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**Sunday 26 July to Sunday 2 August**

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Sunday 26 July 2020

# To-do list

by Darren Pope

**‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field’ (Matthew 13:44a).**

Read Matthew 13:31–33,44–52

Okay, my holiday starts now. Time to stop, relax and unwind ... Hmm, there’s that dripping tap, bathroom mould, dirty windows, dead flower beds, leaning fence, blown light globe, cluttered wardrobe and squeaky door. My to-do list just keeps getting longer. Not fair! Just when I get time to stop, I feel like I need to go, right now, to get all those nagging little jobs done because I never have the time otherwise. Oh well, I'd better get busy!

There’s a lot of doing in the stories that Jesus uses. They’re action-packed and all very practical – with planting, kneading, finding, hiding, looking, fishing, sorting, chucking away and keeping. We can easily get sucked into the idea that we need to be doing – and doing more and doing it quickly.

Hang on, stop! Do we really need to rush around, being busy doing busy stuff? Let’s slow down for a bit and look deeper here. The smallest, most subtle aspect of these dynamic parables keeps poking and prodding us to lift our eyes and look at what the kingdom of heaven is like. What do you see? Is it all fluffy clouds and angels strumming musical harps? The practical, grounded action of God’s unending and unconditional love flashes like LED parable signage, loudly but gently declaring that it is all his work. It is always his work.

His work is gritty, earthy and earthly. It doesn’t matter how much of a busy frenzy we get ourselves into, God has already done what matters. God’s shady tree, bountiful bread, precious pearls, fabulous fish and trove of treasures are free. Our God is checking his to-do list for today and getting busy doing, right now. What’s on his list? Coming to you today, with a deep desire to be in a relationship, to gift you his love, to ease your pain and to release your burden as he immerses you completely in his grace.

Stop. Listen. Receive.

**Wow, God! I just realised that I am the focus of your to-do list for today! It’s really hard for me, but I have stopped. I am listening. I am open to receive. Thanks for coming. Welcome to my day. Peace. Amen.**

Monday 27 July 2020

# Precious pearls

by Darren Pope

**‘For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding’ (Proverbs 2:6).**

Read Proverbs 2:1–15

Popcorn in hand and lights down, here comes another blockbuster movie fix. Okay, bring it on!

Being immersed in a movie transports us to another time and place where our emotions, senses, conscience and values can be deeply engaged, challenged, or even affirmed. Character traits, circumstances, consequences and conclusions are relatable by design. Creative directors pour over scripts to ensure that they portray lighting, angles, action and emotion just right so that each moment reaches out, pulling every single movie buff into and beyond the big screen.

Immersion is transformative. Influential characters impart precious pearls of superlative wisdom that seep into our subconscious for future reflection.

**‘**All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.**’**—Gandalf**,** The Fellowship of the Ring

**‘**Books! And cleverness! There are more important things — friendship and bravery**.’**—Hermione Granger**,** Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

**‘**Oh yes, the past can hurt. But you can either run from it, or learn from it.**’**— Rafiki**,** The Lion King

Have you ever found yourself popping out a movie quote or two in a conversation? It’s amazing how they seem to fit so well in a moment that we don’t even need to think; they just reappear! It’s just as amazing that the characters portrayed as wise have their own journey going on in the movie. Most often, they are actively seeking answers to massive questions or ultimately pursuing wisdom itself.

Often, life imitates art; however, our loving Lord contradicts our need to seek, do, and find for ourselves. The struggle is real, as our broken humanity constantly falls into doubt or worry. ‘When you look to the dark side, careful you must be, for the dark side looks back’—Yoda, Star Wars.

As grace is a free gift, given unconditionally and personally, our amazing Lord gives wisdom. Our Lord imparts precious pearls of superlative wisdom that seep into our subconscious for future reflection. He gives us intelligence, reasoning and personal choice where our emotions, senses, conscience and values are deeply engaged, challenged and affirmed as we move into action.

God has created each of us to be in constant relationship with him. It is from his mouth that we grow in knowledge and understanding. Immersion is transformative. Listen and rest in the deep comfort of his wisdom.

Action!

**Living and true God, it’s a new day. Thank you for being patient with me. I know I have so many questions, doubts and fears, but I just can’t help it! Thank you for coming to me again today, reaching out in love to draw me close to you. Be with me in my thinking, my relationships, my decision-making and my actions today. Thank you for your wisdom. Amen.**

Tuesday 28 July 2020

# Hopeless!

by Darren Pope

**‘Then people go to their eternal home ...’ (Ecclesiastes 12:5c).**

Read Ecclesiastes 11:9**–**12:7

Argh! I can’t believe that just happened! This is absolutely hopeless! Have you ever had one of those days where everything you touch, everything you do and everything you say goes wrong? Maybe it went on for longer than a day. Hmm, that sounds a bit like 2020 so far, doesn’t it?

It isn’t clear how old King Solomon was when he wrote Ecclesiastes, but in this portion of his writing, he shares verse after verse of negativity, despair, death and bold hopelessness. Reading this stuff can be discouraging. Wow, this sense of being completely flattened by something really drains the fuel from your tank. A downward spiral can kick off and seem to accelerate with each moment. Oh no, this is hopeless. So, how do I get out of this?

Subtly, Solomon unveils real, lasting hope. Like a small country town on a long road trip, did you miss it? Solomon certainly needed the assurance of unconditional love in his life. Buried deep in his dreary dilemmas, Solomon proclaims two amazing and awe-inspiring positive truths about our ever gracious and loving Lord. The declaration is so small and yet so mighty that it’s worth reading the words again. Go back and check them out. See what you find, and then come back and read on.

Did you spot them this time?

Knowing that God is the giver of all life and that people go to their eternal home guarantees that hope is a gift from God that is alive, vibrant and real. How good is it that hope doesn’t rely on us or anything we do or can’t do, or mess up or try to fix up! It is all God’s work. He comes to us in every moment and authentically understands that life on earth isn’t shiny. He gets the ugly stuff. When everything seems lost, he sits quietly in the ashes with us, puts his arms around us and loves us.

Hopeless? No way! God’s got you. You are bathed in his grace today and every day. Rest in the comfort of his love.

**Lord, I am yours. Thank you for loving me, no matter what. Your unconditional love fills my tank and gives me hope. Lord, let’s get into the day together. Amen.**

Wednesday 29 July 2020

# To and through

by Darren Pope

**‘... this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us’ (2 Corinthians 4:7).**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:3–12

Up; down; left; right; accelerate; brake; lean; and look through the corner. As I drive between Strahan and Hobart, wending the repeated meandering curves through flowing valleys and over jagged mountains, I am reminded of the joy and simplicity of windy roads. Ah, Tasmania, I love it!

Looking across from one side of the steep valley, I see that the road on the other side seems to bend back on itself and disappear in the direction we have just travelled. Road signs warn of falling rocks ahead and the slow speed required when approaching the next small gorge bridge. Slowing the car right down to a crawl, I realise that the bridge is actually a high v-shaped dam wall, filling the gorge carved out by powerful torrents below. I spend the next phase of my journey pondering hydro-electric power.

Hydro is intriguing. Employing gravity, water drops freely through a turbine, converting the kinetic energy of the falling water into mechanical energy. A generator converts the mechanical energy from the turbine into electrical energy to send out on the power grid for the benefit of others. Genius!

As Paul writes to the Corinthians, he highlights God’s work in each of us and our lives. It is always God’s work. God comes to us and works through us. Symbolically, God’s unconditional, grace-filled love is a massive downward pointing arrow. That’s it. There isn’t an arrow that points up from me so that I can be loved and forgiven. It doesn’t depend on me at all. Baptism unveils the free-flowing liberty of love that’s channelled to us and through us. That’s the simplicity of the gospel. Genius!

We worship; repent; serve; pray; honour; respect; give; and forgive all in response to what God has already done for us through his life-giving water, his word and his gift of grace. Now, that’s powerful!

**Life-giving God, thank you for being at work in my life. Thank you for coming to me again today to forgive me, fill me through your boundless grace, and refresh me to live a life of worship in service to your world. Amen.**

Thursday 30 July 2020

# But wait, there’s more …

by Darren Pope

**‘Continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness’ (Colossians 2:6b,7).**

Read Colossians 2:1**–**7

Two for the price of one. But wait, there’s more … buy now; you don’t need to send any money, just make four easy payments – plus you get a free set of steak knives!

Have you heard these on TV before? Is it just me or are the ‘infomercials’ even louder than the normal commercials and both of them louder than regular viewing volume? Ads drive me nuts! Everyone wants me to need the gadget on offer so that my life can be better because I can be fitter, thinner, better looking, more efficient and smarter. Each item promises to deliver vast improvements to my life by saving me time and money. Wow, maybe I have been missing out all this time. I better get infoshopping – and fast. Hmm, maybe not!

Despite conjecture about the author of Colossians, the writer homes in on a few simple truths about the foundation of the gospel: all wisdom and knowledge come from God; we receive Christ; and the gospel gives hope. We are encouraged to live our lives in response to the gospel. It sounds simple enough, so why does it feel so hard to do it?

Our broken humanity means that, even with the best of intentions, we keep getting sucked into stuff we don’t need. Our self-doubt, desire to accumulate, and drive to succeed gets in the way as we shift our focus away from the gift of unending love-filled grace, and we convince ourselves that doing and buying stuff makes us better. That’s not new for people; it’s been like that since sin entered the garden, and it will keep being like that. Our sinful nature means that it just won’t change.

Responding to the unconditional love of God, we receive freely through Christ. We can continue to live our lives, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as we were taught, and we can overflow with thankfulness. Despite the weaknesses of our commitment to the relationship, our gracious and living Lord comes to each of us again today, in love, with no strings attached. He says, ‘I love you, but wait, there’s more!'

**Living and loving Lord, thank you for your grace. Thank you for your unconditional love. Thank you for today. Amen.**

Friday 31 July 2020

# The way we roll

by Darren Pope

**‘Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness’ (1 Timothy 6:11b).**

Read 1 Timothy 6:11**–**19

With my eyes glued to the screen, I watch as the ball spins round and round. One by one, the balls drop into the canister. What are the chances my numbers come up tonight? Entranced as each ball comes out, my chosen numbers appear and align as the suspense builds to a screaming crescendo. Woohoo, I’m rich! I never have to work again!

Well, okay, so I’ve never had a go at any type of lotto to know this exhilaration, but imagine having all your debts paid. Winning must feel awesome. Wouldn’t it be nice!

As Paul writes to Timothy, he comes from a life experience of struggle, bad decisions, violence, failure, unbelief and ignorance. Paul knew what it was like to absolutely stuff things up and crave an easy avenue to make it all go away. Paul’s insight is that he was a broken man, and the only thing that restored him was the gift of grace. Paul was deeply grateful that God had come to him, embraced him, forgave him and loved him unconditionally. As Paul writes to Timothy, he gives him a challenging poke and brings this trove of experience to his words. As Timothy’s faith mentor, Paul shares from the depths of his experiences to fervently encourage him in his life journey.

We are fallen, too, folks, so it’s only natural that we are going to keep messing it up every day and crave an avenue to make it all go away. Will it be hard? Will I get it wrong? Will I fail? The struggle is real, and it’s the way we roll, so, yes – but fight the good fight of the faith. Each of us has the same assurance that God comes to us, embraces us, forgives us and loves us unconditionally. This fresh start today allows us to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Do I need to wait for my number to come up to win God’s unconditional love, mercy and grace? No chance! God’s treasure is free, real, enduring and reliable.

**God – the blessed and only ruler, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who alone is immortal and lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see – to you be honour and might forever. Amen.**

Saturday 1 August 2020

# I can’t

by Darren Pope

**‘The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down’ (Psalm 145:14).**

Read Psalm 145:8,14–21

With sweat on his brow, arm outstretched, eyes closed, and fully focused, Luke Skywalker channels his entire energy into lifting his crashed X-Wing fighter out of the secluded swamp, using ‘the force’ as Master Yoda watches on. Moments before, Yoda had proclaimed, ‘Try not. Do or do not, there is no try’. So, Luke had a go only to watch the X-Wing gurgle back below the soupy surface. Exasperated, Luke falls at the feet of Yoda and cries out, ‘I can’t!’

It’s a pivotal moment in the film The Empire Strikes Back because it is in Luke’s weakness that he discovers he has a lot to learn from his mentor and that there is strength in faith.

‘I can’t’ rolls off the tongue so easily, doesn’t it? Here’s the great thing about doing life. Our wise and ever-present mentor sticks close by us each day. God knows that we will struggle, that we will doubt, and that we will be weak, and he is right there to give us strength. The psalmist sings of the way things happen. Each phrase is another aspect of what God does for us, in us and through us. How good is this! It doesn’t matter that I can’t. God can!

**Gracious and compassionate Lord, my mouth will speak in praise of you. You are my mentor, my redeemer and my force. Let every creature praise your holy name forever and ever. Amen.**

Sunday 2 August 2020

# Hungry? God will provide

by Georgie Schuster

**‘They all ate and were satisfied’ (Matthew 14:20a).**

Read Matthew 14:13–21

If there were two words to describe the Bible accounts for this week, they would be ‘God’s provision’. You could also insert any number of adjectives in the middle: miraculous, faithful, to name a couple. There are also a few common elements in these accounts: a person or people; a need (hunger); and God.

This theme of God's provision is replayed time and again in the Bible, over the course of centuries. Today, as always, God's provision is offered to us, for our open hearts and hands to receive.

Let’s start with this story that we have probably heard many times before. The feeding of the 5000.

Perhaps it begins as just an ordinary day, but then word gets out that Jesus was around. People join the crowd and follow the teacher, Jesus: eagerly hanging on to his every word ... witnessing power and compassion mix together as people are healed ... soaking in the presence of someone out of the ordinary.

And then it gets late. Jesus' care and concern for those who had sought nourishment for their souls extends to their physical needs, too. One boy’s lunch is offered. Thousands are fed – with twelve baskets left over! (Do you ever wonder who benefited from those leftovers?)

God, who created us – body, mind and spirit – knows our need on every level, our hunger for food and for truth. Here we see our compassionate God, meeting those needs for all to see and to experience for themselves.

What morsel from this encounter with Jesus will sustain you today?

***Dear God, our Loving Creator, you know our every need. You know our hunger. Please feed us now. We give you thanks. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***