.

Proverbs 16:3

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

Matthew 7:24-26

Day 24:

Halo's "Brutes" - A Case Study in Controlling our Anger

The "Brutes" that were introduced in Halo 2 are an interesting character study, demonstrating a nuanced battle strategy that can make them quite difficult to take down... until you learn the secret of disrupting their tactics.

While they utilize ranged weapons incredibly effectively and take cover like a disciplined soldier under normal circumstances, if you can pop their helmet off with a well-placed shot, they will abandon sound reasoning and enter "berserker" mode. Once they are "enraged" in this manner, they lose all sense of battlefield perspective and begin recklessly pursuing the individual that caused it, making them much easier to outsmart and defeat.

In the battleground of our minds, the enemy of our souls would like nothing more than to push us into acting from a place of rage and frustration than with the mind of Christ... and if we aren't careful, we can easily mistake our anger and passion as a form of "holy zeal". The battles we are called to fight on the behalf of the Lord will never require us to operate outside of His principles of peace, gentleness, and mercy, and the temptation to engage in these conflicts while "enraged" will never generate the righteousness of Christ. Fighting fire with fire is a fool's errand... let's keep our helmet of salvation fully secured today so His wisdom can prevail in our minds.

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James 1:19-20

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James 3:17-18

Day 25:

Master Chief and the Arbiter - Putting our Disagreements Aside to Focus on the REAL Enemy

One of the most surprising moments in the entire Halo series was when both the Master Chief and the Arbiter found themselves captured by the hive mind behind the flood, the “Gravemind”. In that moment, these hostile adversaries came to the realization that there was a much greater threat to their existence than the disagreements that brought them to this moment of clarity... the activation of the Halo rings that would result in the destruction of every life form in the universe. The bitter war they had waged against each other had to be put behind them so they could work together and battle the true enemy that had manipulated both of them into this position of division, and by choosing to move forward in unity, they accomplished the mission that neither of them could have achieved without the other.

As long as humans walk this earth, we will find areas of disagreement to divide us, but our battles are NOT with flesh and blood... they're with demonic principalities that set us against each other with a mission of destroying us all. With our TRUE spiritual enemy in mind, let's align our hearts with the true mission of Christ, not the petty conflicts that are designed to distract us with smaller battles while we lose the war for souls. He came to seek and save, and if we are truly following Him, that's our priority today, too.

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:31-32

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

Day 26:

The Needler - A “Thorn in the Flesh” that Leads us to Grace

The “Needler” in Halo may not pack the same punch as a shotgun or a rocket launcher, but its’ ordnance is capable of defeating even the most powerful Spartan because of one devastating detail... the needles track and attach themselves to their target and then explode, draining their protective energy shield and leaving the victim vulnerable for a follow-up attack. Getting stuck by one lone needle typically represents a short-term irritation that can be easily shaken off, but there is typically more where that came from... and as the Needler rains down a “death by a thousand cuts”, these small annoyances can quickly turn into a fatal disruption for any of us.

In my life, I’ve found that it isn’t necessarily the big problems that pull me away from the Lord... those tend to push me directly into His arms for His support. Instead, it’s the small, daily irritants of chronic pain, work stress, or household tasks that slowly weaken my connection with Christ and leave me feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable to the most basic of enemy attacks. These needles that serve as “thorns in the flesh” can be easy to underestimate and difficult to appreciate, but we shouldn’t ignore them or resent them. Instead, let’s recognize them as reminders of our need for the Lord’s grace throughout our day... and when a needle hits, let’s stop and recharge our shields.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Day 27:

The Warthog: Different Gifts to Serve Unique Roles

Driving the Warthog in Halo all by yourself works just fine if you are trying to enjoy a nice, leisurely cruise around the installation, but if you are trying to take down an enemy stronghold it sure helps to have a support partner manning the turret. The Warthog has room for three for a reason... it was designed for cooperation across multiple different functions. A stationary player in the turret is a sitting duck who won't get very far on their own, and a lone driver without support will quickly find themselves stranded behind enemy lines, sitting next to a useless flaming pile of metal that no longer resembles a vehicle. Operated individually, the turret is exposed to enemy fire, and the driver is ineffective at advancing the objective, but when partnered together they are unstoppable.

There are no "lone wolves" in the body of Christ, and seeking to accomplish His purposes without working in tandem with the rest of the body will leave us feeling alone, overwhelmed, frustrated, and ineffective.

Some are called to minister with words or songs, others will use their platforms to share those messages, and the entire body will put those words into action in their daily lives to truly advance the cause of Christ on this planet. Let's each operate in our God-given roles with excellence and gratitude today... every role is essential, and none work without each other.

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.

Romans 12:4-6b

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

1 Corinthians 3:6-8

Day 28: The Plasma Pistol - Waiting or Charging Up?

The Covenant plasma pistol is often one of the most underrated weapons in the Halo series because it is the one that is most frequently used incorrectly. While its' basic setting can be used to rapidly fire off small pulses of energy, they aren't very powerful compared to the larger options available in the armory. But when it has been patiently charged for maximum effectiveness, one blast will completely decimate a full energy shield and even stop vehicles dead in their tracks. Firing it impatiently only generates a lot of noise without making much of an impact... but in the hands of a patient gamer who understands how to wield it properly, it is a total gamechanger.

Waiting for the Lord to act on my prayers is not always easy but trying to take matters into my own hands rather than patiently resting in faith is about as useful as rapidly firing a plasma pistol at an incoming Banshee. As excruciating as it can be to wait, it is the combination of our faith in His promises as well as our patience with His timing that results in us seeing the largest mountains in our lives move. Let's endure our current waiting season in life with the confidence of a Spartan wielding a fully charged plasma pistol... the Lord is never too early or too late, and as we stand firm in our faith, we'll find that we aren't just sitting and waiting for Him to act. We are charging up.

But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.
Isaiah 40:31

The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.
Lamentations 3:25-26

Day 29: Completing the Campaign is Just the Beginning

The first time I played through the original Halo, I started the single-player campaign under normal difficulty and simply followed the story through to its' conclusion... but that was only the beginning of my relationship with the game. If I stopped there, I would've missed the depth of what has made this series a defining experience for me in many ways. From playing the game cooperatively and conquering the Legendary difficulty setting, seeking out and finding all the hidden skulls, and of course the multiplayer matches that kept me coming back for more, my completion of the core campaign was only the beginning. There was so much more to explore, and the deepest rewards only reveal themselves to the most diligent and committed seekers.

While Christ's work on the cross has offered all of us forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with the Father, our acceptance of this gift is only the beginning of our lifelong pursuit of seeking and finding God. We are called to grow in our faith, continually building a deeper relationship with the Lord by studying and applying His written words, speaking to Him intentionally throughout the day in prayer, and purposefully participating with our fellow members in the body of Christ. His richest treasures are only revealed to those who dig the deepest, so let's actively seek Him every day.

And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Day 30: Answering Halo's Real Question - What Would the Master Chief Do?

While each title in the original Halo trilogy has a small amount of exploration in it, the central storyline remains a linear experience. If we want to make progress, we must take on the missions and perform the actions that Master Chief has been assigned to do. Sure, we have the flexibility to either walk or pilot a vehicle to get to our destination and pick up a shotgun instead of a battle rifle, but at the end of the day we're all still following the predetermined path John-117 was designed for. It may seem limiting that we don't get to select what he says or how he saves the day, but that is kind of the point... this isn't our story, it's HIS. The fate of the universe is at stake, so the game doesn't give us an option to do things our own way. The only question it allows us to answer is "What would the Master Chief do"?

The choice to accept the gift of Christ's grace and follow Him places our feet on a path that is no longer about pursuing our own will, desires, or preferences. If truly we want to see His will done on this planet and experience the fullness of His blessings in our lives, we must do it His way and live our lives on His terms. While it may feel reductive or simplistic to ask, "What would Jesus do?" before each word we say or action we take, those are the guidelines for today's missions... because there's only one way to save the world.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

Final Fantasy

Day 1:

One Unique Tapestry Made Up of Many Different Stories

The Final Fantasy franchise is one of the longest-running gaming series in history, and while there are a handful of stories that have received a spin-off or a proper prequel/sequel, most of the games have very little in common with each other... at least on the surface. Almost every game in this collection features their own specific protagonist, takes place on different planets, and even has unique styles of gameplay. But they also share many similarities despite their unconnected plots, as each tends to feature some sort of “mana” to power special abilities, many include a “Cid” somewhere, and the story usually involves an eclectic cast of characters coming together to save their world. They are all part of one “family” of games, even if they each tell separate stories.

When reading the Bible, it can be challenging to balance the wisdom and beauty of the Psalms and Proverbs with the bitterness and heartache of Ecclesiastes and Jeremiah. But the truth is that ALL of Scripture is inspired by the Lord, and that includes the parts that we don’t like or fully understand. Each story is part of an intricate tapestry... a series of books and letters written by multiple people that may seem to have little in common, but all of which share the same Author. And when they are combined, they form one timeless love letter from our Savior to us all.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.
Luke 24:27

Day 2: Final Fantasy IX - A Surprising Direction for a Unique Progression

After the well-received adventures of the grittier and brooding protagonists of Final Fantasy VII (Cloud) and Final Fantasy VIII (Squall), the developers of Final Fantasy IX went in an entirely different creative direction for the next game in the series. The story of Zidane and his crew felt like a throwback to the games from the cartridge-based Nintendo era both in tone as well as in art style. While the initial reactions to this shift were mixed, FFIIX provided fans with the perfect breath of fresh air for the Final Fantasy franchise as it transitioned into the PlayStation 2 era. It may not have felt like a logical progression for the series at that time, but it was exactly what was needed.

The ways that the Lord chooses to answer our prayers in life will rarely fit into a predictable pattern. Even when Jesus performed healings for those who were afflicted with blindness or born lame, He chose to perform each of those miracles in ways that were customized to the individual recipient... and to this day He still responds to our requests based on the specific needs of each of His unique children. Instead of expecting Him to answer our prayers in the same way that He has for others or in a manner that makes sense to us, let's accept that the Lord may choose to respond to our situation in a different way... one we didn't know we needed until His work is completed.

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts".

Isaiah 55:8-9

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

1 John 5:14-15

Day 3:

Final Fantasy VII - Moving Forward from a Painful Loss

There are a handful of moments in gaming history that are forever etched in my memory for being undeniably shocking and painfully unforgettable... and (spoiler alert) the sudden ending of Aerith's journey at the conclusion of disc one in Final Fantasy VII stands as one of the most prominent. While this is hardly the first time (or the last time) that I experienced a gaming character "moving on", this one hit especially hard because of how unnecessary it felt at the time. But despite my disappointment at this unwanted plot twist, there were still two more discs left to complete... while this action couldn't be prevented or undone, after respectfully mourning her loss, it was time for me to move forward in hope and finish the story.

Throughout our lives, we will all be faced with tragic events that threaten to steal our hope, break our spirits, and stall our journey. And while it is right for us to pause and mourn these losses, they don't represent the conclusion of our story... just the end of this "disc". As King David found when he was praying through a heartbreaking tragedy of his own, our loving Father sees and catches every tear that we cry... and even though He doesn't always intervene the way we would prefer or reverse what has happened, the Lord has at least two more discs of content for us as well as an ending that will make this all worth it.

*You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?
Psalm 56:8*

*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.
Revelation 21:4*

Day 4: Final Fantasy - “Dissidia” or Harmony?

While most traditional role-playing games tend to utilize a “party” system that involves an eclectic cast of characters, the Final Fantasy series has certainly demonstrated some exceptional range. From brooding protagonists like Cloud who had little to say to enthusiastic lead characters like Tidus who can’t seem to keep a single thought private, each game is filled with a selection of classic RPG archetypes like a soldier or a healer as well as a few unique choices like a robot cat or a big red lion. But this incredible diversity is one of the franchise’s greatest strengths, understanding that we don’t need copies of each character in our party. We need each of them to be exactly who they are, combining their unique gifts and skill sets together to deliver victory as a team.

The body of Christ is full of an equally unique cast of characters, with each of us gifted in specific ways so we can serve Him in different capacities on this mission field. Just as a Final Fantasy party isn’t complete without each member serving a complimentary role that supports the needs of the squad, our differences are what the Lord uses to grow our ability to reach others and complete our mission. Let’s work together with respect for each other’s calling and gifts, even if some serve Him in a different manner than us. We are all part of one body, united by Christ to reach the world.

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

1 Corinthians 12:15-18

Day 5: Small Beginnings, Big Endings

Like most game series that have survived from their original 8-bit NES incarnations into the modern era of photo-realistic graphics, Final Fantasy has come a VERY long way. When this franchise first started in all its original pixel-based glory, nobody would have ever imagined it would grow over the years and transformed into some of the most graphically impressive games of each console generation. But while the dream was always there, the graphical capabilities of the hardware didn't exist to fully realize that vision until now... and now that the technology has finally caught up with the imagination of the team, we get to experience these stories in all the fullness of the design team's intentions.

The Lord places dreams and desires in our hearts for us to fulfill them, but there is still a growing period we must experience before His vision will reach fruition. Just as Joseph grew his character and his leadership skills in his roles as a servant and a prisoner before he was elevated to his destiny as second in command of Egypt, the Lord builds each of us up slowly... not because He is testing us, but because He is TRAINING us. His plan for us requires our "hardware" to catch up to our calling, so let's embrace each challenge we face as a part of growing into His larger destiny for us. These small beginnings have big endings.

I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.

Exodus 23:29-30

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.

Zechariah 4:10a

Day 6:

Final Fantasy X: The Most Dangerous Deception of All

Final Fantasy X is one of my personal favorites in the franchise for many different reasons, but the awareness level of Tidus, the game's protagonist, is NOT one of those reasons. Throughout the game, it became obvious to every character EXCEPT for him that he was not who or where he thought he was, but rather than accept the truth of what was right in front of his eyes he continued along in a blissfully oblivious state until his reality could no longer be ignored. While Tidus still ultimately served his purpose to sacrificially save the world despite the ramifications this held for him personally, he could've saved himself a lot of heartache along the way if he had simply been willing to open his eyes to the truth.

While there are many forms of deception that I've grappled with in my life, the most dangerous and costly has been self-deception. My stubborn refusal to follow the Lord's clearly stated will for me because it was inconvenient for me to accept at the time has always ended badly and caused so much unnecessary pain. While I won't always like or appreciate the mirror His Word holds up to my face, He challenges our thoughts and motives to reveal truth and prevent future pain. Let's open our eyes to His guidance for us that we might prefer to ignore... His unpopular answers are for both our present as well as our eternal good.

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness".
1 Corinthians 3:18-19

He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside; and he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"
Isaiah 44:20

Day 7:

Final Fantasy X and Blitzball: A Matter of Discipline

This is going to be a mildly controversial take... as much as I loved almost everything about playing Final Fantasy X, I never enjoyed ANY aspect of the Blitzball matches. My original excitement to participate in what looked like a thrilling new form of soccer in the cutscenes disappeared quickly once the match started, and participating in them felt more like a chore than a fun break from the story. The rules were confusing, player movement was annoying, and even all of my years of playing and enjoying traditional sports titles didn't give me an advantage in this turn-based mini-game. But if I wanted to unlock the rewards that were exclusively earned by enduring this challenge successfully, I had to take the time to learn and strengthen skills that weren't intuitive to me.

While there are certainly aspects of following Christ that may come easily to us, there are also parts that are challenging and require a higher degree of discipline to maintain. For some, prayer feels more natural than it does for others... and for those who already enjoy the act of reading, studying the Bible may come a little easier. Some show and share His love with ease, and others must work a little harder at it. Let's invest our time today into spiritual exercises that build up the areas that aren't part of our natural gifts or interests... it's the only way to 100% completion.

I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:27

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2

Day 8:

Exclusive Rewards Reserved for the Most Diligent Seekers

There are two types of Final Fantasy players in the world... there are those who choose to simply play the games and enjoy the story, and then there are those hardcore fans who painstakingly search high and low for every little secret, unlock all of the hidden summons, find and defeat each optional boss, and then ride off into the sunset on a rare Golden Chocobo at 100% completion. While each game in the series is designed to be completed by fans of any skill level, its' grandest prizes are reserved for those who put in the work and dedicate themselves to seeking out the game's greatest treasures... and only these fans get to experience its' most exclusive endings.

The Lord has made His mercy and grace fully accessible to every soul who has chosen to seek Him, but He has reserved His greatest rewards for those seeking out the fullness of His hidden wisdom and knowledge that isn't discovered by mere causal exploration. He can be searched for and found by every one of His children, but only those who invest the additional time and apply themselves to seeking a deeper relationship with Him find His richest treasures both in this life AND in the life to come. Let's make it our mission to truly pursue the Lord in our prayer and Bible study times today... His most diligent seekers unlock a bounty of rewards beyond our imagination.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13

Day 9:

Final Fantasy VII - Sephiroth and the Dangers of Misguided Convictions

There may not be a more iconic villain in all of gaming than Sephiroth, the antagonist of Final Fantasy VII. Interestingly, he was once a fellow soldier... an ally who transformed from appearing to be an angel of light into a sinister agent of darkness. What made Sephiroth such a dangerous and lethal adversary was not just his strength... he was sincerely convinced that his path was the correct one, and he was willing to go to any length to bring it to pass. But he was deceived... despite how sincerely and thoroughly convicted he was that his way was the only way to cure his planet, he was still sincerely wrong. Sephiroth's path would only lead to destruction.

In His time on earth, Jesus directly challenged the opinions and convictions of all who chose to follow Him, and any belief that ran contrary to His message, no matter how sincerely held, was rejected. Christ's messages were full of love and hope, but the standards of love and hope that He shared are far above our self-serving, misguided interpretations of them. All that we read or hear, no matter how convincing the messenger is, must be held up to the light of the complete Word of God so we can separate the truth from the lies and personal views of others. The words of our enemy, even when they come from a mouth that we trust, are designed to deceive, mislead and destroy... only His Word carries the full truth.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.
Proverbs 14:12

Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.
1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.
2 Corinthians 11:14

Day 10: Final Fantasy IV and the Transformation of Cecil

At the heart of most of my favorite Final Fantasy games is a love story... two individuals who have been brought together by an incredible set of circumstances to save the world, and in the process of finding their purpose in life they find the love of their life as well. But their love wouldn't amount to much if they each went back to their previous status quo after experiencing it. Real love compels them to grow as individuals and replace their previous selfish motivations with a desire to become the best version of themselves. This love doesn't simply bring them together as a couple... the development of their relationship is a parallel path, perfectly intertwining their larger mission with their personal journeys of growth.

The Lord loves us beyond our comprehension, and His great love for us compelled Him to come and die for us to save us. He has invited all of us to "come as we are", but He loves us too much to let us stay what we were. His love is a free gift, but receiving it starts the process of transforming us into who we were always meant to be. When we authentically experience His love in our lives, our hearts reciprocate His love in our obedience to Him and defines how we treat others going forward. Love isn't something we say, it's something we SHOW... let's actively demonstrate the presence of Christ's love in our lives today.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.
John 3:16-17

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.
1 John 5:2-3

Day 11: Final Fantasy XIII - One Cohesive Story Told in Parts

Since most of the titles in the Final Fantasy series are not connected to each other, they typically contain one complete story with a beginning and an ending... but not Final Fantasy XIII. FFXIII was notable for being designed and released as a trilogy, with each game representing one unique chapter of Lightning's journey. While every entry in the series was developed by the same studio, it still took multiple people working on it in different capacities to bring it to completion. If someone played only one chapter without playing the rest, her story would feel incomplete and wouldn't make much sense. But when played out across all three acts, her narrative comes together as one cohesive experience and even the hardest-to-understand parts of her story finally have context.

The collection of writings we call "the Bible" may have been written by multiple different individuals across thousands of years, but they all share one common "Author" and combine to tell the story of God's plan to reach out and save His wayward children. When Scriptures are taken out of their surrounding context or aren't read in connection to the entire message, they can be confusing at best or misinterpreted at worst. The Lord has revealed His truth to us across each and every verse, and when taken together even the hard parts come together to tell one cohesive story.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.
Romans 15:4

And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.
2 Peter 3:15-16

Day 12:

Final Fantasy X - Tidus and the Importance of our Words

Most of the games in the Final Fantasy series do a fantastic job building scenes where the musical score sets the perfect mood for the dialogue that is coming next... but all that beautiful ambience can be quickly shattered by a character like Tidus who seems to immediately insert his foot into his mouth as soon as he gets the chance to speak. While the environment helps set the tone for what comes next, it is what the characters choose to say (or not say) in these moments that makes them memorable for the right reasons or the wrong ones. Dialogue choices can make the entire experience come together or fall apart, and just one errant statement can change it all.

The words that we choose to say, write, and share throughout our day matter... regardless of our intentions, what we choose to communicate either serves to build up the kingdom of the Lord or brings shame to it. The world has never had as many options as we currently possess to share our thoughts with others around the world in real time... with all this incredible power and opportunity, what is it that we are choosing to say? The Lord has given each of us a platform to speak on His behalf and allow His voice to be heard through us, so let's choose our words carefully and use our voices responsibly. What we say will resonate far longer than we may realize.

*Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles.
Proverbs 21:23*

*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.
Ephesians 4:29*

*But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.
Matthew 12:36*

Day 13:

Final Fantasy Dialogue - Seeking a “Fresh Word” When We’ve Already Been Told What to Do

The characters in Final Fantasy tend to have a lot of unique things to say, so when they start repeating the exact same lines of dialogue, I know that is the game’s way of politely informing me that I need to go ahead and do what they are telling me to do. If I want to move the narrative forward and hear them say something different, I will have to complete the last objective that I was given... otherwise, they will just keep reminding me that the last thing they asked me to do is a prerequisite that can’t be skipped, ignored, or postponed. The game isn’t going to offer me new guidance simply because I keep asking for it... if I want to continue progressing in my adventure, it’s time to complete the last instruction I received.

Many times in my prayer life, I reach out to the Lord seeking guidance on what I should do next... but if His response isn’t what I wanted to hear, I wait and check back with Him later to see if He has a different answer (spoiler alert: He doesn’t). The Lord never changes, so while His plans for each of us are unique, they aren’t flexible. Rather than exhausting ourselves chasing a “fresh word” from the Lord that validates what we would prefer to do, let’s listen and be obedient to what He has already told us to do. Sometimes in life we are waiting on God for an answer, but if we haven’t followed His last instruction, He is waiting on us.

Also the Glory of Israel will not lie nor change His mind; for He is not a man, that He would change His mind.

1 Samuel 15:29

And the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward.”

Exodus 14:15

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

Day 14: “Amnesiac Protagonists” - Becoming a New Creation in Christ

“Amnesiac protagonists” are a pretty common trope in video games, and it’s one that the Final Fantasy series has successfully employed many times. Our gaming avatar is just as unfamiliar with their previous choices as we are, and because of this “fresh start” we can both embark on these adventures as an entirely new page in their stories. Sure, we may run into others who still remember who they were before and hold a grudge against them as a result... but even if that is who we WERE, it isn’t who we are NOW. We are becoming someone new, and we can’t allow the way that others see us get in the way of fulfilling the glorious purpose we are burdened with now.

We all have a past, and for most of us it contains actions and choices that we wish we could forget. But in His infinite grace and mercy, the Lord gives all of His repentant children a new beginning so we can all move forward from the sins of our past and fulfill the destiny He designed for us free of the regret and shame that we once carried. We may still deal with some ramifications from our old lives from time to time, but that person isn’t who we are anymore... in our Heavenly Father’s eyes we are a brand-new creation. Since He has chosen not to remember any of our old sins, it’s time for us to forget them as well. He deliberately picked broken vessels like us to save His world.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Psalms 103:10-12

For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.

Hebrews 8:12

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Day 15: The Importance of “Save Points”

Final Fantasy games aren’t designed to be played through to completion in a single session... each title in the series contains a lengthy campaign that takes dozens of hours to play through before reaching its conclusion. To support players with playing the game through to completion, each mission is broken up into multiple “save points” that requires the player to intentionally stop what they are doing, find a save location, and save their progress. Sure, it’s inconvenient to stop what we’re doing to track down a save point instead of simply pressing forward, but this break in the action also forces us to intentionally pause and take time to heal, regroup, restock, and re-enter the battlefield in a better position than before.

In our real-world lives it is equally critical that we take the time to intentionally “pause our game” at multiple points in our daily missions, find a quiet “save point”, and spend some time regrouping in prayer with the Lord. Just as it would take a very reckless gamer to play a Final Fantasy game to the end without stopping to save, we only make an already challenging task more difficult by proceeding without praying continually for His guidance. Trying to play today’s game of life in our own strength is a fool’s errand... it’s only when we consciously bring the Lord into every aspect of our day that we make progress worth saving.

*Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things,
which you do not know.
Jeremiah 33:3*

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is
the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Day 16: Final Fantasy x Kingdom Hearts: A Collaboration that Requires Full Integration

The Kingdom Hearts series may be the “Reese’s peanut butter cups” of the video game world now, but there was a time that the serious nature of the Final Fantasy games getting mixed up with the slapstick antics of Mickey Mouse and his pals seemed doomed to fail. How could two franchises that could not have been more different merge to become one of the most celebrated series in all of gaming? It’s because both properties seamlessly combined to form something new... not as two separate entities trying to coexist in one game, but as one unified experience where both were so intertwined that we couldn’t even tell where one stopped and the other one started.

Jesus didn’t just come to earth to provide us with forgiveness for our sins...

He came to begin a relationship with each of us that would make us an entirely new creation. He isn’t an ingredient that we can simply add into our daily routine... abundant life with Christ means fully integrating Him into every aspect of our homes, hobbies, relationships, work, and school.

The Lord isn’t interested in merely renting space in our hearts, He is seeking to be so intertwined in our every thought and action that there isn’t a place where we stop and His kingdom starts. Our walk with Christ isn’t a part-time collaboration, it’s a whole new way of living life... hand-in-hand with Him.

For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.

Luke 17:21b

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

John 15:4

Day 17: Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles - Volunteering to “Carry the Bucket”

If you never got to play Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles on the Nintendo GameCube with your friends in multiplayer mode, you missed out on a truly unique experience. Up to four players would come together and work as a team to save their world from the poisonous Miasma that was killing it, and the only way for the entire group to safely proceed through it was for a member of the team to actively carry the chalice of myrrh that would provide protection for those underneath its' cover. While three players were jubilantly hacking and slashing their way through the level, one team member had to be willing to literally carry this bucket so the entire team would remain protected during their journey. Sure, volunteering to be the one to “carry the bucket” certainly wasn't fun, but choosing to act as a covering for others rarely is.

As followers of Christ, we have a responsibility to give His forgiveness as freely as we have received it, and during our adventures there will be many times we will need to “carry the bucket” and act as a healing covering for our fellow explorers. Stepping in and placing an undeserved covering over the heads of those who have made mistakes that harmed us and others will rarely come easily or “feel fair”, but forgiveness isn't something to be earned... it is something we are instructed to give. Let's pick up the bucket and be a healer today.

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”

1 Peter 4:8

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32

He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.

Proverbs 17:9

Day 18:

Prioritizing the “Fantasy” or the Things that are “Final”?

If you could take one item from the universe of all the Final Fantasy games and possess it in real life, what would it be? Would it be Zach’s iconic, larger-than-life Buster Sword? Or how about an epic ride like Cloud’s motorcycle Fenrir or perhaps a Golden Chocobo of your very own? My personal temptation would be to possess an epic head of hair the way most of the game’s protagonists do, as I sure wouldn’t mind having a head full of long, luxurious hair blowing in the breeze. The desire will be different for each of us, but the concept is still the same... no matter what we have, there will always be something else that we wish we had.

The desire to improve our situation in life isn’t inherently wrong, and several times in the Bible we are specifically told to come to the Lord with all our requests. But if we aren’t careful, our prayer life can quickly become a “shopping list” full of temporary items that we’re prioritizing over things of eternal significance. It is true that every good gift comes to us from the Father, but just as the items we receive in Final Fantasy are provided to help us advance the story, the gifts He supplies are meant to be used to complete our respective missions from Him. Once the game is over, the items themselves won’t matter... only what we did with them will. Let’s pray for what we need AND for the wisdom to know how He wants us to use it.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-2

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Matthew 6:33-34

Day 19: Stepping Out Onto the Water

Most of my Final Fantasy experiences start out the same way... I spend a few hours learning who I am and how to play the game, meet some new friends who join me on my journey, travel to a few different places to get a sense of the world I am trying to save, and then the story finally kicks into high gear. At this point in the story, I have two options... I can either keep hanging around the nice, safe beginner areas occupied by simple enemies and repetitive battles, or I can press forward into the unknown where the deeper challenges are found. Sure, those quiet oases are nice to return to from time to time, but nothing new happens there... the game doesn't truly start until we start fighting the battles that matter.

The truth about our calling from the Lord is that His missions for us will rarely involve chilling on our couch or hanging out in our places of deepest personal comfort. Spiritual growth only comes from the challenges that press us farther than we had planned on walking and into deeper waters than we had hoped to swim in. The Lord isn't looking to do new things in the same old places; He is calling us out of our comfort zones and into the places where the real battles are being fought and the most meaningful victories are won. Let's take that first uncomfortable step out of the boat and follow His voice out onto the water today.

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:12-14

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it?
Isaiah 43:18-19

Day 20:

Final Fantasy IV - Cecil's "Re-class" and Ripping Off the Labels from our Past

While each entry in the Final Fantasy series is notable for different reasons, FFIV truly broke its own rules by allowing the protagonist Cecil to "switch classes" during the game. While every lead character tends to undergo growth during the story, Cecil's switch from a Black Knight to a Paladin flipped the entire narrative right in the middle of the plot. While there were still some who mistrusted him and doubted his "conversion",

Cecil did more than "talk the talk" ... he walked the walk and chose a different path from the label he wore at the beginning of the game. Sure, he was originally part of some bad stuff, but he didn't give his past labels the power to choose his fate.

Sometimes the ugly labels we are given in life are unearned, but for many of our "heroes" in the Bible they are unfortunately accurate... thieves, liars, murderers, adulterers, and more. But in His infinite and incomparable mercy, the Lord gives even the most villainous knight an opportunity for more than a mere redemptive arc... He offers a full rebirth and a new destiny as these individuals became patriarchs, kings, apostles, and more. No matter who we once were or the labels that we've previously worn, the

Lord chose us for who we'd become in Him. He called us out of the darkness of our past so we could walk confidently in His light, so let's rip that old label off once and for all.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Day 21: Final Fantasy XII - Random Battles or Necessary Encounters?

While each entry in the Final Fantasy series has its' own unique twist, Final Fantasy XII stands out as the first title in the mainline series to fully do away with "random battles" ... something the series is pretty well known for. Being able to see the dangers we were about to face and make a choice to either avoid them or engage them was certainly convenient, but if we wanted to grow our skills and complete our missions these battles still had to be fought. The only difference was that we were now able to anticipate and prepare for these encounters in advance... these events were no longer happening TO us, they were occurring with our acceptance of both their inevitability as well as their importance to the rest of our story.

In life, the challenges we face and the attacks we endure often feel like "random battles" that pop up for no apparent reason other than to slow down our progress or cause us pain... and if we could see them coming in advance, we'd most likely avoid them altogether. While these "pop-up" battles are unwanted, our enemy's attacks serve a critical purpose in building our character and pressing us forward in ways we wouldn't have chosen but couldn't achieve otherwise. Rather than resent these trials or question God on why He is permitting them to occur, let's embrace their presence with joy... it means we are growing.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

1 Peter 4:12-13

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

James 1:2-3

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

Day 22:

Final Fantasy - The Spirits Within or Advent Children?

The Final Fantasy franchise has delivered two unique cinematic adventures over the years... the well-received Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children and the decidedly less successful Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within. While both animated films were visually stunning and had the benefit of carrying the Final Fantasy name, only one of them resonated with their fan base while the other went down in flames... and it's easy to see why. Advent Children was authentically connected to the franchise that they owed their name to and represented a continuation of that relationship, while Spirits Within carried the name "Final Fantasy" but lacked an actual connection.

When we call ourselves followers of Christ or "Christians", this title comes with an expectation... an expectation that we can only fulfill if we remain in an intentionally connected state with the Lord throughout our day.

Being a "Christian" doesn't mean that we will always do everything perfectly, but it DOES mean that the authenticity of our relationship with Him should always shine through in all we that we choose to say and do. Let's represent Him today in more than just name alone... we are called to act as the continuation of His mission to seek and save the lost, love and heal the hurting, and forgive and restore those in need by carrying His Spirit within us to the world.

*He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.
1 Corinthians 6:17*

*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.
John 15:4-5*

Day 23: Hope, Faith, and Getting Answers to our Prayers

The Final Fantasy series has never shied away from the “fantasy” part of the title, packing their games full of seeming paradoxes like the massive boats that sail through the air instead of the sea, giant chickens that happen to be the fastest land animals around, and of course the ridiculously oversized swords that look stylish and fun but are completely impractical for combat (or even just carrying around). But the artists and developers behind these design choices decided to move past the previous interpretations and perceived limitations of these items and instead allowed what they believed to be possible in these virtual realms to guide them into bringing them to life.

There is a massive difference between “hoping” that the Lord will act on our behalf and truly “believing” in faith that He will do something that is beyond our previous experience. While our Heavenly Father is not a vending machine, He has instructed us to bring Him all our requests in full faith that He can and will answer them. The Lord can do far more than we could ever imagine, but He still chooses to answer our prayers in direct correlation with the depth of our faith. There isn’t anything that is too hard for Him, only things that are difficult for us to believe. Let’s ask Him in faith for what we need today... He specializes in doing the impossible.

*Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”
Mark 9:23*

*Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?
Jeremiah 32:27*

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.
Hebrews 11:1,3*

Day 24: Turn-Based Strategies in a Real-Time Battle

While there are over a dozen entries and rising in the mainline Final Fantasy franchise, the way players engage in combat comes down to two basic concepts... the slower, turn-based style made popular in the original titles and the faster-paced, active-time battle systems used in the more modern releases. While both systems of play have their merits, the truth is that it is not terribly realistic for adversaries to stand and patiently wait while we juggle inventory, set up attacks, and formulate strategies. Villains don't tend to take breaks, and they don't typically give them out in the middle of battle so their opponent can regroup and adjust their tactics, either.

While it would be nice if the daily challenges we face in life would line up, take turns, and politely wait for us to make our selections from a menu of available choices, that isn't how this battlefield works. We are facing an enemy who knows his time is short on this planet and he isn't going to make any part of this easy for us... but even though our adversary comes in like a flood to overwhelm us, we serve a God who never sleeps and is actively with us through every trial we face. Let's surrender all our anxieties and give Him total control over each part of the battle we are in today. He never lets His child fight alone... and if we listen to Him, He will guide each step we take.

Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul would soon have settled in silence. If I say, "My foot slips," Your mercy, O Lord, will hold me up. In the multitude of my anxieties within me, Your comforts delight my soul.

Psalms 94:17-19

So shall they fear the name of the Lord from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.

Isaiah 59:19

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

Day 25: Choosing the Correct Soundtrack for Victory

For me, the only thing that is more iconic than the characters in a Final Fantasy game is the game's soundtrack... from the immediately recognizable beats of a battle sequence to the way every area has a theme that sets the perfect tone for it, the music either fills us with a sense of wonder or adds to our feelings of dread. While every game adds some ambience to their adventure using a collection of songs, Final Fantasy does more than just fill the empty space with sounds... it guides us on how to interpret what is currently going on around us as well as informs us on how to best prepare ourselves for what is coming next.

What we choose to listen to and absorb has a greater impact in both our mindsets and our battles than we realize. There is a reason why the Lord sent musicians into the forefront of the army in the physical battles that the people of Israel fought... He was creating an environment for victory through their "soundtrack". And when King Saul was troubled by dark thoughts and evil spirits, the soothing sounds of David's music were used to bring him peace. Let's intentionally and prayerfully consider the anthems playing in our minds as well as what types of messages we allow to minister to our souls as they prepare us for the spiritual challenges of our day. We don't get to choose our battles... just the soundtrack.

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Colossians 3:15-16

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Philippians 4:8

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:19-20

Day 26: A Matter of “Tactics”

Winning battles in Final Fantasy requires more than just resilience and determination... to be victorious in these battles we must both know our enemies as well as effectively plan our strategies. Running into combat and simply mashing the attack button is a recipe for disaster... elemental enemies will absorb and even be strengthened by attacks that use the same element, while only ranged attacks are effective against flying foes.

Our method of engaging our opponents in battle must be strategically aligned with the specific weaknesses of the adversaries we are facing at that time, and employing any other technique is an ineffective and misguided waste of our time.

As followers of Christ, we will all face daily battles on this planet, and we can't expect to defeat the “airborne adversaries” that we are fighting with by using “ground attacks”. We aren't wrestling with flesh and blood opponents... we are engaged in battle with spiritual enemies that are skilled in convincing us to engage them on their terms and tricking us into confronting spiritual strongholds using the same “elemental” tactics that only serve to strengthen them. Let's turn our attention away from the physical manifestations of these dark forces tempting us to fight fire with fire and hit them where it counts... prayerfully aligning our actions with Christ's power to take them down.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.

2 Corinthians 10:4

Day 27: Final Fantasy VII's Buster Sword - Zack's Legacy, Cloud's Victory

The massive and iconic “Buster Sword” may be most well-known for being wielded by Cloud to defeat Sephiroth in Final Fantasy VII, but he was not the original owner of this powerful blade. The Buster Sword was passed down to Cloud from Zack... a brave soldier who also fought the good fight and finished his race before bequeathing his weapon to the next warrior who was destined to hold it. Zack may not have physically survived to participate in the events of FFXVII and beyond or even see the impact of the choices he made, but the intentional legacy that he left behind was the catalyst that helped deliver the final victory for not only Cloud, but his entire planet as well.

None of our lives exist in a vacuum... every choice we make as well as the actions we take create legacies that will resonate long after we have left this place, becoming the weapons that future followers will pick up to continue the fight. With the full impact of our decisions for generations to come in mind, everything we say, write, share, and do should be something we are intentionally leaving behind for the next generation, so they are armed for their battles with more than we started with. Let's serve the Lord today in a manner that makes tomorrow's challenges easier for those who follow behind us... each of us have a race to finish today to build a lasting legacy for tomorrow.

Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.

2 Peter 1:13-15

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:6-7

Day 28:

Unique Games That Make Up One Beautiful Tapestry

There is more to the Final Fantasy series than just the mainline titles that carry Roman numerals in their names... the Final Fantasy universe is filled with additional entries that expand on the franchise ranging from brawlers like Dissidia to unique spin-offs such as the musically based Theatrhythm or the kart racer Chocobo Racing. Each of these games were designed and crafted by different developers over a large period of time, and because of that each of them feels very different in both tone and play style... but every title fills in a different gap as an essential part of the full tapestry of the Final Fantasy series.

Just as our Bible is made up of sixty-six books that was written by multiple authors with unique writing styles over thousands of years to share one unified message, each of us are a distinctly different and unique part of the body of Christ who have been brought together to serve the Lord's purpose. We were intentionally chosen for this time period that we live in, and because we each have unique gifts and were designed for specific purposes we will all serve the Lord in different ways. Let's resist the urge to force fellow members of His body to fit into the comfortable mold that we prefer and instead allow "hands to be hands" and "feet to be feet" ... we are different parts of one body who are better together.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:4-6

But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

1 Corinthians 12:18-22

Day 29: The Prerequisites to Performing the Most Powerful “Summons”

There are few moments in a Final Fantasy game more epic and awe-inspiring than performing a “summon”, and rightfully so... pressing the button to call for the game’s most serious reinforcements and launch the most potent attacks available is usually a complete game changer. But the power to activate a “summon” doesn’t give us the ability to simply button-mash our way through the entire game while someone else does all the work... they typically must be built up over the course of the battle and only become an option once we have fulfilled all the prerequisites to unlock access. A “summon” isn’t an unearned “easy button” to bypass the game’s challenges... it’s something that only unlocks when we play our part, too.

While our prayers to the Lord are truly powerful and capable of pulling down every stronghold that we face, there are multiple references in both the Old and New Testament to the combination of both dedicated prayer AND fasting for answers to our deepest needs. Christ Himself practiced both, and He guided His followers to do the same... so when those big challenges in life are looming, we should follow the pattern of those who have faced the deepest, darkest forces on this planet and prevailed. Engaging in spiritual warfare requires preparation and discipline, so let’s pray like our battle depends on it... because it does.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”

Matthew 17:19-21

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 14:23

Day 30:

Final Fantasy XI - The High Cost to Possess a Pearl of Great Price

In the challenging environment before built-in internet capabilities existed in consoles and broadband internet access was scarce, the development team behind Final Fantasy on the PS2 not only saw the future... they created it. By launching Final Fantasy XI as a purely online title for a console that didn't have the PlayStation network we enjoy now or even a built-in modem to connect online, the developers had to believe in what they were doing enough to offer a title that required gamers to purchase a modem, a monthly subscription, and a hard drive simply to access the game. While the cost to participate was high, FFXI went on to become a big success and paved the way for future hits like FFXIV... all because the price of following was worth it.

In our pursuit of Christ, we will be tasked with taking up our own cross, carrying each other's burdens, and offering our bodies as a sacrifice in service to Him each day. But before we complain about how high the price is to follow Him, let's remember that we are simply walking in the footsteps of the Savior who loved us enough to do the same for us. Yes, it will cost us all that we possess to be members of this family, but the return on this investment now and into eternity is beyond any comparison. Jesus is the "pearl of great price", and He is worth any cost to possess.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matthew 13:44-46

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Romans 12:1

Animal Crossing

Day 1:

A New Day in “Animal Crossing: New Horizons”

There is something unique about playing Animal Crossing during the “seasonal events” that it offers that few other games can successfully mimic. From receiving gifts on my birthday, the real-time celebration of almost every major holiday throughout the year, and the variety of tournaments and other limited-time special events that pop up during select dates, Animal Crossing sure knows how to make a gamer feel special. But there are also plenty of days in Animal Crossing that are just an ordinary day... no news from Isabelle or parties to attend, just another day to walk around and catch bugs. But this is why Animal Crossing is so great... even a simple Monday in the world of Animal Crossing contains more joy than most games have in their entire play-through.

As followers of Christ, we will find that there will be seasons of rejoicing, times of mourning, and days that we wish were over shortly after they started. But each of these days are STILL a unique day that the Lord has granted us on this planet that represents an irreplaceable gift to be cherished... even those painful ones that seem to only bring more problems. Let’s rejoice today for the new opportunity we received when we woke up this morning, because even the worst day that we spend down here is still a day we can spend walking hand-in-hand with the Lord.

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:12-13

This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalms 118:24

Day 2:

Money Trees In Animal Crossing - Reaping What We Sow

The act of “planting” in most games follows a pretty predictable and linear path... if I plant an apple seed into the ground, typically one single apple tree will grow. But Animal Crossing: New Horizons provides a special opportunity for our planting to create exponential growth if I am willing to make a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain. There are some unique spots in the ground where I can plant some of my hard-earned in-game currency and see a “money tree” pop into existence on a later date. But to receive this 3x bonus on my investment, I first must be willing to bury my “bells” into the ground in faith that this temporary investment will end up paying off for me in the future.

If I’m being honest, investing has never been my strong suit... I much prefer a bird in the hand to two in the bush. But all the “sowing” in life that we perform for the Lord will require an act of sacrifice in the present as well as the patience to see it bear fruit in the future... from the time we spend with Him in the Bible and prayer to the acts of obedient service that we perform as His followers. It can be hard in the moment for us to give up our limited time, energy, and resources and see zero impact in our present moments of need, but what we willingly sacrifice for the Lord today will be exponentially worth it in His time.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:20-21

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

Galatians 6:7-8

Day 3: Catching an Atlas Moth in Animal Crossing - Taking a Different Approach

If you haven't yet experienced the challenge of catching an Atlas moth or some of the other more valuable (and skittish) insects in Animal Crossing, let me just tell you that it is certainly a uniquely exhilarating task. While none of the various insects that populate the village enjoy being startled, the rarest ones will take flight instantly and permanently if the player doesn't approach them softly and carefully. Many times, I have found myself SO close to holding one in my hands, only to accidentally press the analog stick just a LITTLE bit too hard... and it ends with me watching them and the opportunity to catch them disappear. The way I choose to approach them determines the success of my attempt.

As followers of Christ, it is only natural that we would want to share the abundant life we have received with everyone we meet, but reaching others for Him doesn't work with a one-size-fits-all approach. Just as we are each in different stages in our walk with the Lord, the souls we have been placed here to reach are unique... some may be scarred from past experiences and must be handled with care, while others appreciate directness. There is a specific time for convicting intervention and a right time for compassionate intercession, and if we listen to His leading the Holy Spirit will show us the way.

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Colossians 4:5-6

And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

Jude 1:22-23

Day 4: Navigating “Seasons of Change” in Animal Crossing

The world of Animal Crossing might be a bright, colorful oasis populated with cheerful activities to participate in, but that doesn’t mean we won’t experience some difficult moments... like when a beloved neighbor comes to us to let us know they are going to move on to a different town. After spending weeks, months, or even years of real-world time in the game together, the last thing we want to do is see them leave. But while saying goodbye can be difficult, it’s the only way new villagers can move in with fresh interactions and items that keep the game moving forward. Change can be unpleasant in a game that’s built around comfort, but it’s the only way to grow.

Throughout our walk with Christ, our comfort zones will frequently be disrupted by unwanted change as either we or our “neighbors” in life will be called by the Lord to move on to new places, different adventures, or perhaps simply called home. We don’t typically enjoy or appreciate these moments when they are happening, but it often takes a new set of neighbors to open our eyes to new horizons. These moments may feel bittersweet to us (or just downright bitter) as the Lord pushes us out of the comfortable nests we’ve built, but it is through these changes that we grow in our dependence on Him and move forward into the new things He has for us to do.

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:19

Day 5:

“DIY” in Animal Crossing - Some Assembly Required

The world of Animal Crossing is filled with fun objects to find, collect and decorate our virtual homes with, but many of the coolest items in the game require a little bit of good old-fashioned DIY (do it yourself). From tracking down the actual DIY template itself to sourcing all the unique materials required to complete the build, these items require us to do more than simply ordering one for delivery to our mailbox... they can't be bought or found through any process other than diligently applying ourselves to constructing them by hand. Animal Crossing is full of good gifts to enjoy, but some assembly is still required.

While there is NOT a verse in the Bible that says “God helps those who help themselves”, all of Christ's lessons contained verbs commanding us to “GO out into all the world”, “SEEK first His kingdom”, “BUILD on His foundation”, “SHINE our light”, and “INVEST our talents”. The gifts of the Lord are freely given to each one of us with an expectation for us to USE them, and they require our intentional activation of them to achieve their intended purpose. One of Christ's harshest recorded judgments was directed at the servant who was given talents to use and chose to hide them, so let's use our God-given talents today to build and grow the kingdom of the Lord... it's the reason that He gave them to us in the first place.

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.

Romans 12:6a

So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, “Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.” His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

Matthew 25:20-21

Day 6: Animal Crossing - The Humble Beginnings of our New Horizons

Regardless of our skill level in other games or even our experience in previous Animal Crossing titles, we all start our adventure in the world of Animal Crossing: New Horizons the same way... in a tiny, homely, sparsely furnished little house bundled with a nice little debt to work off for Tom

Nook. We don't begin the game with any fancy home furnishings, additional clothing options, or even the tools necessary to catch fish or collect bugs. But these "small beginnings" are just our starting point in the game, and the simplicity of our humble launching point helps us to slowly grow into all the different challenges this new adventure contains without feeling overwhelmed by them... it grows in response to our capacity.

While we would all love to see our efforts in life and in service to the Lord immediately blossom into overwhelming success, He typically has a slower growth philosophy in mind that ensures we build our foundation deep enough to securely hold the weight of our calling. David received his destiny to become king in his youth, but he spent decades training and developing his character in lower-level battles before it was time for him to wear that crown. Let's not despise our small beginnings or grow frustrated with our limited visible success; these baby steps are precious in His eyes as we learn to crawl before we can run.

*For who has despised the day of small things?
Zechariah 4:10a*

*I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.
Exodus 23:29-30*

Day 7: A “Cheat Code” in Animal Crossing?

It only took a short time in my Animal Crossing game for me to find that many of my neighbors are of the “giving” sort... they would just walk up to me and give me a random item because they were thinking of me. I tried this same idea and gave a fellow villager something extra that I was carrying, and they reciprocated with a gift that was far better than the little seashell I handed them. The “gamer” in me clicked as I wondered if there was a connection to what I gave and what I received, so I tried it again with a more valuable item and a different villager... this time they politely thanked me, took it, and walked away without giving me anything in return. “Giving” is not an “item duplication glitch” to exploit... it is simply being a good neighbor.

Too many times in the body of Christ we see the act of giving is treated like a “cheat code” to increase our own material treasures, but we are truly closest to the heart of Christ when we give to others and serve His kingdom without hoping for something in return. When my nose itches, my hand reaches out to scratch it... not because it gains anything from this action, but because it is part of the same body. In a similar manner, let’s show the love of Christ by serving someone else today without expecting a reciprocating action in return. It’s what good neighbors do.

I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Acts 20:35

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

1 Corinthians 12:25-26

Day 8: Dealing With “Unfair Nicknames” in Animal Crossing and Beyond

One of the ways that Animal Crossing makes the villagers in the game feel like real characters is the way they come up with nicknames for my avatar. Typically, they make one up based on a characteristic I’ve displayed that they have observed... but some of the nicknames that they come up with aren’t ones I would prefer to be known by. Many are simply not very flattering, reflecting a behavior that I no longer exhibit or want to be associated with. That is why I am grateful that I have an opportunity to CHANGE my nickname from the one they have chosen to one that suits how I want to be known and who I am becoming, not just the person I used to be.

While it may not be an official nickname on our driver’s license, many of us are stuck wearing the sins of our past or bearing the burden of unfair, inaccurate characterizations because of the unkind words of our fellow neighbors. But when we allow the Lord to renew our hearts and minds, we are freed from these labels we were previously known by as well as the chains that once held us down. As new creations in Christ, let’s fully embrace His grace that frees us from our past shame and grants us a new name. No matter what others choose to call us, we are no longer the “thief on the cross” or the “woman caught in adultery”. He makes ALL things new.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 56:5

Day 9: Animal Crossing and a “Daily Bread” Mentality

Shopping takes up a decent amount of time in any villager’s day in Animal Crossing... but just like in real life, immediate gratification isn’t always guaranteed. For example, any items purchased from the Nook Miles catalog will not arrive at my home until the next REAL WORLD calendar day. Expanding the size of my home? That’s an overnight gig. Sure, the game could simply grant me everything I want right when I request it, but the entire gameplay arc is built on giving me a reason to come back and play each day... and making me wait for some of my larger requests keeps me returning to it every day in anticipation of what each new sunrise will bring.

The Lord is fully capable of performing every promise that He’s given us, but that doesn’t mean we always receive the answers to our prayers on day one. Throughout the Bible even His most loyal followers have waited days, weeks, months, and sometimes years for His perfect timing to align with their requests, but that isn’t because He’s unconcerned about their needs. While part of the reason we must wait is because His larger plans for us are still coming together, He’s also teaching us to come to Him EACH DAY for our daily bread, not just on special occasions. The Lord only gives His children good gifts, and His best gift is our daily time with Him.

Give us this day our daily bread.
Matthew 6:11

*Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His
compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your
faithfulness.*
Lamentations 3:22-23

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.
James 5:16b

Day 10:

Crazy Redd - Counterfeit Fruit vs. Authentic Solutions

Of all the unique characters who populate the world of Animal Crossing, the entrepreneur Redd (often known as “Crazy Redd” stands out as one of the most interesting. Showing up with rare artwork for sale at a deep discount, the catch is that she is typically selling one or two genuine items and the rest are all counterfeits/fakes... and only a very careful examination will expose that the Mona Lisa painting that we are buying for a “great deal” isn’t actually the real deal. Many of these items look authentic, and if we aren’t very familiar with the original work it is easy to be deceived. The only way to know for sure is to stop and compare it to the original.

Many times, I have found that even with the best of intentions we can become guilty of producing “counterfeit fruit” ... myself included. When we try to accomplish things in our lives through our own power and capabilities instead of following the Lord’s guidance and timing, we generate an “Ishmael” solution that appears correct on the outside but is actually an unauthorized forgery of the Lord’s plans. The only way to receive the “Isaac” blessing that He promised us by fully examining our hearts, comparing our plans with His, and aligning our thoughts and actions with Him daily in prayer. His promises never include compromises... let’s hold out for His real answer.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.
Psalm 139:23-24

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”
James 4:13-15

Day 11:

Getting the Best out of Animal Crossing - A Matter of Time

When it comes to our multi-tasking philosophy in gaming, my wife and I have two very different approaches. While I often have several games I'm bouncing between (without being close to finishing any of them), she typically focuses her available time and energy on only ONE. As a result, when we load up Animal Crossing to play together, she will have gained a ton of new tools, completed all the seasonal events, expanded her house, and filled it with cool new things. Meanwhile, my house is full of bugs, my yard has weeds, and my villagers are complaining that they never see me. We might be playing the same game, but our experience with it varies because we invested our time much differently.

While the Lord loves all His children equally, He also made it clear that our relationship with Him is a two-way street. If we choose to make time for Him, we'll reap the benefits of growing closer to Him... but if we allow the cares of this world or even our God-given responsibilities in life to take priority over investing deeper into Him, we will only possess a shallow relationship at best. No matter how busy we are today, let's create some space in our schedule to share our hearts with the Lord as well as give him dedicated time to tell us what He has to say... the best rewards are reserved for those who reserve time for Him.

Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:41-42

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

Galatians 6:7-8

Day 12:

“Rainy Days” and the Fish that Only Come Out in the Rain

One of the things that makes playing Animal Crossing so compelling is the way it follows the “seasons” we are experiencing in the real world. For example, when it is New Year’s Eve on the calendar it is also New Year’s Eve in the game, complete with fireworks, festive outfits and party favors. There are unique items and interactions that only exist on certain days in the game and occur within specific windows of time, with each season containing its’ own fish and insects to catch that are exclusively available during those months of the year. Some of them only appear during the day or night, and even the weather has an impact... there are certain rare species of fish that only come out to play on a rainy day.

We all experience different seasons in life, and some of them feel a lot more enjoyable to go through than others. But the reason that the Lord guides us through periods of both sunshine and rain is because there are unique opportunities to serve Him and reach others during these “rainy days” that we endure that simply aren’t present in our preferred seasons. In our calling to serve the Lord as “fishers of men”, we will often be pulled out of our comfort zones to fish... at night, in the howling winds of winter, and in the rain. But it isn’t a punishment... this may be the only time and place that these hurting souls can be found.

*Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
Matthew 4:19*

*To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.
Ecclesiastes 3:1*

Day 13: The Secret to Moving Past our “Basic” Start

The first few days (or even weeks) spent in the world of Animal Crossing are a bit “basic”. Our “home” is just a tiny room with a bed, and the local general store called “Nook’s Cranny” looks like little more than a loosely organized pile of sticks that are held together by some twine. But this humble little base of operations can quickly become the thriving epicenter of a growing city if I continue to invest into it... and as I build up and grow

Tom Nook’s shop, more options open up for me to beautify my island, expand my house, and attract new villagers to move in and make my town their new home. But it all starts with me helping Tom Nook achieve his island dreams for mine to finally come to a place of fruition.

The Lord’s kingdom is exclusively grown by seeking Him first and placing others’ needs above our own, and as we help others achieve their God-given dreams the path to our own destinies is often unlocked. As Joseph found in his undeserved prison experience, it was through the unselfish act of interpreting his fellow prisoner’s dreams that his own dreams would eventually be accomplished, and his obedient service to a foreign king ultimately saved his own family. Let’s help someone grow towards their God-given dream today... the answers to our deepest prayers may be contained within.

And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

Mark 9:35

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

Day 14: Animal Crossing and Emptying our “Pockets”

As in most video games, my character in Animal Crossing has a limited amount of space to carry the tools and items that I want to have access to while I play. My “pockets” can carry a lot of stuff, but they aren’t infinite, so strategically deciding which objects I must always carry as well as which ones I can afford to pick up along the way is pretty important. Before I venture away from my home, I take time to check and ensure that critical tools like my net, shovel, and fishing rod are in my inventory... and I empty my pockets of items that aren’t necessary, so I have space for the unanticipated surprises of the day. And as I play the game, I return home as often as needed to replace broken items and drop excess weight.

Today is bound to contain some surprises for all of us, so preparing ourselves to have both the space to enjoy the pleasant ones and the tools to contend with the challenging ones is critical. Starting our day in prayer with the Lord allows us to release all the pain we are carrying that prevents us from picking up the unique treasures that each day holds, and daily Scriptural reading is how we “equip our armor” for the battles we will face. Let’s empty our pockets of yesterday’s broken pieces so we can face this new day, and “return home” to Christ as often as needed to repair our armor and keep our burdens light.

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16

Day 15: Fishing in Animal Crossing - When We Can't "Feel" it Working

The act of fishing in Animal Crossing is pretty simple in concept... we watch the water for the telltale shadow of a fish, cast our line where they will see it, and by following the vibrations of the Joy-Con controller we know exactly when to pull the fish up. But when I had to play with the game with a different controller that lacked vibration functionality, catching fish was far less intuitive and became much more difficult. Since I couldn't physically "feel" my controller rumbling, I had to follow the same prompts without the satisfaction of "feeling" that I was doing the right thing... I had to have faith that following the pattern set by the game creator would result in the desired outcome even when I couldn't feel anything.

Life would certainly be a lot easier if the Lord always gave us "feedback" that we can feel, but in our walk of faith there will be many times we are asked to simply trust and follow Him without the benefit of "feeling" anything that reassures us. But even when our thoughts and feelings betray us, we can remain confident that every soul who has ever made the decision to follow the Lord has found Him to be faithful all the way through the end. The temporary silence that our prayers are receiving may cause us to "feel" insecure, but we can have peace knowing He doesn't start anything that He doesn't finish.

Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

Day 16: Animal Crossing and A “Seasonal” Opportunity

While crafting new items is a core part of the Animal Crossing experience throughout the year, the unique crafting recipes and resources that can ONLY be obtained during specific seasonal events take on a special level of urgency. From the extremely limited time that cherry blossoms can be harvested to the holiday crafts that only appear for a few weeks a year, if I’m going to unlock ALL of them that doesn’t leave a lot of time for unrelated pursuits. To get the best rewards, I must focus on acquiring the right items and gathering all the limited time options while they can still be found... and that means my regularly scheduled program must wait.

Often in life I have been guilty of allowing my busy schedule to get in the way of listening for the Lord’s voice, and if I’m not careful, I can become guilty of “quenching His Spirit”, missing perishable moments of Divine opportunity while chasing smaller, temporary rewards. Christ set His face from His youth to be “about His Father’s business”, frequently interrupting His scheduled plans to follow the guidance of the Spirit in the moment... and doing so led Him to saving the Samaritan woman at the well and Zacchaeus in a tree. Let’s remain spiritually alert in our daily routines and listen for His “divine interruptions” today... He can only be heard by listening ears.

*Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,”
whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.
Isaiah 30:21*

*Do not quench the Spirit.
1 Thessalonians 5:19*

Day 17: “Cozy Gaming” in Animal Crossing and Finding Peace in our Storm

One of the reasons the Animal Crossing series has remained so popular after all these years is that it skillfully blends small daily surprises with a warm feeling of comfort and predictability... a welcome break from the real world that rarely provides either one. The stakes are relatively low, and the pace is pretty mellow... the worst thing that can happen is that we sell our turnips too late or let a rare bug get away. Our path through the game is free from any real danger, and even the pitfalls we trip into are merely momentary annoyances. The creator designed the game to provide a feeling of safety whether we are sitting on the beach or diving deep into the ocean, and because we trust them, we can play without fear.

While we would all probably prefer for the Lord to calm our storms before asking us to walk out to Him on the water, He intentionally calls us to come out to the deepest part of the waters with Him in situations where we cannot lean on our own strength, capabilities, or understanding to “feel safe”. Whatever He’s asking us to do today, we can step forward in faith knowing that if He has His eyes on the smallest of the sparrows, we are definitely safe in His arms. We don’t have to fear today’s surprises or worry about tomorrow’s challenges... the highest stakes we face on this side of eternity are a walk in the park for Him.

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

Day 18:

Nintendo's Family of Games - Understanding how the Same God Gives Different Answers to Prayer

There is just something about a game created by Nintendo that makes each title feel like they come from the exact same family of games, even though they couldn't be more different in terms of the stories they're telling or their style of gameplay. Franchises like Mario, Kirby, Pikmin and Animal Crossing aren't even connected to each other narratively, but even a person who is completely unfamiliar with the gaming world would still sense a shared philosophy behind the bright color palettes, easily accessible control schemes, and sense of wonder that each of them creates. Sure, each game contains its' own unique challenges and different frustrations, but it is still the same "Nintendo" behind them all.

While it can be difficult for us to understand at times, the same Lord that is our healing and providing "Jehovah Jireh" is also the same God who told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" after his multiple prayers for the removal of his "thorn in his flesh" were denied. His grace and love are everlasting even though they may not always show up in His answers to our prayers in the exact same way. And if we look beyond our expectations, we can see the same loving Father is fully present in each chapter of our stories. He doesn't love us less or more... His answers are simply as unique as the story being told.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

James 1:17

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:8-9a

Day 19: Truth in Advertising in Animal Crossing and in our Walk of Faith

There are SO many items to collect and build in Animal Crossing that I'm not even sure that they have ever been properly counted... but while most of them are "functional" items that can be worn, used, or interacted with, many are not. I spent a great deal of time saving up just so I could finally order a giant robot, only to find that the robot doesn't move or really do anything... it's just a nice lawn ornament. My vision for this robot was much different than what I received, but that isn't the game's fault. It never promised to let me stomp around the island as Voltron... it delivered exactly what it promised, even if it doesn't operate in the exact manner I expected.

As believers in Christ, it can be easy to mistake our love for the Lord with our love for what He does for us (or what we hope He will do). And if our love for Him is based on our interpretation and appreciation of what He does instead of who He is, our love will fluctuate based on how He answers our prayers at that moment in time. Yes, He is a good and loving Father, but He wants us to love Him for His essence, not just for His "presents". If we truly love Him, our feelings toward Him will remain unchanged no matter how He chooses to answer our prayers. Let's give the Lord more than simply appreciation for what He gives... let's love Him for who He is.

Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

Job 1:20-21, 13:15a

Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment.

Matthew 22:37-38

We love Him because He first loved us.

1 John 4:19

Day 20: Being a “Good Neighbor” to the “Un-neighborly”

Our “neighbors” in Animal Crossing add to the experience in more ways than one... some are kind, others are prickly, and all of them will come to us needing our help at some point. While most of them are friendly, there are times that new neighbors move in and disrupt our happy island status quo. But being a “good neighbor” means we don’t simply “kick out” those who are acting in a manner that we don’t appreciate or that we disagree with. We are acting our most “neighborly” when we show love to others based on their need of it, not on how they’ve previously behaved... demonstrating unearned kindness without any expectation of reciprocation.

The Lord made it crystal clear in the story of the “Good Samaritan” exactly who He is defining as our “neighbor” and what His standard of loving them truly is. It was more than just a stranger in need; it was someone with entirely different religious beliefs and opposing ideologies who may not have reciprocated the same kindness if the tables were turned. Helping them was at best a costly inconvenience, and at worst was a potentially ostracizing decision... but this is the love we are called to. Our “neighbors” may not behave in a “neighborly” manner in their times of need, but this is when Christ commanded us to show His unearned grace and love the most.

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” So he answered and said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
Luke 10:25-29

“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” And he said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”
Luke 10:36-37

Day 21: Crafting in Animal Crossing - Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

While many games allow us to customize what our virtual avatars look like including the clothes that they wear, Animal Crossing takes it a step further by giving us the tools to MAKE our own outfit. With enough creativity almost any pattern can be generated, allowing me to craft an outfit that resembles Mario's iconic overalls, Link's green tunic, or even Zelda's royal robes. The act of putting these little pixels together may look a little raw, chaotic, and messy up close, but once it has been applied to my character and viewed in the game it accomplishes its purpose and fits into the rest of my little island world perfectly.

We are all uniquely crafted and intentionally gifted for our missions on this planet, but when we look at ourselves under the microscope it can be easy to find flaws in our design and question our Creator's decisions. While many of us would appreciate being gifted with King Solomon's wisdom (and money), Esther's beauty, David's musical abilities or Samson's strength more than what we were given, the Lord handcrafted each of us for a very specific purpose. Up close we may look a little messy, but when we pull the camera back and see ourselves and our mission from the Lord's viewpoint, we can find peace in His divine craftsmanship knowing that we have been perfectly formed and expertly made.

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.

Psalm 139:13-14

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

Day 22: Crafting the Rarest Items in Animal Crossing - Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary

Crafting items in games like Animal Crossing typically involves the combination of some rare, hard-to-find items with other normal and ordinary materials. For example, crafting a golden shovel involves taking the same everyday objects that we use to make a regular shovel and combining them with an exceptionally rare golden nugget, and building my giant robot was achieved by putting together a bunch of plain and common iron nuggets with other items that were much more costly and difficult to acquire. The most powerful items in the game aren't found, they're FORGED... and these common, ordinary sticks and rocks become something much greater when they are put together by a designer who knows the right combination to transform them into something extraordinary.

If I'm being honest, I often struggle with feeling so overwhelmingly "common and ordinary" that I can't possibly be used by the Lord to grow His kingdom, but throughout the Bible His chosen vessels were selected from some very common and ordinary places. "Regular people" like Ruth, Mary, David, and Peter were used to accomplish mighty things through a combination of their faithful obedience and His divine power, so let's place our seemingly small, meager materials into His hands and watch Him do the impossible!

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Day 23: The Best Gifts of All

The citizens that populate the world of Animal Crossing truly love giving gifts, and often the only way to acquire some of these rare and thoughtful one-of-a-kind items is to receive them from someone else. They give from a full heart when I didn't even do anything to deserve them... and they do it expecting nothing in return. My favorite items in the game are the unique ones that ONLY those characters can give, and receiving these unexpected gifts is appreciated even more because these are items that I could never earn by playing the game on my own.

As followers of Christ and recipients of His grace we possess the ability to give our “neighbors” on this planet gifts that carry incomparable value. We each carry the ministry of reconciliation, the responsibility of being peacemakers, and the gift of forgiveness to offer freely to every soul we meet... and that includes those who aren't behaving in a very neighborly manner to us at the moment. Let's give others the very best gifts that we possess today... the unearned gifts that come from a heart full of Christ's grace and love. Let's forgive those who have done us wrong (even if they aren't sorry), make peace with others (even if they don't deserve it), and offer the gift of reconciliation to those in need... He gave us these gifts to give them away.

*And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.
Ephesians 4:32*

*Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.
2 Corinthians 5:18*

*Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
James 3:18*

Day 24: Dealing With a Disappointing Season in Animal Crossing (and in Life)

As the seasons come and go, games that exist in real time like Animal Crossing can carry both joy and regret... despite our best efforts, the hopes and expectations we set on the game as well as ourselves may not be met. Perhaps the season went by too fast and some of the things we hoped for didn't happen, or maybe we got exactly what we wanted but it didn't turn out how we thought it would. Either way, we may leave this current season feeling disappointed... but that is part of what makes the game so much fun to play. Animal Crossing never ends... it always has a new season right around the corner full of new adventures to enjoy. Sure, this season may be winding down, but another one is coming that will be beautiful in its own way.

Even during our favorite times of the year, we all grapple with feelings of disappointment with our situations and how the Lord chooses to resolve them. There will be moments of joy and humor present within our darkest seasons of life, and there will be other times when the sunniest of skies will still rain on our parade. If this current moment in time doesn't look or feel as beautiful as we had hoped for, let's remember that this is just one page in the eternal love story that He is writing to us. On our best days as well as on our worst, His loving plans for us will never change.

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.
Ecclesiastes 3:11*

*Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
Isaiah 43:18-19*

*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.
Jeremiah 29:11*

Day 25: Animal Crossing and a “Foundational” Decision

Choosing where to build our home in Animal Crossing is more important than it seems, and since we make that choice at the very beginning of the game, we may not realize that we built it in the wrong place until much later. Sure, good ol’ Tom Nook will let us move our house (for a fee, of course), but if we knew from the start of the game where our home base would be most conveniently situated, we would have saved a lot of our time, money, and wasted effort running around back and forth across the island. Still, I’m thankful for a second chance to lay a new foundation so I can remedy those early mistakes now that I fully understand the game.

If we want the blessing of the Lord on everything that we do, He must be the foundation of every pursuit in our lives... our work, school, friends, activities, and relationships must all have Him at their center and bring Him honor. He cannot reward interests that move us away from Him, but as the “Master Architect” He offers us the opportunity to rebuild every part of our lives that we surrender to Him on HIS foundation. Now that we understand this “game of life” and how we are meant to play it, let’s take every pursuit and desire that is in our hearts and place them under the magnifying glass of His will... only those things that we build for His glory will last.

Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock.
Luke 6:47-48

For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.
1 Corinthians 3:9-13

Day 26: Building Fences, Guarding our Hearts

One of the best additions to Animal Crossing: New Horizons is the ability to leave your island and visit the towns of other real-world players, but this enhancement does come with some drawbacks. There are plenty of gamers out there who don't behave in a very "neighborly" manner when they travel to another player's island, and while the damage they can do is fairly limited they can still create preventable problems. Fortunately, there is a solution... by placing fences from the point of entry to the area guests are permitted to visit, everyone can access what was designed to be shared while protecting the island from taking damage by those who would abuse the privilege.

All of us are called to follow the Lord's example and freely offer His unearned grace and love to everyone we meet, but we are also guided by Him to walk in wisdom, approaching this world in a manner as innocent as doves while remaining shrewd as serpents to satan's desire to harm us, abuse our good intentions, and sabotage our mission. While Christ works through us to shine His light in the darkness, satan uses people like Judas and Jezebel to advance his evil plots, and it is only by prayerfully leaning on the Spirit of God for daily discernment that we can remain welcoming to all who are seeking Him while guarding our hearts from the enemy's schemes.

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Matthew 10:16

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

John 10:1, 10

Day 27: To Give or to Keep? Building the Museum in Animal Crossing

Every insect, fossil, and fish that we collect in Animal Crossing serves a dual purpose... we can either sell them for a profit to keep building up our own residence, or we can donate them to the local museum to grow it and enhance our town. It's not always an easy decision to make... do I keep an exceptionally valuable specimen that could be sold for personal gain, or do I give it away to support the growth and expansion of the museum and serve the greater good of the entire community? But before I make that choice, I am reminded that these items were never mine in the first place... I simply found them. And if I surrender them to the museum curator, he'll do a lot more with them than I can.

The Lord has given every one of us unique gifts and talents to be used for the growth of His kingdom, but if we choose to selfishly consume them and use them solely for our own profit and benefit, we deny them their true purpose. These free gifts were given to us to be offered, used, and put on display for His glory, and if we place Him first in our thoughts and actions, He will multiply our efforts in ways that are beyond our comprehension, blessing countless others as well as ourselves in the process. Let's look at the talents He's given us with a fresh perspective on how to use them today... they are our ministry.

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.
Romans 12:6a

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.
1 Peter 4:10

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.
Matthew 5:16

Day 28:

Gulliver's Travels and the Dangers of Following our Heart

Gulliver is one of the most interesting visitors to our Animal Crossing islands... each time we find him he is face down in the sand, disoriented, and in desperate need of help. He always has a lot of different reasons why he has arrived at our island in this condition, but whether it was a navigational mistake or just an error in judgment, he ends up crash landing on our beach all the same. The good news is that with a little work we can get him back on his feet and onto his ship again... the bad news is that he never learns from this experience, living his life in a perpetual cycle of preventable shipwreck.

The most painful mistakes that I've made in life are when I have made the decision to "follow my heart", believing that it would lead me to my best destiny and a happy ending. But every one of the decisions I have made without the leadership of Christ have always resulted in a "shipwreck" ... even the ones made with the best of intentions. The only way to break free of this endless cycle of moving from one shipwreck to another is to stop allowing our heart's desires to guide us and fully follow the Lord's navigational guidance He's given us in His Word and through prayers that are fully submitted to His will. Our heart isn't qualified to be our North Star, so let's give Him control of our ship. He'll never steer us wrong.

This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.

1 Timothy 1:18-19

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.

Jeremiah 17:9-10

Day 29: “Covering” the Pitfalls in Animal Crossing

Animal Crossing is a pretty safe place to stroll around in, with no health bars to worry about or even the ability to take damage. But there ARE a few annoyances that can have an adverse effect on the experience, such as the “pitfalls” in the ground that appear to be concealing an item of value on the surface... but they are hiding a hole in the ground that characters can fall into. These hidden traps would be easy to avoid if they weren’t disguised as a spot that contains a secret treasure, but falling into one doesn’t have to be a permanent setback. Once we or someone else falls into a “pitfall”, there is a simple solution... get out of the hole, grab our shovel, and cover it up so nobody falls in again.

We will all trip and fall into some “pitfalls” during our time on this planet, and the greatest gift any of us can offer each other is the same full and unearned forgiveness that Christ has given to all who have repented and accepted His grace. True forgiveness isn’t measured merely by our words of restoration, but by our intentional actions to lovingly cover the sins and missteps of our repentant brothers and sisters in the same manner that Jesus has freely absolved us of our misdeeds. Let’s demonstrate the Lord’s mercy and grace, release others from their mistakes, and cover up those holes... once and for all.

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”

1 Peter 4:8

He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.

Proverbs 17:9

Day 30:

KK Slider's Weekly Jam - Exclusivity vs. Accessibility

KK Slider's weekly appearances are one of my favorite parts of Animal Crossing, and because his performances are so fun to experience it is disappointing that they are held so infrequently. Many of the coolest and most exciting events in Animal Crossing are exclusively held either once a week, once a season, or in some instances once a year... and while this does make these moments special, it also makes them moderately inaccessible. I appreciate all of KK Slider's jam sessions as well as each of the incredible limited time offerings in Animal Crossing, but I wish they were available to me at more convenient times.

While our weekly gatherings with fellow believers and participating in seasonal events throughout the year are a special way to celebrate the love that we have for the Lord, the best part of our relationship with Him is that we don't have to wait for these moments to experience His love and grace. Through Christ's sacrifice the very throne room of God has been opened to us, making His presence available and accessible to us every day, at any hour that we need Him. He has chosen to make Himself approachable, relatable, and fully understanding of every part of our human experience. Let's appreciate and embrace His open invitation today... we can experience Him at whatever time we choose to!

*When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.
Because You have been my help, therefore in the shadow of Your wings I
will rejoice. My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.
Psalm 63:6-8*

*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our
weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us
therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy
and find grace to help in time of need.
Hebrews 4:15-16*

PlayStation

Day 1: The Reason I Bought a PlayStation 1

If I'm being honest, I didn't plan to purchase a Sony PlayStation 1... at the time, I was the mostly satisfied owner of a Sega Saturn system as well as a few older Nintendo consoles, and I thought that my gamer life was as good as it could get. But then I saw some new games coming out that were exclusive to the PS1 that I really wanted to experience... games like Crash Bandicoot, Gran Turismo, FFVII, and Metal Gear Solid that simply weren't available on any of the platforms that I owned. I never thought I would become a Sony "fanboy" ... but it offered an experience that would never come to the systems I possessed.

In our mission to reach others for Christ, trying to convince them that their "system" is flawed or insufficient will only serve to create unwinnable arguments and division. It is only by showing the authentic joy and peace we experience through Christ in our daily lives and demonstrating the exclusive fruits of a life lived in submission to Him that we will make others interested in what our "platform" has to offer... especially when life gets tough. In a world that's desperately seeking a love that is genuine and a hope that is real, we are the carriers of Christ's light on this planet... and our calling is to shine Him in everything we do so that others will both see and be drawn to an authentic experience that's only found in Him.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

Day 2:

The Counter-Intuitive Nature of Metal Gear Solid

It may occupy a space as one of my favorite PS1 games of all time, but my first attempt at playing Metal Gear Solid was anything but, well... “solid”. For starters, the button layout was the opposite of what I was accustomed to, with the buttons I used to confirm a choice vs. cancelling a selection reversed... and that’s not to mention adapting to a gameplay style where stealth and restraint was the only way to succeed. For years I enjoyed games with unlimited ammunition and solved my problems through a combination of firepower and quick reflexes, but MGS forced me to be patient, thoughtful, and intentional about what I did and how I used my limited resources. It challenged me in ways I hadn’t faced before, and I became a better gamer for the experience.

Choosing to follow Christ requires a complete rewiring of our minds, because the only way to play this game and win is HIS way. Walking in His footsteps and carrying our cross requires us to embrace the paradoxical nature of the last becoming first and turning the other cheek, and these concepts will never compute until we allow His Spirit to transform our minds and reprogram our thinking. His path will always feel counter-intuitive to our natural instincts, but He can’t multiply the bread in our hands into enough to feed multitudes until we surrender it to Him first.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2

That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

Day 3: Deus Ex - A Relationship Shared Through Shared Experiences

On my short list of the most influential games I've played in my life, there is a title that probably shouldn't be there. I never saw a marketing ad for it, I didn't read a review that compelled me to try it, and it wasn't a sequel to a game I'd played before. That game is "Deus Ex" on the PS1, and from its setting in a rain-soaked dystopian future filled with robust dialogue trees to its branching storylines with multiple compelling endings, for me it was everything I never knew I needed in a game. So how did it come into my possession? Because a game store clerk took the time to talk to me and truly listen to what I was looking for... and that led them to share their experience with a game that I wouldn't have tried otherwise.

As the ambassadors of Christ on earth, each of us carry a calling to share Him with others and accomplishing that mission will require us to do more than passively put our faith out on display. It is exclusively through the authentic connection we make with those we interact with in our daily lives that we hear their deepest needs and allow His Spirit to show us the points of intersection in our own personal testimony and experience with Him. The best advertisement for a relationship with the Lord is the one we possess, and if we truly listen to those He's placed in our path, we'll find we have exactly what they're searching for.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:18,20

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all that I ever did." Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."

John 4:39, 42

Day 4: The “EyeToy” - Ahead of Its Time or Sony's First Steps Towards VR?

All the incredible virtual reality games that are available to play on Sony’s PlayStation VR add a whole new way to experience video games, but the VR headset was NOT Sony’s first attempt at immersive gameplay. Long before they launched their VR headset, Sony released the “EyeToy”, a camera designed to control the game using the player’s physical movements... and I picked one up at launch along with any game that featured it. Sadly, the technology at the time wasn’t ready to support the vision Sony had for it... the games were shallow, the controls didn’t work very well, and ultimately the EyeToy was ahead of its time. But once their capabilities caught up with Sony’s dreams, a true VR experience was finally born.

There is often a delay between the visions that the Lord places in our hearts and those dreams becoming reality... not because He is dangling a carrot in front of our eyes that we’ll never reach, but to guide us towards our future destiny while developing our capabilities and capacity for it along the way. Joseph, David, Abraham and so many others waited decades for the promises that they were given to come to pass, and the time in between was used by the Lord to grow both their character and their skills so they could handle the role. Let’s not lose faith in the dream if the wait is long... we aren’t waiting, we’re preparing.

I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.

Genesis 23:29-30

For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hurries toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it delays, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay long.

Habakkuk 2:3

Day 5: Sony's DualShock Controller - Love Redefined

The first time I held a PlayStation DualShock controller in my hands, it felt very foreign to me... it featured a dramatically different layout than my N64 or any of my Sega consoles, with dual thumb sticks replacing my previous reliance on directional pads. But I quickly found that my ability to play many of my games was not only changed but dramatically improved by a control scheme that has now become standard across other gaming platforms. The modern adventures I play now would be either incredibly difficult or impossible on the controllers I used in the past... it took a company redefining the way we play the game to make new genres of gameplay possible.

Showing the “love of Christ” to others isn’t just difficult when defining it by our human standards of love... it is impossible. His caliber of love that requires us to die to our own desires and bless even our enemies doesn’t come naturally to us, and demonstrating it requires us to submit our emotions to a new control scheme... His Spirit in us, guiding our thoughts and controlling both our words and our deeds. The quality of love that we’re commanded to show others isn’t based on warm feelings of affection, but on our selfless actions. Let’s raise our definition of love to the His level today... the only version of love in this world that will never fail or let us down is His.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.
1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.
John 13:34-35

Day 6:

Sony's Blu-Ray Decision - Forging our own Armor

Sony's decision to chart their own course with a proprietary media format, the Blu-Ray disc, was a choice that carried a lot of risk... they invested heavily into the technology to redefine how data was purchased and stored for both games and movies after finding that the disc and cartridge based solutions from other companies simply wasn't sufficient for them.

While it would've been much easier and cheaper to adopt another company's format as their own, it also would've limited their ability to grow both the size and the quality of their games... and because they didn't simply copy from someone else's paper, Blu-Ray became the dominant format in the industry.

We cannot simply inherit our belief system from someone else and believe that a meaningful relationship with the Lord will come from it... the Lord is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him out for themselves, growing and developing our faith in Him through our own personal prayer life and intentional study of His words. While He certainly gives us spiritual mentors in the forms of pastors, teachers, and more to guide us, we are each called to build our own unbreakable bond and invest into it daily. We can't win our unique battles in life by borrowing someone else's armor... let's forge our own and face today with the God we know personally by our side.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Philippians 2:12

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Day 7: PlayStation's "Mascot" Dilemma

For years, Sony tried to make it happen... they did their best to find a mascot to identify gamers with their platform the way Nintendo had Mario and Sega had Sonic. After trying to make Crash Bandicoot their unofficial mascot, they turned to characters like Ratchet and Clank and Jak and Daxter as proprietary creations that would be forever identified as "PlayStation" icons... and while they were great franchises, they never reached the global recognition of Mario or Sonic. But Sony simply wasn't meant to be identified with one singular mascot like their competitors... instead, they have dozens of characters that are inextricably linked to many of our best gaming memories. Sony simply had a unique path to their destiny that wasn't the same as the others.

Even in the body of Christ, we can fall victim to the unhealthy desire to compare ourselves and our path to the lives of others... but because the Lord has a unique calling for each of us, we will all experience His guidance and provision in different ways. From the material blessings and successes that we enjoy, to the talents and spiritual gifts we receive, to the amount of time we each receive on this planet, none of our paths will be identical. If someone is being used by the Lord differently than we are, let's ask ourselves, "What is that to us?" ... and remember we follow HIM.

*Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."
John 21:21-22*

*He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.
Matthew 25:15*

Day 8:

PaRappa the Rapper - You Just Gotta Believe!

There isn't a rhythm-based game out there quite like Sony's "PaRappa the Rapper", a story about a rapping, two-dimensional dog that predates almost all of the music-based titles that made the genre of matching button presses to sounds popular like Frequency, Guitar Hero, and Rock Band. While the funky beats of PaRappa and his unique collection of supporters like Chop Chop Master Onion might not have appeared to be the pioneers of a new style of gameplay that would spawn an entire category of games, in the words of the hero of the story, "You gotta believe!"

In His infinite wisdom, the Lord often chooses to use servants that might appear to be unqualified for their role on the surface... penniless widows like Ruth, overlooked shepherd boys like David, and even repentant tricksters like Jacob were all chosen to be critical parts of His mission to save the world and found their place in Christ's family tree. But the key in each of their stories was the faith they chose to place in the invisible God who has promised to guide each of our paths and supply all of our needs along the way, even when the situation appears hopeless. It is exclusively through combining our full faith with His divine power that we see impossible situations become the launching point of our destiny, so let's take PaRappa's advice today... we just gotta believe!

Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes."

Mark 9:23

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

Hebrews 11:1-3

Day 9: Sony's Memory Cards - The Price of Admission to "Save" our Games

While Sony's decision to utilize a disc-based format for their console experience instead of cartridges came with many enhancements that improved the look, sound, and quality of their games, it also introduced a brand new "price of admission" requirement for gamers... purchasing memory cards. These proprietary rectangles of storage space were a necessity for anyone who wanted to join the PlayStation party, and over the years the memory card hasn't gone away... as the PlayStation platform grew, they evolved into the massive hard drives that now store not only our game saves, but the entire game. The incredible leaps in technology that we now enjoy came with a cost... both for Sony and for us.

While it is true that Christ has paid our entire price of admission to grant us cleansing from our sins and access to the Father, we still have a daily cross to carry of our own. The yoke that He offers is certainly lighter and easier to bear than the burden of carrying our sins, but the salvation He provides shouldn't be misinterpreted as the freedom to do whatever we want with our lives... it simply means we are now free to choose who we are submitting control of our lives to. All the incredible benefits He promises His followers still contains a "price of admission" ... being "saved" requires submission to seeking His will FIRST.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Matthew 11:29-30

And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?

Luke 14:27-28

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

Day 10: Gran Turismo and an Instruction Irritation

As someone who wasn't into racing simulation games, I never tried a Gran Turismo title until I found a secondhand copy of Gran Turismo 2 on sale at a local game store. Because it was used, it didn't come with the instruction book... but as an experienced gamer I was confident I could figure it out on my own. It seemed simple, but because I didn't know the button layout and lacked familiarity with racing games, I wasn't aware that there was one button that controlled the handbrake (a slower deceleration designed for drifting) and a separate one that hit the primary brakes (for stopping). I spent hours struggling to do basic things, wondering if there was something wrong with my copy of the game, my controller, or with me... all because I was trying to play the game without understanding how it was designed to be played by its' creator.

This life was designed by our Creator to be lived in a very specific way... His way. This isn't to limit our choices or remove enjoyment, but to guide us towards the most abundant life possible... a life that is only accessible if we obediently follow His guidance. Rather than blindly press buttons in the hope that one of them leads us to our best destiny and act surprised at the unsuccessful results, let's look at the guidance He provided us in His Word to define the way we live our lives. He gave us these instructions for a reason.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

Hosea 4:6a

The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

John 10:10

Day 11: Hollow Clones - When Imitation is NOT the Sincerest Form of Flattery

While the PlayStation was home to several great 3D platformers like the Ape Escape, Ratchet and Clank, and Spyro series of games, there were also numerous failed attempts at launching a new franchise that should've succeeded but didn't... I'm looking at YOU Bubsy, Gex, and Croc. While these characters and their games were most likely created with good intentions, their shallow attempts to simply copy and paste what other games possessed organically only resulted in the creation of a hollow mimic with no substance of its' own. The style and gameplay mechanics at the heart of a great game can be imitated, but the experience can't be duplicated; a painful lesson I learned the hard way each time I bought an inferior clone of a better game.

One of the things Christ warned us about the most was the danger of following blind guides who offer a counterfeit form of Christianity that lacks any actual substance or power to change lives. Our world is full of imitations, duplicates, and manufactured religious practices that are designed to mimic the authentic output of a follower of Christ, but they are a poor substitute for a true relationship with the Lord. Let's inspect our own fruits as well as carefully examine the fruits of what we are consuming today... our real battles require real armor, not a plastic replica.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

Matthew 7:15-17

Holding to a form of godliness although they have denied its power; avoid such people as these.

2 Timothy 3:5

Day 12:

The DualShock Controller - Following our Feelings?

The original DualShock controller changed the way we experienced games forever... by fully integrating the “rumble” function directly into the controller itself, Sony made “feeling” our games a standard part of playing them. But our ability to feel the controller shake when an explosion went off nearby or rattle when we were tackled by an opponent didn’t necessarily make us any better at playing the game... sometimes, it could even present an unwanted distraction such as when the rumble feature realistically mimicked the feeling of our heartbeat while trying to aim at a target, causing us to miss the shot. Feeling the game may immerse us deeper into the fun, but it rarely makes us more successful players.

Our feelings were given to us by the Father to deepen our ability to connect with each other and appreciate the world around us, but they were not designed to be a navigational device that we lean on for our direction. Our natural instincts for self-preservation and personal gratification will always be at odds with His calling to crucify our flesh and follow His will... so let’s obediently surrender our hearts and minds to the Lord and His written directions for our lives, even if it doesn’t align with our “feelings”. Our hearts are unreliable narrators in our story... lasting joy and peace can only be found in Him.

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.
Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief.
Proverbs 14:12-13*

*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.
For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and
these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that
you wish. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its
passions and desires.
Galatians 5:16-17, 24*

Day 13: Metal Gear Solid and Breaking the “Fourth Wall”

Metal Gear Solid on PS1 is considered iconic for many reasons, and one of them is the way it would “break the fourth wall” during the game... from the Colonel telling us that the correct frequency was on the back of our game case (140.15 in case you still needed it) to the epic Psycho Mantis battle where he not only read what else was on our memory card, but also predicted our movements in battle (until the game prompted us to move our controller into the second controller slot). The game made a deliberate effort to let us know it wasn’t just telling the story of Solid Snake, the character we were observing and playing as... it was speaking directly to us as the player the entire time.

While the Bible was written over the course of thousands of years by dozens of unique authors, it was supernaturally inspired to transcend eras of time and reveal the secrets of the eternal God to us no matter what generation we live in. His words are very much alive and contain all the promises and guidance we need... and when we read them, He breaks through the “fourth wall” of time and space to speak directly to us and our specific situations. If we are facing a battle we cannot win or simply scanning frequencies in search of help, His Spirit will speak to us from inside its’ pages... if we will open it up and listen.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

Day 14: Ape Escape - The Only Way to Play

With the addition of the dual analog sticks to the PlayStation controller, gamers finally had more than one way to control their character in the game... either the classic directional pad or the new “thumbstick”. But that freedom of choice didn’t last long... shortly after this innovation arrived, games like Ape Escape launched that REQUIRED players to not only possess a new controller with dual analog sticks but also to exclusively use these thumbsticks for movement. At the time it felt like a forced upgrade, limiting us from participating unless we chose to change the way we play, but now the idea of playing a 3D platformer without an analog stick feels archaic if not downright impossible. It wasn’t just a better way to play; it was the only way to play.

The path of following Christ may feel limiting to us compared to the “control” that we have been accustomed to over the choices we would make in life, but His way contains the exclusive path to experiencing joy that transcends our pain, enjoying peace that can never be stolen, and receiving a love that is eternal. While receiving the benefits of all His promises does require us to submit to His way of playing the game and leaving our old ways behind, it also unlocks an entirely new dimension to our lives... His Spirit living within us, making the impossible possible.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

John 14:6

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” But Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

John 6:66-68

Day 15:

NBA Live and the Importance of Growth to Survive

While the PlayStation was home to many of the best sports titles in gaming for many years, one specific franchise started out strong but didn't last long... NBA Live. Originally considered the basketball equivalent to the Madden football franchise, the NBA Live series failed to do the one thing that is necessary for any annualized gaming release to thrive and survive... it stopped growing. What was originally considered to be the defining basketball experience gradually declined simply by standing still, allowing a more relevant gaming experience (the NBA 2K series) to take the crown... and in a bitter twist of irony, the franchise named NBA Live is now completely dead, all because it failed to continue to grow.

Growing in our faith isn't something that occurs passively after we make the decision to follow Christ... it requires a deliberate investment of time spent in prayer and Biblical study as well as putting what we've learned into practice in our daily lives. If we are feeling weak in our faith or struggling with a particular battle, perhaps some "spiritual growth" is in order... if even Paul felt the need for continued growth decades after he launched his world-changing ministry, then there isn't a time where any of us will reach the point where we'll stop growing. Abiding in Christ isn't a decision we make, it's a daily action we take.

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
2 Peter 3:18a*

*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:12-14*

Day 16: Disc Read Error - A Lens Limitation

If you had an original PS2 console back in the day, then perhaps you felt this same pain that I did... the fateful day that my dutiful PlayStation 2 that had never let me down before failed to read a disc. After trying multiple “lens cleaner disc” solutions as well as an entire container of canned air to fix it, I finally sent my system in to Sony to confirm what I already knew to be true... while my PS2 could read discs with a clear back (DVD’s) just fine, it could not read any disc with a blue or black back (CD’s) due to a faulty laser lens that had to be adjusted. It was not an issue with the disc or even the PS2 itself... it was the lens inside that had to be changed to read the disc correctly so it could display the game.

If we are being honest, there are many Biblical passages that can be challenging both to read as well as to understand, but there is nothing wrong with God’s Word... it simply isn’t designed to make sense when being viewed through the flawed lens of our limited human perspective. Trying to comprehend the wisdom of the eternal God with our finite minds is impossible without allowing His Spirit to guide us, replacing our narrow perception with His omniscient direction. Rather than reject what we find problematic, let’s surrender our lens to Him so He can adjust our flawed point of view into alignment with Him.

These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:13-14

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8-9

Day 17: Hiding God's Word in our Hearts - The Secret “Combos” to Success

In the early days of the PS1, “fighting games” really rose to prominence, but becoming good at my favorite games in the genre such as Soul Blade, the Tekken series, and WrestleMania the Arcade Game required me to do more than just button mash my way to victory... I had to go to my local bookstores, gaming stores, and even magazine racks to hunt down and find strategy guides, books, and articles that contained the secrets to playing these games successfully. To truly master them I had to seek, learn, and apply the “combos” that were the keys to conquering the most challenging battles in the game. Trying to play these games without being armed with these combos was a fool’s errand... in the words of G.I. Joe, knowing truly was half the battle.

The Lord’s commandments in the Bible aren’t designed to steal our fun or take our joy... they are the real-world “combos” that contain the secrets to enjoying abundant life on this planet and into eternity. Many times, my real-world challenges aren’t the result of enemy attacks... just the outcome of my own failure to follow the written “combos” He provided in His Word. Let’s take time today to seek out the wisdom that contains the keys to winning our daily battles by hiding His words in our hearts and following them... they are the exclusive path to victory.

How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.

Psalm 119:9-11

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 5:2-3

Day 18:

Kratos and a Painful Lesson in Prioritization

While the tragic backstory of Kratos, the titular character from Sony's "God of War" series, is a fictional account of a video game character, it also serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of placing the pursuit of your personal goals for fame, glory and success above your number one priority... in Kratos's case, his family. Kratos sold his soul to achieve success on the battlefield, but the conquests that he prioritized over those he cared about the most caused him to lose the very thing he was fighting for.

All the emotions that defined him... rage, pain, frustration, and all the destruction that followed all started with Kratos failing to prioritize what mattered the most, and by placing the achievement of his own ambitions on the throne of his life, he exchanged a very temporary gain for a lifetime of pain.

Our priorities in life aren't defined by what we say, but by what we do and the order in which we pursue them... our heart follows our treasure, not the other way around. When we place the Lord on the throne of our heart and His will at the center of all our decisions, He guides us on the proper alignment of our faith, family, and other pursuits... but that doesn't mean we will find the treasure we were seeking. It means we will finally understand where the real treasure is truly found, both in this life and into eternity.

Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

Mark 9:33-35

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:21

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

Day 19: The Sony PlayStation “Slimming” Strategy

If there is one thing Sony has consistently shown over the years, it is their penchant for making a “slim version” of their system in each console generation. While it may seem more expensive and counter-productive to create a system and then release a moderately similar slim version a few short years later, they have a good reason for this... after launching each of their consoles they took the time to evaluate which features were necessary, which were rarely used, and which components could be replaced with more cost-efficient yet still effective alternatives. The result? A system that kept all the strengths of its predecessor and eliminated “dead weight” items that cost more than they were worth, resulting in a leaner, meaner, and slimmer fighting machine.

In our Christian walk we will often find ourselves guided by the Spirit to “shed the weight” of items that are holding us back from fulfilling the full potential of our destiny... and while these areas marked for “slimming” may not necessarily have an obvious negative impact on our life, they still represent time and energy that could be applied towards pursuits of higher value. Let’s put those things behind us that prevent us from running at full speed... past regrets, present temptations, and even future dreams that don’t align with His will. He called it the “narrow way” for a reason.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.
Hebrews 12:1

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.
Philippians 3:8

Day 20:

The Sony PSP - The Battlefield of Style vs. Substance

Based purely on specs, the PlayStation Portable system should've dominated the handheld gaming landscape for many years... it was vastly superior to Nintendo's DS in terms of raw power and graphics capabilities. Visually it was more impressive than its competition in every way, but what Sony's PSP possessed in style it lacked in substance... With very few truly great games that took advantage of all that the hardware had to offer, the PSP struggled to attract a dedicated audience of fans and gradually faded into the annals of history as a forgotten member of the PlayStation family. Meanwhile, the humble DS grew through multiple successful incarnations before merging with the WiiU console to become the Nintendo Switch... the best of both worlds.

Even followers of Christ can be discouraged by the limited external measurements of success that we see when doing what He has placed in our hearts to do... and if we focus our attention on our amount of likes, follows, subscribers, or other outward indications of progress we'll miss what He is doing on the INSIDE of us to develop us towards a future beyond our comprehension. Let's embrace the growth that He is performing underneath the surface through our humble obedience to Him in these quiet places... He always grows our heart before we play our part.

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Day 21: Backwards Compatibility - Balancing Truth With Love

Backwards compatibility is typically one of the most controversial topics during a new console announcement... when Sony launched the PS2, it was fully compatible with the full library of PS1 games. But only select models of the PS3 supported playing PS2 games, and the PS4 was not backwards compatible with ANY games we owned on the previous PlayStation consoles. But after years of moving in a direction that left so many gamers behind, Sony listened to their fans and chose to launch the PS5 console in a way that offered the best of both worlds... a digital version for those who preferred digital options, and a disc-based system that would support playing almost every title in the PS4 library. We are all gamers, but some of us are in different phases... and there's room for all at the table.

In a world designed to divide us across every possible point of difference or disagreement, we are called to unity in the body of Christ... and that means actively pursuing peace with each other and understanding that some of us are still at the PS1/PS2 phase of our faith while others are playing the game on a digital-only PS5. We are all growing in our relationship with the Lord and His truth, so let's show all the "backwards compatibility" of grace today... uncompromising truth must always be accompanied by His love.

Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.
Romans 14:4,10,19

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.
1 Corinthians 13:1-2

Day 22: Working as a Team - The Principle of Partnership

While many gaming franchises are defined by a singular character such as Halo's Master Chief or Tomb Raider's Lara Croft, Sony designed their platforming mascots to take on their adventures in pairs or groups... Jak and Daxter, Ratchet and Clank, and Sly Cooper's trio all faced missions that could only be conquered through teamwork. But this wasn't just about strength in numbers... these partnerships were built to complement each other's weaknesses by leveraging their different personalities and unique strengths to solve problems and overcome obstacles that couldn't be completed alone. And by accepting help that came in very unexpected forms, they finally achieved the victories they were seeking.

The necessity of teamwork when taking on our missions for the Lord are found all throughout the Bible... Moses had Aaron, Paul had Silas, and even Jesus consistently brought his trio of Peter, James and John into his most critical battles. But the partners that the Lord brings into our lives to help us will rarely be what we expect... they exist to challenge and grow us, sharpening our iron by telling us what we need to hear and offering a different perspective while sharing the same goal. We all need accountability partners, so let's embrace the help He has sent us today... none of us can get where we are going alone.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."
Matthew 18:19-20

Day 23: The PS Classic - All Vibe, No Substance

In the midst of the “retro mini” renaissance that saw both Nintendo and Sega release miniature versions of their consoles pre-loaded with most of their greatest hits, Sony decided to jump on the bandwagon and launch the “PlayStation Classic”... but while it had the look and feel of the original PlayStation that we all know and love, something was missing. Specifically, the GAMES. Most of the iconic games that made the PS1 a must-own console was not developed or owned by Sony, so they couldn’t include them in the meager list of twenty games that the PS Classic contained. The PS Classic certainly gave off the right vibes, but it lacked the content we were seeking... you can’t give what you don’t possess.

As followers of Christ, we have an expectation of shining His light and carrying His love, truth, and grace into the world around us... but like the PS Classic, we can only give to others what we ourselves possess first. We are not merely conduits... we are vessels who must first be filled with His love, joy, and peace before we are able to authentically share it with others. Let’s ingest His Word and seek Him in prayer today, allowing Him to fill us with His unlimited love, eternal truth, unspeakable joy, and peace that passes all understanding. Our world needs more than just good vibes; it needs to see Jesus living in us.

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

Day 24:

Shadow of the Colossus - The Hidden Danger of Following our Heart

Shadow of the Colossus stands tall as one of the most iconic games in PlayStation history, with the game being released on the PS2, remastered on the PS3, and then getting fully remade on the PS4. But Wander's story is a cautionary tale, as his single-minded pursuit of what his heart desired the most led him down a selfish path of destruction that would impact the entire world around him. Following a voice that promised to give him everything he wanted without ever divulging the full price, each step Wander took came at an ever-escalating cost... and at his journey's end, it became clear that he was the villain of his own story. He had been misled... not just by the voice, but by his heart.

Our heart is an unreliable guide, seeking what it desires without fully understanding the hidden costs of its pursuits. Even Christ was offered the world if He was willing to compromise His path to achieve it, so let's be mindful of the voices we are listening to... our heart's desires may be noble, but only the Father knows the right path for us to take. Let's place our pursuit of Him and His will at the center of our thoughts and allow His Word to have the final say in every decision we make today... good intentions are a poor substitute for His divine directions. It's only when He is put first that our path becomes clear.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.
Jeremiah 17:9-10

Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.
Proverbs 4:23

Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.
Psalm 37:4-5

Day 25: Sony's "Dreams" - Seeing One Small Piece of a Larger Puzzle

The act of making a game is something I always aspired to do one day, so when Sony released "Dreams" on PS4 it gave me the opportunity to finally turn my ideas for creating the "perfect game" into a reality... but after a few hours of tinkering with it, all I had crafted was a big open space that wasn't anywhere close to the dreams I carried in my imagination. While I've always respected the talent of those who designed my favorite games,

I gained a new appreciation for all the mechanisms that must work together flawlessly for the game to function. Sure, I may still disagree with a narrative choice or wish that some gameplay aspects are better tuned to my preferences, but after my time with "Dreams" I learned I'm a much better player than a creator.

In the real world, I've often had "dreams" that I wish the Lord would take into consideration... but He sees the bigger picture that includes many moving parts (including the needs of others) that I lack the ability to consider. He sees beyond our surface-level view into a grander narrative that impacts the planet for generations to come. Our prayers for Him to fulfill the dreams we carry in our hearts should always be balanced with a heart prepared for Him to reshape us and our dreams into serving His divine plan... we only see one part of the grand masterpiece He's building.

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

Romans 8:26

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 12

Day 26:

Ico - A Helping Hand that Goes Both Ways

I've never been a fan of escort missions in my games, so the idea of a game that is essentially one LONG escort mission sounded terrible... until Ico came along and changed my mind. The act of guiding the defenseless princess Yorda by hand through each level as well as protecting her from enemy attacks was exhausting and at times frustrating... especially when you add in the fact that Yorda spoke an entirely different language than Ico did, making communication difficult. But the challenges they were tasked with solving were designed to be completed by both... and as Ico led and saved Yorda, it turns out that she was helping him as well.

The Lord has called us to do more than simply share His love with others...

He told us to make disciples of all who are willing and shine His light to guide others out of the darkness. Will it be messy, time-consuming, and frustrating? Yep. Will it pull us out of our comfort zones as we lead others by the hand through battles that they aren't able to fight on their own? Absolutely. But He gave us a light so we can share it with those who are in need... and the act of pouring ourselves out so others can be filled is part of how we learn to be more like Him. Let's reach out to those around us today and be the encouragement they need... we may find they are actually the one helping us.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

Day 27: PlayStation's Most Iconic Villains - Pride that Goes Before the Fall

While the most iconic villains from PlayStation's greatest hits don't share a lot of similarities, they all have one thing in common... pride. From Dr. Neo Cortex to Sephiroth, each one of these epic antagonists fell victim to their own self-serving ambitions to rule the world. Believing themselves and their goals to be higher than others, they took the gifts they were given that could've been used to serve others to carry out their selfish schemes instead. In their arrogance, they failed to recognize the threat that seemingly weaker opponents such as Crash Bandicoot and Cloud Strife represented to their plans... the parasite of pride in their heart was eventually their undoing.

Pride is not just the original sin in Lucifer's heart; it is also one of his favorite weapons he uses to take down a child of God from within. From King David and Hezekiah to Peter's denial of Christ, even the best of us battles with the temptation to put our confidence in ourselves and the gifts we've been given instead of the Giver of these gifts. The moment we turn our gaze inward with pride instead of upward in gratitude as well as outward to help others we become the villain of our own story. Let's run with full confidence of who we are in Christ while still remembering we only possess what we've been given... in Him we have everything, without Him we are nothing.

*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.
Proverbs 16:18*

*For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he
deceives himself.
Galatians 6:3*

*For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and
the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.
1 John 2:16*

Day 28:

Taking the PlayStation Online - A Matter of Bandwidth

I'll never forget my first experience playing a PS2 game online... I purchased a network adaptor and the longest Ethernet cable I could find, put the installation disc into my system, followed all the prompts, and once it was connected, I loaded a game and got ready to play. So far so good... but as soon as the match started, I realized that something was wrong. Between my character glitching all over the screen, the significant delay between pressing a button and seeing the action occur, and the frame rate issues the game was completely unplayable... I performed all the correct steps to set it up, but I never increased the bandwidth of my internet connection. These games weren't designed to run on my 56k dialup connection... I needed a stronger connection to enjoy all the benefits of an online experience.

The Lord has promised so many benefits to all who follow Him with their whole hearts, but a surface level connection with our Creator will never produce the fruit that only comes from a life that is deeply rooted in Him. If we are not experiencing the fullness of His promises, let's take a closer look at the soil we're offering Him. The Lord can't penetrate our hearts and lives any deeper than we allow Him, so let's open the bandwidth of our time, thoughts, and actions to Him today. Great fruit requires deep roots.

Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!

Matthew 13:18-23

Day 29:

The Last Guardian - Hands that were Designed to Heal

One of the most beautiful parts of “The Last Guardian” is the way that the player cares for Trico, the massive creature that befriends him and protects him through the game. As Trico takes damage, it is the player’s responsibility to find and remove the spears that have injured it... spears it cannot reach and remove on its own. Conversely, failure by the player to address and treat Trico’s wounds prevents Trico from moving forward, and what may appear on the surface to be a refusal to cooperate is actually an inability to move forward until these wounds have been identified and healed. And by acting as the healing hands that Trico needed, they were able to reach places they could only access together.

All of us fall short of the Lord’s will, and these moments of failure create wounds that don’t necessarily heal on their own... and that is where we as the body of Christ should come in and remove those spears, providing comfort and healing without passing judgment. Christ himself is the only One qualified to throw stones, and He chose to offer forgiveness to the repentant. We have been gifted the ministry of reconciliation, not condemnation... let’s choose to be a place of safety and refuge where the injured receive His healing love and grace. We are His hands of mercy to pull out spears, not add salt to wounds.

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:1-2

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Day 30: Syphon Filter - Losing the Plot

While the Syphon Filter series may have lacked the gravitas of competing “spy” titles like Metal Gear Solid and Splinter Cell, the globe-trotting adventures of Gabriel Logan and his allies to rid the world of a dangerous bio-weapon was still a mission worth playing... until the series shifted the focus off of Gabe and onto his followers in Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain. Once the star of the show, he was now sidelined in his own series, kept around as a non-playable character to provide plot exposition while the game shifted its focus onto these newly created characters. What started out as a promising franchise “lost the plot” by failing to maintain focus on the main character, and despite trying to revive interest later with two PSP entries, the damage was already done and the franchise never recovered.

While the Lord certainly anoints and uses many people on His behalf to minister and teach His followers, we must be cautious not to place them on a pedestal and shift our focus off Jesus, the main character of the story. Even the best human ministers may fall and disappoint us, and if we place our confidence in them our faith will be shattered in the process. Let’s keep Christ at the center of our attention, allowing Him to speak through His servants without replacing His presence in our lives with their messages. Every message should point us towards Him, because the story is His alone.

*Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?
1 Corinthians 1:12-13*

*For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.
1 Timothy 2:5*

Star Wars

Day 1:

The Best of Times and The Worst of Times – The Path to a “New Hope” through Star Wars: Clone Wars

As a lifelong Star Wars fan, I have endured the highest of highs as well as the lowest of lows. While the good has typically outweighed the awful, some of my most cherished experiences were born from things I didn’t really enjoy or appreciate at first. For example, I didn’t care for the first animated Clone Wars movie, but my appreciation for the Clone Wars animated series and all of its spin-offs only grew larger over the years... and without it, I would’ve never gotten to enjoy some of the best Star Wars projects ever made, as well as missed out on characters like Ahsoka, the Bad Batch, and many others who were only introduced because it existed first.

Just as there are parts of Star Wars that aren’t my favorite, there are many portions of my real-world adventures that I didn’t really appreciate at the time I was going through them... and if I had been given the option, I would’ve chosen to skip them entirely. But it was through these painful and unwanted experiences that many of the most important and beautiful moments of my life were born, and I gained new insight through these lessons that I couldn’t have learned in my previous places of comfort. As we face today’s trials, let’s look for what the Lord is doing to grow us through them, not just what He is doing to end them... a “new hope” is hidden within.

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

Day 2: Grogu/Baby Yoda - When We Have More Questions than Answers

The backstory for Grogu (or “Baby Yoda” for those who still refuse to accept his legal name) has been the cause of more speculation in the Star Wars universe than the age-old question of who shot first, Solo or Greedo. Where did he come from? Is he related to Yoda? Why doesn’t he speak? What is he doing during the sequel trilogy? While some of these may eventually get answered, many times the answers we receive only generate more questions... some we will never get the answer to, and others we may get an answer to but still won’t fully understand. But that’s okay, because I’m still enjoying the ride even when I don’t know exactly where it is going.

While it’s not what any of us probably wants to hear, the Lord isn’t required to answer any of our questions... and even if He chose to, we wouldn’t truly understand most of His answers anyway. He is the Almighty, All-knowing, Sovereign God of all creation, and His thoughts are far beyond our comprehension because He sees past our present difficulties to a future that we wouldn’t have anticipated. Let’s avoid the temptation to question His wisdom when our lives don’t make sense and instead accept by faith that He is holding our situation securely in His hands. His ways are higher than ours, so let’s submit to His divine will today... His way is the ONLY way.

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

Romans 9:20-21

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8-9

Day 3:

The Star Wars Cantina Band - Making a Joyful Noise (Even in the Darkest of Places)

Obi-Wan Kenobi's warning before entering the infamous cantina on Mos Eisley prepared me for the worst, and his iconic line, "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy," was accurate from almost every point of view except one. While there certainly WAS more scum and villainy than you could shake a lightsaber at contained Inside, the mood was owned by one of the liveliest bands in movie history with their unique style of light jazz. You can probably still hear the music in your head while reading these words... the odd juxtaposition of the deepest darkness that the galaxy had to offer was offset by a joyful noise that could not be denied regardless of the environment they were in at the time.

We don't get to determine how dark the valley of the shadow of death that we walk through in life will be, but we always have control of the soundtrack that we create for it. No matter how much "scum and villainy" we find ourselves surrounded by today, we still control the mood that we choose to take into these hostile environments. As a child of God, we can make a joyful noise in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, knowing that our Lord is here with us in the midst of them, inhabiting our praises and using this opportunity to break EVERY chain that binds those who are seeking to be set free.

Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands! Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

Psalms 100:1-4

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed.

Acts 16:25-26

Day 4: Overcoming our “Sin Nature” - Contending With “Order 66”

The darkest moment in all of Star Wars is the infamous command to “Execute Order 66,” as the previously loyal clone troopers suddenly and violently betrayed their Jedi companions, culminating with that fateful march on the Jedi Temple. What we didn’t know at the time is that the clones had been “programmed” to react in this manner... a “behavioral modification” chip had been placed in their heads that compelled them to perform these previously unthinkable actions. The only solution? That chip overriding their thoughts had to be disabled by surgical intervention... despite their best intentions, they couldn’t simply overpower it by sheer will alone.

Every one of us has an “Order 66” chip in our heads... a “sin nature” we are born with that can overpower our good intentions and compelling us into shameful actions. No matter how hard we try on our own, we can’t simply “exert enough willpower” to override our inherently selfish programming... we need the surgical precision of the Great Physician to remove these dark impulses and replace them with a renewed mind that is fully submitted to His Spirit. Let’s fully surrender every thought in our minds to the Lord today... Christ came to break every chain that once held us bound, not teach us how to comfortably live with them.

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Romans 7:21-25a

Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.
2 Corinthians 10:5

Day 5:

Jedi Knights, Padawans, and Servant Leadership - Helping Others in the Midst of our Own Storms

The mutually beneficial relationship between a Jedi Knight and their padawan is a pretty unique dynamic... while neither of them is a “master” yet (sorry Anakin), both are actively giving as well as receiving while still being in the position of “learners” themselves. While it can seem counterintuitive to have someone who has not yet fully mastered a skill be charged with the responsibility of demonstrating it to others, both participants support their partner’s growth as well as their own by unselfishly serving each other through their shared struggles. It is only through the alignment of their needs that they are placed in the perfect position to receive what they are seeking by giving what they have first.

The Lord doesn’t wait for us to feel like we have achieved “mastery” of our current challenges and situations in life before using us to serve others.

We are called to act as living conduits of His grace amid the personal storms we are currently enduring, supporting others in their moments of need with the same comfort we are actively receiving from the Father in our own situations. The little that we possess can’t be multiplied by Him until we choose to give it away, so let’s freely offer His gifts of encouragement and love to others today. We will often find the answers to our own prayers in the process.

Blessed be the God and my Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Day 6: Reborn for a Purpose - The Redemption of the Millennium Falcon

The Millennium Falcon is arguably one of the most popular and recognizable “spaceships” of all time, but it hasn’t always been known for its speed and maneuverability alone. The Falcon was designed as a smuggling vessel, leveraging its capabilities for use in all kinds of illegal activities prior to the more heroic actions of its later days. But the ship that had previously only been known by thieves and pirates as a ferry for their ill-gotten gains would one day use those very same cargo holds to shield and protect the galaxy’s greatest hope... and when it was time to take down a Death Star, the Falcon’s unique design was exactly what the situation called for.

If you’re anything like me, you’ve made many decisions in life that you regret and wish you could change... but while we can’t simply erase our “smuggling days,” through repentance and reconciliation with the Father we CAN change our smuggling ways and use the very same vessel that once brought us shame to serve His glorious purpose. No matter how we started our lives, the Lord knew every choice we would make before we ever made it... and what we once used to serve the darkness can still be used for His glory if we submit ourselves to Him. He doesn’t just repurpose us... He reveals our true purpose that was waiting to come into the light all along.

And Joshua spared Rahab the harlot, her father’s household, and all that she had. So she dwells in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua 6:25

By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

Hebrews 11:31

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

2 Timothy 2:20-21

Day 7:

Darth Maul's Second Blade - The "Phantom Menace" Concealed in our Temptations

If you watched it in theaters unspoiled, then you will never forget that moment... the feeling of shock when Darth Maul ignited the SECOND blade on his lightsaber and we all realized that he was a far more dangerous opponent than any of us had prepared for. And this reveal was more than mere posturing or Maul showing a flair for the dramatic... despite being outnumbered, he quickly proved his lethality by defeating a highly respected Jedi Master before narrowly falling to Kenobi in battle. We all knew that Maul was trouble, but the full extent of his capabilities was concealed until he had been engaged in combat, and his hidden blade was discovered the hard way. A true "Phantom Menace" indeed... the deepest cuts come when we underestimate a threat.

All the sinful desires we face in life feature a blade that we see and a blade that we don't... until it is too late. Our enemy doesn't tempt us into battle with the "big sins"; he lures us into a fateful dance with a small act of dishonesty or a "harmless glance," and the destructive powers they conceal aren't fully revealed until we have taken the bait. Even a brief dalliance with an unhealthy desire is a battle we won't win, and it is the "little foxes" that spoil the vine, so let's take even the "smallest" of temptations seriously and submit every thought to Christ today.

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1:14-15

Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.

Song of Solomon 2:15

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

James 4:7

Day 8:

The Grace by Which We Stand - The Redemption of Anakin Skywalker

Anakin Skywalker's story arc contains one of the most stunning and painful falls from grace in cinematic history... from a noble and heroic Jedi Knight who performed countless acts of selfless bravery to transforming into the very face of evil he had been chosen to destroy in the galaxy. If we were able to watch the Clone Wars series without knowing he would eventually become Darth Vader, it would be unthinkable to believe that he would betray the entire Jedi Order and duel his best friend Obi-Wan to the death. But even though Anakin made a horrific series of choices that made him the villain of the story, there was still a redemptive path available to him... and while his return to the light didn't undo all the pain he had caused, he was still the one who was chosen to take the Empire down.

We are all one selfish decision in life away from becoming the villain in someone else's story as well as our own, but there's still a full redemptive arc back to the Father that is available to even a fallen Jedi turned Sith. Before we judge someone else's past too harshly, let's remember that every one of us is only standing because of the unearned grace we've received from Christ... and it is that same amazing grace that He extends to even the darkest of hearts, bringing them back into the light so they can finish their story.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5:1-2

Day 9:

Knights of the Old Republic – Darth Revan and Being Our Own Worst Enemy

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic is easily my favorite game of all time, with an epic story that takes the classic “amnesiac protagonist” gaming trope and spins it into gold. (SPOILER ALERT!) When the game finally reveals that my character with memory loss wasn’t a Jedi at all but was actually the brainwashed, villainous Darth Revan that I’d spent the entire game chasing, my mind was blown. I was LITERALLY my own worst enemy... I just didn’t know it at the time. But once I realized who I truly was, the choice was mine... would I choose to return to that dark path, or take this opportunity to tell a new story despite who I originally was inside?

In our real world, we deal with very real spiritual enemies, but our most dangerous adversary is hidden within each of us... our own hearts. If I’m being honest, I’ve let myself down far more times than any other villain from the story of my life, and despite my very best efforts, I could never subdue that darkness on my own. Even in the life of a follower of Christ, the enemy we carry within will remain present inside for the full duration of our story, but if we will intentionally choose to submit every thought to the obedience of Christ and follow His leadership daily, we can resist the pull of the dark side that once defined us and walk confidently in the light of our true destiny.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:18-19, 24-25a

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:1, 8

Day 10: Star Wars “Bad Batch” - Defective Design or Fearfully and Wonderfully Made?

One of my favorite spin-offs to come from the animated Star Wars: Clone Wars series is the “Bad Batch” ... a group of “failed” clones who were deemed unfit to serve alongside the rest of the clone troopers due to their perceived imperfections. Originally considered defective, each member of Clone Force 99 revealed that while they weren’t designed exactly like their clone brethren, they were uniquely enhanced in ways that made them the perfect choice to take on and complete specific missions that only they could accomplish. From elite sniping skills to unmatched technical intellect, each seemingly inferior clone’s limitations were their superpowers... and when they combined them together into one unit, they were unstoppable.

We all struggle with seeing ourselves as being “fearfully and wonderfully made,” especially when parts of us and our lives contain what we consider to be imperfections when comparing ourselves to others. But the Lord designed each of us in a manner that is both unique as well as perfectly aligned for our specific calling in life, and those things we wish we could change are meant to be placed into His hands to support the completion of our missions. When we look in the mirror, we aren’t looking at a mistake... we are each exactly what the body of Christ needs.

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.

Psalm 139:13-16

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.

Romans 12:4-6a

Day 11:

The Fall of the Jedi Temple - How the Wise Became Fools

The tragic fall of the entire Jedi order and the overthrow of the Jedi temple in “Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith” isn’t easy to watch, but it becomes even more painful as we realize how easily preventable it was. The Jedi were at the height of their knowledge and influence at the time, but they were lulled into a fatal state of overconfidence by their own success, blinding them to an adversary hidden in plain sight who took advantage of their clouded judgment and manipulated their mission. They allowed the very thing they were meant to stand against to not only infiltrate them but compromise their values... believing themselves to be wise, they became fools and lost the galaxy as a result.

In the life of a believer, the greatest danger we face is not the direct attacks of our enemy... it is the compromises we permit to exist in our lives that represent the deepest and truest threats to our spiritual well-being. Our body is the very temple of the Spirit of God, and it does not run on the operating system of this world with its competing priorities and values.

Let’s be mindful of both who and what we allow to have access to our temples and speak into our lives under the disguise of being “harmless” ... the light of Christ that we carry in us has no fellowship with the darkness of this world other than to save it.

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?

James 4:4b-5

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

1 John 2:15-17

Day 12: The Legacy of the Sith - Being Played for a Fool

What do Darth Maul, Count Dooku, and Asajj Ventress have in common? While each of them enjoyed a season of being the prize pupil of a Sith lord, they were ultimately betrayed by the evil master that they had loyally served. Each of them were used, abused, and eventually cast aside once they became expendable because that is the way of the Sith. They were never truly loved or appreciated... they were simply a means to an end, an asset to be deployed when useful and abandoned when their purpose had been accomplished. They gave their entire lives to serve a master that never cared about them, and in the end, they were all played for a fool.

There are many enticing sins in this world that may seem to offer pleasure for a season, but everyone from Samson to Judas who have taken a bite from that fruit only found betrayal and heartache on the other side. Our sinful desires will always promise love, joy and peace but any temporary benefits will always end in pain and regret. While choosing the path of following Christ and denying ourselves isn't always easy, it is the only decision that offers us the option to serve a Master who chose to serve us first. Sin never loves us back and will always leave us high and dry... Christ loved us first, loved us best, and He has promised to never leave us.

*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8*

*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.
Matthew 20:28*

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23*

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.
Galatians 6:7-8*

Day 13: Lego Star Wars - Broken to Be Rebuilt

The Lego Star Wars games are a bit of a guilty pleasure for me... the simple joy of smashing and blasting almost everything in the level into little Lego bits never gets old. But while most of the items in the game are designed to be broken apart, the secrets to advancing in the game are often concealed in the shrapnel left behind from these battles. These bits of Lego pieces only reach their full potential after their original configuration has been seemingly destroyed... when they fall apart, they can now be rebuilt into something bigger and stronger that serves a better purpose than before. Taking these broken pieces and turning them into something new is the way the game is designed... and often it is the only way to keep moving forward.

The life of a follower of Christ is far from easy and following Him often feels like a target was placed on our back... because it has. But even when the attacks of our enemy feel like they are breaking our spirit into little pieces, it is in this place of brokenness that the Lord strengthens and perfects us. Let's resist the enemy's attempts to shake our faith with his intimidating roar... our true purpose is revealed through these broken pieces, and the Lord will use the battles that were designed by our enemy to break us down to build us up even stronger than before.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

1 Peter 5:8-10

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Day 14: Star Wars Jedi Survivor – Lost and Forgotten or Hidden for a Purpose?

The story of Cal Kestis that plays out over the course of the Star Wars: Jedi series fills in a few of the gaps in the Star Wars timeline, and it also introduces us to a previously unknown survivor of Order 66. Cal errantly believed that he was “lost to the force” and destined to live his life in hiding, but his destiny wasn’t merely to survive, and he was never “lost”. He was intentionally hidden by the force to keep him safe from the lethal Inquisitors that were hunting him and other Jedi like him down until he had grown strong enough to face and defeat them... and along the way he would achieve his hidden purpose by unlocking the pieces of a puzzle that would one day help save the entire galaxy.

If the trials you’re dealing with have made you feel “lost” to the Lord, you are in pretty good company... many of our “heroes of faith” have felt the same way, and even Jesus cried out “Why have You forsaken Me?” from His cross. The Father never loses track of us or abandons us no matter how crazy it gets down here. We all face times of feeling unseen, unheard, or hidden while He completes the work He’s doing in us, but we are never out of His sight... we are simply being shielded from view until we are ready for the next mission He has for us. We’re more than just survivors in Christ... we are conquerors.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35-39

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31

Day 15: Star Wars KOTOR - When the Loyalty Missions ARE the Real Mission

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic is one of my all-time favorite games for many reasons, and one of them is the unforgettable cast of characters we meet across our journey. From the “odd couple” pairing of Mission Vao and Zaalbar to the eccentric droid HK-47, each party member had their own reasons for joining my team... but if I wanted to unlock their full potential, I had to get to know them so I could learn and complete their specific “loyalty missions”. These very personal quests may not have had anything to do with my original mission, but they were the only way to save them and achieve their best ending.

The most impactful missions we take on in life will always involve people... every part of Christ’s earthly ministry was based on His priority to seek and save the lost. But many times, our assignments may appear so small and personal on the surface that the eternal significance of them isn’t always immediately obvious. Let’s look at these seemingly inconsequential side missions the same way that Jesus did when He went out of His way to save the woman at the well... in His eyes there are no small quests and every soul is priceless. Let’s act as if today’s “loyalty mission” is the one that completely changes the game, because it might be the one that ends up mattering the most when the final credits roll.

*Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’
Matthew 25:34-40*

*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Luke 19:10*

Day 16:

Ahsoka Tano - The Refiner's Fire of Rejection and Pain

The character of Ahsoka didn't exactly receive the warmest of welcomes when she originally debuted in the Star Wars: Clone Wars animated movie... both her fictional mentor Anakin as well as the real-world Star Wars fanbase perceived her as an unnecessary addition to the Obi-Wan/Anakin dynamic that already worked so well. But Ahsoka pushed through the painful experience of being an unwanted padawan to grow into a feared warrior with few equals, even defeating Darth Maul himself in combat. Despite all the losses she experienced and even seeing her own mentor turn to the dark side, Ahsoka didn't let her struggle define her... she used the pain to refine her into a hero who has transcended the Clone Wars series to become a franchise icon.

Real-world heroines such as Sarah, Ruth and Esther could have easily allowed the pain that caused one to be barren, left one a widow, and another an orphan to define them... but they pushed through these hardships and tragedies to become the champions that their stories called for. Our hard times in life will often feel unnecessarily painful, but they are the refining fire the Lord uses to bring unbelievable miracles into our lives. If our story feels unreasonably hard, it's proof of an incredible future destiny that couldn't have been achieved any other way.

But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."
Ruth 1:16

By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.
Hebrews 11:11

Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?
Esther 4:14

Day 17: The Death Star - The Truth About the Weapons Formed Against Us

The Death Star is one of the deadliest projects in the entire sci-fi universe, a monstrous battle station designed to both intimidate and destroy all who dared to defy will of the evil Empire. But in Star Wars: Rogue One, we found that this horrific construct was designed by an unwilling scientist who had deliberately engineered a fatal weakness into the system... one that would later be exploited by the Rebel fleet. Even though the enemy was able to successfully bring their plans into reality, it was already doomed to fail... and the technological terror meant to inspire fear in the galaxy was destined to bring people like Luke Skywalker into an intersection with their destiny that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

As followers of Christ, our lives will be filled with challenging situations designed by our enemy to control our actions and conquer our faith. We have an active adversary who will form plans and develop weapons against us for the entire duration of our earthly lifetime... but we serve a Savior who takes the very things constructed to intimidate and destroy us to serve His purpose on this planet. Weapons WILL be formed against us by an opponent bent on defeating us, but even when it seems like they are winning, we can rest assured that the Lord will not only turn them to our good but use them to fulfill our destiny!

"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me," says the Lord.
Isaiah 54:17

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

Day 18: When Victory Looks Like Defeat - Obi-Wan Kenobi's Last Stand

With the releases of the prequel movies as well as a prequel streaming series, we've learned that Obi-Wan Kenobi defeated Darth Vader at least twice in a direct lightsaber battle... which makes it all the harder to understand why he simply dropped his guard and allowed Vader to defeat him in "A New Hope". That moment didn't make sense to me at the time... but all these years later I've realized that even though he left Vader broken and defeated more than once, Obi-Wan never truly accomplished his mission until that moment... when he saw Luke and Leia reunited as adults for the first time and prepared to end the Emperor's reign of terror once and for all. That sly smile as he lowered his sword wasn't just a feeling of peace... it was one of victory.

Even as followers of Christ, we will all experience times in which we appear to have been defeated... at least by the way victory is typically measured in the physical world. But when we choose to surrender ourselves in full obedience to Christ regardless of the outcome, we can experience joy and peace even during what looks like a "losing battle". We can smile and find rest in the knowledge that the real battle has already been fought and won in heavenly places... our part was just to remain faithful to His plan all the way through the end.

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 15:54-56

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
1 John 5:4-5

Day 19:

Andor – Burning Our Lives for a Sunrise We Will Never See

The events of the “Andor” series as well as the Star Wars: Rogue One movie finally revealed the massive amount of sacrifice that was involved in acquiring the Death Star plans as well as setting in motion all the events that would build up to the Rebel Alliance toppling the Empire. The heroic actions of these imperfect but completely committed rebels is best summed up in Luthen’s iconic line, “I burn my life to make a sunrise that I know I’ll never see”. All these fictional characters made massive sacrifices for a future they never got to personally enjoy... all because they believed that saving each of their worlds was a cause worthy of giving their lives for.

Everyone who has chosen to follow in our Savior’s footsteps has chosen to live a life of service and sacrifice, and the truth is that we may not get to see or enjoy the fruits of our labor on this side of eternity. But we aren’t simply giving our lives away... we are investing them so all can see the “Son” rise through our unselfish, sacrificial actions as we willingly choose to burn our lives for His sake as well as theirs. We will all see the temporary flame of this life flicker out one day... let’s place our lamps into His hands and share His light to our world so it will continue to burn long after we are gone. Let’s shine boldly for Him today... the hope found in Him is worth the price.

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

John 12:24-25

He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

Matthew 10:38-39

Day 20: The Fall and Rebirth of Bo-Katan - This is the Way

Many of the most memorable characters in the Star Wars franchise are introduced to us with a problematic background painted in shades of gray... characters such as Bo-Katan Kryze, a Mandalorian warrior who errantly joined a rogue faction known as the “Death Watch” to pursue her goals of a stronger, united Mandalore. While she had positive intentions, she had chosen the wrong allies that led her down a very dark and compromising path to achieve them. Possessing a few similar goals didn’t mean they shared her core values or convictions, and they ultimately betrayed both her and their cause. Following her own way only led to the very outcome she was trying to prevent... fulfilling her destiny meant she had to find and follow the one true “way”.

Even our most noble and well-intended actions are doomed to failure when they aren’t aligned with the Lord’s will and His “way” ... there aren’t any shortcuts He will accept to achieve His purposes and His plans are non-negotiable, leaving no room for compromise. Our efforts to accomplish His will without following His way will only result in frustration and failure, so let’s yield full control of our minds and the temptation to do things our own way. The Lord never asked us to understand His directions... He simply told us to trust and obey them. His way isn’t just the best way... it’s the only way.

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.
Proverbs 14:12*

*Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,”
whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.
Isaiah 30:21*

*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”
John 14:6*

Day 21:

Star Wars - The Perfect Group of Misfits Chosen to Deliver a "New Hope"

One of the reasons I believe the original Star Wars has stood the test of time is because the original "rebels" we fell in love with weren't the traditional "hero squad" we'd expect to take on and defeat the larger, better organized Empire. Our heroes were a pair of orphans, a wanted smuggler and his partner in crime, a couple of eccentric droids, and a bizarre old hermit... a crew that on the surface would have been deemed unqualified or unfit for service by most people when assembling a "dream team". But these ragtag rebels with their complicated backstories and their unique skills were exactly what this story called for... misfits who happened to be the perfect fit for this specific mission.

The Lord doesn't look at our past issues or our even our present status in life the same way we do when choosing who He will use... He looks at our heart. Jesus selected some unqualified fishermen, an unpopular tax collector, a woman with a history of demonic possession, and a few other "scoundrels" and He commissioned them to go out and change the world... and they did. Let's not be discouraged by who we once were or even what we are now... no matter what our past or present holds, He knew it all before He ever selected us to follow Him. And He still chose us as the perfectly cast "misfits" for our missions, too!

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Day 22:

Anakin's Downfall - The Importance of a Grateful Heart

While there were many contributing factors that led to the downfall of Anakin Skywalker, one of the largest is how he took the special gifts that he had been given for granted. From an early age Anakin demonstrated skills far beyond his years, but even when he was given opportunities that others would never receive, he still wanted more and was never satisfied. His incredible gifts never seemed to be quite enough for him... Anakin was a talented and respected Jedi knight who needed the position of master to validate him, an unparalleled force user who was so completely consumed with his need for "more" that he failed to recognize and appreciate all of the things that he had already been given.

When we are in a position of either want or need, it can be easy to take all of the gifts that we've already been given for granted... and when we fail to see and appreciate the blessings and favor that the Lord has already given to us, our lack of gratitude becomes a poison that slowly chokes all of the joy from our lives and replaces it with bitterness and resentment. Let's take a moment to be truly thankful for the unmerited grace and love we've received from the Father... the only path to having peace and joy at ALL times is to never permit what we lack to steal our joy from the blessings that we already possess.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

Day 23:

Obi-Wan Kenobi - A Light Forged in a Dark Place

In the first six Star Wars movies, Obi-Wan Kenobi was presented as a consistent beacon of light who shined brightly in even the most hopeless of situations, but in the time period between the “Revenge of the Sith” and “A New Hope” his entire world was flipped upside down. Obi-Wan’s beloved Jedi Order had fallen, his best friend had betrayed him, and his faith had ebbed to its lowest point. Haunted by all the pain and losses he’d endured, Obi-Wan felt like he had become disconnected from the force... the very source of his strength. But Obi-Wan hadn’t been forgotten or forsaken, and his most critical mission had just begun. What looked like defeat was just a season of trials and tribulations that he had to endure before a new hope could dawn.

We will all face periods of time in life when it feels like the darkness has surrounded us, but we can’t permit the difficulty level of the trials that we’re facing to disconnect us from our faith in Christ, no matter how challenging they are. The Lord’s strength wasn’t revealed by how He AVOIDED His struggles, but by how He faithfully ENDURED His times of pain and suffering. Our light is most necessary when the darkness is the most prevalent, so let’s hold fast to our faith through our storm... we WILL experience the joy of a new hope on the other side of this battle.

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.

Hebrews 10:32-33, 35-36

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

1 Peter 4:12-13

Day 24: The Death Star “Trench Run” - Faith in What We Can’t See

In Star Wars: A New Hope, there was a defining moment during the infamous “trench run” on the Death Star when Obi-Wan Kenobi instructed Luke to let go of what he thought he needed to fulfill his mission (the onboard targeting system) and reach out through the force instead. While these tools were intended to help him, Luke’s reliance on them was hindering him from achieving his goals because they restricted his sight to what was visible in the physical realm. It was only when Luke shut them down and placed his faith in what he couldn’t physically see that his path to victory finally became possible.

Walking by faith is more than simply trusting in the Lord to do His part... it means consciously letting go of all our perceived limitations and closing down anything in our lives that tempts us to lean on our own understanding instead of His. The Lord has promised to supply every one of our needs, but many times His provision isn’t fully revealed to us until we’ve removed all those distractions and stopped depending on our own capabilities for the answers to our prayers. Let’s allow the Lord to guide us in all we do today, even if we can’t see how it will all work out from our vantage point. Belief doesn’t transform into faith until we choose to close our eyes, let go of what we see, and follow His voice.

We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:18

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

Hebrews 11:1-3

Day 25:

Anakin, Padmé, and the Importance of Dealing With our Pain

The doomed relationship between Padmé and Anakin in the Star Wars prequels is one of the most heartbreaking parts of the entire saga... two star-crossed lovers torn apart by past pains and unresolved issues that ultimately led to the most tragic outcome possible. Anakin never took the time to fully process the grief he carried from his past or deal with his frustrations to the point of resolution, and his inability to reach a place of inner peace completely undermined his efforts to bring peace to both his home as well as his galaxy. The old adage that “people who are hurting hurt other people” was proven to be true... it’s only when we allow our private pain to be healed that we can be a conduit for peace.

We all endure times of testing, trials, and pain on this planet, but if we hold onto these pockets of hurt and grief instead of submitting them fully to Christ for healing, we will only end up hurting the people that we love the most. The Lord sees and understands our pain, He can relate to every heartache we will ever experience, and He is as near to our broken hearts as we allow Him to be. Let’s lay down the burdens that our past and present traumas have inflicted on us, call out to Him for healing, and surrender our pain into His loving arms. The first step to helping others is to allow the Great Physician to heal our hearts first.

As for me, I will call upon God; and the Lord shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice. Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.

Psalm 55:16-17, 22

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

Psalm 34:17-19

Day 26: Bad Batch's Tech - Living Out "Plan 99" in an "Order 66" World

Star Wars characters giving their lives in a final act of sacrifice is nothing new but losing Tech in Star Wars: The Bad Batch hit me pretty hard. I could never personally relate to the incredible athleticism of Anakin or the heroism and wisdom of Obi-Wan, but in the unique squad of misfits collectively known as "Clone Force 99" I finally found the one Star Wars character that I could personally identify with... the nerdy, slightly awkward one with the glasses and the receding hairline. Tech was my favorite, and I thought he was headed towards a happy ending... until the situation called for Plan 99 and he gave his life to save his teammates. He might not have been very good at articulating his feelings, but through his actions he demonstrated the greatest love of all.

In a world that is quick to execute "Order 66" when we disagree with each other, we are called to be the living, breathing embodiment of "Plan 99" and show Christ's self-sacrificial love to everyone we meet and in everything we do. His love is not some bubbly, magical feeling inside of us... it is a choice we make to do the right thing, the hard thing, and the self-sacrificial thing in those moments when we would prefer not to. This world will only know as much about the love of Christ as we show in our actions, so to quote Tech's final words, "There is no time. Plan 99."

*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his
friends.*

John 15:12-13

*Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade
itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not
provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the
truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all
things. Love never fails.*

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Day 27: From Hopeless Case to an Act of Grace - The Redemption of Crosshair

To be honest, I had given up any hope that there could be a redemptive arc for “Crosshair” from the Bad Batch series... after he revealed that his merciless actions in service to the Empire did not come from an inhibitor chip but were from his own self-righteous beliefs, it seemed like he was lost for good. But his cold heart shifted the day that he chose to sacrificially pick up and carry an injured fellow trooper through dangerous and freezing conditions for miles... a soldier who was as hopelessly broken and damaged externally as Crosshair was internally. But in that moment, Crosshair didn’t judge his fallen brother for how he got into that position or leave him behind because he was a hopeless case... he simply picked him up and carried him back to base.

Our relationship with the Lord is an incredible, unearned gift, but if receiving His grace makes us think we’re better than those who’ve fallen or are on the outside of our faith, we’ve completely missed the point. All His children are fellow brothers and sisters that we’ve been instructed to pick up and carry back to base... regardless of how they got there in the first place. We were given His gift of love and mercy so we can carry it to others who are in need, and that includes those we may consider to be hopeless cases... because we were once a hopeless case, too.

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.
Galatians 6:1-3

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.
1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Day 28: Darth Vader - A Case Study in Undeserved Mercy and Amazing Grace

The journey of Anakin Skywalker may be a little hard to accept from some of us... and perhaps that's because we don't believe he deserved his final redemptive arc. Anakin's fall from grace wasn't simply a matter of having an alternate viewpoint on the Jedi order... he betrayed them and all who loved him to become a heartless, cold-blooded monster who embodied the very evil he had spent his life fighting against. But maybe that's why his story resonates with us... if there was still a flicker of hope for such a bitter and undeserving villain like Darth Vader to see the light and fulfill his destiny, perhaps there's still hope for all of us who've lost our way, too.

Christ didn't come down to earth to find the souls He considered the worthiest and offer them salvation... He came to seek out and save all who are willing to receive Him, which includes the very worst of us. All of us are fallen sinners undeserving of His grace, but through His mercy every repentant heart can receive redemption from our selfish and sinful decisions, turn away from our past mistakes, and enjoy a "new hope" in Him. No matter how far we have fallen or how "hopeless" we may seem, He still offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration to all who fall at His feet... I know this to be true because He did it for me, and He'll do it for you.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

John 3:16-17

Day 29:

Lando and a “Deal That is Getting Worse All the Time”

Lando’s friendliness and hospitality towards Han Solo and Leia in “The Empire Strikes Back” hid a dark secret... Lando had made a “deal with the devil” to turn them over to Darth Vader and the Empire in exchange for his continuing freedom and the promised safe release of some of his friends. But Lando was in over his head, and as he came to the painful realization that “this deal is getting worse all the time”, he had a choice to make. Instead of continuing to walk down a path that promised pleasure while demanding an increasing price he couldn’t continue to pay, he chose to make a better deal and was reborn as the heroic General he was always meant to be.

The little compromises that we make with sinful temptations in our lives always contain hidden costs, and as people from the Bible like Samson found out these “deals with the devil” only get worse over time until they eventually take everything away from us. Rather than enjoy the poisonous fruits of sin for a season, let’s slam the door closed on every tempting thought that makes promises that it won’t honor and always ends up costing more than the price tag shows. The best deal we can ever make for ourselves is to give up what we can’t keep in exchange for the priceless gift of salvation from our Heavenly Father that we could never afford.

Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.

Hebrews 11:25-26

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Isaiah 1:18

Day 30:

Heeding the Warning of Admiral Ackbar - It's a TRAP!

The moment Admiral Ackbar realized that the Rebel fleet had been lured into a dogfight with a FULLY operational Death Star in "Return of the Jedi" yielded one of the most iconic Star Wars lines of all time... "It's a TRAP"! Even though he and his allies possessed the moral high ground and were on the right side of the conflict, countless lives were ultimately lost in a battle that could have been successfully fought under different circumstances. Sure, the war was still won, and the Death Star was permanently destroyed, but if the Rebel fleet wouldn't have underestimated their enemy's capabilities in the first place, they might've achieved the same victorious result with far less collateral damage.

In a world where verbal conflicts are easier to engage in than ever before, we should follow the discretion shown by Christ when He chose to exclusively engage in discourses that were on His Father's agenda, not His adversary's. He routinely avoided or refused to engage in the "traps" that were designed to distract from His mission... so let's follow in His footsteps and deny the temptation to enter these fruitless battles unless He specifically told us to do so. We weren't commissioned to win arguments; we were sent to seek out and save the hurting souls who need reconciliation with the Father.

This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

John 8:6-8

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Colossians 4:5-6

Day 31: The “Duel of the Fates” - Anakin’s Pride vs. Obi-Wan’s “High Ground”

As the “Duel of the Fates” between Anakin and Obi-Wan reached its climactic crescendo, the full truth behind Anakin’s fall to the dark side was exposed... it wasn’t just a desire for power that mutated Anakin into the villainous Vader, it was his pride. As Anakin shouted in his rage, “You underestimate my power!”, he engaged in an attack on his friend and mentor that was driven by ego and hubris rather than strategy... and it extracted a heavy cost. Anakin ignored Obi-Wan’s warning that he had the “high ground” and continued to press the attack, and he was easily swatted to the ground by a true Jedi Master as his foolish pride led him into a battle that he couldn’t win... and it took all that remained of Anakin’s humanity as its’ price.

Even in the lives of believers, pride will seek to attach itself to our actions and feed our egos, and if it can succeed in pulling us down a path of trusting in our own gifts and abilities instead of the Lord, we will quickly find ourselves in over our heads. The only cure for pride is to do all things in a spirit of humility, recognizing that every one of our gifts and talents were given to us by our Father for His glory and the benefit of others.

Pride’s ambition is never satisfied, and it won’t stop until it has fully consumed us... let’s yield to the “higher ground” of unselfish service today.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 14:12, 16:18

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

Philippians 2:3

Xbox

Day 1:

Fable - For Every Choice, a Consequence

The infamous tagline for the original Fable was “for every choice, a consequence” ... and while it didn’t fully live up to the developer’s promise, it came pretty close. Over the course of the series, decisions we made from the seemingly small and insignificant to those that clearly affected the end game had repercussions that impacted the player’s experience. Sure, we could restore a previous save file or even restart the game if we didn’t like the outcome of a specific choice, but if we chose to repeat that same decision that we regretted the same unwanted outcome would inevitably play out. Being able to reset the game didn’t mean that we could keep making bad decisions and avoid the consequences... it gave us the wisdom to avoid making them again.

Christ came to deliver us from more than just the consequences of our past sins... His Spirit living in us provides us with the discernment to reject sinful temptations and avoid the ramifications of our poor choices by no longer making them in the first place. Choosing to follow Him doesn’t mean that we’ll always get it right, and His grace is there to restore His repentant children if we fall. But every selfish decision we make comes with consequences and every sinful choice hurts someone, which is why He gave us the power to prevent the cycle of pain before it ever begins.

*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?
Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?
Romans 6:1-2*

*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it
in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of
unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from
the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For
sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under
grace.
Romans 6:12-14*

Day 2:

Mass Effect - Many Paths Leading to One Final Decision

The original Mass Effect trilogy was packed with hundreds of unique choices throughout the series, but every one of these paths still led us all to the same place with one final decision left to make. From “Paragons” to “Renegades” and every variation in between, each Commander Shepard eventually had to answer the question of how to resolve the Reaper invasion once and for all. No matter what dialogue options we had chosen or gameplay selections we had made, at the end of the game every player still stood in front of the same consoles to resolve the universal conflict we all faced. We may not have gotten here the same way, but we were all unified by where our individual choices eventually brought us... to one centralizing point of final resolution.

While each of our lives play out differently, all our choices and decisions still build to the same critical decision... do we choose to resolve our lifelong conflict with sin on our own terms, or Christ's? Do we allow what we've endured in life to shape us into a grateful recipient of the Lord's abundant grace, or does it cause us to reject His mercy? No matter how each of us arrive at our individual valley of decision, transformation is the only path to resolution... and we all choose something. Let's break the cycle once and for all, sacrifice ourselves, and gain Christ in return.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20a

Day 3: Halo “LAN Parties” and the Body of Christ - Some "Assembly" Required

Before the gaming world fully embraced online gaming, “LAN parties” were the way that we would come together to play titles like Halo with our fellow gamers. Some would bring gaming consoles and cables, others would lug heavy televisions and monitors, and a few would arrive with nothing more than their controller and a box of pizza to share... and as each player came together with whatever gift they possessed a beautiful, irreplaceable camaraderie was forged. In this shared experience strangers became friends, friends became family, and gamers became a true community that was united by the shared passion that they had in common.

In the body of Christ, we are all called to join in one accord as often as possible for the purpose of building each other up with whatever gifts we’ve been given by the Lord... and not just in a weekly formal church setting. Our participation is not only an expectation, but also a prerequisite for unity... it is in our willingness to humbly serve each other as active members of this family that brings us together and dissolves all the superficial walls that divide us. When we start feeling alone or disconnected, let’s prayerfully consider what gift we possess that edifies others and joyfully bring it to the party. To achieve true unity, some assembly is required.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

Psalm 133:1

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Ephesians 5:18b-21

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-25

Day 4:

Xbox Live, Prayer, and a State of Constant Communication

Xbox Live wasn't the first online game network, but it certainly changed the way many of us played games forever. I never even owned a "chat headset" until I purchased my first Xbox Live kit that came with one... and now I can't imagine playing online with my friends without one. Even if I'm playing an entirely different game we can still be in a party together, allowing me to talk to them, share what I'm currently going through, and even invite them into my game to join me if I need help. I never have to play alone unless I choose to, even if I am playing a single-player experience... but it's still up to me to put on my headset, initiate the chat, and participate in the conversation with them.

Our access to the Almighty God in prayer is an incredible gift that we can easily be guilty of taking for granted... the omniscient Creator of the universe literally waiting for these little clumps of dust that He made to call out to Him and talk to Him. Rather than waiting to reach out to Him until we have got ourselves stuck and in need of assistance, we should always keep an open dialogue with Him so He can advise us through His Spirit throughout our day in real time. We never have to take one step in this "game of life" alone, but we choose our proximity to His voice... so let's keep that chat line open.

*The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.
He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry
and save them.*

Psalm 145:18-19

*Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things,
which you do not know.*

Jeremiah 33:3

Pray without ceasing.

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Day 5:

Rare - The Open Doors We May Not Be Meant to Walk Through

Microsoft has made studio acquisitions one of their top priorities from the very beginning, and one of their first major purchases was “Rare”, a team known for creating hits for Nintendo such as Donkey Kong Country, Goldeneye, Perfect Dark, and Banjo-Kazooie. But while Rare has continued to develop new titles for Xbox, they have yet to achieve the same level of success they were experiencing when crafting games for Nintendo’s platforms. While the money that Microsoft offered to buy them was substantial, accepting that offer took Rare away from their best destiny... an open door doesn’t always mean that we are meant to walk through it.

Most of the worst decisions I’ve made in my life were because I walked through a door that was open to me without consulting with the Lord first, and that has always led to heartbreak and pain for myself as well as many others. One of the main purposes of prayer is for us to receive guidance and direction for every decision we make in life, making the space for the Lord to give us the discernment we need to make wise choices. Many doors will be opened to us in life, and some may even appear to be answers to our prayers on the surface. But only the Lord sees the full path that they’ll take us on, so let’s stop and listen to His voice of confirmation today.

Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the Lord.
Joshua 9:14

Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.
Isaiah 30:21

Day 6: The Microsoft Kinect - Ahead of its Time?

The first iteration of the Microsoft Kinect was ahead of its' time, but because the technology as well as the software support to deliver on all its' promises wasn't fully ready, the Kinect ultimately failed to live up to all the hype. Timing is everything... the convergence of great games and a unique interface could have changed the way we experience games forever, but even the best ideas executed at the wrong time always end in disappointment. Having a vision is good, and possessing the ability to execute it is even better... but the very best things come to those who are willing to wait for vision, capability, and destiny to converge into a perfect alignment.

The Lord's timing is rarely the same as ours, and the dreams He places in our hearts often have delivery dates that are far later than we prefer. During those time periods in life that appear to represent a "delay" in our vision coming to pass, the Lord is aligning the partners we'll need, the opportunities that we'll step into, and developing our own abilities so we can walk in the destiny He has designed for us. Moses's path started with leading sheep for forty years before he spent his next forty years guiding Israel to the promised land, so let's find peace in the knowledge that we aren't simply waiting for the Lord to do something, we're actively preparing.

*For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hurries toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it delays, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay long.
Habakkuk 2:3*

*The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.
Lamentations 3:25-26*

Day 7: Microsoft's Game Pass - Counting the Cost

Microsoft's "Game Pass" subscription service offers a large amount of value for those who have chosen to become members, including "day one" access to major upcoming titles from Microsoft Game Studios... but there is a high recurring cost to participate. While paying the price of admission is far less than the full retail cost of purchasing all of the games we can play while we are actively enrolled in the service, it still comes at a cost to the consumer that must continue to be paid on a regular basis if we want to enjoy all of the benefits that it offers. Game Pass offers a lot of freedom, but it isn't free.

While the Lord has never raised the price of admission to follow Him, He always made it closer that choosing to follow Him would cost us something... it requires total submission to Him in every aspect of our life. Christ absolutely paid the full price for our sins so we can be reconciled with the Father, but there is still a DAILY cross that we are each charged with carrying as we fulfill our calling. Sure, there will be times when our cross will feel unbearable... even Jesus asked if His cup could be passed from Him. But the weight of our daily cross pales in comparison to the burden of living a life without His grace, so let's count the cost, take up our cross, and follow in His footsteps today.

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."
Luke 9:23-24

And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?
Luke 14:27-28

Day 8: Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion - The Guide that Supports the Game

I never really purchased many “strategy guides” for my games over the years, but then along came Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. I didn’t think I would need this massive book by my side while I played the game, mostly because I’ve always been successful in playing other games without this additional support guiding me on what to do next all the time. But its’ value quickly became apparent the deeper I got into the game... it not only pointed out the best path to where I was going, but it showed me how to prepare for the game’s most difficult challenges in advance. The guide wasn’t designed to be restrictive... it was provided so I could enjoy the wisdom of the game’s creators, with advice on how to avoid the most common pitfalls and find the best rewards.

The current accessibility level of the Bible can lead many of us to either take it for granted or see it as merely a reference book for when we get stuck... but it is only through spending time daily within its’ pages that we reveal the Lord’s intentions for our lives as well as expose our own deepest motivations. We aren’t equipped for the missions He has designed for us or even able to head in the correct direction without its’ timeless wisdom, so let’s play the game the way that it was designed today... with fresh guidance from His “strategy guide” freshly buried in our heart.

*Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.
Psalm 119:11*

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17*

*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12*

Day 9: Call of Duty and the Importance of Persistent Online Connection

While the physical file size of each Call of Duty game has consistently grown larger over the years, the most recent iteration took things one step further by requiring players to maintain a persistent online connection to support texture loading from the cloud. With the game itself already taking up well over 150GB in hard drive space, this is a fairly surprising development... and forcing us to have continuous connectivity to play a game is rarely a popular choice. But if the game is going to deliver the next-level experience gamers are expecting, it doesn't just require more space on our console, it needs the ability to receive continuous updates in real time.

In our real-world lives, maintaining a persistent connection to Christ to guide us on what to say and when to say it is the only path to reacting properly to the ever-changing world around us. No matter how much space we make for the Lord in our hearts, we must also submit our tongues to His constant guidance, or we'll find ourselves saying things that we'll regret. Before we choose to speak today, let's intentionally connect to Him and allow His Spirit to not only give us the right words to say but to add the right "texture" to them as well. Answering our "Call of Duty" many times means our best response to others is simply to hold our peace.

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Colossians 4:6

He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit. Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.

Proverbs 17:27-28

But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

Matthew 10:19-20

Day 10:

Halo - Reconciling with the Truth About our Best “Destiny”

If we are all being honest, Halo hasn't been the same since Bungie moved on to create Destiny and Microsoft handed the Halo license to 343 Studios. As a Halo super fan, I must admit that none of the games developed after this split have lived up to the franchise's high points of Halo 3 or Reach. While 343 Studios clearly has a passion for growing the Halo franchise, the truth is nobody knows this series and how to honor its characters better than the minds who carefully and intentionally created it in the first place... and Master Chief will never be in better hands than when he was under the loving care of those who designed him and brought him to life.

The best we can hope to accomplish when we usurp control of our lives from the Lord is to create our own inferior sequels that pale in comparison to what He originally designed for us. As our loving and benevolent Creator, He knew every beat of our life's story before we ever took our very first step... and even the “detours” that He leads us down always serve a higher purpose than we can comprehend at the time. Let's relinquish control of our lives, stop pursuing our own selfish dreams and self-serving goals, and obediently follow what the Lord has scripted for us... His ways are always higher and better than anything we could ever come up with.

O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether.

Psalms 139:1-4

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8-9

Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.

Psalms 139:16

Day 11:

Gears of War - More than Just “Cogs” in a Machine

When it first came out, Gears of War appeared to be just another third-person shooter releasing in an already saturated market... but the familial bond that exists between the “COG” soldiers is the beating heart behind all the over-the-top violence that makes it stand out from the rest. Despite their unique backgrounds, these soldiers were brothers and friends in every sense of the word, and behind the backdrop of a horrific war for survival lies the story of an unbreakable brotherhood. In a “mad world” where they were treated by their leadership like little more than useful pawns on the battlefield, to each other they were committed friends to the bitter end.

When we are going through our own personal struggles in life, all the chaos, pain, and loss we are enduring can make us feel insignificant, small, or forgotten by the Lord. But we aren’t simply “cogs” in His machine, marching forward as soldiers for Christ in this war against spiritual darkness... the Almighty God who created the entire universe calls us His FRIENDS. We are a band of brothers and sisters chosen to share in this sacrificial journey with the Lord... one that Christ Himself chose to walk for us first, paving the way with His own blood. We are never alone on this battlefield... He is in the trenches with us. And when He calls our name, He calls us friend.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

John 15:13-15

And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.

James 2:23

Day 12: Viva Piñata and Finding the Purpose Behind our “Broken” Seasons in Life

One of the most unique titles to ever grace an Xbox console is Viva Piñata, a game built around the concept of sacrifice. The point of the game is to grow your garden and compel new piñatas to reside there... but accomplishing that means we must permit the piñatas that already live in our garden to be “broken”, which generates the candy that attracts others to come in. Allowing my little “whirlms” to be sacrificed to gain a “sparrowmint” is a high price, but it’s a necessary one... my goal isn’t to have just one happy piñata, but to grow my garden until it is full. None of my piñatas are of higher or lower importance, they just serve different purposes... and it is their willingness to become “broken” that brings the other missing piñata’s home.

As followers of Christ, each of us are the fragile jars of clay He has chosen to inhabit on this planet... and while none of us enjoy the feeling of being “broken”, it is in our “broken” state that His grace is demonstrated and shared with others most effectively. The Lord doesn’t create these painful events in our lives, but He does use them to bring others into the garden, taking these bitter experiences to generate and share the sweet candy of shared brokenness that only a similarly hurt piñata would understand and appreciate in their time of desperate need.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.
2 Corinthians 4:7-10

Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.
2 Corinthians 1:4

Day 13:

Xbox, Halo, and the Master Chief - Destined to Carry the Flag

When launching the original Xbox console, Microsoft chose to make a new and completely unknown game the star of the show... Halo: Combat Evolved. On the surface, a mostly silent space marine who never shows his face battling a group of alien forces for control of an ancient relic may not sound like the best mascot for an entirely new hardware platform, but Microsoft saw the massive potential in the Master Chief before anyone else. No, he wasn't as expressive as Mario or as dynamic as Sonic, but despite the lack of brand awareness or a past track record of success for this character, Xbox chose to make the Master Chief responsible for carrying the flag for their system... and the rest is history.

As followers of Christ, many of us struggle with feeling that we either lack the qualifications to serve Him or have disqualified ourselves due to the mistakes our past. But while our enemy will seek to remind us of our lack of experience and limited capabilities in an effort to strip us of our confidence, the Lord built our potential into us before we were even born... and in His grace He made plans for each of us to carry His flag into our respective missions before we ever had any "qualifications" for doing so. No matter what our history is, He designed us to play a specific part in "His Story" ... and we're just getting started.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:8-10

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

Day 14:

Halo 2 - The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was Halo 2. While almost everything about Halo 2 improved on its predecessor, the cliffhanger ending that left us with an almost three year wait to see what happens next was not my favorite part of the experience. Not only did the game end right when it was building to a massively exciting crescendo, but the next game in the series also came out on an entirely different console, forcing me to upgrade to an Xbox 360 to “finish the fight”. But when Halo 3 finally launched as a nearly perfect end to the trilogy, I realized that the wait (as well as the personal upgrading I had to do) was definitely worth it.

Waiting for an answer to prayer is never easy, and as the ticks of the clock turn into months on the calendar, we can begin to lose faith that a response is coming. But there is a reason that during His time on this planet that Jesus never seemed to be in a hurry... He knew that these times of waiting are when the Father is preparing the environment for His solution to the problem. Sometimes He is developing us to prepare us to take that next step in our walk of faith, and other times He is building the platforms we will need as well as gathering the support partners who will be taking that journey with us... so let's fully trust in His timing. He always finishes the story.

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!

Psalms 27:13-14

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:28-31

Day 15:

Halo 2 - The Arbiter and Seeing the Story from a Different Perspective

One of the most controversial moments in Halo 2 was the developer's decision to switch the player's perspective in the middle of the game from our beloved Master Chief to a brand-new character... the Arbiter. While this felt like an unwanted "bait and switch" move at first, the opportunity to play as the Arbiter and see John 117 from a different point of view enhanced our understanding and appreciation for both characters, adding some much-needed depth to the stoic character of the Master Chief in the process. While I didn't appreciate that narrative choice in that moment, now that I'm reflecting on it those Arbiter levels ended up becoming some of my favorite levels to play in the entire game.

Much to my chagrin, the Lord doesn't always answer my prayers in the manner that I asked or in the way that I hoped that He would... but that is because He is telling a much bigger story than the one I can currently see.

Our Heavenly Father hears every single one of our prayers, but He only answers them in a manner that is consistent with both His character as well as His divine will... and in those times where it seems like His response is at odds with my desires, I've found that these unwanted detours that He takes me down always end up becoming some of my very favorite parts of my life-long journey with Him.

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

James 4:1-4

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

1 John 5:14-15

Day 16:

Halo 3 - Waiting for the Door to Open so We can “Finish the Fight”

The Halo 3 campaign was all about “finishing the fight” that was left incomplete at the end of Halo 2, but it took three long years of waiting before gamers were finally able to drop into the conclusion of the original Halo trilogy to see how Bungie would resolve the conflict with Covenant.

While three years feels like a long time between installments for us, for the developer it was a relatively short development cycle for a AAA game... especially one that had to live up to such high expectations and would conclude this story arc for multiple characters. The wait felt long to us, but the stakes were incredibly high... so the “delay” was necessary to bring it all together.

While waiting on the Lord is one of my least favorite activities in life, He has a reason for what appears to be a “delay” in what we are seeking. The doors that He opens for us may represent the closure of a door for someone else, and in His infinite mercy He will wait until the perfect time for both of those events to occur by holding the door open for them to the last possible moment. And in the meantime, He wants us to find the beauty and purpose in the places that we are currently occupying as we continue down the path that He designed for us. Let’s be patient with His timing... there was a day He held the door a little longer for us, too.

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.
Ecclesiastes 3:11*

*But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.
2 Peter 3:8-9*

Day 17:

Halo 3 ODS - Serving a Savior Who Suffered Like Us

While the jazzy, rain-soaked, vibe of Halo 3: ODS has become one of my favorite overall Halo experiences, I don't think I ever felt more vulnerable in a Halo game than I felt when I was unceremoniously dropped into this one. After years spent behind the visor of the unstoppable and nearly indestructible Master Chief, playing as a simple ODS trooper felt like a dramatically different and unwelcome experience. Whether I was taking damage from falls that wouldn't have even scratched the Chief's armor to being defeated in battle by opposition that I used to mow down with ease, I suddenly understood just how powerful the Master Chief truly was... and how fragile and weak I am in comparison.

Nothing is more amazing to fathom than the very Son of God Himself coming down to earth and experiencing the fullness of our human reality. He willingly chose to feel all our pains, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and even death. And because He has walked in our shoes, He understands us far better than we realize... He can relate to every limitation we possess and fully sympathize with our sorrows. He suffered like us so He can not only support us in our times of need, but He also gave us a pattern to follow so all of us fellow ODS's can face our battles with confidence and overcome them with Him.

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15-16

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

1 Peter 4:12-13

Day 18: The Closure of the Xbox 360 Marketplace - Perishable Moments of Opportunity

The final closure of the Xbox 360 marketplace marked the end of an incredible era in gaming... and it also meant the loss of the ability to buy any of the games that were exclusively available in a digital format on that platform ever again. While advances in technology means that all games eventually fade from the spotlight, since these titles never existed in a physical disc form, they essentially ceased to exist for those who didn't buy them while they were available. And as more games become "digital-only" releases, they will all face this same fate one day... only those who choose to acquire them while they can still be found will possess them permanently.

How we use our limited time down here and what we choose to invest it into matters in both this life and into eternity, and each turning page of the calendar represents perishable moments of time that we will wish we could have back one day. In all our pursuits in life, let's chase those treasures that will last eternally... treasures that are exclusively found in the pursuit of Christ and His guidance for us. Each new day provides new, exclusive, limited-time opportunities to not only spend time with Him but to share His grace with others... and there are no guarantees that those same chances will still exist tomorrow. Let's seek Him and share Him while He can still be found.

*Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.
Isaiah 55:6*

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Matthew 6:19-21*

Day 19:

Halo Reach - Winning Tomorrow's Battles Through Today's Sacrifices

Halo Reach, Bungie's final "swan song" in the Halo universe, was a prequel that set up the entire Halo conflict through the eyes of a brave fireteam of Spartans named "Noble Team". As each member of the squad lived up to their name and paid the ultimate price in service of their mission, it slowly became clear that none of us were going to survive the events of Reach... but we WERE going to shape the future. As the game built to its powerful, inevitable crescendo, the pain in our journey all finally made sense... our sacrifice preserved the life of the one and only Master Chief, the Spartan who would go on to finish this fight one day. We didn't win this battle, but our faithful obedience won the war.

Our struggles in life serve eternal purposes that aren't always going to be immediately obvious to us while we're going through them, and many will not reveal their full impact until after our time on this planet has reached its' conclusion. But if we obediently yield our lives to the unique challenges our Master has called us to, we'll find the meaning behind our mission. We are each one part of a sacrificial relay race, carrying the baton as far as we can during our leg of the race before passing it on to the next teammate until the circle is complete... and reaching tomorrow's souls is paved through the sacrifices of today.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.

1 Corinthians 9:24-26

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

Day 20: The Handheld Wars - Seeking the Right Priorities First

When Sony chose to challenge Nintendo, the reigning king of portable gaming, in a battle for handheld supremacy, Microsoft wisely chose to stay out of the fight at that time. Rather than waste their resources pursuing a prize that belonged to someone else, they invested in purchasing entire studios that owned proven IP's like Minecraft and focused on building up the Xbox Live platform that represented their future. By staying true to their "North Star", Microsoft avoided a fruitless battle to possess someone else's destiny... while Sony paid a high price in their unsuccessful handheld war, Xbox bought entire franchises that will stand the test of time. And since they chased the best treasures first, they can finally make a handheld of their own.

There are plenty of "treasures" on this planet to chase and acquire, and many offer rewards that are at least temporarily beneficial. But as followers of Christ, our "North Star" is to seek God FIRST and pursue those treasures that are worthy of the time and attention we give them and offer rewards that are permanent. Rather than wasting time and energy chasing someone else's dream or even pursuing the right things in the wrong order, let's prayerfully seek the unique destiny that He has for us and follow His perfect timing... that's where the real treasure is found.

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.
Matthew 6:33

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.
Colossians 3:1-2

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Matthew 6:19-21

Day 21: Microsoft's Backwards Compatibility - Amazing Grace for Even the Unworthy

While I'm a huge fan of both the Nintendo and PlayStation families of games and consoles for different reasons, I've always appreciated one thing about each console that Microsoft has released... backwards compatibility. Being able to pop almost any 360 disc into an Xbox One or even an original Xbox copy of Halo into the Xbox Series X is a demonstration of support for their fans that isn't free or cheap to provide... but they do it anyways. By using the processing power of their current platform, Xbox reaches backwards and invites every game to the party... even those that some of us might consider to be "less than worthy" of the opportunity to rejoin the family.

The unearned grace the Lord showers us with in our unworthy, unsaved state is truly amazing... but after we've enjoyed the benefits of His forgiveness and restoration, many of us forget who we once were and harshly judge others for the very same sins that we were once guilty of ourselves. We shouldn't look back in shame at our past, but we should never forget that the Lord loved us when we were far from lovable. If His mercy was "backwards compatible" enough to reach down, forgive, and restore a wretched sinner like me, then we should cheerfully extend His mercy and grace to all who are willing to receive it the same way that He once did for us.

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).
Ephesians 2:1-5*

*And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.
1 Corinthians 6:11*

Day 22:

Xbox's Unique Console Naming Process - A New Creation

Over the years every console developer has had their own specific naming style for each version of their hardware... but if I'm being honest, I've always found Microsoft's choices to be a little confusing. After their original system was given the simple moniker "Xbox", they went with "Xbox 360" for their second console before completely descending into utter madness by naming their third home gaming system the "Xbox One" ... and of course, they followed that up with the "Xbox One X" because why not. Sure, a progressive numbering system would be easier for everyone, but Microsoft didn't see these projects as mere sequels of what came before them... they saw each console as something entirely new.

In our rebirth in Christ, we are not just a new and enhanced version or a sequel of what we once were... when we accept His Lordship in our life we become a completely new creation in His eyes. While our inner transformation is a lifelong process of continuing growth, we are not simply the same person with a clean slate and a new calling... we carry an entirely new name and can walk into the destiny that He designed for us with confidence. No matter what others may call us or if we once identified ourselves as hopeless, worthless, broken, forsaken, or desolate, He delights in each of us and He calls us "beautiful".

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.
2 Corinthians 5:17*

*You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.
Isaiah 62:4*

Day 23: Xbox Live - Giving Away a "Free Sample"

One of the savviest decisions Microsoft made when originally launching their new online "Xbox Live" service was to give away the first taste of it for free... almost every game I purchased came with a card for a free trial of the membership for anywhere from a few days to an entire month. My friends and I would coordinate when we would activate our "free sample cards" for a weekend so we could all play together, and after a few sessions we were all completely hooked. Sure, there were plenty of cards that were never redeemed as some people chose to reject the offer, but Microsoft still gave everyone an invitation to the Xbox Live party and let them make the choice if they wanted to participate.

As followers of Christ, we've been sent to bear and share His fruit to every soul that we meet, cheerfully offering free samples of His love, mercy, kindness and grace. While there will be many times that our invitations will be rejected or even responded to poorly by those we are offering "free fruit samples" to, we weren't called to take our fruit inside a safe space and insulate ourselves from all the souls around us who desperately need it. Let's make it our mission to not only share Christ with others, but to SHOW Him through our actions... the only way to grow His kingdom is by generously sharing His fruit.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

John 15:5, 8

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

Galatians 5:22

Day 24: Microsoft Game Studios - A Commitment Proven Through Sacrificial Investment

The amount of massive studio acquisitions that Microsoft has invested into over the last several years is staggering... from Minecraft developer Mojang to Bethesda and even the juggernaut of Activision/Blizzard, Microsoft has been putting their money where their mouth is and truly proving their long-term commitment to the realm of gaming. While every gaming company tends to be devoted to their mission, the sacrificial level of investment that Xbox has demonstrated goes beyond mere self-preservation of their brand... the price they have been willing to pay shows that they are in this game for keeps. They have their eyes set on becoming the biggest game publisher in the world, no matter the cost.

The love of Christ is freely given to all who are willing to receive it, but the act of receiving His grace should compel our heart's response to pursue Him in return. And as we seek after Him, our lives should demonstrate the investment we are making into our relationship with Him... not because He asked us to or is requiring it, but because the great love that He has shown for us inspires our desire to love Him back. He is the pearl of great price we've been searching for, and the priceless treasure worth sacrificing everything to acquire... all who lose themselves in pursuit of Him find the greatest treasure of all.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matthew 13:45-46

We love Him because He first loved us.

1 John 4:19

Day 25:

Format Wars - Microsoft's HD-DVD vs. Sony's Blu-Ray

During the height of the “format wars”, Xbox attempted to compete with Sony's Blu-Ray disc with their own high-definition storage disc... the ill-fated HD-DVD. After spending a small fortune developing the technology to support this expensive addition to their product line, the HD-DVD drive was launched to complete consumer apathy due to the lack of quality content available for it. Most movie studios made their titles exclusively available on Blu-Ray, leaving HD-DVD with only a handful of compelling options. Both Sony and Xbox created a product with similar capabilities, but the Blu-Ray format became the universal standard of physical media because their discs exclusively carried the content that we wanted on the INSIDE.

As a follower of Christ, the only fruit we can offer others is what we've allowed the Lord to produce in our lives... if we haven't grown and applied that fruit in our lives FIRST we are offering fruit that may look good on the outside but doesn't possess any beneficial content on the inside. If we want to shine a light that contains actual warmth and provide fruit that truly feeds others, we must ingest that fruit and demonstrate it in our actions. This world is filled with “content” ... let's offer something the souls around us NEED, not a shiny disc with only hollow promises inside.

You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

John 15:16

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

Day 26:

Microsoft's "Gaming From the Cloud" - Powerful Access Requiring a Persistent Connection

When Microsoft first announced their plan to deliver a "cloud gaming" experience that would allow gamers to stream entire games without downloading them to their hard drive first, I was pretty skeptical. Most games are HUGE, taking up many gigabytes of storage space, but if we possess the bandwidth to support the direct delivery of this data, the current Xbox models are designed to both receive and display these games through their access to a powerful cloud server that loads exactly what we need in a continuous feed as our progress requires it. And all this incredible power comes with one simple requirement... we are responsible for maintaining a persistent connection to the source of the data to enjoy the benefit of gaming through the cloud.

The responsibility of acting as an ambassador of Christ in our daily lives can feel overwhelming, but we aren't expected to know what to say or do in advance. The Lord has promised that He will send guidance from "the cloud" in our times of need, reminding us of the Scriptures that we've read and giving us access to His divine power and wisdom in every situation. If we will consciously maintain an intentional connection to Him throughout our day and offer ourselves up as a living conduit of His grace, His Spirit will work through us to deliver everything we need.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

John 14:26

But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.

Luke 21:13-15

Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

Luke 12:11-12

Day 27:

Microsoft Game Pass - A “Day One” Sacrifice that Comes at a Cost

Microsoft made several expensive investments into the future with their

Game Pass service, but giving away their newest games such as Halo Infinite and Starfield on their launch days as part of the service represents one of the costliest offerings they could make. While Sony typically waits for a time that is more convenient to them (and when the games are less relevant) to place their first-party titles onto their PS Plus service, Xbox demonstrates that they are fully invested in the future of Game Pass no matter how much it costs them by giving every subscriber the very best games that they possess on “Day One”.

Each day we will be brought into positions where we are asked to give the Lord the best of our time, energy, and capabilities for the growth of His kingdom, and this honor will rarely come at a moment that we prefer or that is convenient to us. Following Christ always comes at a cost, and part of the sacrifice it requires is placing His will for our lives above all our other priorities and desires. As we go about our day, are we truly giving Him the very best of what we possess or just the rest of what we feel we can comfortably afford to give Him? The price that we are willing to pay to obey Him is where our love and devotion is truly demonstrated, so let's give Him the best of ourselves in all that we do today.

Then the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing.”

2 Samuel 24:24a

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

Matthew 16:24

Day 28: Microsoft's Minecraft Approach and Cross-Platform Cooperation

When Microsoft originally purchased Mojang, the studio responsible for Minecraft, fans were understandably worried that one of the largest franchises in the world would become an Xbox exclusive going forward. But Microsoft didn't purchase Minecraft to remove its' access from other platforms... instead, they saw the value in continuing to support the growth of Minecraft on every platform available, including those they are technically "competing" against. Their goal wasn't just to grow the Xbox brand... they were seeking to grow and expand Minecraft to even higher levels of success no matter where or how someone chose to participate in playing it.

Each of us have been given specific gifts and unique ministries to serve the Lord, but we're all on the same side regardless of our "platform" ... to shine the light of Christ and reach souls for Him. Some are called to positions that offer a massive audience with millions of views, and others will quietly plant seeds in places that offer little recognition on this side of eternity... and each role is critical to the growth of His kingdom. We're all working in the same field, so let's avoid dividing, competing, or becoming jealous just because some of us are planting and others are watering. Let's serve with joy and support each other's missions as we mine this field together.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.

1 Corinthians 3:6-9

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:4-6

Day 29: Breaking Down “The Duke”, Xbox’s Original Controller

As most new consoles typically do, the original Xbox console launched with an entirely new design for their controller that was quite unique. The “Duke”, as it was affectionately nicknamed, was much heavier and nearly THREE times the size of Sony’s PlayStation controller, making it incredibly bulky and difficult to use for both younger players and gamers with smaller hands. While this over-sized controller certainly had its’ fans (and still does), it wasn’t a good fit for every gamer, forcing Microsoft to pivot to the smaller and more universally accessible “Controller S” model. The best games in the world still wouldn’t bring new players to their platform until they made a controller that every player could hold.

His time here on earth, Christ routinely broke down complicated spiritual concepts by using analogies and parables to make His messages accessible to all who were seeking out the truth. And as the ambassadors of Christ on this planet, we are called to submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s leading and share His truth with others in a manner that meets them where they are and fits their learning needs, even if those aren’t the same as our own personal preferences. The narrow way may be hard to walk, but it shouldn’t be difficult to find. Let’s be the light that makes finding Him easier for those seeking Him today.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.
1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Day 30: Xbox Live Party - When Our Paths Diverge

One of the best features Xbox added before their competitors did was the ability to join an Xbox Live “party” with your friends and bounce from one game to another without ever having to leave the group. But while this was an incredibly convenient feature to keep players together, the truth is not every player was able or willing to move forward with the party to the next game. Maybe it wasn’t a game they owned or wanted to play, or perhaps while some moved on to play Call of Duty, others preferred to continue running raids on Destiny. It didn’t mean that we weren’t friends anymore... it just meant that as our paths diverged, some of our teammates simply aren’t meant to join us on the next part of our journey.

Jesus had seventy-two followers who served as ministers for Him, twelve who were chosen to become His disciples, but only three who He trusted to accompany Him during His most intimate battle in the Garden of Gethsemane. While all of them were “teammates”, each were only meant to join Him for specific parts of His journey. And as we go through our lives, we will find that not every friend is meant to take the next step in our stories with us either, but let’s not become bitter or disappointed when these times of divergence inevitably come. Their destiny simply lies on a different path than ours.

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4-5

And when He got into the boat, he who had been demon-possessed begged Him that he might be with Him. However, Jesus did not permit him, but said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.” And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled.

Mark 5:18-20

Day 31:

Microsoft's Costly Xbox Console Commitment - Taking Up our Cross

Launching a new console is not easy or cheap, and to remain relevant in the console marketplace a continuing price must be paid... a price that Microsoft has learned the hard way. But as longtime hardware developers like Atari and Sega as well as newer companies to the party like Google became unwilling to pay the ongoing price of participation, Xbox doubled down and has continued to invest deeply in their commitment to the home console market every year despite the cost. While each iteration of their hardware has consistently sold at a net loss, the only path to the treasure that they are seeking is to see the road through to the end.

The act of “taking up our cross” and following the Lord involves more than just a one-time event of believing in Christ and accepting His grace... it is an ongoing, self-sacrificial journey that will continue for the rest of our lives. Each step we take as we carry our cross will compel us to shed the layers of selfishness that once defined us, and it is a process that is guaranteed to be uncomfortable... crosses are costly, not cozy. But it is in our active, daily choice to pick up a cross that we'd rather not carry that shows we're truly following in the His footsteps... He would've liked a different option as well, but He chose to obey because the reward was worth it.

Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it - lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.
Luke 14:27-30, 33

And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."
Luke 22:41-42

Mario Kart

Day 1: Mario Kart and the Problem with Revenge

Few gaming franchises are more iconic than Mario Kart, offering the perfect blend of a simple racing game with the unpredictability of vehicular combat, resulting in an addictive experience where no two races ever play out identically. But I have found many times that all these items laying around the course can easily backfire on the user... too many times I have launched a green turtle shell with the intent of striking an opponent only to have it miss and bounce right back towards me. These attacks lack precision, and my efforts at gaining revenge on another racer can easily ricochet and cause me to become the architect of my own downfall.

There will be many times that we are treated poorly by our fellow racers in life, but taking these matters into our own hands is always a recipe for self-inflicted disaster. The Lord is both our Judge and Avenger for a good reason, as He is the only one with an omniscient view of the entire track and how the entirety of the race will unfold. Let's focus on running the "good race" today, knowing that our itchy trigger fingers firing off the green shells of attacks and insults rarely results in accomplishing His will on this planet. We are called to be peacemakers, not vengeance seekers... let's turn the other cheek, and trust in the Lord to fight our battles.

If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.
Romans 12:18-19

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
Matthew 5:44-45

Day 2: Mario Kart - It's Not Over Until It's OVER

Mario Kart races aren't over until they are truly OVER... until one racer crosses the finish line, there are still multiple paths to finish first for those who keep fighting all the way to the end. From the various power-ups that can quickly level the playing field to the lead kart making a critical mistake that creates an opportunity to catch up, we are all still in the race until that finish line ribbon is broken... as long as we don't allow our slow start to get in our heads. Some of us start slow on lap one, and others take a spill on lap two, but it is how we choose to run our final lap and finish the race that matters most.

Whether we started this race going the wrong direction like the Apostle Paul or accidentally drove off the edge and fell into the water like the Apostle Peter, all of us make some mistakes while running this race... but the Lord doesn't hold our slow starts against any of His repentant children. His sacrifice set us free so we can run at full speed, breaking every chain that once held us... even if we did the very thing that we promised we wouldn't, or chose not to do what we said we would do. We can't change how we started, but we can all still choose how we finish, so let's press forward in confidence that His grace is sufficient for us... this race isn't over yet!

"But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you."

Matthew 21:28-31

Day 3: Mario Kart and the Infamous “Luigi Death Stare”

One of the most iconic images in all of gaming is the infamous “Luigi death stare” ... that look of absolute and utter disdain cast by Mario’s brother in Mario Kart. To be fair, Luigi doesn’t just roll around giving everyone the “evil eye” all the time... he is usually known for being mild-mannered, gentle, and kind. But that friendly demeanor is quickly left behind once a fellow racer passes a jealous Luigi on the racetrack, as his jovial attitude is rapidly replaced with a scowl... even if it is his very own beloved brother Mario who has finally gotten on the right track.

The story of the prodigal son’s return home to his father isn’t complete without the reaction of the brother who gave him the “Luigi death stare” as the prodigal was showered with unearned grace and forgiveness... and sadly, we’ll all face times when our Father’s grace is resented and our forgiven status rejected by those who feel we don’t “deserve it”. But that’s the point... none of us do. There will always be haters who remind us of our past failures and sneer in disbelief that we’ve changed, but we don’t have to listen to their accusations or allow them to slow us down. Let’s leave them in the dust and head towards the finish line with confidence. knowing Christ’s sacrifice was sufficient to fully restore all the Father’s repentant children who return home.

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.” But he was angry and would not go in.
Luke 15:25-28a

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
Romans 5:1-2

Day 4: Fake Item Boxes in Mario Kart - Counterfeit Answers to Prayer

Races in Mario Kart can be won or lost based on the item boxes around the track that we pick up, and the most devious object in the entire game is the “fake” item box. From a distance, it draws us in by appearing to be a normal item box containing a game-changing power-up... it is only when we are close enough to pick it up that we realize it is actually a counterfeit item box in disguise, dropped by an adversary to knock us off course. This fake item box may have looked like it contained answers to all our problems, promising us a shortcut to victory, but it only lured us into a trap of pain and heartbreak.

Our enemy is fiercely aware of the prayers that we speak and is actively engaged in fighting against them, and one of his most sinister tricks is to disguise his evil schemes as an answer to our heart’s deepest desires.

Satan masquerades as an angel of light, even boldly offering Christ a counterfeit path to victory during His wilderness temptation and promising Him a crown without a cross. Every good gift is from our Father, but His definition of good and ours isn’t always the same. The serpent has told us what we want to hear from day one, while the Lord tells us what we NEED to hear. Let’s test everything we see, read, and hear against what the Bible has to say on the subject... it will never steer us wrong.

And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.
2 Corinthians 11:14-15

Test all things; hold fast what is good.
1 Thessalonians 5:22

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
1 John 4:1

Day 5: Getting "Inked" and Walking by Faith

While there are plenty of obstacles that can stop us in our tracks during a Mario Kart race, the “inked screen” from a Blooper ink attack is the only one that causes us to slow down or stop of our own accord. Technically, we could keep on moving forward... this attack doesn’t impair or impact our vehicle, only our visibility. But our lack of sight can cause us to take our foot off the gas pedal or even hit the brakes and pull over until this effect has worn off... even though we know these roads, we don’t have the same confidence navigating them in the dark.

When the road in front of us is impossible to make out, continuing our race is a frightening prospect... but if we become paralyzed by our fear of an uncertain future and stop moving forward, we give our enemy exactly what they were hoping for. While our adversary seeks to stall our progress by closing all the paths that we can physically see, the Lord never asked us to walk by sight... and roads that don’t require faith to navigate aren’t roads that lead to truly meaningful victories. Let’s lean on Christ and remember His past faithfulness to us when the screen gets dark... He is our light in these dark places, and He will see us through to the end.

For the enemy has persecuted my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me dwell in darkness, like those who have long been dead. Therefore my spirit is overwhelmed within me; my heart within me is distressed. Cause me to hear Your lovingkindness in the morning, for in You do I trust; cause me to know the way in which I should walk, for I lift up my soul to You.

Psalms 143:3-4, 8

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

2 Corinthians 5:7

Day 6: Mario Kart and the Art of the Power Slide

Every great video game over the years has stuck to the tried-and-true formula of being easy to pick up and play, but difficult to fully master... and Mario Kart exemplifies this as a title that is arguably the most popular racing series of all time. Sure, it starts out incredibly simple with basic acceleration and turning, but the depth of the experience isn't fully revealed until we begin to learn how to drift around corners, perfectly time our boosts, and strategically utilize the items around the course. It's accessible enough that we can win a race on our very first try, but it slowly reveals its full challenge as we move up from those 50cc races to the 200cc battles.

Just as Mario Kart is easy to start but takes dedication to master, our relationship with the Lord isn't something we possess in its fullness in one moment of conversion... we must continue to grow and cultivate it through intentional study and prayer every day. The larger challenges we face in life will require us to dig deeper, seeking the guidance and wisdom that's only revealed to those followers who are fully committed to a lifelong pursuit of Him. His grace is freely given but growing in His grace isn't automatic, so let's spend some time with Him learning how to pull off a power slide before the next lap begins.

*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
2 Peter 3:18a*

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17*

Day 7: Mario Kart - When We Fall Off the Track

Even the most skilled veteran on the racetrack will eventually have a “spin-out” moment in Mario Kart... perhaps an adversary landed a blue shell attack and took us out, or we collided with another racer and got knocked off course. Either way, it is disappointing when we were in the middle of a great run only to completely lose all our momentum (and those race-changing coins) due to an unplanned pit stop. But we don’t have to remain in the pit, no matter how we got there... we just need to turn around, return to the correct path, and get back into the race.

We all make commitments with the best of intentions, resolving to put sinful habits behind us and build healthy routines that grow our relationship with the Lord... but that doesn’t mean we won’t miss the mark on occasion. We have an external enemy bent on destroying us and an internal sin nature at war with us until our final breath, and while Christ absolutely gives us the power to overcome every temptation we’ll ever face, even the best of us can still get it wrong sometimes. We might fall into the pit of despair, but we don’t have to STAY there. Let’s turn this pit into nothing more than a pit stop, return to the Lord in repentance, and continue running our race with confidence. Falling is never "Plan A", but when it happens we can fall on the Lord's grace to put us back on the track.

The godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again. But one disaster is enough to overthrow the wicked.

Proverbs 24:16

He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.

Psalms 40:2

I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

Luke 15:18-20

Day 8: Mario Kart and the Importance of Who We Choose to “Follow”

Watching another players’ portion of the screen while playing in “split-screen” with them can be a dangerous game, and doing this during a race in Mario Kart is no exception. If we are “screen peeking” at someone who is a little bit ahead of us, taking a look at their display can provide us with an early warning on upcoming obstacles, prepare us for challenging turns, and provide a line of sight to the optimal path... but that only works if they are going the correct direction. If they’re going the **WRONG** way, it’ll only result in distracting us as we blindly follow them into the same trap that they are heading towards... and we’ll both share in an identically tragic downfall.

Who we choose to “follow” in life is one of the most important choices we make... listening to the voices of those who we allow to influence us will guide us into making similar conclusions as well as earn identical outcomes. If the person we are following isn’t following Christ, we don’t have the most critical part of this race in common... we’re both playing this game very differently and pursuing totally different goals as a result. Let’s be mindful of who we permit to speak into our lives, as they can only guide us down the same path they’re following. There’s only one way to the Father... let’s follow those who are on it.

Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; remove your foot from evil.

Proverbs 4:25-27

And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.

Matthew 15:14b

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

John 14:6

Day 9: Mario Kart Cup Races - Starting Out Wrong, But Still Finishing Strong

Every Mario Kart title features a variety of “cup races” to compete in, and winning one of these cups requires the racer to achieve the highest combined score across all the tracks in the circuit. Over each of the rounds, participants may end up in last place on any given lap or even an entire track, but that doesn’t mean they have lost all hope of winning the trophy. While a slow start does require a higher level of focus and determination on the laps remaining to us, even the worst beginning can be offset by our full commitment to running the rest of our race with excellence... that Star Cup can still be ours.

If anyone knows what it feels like to completely botch the first race in their circuit, it was the Apostle Paul... he started off his race by running in the completely opposite direction, actively persecuting the followers of Christ before his conversion. But Paul didn’t allow his shameful past to destroy his future... he fully accepted the Lord’s grace to not only move forward from his past mistakes but run the remaining laps of his race with confidence. We all have parts of our circuit that we regret, but continuing to stare at them in our rear-view mirror only slows us down. No matter how poorly we started, we still get to choose how we finish... let’s put the past behind us and press forward towards the goal today.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Hebrews 12:1

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

Day 10:

Mario Kart and Dealing with a Blue Shell Attack

Of all the enemy attacks in Mario Kart, the blue shell is my LEAST favorite.

While green shells are clumsy and easy to dodge and red shells require proximity to an adversary, blue shells come out of nowhere with one thing on their mind... to take out the kart in the lead. These powerful weapons ignore every other racer on the track, targeting only the player who is currently running the best race. While a power-up that exclusively focuses on those who are doing everything right seems to be a bit unfair, we shouldn't be surprised by it... we should be prepared for it.

Abundant life in Christ is not the absence of persecution, but the presence of His Spirit with us through every trial and tribulation we face. Fellow racers like Joseph and Paul found His grace while unfairly confined in prison, while Ruth and Job experienced His hand of provision after a blue shell attack completely devastated their lives. We are told to take up the armor of God daily because we WILL be attacked... our unjustly murdered Savior promised we'll face similarly brutal opposition in this life. Let's expect both the enemy AND the Almighty to show up in our races today... we carry a shield for a reason.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.

Ephesians 6:11,16

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

Day 11: Mario Kart and Keeping our Eyes on the Road

Like most racing titles, winning a race in Mario Kart requires us to keep our eyes completely fixed on what we are heading towards... a quick glance in the wrong direction can provide the exact opening our adversaries are waiting for so they can knock us off course and zoom ahead of us.

Navigating all the twists and turns each course contains requires precision, and just one momentary lapse in judgment can result in our cart veering wildly off the course. Tracks like the Rainbow Road pack plenty of difficulty and permit very little room for error already... while there will always be distractions that entice us to take a second look, this narrow road requires discipline to keep our eyes locked on the prize.

What we consciously choose to consume with our eyes has an impact on how we run our race. As King David learned the hard way, his decision to passively observe something he shouldn't have watched led to actions he would've never imagined... as well as consequences that changed multiple lives forever. Let's be mindful of what our eyes are permitted to absorb and submit every thought to the Lordship of Christ today... where we allow our eyes to wander, our hearts and our actions will soon follow.

*I have made a covenant with my eyes.
Job 31:1a*

*The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.
Matthew 6:22-23a*

*Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.
Hebrews 12:1b-2a*

Day 12: The Dual Purpose of Coins in Mario Kart - Showing Us the Way

One of the kindnesses that Mario Kart shows its players is guiding us on the optimal path around the course through the placement of coins. Even from a distance, seeing the way the coins are lined up gives us an idea of how we want to take an upcoming turn or where the next boost pad is, and as we pick them up, we are directed along the best route to take as well as steering us away from road hazards. While collecting the coins themselves provides value by increasing our top speed throughout the entire race, their greatest service is guiding both novice and veterans alike around the track safely by showing us the way.

While reading and applying the eternal wisdom contained in the Bible is a great way to grow in our personal character, this collection of books isn't merely a guide to self-improvement... it is the unfiltered accounts of those souls who have walked closest to the Lord and chosen to share their journey, allowing us to both follow in their footsteps as well as avoid their mistakes. From cautionary tales of those who lost their way to lives worthy of emulation, this living Word is not simply a collection of coins to be picked up... it is the authoritative roadmap to seeking, building, and maintaining a true, in-depth relationship with our Creator. The Bible is so much more than an anthology of helpful advice... it is The Way.

Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.
Isaiah 39:21

Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
Psalms 119:104-105

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.
1 Corinthians 11:1

Day 13:

Mario Kart 8 and the DLC Dilemma - Taking Up Our Cross

Like almost every other video game out on the market today, Mario Kart 8 allowed us to expand our experience through paid DLC, offering even more characters to play as and additional tracks to master... all for an additional price, of course. While nobody enjoys paying more money to experience the fullness of a game that we have already purchased, these extra add-ons truly do contain some of the most compelling content in the game. The cost for all the game has to offer might feel higher than we intended to pay, but gaining access to the full experience is worth it.

While it is absolutely true that our access to the Father was purchased and paid in full by Christ's sacrificial death, there is still a cost involved for all who choose to follow the Lord. His disciples not only made tremendous sacrifices on this planet to serve Him with their lives but give their final breath in the accomplishment of His will as well. Over the years, many who truly desired to experience the fullness of a relationship with the Lord and make an impact on this planet have paid the ultimate price... because following in His footsteps leads each of us to take up our own cross as well. Our crosses may look different, and each will cost all we have... but giving our lives back to the One who gave them to us in the first place is the only way to truly find them.

Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?

Luke 14:27-28

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Matthew 16:24-25

Day 14: Mario Kart and Saving the Best for Last

Either through my own errors during the match or by the machinations of the other racers I'm competing against, there are many times that I enter the third lap of my Mario Kart race in last place. It's pretty easy to become dejected at this point and give up on winning the race, believing that all hope is lost... but Mario Kart offers the opportunity for a glorious comeback in the form of a speeding bullet power-up. Transforming me into an unstoppable force of raw speed and power, picking up and using this item doesn't simply level the playing field... it leaves all my previous mistakes behind me in the dust.

We all have laps in our race we wish we could change... some are self-inflicted wounds (like Samson, who lost his strength through spiritual compromise), while others are caused by the environment or other racers on the track (like the complete desolation of Job or Ruth's loss of her husband). But we serve a Heavenly Father who specializes in saving the best for last... just as our scarred Savior victoriously emerged from His tomb on the third day, the Lord can use the third lap of our race to accomplish more than our first two laps combined. Let's leave how we started in the rearview mirror and look forward in faith and anticipation of what He'll do next... He tends to perform His signature work on the final lap.

Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.

Hosea 6:1-2

"This is wonderful stuff!" he said. "You're different from most. Usually a host uses the best wine first, and afterwards, when everyone is full and doesn't care, then he brings out the less expensive brands. But you have kept the best for the last!"

John 2:10

Day 15: Mario's Many Hats - A Fruit for Every Mission

As a veteran of almost every Mario title that's been released over the years, I've learned an inconvenient truth... my skills playing as Mario in one of his side-scrolling adventures doesn't automatically translate into capability in one of his other titles like Mario Kart, Mario Party, or Mario Tennis. While Mario seems to be gifted at a wide variety of pursuits, each of his spin-offs requires me to learn and demonstrate a unique set of skills that helps this plumber succeed equally at racing, archery, golf, and rescuing princesses from a giant angry turtle. Because he never knows what arena he'll be competing in next, becoming a complete and well-rounded Mario demands proficiency in every area, not just the ones he prefers or naturally excels at.

The "fruits of the Spirit" are not a buffet for us to choose from, deciding which ones we prefer to specialize in... they are all necessary and complimentary demonstrations of a life fully submitted to Christ in every area. The Lord in His grace will use the unique opportunities we face in life to develop us in the places we need to grow in... not to punish us, but so we are able to display the full repertoire of His fruits in every type of environment and level of challenge we find ourselves in. Let's look at today's battles as a new skill to master with fresh fruit to unlock!

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-25

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

Day 16: Slipping on Our Own Banana Peel and Turning the Other Cheek

Of all the “power-ups” in Mario Kart that can be used to slow down our opposition, the banana peel gets my vote as the one that is most likely to succeed in accidentally resulting in our own demise. Dropping one of these in just the right spot can certainly wipe out a rival racer, but a banana peel that ISN’T slipped on by a competitor will remain on the track for the rest of the race... and far too many times, I have found myself on the receiving end of my very own banana peel. If I had concentrated on running my own race well instead of sabotaging someone else’s, I would’ve been much better off.

The Lord’s command to “turn the other cheek” is a challenging concept to apply, but the truth is that our feeble attempts at justice, retribution or revenge tend to result in self-inflicted wounds that would’ve been avoided if we had simply chosen not to respond. Showing God’s love and grace to those who have harmed us or done us wrong is not a weakness... it is allowing His strength to be demonstrated through us by our refusal to recklessly retaliate when we have been wronged. When our adversaries choose to go low, let’s take the higher road today... if we avenge ourselves, the best we can do is show our own strength. When we choose to turn the other cheek, we allow the Lord to show His.

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

Proverbs 25:21-22

He made a pit and dug it out, and has fallen into the ditch which he made. His trouble shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down on his own crown.

Psalms 7:15-16

Day 17: “Balloon Battles” in Mario Kart - The Last Balloon

“Balloon battle” mode turns the competitive races of Mario Kart into an entirely different game, with each participant starting the match with a limited number of balloons that are depleted when an attack is landed by one of the other competitors. Each player’s health status is represented by the quantity of balloons that they are currently carrying, and running out of your balloons means game over. Due to the cutthroat nature of these matches, a player who is down to their very last balloon will not find much mercy from the other players... as a matter of fact, they may even be targeted for elimination because they are already weakened and vulnerable.

In our real world, how much differently would we treat each other if we could actually see how many “balloons” each of us are carrying... and who is desperately trying to hold on to their last one? Every day we run into people who are down to their final balloon... we just can’t see that with our physical eyes. And in our blindness, we can often be guilty of being inconsiderate, short, or simply unmerciful to those who are at the end of their rope and clinging to one last thread of hope. In this merciless rat race, let’s be the ones who choose mercy and show His love and grace to every soul we encounter today as if they were on their final balloon... because most of us are.

“For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”

Matthew 25:35-40

Day 18: Maps in Mario Kart - Worrying About the Future

While I appreciate that Mario Kart provides me with a small map of the track I am racing on, it is rarely beneficial to me. I already have my hands full with the part of the course that I'm currently navigating and worrying about future portions of the track that I'm not on yet only distracts me from executing the actions that I control right now. Sure, proactively planning for the future is an important part of any gamer's strategy, but stressing out over the challenges that await me on the road that lies ahead will only strain my limited bandwidth on problems that aren't even here yet... and I have enough of those already.

While Christ had a clear "endgame" in mind from the start of His time on this planet, He remained "in the moment" all the way through His final meal. Even with the constant specter of the cross dangling in front of Him from day one, Jesus never seemed stressed or worried about how He would get there or what would happen once He did... He just did what the Father gave Him to do each day. And for all of us marching towards uncertain futures, let's just keep our eyes fixed on Him and what He asked us to do today... today's allotment of His daily bread will be enough for us, and when we get to tomorrow, we will find that His provision will be more than sufficient for our needs when we get there, too.

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Matthew 6:33-34

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

Day 19: Mario Kart and the Final Goal

I don't know about you, but I much prefer the clearly defined "three lap races" in Mario Kart to facing an endless endurance mode featured in other racing games... I like knowing where the finish line is, how much longer it will be until I get there, and being able to count the laps until I reach my goal on one hand. If all the races were lengthy, multi-hour marathons, casual fans would most likely be turned off by the high price point of entry... and if the placement of the finish line was ambiguous and inconsistent, hardcore gamers would quickly become frustrated. Short races with clearly defined finish lines are a large part of the reason why the Mario Kart series has maintained its' popularity over the years... too bad our real-world race isn't that easy.

We are all running our race down here with one goal: to hear, "well done, good and faithful servant" at the end. But none of our races are identical, and each of our paths have a finish line at a different place on the track. During the painful portions of our course, it would be nice to know how much farther we have until our current lap ends. But while the Lord didn't construct our pain, He did define our course down to the last detail with one goal in mind. If we didn't wake up hearing, "well done", we aren't done yet... so let's run today's race in faith until the day that we do.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.
1 Corinthians 9:24, 26

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 12:2

Day 20: Mario Kart - When it's Time to Turn Around

While most of the tracks in Mario Kart are fairly straight-forward, it is still possible for us to find our racer facing the wrong way after a collision has occurred with either another racer or a track obstacle. Fortunately, the game is quick to point this out to us, sending Lakitu down from the sky with a sign guiding us to reverse our course. This intervention from the game isn't trying to restrict us with this message; it is an attempt to help us get back on track. There simply isn't anything to be gained from continuing down the direction we are headed, and only pain and loss await us if we don't make a change. If we're willing to heed the warning, accept this advice, and turn around we can spare ourselves a lot of sorrow as well as a disappointing end to our race. It's our choice.

None of us enjoy being corrected, but the Lord doesn't send warning signs our way because He is trying to steal our joy or take away our fun... He knows the pain the path we are currently on will bring us as well as how it will end, and in His mercy He is actively trying to guide us to a place of true repentance and a return to the correct path. Let's not despise or ignore His chastening, even if it brings us feelings of temporary pain or frustration... as a loving Father, the Lord corrects His children so we can turn around, head back in the correct direction, and win this race.

For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.
2 Corinthians 7:10

If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.
2 Chronicles 7:14

Day 21:

Mario Kart and the Proper Perspective on “Coins”

While the coins that surround the racetrack in Mario Kart provide a much-appreciated speed boost, they have a few downsides... they aren't permanent, they don't carry over into the next race, and the additional velocity they provide doesn't make us a more skillful racer, just a faster one. There isn't anything wrong with collecting them... as a matter of fact, they are definitely beneficial when a driver applies them in combination with driving the right direction with the proper priorities. But these coins can be lost just as easily as they are gained... their best use is to enhance a racer who is focused on a much higher prize, investing these temporary assets into achieving more lasting rewards.

The grandest treasures that this life offers are still temporary at best, and the good gifts that our Father gives us during our mortal race are designed and intended to be used to grow His eternal kingdom, not hoarded or hidden for our selfish consumption. The “coins” that we've been given down here were never truly ours in the first place... He gave them to us to invest on His behalf. Let's use the “talents” and gifts that we have been given during our time down here to generate treasure that will last... running our race in a way that reaches souls for Christ and results in the most valuable of eternal rewards.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. He who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, “Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.” His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.

Enter into the joy of your lord.”

Matthew 25:14-15, 20-21

Day 22:

Mario Kart - Falling Down and Getting Back on the Track

As hard as I try to prevent it, there are still times that I fall off of the track while playing Mario Kart. Fortunately, that mistake doesn't mean that my game is over or that I've lost the race... I will be picked up, placed back on the track in the most recent safe position that I was in, and given an opportunity to try that same section of the track again. The game isn't penalizing me by placing me back before my misstep occurred... like every other racer on this track, I will have to navigate that turn to move forward. I can't simply bypass it because it is difficult... but I can learn from my previous errors, make a better choice, and safely navigate that turn this time around.

Just as King David found when trying to bring the ark to Jerusalem, the Lord has a specific way He wants His will to be done here on earth... and if we try to accomplish the things the Lord has placed on our heart in a different manner than He has told us to do them, our actions can't be blessed by God. Fortunately, when we get it wrong He gives us an opportunity to try again after we fall until we get it right... and because He loves us, He won't let us skip a critical lesson until we master it. Let's accept His correction and return to the track again... not in shame but with determination. This race is still ours to win, but there is only one way to run it... His way.

*For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity.
Proverbs 24:16*

*The Lord upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down.
Psalm 145:14*

Day 23: The Mistake of Rejoicing When Our Enemies Fall

As much fun as playing Mario Kart can be, it is still a competition at its' core... players use a combination of racing techniques and offensive weapons to advance towards the top spot, with each racer viewing their fellow participants as their primary opposition rather than the actual race track itself. As a result, we can prioritize the destruction of other racers over simply running our own race well, celebrating the missteps and falls of our competitors as we move ahead of them in the race. But this temporary advantage can be deceptive... moving into first place makes US the new primary target for all the blue shells and other attacks that were just used to knock our opponents out of the race. In true Biblical fashion, those who fight to be first in Mario Kart truly shall be last and the last end up first.

It can be easy to make the mistake of looking at our earthly race as a competition with others instead of a battle against demonic forces in a war for souls... and because of this we tend to celebrate the falls of those who've behaved in an adversarial manner to us instead of showing them the same mercy we have received from the Father. Let's resist the sinful urge to dance when an enemy "gets what they deserve" and instead behave in a manner that brings honor to the Lord's name in both the sunshine and in the rain.

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it, and it displease Him, and He turn away His wrath from him.
Proverbs 24:17-18

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
Matthew 5:44-45

Day 24: What to Do When Cheaters Appear to Be Prospering

While playing online with others is one of Mario Kart's major draws, it also brings in one of the worst aspects of the online gaming experience...

CHEATING. The ability to enjoy fun competition with our friends around the world is incredible, but this technology is often exploited with mods and hacks that provide unfair advantages to players who are willing to cheat to win. Sure, it's incredibly frustrating to have our race ruined by the interruption of a rival who has abused the system to speed past the competition, but we shouldn't be jealous of those who break the rules in order to win or become tempted to play the game in the same manner... there is no glory to be found in a crown that isn't truly earned. These victories are as hollow and cheap as the illegal tactics that were used to acquire them.

In our lives, we will often find fellow racers who "cheated the system" to achieve what we can only dream of, but envying those who took sinful shortcuts to advance only leads to bitterness and frustration. None of our earthly treasures will follow us into eternity... those crowns are reserved for those who put their lives in Christ's hands and chose to play the game the way He told us to play. Let's not become jealous or angry when it appears that "cheaters prosper" down here... in this race, the last shall be first.

Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret - it only causes harm.

Psalm 37:1-4, 7-8

Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the Lord all the day; for surely there is a hereafter, and your hope will not be cut off.

Proverbs 23:17-18

Day 25: Choosing Which Battles are Ours to Fight

Multiplayer modes such as “balloon battle” add a unique twist to the Mario Kart formula, with our racing ability taking a backseat to developing a superior battle strategy. These victories do not typically go to the swift nor the strong, but to the wise. Knowing the right time to engage in battle as well as when to keep a low-profile and avoid unnecessary conflict is critical... many times, the player who stands victorious at the end of the match is the one who demonstrated discretion by avoiding unproductive and fruitless battles that were never theirs to fight in the first place.

While it is true that as followers of Christ we are called to engage in battle with the spiritual forces of darkness on this planet, there are also many conflicts that are not ours to fight. King David was guided by the Lord to fight and defeat Goliath in battle, but when pursued by King Saul or being pelted with rocks and insults by Shimei, David chose not to engage. It is the Lord who determines which battles are ours and which are His, and He has reasons far beyond our ability to comprehend when He permits our adversaries to remain in the game instead of taking them out. Let's prayerfully seek His guidance before battle lines are drawn today... the Lord alone sets the rules of engagement for when we march, and only those who obediently follow enjoy victory.

But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:23-26

You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem! Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord is with you.

2 Chronicles 20:17

Day 26: The “Weak” vs. the “Mighty”

Appearances can be deceiving in Mario Kart... characters like Baby Mario and Baby Peach may not look like legitimate contenders for victory at first glance when compared them to their larger and more impressive looking opposition such as Bowser and Donkey Kong. But underestimating their prowess on the track or dismissing them as worthy racers due to their young age, smaller stature, or limited experience compared to other characters is a mistake... what is visible on the surface doesn't tell the whole story. They were specifically designed by the developer of the game to not only compete, but to defeat their rivals... their seemingly small and insignificant outward appearance conceals an inner coding that was perfectly crafted to win these races.

In our real world we can often feel too small, insignificant, or unqualified to make an impact for the kingdom of God, but our Father doesn't look at outside appearances when choosing His servants. The same Lord who used unknown and seemingly unimportant people like Ruth, David, Mary, and a group of fishermen to change the world is the same Creator who carefully wrote and designed our individual “coding” for our specific missions down here. He uses what the world considers weak and foolish to accomplish His will and overcome the “wise and strong”.

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.

Psalm 139:13-14

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

1 Timothy 4:12

Day 27:

Kart Racing Spin-Off's - Soulless Copies or Attracting a New Audience?

Thanks to the popularity of the original kart racing games like Mario Kart and Diddy Kong Racing, almost every gaming franchise seems to have their own “kart racing” spin-off now. While some are excellent additions to the genre such as Crash Team Racing or the more recent Lego 2K racing title, we now live in a world where non-gaming characters like Hello Kitty, Garfield, and SpongeBob SquarePants all have at least one “kart racing” title to their name. But while many of these may feel like a carbon copy of Mario Kart’s legendary success with a different coat of paint, imitation is more than just the sincerest form of flattery... these games invite an entirely new fan base into the gaming world in a manner that may not have ever happened otherwise.

As we follow the Lord, we will find many fellow workers in this mission field that are not part of our preferred denomination, fully aligned with our personal worldview, or serving the Lord in an identical manner to us. While there are certainly counterfeit servants among us to be aware of, we must be cautious not to discourage the very allies our Father sent to join us simply because they were called to work a different part of the field. We are each unique parts of one body in Christ... united in purpose, unified in love, and diverse in our gifts to reach unique souls for Him.

Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side.”

Mark 9:38-40

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12

Day 28: Same Item Box, Different Provision, Always Enough

Item boxes in Mario Kart are both intentionally placed in their location by the game's developer as well as dynamically filled. Upon picking one up, players receive a unique item based on their specific position in the race and their needs at that time. Racers at the back of the pack receive powerful boosts like a golden mushroom or a speeding bullet to help them get closer to the front, while those who are in the lead find that the same item box that provided a "Bullet Bill" for others was packed with an ordinary green shell or some coins for them. While it may not feel fair, each racer gets exactly what is needed and appropriate for their current race position, so there is no need to be jealous... when our situation calls for "Star Power", we will get it.

It's easy to look at what others have received in their "item boxes" in life and feel that our gifts and talents were not distributed fairly... but the Lord provides each of His servants with exactly what they need for their specific place on the track at that moment in time. When our situation calls for a boost of speed, we'll get one... but if He only provides one little green shell, we can be confident it's all we'll need. David beat Goliath with one well-placed rock and a heart of faith, so let's pray for His provision today and trust that what He provides will be more than enough.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7, 19

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8

Day 29: Being Careful What You Wish for in Mario Kart

I've found that I should be careful what I wish for when playing Mario Kart... because I might get it. For example, when I am falling behind in a race, I desperately want to receive a power-up that will quickly boost me up to the front of the pack... but as soon as I take the lead, I'm immediately targeted by blue shells and other attacks that previously ignored me when I wasn't in such a prominent position. The blessing of running in first place comes with different challenges than when I was in last place and had nothing to lose. Trying to win the race is a good thing (it's kind of the whole point of the game), but what I was seeking came with changes that permanently altered my status quo in ways I didn't anticipate.

In the real world, there are times that I've found myself complaining about things that are simply the additional responsibilities that came with an answered prayer... I prayed for a job promotion but became frustrated by the heavier workload and longer hours that it required. I prayed for my wife and kids, but even those blessings came with all new challenges to navigate. Seeking to be used by the Lord involves sacrifices unique to our calling, so instead of complaining about what changed in our lives as a byproduct of our dreams coming true, let's remember that we prayed for this... and be thankful He answered.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Philippians 2:14-15

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

Day 30: Mario Kart and the “Narrow Way” - Restriction or Protection?

Like most racing games, Mario Kart has two basic racing options... I can drive on the nicely paved road that was perfectly designed for my vehicle to reach the finish line safely, or I can choose to drive off the designated track and create my own path through the sand, grass, and water. One of these decisions gives my tires maximum traction, improves my handling and enhances my speed, while the other causes the exact opposite to occur and typically results in me losing the entire race. Staying on the narrow road that was designed and prescribed by the developer of the game isn't meant to limit me or my fun... it's simply the only way to win the race.

It is true that following in Christ's footsteps leads us down a narrow road that limits some of our choices on how we run our race down here... but the Lord's guidance isn't designed to restrict our enjoyment, but to enhance it. Our attempts to drive off the path He has lovingly prepared for us and make our own way only slows us down, leading us into destructive outcomes He never intended for us to experience. The narrow way is the only road that leads to abundant life during this race and victory at its' conclusion, so let's embrace the unique ways the Lord has narrowed our path or compressed our options. He isn't punishing us or limiting us... He's protecting us.

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

John 14:6

Sonic the Hedgehog

Day 1: Sonic the Hedgehog - Gotta Go FAST

If there's one thing that Sonic, Sega's mascot, has become known for over the years it's that no matter where he is going, he's gotta go FAST. Speed is the name of his game, and moving at supersonic speed isn't just his favorite thing to do... it's the only way to play his game and win. The timer at the top of the screen never stops ticking down, so speeding through each level is simply part of the strategy... and that means running past things that only serve to slow him down or fail to contribute to his goals.

Each level is filled with items designed to distract Sonic and halt his momentum, but he always has the finish line at the front of his mind. His gift of super speed doesn't just help him to run fast; it keeps him focused exclusively on what matters most.

Perhaps more than ever before, our world is filled with time-draining distractions... and if we aren't careful, we can lose sight of the entire purpose of the race that we are running and become consumed by their flashing lights that call for our attention. As followers of Christ, we are called to run our race and set aside anything that hinders our journey... not necessarily because they are bad, but because running with a purpose means we can't afford for them to slow us down. Let's fix our eyes on the prize that is Christ... and everything else will find its place.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Day 2:

Sonic Adventure - Finding and Equipping our “Lightning Shoes”

In the Sonic Adventure series, we learned that while Sonic is exceptionally fast, the secret to making him exponentially stronger and faster was finding and applying the hidden gear that would upgrade his abilities. Each member of the Sonic team had multiple options to grow their capabilities such as light speed shoes for Sonic, new fighting gloves for Knuckles, and a more powerful hammer for Amy. While some items were required to proceed and procured simply by playing the game, there were also many optional enhancements that required us to intentionally track down and acquire them to provide these additional skills, giving each member critical advantages for the upcoming battles ahead.

As followers of Christ we have access to His spiritual armor to support us in the battles we each face, but these items are not just passively applied through our faith in Him... our weapons and defenses must be forged through intentional preparation in prayer and applying ourselves to seeking out His wisdom through Biblical study long before we ever take our first steps onto the battlefield. Paul wouldn't tell us to take up our armor if it was automatically equipped, so let's take some time today to prepare by lacing up our lightning shoes, sharpening our sword, and reinforcing our shield before the battle begins.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.

Ephesians 6:13-18

Day 3:

Sonic Adventure - An Action Stage for Every Season

As much as I loved Sonic's first foray into 3D gaming in the Sonic Adventure series, there were still parts that I wouldn't have minded skipping. For example, playing through the Action Stages as Sonic was always fast-paced and exciting, but when the story required me to take a break from the action and help Big the Cat fish for his pet Froggy... well, let's just say those weren't my favorite parts. The constantly shifting viewpoints from one character to another meant there were parts of the game I enjoyed more than others, but as the game progressed it became clear that all these parts worked together to tell one complete story that wouldn't have been possible if I only played from Sonic's point of view.

At times it can be hard to understand why the Lord allows us to experience periods of both sunshine and rain, and while there are some parts of our walk with Him that will be full of joy, we will all face tribulation as well. Every season we experience is equally important to the story He is telling through our lives, but we may not see how all these threads will come together to form a perfect tapestry until after His work is completed. He is equally present in our lives in the good times and in the bad, so let's walk with confidence today that each step we take with Him WILL work together for good in His time.

In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him.
Ecclesiastes 7:14

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:11-13

Day 4:

Sonic and the Secret of the Disappearing Rings?

One of the defining features of any Sonic game is the act of collecting rings as we race through the level... but no matter how many rings I pick up, all it takes is one misstep for me to lose them all. Whether I have one ring or one hundred, all the rings I've been collecting explode across the level as soon as I step on a spike or mistime a jump. This isn't to say that the rings have no value, but my hold on them isn't permanent. I don't truly "possess" them, because they can be lost as quickly as they are picked up... despite all my hard work acquiring them, all these rings are one mistake away from being rendered useless.

As followers of Christ, we are called to do good works on His behalf, but that is not the purpose of our faith... it's simply the natural byproduct of a life lived with Him dwelling in us. All our best attempts at righteousness in the absence of an actual relationship with the Lord has the same value as a pile of filthy rags in His eyes, because all it takes is one sinful thought or action to cost us all of those "rings" we collected. There isn't any amount of "good deeds" we can perform that will grant us right standing with God, but He didn't ask us to earn our access to Him. He freely offers His righteousness to all who will love Him, seek Him, and follow Him with all their heart... and if we do that, the "rings" will follow.

But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Isaiah 64:6

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:28-31

Day 5:

Sonic and Shadow - Parallel Pains, Diverging Destinies

In many ways Sonic and Shadow's journeys run parallel to each other, as both hedgehogs have endured far more than their fair share of painful losses and unprovoked challenges in their lives. While Sonic took his obstacles in stride, letting these unwanted circumstances develop him into a heroic protector of others, Shadow allowed the darkness he experienced to completely twist his perspective and reshape his destiny in the process. Both suffered in ways that threatened to redefine their lives, but Shadow surrendered to the bitterness he felt, permitting it to consume him... transforming him into a destructive force who would cause similar pain to others without mercy or remorse. Tragic back stories are part of every hero's journey... only villains allow the pain from their past to destroy their future.

We will all endure pains and losses in our lives, which is why the Bible warns us not to allow a "root of bitterness" to spring up in our hearts that will lead us down a dark path. The only cure for bitterness is to refuse to hold onto our anger past the setting of the sun, showing others the same unearned mercy, grace, and forgiveness that the Lord has given us. Let's refuse to allow the darkness we have endured to define who we are and instead permit the Lord to use these events to grow us into who we are becoming.

Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:26, 31-32

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

Hebrews 12:14-15

Day 6:

Tails and the Secret to Having Joy at All Times

Team Sonic is frequently pressed into service fighting one exhausting battle after another with the fate of the entire planet on the line, but if you were talking to Tails you would never know it. His consistently positive and cheerful attitude keeps his entire team motivated and encouraged even when they are facing incredibly uncertain times and fighting the most dangerous of opponents. Tails isn't oblivious to the peril they are in; he just refuses to allow it to change who he is or affect his worldview. His attitude is more than simply blind optimism, toxic positivity, or a stubborn denial to acknowledge the reality of the situation they are in... he has simply made the decision to choose joy in every circumstance that he faces

We don't know what today's missions will hold, but we can always choose our response to the battle... not to simply force a smile or pretend to be positive when times are tough, but to face every challenge with joy knowing that what our enemy has designed for evil the Lord will use for our good. We only grow in our faith by enduring these trials and allowing the Lord to use them to build us up, so while we don't get to select the adventures that we are going on today, we can maintain our cheerful disposition even when we are marching through the valley of the shadow of death... because we aren't facing them alone.

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

James 1:2-4

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

Philippians 4:4

Day 7: Knuckles - The True Strength of a Warrior

Knuckles is certainly the “heavy hitter” for Team Sonic, using his formidable strength to support his fellow team members as well as protect any other creatures who are in need. Nobody would ever accuse Knuckles of being “weak” ... he has simply chosen to apply his abilities to defending the helpless rather than using them to pick fights and cause harm. Only bullies leverage their advantages over others for selfish gain... true warriors use their strength to serve and to save.

In our walk with Christ, it can be easy to mistake the love, mercy and grace we show others as a sign of weakness, but it’s actually proof we are truly leaning on His strength instead of our own. Jesus didn’t command His followers to turn the other cheek because we are timid or weak, but because our mission (like His) calls for saving others, not condemning them. Christ’s strength was shown many times by how he stood up for the children coming to see Him, protected the woman that others wanted to stone, and called a hated tax collector out of his tree. Our Lord wasn’t weak... He chose to use His strength to help others in need, willingly carrying the burden of an undeserved cross so they might be saved. Let’s walk in confidence that His strength will be sufficient for us today in all we do... and use the power we’ve been given to serve others in love.

Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Isaiah 1:17

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Ephesians 6:10-13

Day 8:

Amy Rose - The Importance of a Meek and Gentle Spirit

Amy Rose is the heart of Team Sonic in more ways than one... while most of her teammates tend to fight first and ask questions later, Amy shows her strength by choosing to seek peaceful resolutions to conflict before engaging in battle. But Amy is not a pushover either... her meekness is balanced with her ability to wield a massive hammer to defend herself and her comrades any time push comes to shove. And more often than not, the key to victory is not found in Knuckles raw combat abilities or Sonic's blazing speed, but in Amy's gentle and patient approach to find common ground and defuse the situation before it escalates to a war that nobody wins. Her goal isn't to defeat her adversaries in battle, but to use this situation to convert them into allies.

There will be many times in our lives that we will be brought into a place of conflict with those who don't share our faith, but the question we must ask ourselves before engaging is are we seeking to win an argument or lovingly guide a soul towards Christ? The Bible explicitly states that the weapons of our warfare are designed to tear down spiritual strongholds, not people... so before we pick that hammer up, let's pause and allow Him to answer through us in meekness and gentleness, not anger. Jesus didn't come to defeat the lost, He came to seek and save them.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.

1 Peter 3:15

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.

2 Timothy 2:24-25

Day 9:

Sonic vs. Metal Sonic - The Battlefield of Our Minds

Of all of Sonic's many opponents, Metal Sonic has consistently proven to be one of his most dangerous adversaries... and what makes this robotic replica so difficult to defeat is that it was engineered to mimic Sonic's strengths and take away his advantages in battle. Going toe-to-toe without help against his evil doppelgänger rarely works out in Sonic's favor, because Metal Sonic knows his weaknesses and how to exploit them all too well. But Metal Sonic is still a victim of its own flawed programming, and that is the key to defeating it. Overcoming the mirror version of himself in his own power is a fool's errand... it's only when Sonic deploys strategies that don't rely on his strength alone that victory is found.

Our greatest opponent isn't the adversaries that we face on the outside, but the enemy that lives within each of us... it's our inner programming that compels us to lie, cheat, steal and pursue all manner of other selfish, fleshly desires that only serve to please ourselves. The dark enemy we see in the mirror each day is formidable, but the temptations we fight in life weren't designed for us to defeat by ourselves. Victory is only obtained by submitting every word, choice, and action to Christ for approval before we make a move. The real battlefield is in our minds... so let's surrender every thought to the Lord today.

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:18-19, 25

Day 10: Eggman/Dr. Robotnik - A Persistent Adversary

Whether you call him Eggman or prefer to use his proper legal name of Dr. Robotnik, the truth remains the same... he is one resilient villain. No matter how many times Sonic sends him and all his evil schemes crashing down in defeat, you can safely bet your next sixty dollars that he will find a way to return and antagonize Sonic yet again in each respective game release that follows. Much like Bowser, Ganon, Dr. Cortex, and every other “final boss” in our gaming franchises, these adversaries don’t simply stay down. No matter how many times we defeat them in battle, they keep coming back for more... as long as there is a game to be played, they will be there to oppose us every step of the way.

Jesus has fully defeated our enemy through His death and resurrection, purchasing victory for all who follow Him... but until we reach the end of our story, Satan will never rest in his relentless campaign to derail us. While most temptations come from within, we also face external spiritual adversaries who will persistently attack us until our final day. Let’s not be surprised by the battles we face or disappointed that He allowed them to occur... Jesus promised we would face tribulations in life from an enemy we must resist, and He reminded us we can have peace in the storm because He’s already won the game.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

1 Peter 5:8-9

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Ephesians 6:12-13

Day 11: Sonic's Most Persistent Opponent - Contending With the Thorn in our Side

In each of his games over the years, there has always been one constant thorn in Sonic's side... water. While the "Blue Blur" possesses nearly unmatched speed on solid surfaces, the wet stuff has consistently been his Achilles' heel throughout his adventures, a persistent enemy that he couldn't even engage in battle, much less defeat. But the water was never meant to be beaten, and Sonic's path to victory didn't lie in simply avoiding it... he had to rise above his fear of what it had done to him in the past as well as his resentment of its existence in his present so he could confidently run across it in his future.

The Lord doesn't send these "thorns in our side" that represent seemingly unwinnable battles and cause us daily frustration, but He does permit them to exist so we will remember to lean on Him for His strength to overcome them instead of our own capabilities. While our Father has certainly proven Himself to be the Master of the water in all its' forms, He doesn't always stop the rain or part the sea, and He isn't giving out swimming lessons so can fight these battles without Him... He wants us to learn that it's exclusively when we walk hand in hand with Him that we have access to the power to run across the water. We can do all things through Christ, but daily victory requires leaning on Him daily for our strength.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
2 Corinthians 12:7-10

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13

Day 12: An “Ugly Sonic” Start, a “Super Sonic” Finish

In the past, video games have had a really poor track record of becoming successful movies, and it looked like that trend would continue when the first images of the Sonic the Hedgehog movie were revealed to the public.

But while the first steps of this now highly successful movie franchise resulted in what was impolitely dubbed as “Ugly Sonic”, his rough beginning wasn’t the end of his story. The animation team took the feedback from the fans and Sonic underwent a complete rebirth that resulted in the best possible cinematic version of this beloved character... proving once and for all that it’s not how you start the race, but how you choose to finish it that truly matters the most.

We all have failures in our past that we look back on with regret, but our “Ugly Sonic” start does not have to define how we finish our race. The “new birth” the Lord offers His repentant children is more than just a fresh coat of paint... it’s a complete restoration of who He originally designed us to be from the inside out. The Lord loved us when we were at our most unlovable, choosing us for our specific destiny and knowing each decision we would make before we ever made it. We can’t change our start, but we can still choose how we finish... so, let’s move forward in His grace and run our remaining race at “Sonic” speed towards the destiny we were made for.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

Day 13: Sonic and Knuckles - Differences in Opinions, Unity in Purpose

Our initial introduction to Knuckles the echidna in both his gaming appearances as well as his cinematic adventures is typically adversarial in nature... the circumstances that bring Knuckles and Sonic together in the story also brings them into a place of conflict with each other. But while they both had different ideas on how to protect the Chaos emerald, they also realized that they had been manipulated into seeing each other as opposition... and wasting their time and energy fighting with each other only served to pull them away from their shared purpose. Sure, they still disagree on tactics from time to time, but their common goal unifies them as a team against the real enemy seeking to divide and conquer them.

As followers of Christ, we all serve the same Lord and share the same mission... but all too often we are drawn into conflict with each other over differences that lack eternal significance. We are called to make peace, not win arguments... and every minute we spend fighting with fellow believers instead of our real enemy is a minute wasted. Our world needs to see that we can disagree with each other both productively and respectfully, united in Christ's love even when our opinions differ. We are called to serve Him as ONE body, so let's learn to live in peace before we move next door to each other for eternity.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 1:10

Day 14:

Sonic - An Uncompromising Light in the Darkness

While Sonic's gaming franchise is home to many of the most iconic console games across many different eras, it doesn't mean they haven't produced a few clunkers. Every time Sonic's development team allowed external gaming trends to influence their design decisions, we ended up with some truly horrible titles such as Sonic's first attempt at a 3D game called Sonic's 3D Blast, the broken Kinect atrocity Sonic Free Riders, the flawed Mario Kart knockoff Sonic R, the weak Mario Party clone Sonic Shuffle, or the fighting game abomination that was Sonic: The Fighters. Allowing other games to influence them never worked out well... Sonic has always been best when he blazes a trail for others to follow.

While we are called to be an active and present light in the dark places around us, we must be very careful not to be negatively influenced by the very souls we were sent into the darkness to save. Christ showed us the best example of this, choosing to spend time with those who needed Him the most and leaving THEM changed for the better as a result... keeping His own light pure in the process. Let's remain committed to our mission to seek and save the lost while ensuring we don't allow the worldly worldviews that are weighing them down to become a yoke we are sharing... hidden light has no impact on the dark.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals".

1 Corinthians 15:33

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

2 Corinthians 6:14

Day 15: Sonic Spinball - Finding Peace in the Chaos

While most of Sonic's games involve the world's fastest hedgehog careening off bounce pads, enemies, and obstacles like a living pinball in a mad dash to finish the level, in Sonic Spinball he was dropped into a LITERAL pinball machine as part of the game's design. Losing direct control of Sonic and being forced to guide him through the levels using pinball flippers made this game feel even more chaotic than some of his other adventures... but once we accepted the part of the game that we couldn't change, it made it much easier for us to relax, focus on the only part of the game we DO control, and enjoy it.

Many times, the pressures of this life can make us feel like we are trapped in a pinball machine as we are bounced around by external forces, and all of this can lead us to feel stressed, overwhelmed, and out of control. But when the chaos surrounding us threatens to pull us under, let's stop spinning and take a seat at His feet... and in that moment we can see how small our cares are next to His infinite power and grace as He reminds us that He is always in full control. He never told us we wouldn't have burdens in this life... He promised that when we cast all our worries and cares on Him, we can experience a peace that passes all understanding in the midst of our storms and find rest in our souls.

*Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.
1 Peter 5:7*

*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.
Matthew 11:28-30*

Day 16: Sonic Shuffle - Every Day I'm Shuffling...

While there are many reasons to dislike Sonic Shuffle, Sonic's weak attempt at mimicking a Mario Party style game, one of the biggest is that it feels like the game is rigged so that the computer-controlled characters would win. No matter how well I would perform in the various mini-game challenges, my AI opponents would always land on the exact spaces they needed to, triggering events that resulted in stealing all my hard-earned rings. The lack of fairness in the game's design made it impossible to enjoy for even the most dedicated of Sonic fans, who ironically were cheated twice... once when we bought the game, and again when we played it.

It can be very frustrating when this game of life seems rigged for us to fail, and as followers of Christ it can be hard to reconcile the fact that even when we are doing everything right, we will still often feel like the deck is stacked against us. But when we are facing undeserved headwinds and storms in life, let's remember that the very Son of God Himself endured every frustration, rejection, pain, and suffering we will ever deal with and more... and even though He possessed every cheat code to win this game, He refused to use them so He can understand and comfort us in our battles. Let's keep our heads up and eyes on Him... His grace will be sufficient today.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

1 Peter 4:12-14, 16

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15-16

Day 17:

Sonic the Hedgehog - The Problem With “Going Too Fast”

Sonic’s franchise of games compels us to “go fast” ... it’s kind of in the DNA of Sonic himself. But speeding through every level often means that I miss some of the imprisoned creatures that I am there to set free... these victims of Dr. Eggman that are trapped inside of his robot creations in each level are easy to miss if I am running too fast. While getting to the end of the stage typically releases multiple animal friends from their fate, there are also several that I will have to slow down and go out of my way to find within each level. Sure, I’d rather “go fast” ... but saving them is part of the reason that I’m here.

It can be so easy to get caught up in pursuing our own personal goals and ambitions in life that we find ourselves running past the Lord’s main purpose for our lives... to slow down and go out of our way to seek and save those we’ve been sent to reach. Just as Jesus went to Samaria to reach one woman at a well and Phillip walked down a long dusty road in order to share the message of Christ with one traveling eunuch, these “Divine diversions” are designed to bring us into an intersection with just one hurting soul in search of answers... and they’ll require us to get out of our comfort zones and take a detour from our personal agendas. But seeking one lost sheep isn’t part of the mission, it IS the mission.

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

Luke 15:4-5

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Day 18:

Sonic and His Chili Dogs - The Importance of DAILY Bread

Sonic may be capable of moving at supersonic speed, but his need for speed also comes with a need to feed... specifically on chili dogs. Running everywhere he goes burns through calories that he must replenish before he starts running on empty, or he won't have the energy or strength to deal with Eggman's forces. Being ready for anything at any time means Sonic is always eating... partially because he is always hungry, but also because he never knows when a fresh challenge is right around the corner that will require him to be at full strength before he takes on the unexpected battles that await him.

We will all face some challenges today that will test our preparations, and if we haven't fed our spirit with "daily bread" in the form of time spent in prayer and consuming His written words, we will quickly find ourselves lacking the strength to press through them. Running this race comes with heavy opposition, and stopping to eat once we are engaged in battle can be very difficult when our enemy doesn't pause for lunch breaks. Don't run on empty today... let's take the time to "eat up" before we take our first step onto the racetrack today. Running fast requires us to fill ourselves up with His strength that will last. He calls it "daily bread" for a reason... because He knew we would need to feed with Him every day.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Matthew 6:11

Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

John 6:34-35

Day 19: Sonic and the Chaos Emeralds - A Complicated, Transformational Relationship

Sonic's relationship with the Chaos Emeralds is a bit of a complicated one... on one hand, the very existence of these powerful stones is the cause of many of his problems, bringing him into direct conflict with those who seek to harness the power of the emeralds for destructive purposes. But they also exponentially magnify Sonic's abilities, transforming him into "Super Sonic" ... his ultimate form. The chaos emeralds might be making his life more challenging, but they also bring out the very best in Sonic in the process, growing him into the hero he was meant to be.

It can be easy to resent the existence of the trials and battles that we face in our lives, seeing them as the absence of the Lord's provision or protection. But there is a good reason why God doesn't simply remove our challenges and erase our problems... just as the presence of Goliath brought David into a position of conflict that was designed to elevate him to the throne, these undesired battles act as catalysts that shape us into the perfect vessels for the Lord's purposes. The "chaos" that these trials bring into our paths might feel disruptive, but they are not punitive... they are transformative, fueling our development into the perfect vessels for the Father's will to be accomplished through our lives, pressing us into a destiny we wouldn't have found without them.

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 1:2-4

Day 20: Sonic Unleashed - Denying The Darkness Within

While most Sonic games have stuck to the tried-and-true formula of racing through each level at lightning speed, the creative team behind Sonic Unleashed made the decision to not only slow down the world's fastest hedgehog but turn him into a "were-hog" in the process. This version of Sonic sacrificed speed for raw brute strength, transforming into a "werewolf" whenever the darkness came... a game mechanic that meant we were playing as two very different variations of Sonic while advancing one singular story. So why didn't we see Sonic continue to exist in this "unleashed" state? Simple... the whole point of the game was to repair his world and get rid of his "were-hog" side. This wasn't a problem he had to accept, it was a disease to be cured.

Even as followers of Christ, we all experience moments when we feel out of control and at the mercy of our darkest impulses... but these urges to give in to anger, envy, pride, lust, or bitterness will only result in pain and regret. Our flesh will always try to rise up when we're surrounded by darkness, tempting us to transform into the very thing we've been set free from... and when this occurs, we shouldn't be surprised, discouraged, or doubt our salvation. It is a reminder that it is only the active presence of Christ in our lives that gives us the strength to run free in His light.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Romans 7:18-19, 22-25

Day 21: Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine on the Outside, Puyo Puyo on the Inside

It's not every day that a villain gets a game of their very own, but in Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine we found Sonic's chief nemesis in a spin-off that honestly didn't make a lot of sense. For no real apparent reason,

Dr. Robotnik shifted his strategy of collecting Chaos Emeralds and tormenting Sonic to collecting the citizens of a city called "Beanville" for the purposes of turning them into robots. If that seems a little strange (even for Eggman), it's because it IS. The game was actually designed and released as "Puyo Puyo" in the East, but because the developers lacked the confidence to release it for what it truly was, it was given a "Sonic" coat of paint to make it more marketable for Western audiences, covering up what it contained on the inside.

There will be many situations in our lives that will present a more "successful" option to us if we will simply downplay our relationship with Christ, hiding our faith to gain wider acceptance. But any pursuit including friendships, relationships, careers, fame, or fortune that tempts us to cover up the presence of the Lord in our lives leads to a dead end... He can't illuminate our path if we bury His light underground. We choose each day whether our choices reveal Him or conceal Him, so let's walk unashamed of the Lord we love and serve today... Jesus is not a secret to be kept.

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 10:32-33

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Romans 1:16

But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

1 Thessalonians 2:4

Day 22:

The Death of Dreamcast, the Beginning of the Dream

When Sega made the decision to stop creating new hardware after the failure of the Sega Dreamcast console, it left fans of their first-party games such as the Sonic series with a lot of questions. Would Sega continue to develop titles featuring Sonic and his friends? And if they did, what console would they be released on? But the death of the Dreamcast console didn't mean the dream of saving the world as the world's fastest hedgehog ended. As a matter of fact, this turn of events led to Sonic expanding to even greater exposure, placing him onto EVERY available gaming platform so new fans could be found no matter where they chose to play, leading to not only more games but the launch of the Sonic cinematic universe as well.

We all experience the pain of seeing our dreams explode in our face over the course of our lives, and in the aftermath, it is easy to become bitter, angry, or depressed enough to give up on the dream entirely. But the Lord isn't allowing our God-given dreams to be crushed without a reason... He is using these events to guide us into something bigger. Just as Joseph's dreams led him far beyond leading his family to a throne in Egypt, our destiny will take many unwanted detours to see His grand plan fulfilled. As Jesus Himself demonstrated, the tomb containing our buried dreams is where His plan truly begins.

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.

John 12:24

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

Day 23:

Sonic and Joining to Support Someone Else's Battle

While Sonic has certainly kept himself busy over the years in his own titles, that doesn't mean he hasn't taken the time out of his busy schedule to support other gaming franchises as well. From joining his former rival and Nintendo mascot Mario in his Olympic Games series, popping up in fellow Sega games such as Super Monkey Ball and Sega Superstars Tennis, and showing up as a playable character in titles like Super Smash Brothers and Lego Dimensions, Sonic shows that he doesn't always have to be the main character of the game to add value to it. Being a franchise mascot means showing up wherever you are needed in service of another character's story.

I know there are plenty of times in my life when I find myself giving off "main character energy", forgetting that this life isn't just MY story... we are all called to play a supporting role in each other's stories as well. When our dreams aren't coming true yet or our prayers haven't been fully answered, let's follow the path of Joseph when he showed us that choosing to help others with their own dreams was the key to seeing his own dreams come to fruition. When we choose to allow the Lord to work through us to become the answer to someone else's prayer, we will often find that our unselfish actions are the only way to see our own prayers finally come to pass.

And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?"

And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it." So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."

Genesis 40:6-8

And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Job 42:10

Day 24: Sonic and the Chao Garden - Slowing Down to Rest

This might sound like sacrilege but hear me out... while I loved both Sonic Adventure games, I never really understood the point of the Chao Garden. Sure, they are cute little creatures that you can save and interact with in a quiet place away from all the combat... but I just wanted to get back into the action and continue advancing the story. I felt like the Chao Garden was a waste of time, slowing me down without any obvious benefit to my journey. But that was the point of the Chao Garden... to give me a chance to take a break and enjoy the ambience of the game. Slowing down isn't what Sonic is known for, but even he needs to stop and rest sometimes.

With all of the pursuits in life that seek our time and attention, it can often feel like stopping to rest and get alone time with God is simply not an option. But taking a break to rest in His arms is not wasted time... it is essential to providing our body with an opportunity to recharge and giving our mind a quiet place to hear from the Lord. Even Jesus, who only held an earthly ministry for around three years, routinely took time to get away from His mission to rest and pray... so let's follow His example today to slow down and take a prayer break when life starts getting hectic. He promised us rest, but we must stop and come to the garden if we want to experience His peace.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Psalm 23:1-3

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Day 25:

Sonic Generations - Feet in the Present, Eyes on the Future

The Sonic gaming franchise has existed in two distinctly different gameplay styles over the years... his classic 2D side-scrolling adventures that made him Sega's most popular mascot, and his more recent 3D titles that brought Sonic into open-world environments to explore. But having two different versions of Sonic was a problem for the gaming audience, as some preferred for him to remain in 2D doing what he does best, while others insisted he needed to grow and embrace the future. So, Sega gave both fans what they wanted in Sonic Generations... the original Sonic we all know and love coexisting simultaneously with the 3D Sonic he was becoming, present and future operating together and unified in purpose.

As followers of Christ, we are called to have our feet planted firmly in the present doing His work here on earth while simultaneously keeping our eyes fixed on the future and our eternal home with the Lord. While it is perfectly all right for us to look forward to the day He calls us home, as long as we still have breath in our lungs, we still have a commission to fulfill down here that isn't finished yet. Let's avoid the temptation to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good... every day we're given contains a mission and a purpose for a generation that's counting on us. And the clock is ticking, so we gotta go fast.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith.
Philippians 1:21-25

Day 26:

Sonic's Cross-Platform Strategy - Becoming All Things to Save Some

Years ago, the idea that Sonic the Hedgehog would appear in games on a Nintendo platform seemed ridiculous to consider. But when Sega made the decision to end hardware development and focus solely on software, the only way Sonic would have the opportunity to continue to be played by gamers around the world was to show up on not only Nintendo's consoles but Sony's and Microsoft's as well. Sure, Sonic's original material was still available on Sega's hardware for those who still owned those or were able to acquire them, but the only way to go make new fans was to meet them where they currently are.

As followers of Christ, we are commissioned to go out into the world and share Him with all who are willing to hear... the mission isn't to wait for them to come to us in our comfortable places, but to leave our comfort zones to seek and save the lost. Finding every possible path to reach souls means it won't necessarily happen in ways that are convenient to us... we are called to bring the uncompromising message of salvation in Christ however, wherever, and in whatever manner is possible so we can reach whoever we can. Let's look for fresh opportunities to engage with those who are seeking truth, following the Apostle Paul's example by becoming all things to all souls so we can by any means save some.

Then the master said to the servant, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled."

Luke 14:23

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22

Day 27: Running the Loop - Sonic's Secret to Defying Gravity

One of the most iconic parts of any Sonic game is when Sonic speeds through those giant loops that populate his game levels, defying gravity with each step he takes. But as fast as he is, Sonic can't simply begin running at the start of the loop and expect to have the speed he needs to complete the entire circle... he has to hit the loop with a running start, building momentum so he has enough velocity to carry him through the parts that flip his world upside down. Even the world's fastest hedgehog needs a little bit of a rolling start before he can do what he does best.

There will always be portions of our day that feel a lot like one of those infamous Sonic loops, and if we don't hit the ground with momentum at the beginning of our day, we will struggle when the going gets tough. How we choose to start today's race determines the velocity we will have when we face these obstacles, so before we start scanning the news, checking emails, or scrolling through our social media channels let's give the Lord an opportunity to speak peace, love, and life into our hearts FIRST by connecting with Him in prayer and Scriptural reading. Today WILL have some challenges that will attempt to flip our world upside down... but if we lace up our boots in preparation before the battle starts, we can have confidence He will direct all our steps.

My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up.
Psalm 5:3

Stand firm therefore, having belted your waist with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having strapped on your feet the preparation of the gospel of peace.
Ephesians 6:14-15

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.
Matthew 6:33

Day 28: Sonic's Inauspicious Debut - Small Beginnings

While Sonic the Hedgehog is the character most easily identified with Sega, he got off to a pretty inauspicious start... his original gaming debut wasn't as the speedster with his own massive franchise, but as an ornament hanging from the rearview mirror in "Rad Mobile", a racing game you might not have ever even heard of before. But this was just the introduction for Sonic, who would move on from this "small beginning" to become a megastar in both the gaming world and the big screen... while nobody knew how big his destiny would be at the time, Sega let Sonic ride as a small part of a larger game before he walked and ran as the headliner of his own.

While the Lord often places big dreams in our hearts, the path to seeing our destinies come to fruition usually starts small... David was battling wild animals without an audience long before he faced Goliath on the battlefield, and even Jesus gave his first sermon in His local synagogue, not in front of the thousands He would minister to later on. Let's avoid the temptation to look down on the developmental place that we're currently in and embrace this place of "small beginnings", knowing that He is forging our character as well as growing the skills we will need for the future. There are no "little things" in His kingdom, only roles that prepare us for the larger things ahead.

Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.

Zechariah 4:10a

If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.

Luke 16:10

Day 29:

Sonic: Running at Full Speed, even in the Dark

It hasn't always been easy to be one of Sonic's biggest fans... while the Sega Genesis era was full of incredible releases that made the future seem bright, as Sega went through the darker eras of their Saturn and Dreamcast consoles before finally pulling the plug on their hardware business it looked like Sonic's days in the sun might be over. But despite belonging to a parent company that was facing a big "Game Over" screen Sonic wasn't done yet, and all of his fans who kept the faith through those dark periods were rewarded with not only some amazing games, but an entire cinematic universe that far exceeded our wildest dreams... a future that wouldn't have happened if Sega's original plans for console dominance hadn't fallen apart first.

We all face periods of time when it looks like the dreams that the Lord has placed into our hearts are dead and buried, but we must remember we are only responsible for our faith in Him and our obedience to His words... He is the One who will bring His promises to pass. We may not always see where He is leading us or understand how His plans will come to pass, but keeping our faith in Him through the dark times is what faith is all about... trusting that what we are hoping for may show up much differently than we expected, but blindly following Him is where dreams come true.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Hebrews 11:1,8

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Romans 4:20-22

Day 30:

Sonic and the Disappearing Rings - Eternal vs. Temporary

While there have been many things that have changed in the Sonic franchise over the years, one thing has remained a constant... the rings that I pick up while running through the level are not mine to keep and they can be lost just as easily as they are found. Sure, having a wallet full of rings always feels good as I zoom across each area, but my grasp on them is temporary at best... and one misstep will send all my carefully collected rings scattering across the screen whether I have seven rings or seventy. They are nice to have, but no matter how many I collect during my run, I still don't get to carry any of them into the next level with me.

The Bible describes our short time down here on this planet as a vapor, guiding us to use this time wisely. We don't get to carry anything of earthly value with us into the next part of our adventure, and even if we could, showing up in heaven with a pocket full of gold is like depositing asphalt into your bank account (it's used for pavement there). None of us know how much time we have left to run this race, so let's make today's lap around the track one that leaves a resonating impact beyond this level... intentionally investing our lives to store up treasures of true eternal significance rather than wasting it on pursuits that only offer temporary rewards we can't keep.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Matthew 6:19-21

Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?
2 Peter 3:11

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.
James 4:13-14

Marvel

Day 1: Taking Down Thanos - Overcoming Fear

There is a reason that Thanos is considered one of the most dangerous villains in Marvel's comic history... he is both willing and capable of acts of destruction without remorse, as shown by his infamous "snap" that erased half of all life in the universe. But while defeating Thanos wasn't easy, it wasn't impossible either... by refusing to accept his wicked scheme as our new normal or cower in fear of what he would do next, the Avengers assembled and denied him the power he clearly craved over them. Sure, Thanos was a committed adversary with power to inflict harm on those who opposed him... but he wasn't invincible. To defeat him, they simply had to take back the power he was never meant to possess.

One of Satan's most powerful weapons against us is fear, paralyzing us from doing what the Lord has placed in our heart to do because of the potential consequences. The attacks that we experience in our hearts, minds, and bodies are intended to erode our faith in the omnipotence of the Lord, but we were not designed to live in fear of Satan or his evil schemes. We have all been given the gifts of power, love, and a sound mind through Christ to reject Satan's attempts to control us through fear, so let's stand tall in what we've been called to do today. We're at war with an enemy who has already been defeated.

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.
2 Timothy 1:7*

*You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
1 John 4:4*

*Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.
James 4:7*

Day 2:

Marvel's Wolverine - Facing the Challenge of "Be Angry and Sin Not"

Wolverine is arguably the most iconic character in the "X-Men" franchise for a good reason... his tragic backstory combined with his healing factor that makes him practically indestructible makes for a pretty compelling superhero. But all that pain he endures as well as the frustration that he carries and never deals with produces an undesirable side effect... his "berserker rage" that unleashes his fury on both friends and foes alike. When his anger is kept under control, he is capable of being both a great teammate and a valuable asset on the battlefield... but when he loses control he becomes a liability, performing destructive actions he will greatly regret later on.

The presence of Christ in our life does not mean that we will never become angry... but it is only when we submit those emotions to His Spirit and allow Him to direct our words and actions as a result of those feelings that we can avoid sinful reactions that we will regret. We all experience painful moments that make us want to lash out, but His righteousness will never be produced by our rage-filled responses. Let's give every angry moment a prayerful pause before the "claws" come out today and immediately bring those wounds to Christ so He can heal us of our pain as well as guide us on how to react in a manner that we won't regret once the dust settles.

*Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.
Ephesians 4:26-27*

*So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.
James 1:19-20*

Day 3:

Black Panther - Finding the Purpose in our “Rebirth”

T’Challa may have been born to be a leader, but he wasn’t born as his super-heroic alter-ego the Black Panther... it was only after he was “reborn” that he gained the incredible powers that he is known for. And his rebirth wouldn’t have saved anyone if he didn’t put his new capabilities to use, because becoming the Black Panther was not just a gift, it was a responsibility. T’Challa had to truly embrace his new purpose, go out into his world, and look for places to utilize his powers not only for the benefit of the kingdom of Wakanda, but the entire world. Rebirth was only step one of the process... a Black Panther is not defined merely by what they are, but by what they choose to do with the gift that they have been given.

Being “born again” through Christ is the most important decision any of us make in life, but this free gift came with an embedded responsibility... the command to go out into our world and make disciples of others. The Lord did not grant us favor simply to absorb it on ourselves, but to put it to use and grow His kingdom as ambassadors for Him. Every follower of Christ has been given unique gifts to perform the work of a “Christian” and reach others for the Lord, so let’s take up our mantle today and make the choice to do more than simply “watch from the shadows”. We were given this amazing gift to go make a difference.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.
Ephesians 2:10

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.
Matthew 28:19-20

Day 4: Captain America and a “Worthy” Question

If you saw it without it being spoiled for you, then you know exactly what I’m talking about... the moment that ignited cheers in theaters around the world as Thor’s hammer soared through the air and landed squarely in Captain America’s hand. Putting an end to years of speculation, Steve Rogers was proven to be worthy to both call and wield Mjolnir in battle, putting on a display of combat prowess that single-handedly drove the mad titan Thanos down to his knees. While there were plenty of others rocking their unique super-powers all across the battlefield, this moment had the most meaning because it wasn’t just the Captain showing off the effects of his super-soldier serum... the hammer **CHOSE** him to be the one to call the thunder down.

We are all unworthy of the calling the Father has placed on our lives, but through Christ we have been given the gift of being reconciled to Him and possessing a righteousness that we never could have accessed on our own.

The Lord has called each of us to the battlefield, but our enemy will attempt to convince us to disqualify ourselves from joining the battle because of our past sins or our current limitations. In that moment, let’s remember that we don’t stand on our own self-worth, but Christ’s. He knew who we were and chose us anyway... and by His grace we stand.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5:1-2

Day 5:

Marvel's Cyclops - The Importance of Controlling our Eyes

If anyone can speak to the importance of being mindful of what your eyes are doing, it is Scott Summers... his optical powers earned him the name "Cyclops" for a good reason. The beams that radiate from his eyes could have made him one of the most dangerous and destructive mutants on the planet, but instead he chose to use this power responsibly, wearing a visor over his eyes to control the power they contained inside. While many mutants must "activate" their powers to use them, Cyclops' eyes are in a permanent state of activity that would cause massive damage if they weren't restrained... his challenge isn't to use them, but to control when they are used and what they are used for.

Much like Cyclops, our ability to demonstrate discipline and control over our eyes can either be our superpower or our weakness... in this age of instant accessibility we can expose our eyes to things that contribute to anxiety, depression and temptation or we can choose to avoid their destructive impact by placing safeguards over what we permit them to watch, search, read, and absorb. If we want the Lord's light to shine through us, it starts with ensuring that our eyes are fixed on Him and the things of His kingdom. Let's make a covenant with our eyes and set our visor on what is pure and virtuous today.

I have made a covenant with my eyes.

Job 31:1a

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23

Day 6:

Sam Wilson's "Captain America" - Picking Up the Shield

Sam Wilson may have received the most difficult job in the entire Marvel multiverse... stepping up to fill the shoes and carry the shield of none other than Captain America himself WITHOUT the super-soldier serum that gave Steve Rogers his remarkable physical powers. But both Sam and Steve shared a gift that had nothing to do with genetic manipulation... the heart of a sacrificial hero who was willing to give their lives in service to those who needed them. While it took him a little time to learn how to "wield the shield", Sam didn't allow the massive shadow of the larger-than-life hero he was following to deter him from fulfilling his destiny. The world still needed a "Captain America", and the shield chose him.

When reading the Bible, it is easy to feel small and inconsequential when comparing ourselves to the "champions of faith" contained within its' pages, but they were just similarly imperfect humans who were charged with carrying the same shield of faith that has now been handed down to us. The same Spirit of God who led those men and women dwells in us, and while we may possess different gifts, we all carry the same commission to reach our world for Christ... so let's run our race today in a manner worthy of those who fought and, in many cases, died for the Gospel we now possess. It's our race to run now.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Day 7:

Loki and the Secret to Finding our “Glorious Purpose”

Loki may have undergone the most dramatic transformation in the entire MCU, starting out as a manipulative villain consumed with achieving his “glorious purpose” ... a selfish desire to see his happiness achieved at the expense of others. But after realizing the error of his ways and the empty futility of his mission, Loki learned that his “glorious purpose” was not to rule others, but to serve them... and by choosing to offer himself as a sacrifice and place the needs of others above his own dreams and ambitions, Loki unlocked his true potential and finally found the purpose he had been searching for. Crowns that are chased for personal glory are lost as easily as they are found... eternal crowns are exclusively reserved for those who put others above themselves.

For much of my life I grappled with figuring out what the will of the Lord was for my life... and if I’m being honest, my selfish desires led me down many wrong paths. But finding our purpose in His kingdom and seeing our God-given dreams come true only occurs when we seek to use the unique gifts we’ve been given to serve others in the same sacrificial manner that Christ did... and crosses always precede crowns. Let’s take up our cross today and help others achieve their dreams... it is only when we choose to help others fulfill their own destiny that our “glorious purpose” is found.

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Mark 10:43-45

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4

Day 8:

Daredevil - Afflictions that Transform us for a Purpose

The catastrophic injury that cost Matt Murdock his sight gave him something else in return... heightened senses that completely altered the course of his life and transformed him into the “Daredevil”. His ability to sense and “see” things that others couldn’t became more than just his superpower; they gave his life a calling and a mission that he wouldn’t have ever dreamed of otherwise. While the tragedy that blinded him physically took something from him he couldn’t replace, he allowed his pain to be transformed into a new purpose... the accident that removed his sight gave him the ability to look beyond the surface, unlocking a dimension of awareness far greater than natural eyesight could ever see.

We all endure different tragedies in our lives, and many of our prayers don’t get answered the way we wanted... like most of you, I’ve lost loved ones who weren’t cured, I possess injuries that never healed, and I’ve experienced losses that weren’t restored. But if we allow Him, the Lord will use these afflictions that were intended to destroy us to become a “super-powered” testimony, moving us past what we can see into a destiny that lies beyond our natural perception. Let’s look beyond our pain in faith that these events serve a higher, unseen purpose... giving us a new ability to see and help others through their moments of need.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Day 9:

Frank Castle - The Punisher's Predicament

While every Marvel character grapples with how to deliver justice in their own way, Frank Castle's "Punisher" severed all ties with his conscience long ago. As a self-appointed judge, jury and executioner, Frank delivers "punishment" as he sees fit... but the bitter truth is that no amount of vengeance will ever bring him peace or give him absolution. The pain that he inflicts on those he finds deserving of it never provides relief for the pain that he carries inside, creating a vicious cycle he can't escape from. In all his actions as "The Punisher", the only person Frank is eternally punishing is himself... because a heart that can't offer mercy and forgiveness can never accept it.

We have all had wrongs done to us by others, and some of these actions may have altered the entire course of our lives in some horrible ways. But choosing the path of vengeance only causes us to harden our hearts, transforming us into the very thing we were trying to destroy. The Lord doesn't tell us to be kind to our enemies simply for their sake, but for ours... He knows what the endless pursuit of "righting wrongs" does to His children, which is why He alone is the Judge. Let's end the grudges that we've carried and release the private bitterness that has poisoned our souls for far too long... forgiveness is the gift that we give to others that is actually for our ourselves.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21

Day 10: The Black Widow - Clearing the “Red” from the Ledger of our Minds

The MCU version of Natasha Romanoff has a backstory she would like to forget... her previous actions as the ruthlessly effective Black Widow resulted in a heavy burden of regret that she couldn't shake off. While her pursuit of doing anything she could to clear the massive amount of red in her ledger brought us a heroine who eventually made the ultimate sacrifice, she never got to enjoy living free of the guilt and shame that she carried for the sins of her past. She had been forgiven by others and was even given a place of responsibility and leadership, but poor Natasha never permitted herself to be set free in her own mind... she was trapped in the prison of her past.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the Lord's commands, and no amount of “good” that we do can ever undo the “wrongs” we've committed in a feeble attempt to balance the scales of justice. Christ came and paid our debts so our ledgers, no matter how much red they contain, could be washed clean... and that forgiveness means we can now walk forward not only in freedom from sin, but from the guilt and regret we carry from who we once were. Let's make today the last time we walk back into the prison of our forgiven past in shame. Let's embrace the freedom that Christ purchased for us and turn our faces toward what lies in front of us... and never look back again.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:7-9

Day 11:

Spider-Man and the "Spider Bite" that Becomes our Calling

On the surface, there isn't too much difference between Peter Parker's "Spider-Man" and the gallery of rogues he is frequently forced to deal with. Each of them suffered devastating personal losses and endured unique, life-altering accidents that transformed them, disrupting their "normal" lives permanently. But while these villains fixated on what they lost and used these painful events as an excuse for their bad behavior, Peter refused to allow his pain of losing Uncle Ben or the way his life was irrevocably changed as a reason to become bitter, angry, or selfish. Instead, he used them to become a beacon of hope to anyone in need of a friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man... the bite that changed him became his calling.

We will all endure "spider bite" moments in our lives that transform us as well as grieve losses that leave painful scars. But what our enemy set in motion to destroy our lives and steal our joy isn't the end of our story... it's the first chapter of a new mission. Our pain and trauma does not define us or determine our future... it is how we choose to react to these moments that decides if we allow them to make us bitter or use them as a testimony to make our world better. God doesn't design our pain, but He will use these events to unlock a previously unseen destiny in our lives... one that our neighborhood desperately needs.

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
Genesis 50:20

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28

Day 12:

The Key to Defeating Galactus: Starving out Fear with Faith

While the Marvel multiverse certainly has its fair share of villains bent on ruling their respective worlds, Galactus is in a class of his own... he isn't here to conquer worlds, but to devour them. His massive size and nearly unmatched power make him one of the most fearsome opponents of all time, so when his "Silver Surfer" shows up to announce his impending arrival the response is usually fear, panic, and a grim acceptance of the inevitable outcome. But Galactus is NOT invincible... his need to feed betrays his greatest weakness. If it requires more energy for him to consume a planet than he possesses, he will be forced to withdraw and search for an easier target... starving him out is the key to victory.

One of our enemy's primary tactics in his mission to steal, kill and destroy is to send us a "Silver Surfer" of bad news to overwhelm our minds, redirecting us to focus on our fear and deplete our faith before the battle even starts. But these "scare tactics" expose his greatest weakness... he needs to move our attention off Christ to gain the upper hand. No matter what "news" we receive today, let's view it as the intimidation tactic it truly is... even if the news is true, it isn't time to panic. It is time to pray, starve out that fear with faith, and prepare to resist. Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world.

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

1 Peter 5:8-9

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

Day 13: Marvel's Ronan - Overcoming the Accuser

With a title like “Ronan the Accuser”, it’s clear that Ronan isn’t here to make friends or play nice with others, and the hammer that he wields isn’t just for show. Ronan’s view of justice gives him no shortage of guilty parties to point his finger at, delivering his brand of justice without mercy or remorse as he literally brings the hammer down on entire civilizations.

For Ronan there is no room for repentance, only a reckoning with his flawed, unforgiving, and corrupted version of the truth.

Every one of us have sinned and fallen short on many occasions, and it is only through God’s grace that we can submit our sins to the Lord in repentance to wash our slates clean. But we still have an accuser who isn’t going to give up... our enemy will continue to use those past failings to unleash a hammer of guilt designed to remind us of what we once were, break our spirits, cause us to doubt our salvation, and get us step out of the destiny that Christ has called us to. His weapon of choice is intimidating, but it has no power over the life of a follower of Christ... and it is no match for the combination of His sacrifice and our testimony of the triumph of His grace in our lives. Let’s deny our accuser the power over us that he no longer possesses and silence the guilt from what Christ has forgiven us of once and for all. Those who the Son sets free are free indeed.

Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

Revelation 12:10-11

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23-24

Day 14:

The Guardians of the Galaxy - A Team of Misfits Greater than the Sum of its' Parts

Of all the “team-ups” in the Marvel universe, the one that would’ve been voted “the least likely to succeed” by the most fans are the “Guardians of the Galaxy”. On paper, they lack the star power of the Avengers, the X-Men, or even the Fantastic Four, but it is the way they come together as a family that makes them nearly unstoppable, defeating opponents that nobody else could. Their unique backgrounds and distinctly different skill sets that could’ve caused division between them is actually their greatest strength... Rocket’s intellect perfectly complements Drax’s power, and Gamora’s focus and discipline is enhanced by Star-Lord’s unpredictability to transform a group of misfits into the Guardians the universe needed.

The body of Christ is made up of unique people from every walk of life for a reason. We are all necessary for different reasons that only make sense when we come together as ONE. We may not share anything else in common but our love of Christ, but that is by His design... He chose to gather a collection of people that might be considered rejects and misfits by the world’s standards to perform His great commission. Our missions are built to be accomplished hand in hand, so let’s set aside the opinions that serve to divide us and recognize that our differences are not just complimentary, they are intentional.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

Day 15:

The Fantastic Four's Mr. Fantastic - The Adversities that "Stretch" us into our Destiny

Reed Richards already possessed an incredible gift to help humanity in the form of his genius level intellect, but it was the accident that gave him his "stretching powers" that transformed this humble scientist into "Mr. Fantastic", a hero who was now able to use both his brains and his elastic brawn to serve the needs of others as the leader of the "Fantastic Four".

His new ability to be stretched into unique shapes and different sizes exponentially multiplied his ability to save others, but if he remained in his comfort zone as a scientist, he would've wasted the gift contained in that traumatic event. His best destiny was discovered by taking the moment that reshaped his life to become the shape of other's needs.

The Lord's calling on our lives will require us to stretch far outside of our comfort zones to reach others in need, and it is often through the trials, traumas, and adversities that we endure that we are shaped into the perfect vessels for these missions. These events were designed by our enemy to break us, but these experiences are actually the catalyst for the power of Christ to be demonstrated through us in the unique shape and manner that someone else needs to receive it. Let's push beyond our comfort zones today to become what others need, stretching to meet them where they are and pull them towards Him.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:22b

Day 16: Fantastic Four's Sue Storm and "Feeling Invisible"

While each member of the Fantastic Four were transformed in some pretty visually obvious and remarkable ways, Sue Storm was altered in the completely opposite direction, becoming the "Invisible Woman". While the event that gave her the ability to "disappear" and generate force fields meant that she was the least optically visible member of the team, the team would not have succeeded without her critical but "invisible" contributions... her missions were designed to be completed "under the radar" in a behind-the-scenes manner that only she could accomplish. Without her gifts and her sometimes "unseen" actions, the Four wouldn't be very "Fantastic".

There will be many times in our service to the Lord that we will feel "invisible" ... our prayers feel like they are going unheard, our problems persist without resolution, and our labor for the Lord fails to yield any visibly measurable results. But His eyes are never off of us... He sees through us down to the thoughts and intents of our hearts and keeps a running count of every hair on our head. Everything we do for Him and His kingdom is seen and important, even if we can't see it ourselves. Even when we are feeling invisible, He sees us, hears us, and cares about us... and the work we do for Him that nobody else sees often achieves the most important missions of all.

O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it.

Psalms 139:1-6

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31

Day 17:

Ben Grimm - A Unique Transformation for a “Fantastic” Calling

Ben Grimm was living a fairly normal life before he was exposed to the radiation that transformed him into “The Thing” ... an accident that granted him superhuman strength and endurance, but at the cost of ever leading a “normal life” again. The same event that changed others in ways that seemed much more “Fantastic” forged Ben into a virtually indestructible being, building him into an unbreakable wall of protection for his team as well as an unstoppable battering ram against their many adversaries. If Ben had the choice, he probably would’ve gladly traded his “gift” with any other member of the team... but his calling as “The Thing” required a different skill set that made him the perfect complement to his team.

The Lord doesn’t permit the adversities that we experience in life to exist because He is uncaring or insensitive to our pain... but as the omniscient God of the universe, He knows that these events are critical to building us up to be strong enough to face the unique battles that are ahead of us. Our Father uses every moment, including the ones we would’ve preferred to avoid, to generate character in our lives and produce growth that we will need in the future. Let’s be encouraged that He has a “fantastic” purpose for even the most bitter cups we are called to drink from and refuse to let it steal our hope and joy along the way.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1:2-4

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

Day 18:

Marvel's Hawkeye - Gifts that are Matched to our Calling

Of all the people who make up the Avengers in the MCU, Hawkeye is the one who seems most out of place. He wasn't given superpowers by exposure to gamma radiation or a super soldier serum, he doesn't command thunder or possess a fancy AI powered armor shell, and while his combat skills are potent, he isn't even a trained assassin like Black Widow. But despite his lack of a spider bite or vibranium arm to enhance his abilities, Clint Barton doesn't permit the gifts he doesn't possess to distract him from using the talents that he DOES possess... so whether it's Loki, Ultron, or Thanos himself, Hawkeye will be there bringing his bow and arrow to a gunfight.

It is easy for those of us who possess a "normal" calling to feel that our gifts are either too small or insignificant to have much of an impact for the kingdom of God, but He doesn't give "small" gifts or send us on unimportant missions. Let's not get caught up on the size of our audience or how "unspectacular" our gifts and talents appear to be and instead focus on showing up to battle with the confidence of Hawkeye staring down an enemy fleet with a handful of arrows or David reaching into his bag of rocks against Goliath. The Lord's gifts are perfectly matched with our calling to accomplish what He placed us here to do, so let's faithfully put them to use today.

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

1 Peter 4:10

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.

1 Timothy 4:14

Day 19:

Jean Grey and the Battle With the “Dark Phoenix” Within

Jean Grey has a bit of a complicated problem... when she is in full control of herself, she is an incredibly powerful and beneficial member of the X-Men, but the “Phoenix Force” that lives inside her and amplifies her powers unlocks a very dangerous and less altruistic side of her, the “Dark Phoenix”. This version of Jean is always present, waiting for her to yield control of herself to its dark impulses resulting in horrifically self-sabotaging decisions. But while she will always battle the “Phoenix” within, Jean still makes the choice on which side of her takes control today.

It isn't merely difficult to do what is right without the presence of Christ in our daily lives... it is IMPOSSIBLE. In these daily battles we carry our largest opposition to His will for our lives inside of us... we are our own worst enemies. For all who come to Him in repentance of our past sins, we can move forward with confidence that His forgiveness is absolute, but walking in victory over our sinful nature in the present requires us to intentionally bring Him into our day from start to finish and leave no room for our temptations to move in. Even the Apostle Paul still had to crucify the “Dark Phoenix” within him daily to serve Christ over his own desires, so don't lose hope if you feel like you are still battling an internal enemy. We all are... and through His power we WILL be victorious today.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Romans 7:18-19, 24-25

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

Romans 13:14

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

Day 20: Professor X - Leading the X-Men With the Heart of a Servant

It isn't easy being Professor X... as arguably the most powerful telepath in comic history, Charles Xavier has the innermost thoughts of every being within his immediate vicinity bombarding his mind at all times. But while a lesser individual would abuse this power for selfish gain, Charles chose to use his ability to hear the thoughts and desires of others to help them and guide them... and even though he lacked the physical ability to assist them due to his confinement in a wheelchair, he never let that prevent him from becoming the support that they needed the most. And as the leader of the X-Men, he accomplished more good by building and growing the capabilities of others than he ever would have achieved on his own.

We each receive different gifts to serve the Lord as well as others on this planet, and we also possess unique limitations that we won't always appreciate. And if we aren't careful, we can allow the things that we believe we are "missing" to distract us from our "mission", causing us to miss the entire point of the individual talents we were entrusted with. Our ministries are designed to be used in coordination with our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, as each of us unselfishly amplify the abilities of others with our own gifts. Reaching our full potential for His kingdom is only found when we seek His will for others first.

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.
Philippians 2:3-4

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
1 Peter 4:8-11

Day 21:

The X-Men's Ororo Munroe - Finding the Purpose in our "Storm"

Ororo Munroe, better known as "Storm", knows a little something about the interesting dual nature of the winds and the rain... while these elements certainly possess the capacity to be incredibly destructive, she has found that they can also be used constructively to solve problems beyond any human's capabilities. The atmospheric conditions that surround her certainly look overwhelming and terrifying on the surface, but these forces are actually what she is perfectly designed to utilize to serve her unique purpose on the X-Men team.

We will all face some powerful storms in life that we would rather avoid, but as the early followers of Christ learned these winds and rain often serve purposes far beyond our comprehension. The massive typhoon that caused the Apostle Paul's shipwreck wasn't a setback or a detour... the destructive power of that unwanted storm pushed him in a direction he wouldn't have travelled to on his own, resulting in an opportunity to share Christ with an entire island of needy souls. Let's look at the storms we are facing with the Lord's eternal purposes in mind and pray for Him to open our eyes to the hidden opportunities that only exist within this undesired environment. He sets the boundaries for this tempest we are in, and He will use this storm to unlock a destiny that only exists where the winds and rain are fiercest.

The Lord has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet.

Nahum 1:3b

O you afflicted one, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me," says the Lord.

Isaiah 54:11, 17

Day 22: Bucky Barnes - From “Winter Soldier” to Avenger

While every Marvel character has a complicated backstory of some kind, Bucky Barnes is in a league of his own. Sure, Iron Man was a selfish, greedy war profiteer and the Incredible Hulk has some pretty serious anger issues, but the Winter Soldier was a downright villain... a merciless mercenary lacking any kind of moral code as he battled the very Avengers he would one day join. But that vibranium arm that was once used for evil purposes is now attached to a man who experienced a complete rebirth, and while the Winter Soldier doesn't possess a perfect past, he isn't letting that stop him from becoming the force for good that he was always meant to be.

Being “born again” in Christ means that we have become a new creation from the inside out, and that includes the full forgiveness of our past sins that once defined us. We are “Winter Soldiers” no more... and that means we move forward in confidence that He didn't just deliver us to save us, but He also commissioned us to help reach and save others. Let's put away the things that led us down paths of regret and shame and start today with a renewed mind that has been set free from our enemy's brainwashing. The Apostle Paul was once a “Winter Soldier” too... so let's leave the past behind us, grab hold of His grace with that vibranium arm and press forward into our calling today.

*But they were hearing only, “He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God in me.
Galatians 1:23-24*

*Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:13-14*

*Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.
Galatians 4:22-24*

Day 23:

Marvel's "Watcher" - The Difference Between an Observer and a Savior

While there are many beings of significant power and capabilities in the Marvel multiverse, there isn't anyone quite like "The Watcher", a being who exists outside of the story and serves as both a narrator and recorder of these cosmic events with a very simple rule... watch and observe from a safe distance, and don't interfere unless the multiverse is at risk. But while the Watchers are a mostly benevolent group, this non-interference policy makes all their knowledge and power pretty pointless... humanity needs more than just a historian cataloguing mistakes. We need help.

When we're going through tough times, it can often feel like our Heavenly Father is too far away from our problems to see them or care about them, but the truth is the Lord didn't simply wind up our planet and let it spin while He casually observes it from a distance. He cares so much about us that He chose to come down here to live, suffer, and die on this blue marble just so He could fully relate to us in every way. God is not unfeeling, uncaring, or sitting back casually watching us as we struggle through our predicaments from afar like some cosmic reality show. He's as near to us and our daily problems as we allow Him to be. We don't serve a Watcher... we have access to a Savior who understands us far better than we know. He didn't come here just to watch us. He came down from heaven to seek us and save us, and the name He chose is "God with us".

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:13-15

Day 24: From Hawkeye to Ronin - The Danger of a Heart Hardened by Pain

When Thanos snapped his fingers at the end of “Avengers: Infinity War” and erased half of all life in the universe, the lives of those who were left behind were irrevocably changed in many ways. Some like Captain America came together with others in support groups to work through the aftermath of the event, others like Thor chose to bury themselves in distractions to numb the pain, and then you have Hawkeye... he permitted his pain to completely harden his heart as he transformed into the merciless assassin “Ronin”. While his sorrow was certainly understandable, he allowed it to penetrate his heart and redefine him, mutating this heroic Avenger into a lawless vigilante without a moral compass. Everyone on the planet endured the same searing pain... but how they responded depended on their heart.

Enduring unspeakable tragedies, heartbreak, and pain are sadly an inescapable part of life on this fallen planet, and while these moments may alter the course of our lives it is our decision on whether they harden our hearts. Our pain is real, and processing our sorrow and grief takes time... and only the Lord can both heal our pain and protect our hearts from being hardened by the scars left behind. Our Savior carries scars, too... so let's place our broken hearts into His nail-scarred hands so He can start the healing process today.

*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.
Proverbs 14:23*

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
Ezekiel 36:26*

Day 25:

Bruce Banner's Journey from "Rage Monster" to "Smart Hulk" - Dealing with Anger

The seemingly mild-mannered Bruce Banner was hiding a secret, but it's not the obvious one that you would think. Sure, he turns into an enormous green rage monster in the right circumstances, but the invisible burden he was carrying was finally exposed in the battle of New York when he confessed that getting angry enough to transform into the Hulk would be easy because he was "always angry". Buried deep beneath the facade of a kind, gentle man of science was the victim of a gamma radiation accident that changed his life forever, and his frustration at the life that he lost meant this hero was persistently at his breaking point. But his painful past, once he reconciled it with his calling, became his superpower and "Smart Hulk" emerged... a hero finally at peace.

We all struggle with anger, and whether it is the unresolved trauma of our past or the challenges we are facing in the present, by submitting our frustrations to Christ we can prevent our anger from defining our actions and transforming us into an out-of-control "hulk" at the smallest provocation. Being angry at the unfair things that happen to us and alter our lives is normal, but when we surrender our pain to the Lord, He does more than simply help us release our anger and heal our pain. He reveals the hidden power these events gave us to reach and save others.

*Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.
Ephesians 4:26-27*

*So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.
James 1:19-20*

Day 26: Captain America - The “Man Out of Time” or Made for Such a Time as This?

Before Captain America assembled the entire MCU to battle Thanos, he was the “man out of time”. A relic from a forgotten era, Steve felt out of place in the world he woke up in and yearned for the simpler days when good and evil were more clearly defined. It would’ve been easy for him to decide that this new world wasn’t a place worth saving or that he was the wrong man for the job, but his heroic actions to thwart Hydra in the past was just the beginning of his purpose on this planet. He wasn’t a “man out of time”; his time was now and all his previous missions were just a prelude for the future battles that he would fight with the fate of the entire universe on the line.

There are many times in my life I’ve wondered if I was born in the wrong era, my best days are behind me, or that my opportunity to make an impact for His kingdom lies somewhere in my broken past. But just as Steve Rogers was born to be a hero in two different eras, we were meant to be in this place, at this specific time, to serve the Lord and fulfill the calling He placed on us. If we are still here, then that means our mission on this planet isn’t over yet... and our most important work for Christ remains in front of us. Let’s pick that shield up and allow the Lord to reveal the purpose we were designed for. We are not “out of time” ... He made us for such a time as this.

Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14b

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

1 Corinthians 15:8-10

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

Day 27: Professor X and Magneto - Praying for Those who Persecute us

Magneto is one of the most complicated and nuanced villains in Marvel's entire cast of comic characters. The horrific pain and trauma he endured fractured his psyche and transformed him into a defender of his mutant brotherhood at any cost, which frequently puts him at odds with his life-long "frenemy" Professor X who sees their powers as a gift to help humanity, not rule over them. Magneto's pain combined with his power resulted in a superiority complex that made it impossible for him to care about those who were different than him, and his unresolved issues with his past created a mutant with the power to save the world but lacked the empathy to help them.

In this broken world we live in, new battle lines are drawn almost daily as our spiritual enemies seek to divide humanity across every possible point of contention... but we are called to rise above all the hate-filled rhetoric and speak love, grace, and mercy even in the darkest of times. Christ gave us the ultimate example, as He showed love and forgiveness to the very people showering Him with insults as they cruelly executed Him on the cross. Let's demonstrate compassion and pray for those who persecute us, refusing to allow the actions of others to control our responses. After all, it was his unconditional love and mercy for our unworthy souls that saved us in the first place.

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

Proverbs 25:21-22

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Romans 12:14, 17-18

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

Luke 23:34a

Day 28:

Thor - From Unworthy to Bringing the Thunder

Thor might be one of the most powerful beings in the entire MCU, but the events of Avengers: Infinity War left him with a burden that even all his super strength couldn't help him lift... the pain of his own failure. Devastated by the memory of how he let himself and his team down, Thor retreated into a cocoon of isolation in an attempt to avoid any reminders of his mistake. But this self-imposed exile was NOT his destiny, and the universe still needed his help. Sure, Thor wasn't perfect... but there isn't a perfect Avenger on the team. It's a collection of formerly broken, flawed, and damaged beings who assembled together for a higher purpose... he just had to be willing to move forward from his past and rejoin his family.

We have all fallen short, and the memory of our past failures as well as the consequences of our actions can weigh us down so heavily that we collapse underneath the pressure and seek to simply disappear from the battlefield. But the Lord does more than just allow His repentant children to return home in shame... He restores us, clothes us in His righteousness, and reminds us that He knew all of our future mistakes when He gave us our calling and gifts in the first place. We're all unworthy prodigals saved by grace, so let's receive His full restoration and forgiveness and move forward. It's time to bring the thunder.

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son". But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to be merry.

Luke 15:20-24

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:29

Day 29: Johnny Storm - The "Human Torch" and the "Fire" Contained in our Words

Johnny Storm (aka the Human Torch) brings his fiery demeanor to the Fantastic Four in more ways than one... his quick wit and sarcastic quips might bring some much-needed humor and levity to some pretty serious situations, but his mouth is often the reason that many of these problems exist in the first place. His inability to control his words often leads him and his allies into battles that could've either been avoided or at least engaged on more advantageous terms if he had simply shown some verbal restraint... every word he says (and chooses NOT to say) determines not only the direction of his life but how difficult his path will be to get there.

Our spoken and written words have more power than we may realize, shaping the course of our lives and impacting others in ways that may not be apparent until we give a full accounting of our verbal choices to the Lord. We have been given the gift of communication to build others up and impart grace, but too often our quick temper or misguided attempts at humor tears others down and brings grief to the Spirit of God. Let's give a prayerful pause before we speak today, because some things cannot be unsaid and the damage our tongue causes is easier to avoid than it is to repair. Bitter, angry, and sarcastic words yield inedible fruit... let's share words that give life.

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matthew 12:35-37

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Proverbs 18:21

Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!

James 3:4-5

Day 30:

Tony Stark - A Sacrifice Made, a Debt Repaid

Tony Stark's final act of sacrifice to stop Thanos, while difficult to watch, was the only possible conclusion to his story arc... after all, the "arc reactor" in the chest of the world's most famous "genius billionaire playboy philanthropist" only existed in the first place because someone else laid down their life so Iron Man could live. Tony's shallow existence would've ended years earlier in a desert cave if it wasn't for the self-sacrificial actions of a kind doctor who gave away his final breath... and that choice placed Iron Man on his path to one day do the exact same thing.

Our decision to follow Christ is more than just receiving a clean slate of forgiveness from our sins... we are commanded to demonstrate His quality of love to others by dying daily to our personal wants and desires. While "taking up our cross" will look different for each of us, it will always mean that we surrender what we would prefer to keep so others can receive what they can never lose. But we aren't asked to give away anything that we weren't freely given first... we are only standing today because of His amazing grace and the sacrifices of those who chose to share Him with us. Let's pick up that gauntlet today and act as a selfless conduit of His grace, even if the cost to our own desires is high. It is only by giving our life away that we truly find it.

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."
Luke 9:23-24

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.
John 15:12-13

AFTERWORD:

We hope you enjoyed reading these devotionals as much as we enjoyed exploring these themes in the movie and writing them. We invite you to continue to follow us where you will find our freely provided daily devotionals, videos and more on our Finding God in Video Games website or on our social media platforms!

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Who We Are

Finding God in the World of Video Games has been our labor of love, blending our personal appreciation for the medium of video games with our heartfelt desire to reach this generation with the Gospel of Christ. The mission of our weekly articles and videos is to encourage both Christians and non-believers alike of the relevance and necessity of a daily, personal walk with Jesus Christ while challenging some of our perspectives, long-held perceptions. and pre-conceived notions along the way.

The world of gaming is an incredible way to experience an emotional journey, spend time with your family, or simply stay connected with friends around the world. It gives us a rich, common language that is shared across all ages, nationalities, and backgrounds in every walk of life. And the reality of God is so much more than what we often give Him credit for because our mortal minds struggle to comprehend Him. When walking the earth Jesus often used allegories and parables to help us understand the complex concepts of God, faith, and living this Christian life. And through our gaming anecdotes, favorite video game narratives, and our passion for all things “nerdy” we aim to uncover the deep truths of God in our day-to-day adventures in the vibrant world of gaming.

Speaking for myself, I grew up studying and appreciating the Bible but, like many of us, struggled with living a life consistent with my beliefs. To be honest, I always believed in God and never doubted His existence, but I refused to loosen my stubborn grip on the controller of my own life. I was playing through this “Game of Life” without bothering to pick up or follow the strategy guide that comes with it. My misguided belief that I could make it through this journey believing in God without actually following or serving Him got me into more predicaments than I can list here. Thankfully, God never gave up on me, and despite my countless flaws and inexcusable failings over the years He has remained faithful to me and not only blessed me with my beautiful family but also granted me the gift of this project... to show people how to seek and find God in, of all places, the world of video games.

One day I was trying to encourage a friend to keep strong through a challenging period in their life. I shared a Bible story that the Lord had placed on my heart that I believed would give them strength through their storm. Unfortunately, they were not a believer in Christ, and they did not have a point of reference to understand the context or principle of the

portion of Scripture I was sharing with them. But we DID share a passion for gaming, and God brought an example to my mind that helped me frame the Biblical concept through a gaming narrative that we both knew very well. After we had talked through their situation and prayed together, they told me that they had never really thought about the Bible in this way. That conversation became one of my very first written blogs, “When God Needed a Hitman – Living Up to the Assassin’s Creed”, and from that humble beginning we have been writing and sharing ever since.

By posting anonymously under the name “Finding God in the World of Video Games” we attempt to keep the focus purely on combining our personal adventures in the world of gaming with the messages that the Lord places into our hearts each week. In late 2019 my wife began utilizing social media in our attempt to share what God has placed in our hearts with as many people as possible, and together we also started recording our writings in a video format as another critical part of our mission to reach everyone we can with the message.

It is our prayer that these articles and videos inspire our readers and viewers to see the eternal wisdom of God in a modern light and provide hope and encouragement in a world that is overflowing with negativity, darkness, and suffering. Along the way we hope we can make others laugh, think, and reflect while exploring the mysteries of Christ from a different point of view than they may have considered before.

We hope you will join us as we all share this journey together in the wild world of gaming and this open-world adventure we call life! Please share us freely with anyone you believe would enjoy or appreciate our articles!



If we haven't been formally introduced, let's fix that right now. We are "Finding God in Video Games", and over the past ten years we have been sharing daily devotionals, videos, and articles on the spiritual analogies and practical applications we have found from our various gaming and other "nerd culture" experiences and how we incorporate those into our passion for following the Lord!

Get ready for a daily devotional that will take you through the world of video games and beyond as we share our search for a deeper relationship with the Lord from our own personal Bible reading and gaming experiences in our third devotional book, "Finding God in Video Games"!

Join us as we travel from the Land of Hyrule to the Mushroom Kingdom and even into galaxies far, far away seeking spiritual truth and finding it in some very unexpected places. Whether you are a follower of Christ who could use a daily dose of encouragement or are simply a fan of video games looking for answers to your real world challenges, this book is for you!