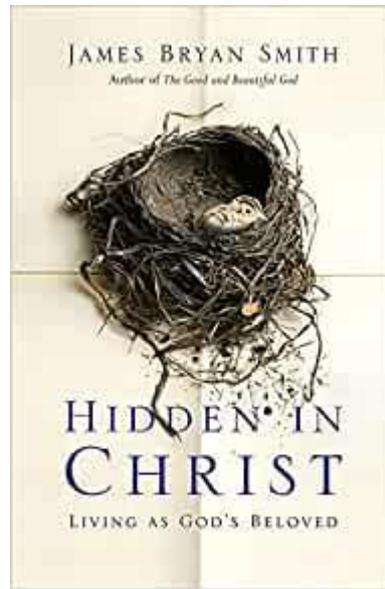




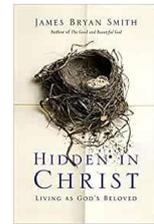
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Advent Reflections 2020: 'Hidden in Christ'

In this Advent Season, as we wait in hope and expectation for the coming Saviour, let's refocus our attention on what this glorious Saviour came to do. The following devotional reflections are based on Colossians 3:1-17 – one of the great passages of scripture. Each takes a single word for our daily inspiration and enables us to drink deep of these great truths: that you are one in whom Christ dwells, and that you live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. In this unique season, never have we needed more to root ourselves in our identity in Christ.

The reflections are excerpts taken from James Bryan Smith's book 'Hidden in Christ', and are reproduced with his permission – our grateful thanks to Prof. Smith, one of the world's best devotional writers, for generously allowing us to share these free of charge. To buy a copy of 'the real thing', the book is sold online in multiple places: currently on offer at hive.co.uk, also at eden.co.uk and amazon.co.uk. Prof. Smith also publishes a regular podcast 'Things Above' which you can access here: <https://apprenticeinstitute.org/things-above-podcast/>



Day 1 – 'Raised'

As Christians we put a lot of focus on the cross. It is at the centre of most churches and the subject of most sermons. We even wear it on necklaces. In contrast, much less attention is paid to the resurrection. Without the resurrection, evil would have won. The resurrection is God's great 'YES' to the world.

Death is the great enemy, but it has been defeated. Sin is the great destroyer, but it too has been defeated. Both of these menaces have been defeated by the greatest event the world has ever witnessed: the resurrection of Jesus.

And it is all a gift from God. I did nothing to deserve it. He did not merely die to get me into heaven, but *to get heaven into me*. His life – pure and powerful – now lives in me. I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. St. Paul begins Colossians with "Since you have been *raised* with Christ," because that is the fundamental truth about who I am. Whatever we face, we do not face it alone, but with the one who now rules and reigns in the heavens, prays for us and will see to it that in the end we will laugh until it hurts, because the beauty of God is overwhelming.

Jesus is the King of the Universe, the ruler of all. You and I have been *raised* with him, alive to the world above, where he is. And since Jesus is now in the position of authority as the resurrected Lamb and Lion, nothing, absolutely nothing, can prevent our access to God and his glorious realm.

God gets the last word. And God is good. And it is going to be well. All manner of things will be well.

AFFIRMATION

Jesus rose from the grave. There is nothing I cannot rise from. Even death cannot hold me down. Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

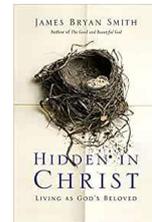
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus to die and rise, to defeat sin and death and all that plagues humanity. His resurrection not only proves your victory but gives me new life, salvation and hope. Thank you.

REFLECTION

Have you known, and been living your Christian life from, this reality (that you died and rose with Jesus)? If not, why do you suppose it was never explained to you? What difference can this insight have in your life as an apprentice of Jesus?

What things from your life before being raised with Christ are you holding on to that are hindering you from experiencing the freedom given in Christ?



Day 2 – 'With'

One of Jesus' names is Immanuel, which means "God *with* us". We have a choice between two ways to live: with God or without God. The first way is like mowing with a self-propelled engine: the second is like mowing without it.

My greatest regret as a Christian is that for many years, I thought faith amounted to keeping a set of rules. My greatest source of frustration came from the fact that I tried, for many years, to live the Christian life by my own strength. I became part of organised Christianity, but the problem was that I didn't live up to the standards I professed to live by: I assumed God was frustrated with me and I was miserable.

The solution came when I learned about my identity in Christ and the power of the kingdom of God. It turns out I was missing two essential ideas in Christianity: Christians are indwelt and empowered by Jesus, *and* we have access to a life with God (the kingdom of God) every moment of our lives. All those years I had it wrong. I cannot make myself a Christian by obeying all the rules.

St Paul writes in Colossians 1:1, "So if you have been raised with Christ..." Notice the language: "you *have* been." It is a reality, a truth, a completed act. This is who I really am, not because of what I do, but because of what God has done. I really died with Jesus and I really rose with him, and he really lives in me. When I walk in the Spirit I find a strength I never knew I had access to, wisdom I never found in my own small brain and a joy I never imagined. I can do all of this because God is *with* me.

And God is within you, calling you to live the Christian life not out of your own willpower, which will always fail, but by the power of Christ, through whom you can do all things, even more than you can ask or imagine.

AFFIRMATION

God is with me in all that I do. I have strength, wisdom and all the provision I need.

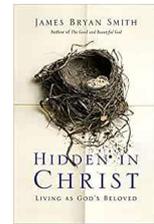
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I do not know why you chose me, but you did. And I know that I do not have any strength on my own. But I also know I can do all things through you who gives me strength. Teach me how to walk with you every step of this day.

REFLECTION

What did you feel when you first discovered that God is with you?

In what areas of your life do you struggle to let God be with you? Why?



Day 3 – 'Seated'

There is one phrase in the Apostles Creed that, for a long time, I never understood: '[Christ] is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty...' What does it mean? Why is it important?

I would later learn that in the Bible, "to be seated" is a metaphor for having finished one's work: *you are seated when your work is completed.*

The work Jesus did – from the incarnation, to living a perfect life we could not live, to freely offering himself on the cross, to the resurrection – was the perfect completion of God the Trinity's effort to bring the world into a life of intimacy with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words, he finished the job! As he himself said on the cross: "It is finished."

This is very good news for us. But there is also another reason why he is seated. Jesus our great High Priest intercedes for us. He is now labouring for *our* healing through his prayer. And what is he praying for? That you and I would be completely new people, people in whom he can make his home.

When Paul asks the Colossians to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God," he is urging them to reflect on the *wonder* of Jesus – the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world – and the *splendour* of Jesus, the High Priest who now prays for us. This is how God is "making all things new".

When Jesus prays, things happen. He will not stop until he has made us all new people.

And simply knowing that, when I pray, I am praying *with Jesus*, gives me great courage. Together we are making all things new.

AFFIRMATION

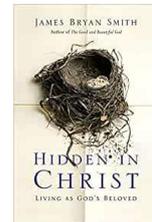
Jesus paid it all, and now he is praying for all. This is another reason that nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

PRAYER

Precious Jesus, thank you for taking away all of my sins, even mine, for now and for all time. Your work in that regard is done, and I now live in the peace of the finality of the cross. Thank you. And thank you for praying for me. Help me to know that when I pray, I am not praying alone. Amen.

REFLECTION

What difference does it make knowing that Jesus is praying for you? How does that make you feel?



Day 4 – ‘Set’

My car stereo, like most people’s, has two different bands in which to receive radio signals: AM and FM. Now imagine for a moment that one station is constantly proclaiming the values of “the world” and the other, “the Spirit”. Which station would I listen to?

When it comes down to it, living the Christian life is simply a matter of where we *set* our minds. Every moment we have a choice: that is something we are free to do. What we think about has a large impact on how we live, how we feel, and how we react to the world around us. If I steep my mind in “things above”, I find myself energised and encouraged. If I focus my consciousness on “things that are on earth” I find myself frustrated and disappointed.

What are these “things above”? I think it means things like the unending and unchanging love of God; the provision and power of God; the forgiveness of sins; the fact that God is with us in all we face; our adoption into the family of God; the intimate compassion of God. Simply reflecting on the fact that I have died and risen with Christ changes my countenance. Setting my mind on the mind-blowing reality that Jesus is praying for me creates a sense of awe. And it makes me glad.

Making a choice to reflect on the truths of God that I know – God is good, God is beautiful, God is true, God is self-sacrificing, etc – and contemplating them as much as possible throughout my day helps me see the world I live in a new perspective. I see my culture through the lens of the kingdom of God.

I have a choice about what to steep my mind in, which will shape my soul, for good or ill. I vastly prefer the good.

AFFIRMATION

Each day I must decide where to set my mind. If I set it on the truths of God I will be happy and holy and strong. Therefore, I choose to set my mind on the things of the Spirit this day.

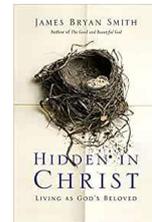
PRAYER

I am not strong, Lord. I need your help in this matter of where I set my mind. Help me, Holy Spirit, to keep my thoughts on things above.

REFLECTION

How have you experienced the difference between setting your mind on the flesh versus setting your mind on the things of the Spirit?

If you could only set your mind on one truth of God (mentioned above), what would it be? Why?



Day 5 – 'Hidden' (pt 1)

I had a student in several of my classes who was from Russia. Just before graduation she gave me a babushka doll – a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another. This doll had just two dolls, and I thanked my student for the gift.

A few years later I found myself looking at the doll and I had a small epiphany. I had been memorising Colossians 3, and first four verses all talk about dying and rising with Christ and how our lives are “hidden” in Christ. This concept was hard to understand. How did I die with Jesus? Or rise with him? How was my life “in” Christ? And does it really matter? Apparently it does, because St. Paul uses the phrases “in Christ” and “Christ in us” 89 times. That is a lot, I thought, so it must be important, even if I do not understand what it really means.

I realised that the Russian dolls illustrate both kinds of “in”. When I focus on the bigger doll hiding the smaller doll, I think about how I am “in Christ”. Jesus is like the bigger doll, and I live and move within him. This is very comforting and encouraging as I think about how, by God’s grace, have received all that Jesus is and does and has done – forgiveness, reconciliation, life, healing, power, wisdom.

When I focus on the smaller doll inside the bigger doll, sometimes I reflect on how Christ is “in me”. Again, by God’s grace, I have new life in me; the very life and power that raised Jesus from the dead lives in me. I don’t know how this works, but I know that it is a reality by the ways Jesus works in me and through me.

I am one in whom Christ dwells. Or as St. Paul puts it: my life is hidden with Christ in God.

AFFIRMATION

My life is safe, secure and hidden in Christ Jesus. I have nothing to fear this day, or any day.

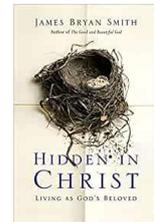
PRAYER

Thank you, Jesus, for establishing my life in you. May I walk in the glorious freedom that nothing can harm me. Help me to live each breath today in wonder over this great truth.

REFLECTION

Have you ever felt really alone? If so, how might the truth of this verse bring comfort to you?

In what “earthly” ways do you try to find safety, security and significance?



Day 6 – 'Hidden' (pt 2)

So I am “in Christ”. But what does it really mean that my life is now “hidden with Christ in God”?

We are all desperate to find answers to two important questions: Who am I? and Where am I? The deeper questions behind those questions are: Am I significant? and Am I safe?

Then the small epiphany came from the Russian dolls. Just as the smaller doll was hidden in the larger doll, so my very life is hidden in Jesus. I am like the smaller doll. I cannot see this life, but I know it is real. I know it each time I experience God with me. If Christ is in me, and I am in him, then I am significant, and I am safe.

My identity is something I work hard to establish: I assume that people think I am important because of this identity. But these things are precarious. What if I lost my job? Or no-one wanted to publish my writing? Who would I be?

From Colossians 3, and the Russian doll, I got a clear picture. I am one *in whom Christ dwells*. And if he willingly gave his life for me out of love and has taken my life into his, then he must also be crazy about me. God, I then thought, does not merely love me, he actually *likes* me. So my identity became even more wonderful: I am Jim in whom Christ dwells and delights.

I fret about how committed I am to Jesus. What really matters is that Jesus is fully committed to me. My life is hidden inside of his.

What are you facing today? Remember *who* you are: one in whom Christ dwells and delights. Remember *where* you are: “in Christ”, safe and secure. And remember *what* you are capable of: you can do all things through Christ.

Try memorising and meditating on this phrase today: “My life is hidden with Christ in God.”

AFFIRMATION – the following reprise yesterday's affirmation, prayer and reflection

My life is safe, secure and hidden in Christ Jesus. I have nothing to fear this day, or any day.

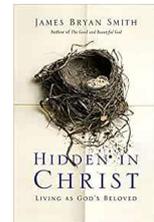
PRAYER

Thank you, Jesus, for establishing my life in you. May I walk in the glorious freedom that nothing can harm me. Help me to live each breath today in wonder over this great truth.

REFLECTION

Have you ever felt really alone? If so, how might the truth of this verse bring comfort to you?

In what “earthly” ways do you try to find safety, security and significance?



Day 7 – 'Life'

In Colossians 3:4, St Paul uses the phrase: “Christ *is* your life.” Jesus is the true and genuine source of life, not just for Christians. Jesus is the divine Word of God, the Logos, who created and sustains the universe (John 1:1-3).

Earlier in Colossians, Paul wrote of Jesus: “All things have been created *through* him and *for* him... and *in* him, all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16-17) From this it is clear: Jesus is not only the source of everything, but all things are also held together by him. Our biological life was created, and is sustained, by Jesus.

But Jesus is also the giver of our spiritual life. The Greek word *bios* refers to our biological life, but St. John used the word *zoe* to describe spiritual life. Our very spirits were designed to be infused by *zoe*. We receive *zoe* when we receive Jesus by faith: “by believing we have life (*zoe*) in his name” (John 20:31)

When I put my confidence in Jesus and began living as his apprentice, a new life emerged in my being. My spirit, like Lazarus’ body, went from death to *life*. And that *zoe* life is eternal, safe and secure, hidden with Jesus. I live by this eternal life now, and I will enter fully into it when I take my last breath on earth.

We would never have come into existence if it were not for Jesus, and we would have no hope of eternal life if not for his grace. That is why Paul says in Colossians 3:4: “Christ is your life.”

Postscript: Only Jesus can be our life – your life and mine were not only created by Jesus, they were created *for* him. To live for Jesus, we begin with gratitude. This helps us to see all of our life as being centred in Jesus, and we [start to] discover the reality of what he came to bring: not merely life, but abundant life.

AFFIRMATION

Just as my body needs to take in energy from outside of itself in order to live, so also my spirit needs to take in the energy of God himself in order to thrive. Today, I will seek that energy by opening myself up to God and his kingdom.

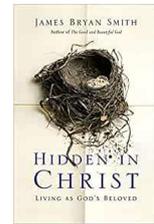
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for creating me, but even more so, this day I thank you for sustaining me, in body, soul and spirit. Give me a heart of gratitude for all of the grace you give me each day.

REFLECTION

If someone simply watched you living your life, what might they conclude is your life? What would they say is the thing you live for?

What are the most spiritually nourishing practices for you? What are they so helpful to you?



Day 8 – 'Revealed'

I am an avid sports fan. I often record the games of my favourite teams so I can watch them later. Sometimes, no matter how hard I try, I find out the result beforehand. Even when I know my team wins, I can still become nervous during the game – old habits die hard – but keep reminding myself: “Remember, we win. You know how this ends, Jim, so don’t get discouraged.”

What Paul is saying in Colossians 3:4 is the same truth while watching my tape-delayed baseball game: “Remember – we win.” Or as he puts it, “When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be *revealed* with him in glory.” He wants us to think about that glorious final day and to know – to know with certainty and not merely wish for – how it all ends.

There is a word for this certainty in a good future: *hope*. Hope is not wishful thinking: it is being certain the future is bright.

Hope gives us confidence. Hope gives us assurance. Hope enables us to trust, to have faith in the present moment, no matter how bleak. Hope gives us peace in the midst of strife. Hope brings us joy in times of sadness. As long as we have hope we will never give up.

Only the reality of the resurrection, and its final consummation in Christ’s return, can bring us the confidence, assurance, trust, faith, hope, peace and joy that will make our lives magnificent, the kind of life we were made to live.

This fact about the future makes an enormous difference in the present, because in the present we experience setbacks, losses, dark valleys and disappointments, and they can overwhelm us. So we must remind ourselves each day that we win. It makes all the difference. There is nothing we will face today that will not be overcome in the final victory of Jesus.

AFFIRMATION

No matter what life brings me today, I know how it ends, and who wins. Therefore I walk in complete confidence, without any fear.

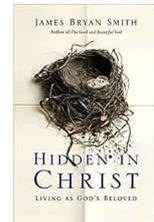
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for securing our final victory and for the certainty that we will be revealed with you in glory. Our world is full of much pain and suffering, and it makes our souls weary. But knowing that you get the last word and that all will be well gives us energy and courage. Thank you. Amen.

REFLECTION

Think of a time, or several times, in your life when a situation looked bleak, but in the end things worked out. Describe what happened and how it affected you.

How can knowing that in the end we will be with Jesus in glory affect how you live the days of your life until then?



Day 9 – 'You'

Several years ago, a friend of mine, who is a guitar aficionado, gave me a very valuable guitar. It is an Eric Clapton-signed, limited-edition guitar. I take great care of it, and I would never willingly subject it to harm. It is sacred to me, a fine work of art, so naturally I treat it with respect.

Oddly enough, that is precisely Paul's reasoning about sin in the life of a Christ-follower. For the first four verses of Colossians 3, Paul has been describing our *identity*. He says: 'You died and rose with Jesus. He now lives in you, and your life is safe and secure in him. Get that in your head, and keep it there all the time. *Remember who you are.*'

Then comes a therefore: 'Put to death, *therefore*, whatever in you is earthly.' Every Christian knows we are not supposed to do these 'earthly' things (listed in v5-8), but very few know the real reason why. Most people think we should stop doing these things because God will be mad at us. So they try, using their willpower – which leads to failure and frustration.

This is certainly not Paul's approach – instead he says, simply: 'Remember who *you* are, and act accordingly.'

So who are we? We are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. We are sacred and holy, of immense worth, finely crafted, purified by the blood of the Lamb. We were bought with a great price. Therefore, *our behaviour should reflect our identity.*

The key to Christlike living and Christlike loving is knowing your sacred value and worth. Just as I would never consider scratching my special guitar, so we should never allow our bodies to wallow in sin, to desecrate the temples that we are.

We are designed to inhabit God. Sin is beneath us, unworthy of us, and can only mar and scar our souls. 'Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee.'

AFFIRMATION

I am sacred and special, a holy vessel, a temple of Jesus. Sin has no power over me, and it can only harm me. *Therefore*, I have no interest in it.

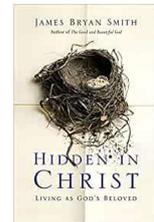
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I need your help to see myself as you see me. I forget who I am and find myself drawn to sin. But in your eyes it is beneath my dignity. Help me to see it rightly, and therefore naturally turn from it.

REFLECTION

How do you feel when you think of yourself as God's precious, valuable instrument designed to be played by him?

In Christian settings what messages have you received about your sacred worth?



Day 10 – 'Mortify'

It was St Augustine who famously prayed: 'Lord, make me chaste.... but not yet.' The reason for the 'not yet' part of the prayer is that for many of us, life seems dull compared with the enticement of sin. We know sin is wrong, but we cannot imagine having joy without it. So it causes us inner turmoil.

As I increasingly become caught up in the joy and wonder of living in the highly fulfilling kingdom of God, and more keenly aware of my sacred worth, sin becomes less interesting. Setting my heart and mind on the goodness and beauty of God makes sin, in turn, seem ugly.

The best way to deal with sin is to give it no place in our lives. There is a very strong word used in the King James translation of Colossians 3:5: 'Mortify your members which are upon the earth.' To mortify means 'put it to death'. The way we do this is to refuse to let it enter our minds and hearts by keeping them on things above. This does not mean we live every waking moment in a religious trance, but rather that we make a clear decision that sin is not something we want in our lives, and that when we see it coming, we will not let it in the door.

A teacher said to me recently, 'I just struggle so much with gossip in the teacher's lounge.' I said: 'Pray before you enter the lounge, and when you first hear gossip, as far as you are able, redirect the conversation to something positive. If you cannot, then slip away.' A few weeks later she said: 'You know what, that really worked. Thanks! I never knew it was so simple.'

The key is to kill temptation early. Think about a sin that consistently troubles you, and the occasions in which you most frequently face this temptation. Then think about ways you can simply cut sin off before it reaches you. Temptation becomes sin only if we let it in.

AFFIRMATION

If I set my mind on the things of God, things of earth grow strangely dim, which allows me to cut off sin the moment I encounter it. Sin can only overcome me if I enter into dialogue with it. Today I will not even think about it.

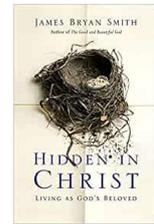
PRAYER

Lord, help me to see the areas in which my old self and its habits need to be put to death, and give me the strength and courage to do it even before it arises.

REFLECTION

What are some of the culturally acceptable forms of sin that we allow in our lives?

How could we avoid those temptations?



Day 11 – 'Bodies'

Our bodies are really smart. Through habits we develop over time, they actually run our lives without our conscious effort. Though this is good, it can also be bad. In addition to all the helpful things our bodies learn, they also have sin in their memories. We must help them forget these old sinful memories and develop new ones. As those in whom Christ dwells, we need to train our bodies, which are highly pliable and malleable.

We often think sin is purely a spiritual act, but it also involves bodily habits. When we gossip or lie, we are training our tongue to speak ill of others or not to tell the truth.

There is good news, however, we *can* retrain our bodies and their natural habits. In Colossians 3:5, Paul tells us to put to death the sin that is in our 'members', or body parts. This may seem odd, but it makes sense: our bodies have learned how to sin – they can also learn how to be virtuous.

We can train our tongues to tell the truth, to bless others with our words and to refrain from speaking ill of others. We can train our hands to serve others. We can train our feet to go to the least and the lost. Our bodies will not naturally be inclined this way, but by doing the right things over and over, under the leading of the Spirit, our bodies will start naturally to do what is right.

So I would encourage you to give thanks for your body: it is good. Then I would encourage you to think of the ways in which your body has been trained under the ideas and ideals of the kingdom of this world, and prayerfully consider how it can be retrained to be your ally in your walk in the Spirit.

AFFIRMATION

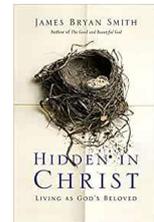
My body is a glorious gift from God, and I refuse to use it for sin. Instead I will celebrate it each day and train it so it becomes my ally in my apprenticeship to Jesus.

PRAYER

Abba, forgive me for not respecting the role of my body in my life with you. Thank you for this beautiful, living temple of the Spirit you have given me. Help me to purge harmful habits and start healthy ones today. Amen.

REFLECTION

How have you thought about your body as an enemy or ally in your life with God?



Day 12 – ‘Desires’

God created us with the capacity to desire. Can you imagine what life would be like if you suddenly lost your ability to desire anything? It would make life unbearable.

Many of our desires are, in fact, very good. I desire God. I desire to live. I desire to be with my lovely spouse. I desire to be a good parent. Some of my desires, however, are wrong and sinful. I sometimes desire to be admired and praised. I sometimes desire to see others fail, especially people who do not like me. I sometimes desire to be rich because I could buy all the things I think would make me happy.

Desires expand when we give them a place in our lives that they do not deserve. Even our good desires become sinful when they become all-consuming. Many of our sins are the result of *disordered natural desires*. Paul does not say: ‘Put to death money.’ He says: ‘Put to death greed’ – an inordinate desire for money.

Desire becomes sin when it moves from something we enjoy to something we seek as our main desire. When our deepest desire is for God, all other desires take their natural place. But when God is not the centre, other desires cannot fill the void. They can become insatiable.

So Paul is not counselling us to put an end to all desires, rather he is saying: ‘You are Christ-inhabited, fully loved and cared for. Don’t seek solace in some earthly desire – keep them in their place. Enjoy your life, just don’t try to find your life in your joys.’

Desire in itself is not a bad thing, but a gift from God, a part of how I was made. But pure delight, delight in God, is what I was made for. That alone can reorder the desires of my heart.

AFFIRMATION

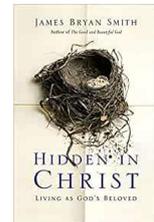
Desire in itself is not a bad thing, but a gift from God, a part of how I was made. But pure delight, delight in God, is what I was made for. That alone can reorder the desires of my heart.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, help me to find the hunger of my heart and soul in you and not in some earthly thing. Teach me how to enjoy the good things of this world in their proper order. Amen.

REFLECTION

What is one craving or desire you find it hard to say “enough” to?



Day 13 – 'Wrath'

In Colossians 3:6, we run across the theologically volatile phrase 'the wrath of God'. We usually use the word wrath to describe intense anger. Many people think this therefore means that God is sitting up in the heavens glaring down at people, filled with rage. And how does this reconcile with the big story of the gospel: 'For God so loved the world...' Unless we can find a way to understand how both can be true of God, we end up with a Jekyll and Hyde kind of God.

I do not believe that God's wrath is the same as human anger. Wrath is not God's disposition towards us; *wrath is God's arrangement regarding sin*. God isn't in the punishment business on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis, like some divine karma. *Sin is its own punishment*. We experience the inevitable consequences of our own free choice.

Can you imagine if sin carried no consequence? Sadly, many Christians think sin is something that is pleasurable for us, but unfortunately makes God mad at us. They don't see that sin is deadly.

God set up an order, a good order, and if we rebel from that order we suffer. That is what the wrath of God is.

God is love. God's disposition towards us is, and forever remains, love. God is *for* us – that is why he hates sin. Sin brings with it the wrath of its own punishment. The emptiness found in sin is often the only way people will, like the prodigal son, come to their right minds and come home.

My biggest concern is not that God expresses wrath toward sin but that I do not. God's people are being harmed by one another, and that alone ought to cause me to feel something of the same wrath God feels, and to ask God to help me to see sin as he does – a force of destruction.

AFFIRMATION

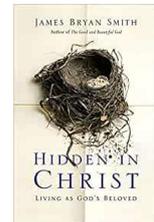
God has ordered this world so that sin will naturally harm me. This is not because God is mean, but because God loves me. I am therefore thankful for the wrath of God toward sin.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I find sin tempting, and I find myself jaded at times. But you are teaching me that sin has natural and un-avoidable consequences. Help me not only to tire of sin but to hate it as you do. Teach me how to say no to it and yes to you, which is my only hope of a good and beautiful life. Amen.

REFLECTION

How does this idea that the wrath of God is the attitude of God toward sin (and not toward us) help us love him even more?



Day 14 – 'Walk'

The word *walk* is used throughout the bible as a kind of metaphor for how a person lives: 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him [and] to love him.'

The way we walk refers to the way we go about our lives. In verse 7 Paul is telling the Colossians that before they became united with Jesus in his death and resurrection, they *walked* a certain way, one that was characterised by sin.

The way God calls us to walk has to do with light and truth and love. Have you ever tried to walk in the dark? It is slow and scary. Jesus said those who follow him will never walk in darkness because he is the light of the world (John 8:12).

When we learn to see the world by the light of Christ, the whole world looks different, luminous. Thanks to Jesus I know *who I am* (Jim in who Christ dwells) and *where I live* (in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God).

We walk in the light and we know the truth. The primary truth we learn in this walk is that we are loved. 'This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us.' And because we are loved, so we love: 'Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.'

Walking with Jesus helps us know that we are not alone, that we are sacred beings of immense worth regardless of what we do, and that great joy awaits us. We walk with Jesus and therefore we walk in the light, because he *is* the light. We walk with Jesus and therefore we walk in the truth, because he *is* the truth. We walk with Jesus and therefore we walk in love, because he *is* love.

AFFIRMATION

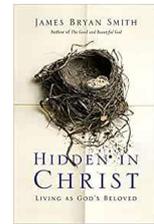
The light, truth and love of Jesus are gifts given to me. I do not deserve them. I did not create them. I cannot lose them. I can only walk in them, and when I do, the whole world will know I am his apprentice.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, who is the light of the world, the truth and the love that I need. Help me to know and appreciate this gift, and help me to walk in it all the days of my life. Amen.

REFLECTION

When people see you walk – your way of living – what might they conclude about you and who you follow?



Day 15 – 'Once'

Making the adjustment from the ways of the world to the ways of the kingdom is hard. But guilt is a poor motivator. Some people think keeping rules is the right way, and use guilt to enforce them. This is simply not helpful to me.

Being an apprentice of Jesus is not about rules and laws, it is about identity and place. The Christian life is not an if-then obligation – “If I do this, *then* God will do that”. It is a because-therefore opportunity – “*Because* I am one in whom Christ dwells, *therefore* I will...”

The better way to encourage change is to remind people who they are *now* in contrast to who they *once* were. That’s what Paul does in his letters to new Christians. Christ lives in us, and our life is in him. Instead of applying guilt, we should say to ourselves: *I am a Christ-inhabited person. What does that look like in the world I live in?*

Put simply, I am called to live differently because I am not the person I *once* was. For example, I once lied because I thought it helped me get what I want. In truth it made me feel ashamed and it fractured relationships. Now I tell the truth because God provides what I need, and I respect people and I value my relationships enough not to lie to them.

Now I have a new nature. It no longer needs to sin, and in fact, it cannot run on sin as it once did when it knew no better. I am different from the person I once was. It is possible to have a good time without sinning. And to be honest, the only way we can genuinely have a good time is without sinning. I *once* was blind to this, but now I see.

AFFIRMATION

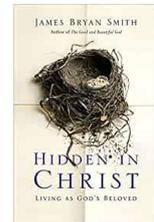
I am a new creature in Christ – the old has passed, the new has come. Today I will let my identity – not trying to keep rules – shape my behaviour.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, it is hard at times to shake off who I once was. Help me to focus not on behaviour but on identity. You have made me a new creation. Help me to see that and to live accordingly. Amen.

REFLECTION

If you could change one thing about your behaviour, what would it be? How can your identity as one in whom Christ dwells affect that behaviour?



Day 16 – 'Mouth'

What we say to one another can cause a great deal of harm. In Colossians 3:8-9, Paul tells us to get rid of 'abusive language' from our mouths. The Greek word Paul uses refers to the language we use when we want to hurt someone with our words.

When we are hurt by someone, we usually want to hurt back. It seems to take away the pain, at least for a moment. Most of us do not resort to physical violence; instead we use our words to hurt others.

But you and I have a new way to deal with our hurts. We are precious children of God who live in the safety and security of our Father's kingdom. We are heirs with Jesus who await a certain and blessed future.

What others may say and do cannot thwart this reality. So we can refrain from using our mouths and our lips to harm those who harm us. We can choose, instead, to use our gift of speech to bless those who would curse us. This is exactly what Jesus called us to do, and as his apprentices we can learn to do this. I try to live each day with the awareness that my tongue can do a lot of damage, but also with the awareness that my words can heal and bless others.

One week I set a goal to use my words to bless someone once each day. It was an easy and enjoyable exercise. As I interacted with people I began to look for the good in what they were doing. I would take a moment to compose a blessing, or to find a way to let them know how much I appreciated what they had done. Each time I watched as their countenance was uplifted. A smile invariably came over their face.

It is a delight to use our mouths to bring God glory.

AFFIRMATION

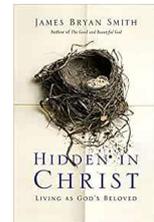
The tongue is a mighty force that can harm or heal. Under the leadership of Jesus, I can tame my tongue and train it to be used to bless and not to curse.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, my lips are not yet sanctified. Anger and resentment find their way into my words. Help me to see others as you see them, as children made in your image. Teach me how to use words to bring light and life to those around me. Amen.

REFLECTION

What recent examples of how you have spoken in a hurtful way toward, or in a slanderous way about, others come to mind? Confess them to the Lord, knowing that he offers you grace and a chance to begin again.



Day 17 – 'Clothes' (part 1)

We who are apprentices of Jesus must take off our old clothes and put on new ones. In Colossians 3:9-10, clothes are a metaphor for behaviour: some we must take off, and others we must put on.

In the previous daily readings we have been looking at some of the “old clothes” we need to throw into the trash: the apparel of anger, lust and lying, the garb of malice, greed and immorality. We used to wear these clothes before we became people in whom Christ dwells and delights. They were our natural wardrobe: we put on anger in order to manage others; we put on lust in order to feel intimacy; we put on deception in order to get what we wanted. Even though they were filthy rags, they were all we had.

But now we are Christ-inhabited. We live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. We know who we are and whose we are. The old clothes simply must go. In their place we put on our very best attire (verse 12 onwards).

Apprentices of Jesus put on *compassion*. Christ-followers wear *kindness* each day. Students of Jesus put on *humility* and *gentleness* and *patience*. Not because Jesus said we must, but because those are the only clothes fit for children of the King. We are royalty. Those virtues are the clothes we wear because Christ has made us virtuous.

Tomorrow we will explore each of these in more detail, but one concluding observation for today – we have to put them on: God will not put them on for us. Apprenticeship to Jesus always involves our effort. So this day we are called to put on these virtues. The world does not need to be impressed by our dress, but it is very much in need of genuine compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

AFFIRMATION

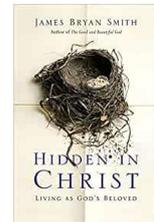
God has cleaned me up, given me new life and also given me a new set of clothes to wear. They are a gift, but I must put them on. Today I will, for the world is badly in need of people who are compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for these wonderful items of apparel. I did not earn them; they are a gift from you. Help me honour you this day, as well as those around me, by putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Amen.

REFLECTION

Have you ever tried to “dress to impress” others? Did it work?



Day 18 – 'Clothes' (part 2)

In the morning I often stop and think about what to wear that day. Lately, thanks to Colossians 3, I go over my list of 5 items that Christ-followers are privileged to wear, and how I might let others see them on that day.

I think about putting on *compassion*. The Trinity is full of compassion toward me, and toward all people. I think about the people I will meet today. Will I judge them, or will I strive to understand them, to be aware that they are fighting a great battle, as we all are? I resolve to put on compassion, and gently slip it on.

I then think about *kindness*. Jesus is my master teacher, and like him, I will show kindness today. I will try to open doors for people, let them in my lane while driving, smile at people and speak encouraging words.

Next I think about *humility*. Humility is not the same as having a bad, or low, opinion of ourselves. If I have done anything worthy, it is because of God at work in me. I resolve to put on humility this day by not thinking highly of myself and, instead, thinking highly of others.

I think about *gentleness*. One can only be gentle if one is strong; the weak cannot be gentle. I am strong because of where I live (the kingdom) and who I am (Jim in whom Christ dwells and delights). I decide that I will not use strength this day to be aggressive, but rather to be gentle. People need the quiet strength I have to offer, thanks to the Spirit.

Finally I think about *patience*. When I have amnesia about my identity and place, I struggle with impatience. But today I will remember who I am and who is in control. I resolve to put on patience: when things do not go as I want them to, I will smile and turn to God and say, "Thank you for this chance to exercise patience."

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience: rarely seen, but the most beautiful attire anyone can wear.

AFFIRMATION – the following reprise yesterday's affirmation, prayer and reflection

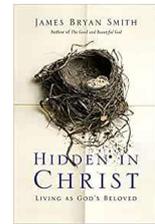
God has cleaned me up, given me new life and also given me a new set of clothes to wear. They are a gift, but I must put them on. Today I will, for the world is badly in need of people who are compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for these wonderful items of apparel. I did not earn them; they are a gift from you. Help me honour you this day, as well as those around me, by putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Amen.

REFLECTION

Have you ever tried to "dress to impress" others? Did it work?



Day 19 – 'Knowledge'

"Knowledge is power" the old saying goes. And it is true. There is a lot to know in this vast universe: and in this information age we have access to more knowledge than we can handle. Unfortunately, while beneficial and useful, that knowledge is something we can live without.

What is the most important knowledge we can have? Knowledge of God. If there really is an almighty Deity, then knowing and understanding this God would be the supreme knowledge.

However, our small, finite minds cannot grasp the eternal God. In order for us to know God, he will have to reveal himself in ways we can understand. That is precisely what God, through Jesus, has done. Jesus reveals the Father to us. And he does it through the Holy Spirit.

How? Not through a curriculum of facts. Rather the Spirit guides us into the depths of the relationship between Father and Son, which is self-sacrificial love.

The Spirit enables us to see and know God. The Spirit tells us that God is beautiful, good and true. The Spirit whispers to us that God is love, that we are loved. The Spirit encourages us to set our minds on things above, to bathe our thoughts in the life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Spirit invites us to participate in that loving communion between Father and Son: the good news of the now-available life with God.

This is knowledge that changes everything. But it is not to be understood as a theory: this knowledge must be lived. And when we grasp this knowledge, we are renewed. Our lives are transformed. If knowledge is in fact power, then this knowledge is the most powerful reality than anyone can know – not knowledge *about* God, but knowledge *of* God. Thanks be to God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we can know it.

AFFIRMATION

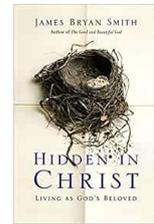
The Spirit witnesses to me in whispers, revealing the amazing love between Jesus and his heavenly Father, and in so doing, witnesses to our spirit that we are his beloved children in whom God is well pleased.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to make you known to us. And thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to lead us into these truths. Increase my knowledge of you, so that my new self can be renewed. Amen.

REFLECTION

If you could have a better knowledge of one aspect of God, what would it be?



Day 20 – 'All'

In verse 11 Paul tells the Colossians: 'Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.'

What does Paul mean by 'here'? He is referring to the body of Christ, the gathered community of Christians, the church. *Here*, in the church of Jesus, things are very different from there – the rest of the world, where clear lines are often drawn. People tend to be afraid of those who look different, think differently and act differently from them.

But all of that changes when we become people in whom Christ dwells and delights. The distinctions of race, gender, education, and ideology are no longer a cause for separation. We now share a deeper bond. Paul gives us the secret to this unity in diversity: 'Christ is *all*, and is in *all*.' First, there is no-one greater than Jesus: as we pledge our allegiance to King Jesus we become fellow citizens of the kingdom of God, where all people are created equal. Second we are Christ-inhabited, and that life is bond of our unity.

Christianity gave birth to a narrative that all of humankind is essentially one. The world would never arrive at this notion. As Professor Max Mueller points out: 'Humanity is a word which you look for in vain in Plato or Aristotle; the idea of mankind as one family, as the children of one God, is an idea of Christian growth.'

When we celebrate communion we gather as a group of different people, declaring: 'We, who are many, are one in Christ.' Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have been a witness to this unity. May we continue to cause people to say of us what Tertullian reports of the early Christians: 'See how they love one another.'

AFFIRMATION

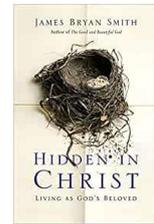
In Christ we are all one. Regardless of our outer differences our inner sameness gives us unity in our diversity, which is just as God designed us to be.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, you made a beautiful and diverse world of people, but we confess that too often we shrink back in fear of people who are different from us. Give us the eyes you have, which see all people as one, especially those who call you Lord. Amen.

REFLECTION

If people looked at your close friends, would they see more similarity or more difference from you?



Day 21 – 'Chosen'

In Colossians 3:12 Paul tells the Colossians that they are 'God's *chosen* people, holy and dearly loved.' The concept of being chosen by God goes back to the Israelites, whom God chose to be his people. But in the new covenant, God has also chosen people outside of Israel to be his people, as we saw yesterday.

Now 'both Jew and Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free' are members of God's household, chosen and adopted and brought into the family. Notice the two adjectives that follow 'chosen': *holy* and *dearly loved*. These two words describe the nature of those whom God has chosen and adopted.

First, they are *holy*. We must be careful not to assume that the Colossians (or us, for that matter) are holy in terms of their behaviour. The word holy refers to that which is sacred and special, and should be cared for because it is sacred and special. We are people in whom Christ dwells. We are holy because God has chosen us.

Second, those God has chosen are *dearly loved*. Do you know how much God loves you? It is beyond your imagination. God loved you into existence and has given you life and breath and grace and sustenance all of your days. You are not merely someone God *likes* (though he does): you are someone God *loves*. Eternal love has chosen *you*: you did not merit this love, and therefore you cannot lose it.

You and I have been chosen by God. God's Spirit bears witness, with our spirit, that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16). Now we can live without fear. We are not slaves, we are children. God went to the furthest reaches to find us, and sacrificed everything to make us his, because in his eyes we are holy and dearly loved.

AFFIRMATION

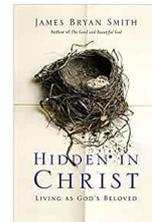
God has chosen me – not merely all people – but me specifically, because in his eyes I am holy and in his heart I am dearly loved. I will live this day with the confidence and courage that comes from knowing that I have been *chosen* by him to live forever with him.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I give you thanks for all that you have done to bring me into your family of faith. Jesus, you willingly went to the cross that I might be rescued from the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light. Thank you for choosing me and making me your child, holy and dearly loved. Amen.

REFLECTION

When you were growing up, did you have a strong sense from your parents or some other relative that you were special and loved? If so, what helped you to feel that way?



Day 22 – 'Beloved'

One of my favourite quotes is from theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. It reads: 'After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child. God interprets himself to humans as love in the same way; He radiates love, which kindles the light of love in the heart of a human, and it is precisely this light that allows us to perceive this, the absolute Love. Just as no child can be awakened to love without being loved, so too no human heart can come to an understanding of God without the free gift of His grace – in the image of His Son.'

Balthasar uses this experience between a mother and her child as an illustration of how all of us come to know that we are the beloved of God. A seed of love is planted into each of our souls, a deep longing to be loved, but it can only be awakened by our being deeply loved.

Our deepest longing is to be loved by our Creator. If we knew we were truly loved by God, as we are, our souls would be whole. Sadly, very few people know that they are loved. We live in a world of competition, separation, isolation, performance and reward. We are taught from an early age that love must be merited by our behaviour, and we project this onto God.

The cross of Jesus Christ shouts that we are loved – as we are, not as we should be. God, in Jesus, reveals the great mystery: God is love, and we are his beloved. It is his gift to us.

And it is a gift which transforms. The truth that we are unconditionally loved leads us to the only place where we can truly love – it awakens us to our holiness, strengthening us and leading us to love and serve.

God is smiling at you. Can you see it?

AFFIRMATION

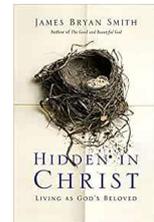
I am God's chosen, holy and beloved child.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for sending your Spirit to show me that I am loved. In a world that tells me love must be earned, strengthen my faith; help me to believe that I am loved as I am. Let me live and believe that I am loved. Amen.

REFLECTION

Why is this fundamental truth (that we are God's beloved) so difficult for so many of us to believe?



Day 23 – 'Bear'

The truth about all community – secular or sacred – is that it consists of people, and people are flawed. Paul encourages the Colossian Christians to 'bear with each other' (3:13). The virtues he listed in 3:12 (compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility and patience) must express themselves in the act of forbearing. Each of us brings our flaws, struggles and weaknesses to relationships, giving others an opportunity to bear with us – as we do with them.

I used to think of this as a burden, and often wished that everyone would become what I wanted them to be – less rigid, less complaining, more outgoing.... I too wanted to be more transparent as a person but often failed to take the risk. If we are going to live in community we will have to learn to accept others as they are, not as we want them to be.

That does not mean that we simply accept the flaws and stop wanting people to change. What it does mean is that we welcome the opportunity to bear the burdens of others. It is a privilege to do so: when we bear with one another we experience genuine love and intimacy. It is an *opportunity*, not an obligation.

Bearing with one another is the only way to loved and be loved: to exercise compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility and patience. In Galatians 6:2, Paul wrote: 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.' The way of Jesus is to bear the burdens of others. He has given us an example and a motive for bearing with each other. May we have his eyes of compassion, seeing the struggles of others as an opportunity to demonstrate real love.

AFFIRMATION

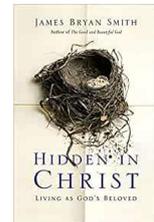
The struggles, problems and weaknesses of those around me are not an obligation for me, but an opportunity for me to demonstrate the love of Jesus.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, just as you have borne all my burdens with gladness, help me to demonstrate that love to the people I live and work with. Give me your eyes of compassion, and teach me how to see their struggles as an opportunity to demonstrate real love. Amen.

REFLECTION

When have you been in a situation where it was difficult to get along because of the personal issues or struggles of those in the community?



Day 24 – 'Forgive'

In addition to teaching us to bear one another's burdens, living in community makes it necessary to learn the art of forgiveness. People harm each other – that is a reality of human existence. Sometimes it is slight, such as not showing us the respect we deserve. Sometimes it is a deeper hurt, such as unfaithfulness or intentional malice. Each of us has been harmed by others in some way, because all of us are flawed and broken and sinful.

Jesus, our master teacher, once said: 'And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.' (Mark 11:25) What is Jesus telling us? He wants us to know that if we desire forgiveness, we must enter into the sphere of God's mercy. We cannot say, "I accept God's forgiveness for my sins, but I refuse to forgive others." This is actually impossible, not just theologically but psychologically.

If we truly know that we have been completely forgiven, then we will naturally forgive those who have harmed us in some way. It may take time – it often does – and it may involve the help of another, particularly a good counsellor or therapist who listens, understands and can guide us.

When we find ourselves struggling to forgive someone, we should not grit our teeth and merely try harder to forgive them. Instead, we should dwell on the fundamental reality that we ourselves are people who need forgiveness, and then set our minds on the reality that God, in Christ, has forgiven us completely.

Paul tells the Colossians: '*Forgive*, as the Lord forgave you.' We can only forgive when we know the presence of Jesus standing with us, the One who is the model but also the *means* of forgiveness.

AFFIRMATION

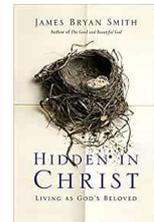
God has forgiven me. I live in an atmosphere of grace. Therefore, I can – by his grace – forgive those who harm me. Forgiveness is not about justice; it is about healing.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for forgiving me for all of my sins. I have sinned against you far more than others have sinned against me. You are my model, and you are my means for forgiving others. By your grace, help me to forgive as you have forgiven me. Amen.

REFLECTION

Have you been hurt by someone, and found it difficult to forgive them? Explain.



Day 25 – 'Love'

Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment was, and he responded, 'The most important one... is this: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:29-31)

Jesus' response has a clear order: first, love God; second, love your neighbour. The order is important because the love we extend to our neighbour is the same love we receive from God. If we are not in a deep, intimate, loving relationship with God, we will not be able to extend genuine Christian (*agape*) love to others. Just as parents in an aircraft need to have their own oxygen mask secure and working before helping their child, so we must first breathe the pure air of the kingdom of God before we can lead others into it.

Our modern culture is in love with the idea of love, but it does not know how to love without condition. In our world, the narrative is clear: we find love and acceptance and worth only through performance, by earning it.

True love, however, is not dependent on our actions but is a condition of being. We learn to reside habitually in the kingdom of God's love, which is patient and kind, never jealous or proud or self-seeking, which protects and trusts and hopes.

And when we catch that love, we begin to love in the same way. The final garment in which we clothe ourselves in Colossians 3:14 is love, which makes it all work together. God dresses us in his unfailing, eternal love. Now we can love as God loves.

AFFIRMATION

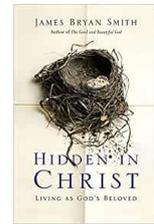
God's love for me never fails. As I learn to dwell in this love I will naturally begin to love others in the same way that God loves me: with patience, kindness, and keeping no records of wrongs. I can love, because God first loved me.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, your love is the greatest gift of my life. Help me to know it not just in my head but in my heart. May your love become such a deep reality that my heart begins to swell with joy and hope. And may I offer that same kind of love to those I live and work with, and everyone I meet this day. Amen.

REFLECTION

What would your life look like if you genuinely, fully and perfectly understood God's love for you?



Day 26 – 'Peace'

As we have seen, living and working with others will naturally require us to bear each other's burdens, forgive one another and love each other. It also requires that we learn how to disagree and work through our problems.

The key to this is peace. In Colossians 3:15, Paul writes: 'Let the *peace* of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.'

Peace is not merely the absence of strife; it is the presence of harmony. And peace is not merely a concept, such as not harming someone. The songwriter John Lennon famously wrote: 'all we are saying is give peace a chance.' This has always failed because the notion of peace itself is simply an idea.

Notice what Paul wrote: 'Let the peace *of Christ* rule...' The idea of peace is not what solves conflict; it is the peace of Jesus that provides the power to live and work in harmony.

What is the peace of Jesus? It is "the peace that belongs to his kingdom by virtue of his sovereignty." Jesus rules and reigns over all: all creation, all humanity and all history. When we step into his reign (the kingdom of God) we step into his peace. We can now live in constant interaction with Jesus, and because of his protection, guidance and provision, we have nothing to fear and can live with sheer confidence. In the kingdom of God we are safe, secure, valued and assured that God is with us.

Strife is often the result of people latching onto their position or argument as if their value depended on it. The focus is taken off Jesus and his kingdom and another issue is allowed to become more important. For the peace of Christ to rule in a community, it must first rule in the hearts of the individuals who compose it: we immerse ourselves in the reality and glory of God's rule and reign. Then we receive the peace of Christ, a peace that the world cannot give, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

AFFIRMATION

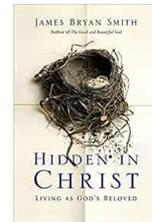
Jesus offers me his peace, the peace found in living under the rule and reign of God. When this rules in my heart, I live in peace with myself, and with everyone I interact with.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I so badly need your peace. I need it in my own heart, and I need it in the many relationships I have. Help me to see and feel your presence and power, your protection and provision, and to live in peace and harmony with everyone, even when we disagree. Amen.

REFLECTION

How can you let the peace of Christ rule in your heart today?



Day 27 – 'Thankful'

In Colossians 3:15-17, Paul urges his readers to be *thankful* three times: in v15 'and be thankful'; in v16 'with gratitude'; and in v17 'giving thanks'. This begs the question: why is being thankful so important to Paul? What is it about gratitude that is so essential in our lives?

One false notion many Christians have is that gratitude is required – even demanded – by God, and that our ingratitude will be punished. But in truth, God wants nothing for himself. God is not like us. He is complete in himself. And as one who loves genuinely, he demands nothing in return. He freely gives to us without any strings. And yet, the only proper response is gratitude and thanksgiving.

The other false view is that thanksgiving is the secret ingredient needed for getting our prayers answered. But if we make offering thanks to God a way to get what we want, then we are distorting Paul's message – that we can be thankful for a God who listens.

When Paul urges the Colossians to be thankful three times, each is for a different reason. The first is that God has *chosen* us: 'as members of one body you were called to peace: and be thankful.' How amazing is that? God chose you! You are now a member of God's family, rescued and adopted.

Second, the *word of Christ* transforms our hearts with the truth of the gospel, leading us to sing 'with gratitude in our hearts to God'. The gospel – which is never-ending and always new – is a gift we should always be grateful for.

The third gift we are to be thankful for is, well, *everything*! Paul writes: 'Whatever you do... do it all... giving thanks to God.' We live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God, where resources are plentiful. Our lives are a gift to be savoured, to be thankful for.

AFFIRMATION

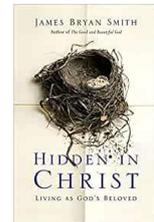
All of life is a gift – undeserved but given by a loving God who does not demand my thanks, but for whom thanks and praise are the only right and good responses.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for choosing me, and bringing me into your family. Thank you for the gospel, the good news that has transformed my life. And thank you for everything good and perfect in my life. All of it is a gift that comes from you. May I live with a constant attitude of gratitude each day. Amen.

REFLECTION

How would you rate yourself in terms of your ability to see everything as a gift from God?



Day 28 – 'Word'

Early in my Christian life I learned that the more I spent time reading, studying and memorising the Bible, the more my life reflected the character of Christ. The Bible, the living Word of God, was an essential part of my daily life with God.

Eventually I transferred to a Christian college... I thought I knew the Bible as well as anyone. In truth, looking back, I became a bit of a snob. Then something unexpected happened. My faith life began to die. I had been trained to study, analyse and dissect the bible. The problem with dissection is that you end up with a dead subject.

I met with my spiritual director and told him of my emptiness. He said, 'Jim, how do you fall asleep?' I said: 'I lie in bed and turn out the lights.' 'Right,' he said. 'You create the conditions for sleep. It is the same with contemplation of the Bible. You can't force God to speak, you have to create the conditions. When you surrender yourself to the passage, the Spirit will speak.'

In verse 16, Paul tells the Colossians: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.' The word of Christ is the teaching of Jesus, transmitted to us by the written word and interpreted by the Holy Spirit. God longs to communicate with us, to bless and encourage and at times exhort us. The Spirit knows exactly what each of us needs, every day.

Our part is simply to come to the Word in an attitude of surrender and openness. I had trained myself to be an interpreter of the Bible, but in truth, the Spirit is the only interpreter of the Bible. We let the word of Christ dwell in us richly when we come with a hungry heart, with open ears, and with a desire not only to hear but also to do what God calls us to do.

AFFIRMATION

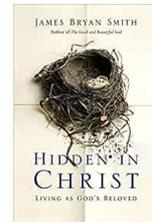
The word of Christ is a gift from God to me, but can only be received when I come to the Bible with an open and hungry heart to hear what God has for me.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for the gift of the Scriptures. They are the primary way you communicate with us. Help me to come before the Bible as one who wants only to hear from you. Give me the word you want me to hear, and may I then ponder it and let it dwell richly within me. Amen.

REFLECTION

Describe a time when God spoke a word directly to you. If you have not had this kind of experience, what are some of the ways that God communicates with you?



Day 29 – 'Teach'

When we think about great teachers, we often think about pastors and professionals. But in truth, most of our teachers are not professionals. They are ordinary men and women who have a genuine relationship with God, through Christ, and God uses them to reach and to teach his people. Two significant teachers in my life – Leonard and Katherine – had no degrees or titles to their name, other than 'faithful followers of Jesus'.

Paul encourages the Colossians to '*teach* and admonish one another with all wisdom.' (3:16) Notice that he does not define a hierarchy of teachers, or say: 'Those of you ordained should teach....' Paul expected all Christians to 'teach and admonish one another' with wisdom. Every person in the pews bears the privilege and responsibility of teaching.

There is a clear logic to this section of Colossians, beginning in 3:10. People are to put on Christ, like a new set of clothes, exhibiting unity, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love. As they do that, the peace of Christ rules over their hearts, hearts in which the word of Christ dwells richly. Such people can teach and admonish others. (Admonishment, a mild form of correction, is a way of demonstrating the love of Christ.)

The classroom is a great place to learn, but God's preferred method of teaching is one-on-one. We learn best when people more mature in the faith take us 'under their wing' and invest their time and wisdom into us. We worry far too much about credentials and gender when it comes to who is able to teach. We worry far too little about what matters most: has this person been in intimate fellowship with Jesus? Those are the people, like Katherine and Leonard, we must look to, to teach and admonish us with wisdom.

AFFIRMATION

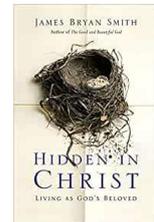
God has given each of us the ability and responsibility to teach and admonish one another with all wisdom. This day I will honour that blessing by being open to being taught, and to teaching, when the situation arises.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for the teachers and mentors you have placed in my life. Help me to honour them and to thank them for their courage to teach me. And use me to help others as you see fit. Amen.

REFLECTION

What is the most challenging part of admonishing others?



Day 30 – 'Sing'

Music is a completely gratuitous and unnecessary part of human life. And yet, music is a great blessing to human existence. Music can reach a deep place in our soul and touch us in ways that nothing else can. Sometimes it expresses feelings that cannot be expressed any other way.

In Colossians 3:16 we read: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, *and* as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.' The word 'and' tells us clearly that another way the word of Christ dwells in us is through song. Teaching is an important way in which the powerful truths of our faith are communicated. But equally important in the history of the church, and in the lives of its members, is music.

When we sing, a beautiful thing happens in our soul: the deep, true and powerful words these songs and hymns express become *our* words; they express what we are feeling toward God in a way that no other medium of communication can. It is as if our soul takes wing.

All worship is a response to God's prior act of love towards us. When we encounter the love of God, what else can we do but praise God? And what better means of communicating this gratitude, our responsive love to God, than in song? St Augustine once wrote: 'To sing is the work of a lover.'

We sing in response to a God who has always been singing over us: The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.' (Zephaniah 3:17)

When the Holy Spirit gives us ears to hear, our hearts are stirred and our only genuine response is to sing our praise to the Lord.

AFFIRMATION

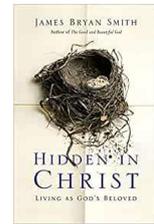
God has been rejoicing over me with singing, taking great delight in me. My only response is to sing back to God, rejoicing and taking great delight in him.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for the gift of music, for the gift of singing, and for the gifted men and women who write beautiful songs of worship and praise to you. May the ears of my heart be opened, so that I can hear your song of love for me, and may I respond by singing songs that express my love for you. Amen.

REFLECTION

What role has music played in your spiritual life?



Day 31 – 'Whatever'

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it does not give us black-and-white answers to all the dilemmas we face. It does, however, provide basic guidelines. Paul said to the Corinthians: 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' (1 Corinthians 10:31).

So instead of asking: 'Can Christians _____?' (insert activity here), the better question is: 'Can I do this in the name of Jesus and for His glory?' Our lives as Christ-followers are completely immersed in Jesus. We died and rose with him and he lives in us. Our ethics must be tied to our identity.

This principle is not only to help us know what not to do; it also tells us how to go about doing all that we do. Paul told the Colossians: '*Whatever* you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' (3:17) Notice that word: *whatever*. Everything we do – every word and every action – is to be done in Jesus' name, and with thanksgiving. Every moment is a gift, every breath is a gift, everything we eat and drink is a gift. In a sense, all of life is a sacrament, a sacred gift from God. Whatever we do, we do for his glory, because we are his and he is our life.

God's main aim in our lives is to teach us how to love him, to love life, and to do all that we do with him and for his glory. The activity is not so much in question, as the heart of the person who does it. Living under the leading of the Holy Spirit is what shapes us into new people, who live for God and glorify him in *whatever* we do.

AFFIRMATION

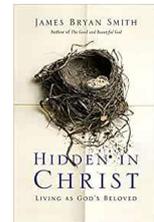
All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial and not all things glorify God. Whatever I do – what I say and what I engage in – can and should be done in Jesus' name and for his glory.

PRAYER

Gracious Abba, I have come to see that not everything in life is black and white. Help me to discern what is good and beneficial for me and what is not. Lead me, Holy Spirit, into a life that constantly glorifies you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REFLECTION

What is one area that you would like to see become an activity you could do for God's glory?



Day 32 – 'Name'

Nearly every time Christians end their prayers they say: 'In Jesus' name. Amen.' What does it mean to pray in Jesus' *name*? When we baptise people, why does the minister say: In the *name* of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...'

For many years, I had absolutely no understanding of what it actually meant to pray in Jesus' name. I just said it, in the same way I might say 'Roger – over and out' when talking on a walkie-talkie. I assumed it was just the way you ended prayers. Thankfully I discovered why...

To act in the name of another means to act on their behalf, to operate with the authority of that person. It means to proceed as if that person were present with you and to perform that action as if that person were doing it himself or herself. When we pray or minister in the *name* of Jesus, we are doing this action with the authority, presence and power of Jesus himself.

The authority, presence and power of Jesus is another way to describe the kingdom of God, where God rules and reigns. We align our little kingdoms and queendoms with the kingdom of God when we choose to live as apprentices of Jesus, our teacher and master, doing the things he called us to do. As we do that, we act with his power.

For example, in Acts 8:12, Philip is extending the kingdom of God in Samaria: 'But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised.'

Notice the combination: the kingdom of God was not a nice idea to these disciples, it was a reality they relied on. And they accessed that reality through the *name* of Jesus. In doing what they did 'in Jesus' name', in a very real sense Jesus was still acting – not independently, but with them.

What will you pray 'in Jesus name' today?

AFFIRMATION

I am privileged to act, to pray, to minister and to do all that I do in Jesus' name. I do not act alone; I operate with the power and presence of Jesus in all that I do.

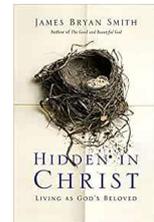
PRAYER

Gracious Abba, thank you for allowing me to act in your name. I did nothing to deserve this incredible gift. Help me to do all that I do in the spirit that regards you as my all in all. Help me to co-labour with you this day, as together we advance your kingdom. Amen.

REFLECTION

What thoughts or feelings did you have about ending a prayer in "Jesus' name" before reading this chapter?

How might the teaching of this chapter shift what that means to you?



Day 33 – Epilogue

In this last daily excerpt from 'Hidden in Christ', Prof. Smith summarises the key themes of this devotional journey. We have reproduced the last page of his book verbatim below...

The main ideas behind these 'Hidden in Christ' devotionals can be summed up in two powerful truths that describe who we are and where we live:

First, 'I am (your name) in whom Christ dwells.'

Second, 'I live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God.'

These are not make-believe, wishful ideas or positive thoughts. They describe reality. Jesus is with you. Your life is safe and secure, hidden in God. Your destiny is not up for grabs. You will one day be revealed with Jesus in glory. You – who Jesus said are the light of the world – are one going to radiate as bright as the sun. Because of who you are (one whom Christ has raised and made new and now dwells in), sin has no place in your life. You do not run on sin anymore. You run on grace.

So in truth there is nothing you cannot do. In this world we have troubles. Our careers do not take off or they sputter. Our relationships sometimes fall apart. Our dreams and hopes are dashed by dire circumstances. We lose loved ones, we suffer losses, we undergo trials. People let us down. We let ourselves down.

But thanks be to God, we are not managing this universe. God, through Christ, is. And by his grace we are made partakers of a new, divine nature. So we wake up and face a new day, not alone, relying on our own resources. We awaken to each new day with God at our side, our good shepherd who walks beside us, leading us to still waters and quiet places, through dark valleys, and into great feasts. His goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives.

That is what it means to do all that we do 'in Jesus name'.

What if our entire lives became devoted to living as apprentices of Jesus, immersed in his power and presence, living each day moving step-by-step toward an inner transformation into the character of Christ? If we were to make that our constant aim, God would triumph in and through us, the world would be changed and the gates of hell would rattle. Of this I am certain. After all, Jesus gathered a group of rag-tag individuals 2000 years ago and taught them how to live in his presence with his power. And he did it with only twelve.

The world is hungry for such people. Will you join me?