

Prepared

The Companion Devotional



Preface



In *Prepared* (available from 21st Century Christian Publishers), you will learn about the amazing life of the apostle Paul, God's prepared servant. When you study the Scriptures and closely examine his life, it becomes evident that all he endured helped to prepare him for the next challenge he would face. And, looking back over his life, we see how they all worked together so he could do the work God had prepared in advance for him to do.

Through the study, you will also examine ways God is working in your life.

How is He preparing you?

What means is He using to grow and mature your faith—helping you to become a Christ-like masterpiece?

And what work has He prepared for you?

That awareness can potentially point to a purpose behind everything you experience. Those experiences may be readying you to do the work God has prepared for you.

It can all be used by God—to bring glory to God . . . and a blessing to others.

While the way may be hard, the preparing is certain.

And who doesn't want the confidence that comes in feeling prepared?

God is in the preparing business. He is preparing you . . . because He has something prepared for you—that you might walk in His prepared way.

God's Preparing Hand

When he made the statement, he was speaking from first-hand experience. He personally knew it as factual truth—to the very core of his being.

From the confines of his house arrest in Rome, Paul could look across the landscape of his life and see the hand of God at work . . . preparing him.

So, guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul penned the most precise words of our faith when he wrote, "We are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10 ESV).

Paul endured much: seclusion, starvation, shipwrecks, and stonings. He knew extreme hardship, persecution, imprisonment, and rejection (see 2 Cor 11:23-33). His autobiography, housed in 2 Corinthians 11-13, culminates in his charge to "test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5).

And when you do?

You will find you are, indeed, prepared for whatever circumstance God has allowed.

Know why?

The answer to that question is also contained in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "**Christ is in you.**"

Paul knew the source of his sufficiency (2 Cor 3:5-6).

Do you?

All Paul suffered had purpose—preparing purpose. Each trial he endured prepared him for the next one. Each blow made progress in chiseling away God's masterpiece.

A sculptor was once quoted as saying, “I just chipped away everything that didn’t look like my subject.” God knows what you are to look like. And He will masterfully chip away everything blocking His unique masterpiece.

It is a lifelong process of sanctification which requires trust . . . until the work is finished.

Through life’s circumstances God is preparing you—creating a masterpiece in Christ. But that is only the first half of the Ephesians 2:10 equation. God is preparing you for what He has prepared **for** you.

The other half of this truth of His preparation is so that you can do what He has placed before you to do.

God does a good work in us, to do a good work **through** us.

God wanted Paul to understand the profound truth of Ephesians 2:10. And He wants every Jesus-follower to realize it as well—for it states both the divine work and divine purpose for those in Christ. It unveils God’s preparing hand. And that has power to make a mountain of a difference in the life of the believer.

The Essence of Preparedness

Since the adage about laying a firm foundation before you build has been proven true, we'll begin with the basics of the concept of *Prepared*.

Week One of the study establishes the essence of *Prepared* by looking into the foundational elements of our faith. It's a way to begin at the beginning.

It is important to first understand:

- Who prepares us—God.
- How He prepares us—in Christ.
- Why we're prepared—Ephesians 2:22.

Also in Week One, Saul made his grand entrance as our primary model of all things prepared. It is his life the study follows, in order to see the precepts of our faith lived out.

When you look at the life of Saul before conversion, it becomes clear that everything he experienced prepared him for the work he was called to do. His education and training, even his ethnicity and his citizenship, were all elements used by God.

God had something prepared for Paul. But Paul needed some preparing by God first.

When you look at the course Paul's life took after conversion, there are noticeable ways and means God used to accomplish just that.

It was 11 years before Paul would be ready to take his first missionary journey—the prepared work for which God had been preparing him.

So don't lose heart, dear Christian. If it seems like you've been waiting and working a long time, it may be God's preparing ground. Allow Him to do His work in you—so you'll be ready when the time comes.

Two bits of good news that really should make your day

You can read something and feel pretty good afterward. And then there are things you can read that make you feel ridiculously exultant!

Because there's good news. There's really good news. There's great news. And then there's over-the-top, extraordinarily fantastic news.

However, I fear there are people who don't view the Bible that way. I think some shy away from it because they think the Bible is intended to impose guilt. It's true that there are passages that can make us feel bad—because they cut deep with conviction. But there's no doubt about it, the Bible **assumes** guilt. The Bible does not exist to provide condemnation for being a sinner; rather, a solution for us as one. It reveals a remedy for all of us rebels . . . a merciful pardon for each of us lawbreakers.

The Bible shows the way God has made available to restore a relationship with a Holy God—so that we can be used by Him. More than revealing shame, the Bible is meant to reveal salvation.

Even contending with those difficult passages, I can't imagine missing out on the grace and glory.

And Ephesians 2:1-10 is all glory and grace!

In fact, I call it my *Hallelujah Chorus*—because every time I that passage I shout “Hallelujah!” afterward.

Ephesians 2:1-10 is the before-and-after account of every Christian. And I do mean **every!** Before any personal sin of your very own, it states what we **all** once were.

There are certain things I once was, but there are things we **all** once were.

There is great encouragement in that, isn't there? More importantly, there is commonality in that—commonality that should breed unity . . . *and shared empathy!*

“Once-was” is the great equalizer—making it the great unifier.

We can't look at the person sitting next to us and say they were *once in darkness and dead in their sins*. No! Because the very same thing can be said of us. Of me.

So, let me ask you: Are you a once-was?

Are you the *only* once-was?

No! We are all a *once-was*.

Our stories share that same *once-was* paragraph.

And, for those in Christ, we also share the grace of “but God.”

The “but-God” of Ephesians 2:4 culminates with the beautiful truth that God has made us a masterpiece.

Now let me ask you: *Are you a masterpiece?*

The irony is this: You can't become a masterpiece without first being a *once-was*. But the grace of God takes the raw . . . the messy . . . the broken *once-was* and recreates us, in Christ, into a masterpiece.

Be sure to note, however, that *once-was* is past tense—it's what you **were**. A masterpiece is what you **are**.

Masterpieces are meant to be noticeable. Not up on a pedestal, mind you. But certainly not veiled either. There are many things that serve as veils. Like fear, lack of confidence, sin, and contention.

So, I have three bits of really good news for you today, friend:

- The Bible is a friend. It's one of God's great gifts of grace to us.
- Verses 1 through 9 of Ephesians 2 names real blessings to help you own the masterpiece (and keep the veils in the closet).
- Reading Ephesians 2:1-10 inevitably leads to shouts of “Hallelujah”!

A Thing or Two About Uncertain Times

It was a day like any other.

He headed off to work early, having to go out of town on official business.

He neared his destination when he was suddenly cast down to the ground.

Blinding light pierced his darkness; but he needed to be kept in the dark to eventually see it.

In his waiting he wondered . . . and reasoned.

He spent three long, sightless days in foreign surroundings. And all those scriptures and benedictions memorized in his youth whirled on repeat—round and round they churned in his confused mind.

One thing he knew for certain: he was a man-on-a-mission, at the top of his game, when he was stopped cold in his tracks.

If only he could see! Then he could put the pieces of this bewildering puzzle together and change his circumstances.

When the scales finally fell from his eyes, he saw the light—and, eventually, the hand of God at work in his life.

Those senseless days—unable to see . . . *understand*—finally started to make sense.

Such was the experience of the apostle Paul, as told in Acts 9.

Have you ever been there? Stuck in the dark? Unable to see what God was doing in your life? Waiting it out through uncertain times?

A thing or two can be said about uncertain times. But one thing is certain: God is there . . . preparing.

In your waiting and wondering, do you tend to worry?

When my nephew, Mitchell, found himself waiting to start a new job, his wise Aunt Yvonne remarked, "Channel your worry into preparedness."

When we can't see what God is doing or why—amid bewildering circumstances—it is imperative to keep trusting . . . keep praying . . . keep seeking . . . keep renewing your mind with God's Word.

Corrie ten Boom wrote, "If you want to hear God's voice clearly and you are uncertain, then remain in His presence until He changes that uncertainty." That, dear one, is wisdom.

Paul may not have realized it at the time, but those days crouched in blindness proved to be a major turning point in his life.

Sometimes uncertain circumstances bring about a turning point. For Paul, that turning point was repentance.

Paul needed to experience a turning point—which included a stint spent in uncertain circumstances.

God prepared Paul through those uncertain circumstances—proving useful later when he would face uncertainty time and again. There would be many times when Paul would need faith to fully rely upon God when he couldn't see the way ahead.

When you can't see what God is doing—and things don't make sense—consider the possibility it's a turning point, where God is preparing you for a purpose.

In

In—a lot of good can come out of something that's been *in*.

You can't enjoy a cup of tea unless the leaves have been steeped *in* boiling water.

A crocus bulb won't grow and bloom until it's been buried *in* dirt.

And you can't bite into a crunchy pickle until it has first been soaked *in* salty brine.

Why, look at all the “ins” Paul experienced. He was heaped *in* suffering, weakness, seclusion, and battle (mostly spiritual battles, of course). And in each experience, his faith was further prepared by God.

I'm sure you've found yourself *in* some pretty fine messes, too. I know I have! But I didn't always learn from it the first time around. So, sometimes, I found myself right back *in* the same jam. Kind of like pasta. If it's not quite done, you toss it right back into the boiling water.

Which brings Jonah to mind. While God gave Jonah opportunity to think about his choices, it took time in the belly of that big fish to bring about a change of heart. Albeit temporarily! Which proves, once prepared does not necessarily mean always prepared.

There are plenty of occasions in the Bible when the people of God glimmered in the fire (like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3).

Consider 2 Corinthians 6:4-10...

“Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Paul and company found themselves *in* less-than-admirable circumstances and yet they were “always rejoicing.” They felt they were “possessing everything.” Notice carefully: they were called “servants of God.”

But wait!

Servants of God don't suffer, *right?! Wrong!* None are exempt. If the only, beloved Son of God, His Suffering Servant, was not exempt, we can claim no such exclusion.

But a faith that can attest to the fruit of suffering, as Paul (see 2 Corinthians 1:9-11) and David (see Psalm 119:71), is a faith exquisitely prepared by God *in* suffering.

The same can be said of battle.

The Christian's faith is prepared both *in* battle and *for* battle. We are prepared *in* battle by learning to depend upon God as our Shield . . . our Defender . . . our Mighty Warrior. And God prepares us *for* battle by providing all we need to fight the spiritual forces of this dark world.

You see, there is a becoming in each and every child of God in Christ.

We are becoming more like His Son.

We are becoming His ready servant.

We are becoming His masterpiece.

There is no doubt that, because of this sin-broken world, bad things happen to decent folks. But God can use suffering as an instrument for our becoming. And He can, and does, redeem it for good.

Hold, in confident faith, to the truth that whatever circumstances you find yourself *in*, dear one, God is *in* it with you.

The Mark of Aspiration

Many and varied are the life aspirations of man.

Some revolve around love or money . . . or both.

Some are achievement-driven (like, fame).

Some are career-based.

But many are based upon experiences (like, travel to exotic places).

Aspirations are essential to living a focused life.

They provide direction.

They provide purpose.

They are often goal oriented.

Parents often have a definite idea of what their children's aspirations should be. (Our Heavenly Father included.)

Sometimes, early on, parents decide what they want their children to become. What's not found at the top of a mother's list, however, is that of servant.

While it may rank at the bottom of the culture's list, it is, in fact, a high and lofty ideal.

The beauty is that being a servant is always ideal. Because it is always others-focused. And it fits every arena (whether the family arena, work arena, or social arena). It nicely compliments all other ambitions and desires. It's timeless. It doesn't require any special education or skill set. And it meets you right where you are, wherever you are.

You see, you can be a servant among other things, because it is as much an attitude as it is an action.

And that attitude is humility.

My YiaYia was very much the servant. She loved her family well. And the older I get, the more I admire her for all the sacrificial ways she served her family.

When I was younger, I adopted society's feminist mentality. It was the era of Gloria Steinem, Ms Magazine, and bra burning protests. Many women of my generation determined to redefine the roles of women. And so, I set my sights on a professional career to overcome the archaic stereotypes for women.

It was all about me!

Subsequently, I have spent even more of my life trying to reverse that mindset.

Scripture clearly reveals God's heart in the matter. God desires for us to become like His Son—as one who serves.

Week Six of *Prepared* focuses on the fact that God prepares us **for** something. (Several somethings, actually.) One of them is to serve others.

Servanthood has no aspirational equal.

We learn from Paul's pen that he became a servant of the gospel by the grace of God and the working of His power (Ephesians 3:7). It is the same for us.

He also teaches that we are not to serve reluctantly or half-heartedly. Rather, we are to “serve wholeheartedly, as if [we are] serving the Lord” (Ephesians 6:7).

Paul's zeal in serving the Lord was unquestionable. As he served the Gentiles, he served the Lord. And vice versa.

God prepares His people for purpose. And being a servant is life's ultimate purpose. One which deserves our highest esteem. As does the Christ, who set the mark.

Works—there's so much more than meets the eye

I'm not always cooperative.

I was even less so when I was younger.

When I was feelin' the love from my family, I'd do just about any chore . . . without being asked, even.

But if I felt offended, under-appreciated, or over-looked, they dared not expect one thing out of me! (Except a bad attitude, of course.) I would get all rebellious and conduct my own sit-down strike.

Come to find out, those works I were to do amounted to much more than met the eye. Even though, at times, I felt it was busy-work that hardly mattered.

My mindset was antithesis to what God expects from members of His family.

He wants us to be like the Thessalonians Paul commended.

“We remember before our God and Father
your work produced by faith,
your labor prompted by love,
and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”
(1Thessalonians 1:3)

The faith of the Thessalonians expressed itself in works. Because of their faith in Jesus, even in difficult times, they served God. They didn't labor in the Lord only when they had that warm, fuzzy feeling. No! Their works were done in repentance, faith, love, and hope.

Questions about works have always been great in number. Many of those questions are explored in Week Seven of *Prepared*. Because there is so much more to works than meets the eye.

One of the more personal questions is *what*. What am I to do?

I know what it's like to come into a group at church who are busy serving but you're just not sure where to start or what to do. You feel like a fifth wheel! But if you just jump in with willing hands, you'll soon feel connected and part of the team. The more you offer to help in various ways, the sooner you will discover your gifts, interests, and passion, even.

There is great joy and satisfaction that comes from serving. Because in serving you come to realize that you're part of the kingdom. There is a place where you belong and are needed.

Every member has a valuable contribution to make.

The grace of God, in Christ, saved us. And the grace of God made us family and gave each of us a work to do.

It's not just busy-work. It matters.

It doesn't have to be a grand feat—showy, or extra-ordinary. It's more personal than that. Often, it's just between you and God—and that makes it rather significant.

If you're stuck, start with prayer. Reach out to someone at church. No doubt, God has something just for you.

You can count on Him to prepare . . . and provide—in more ways than meets the eye.

Prepared to Hope

God gave the soul of man what it needed most . . . from the very first moment it needed it—hope.

He gave it by way of promise.

He gave it by way of His infallible Word.

And with each promise, man could look forward—with confidence in God as their hope, as well as the Source of all things hoped for.

Through the ages, God fulfilled promises along the way, while lending further assurance that what they waited for was yet unrealized—keeping hope's fire burning.

God further rewarded hope with the coming of His Messiah—bringing deliverance, redemption, forgiveness, and eternal salvation, all as promised.

And He anchored hope with the Resurrection.

So, our hope—alive and sure—in the things promised and yet to come has no reason to flinch nor flounder.

No! God has prepared and accomplished many great and wondrous things to keep hope from wavering. For it is a hope that's been proven and found true.

And not just in the twinkling gleam of bright, carefree days. But in fires and tempests, dungeons and prisons . . . and crosses. It has caused the human soul to soar—while in the pit, the cave, the valley, the ash heap.

In homes, schools, courtrooms, hospitals, and gravesides we can hope.

In the state of this world, in a state of ruin and brokenness, in the face of a daunting task, in fierce opposition—though weary and burdened—you **can** hope!

You can hope beyond your current circumstance . . . to get you **through** your current circumstance.

Hope is greater than your trial . . . to carry you *through* your trial.

Because our hope is not in a something, that's fallible . . . but a Someone.

Our hope is in Jesus.

It's not something conjured up inside of man when he feels like it.

It's not even named as a Fruit of the Spirit.

A sure hope comes from God alone and steadily flows from all that He has accomplished in preparing the Way for us. It's a hope hard-won by our Victorious Lord—making the soul triumphant. For we hope beyond this life.

Think for a moment about the hope captive Israel had. Through the prophets, God gave them promise of restoration. The anticipation they had in God's fulfillment of those promises carried the children of God through their **years** of exile. Their hope gave them strength to endure oppression and captivity in a land not their own. They had a hope . . . even in the midst of devastation.

Think about it. They lost it all! But God didn't forsake them . . . or give up on His promises. And they didn't give up on Him! They clung to God, in hope.

And so must we!

Because God's Word of promise prepares our hearts to hope, as we wait for the coming of our "blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13b).

Why, just look at Lamentations 3:24: "'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I **will hope** in Him.'"

In the middle of this book of lament is a declaration of hope.

The surroundings of the remnant may have been charred and singed, but they were "not consumed" by the fire.

There can be sorrow and lament—but hope remains.

And hope we must. For, as Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "To live without hope is to cease to live."

Paul knew it. As bad as things got, he continued to hope in the power and presence of God to sustain, for he stated, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8).

We have many examples of people in the Bible who maintained a living hope in the trials of life—like Daniel, Nehemiah, Peter, Paul . . . even, *and especially*, our Lord Jesus. And if He has a hope that our salvation will overcome this world, ***then we can, too!***

The Way of Walking

There are many places to set our feet . . . and many ways to place them there.

There are those who choose to set their bejeweled feet upon the red carpet of notoriety, like the Hollywood elite.

Or those, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who humbly chose to set worn feet upon the dusty roads of poverty in obscurity.

There is a path a Christian is to walk . . . and a way to walk it.

How?

In humility, by the power of the Holy Spirit, garbed in the virtues of our Lord.

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”
(Colossians 3:12-14).

Those in Christ are to walk the path of holiness in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

It all begins with humility—in recognizing our utter and complete dependence upon an infinitely perfect, righteous, almighty God. In soberly and rightly considering ourselves truthfully, we are to then think of others more . . . and ourselves less. Humility’s greatest opposition rises from attitudes of comparison and envy.

Walking the way of our Lord in compassion is to add another set of footprints to someone else’s rocky path. It reassures the trepid navigator they don’t travel the valley floor alone.

Kindness, gentleness, and patience are each unique in their own right, and yet interdependent. It’s hard to be kind without a gentle heart. And it’s difficult to be gentle and patient without humility. But it’s impossible to express any of them authentically without love.

Look at the path of obedience and holiness Jesus walked. See where the path He was to walk took Him. And note how He walked it.

The path may take you across the valley, **but** God will be with you.

There are things God values. He cares about the choices you make. He delights in those He dearly loves when they walk

Faithfully

Prayerfully

Joyfully

Thankfully

Wisely

Humbly

Hopefully

Patiently

Lovingly

Our walk (as mostly employed in the New Testament) is the manner in which we conduct life.

In what manner will you choose to walk, on this path of faith?

Success is in the Finishing

Mainstream media thrives on rags-to-riches stories AND riches-to-rags stories.

You can't lose when you win both ways.

And we can't lose either when we continually consult the sacred texts of Scripture. There, stories of people who had faltering starts but finished well AND those who started strong but faltered in finishing well abound.

Let's toss ancient Israeli royalty into the ring to see what can be learned . . .

King Uzziah was the tenth king of Judah. He was 16 when he became king. He reigned in Jerusalem 52 years (see 2 Chronicles 26).

Zechariah instructed him in the fear of the Lord (v5). Uzziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (v4) and became very powerful (v8). A string of impressive accomplishments is found in 2 Chronicles 26:9-15 . . . "BUT" (v16) "after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense." Subsequently, God afflicted King Uzziah with leprosy—discipline for over-stepping his authority in usurping priestly duties.

His success led to failure.

But God has set the Christian up for success—provided the Christian chooses to do their part . . . *to the finish*.

All God has done in the spiritual realm by grace, through the accomplished work of His Son, coupled with the ongoing, sanctifying work of the Spirit, is so the Christian can finish their earthly days faithfully.

A real obstacle to that finish, however, can be success.

Success, however, can be measured in different ways. There is the world's way. And the kingdom way.

If the world's standards were used to measure my life, most people would conclude that I'm not finishing very well. (*Even I think that sometimes!*) Looking at my life, you'll discover that not much has changed over the course of the past 10 years. My material life looks much the same. I haven't acquired many possessions or amassed a fortune. Financially, it's as though I'm treading water—busy paddling, but going nowhere. But I've kept the faith. Hope is alive. And God is at work . . . *internally and eternally*.

Personally, I consider that a success.

Why?

Because God, by His grace, is the central to the equation.

Because of the transforming work He's doing—heart, mind, and soul.

Because of the victories over temptations—one by one—toward endurance.

Because I'm still His.

And He is mine.

All that equals divine success!

There is a paradox to finishing successfully in the kingdom of Christ—because it is counter cultural. Fortunately, it was modeled by many of our Lord's greatest disciples. For example, the apostle Paul started his career as a highly educated, successful religious leader. He was persecuted, imprisoned, and eventually executed. But his life was still a great success because it is one that was redeemed and used by God to the glory of Christ Jesus. The same can be said of the apostle Peter.

I consider everyone who finishes faithfully in Christ as having lived a successful life—even with nothing else to their name.

So, what can we learn from King Uzziah about being successful and living a life that brings glory to God to the finish? It would be a lesson in keeping.

1. Keep from becoming prideful by remaining humble.
2. Keep ourselves from self-exaltation by keeping Jesus exalted.
3. Keep trusting the sovereignty and goodness of Father, Son, and Spirit.
4. Keep from becoming greedy.
5. Keep aligned with the will of God.
6. Keep an attitude of repentance.
7. Keep prayerfully focused.

It's not uncommon to have a lapse in good judgment and wisdom, as Uzziah. The difference is repentance. A turning back to God flips a story from ending in failure.

Your story—whether rags-to-riches or riches-to-rags—is one of success when it is redeemed by God, kept by Christ, and finished faithfully.

To Endure or Not To Endure—Is There Any Question?

Endurance, it's the ability to withstand difficulties. Baker's Evangelical Dictionary defines endurance as "continuing commitment in the face of difficulty."

*"God measures our progress by our capacity to endure."
Charles Stanley*

We've all heard inspiring, heroic stories of people who endured extreme situations. When it comes to endurance, my imagination often goes to the world of sports. Probably because of the intense training they must undergo just to compete. But what about the everyday burdens of the mundane? Where does the capacity to endure daily pressures of this world come from? What source of inner strength does the believer have to withstand, not only hardship, but the continual force of our culture? Or even grueling times of waiting?

Let's allow the Bible to answer our probing questions—so that when the question about our endurance arises, we'll be prepared . . .

Endurance comes from God

*"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement
give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus"
(Romans 15:5).*

In Paul's prayer for the Christians in Rome, he praised God as the Source of their endurance. The storehouse of strength of our all-sufficient, all-powerful God never wanes, tires, or depletes.

Endurance comes from Scripture

*"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,
so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures
we might have hope"
(Romans 15:4).*

Every word recorded on the pages of the Bible instructs and informs faith. It teaches about the character of God, the will of God, the plans, purposes, and promises of God. And seeing all He has done in faithfulness, in relationship to His creation, helps us to trust

Him, and encourages us to hope. Hope and trust are two key ingredients for our endurance.

Endurance is a result of prayer

"We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need"
(Colossians 1:11 NLT).

Paul prayed the Colossians would be strengthened by God's glorious power and might, so they would have great endurance. He also prayed they would "live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way." God is pleased to provide endurance in response to prayer.

The growth of the church speaks to God's grace for their endurance. And Paul's intercession petitioned God for just such a grace. This is a great prayer to borrow on behalf of the church and missionaries everywhere.

Endurance is inspired by our hope in Jesus Christ

"We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"
(1 Thessalonians 1:3).

The Thessalonians were being commended for the fruit of their faith, love, and hope. And the fruit of their hope in Jesus? Endurance! Hope in our Lord is a compelling force in our life in Christ. I dare say, we can't flourish without it.

Endurance is aided by the attitude of the heart

*"A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance,
But by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken"*
(Proverbs 15:13 NKJV).

The Contemporary English Version states that "sorrow can crush you". Personally, I find it really hard to be strong when my heart is sad and my spirit is crushed. Discouragement and despair are sure roadblocks to endurance. There are many reasons God warns us to "guard our hearts above all things." Just one being: a broken heart makes countenance

weak—which is a real threat to endurance. Remembering the presence and promises of God keeps our spirit from becoming defeated by worry.

So, we see God makes us able to endure and graciously provides for us to do so. He helps us to bear up under the weight of things . . . for as long as it takes.

In weighing the question “to endure or not to endure,” special knowledge isn’t required for the answer. Just this factor: turn to God, Who is Able—in every circumstance that requires endurance. Because with God, there’s no question about your ability to endure.

More on Ephesians 2:10

Yes, I know, I wrote over 200 pages on Ephesians 2:10 . . . and I'm still writing.

Add 72 *Prepared* blog posts to that, plus Facebook content, and it may seem like a lot.

There's just a lot to say when it comes to this verse!

But think about it: Multitudes (exceedingly more intelligent than I) have written volumes over the past 2,000 years regarding this same verse!

It's that profound!

This one verse is packed with riches—riches to build a relationship with Jesus, to motivate faith, and transform attitude and behavior.

Combine this statement of truth with knowledge of the writer's experience, and the context in which it was written, and it packs an even more powerful punch.

Obviously, Paul was writing to the church of the doctrines of our faith. But I also conclude that he was making three dramatic personal declarations with this verse. It was:

1. A Proclamation of Faith

Paul made a bold statement of what he believed to be true, because God had proven it to be true in his own, personal experience.

2. A Confidence-Booster

This truth of God, as conveyed and communicated by the Holy Spirit, gave Paul courage, strength, and assurance. Furthermore, Paul knew Jesus and His Word to be completely trustworthy. This enabled him to endure harrowing circumstances. Whenever Paul reflected upon these words, I rightly imagine he felt confidence well up within.

3. A Praise unto God

With such a statement of unwavering faith, Paul's words were a praise unto the God. Paul confessed he was made new by God, in Christ, for purpose—a purpose God planned in advance. He humbly gave God glory for the fruit of his labor and suffering—recognizing and professing the sovereign wisdom and grace of God at work in and through him.

Ephesians 2:10 can be those same things for you, too!

It is for you to believe, dear saint, that God has made you a new creation, with every spiritual blessing in Christ, for good works He already has for you to do, as you live a life holy unto Him. *Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised. For, in just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay* (Hebrews 10:35-37).

Continue to walk in His prepared way, as God's masterpiece of Christ's glory.

(Conclusion of articles which follow the study's weekly lessons)

Personally Prepared

I'm going to share something from my personal journal with you, if that's ok . . .

Late Tuesday evening, after I had gotten home from Nashville from fetching *Prepared*, I was feeling rather reminiscent (among many other things!). I pulled out my working binder and revisited "her" story. I came across some of my personal side notes and prayers and began to vaguely remember what was going on in the background of my life as I was writing the manuscript. So, I pulled out my journal to put all the pieces together. And it all came rushing in.

What a trying and difficult season that was!

I should lay a frame of reference first: I started writing *Prepared* in March 2014. My part was finished and the manuscript was submitted to 21st Century for their work to begin in October 2015. The completed work was ready to hit the shelves in June 2016. From start to finish took a quarter past two years. And these two partial entries I'm about to share? They were written in August 2015—at the pinnacle of my writing season. When all about me was a tumultuous storm.

"You can prepare me through the difficulties of this world
to bring about good in me, good to others, good for You....

"May these trials prepare me and bring about such a good, Father—that is their
only redemption. Knowing You are doing just that makes them all worth the
wrestle."

That is the essence of the lessons of *Prepared*. That is precisely what the study is about—how God takes the bad and redeems them for good. How He can use trials and create a good in us to be shared in His work in the lives of others, as we walk this rocky road. It's about how trying circumstances make us ready for what lies ahead.

That's what God taught Paul. Each hardship, each situation and circumstance, all worked together to prepare Paul for the next thing God had for him to do—so he could endure the challenges he would face in doing them. Thankfully, on a much smaller scale, God taught me that lesson, too. I can honestly say I was personally prepared.

Invariably, God teaches me something significant with each new writing project. I am the student of my own studies. I wouldn't have it any other way! It's as if the topic comes to life and I learn firsthand that very thing I am trying to communicate. The words on the

page are enacted about me in the classroom of my life. And *Prepared* was no exception.

As I shared in the study's introduction, God prepared me before I even got to writing. He certainly continued throughout the developing experience . . . and continues still.

I have reached this understanding of "being prepared": It's when God forms in us a confidence in His trustworthy presence, with faith that He will provide all that is needed, no matter what we face, so we can endure.

God has prepared . . . does prepare . . . and will prepare you, too. It's all part of becoming His exquisite masterpiece.

A Prepared Work Intended to Become a Masterpiece

A unique design, stamped on a blank page, lies before you. It is but the point of a colored pencil away.

Your stroke varies—sometimes short and quick, sometimes long and lingering, or light and fanciful. Fleeting moods are read in the tones used. Regardless, the finished work is a masterpiece of color and beauty—all by design.

Adult coloring is all the rage. One glance at the retail racks and the appeal becomes obvious, as most covers are stamped “Stress Relieving” or “Relaxing.” The creative and captivating designs add to their allure.

But as I think upon the recent phenom, a spiritual application comes to mind—that of a prepared work.

Do you know God has one just for you?

Do you also know that He prepares you to be able to do that work?

Just as the colored pencil is the instrument provided to complete the picture, God provides and uses people and experiences, opportunities and situations as instruments in completing the masterpiece of you. Every aspect of your life is a stroke that adds color, embellishment, artistry . . . beauty. They all blend to create a masterpiece from His prepared work in you—so that you are prepared to do the work He has prepared for you.

At a loss for what that is? Are you trying to make sense of the design? Or what the finished work is supposed to look like? The 12-week Bible study *Prepared* was created to help you discover the masterpiece and the prepared work of Ephesians 2:10.

Another advantage to adult coloring comes to mind. It provides opportunity to meditate upon Scripture. Who knows? It may have been prepared for just such a time as this—to unveil a masterpiece in waiting.

The Good in Hard

Yeah, so I had this raging bout with the flu. It knocked me down and out for days. It was this hard thing. I know, in the grand scheme of things, it was just a common illness. And it was really the least of the hard I've known. But it presented difficulties, nonetheless.

Hard hits and can catch us off guard, though, can't it? For the Christian under the misguided notion that all hard ends when we come to know Jesus as Savior—thinking in error that He will save us from all trouble—are the most unfortunate who can get knocked off feet of faith. They can either land on their knees and cling to Him or get knocked down altogether, never to rise on His wings again.

If there's one thing the Lord has taught me through all the hard, it's the sacredness of it—the real blessing of it—because of the great good God can bring from it. Because hardship? It knocks us into the arms of God. And dependent upon Him? That's the ultimate posture. That's where the greatest good comes in like a flood. To invite Him into the hard, is to be held in His embrace. It doesn't remove the hard, but it adds a meaning and purpose to it because of what He teaches about Himself through it.

Those who expect only good times and blessings from God miss the real good that comes from God. Because it's the hard times spent **in Him** that stretches us, grows us, presses us deeper into Him. It makes the bitter sweet, the ugly beautiful, the hard good.

Take King David, for example. He knew hard. And it drove him into the loving arms of God, to experience Him like no other. Difficulties brought depth and dimension. And poverty gleaned riches untold.

Now consider King Solomon, as opposed to the experience of his father, David. God said of Solomon, "No other king in all the world will be compared to you for the rest of your life" (1 Kings 3:13 NLT). He had great wisdom and riches and was esteemed by kings of every nation. "Nothing lacking," the Bible says; all Judah and Israel lived in peace and safety. *Peace and safety*. Isn't that the desire a certain worldview produces in us? They didn't serve him well. They were as a hardship unto themselves.

Solomon "denied himself no pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:10). His life was the endless pursuit of pleasure . . . meaning. He lived the life of plenty and ease—and yet seemed empty . . . bored. He seemed like a man lost and struggling. And he lost the great blessing of a kingdom graced by God because he repeatedly sinned pursuing a hollow happiness. In the end, he concluded that all is meaningless apart from God.

Yet David was a man acquainted with hardship and want. In those times of difficulty, he knew heightened communion with God. He became stronger through every circumstance where he found himself most weak and vulnerable.

God uses such times to prepare us (the subject of *Prepared*). He either prepares you for it or prepares you through it. "It" being "hard." (Something to which I can personally attest.)

We are all prone to hardship. The world is filled to overflowing with illness, abuse, injustice, poverty, addiction. But God can be found working in and through these—with grace a plenty. Because, for His child of faith, it is in the midst of these where what you have heard of God becomes what you have seen of God—precisely what Job learned through the testing of his faith (Job 42:5).

Even the Son of God was not exempt from difficulty or great suffering. He never used His power or authority to eliminate hardship or improve His hard lot in life. He came to suffer with us . . . *for us*.

It is Jesus who takes the hard and turns it to a seed for good. A good that is hopefully used to minister to other companions of hard.

The only redeeming quality of what's bad is a response that invites God into the hardship. Of knowing His presence in it. And abiding with Him through it. An additional blessing comes when we allow Him to transform us toward and through that hard thing.

Only He is able—and willing—to bring good from hard. Let that knowledge forge endurance. For affliction can be endured when there is an awareness that it is merely an instrument in God's trustworthy hands to bring about good. That, and the hope we have beyond the hard in the promised redemption of all things.

Our very encouragement comes from the powerful testimony of the saints through centuries of tragedy, loss, and great affliction. They strongly and assuredly attested to the blessing God births through suffering. They even went so far as to give thanks for whatever befell them—because they came to know the grace of God through such hardships.

God may not prevent the hard. And a relationship with Jesus is no guarantee you will be shielded from it. In fact, quite the opposite is to be expected. But there is a sure blessedness promised to the poor in spirit, to those who mourn, and are persecuted—a blessedness of fellowship with the Suffering Servant of God.

A sweet taste of grace, for our endurance and God's greater good, is that of coming to know our Lord better because of suffering.

It is also knowing the power of God to deliver you through it (and not necessarily the power to demolish it) that strengthens. So, when hard hits, first turn to Him; welcome Him in; trust Him in it; and press on together through it.

The hard comes, as sure as the sun rises. It comes to all mankind, regardless of belief. But good rises from hard—resurrected, like the Glorious Light that spills forth from death's dark chamber.

