

July 1

What's the greatest freedom in your life?

We look to God for many things, for health, for family blessings, for personal peace. That's fine, but God is more than Wal-Mart where you pick and choose the goodies you want. Our basic problem with God is that He's holy and made us to be that way but we're not. Unless you get together with God on His terms, other things are going to become ultimately unimportant. Without the forgiveness of sins, all the other goodies are here today and gone tomorrow.

We're back where we're supposed to be, at one with God, reconciled, when we believe that Christ paid the price for our sins. The wrongs you have done have been forgiven. You might still feel guilty about some things, people might still throw your wrongs in your face, but God says, "The price has been paid. You're forgiven it."

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). As we move into a week of celebrating our freedoms, I hope you'll rank this freedom as the greatest of all.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). I'll be back Tuesday.

July 5

In "Saving Private Ryan," Captain John Miller leads a group of soldiers trying to get Private James Ryan out of combat and safely home to Iowa. Near the end of the movie, Captain John Miller, dying from a gunshot, whispers into the ear of Pvt. Ryan, "James, earn this. Earn it."

Years later an aged Ryan visits the grave of the man who searched him out and saved him. Ryan speaks to the grave, "Everyday I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I earned what all of you have done for me."

Mrs. Ryan then joins her husband at the grave. "Tell me I've lead a good life," he says to her.

"What?"

"Tell me I'm a good man."

"You are," she says.

Wrong, some religious people say. Our goodness only comes from faith in Jesus Christ; not earned by our works. Is that a half-truth? If you believe you've been saved won't you respond both by trying to be the best person you can be?

The patriotic Fourth is over. There are good works for God and country awaiting you and me.

July 6

On this date in 1944 the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus was performing in Hartford , Connecticut . A fire broke out and 168 people died.

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard told this story: “There once was a circus that caught fire. The director of the circus sent his clown to tell the crowd about the fire. The people, hearing the report from the lips of a clown, believed he was just telling one of his jokes. So they simply sat there, a bit burned up over their inability to tell a prophet from a clown. Part of the mystery of the gospel is that God always seems to choose some clown to bear witness to it.” (from Carl Michalson, in “The Company of Preachers,” by Richard Lischer, p. 45)

The life and death importance of discernment: A circus clown, a court jester, someone you don't respect, your enemy, might say something worth heeding for your own welfare. And if the clown is a minister quoting the Bible, you may well laugh off the message. After all, don't we now have so many people who know more than ministers and biblical scholars because they read the DaVinci Code or Left Behind? Whether that religious clown is right or not is worth checking out. Call it Bible study. Your eternal life is at stake.

July 7

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech” (Psalm 19:1-2). No, the sun, moon, and stars don't speak words like we speak to one another, but, yes, by their vastness and grandeur they testify silently to the Creator. As every believer knows, not everyone reads those signs, hears those words, if you will. For His part the Creator seems to wait patiently for the celestial speech to be heard.

Early Thursday morning, 1:52 a.m. , a NASA space probe called “Deep Impact” smashed into a comet half the size of Manhattan . Even though the planned crash happened 83 million miles from earth, it was seen here as a bright white flash on the lower part of that pickle shaped comet, called Tempel 1. One purpose of this mission, scientists say, was to learn more about the beginnings of the universe, 4.5 million years ago they claim.

At impact Donald Yeomans of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory said, “Oh, my God, look at that!” “Oh, my God, look at that.” God is, Donald. Every person should as well, hearing another declaration of the glory of the Creator. (Washington Post, July 5; A1,5; Washington Times, July 5; A8)

“Lift your eyes and look to the heaven: Who created all these?” (Isaiah 40:26)

July 8

Helen Busby of Rhode Island has had herself measured for her coffin. Helen, 60 years old, is healthy and being a nurse knows about health. This is more than your typical prearranged funeral. For the time being, Helen is going to use her coffin as a book shelf in her living room.

Thanks to AP reporter Brooke Donald for the story. Writes Donald, “Americans, specifically baby boomers who have made a habit to do things their own way, are thinking outside the box....” I’ll say!

Imagine a party at Helen’s. “That’s interesting,” says a guest. “It looks like a coffin.” “It is,” says the host. “Mine.” Welcome to the Munsters !

Denise Baxter is painting nature scenes on the new coffin. She says, “I am very aware that by no means is everyone going to want to buy their coffin in advance, design it and possibly use it as a hope chest or liquor cabinet. But it’s good to know you have choices.” (Washington Times, July 5; A2)

How many choices, really? You will die. Does the prospect of your own coffin make you think liquor chest (“Eat, drink, and be merry,” Ecclesiastes 8:15) or hope chest (“He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies,” John 11:25)? Shallow spirituality is today’s conventional wisdom. Are you thinking outside that box?

July 11

After 9-11 people began talking about the “new normal.” The same thought runs through an article by Ridley Pearson. Pearson was with his family in London last Thursday when terrorists struck. “As things get back to normal, the normal things become important again.” “The city has moved on, but it has not forgotten. Things are back to normal. Whatever that means anymore.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 10; B1, 4).

When the Bible talks about suffering, it doesn’t encourage us to get back to normal. The Bible wants us to set our sufferings into a context of deep peace, sustaining peace God gives the person whose hope is in Jesus Christ, forgiveness for sins and the hope of glory. “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.” (Romans 5:3-5) That’s a “new normal.” Not just keeping your eyes open for suspicious activities, but more and more hope in God.

So, if you’re in Dennis’ path... If you’re farm fields are parched... If... what’s the suffering for you? The question is: When the suffering has passed, what will “new normal” mean for you?

July 12

Tonight is major league baseball's "All-Star" game. Thursday night offers the Emmy nominations and talk of Hollywood "stars."

The philosopher Plato wrote that some creator, not the God of the Bible, made souls and "assigned each soul to a star." That soul was destined to spend time in a human body and "he who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence."

The philosopher and statesman Cicero wrote in his "De Republica: "The human race was generated on purpose to inhabit the globe called earth...and they were provided with souls from those eternal fires called stars...." A good statesman, Cicero says, will return to the stars.

Says the inscription on an ancient grave: "I have become an evening star, among the gods." (Quotations from N.T. Wright, "The Resurrection of the Son of God," pp. 58-59)

The Creator who reveals Himself in the Bible compares some people to stars but God doesn't confuse stars and people. "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." (Daniel 12:3). Who's the star in the Bible? "I, Jesus, am the bright Morning Star." (Revelation 22:16).

Whom do you think of when you "wish upon a star?"

July 13

I remember the "Erector Set" I had as a kid. Some contraptions I built with this learning toy worked well; others didn't.

An infinity away from childhood play is the Discovery space shuttle. After 2 ½ years, NASA is ready to return a shuttle to space. Newly designed struts, carbon panels along the wings, redesigned bolt catchers, new actuators in the rudder speed brake... Does anyone know what that all means? Only rocket scientists and yes, this is rocket science.

Failure is always possible. In the universal scheme of things there's God, perfect, unerring, totally different than us and then there's everything that comes from mankind, not perfect, given to err, and given to build marvelous things that can fail.

Jesus once talked about a mechanical failure. For some reason a tower at Siloam collapsed, killing 18 people. Self-righteous religious people assumed the 18 died because God was punishing them for some sin. Jesus said, "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:5). We've all sinned and so death threatens us all. Confessing sin, receiving Christ's forgiveness...only that is eternally failsafe.

When you get into a space shuttle or a car, when you turn on the gas or change a light switch, go to the Holy One: "Deliver us from evil."

July 14

TV people are holding their breath for tonight's Emmy nominations. On September 18th the winners will be announced and enjoy passing glory.

You know... I hope you know! ...so much on TV is unlike real life. Impressionable minds, enquiring minds, people who watch that stuff are setting themselves up for more difficult encounters with reality. How many young people have a harder time adjusting to the problems of the workaday world because they've been conditioned to believe the real world will be no harder than a 30 or 60 minute TV show?

"Last Thursday," reported the Los Angeles Daily News, "a dozen television writers...filed a class-action lawsuit against eight production companies and television networks. The suit alleges 'gross violations' of California's labor laws that govern the payment of overtime, wages and meal breaks." The plaintiffs are writers for, of all things, reality shows! Said one writer, "The most startling thing for me was that no matter how many hours I worked, I got paid the flat weekly rate even if it was 70 or 80 hours. One week when I was sick for two days, I was docked."

TV writers, welcome to the real world! For the rest of us, God's given us common sense. Using it more and TV less will help us all cope better.

July 15

Have you ever...ever...ever...been talking on your cell phone while driving and wandered out of your lane, even a bit? Be honest now. God's monitoring your thoughts!

Kelly Kennedy, Lorene Yue and Tom Rybarczyk are reporters for the Chicago Tribune. Since Chicago passed a law prohibiting cell phone usage while driving, the trio hit the streets to spot violators. They found them. One was a cement truck driver. Imagine the cement truck wanders out of its lane and right toward an oncoming car, your car, dead on. The reporters also found an ambulance driver talking. So there you are, flat on your back, being rushed to the hospital and... well, you get the picture. (July 9; sec. 1, page 1)

One of the stiffest challenges in the Lord's Prayer is "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Of course, God's will is done in heaven, He gets His way, but is His will done on earth. Are you doing it, am I? Does God's will involve cell phones? In a way, yes. "Thou shalt not kill" also means not to endanger someone. Wandering out of your lane...

The Good Samaritan took care of the other guy on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho . The people who passed by didn't care, maybe didn't even notice. Were they on their cell phones?

July 18

Bernie Ebbers was sentenced last Wednesday to 25 years for the \$11 billion fraud he committed while CEO of WorldCom. A hard-driver who started out in Mississippi with a small telephone company, Ebbers gobbled up other companies until he bought MCI, a \$37 billion merger. Now it's back to Mississippi, for prison. After Judge Barbara Jones pronounced the sentence, "His wife, Kristie, came to his side and embraced him tightly. They cried together as the room emptied. Even Ebbers' lawyer, Reid Weingarten, appeared to tear up...." (Erin McClam, AP, in St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 14; C1, 3)

Yesterday many church-goers heard this passage: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26). That's not so much about people like Ebbers being brought down, not so much about the various struggles all people have. It's more about the weakness Christians feel as they try to live in the forgiveness and freedom Christ has won. It's about people who have already cried tears of repentance but who still feel weak pursuing the way of Christ. To these people comes the promise, "the Spirit intercedes for us... the Spirit himself intercedes for us."

For us? How do you feel as you go at this day? Hard-charging, self-confident, "look at me," or well aware of your weakness in spiritual struggle? For us! No need to feel dispirited.

July 19

An acquaintance told me about a conversation he had with a minister. "I'm a life-long Christian," said my friend but the minister objected. Rightly so. No one is born a Christian.

A Christian can be defined as someone who knows, accepts and trusts the forgiveness God gives through Jesus and all the blessings that flow from that gift. No one is born knowing that and without that, you're not a Christian, at least not in the biblical sense. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). If this faith comes, it's sometime after birth. Perhaps it comes weeks later through God's miracle of Baptism, perhaps decades later when the Good News of Christ gets into your head and the Spirit takes it down into your heart. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Summer slows us down, not as much as decades ago but most of us still get significant down time these months. Since Christianity is something that comes to us, an alien invasion you might say, summer is one of the best times of all to crack open a Bible, a devotional book, and let the outside goodness of God invade. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:11).

July 20

When President John Adams nominated John Marshall to the Supreme Court in 1801, he "knew that the Senate ultimately would have to go along. Marshall was nonetheless a bitter pill for the High Federalists...who delayed his confirmation." Senator Dayton, not

of Minnesota but of New Jersey (remember this was 1801), wrote that the nomination was greeted “with grief, astonishment, and almost indignation.” (Jean Edward Smith, John Marshall, p. 15)

204 years later I read in the Chicago Tribune that confirmation hearings “may prove a test of President Bush’s ability to cement a conservative majority on the Supreme Court for years to come.” One columnist predicts senators will try to get the nominee to share views on “abortion, natural rights, affirmative action and other topics that will generate dozens more weighty op-ed articles.” From the same writer: “Some conservatives have launched a pre-emptive strike with TV ads revealing that Sen. Ted Kennedy has had a flawed personal life.” The columnist: the late Mike Royko. The nominee: Clarence Thomas. The copy of the Trib was from September 10, 1991 . We found it packing boxes to move.

“Nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Does the political same ol’ same ol’ remind you to put your hope in a more comforting constant? “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Today, the nominee is John Roberts.

July 21

“You wore flip-flops to the White House?” Yes, answered Kate Darmody, and so did three other members of the Northwestern University championship lacrosse team.

Rare are restaurants requiring suit and tie. To shined shoes many men have said, “Good by.” Young women’s midriffs all can see (and other things as well!). What’s left to the imagination...or to modesty?

“God Himself is present” goes an old church hymn. Does our Sunday dress matter to Him?

No, say people whose Sunday shirts might begin with letter T or who come in sneakers, in cut-offs, and even in necklines plunging in a V. Not these but the heart, people say, God sees. And to a point, I agree.

But is God the question, or are we? Is the heart God sees in you, in me, a heart that’s modest, reverent, a heart revealed in bended knee? Bended knees God stoops to see and our Sunday clothes should show, I think, that same mentality, a heart-deep modesty.

Do Jenna and Barbara wear flip-flops before their dad? At home, probably so, but for formal functions the answer is definitely, “No!” Only in proper attire did Laura train her children to go.

“To everything a season” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God” (Ecclesiastes 5:1)

Flip-flop flap.

July 22

The latest London explosions leave me looking for biblical precedents. Does the Bible record an ancient version of terror, repeated terror?

Centuries before Christ, the prophet Habakkuk complained to God about violence throughout Israel . “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but You do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but You do not save? Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrong?” (1:2-3). A first lesson: Like Habakkuk, take it to the Lord in prayer.

God’s answer wasn’t comforting. “I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people.... They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves....” (1:6-7) Lesson back then: It’s going to get worse. Will that be true in our time?

This applies: God told Habakkuk, “write down the revelation... for the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright – but the righteous will live by his faith.” (2:1-4).

The promise from that ancient precedent is that God’s justice will eventually prevail. Trust God’s promise and do yourself what is right. That’s not comfy, SUV religion but the way of the cross isn’t.

July 25

The other day I was telling my mother about a problem. My mom, whose glass is usually half-full, quoted her favorite Bible verse. “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). That day, however, my glass was half-empty. So I said, “Ya, Mom, and Jesus said, ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’” (Matthew 6:34).

“You say, ‘either’ (E-ther); I say, ‘either’(I-ther)” Half-full or half-empty? Both takes are in the Bible: Sin and judgment...and forgiveness, hope, and life. Both find eternal expression in Jesus Christ, His cross and His resurrection. That’s realism topped off with optimism. “From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another” (John 1:16).

When Jesus said each day has enough trouble of its own, He was talking about the worrying that comes upon us when we forget that our heavenly Father will provide for us His children.

Kathy Ireland wrote, “My Mom is the most positive person I know. She used to say that ‘an optimist is someone who wakes up and says, ‘Good morning, Lord’ and a pessimist is someone who wakes up and says, ‘Good Lord, it’s morning’” (“Powerful Inspirations,” p. 102).

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

July 26

My earliest memory of air conditioning is that we didn't have it, almost no one did, but some drug stores, old time drug stores with soda fountains. One store in Homewood painted its windows with big letters, "Air Conditioned," painted in cool blue with white icicles dropping off the letters.

When it was this hot back in the fifties, Mom used to have us kids sleep in our underwear on a sheet she had spread by the front screen door. She hoped we'd catch whatever breeze the night might bring. Screen door, quaint old idea! And what city dweller today would go to sleep with only a flimsy front door that any crook or pervert could cut through?

AC is comforting but it also isolates us from reality. It not only softens the harsh impact of nature, but can soften us as well. "Dear friends, don't be surprised that you're being tested by a fiery trial as though something strange were happening to you." 1 Peter 4:12. Peter wasn't talking about the weather, but about taking heat for letting people know by your words and actions that you are a follower of Christ. Is air conditioning a metaphor for spiritual reality? Have we conditioned ourselves to the comfort of Christ but not to the heat?

July 27

Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley is being pummeled by a hiring scandal. While no one is accusing his honor of anything illegal, indictments against his friends has the mayor looking vulnerable. “Alderman who once cowered at his feet are now talking openly – at least among themselves – about his political survival....” Other officials “are afraid to say a word or make a move for fear they could be thrown overboard.” (Fran Spielman, Chicago Sun-Times, July 24; 8A)

Silence in some settings but calculating conversation in others, intrigue, fear, winners, losers... This isn't just the stuff of City Hall. The climate is similar in many offices, the gossips who love to whisper, “I heard,” and the managers who insinuate themselves with the boss, or the heir apparent if the old boss is going down. The same conducts are common in volunteer organizations and churches, though self-righteousness often stops the religious from seeing they're acting like “people of the world.”

Martin Luther is often quoted as saying the Christian is saint and sinner at the same time. Saint: forgiven by Christ and thus acceptable to God. Sinner: is your water cooler talk

the proof? City Hall types won't give up their intrigues and will live with the consequences. Can church people give it up? Wouldn't that be something great!

July 28

Every now and then someone asks for my favorite Bible verse. I don't find that an easy question to answer because my "favorites" change as the times and moods of my life change.

One verse that has been constantly with me is the verse given to me when I was confirmed at age 14. "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). Significantly, it was picked for me, not something little Dale chose.

From age 14 to my current age, 58, I've become deeply aware how little I know about God: Job 38 drives the point home: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me if you understand" (Job 38:4). That whole chapter is humbling.

How little I know makes 2 Corinthians 4:6 especially dear: "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Now that I've started thinking about it, I have many favorites. I'll share more next week. Psalm 139:17: "How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand." How many favorites do you have?

July 29

My last installment of favorite Bible verses, at least for a while. I hope you can add a few of mine to your own repertoire. Bible passages can literally change your outlook. "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul" (Psalm 94:19).

Have you asked yourself, "Where did the years go?" Psalm 90:10, 12: "The length of our days is 70 years – or 80, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." I'm not 70 yet, but I know the last installment of earthly life is close.

Passages about aging remind us how good God's been over the years: "I was young and now I am old, (that's what the passage says; don't think I'm quite there!) yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken" (Psalm 37:25).

Another favorite puts aging in a future-oriented perspective. Hebrews 13:14, "Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."

Wow! That heavenly city will truly be the last and greatest installment of all. “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).